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VILNIUS REVIEW

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LITHUANIAN COUNCIL FOR CULTURE

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MEDIJŲ RĖMIMO FONDAS

Eglė Elena Murauskaitė

2 September 2026
Reflections on Belonging



Photo by Sofija Filipovič

What does it feel like to arrive anew in a country one was born into? To try on its seas of water and wheat for size, to trade a conifer forest for towering concrete, the present capital (Vilnius) – for a historic one (Kaunas) and to go back on that deal again? Let me tell you a secret. A country is a fiction. Belonging is a fiction. But who wants to browse in a fictionless library?

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In the Beginning was the Phrase
Could I please go away,
the nine-year-olds need to converse in private
as do the adults at the funeral, the second, the fifth
Piano classes? Ballet?
At seven she's "too old"
Choir – a joke? Did someone choke her?
Why don't I take this sweater
mommy won't fetch any better
at the secondhand stall
Shoes and coat too big? But free
Prom dress? Law degree?
who cares what I'd like
this is what we can afford
Guitar? I play but the basic chords
Why don't I work
for the good of the country instead
the government paid for some of our bread
and needs sharp minds like these
just not the people
who carry them

*

You bitter bitch from the outback, – in my head, the ever-vigilant Sister Prudence of the First Femonationalist Truth Circuit adjusts her collar. What, or perhaps who, is chasing me all over these flat potato lands? What am I after? A dream? Does the dream have a name? Or a price tag? Sooner or later, they'll get to me… No one is unbreakable.

I come back crying to the March sleet, a failure, down the snake ladder, back to square one. One piece of checked-in luggage, one carry-on suitcase, one backpack. Carry on – but how? One, alone in a nine-storied block soaked with too many stories I'd rather forget. This gray city doesn't know the me, who is, and I don't know anyone here. The vile, violent Vil-nius.

Where are you from? What rock have you been living under – not knowing the bus ticketing system, not knowing the names and back stories of the current political players, thinking you can just say what you actually think on live air? I'm an other that's supposed to be one of us.

I drink in the cultural scene, making up for the decade lost, recap the best of – soon, though, the cup is empty. Empty, I drink some more, mostly burned-tire-flavored whiskey. Mostly, the local social circles close when a stranger approaches – what do you want, we've got all the friends we need. I used to dance, lindy-hoppin' my way through Melbourne and Paris, Washington, D.C., and Charleston, Santa Monica and NYC. In Vilnius, the evening anti-socials tempt me to jump through the window I'm leaning against. The wall flowers never bloom here, we don't even talk to each other while waiting for that ask, which almost never comes. A dance birthed by the poor Black youths across the Atlantic, learning from the old-timers, and welcoming the war veterans and interwar-aficionados – here it's a peacocking competition of the alpha personalities in their prime.

The gospel choir distrusts my faith. The secular choir won't take me in without a man – an oversupply of variously capable women. An oversupply of fear and tension. A shortage of sisterhood. Did I ever learn to be one though?

A shapeshifter. Adding one ginger cat – M. – to the mix. One deer-skinned drum. More than once, I turn into a heron mid-afternoon, neck first, then proceed to caress the sky with my feet. From a shoulder length blond to a ginger bob, shedding my eyeglasses as I preen my feathers – the children's book illustrator is confused: should she redraw my portrait?

*

Is it patriotic to stay for land, despite the people? Užupis feels like a little village, a curve on the hip of the city: the river runs right under my bedroom window. As I wade through the slushy cobble streets of January, the wood-burning stoves smell of the Middle Ages. Sneaky gusts play on the wind chimes on the oak in the yard (I come back to ring them now a few times a year). Back in November, I had gathered handful of acorns from a sacred grove and planted them in a flowerpot, almost as a joke – within two weeks the joke was on me: a fresh grove sprang up on my windowsill mid-winter, taking over every newly emptied peach can, every pickle jar. Spring reveals that by my kitchen window a skilled proprietor's hand had made flower magic, planting hyacinth, narcissus, and tulips to bloom, in turn, on the same spot, in consolation. In the bestiary, the firefox M. is joined by the vicious tabby B., and the deaf elderly bitch Y. – I adopt the latter for walkies, but no running, thank you.

*

"She wants to go to the seaside" – it's not just the Kooks, seems like a portion of Vilnius is moving to Nida. It's a test, coming in the harsh season to see if I get it, or if the sea gets to me first. My hermitage is secluded, rented from the original Kurši: the grandpa was a fisherman back when Kunigiškės was a border, patrolled nightly by the soviet troops. The family grazed sheep – the sister shows me her scar from the shears – and planted potatoes right about where the fancy new duplexes are sprouting up. Kunigiškės is, literally, Priestland – must have been Lutheran priests though. They don't celebrate Easter here. Latvians consider them basic, and Lithuanians – alien. My othered kin? By the sea, we're all mostly other, and it's all temporary. We meet and part – like sand and water: now soaked in a mantra jam – we share silence, too; now dry, in low tide – we don't bother to text.

Against the wintry roar, I can scream out my pains, one by one. I can sing in a full voice, and the voice of the sea protects mine from judgmental ears. The micro-seasons are marked by the bodies washed up on the shore: the strip of sand is littered, in turn, by seals, small migrating birds, bees, jellyfish, cockchafers… Some bodies show signs of movement. Some crawlies give me the creeps. How many cockchafers would a good Samaritan turn over? Should I measure the good by the time devoted, or the number of bugs saved, or the number I passed? Would a litigious American bug trial convict me of

negligence as I turn away?

I befriend the night, as it comes early in winter. Walking to the sea through the forest in deliberate darkness, I'm surprised I never bump into a pine. For much of the winter and fall, I bike back from a yoga class in the city through darkness too – not as deliberate, the city council doesn't seem to think it worth their while to light up the paths off season. The foxes don't mind, and soon enough I learn their system of intersections and traffic lights – the silver glint of their eyes. My neighbor tells me one of them is mad. My neighbor tells me I must be mad for planting coriander instead of parsley – where is my sense of tradition.





Photos by Sofija Filipovič

*

I lose track of time. It's not Covid-19 – it takes me a few years to grasp what the rest of the country has gone through. It's because my only neighbors within a few kilometers' radius in Šakiai District are the house martens. Not the British shoegaze kind nor the shoe doctor kind – the actual wild fat furries. I watch them feast on frozen grapes from the roof in a December flurry. In May, the elderly tabby B. may have snagged one of their babies… So sorry, didn't mean to intrude. Indeed, B. must be the local terror, delivering headless rodents to my doorstep daily. M. the firefox brings them whole. I tend to toss them into the same nettle ditch, "better luck next life," a little prayer as I send them flying. I wonder what the archeologists will make of that accumulation of tiny skeletons. A ritual site perhaps?

A midsummer meadow stands as tall as my chest, hiding a band of lazy deer and a shy fox. For the first time, my great-grandmother's story makes sense. When I was a little girl, she used to tell me of her childhood: she'd wear a floral dress, and if she'd squat "in the grass," no one could find her for hours – to a kid who'd only seen patches of urban lawn, this sounded beyond incredulous. I cross the meadow for a swim, sometimes a few times a day, followed by my entourage – B., M., and Y. (Be Me – but whY?). I usually hear two buzzards circling above (should I name them?) – then suddenly it's three. It's August. Granny cries as I show her the wood-burning stove and photos of me jug-showering

outside in winter – a lifestyle she'd worked so hard to escape.

August abundance. I sit outside, watching the sharp sickle of the moon at work – I can hear the apples bumping onto the damp evening grass. *Alyvinis*, *antaninis*, *borovinka*, *melba*, *pepinas*, *rojaus* – alphabetically, they pass through my hands into pancakes, a pie, a cider press. Funny choice – to start sober with an aspiring cider maker. Abundance, greater than any hands can handle. Some of the bumps stay on the hill through November, where deer and thrush manage to enjoy a fermented bite without tumbling down.

Don't you live in America? I choose the red clay of the hundred-year-old furnace as a background for my next live commentary on national TV.

Winter brings me to the nearest traditional song circle some thirty kilometers away. To and from, I'm often the only light on the forest road, crossed by deer and fox, and an occasional hare. Women arrive in long homemade dresses and bring homemade bread. I'm so other that I'm safe from fitting in or taking over someone's spot – mutually curious, we probe with care. They teach me the sacred geometry of straw gardens and cross-stitching. For the next nine months, I stitch some peonies while collegial voices from across the Atlantic tell me that "immediate deterrence is failing" during conference calls and ask about my "exit strategy" from this "gray zone conflict." Conflict is something no village is too small for. We gather herbs and make ointments, but I still get my Covid-19 shots. We drum together, but I cannot march to the rhythm of Family Values.

For years, I still come back to sing – ye olden winter solstice songs are particularly precious. They invite me to do a poetry reading. I bring a bag of contemporary Lithuanian favorites. What is queer poetry? How is women's poetry different? I invite them to draw from the pile and join in the reading. Then we drum. As I leave, a chubby gray cat – F. – hitches my ride. A replacement for the departing Y.? F it, why not.

*

I turn the wheel – of Toyota and of Fortune – Vilnius / Kaunas / Klaipėda? Any place seems as good, or as bad, as the next, revealing its teeth, in turn, in a grin and a growl, only after one spends some time there. Middle ground. Midland. Kaunas. It's not like I haven't been there before, but feeling, groping the face of Lithuanian nationalism with my bare hands – conservative and proud – this is new. Almost everyone has family stories dating back to Smetona's times. The queer archive research group offers a guided tour of historical gay bars and meeting places – one such island survives today, a blue house with chicken legs. I shudder to recall a high school visit to Kaunas: seeing a teenager kicked by a bunch of others in broad daylight on Laisvės Alėja, everyone walking past, wanting no trouble. May not have even been gay, may have been his hair. Might as well have been Jewish some sixty-five years ago.

On Palm Sunday the bishop holds mass in a red brick church downtown. They're looking for volunteers to carry procession banners. I offer to help. Women are not allowed. It's not me whipping you, it's the juniper, a slap across the face. It's the city of basketball and Maironis. During "Poetry Spring," quite a few priests come out to read their rhymes. "Read something juicy," – the organizer whispers as my name is called. The city of Zikaras and Nėris, Cvirka and Sruoga – their creaky wooden villas spring to life on literary evenings. "Does he come around much?" – I hear an elderly dame making casual inquiries about Sruoga's ghost to the perplexed museum worker. One afternoon, I scale the neighborhood fence to peek at Cvirkienė's garden – now abandoned, like much of her artistic heritage. One afternoon I peak at the local archive of museum paintings in storage – ripped and cobwebbed, the ghosts of the authors have probably forsaken them too. I cry in helpless futility.

It's not just the rivers of tears and artistic heights that form the cityscape – hills and rivers carve out impressive reliefs all around. March to May, I scale the steep slopes of Jiesia, training for my first mountain hike in Nepal. My course mate is a mountaineer, scaling the snow-capped oxygen-deprived heights every summer with the national flag. Half of my Facebook seems to be climbing along with him online, mirror neurons tensing leg muscles emphatically. The painters don't seem to be drawing for Lithuania though, not much co-feeling, co-frustration, co-poverty. Smiling like a five-year-old, I send him a picture as I, too, circle the basecamp. He doesn't always summit. We all congratulate him for an instinct to live, to stop. No talk of failure. When I fail, my mother feels a failure, reprimanding me over a splash of mud on her Sunday best face and the family name (which one, I wonder…). When do we sign up to represent, and how do I opt out?

*

Is New Vilna, like New York, so much better than the old – York? Little Saint Stephen, and the birds (not so little) tell me this may not be my last address. Feelnius – the writing's on the wall. Feeling is what this space is for. I may be too close to a bubble, first one and then another and another, to see a city for what it is. And still feel forever other. The probability of encounters in the most peopled place is a mental fig leaf – are we not all denuded and denied, sooner or later? The fig I had shed. Made it and been unmade. Happy to water it now. Next to the fig, I plant tradition (peonies and rues) and avant-garde (sea buckthorn and smoke tree), utility (rosemary and thyme) and utterly pointless curiosity (oxalis). I am invited to Nida to read poems about *squirrel-encis Vilnencis*, and in Naujoji Vilnia, seagulls shit on my texts and seals remind me of spring. I dream of silver firs from my childhood in Druskininkai, and thoughts of grandmother's orchard in Alytus cramp my mouth in acidic memory. I keep searching for a narrative axis, a lesson to learn. I thank the earth that holds me, carrying this stubborn self from one place to the next. I thank the circles that open even a little. I invite others into otherness.

Dovilė Bagdonaitė

21 September 2026
Poetry



Photo by Sofija Filipovič

Prrrpoem

I'd like to write a poem
so tender
that a kitten would enter it
to lap up some milk

it would
smell of cupcakes

and swirl with
clouds of cotton candy

the sun would shine through
containing a summer (sunday)
afternoon

it would tuck a reader in
with a down blanket and spoon them
as they fell asleep

balloons float up
the ice cream and cotton candy melt
tickling my heart

Meeting

I agreed to meet with her because her eyes
were quoting the other eyes the ones I knew

I could never lose myself in

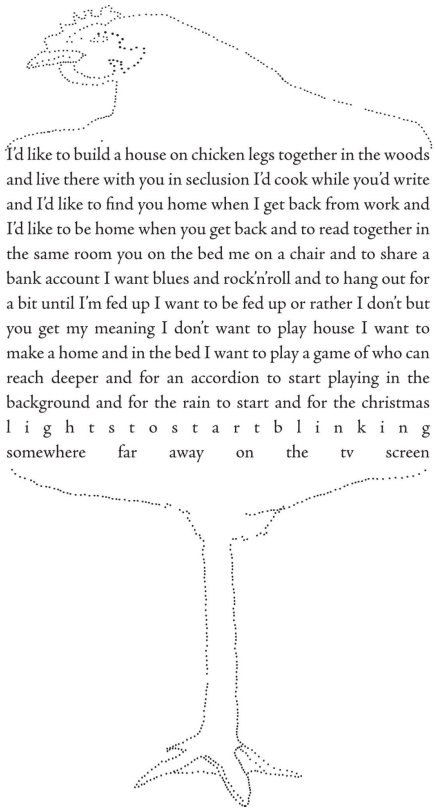
she was older and shy
just like I'll likely be someday
like a mirror dipped in the future

she keeps a room full of her lovers' skeletons under lock and key
when asked if there were many she said no

lacking confidence she played her cd collection
failing to pick out the music

she reminded me of me in so many ways
the qualities I'd like to get rid of
through meditation and affirmations
so I did not enjoy that but the bodies did their work

we could all use some consolation



Sad party animals

Sound. Lights. Blasting.
Eye make-up.

Close your eyes on the dance floor
touch your hand to the hand of another
fingers touching, barely
smoke a cigarette in the dark.

Tell the one waiting next to you at the bar
ugh is it gonna be much longer
the glasses filling with waiting instead of liquid
the ice cubes are melting, tired of work.

L has disappeared with a blonde stranger. Later, the girl disappears into the night, and L is washed ashore. And so, it's the two of us again, like the last two candles still aflame at the edge of this bar. On

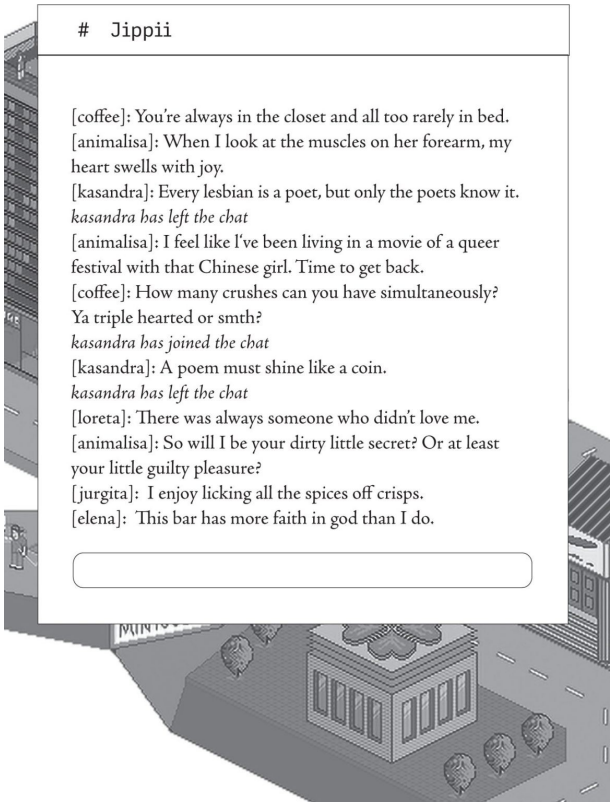
the ride home, she was dozing off and rested her head on my shoulder. The city crept by outside the window. I would've gone with her to the very last stop, like she wanted me to. But I saw the dawn breaking, carriages turning into pumpkins. The morning was wriggling out of a shimmering black evening dress, jumping into a street cleaner's uniform.

What would you like
asks the bartender
a tequila sunrise and
to go back, to sleep
in my cage.

But only after the last song is played.

Heart of a Dog

once upon a time
I turned my heart into a dog
and I couldn't turn it back
ever since it barks and I beat
sometimes the dog bites me
and tries to get away but I
stuff it back in through the wound
a pill in a lump of meat also helps



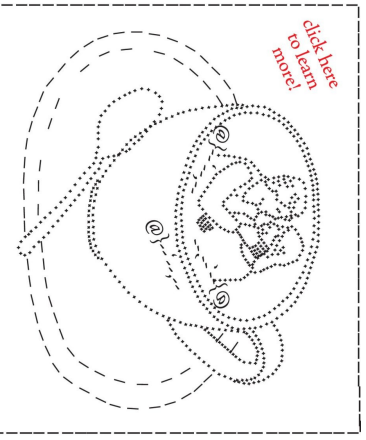
I'm looking for the one

who'd ride with me to the stars

and braid them into each other's hair

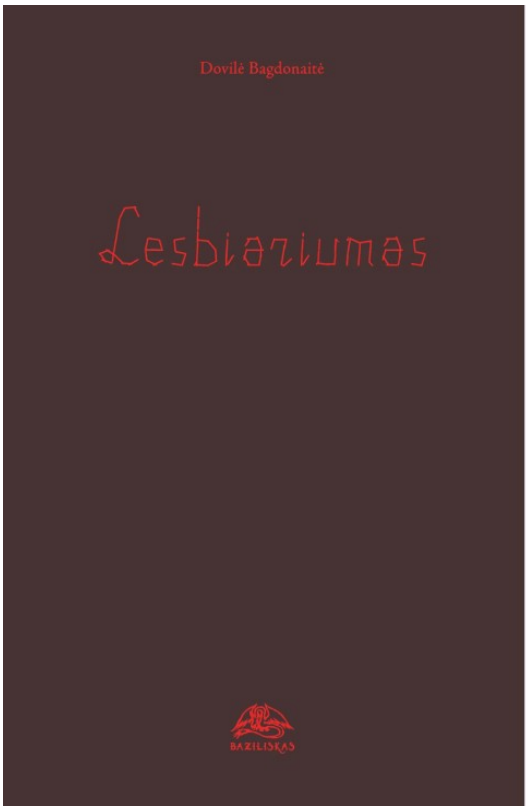
kicking the moon around like a football

pot-bellied ladies need not apply



Taming Romantic Horrors and Beasts

8 October 2026
Reviews



DOVILĖ
BAGDONAITĖ

Lesbiariumas

It is symbolic that my first published review was of poet and artist Dovilė Bagdonaitė's second book, *takeliai_žolėje* (*paths_in_the_grass*), published by Baziliskas in 2022. At the time, this poetry collection felt remarkably fresh, vibrant, and memorable. It seemed that, at last, the poems of a contemporary young woman had been written for young people.

In this conceptually accomplished book, as if along the well-trodden paths in the grass of everyday life, Bagdonaitė compellingly juggles irony, the aesthetics of kitsch, and domesticity. Across its pages, the fragility of contemporary life unfolds alongside perfectionism and the exhaustion that accompanies it. As a reader, I also could not help admiring the visual poems, the clever eroticism, and the subtle presence of queerness and social activism. After this publication, my expectations for contemporary Lithuanian poetry rose. To this day, I look for a similar vibrant authenticity and unique voices in poetic texts.

Therefore, when Bagdonaitė's third poetry collection, *Lesbiariumas* (*Lesbiarium*), appeared, I did not rush to read it and wanted to wait for a few comments from people I knew, just in case it proved disappointing. Resembling a zine or chapbook in both its scope and its abundance of visual poems, the book is only fifty pages long, small enough to fit into a pocket, yet visually dense. Dark crimson in color, with faintly gleaming red lettering on the cover, it resembles a mysterious spellbook that reveals itself only from a certain angle.

The book's contents are exceptionally polished. It contains not a single unnecessary poem, yet that only leaves us wanting more. This time, Bagdonaitė's project is far more focused. Even the book's title and its blurb comparison to a herbarium or a bestiary in the annotation are reference to illustrated publications rooted in a tradition dating back to medieval writing, whose purpose was to preserve and classify plants and to describe mythological beings associated with religion and God's creation.

Admittedly, the classification is not especially pronounced here – it's subtle. Yet, as in the kinds of publications mentioned above, there is an abundance of illustrations, or rather visual poems. At first glance, the subjects depicted in Bagdonaitė's *Lesbiarium* seem to be entirely ordinary phenomena or objects drawn from everyday life: rays of light, stones, fireworks, mist, instant noodles, or tomatoes. Alongside them appear contemporary artifacts associated with various queer and romantic experiences: a paper cut-out of a skeleton in the closet, arrows symbolizing mixed signals, a stop sign

and the petals of a loves-me, loves-me-not flower, armor representing a fear of being hurt and uncertainty, a smoke machine, a trap for a vegan, Vi, a queer character from the video game *League of Legends* and the animated series *Arcane*, and so on. The beasts of our age take on different forms today.

Even on the book's back cover is a stylized self-portrait composed of typographic symbols, one that does not allow the author to be identified. It is like an icon that obscures facial features, rendering them anonymous. The visual dimension of *Lesbiarium* thus suggests that lesbian identity, sometimes very concrete and tangible, and at other times highly abstract, is part of everyday identity and can also be (self-)ironic. It seems that every lesbian can be authentic and unique, yet alienation, apparently, does not discriminate by sexual orientation, and a failure to know the "other" can lead to mystification or caricature. Relationships, therefore, most often romantic and sometimes even platonic, are likened to competitive battles, and to convey this idea, Bagdonaitė draws on various references to action and combat video games as well as fantasy literature, such as *The Lord of the Rings* or the *Harry Potter* series.

The romanticism found in Bagdonaitė's poems not only ironically recalls medieval battles with new monsters, complete with codes of honor and unwritten rules of conduct typical of combat, but is also digitalized and saturated with popular culture. According to Bagdonaitė, contemporary romance is "not what it used to be." Rather, it is a kind of simulacrum that has lost its magical charm. It is campy and filled with rebound kittens holding champagne and roses as well as supposedly cool but outdated emoticons that the younger generation uses post-ironically. Through her capricious, ironic, and sharp visual language, Bagdonaitė brings to the fore the experiences of young lesbians that, regardless of the era, are shaped by feelings of alienation and discomfort, yet are at once deeply recognizable and painful.

Admittedly, while the book seems to suggest that contemporary relationships and desire are casual and noncommittal, beneath this lies a sincere longing to love and to be loved. This is reflected in the poem "Prrrpoem":

> I'd like to write a poem
> so tender
> that a kitten would enter it
> to lap up some milk
>
> it would tuck a reader in
> with a down
> blanket and spoon them
> as they fell asleep

The narrator expresses a desire to be gentle and sensitive, capable of offering others love and comfort. As a creator, she seeks to convey this desired tenderness through "a good love poem," yet she understands that she herself will never fully become such a person and that poetry will never turn into reality. It remains only a fiction of letters and symbols.

The narrator of *Lesbiarium* experiences desire and a longing for genuine feeling, even as she tries to conceal it beneath a mask of irony. This is brought to the fore in the poem "Sad Party Animals," set in a nightclub where the narrator waits for a girl. Amid the noise, many lights and makeup, amid euphoric dancing and the intimacy of the night, miscommunication intrudes, along with unrequited desire. The club space, crucial to queer identity, typically symbolizes not only the anxieties hidden behind entertainment but also transience itself. It is not a place to look for anything more than a one-night encounter. The narrator is tired and disappointed, and so perceives exhaustion all around her: "the glasses filling with waiting instead of liquid / the ice cubes are melting, tired of work." And although the poems are rich in queerness, they also capture with remarkable precision the loneliness of being young. These experiences may be just as recognizable to heterosexual readers.

To conclude, it is worth mentioning the literary context in which this book has appeared. Although same-sex marriage has not been legalized in Lithuania, and homophobic attitudes remain prevalent in parts of society, even if they are gradually changing from year to year, *Lesbiarium* forms part of the LGBTQ+ literary boom that has become increasingly noticeable in recent years. It is encouraging to see publishers increasingly bringing out translated queer literature, while Lithuanian authors such as Giedrė Kazlauskaitė (incidentally, the editor of *Lesbiarium*), Artūras Tereškinas, and Dovilė Bagdonaitė herself are speaking ever more openly in their poetry about their homosexual experiences.

It is worth acknowledging that it is precisely queer poetry that is shaping new vocabularies of contemporary romance, thereby transforming the male gaze on women that has long dominated poetry. Women, so often understood primarily as objects of desire, are granted subjectivity through a lesbian perspective, becoming fully realized subjects in depictions of attraction and love. It is also worth noting that queer writers no longer conceal their identities behind metaphors. Instead, they name themselves clearly and, at times, even bluntly, stepping out of the closet and into the public sphere, leaving little room for readers' alternative interpretations. At the same time, at least for the authors mentioned above, themes of everyday life, domesticity, transience, and embodiment continue to predominate.

In her latest poetry collection, Bagdonaitė classifies not different prototypes of lesbians or other queer women, but rather archetypal situations of miscommunication, attachment, and unrequited desire – the true monsters and horrors of contemporary relationships. For this reason, we can hope that *Lesbiarium*, seemingly playful on the surface yet immensely witty and sensitive, will not be lost to time because of its slightness but will instead find the readers it deserves.

Returning to Visby

16 October 2026
Reflections on Belonging



Photo by Ignacijus Daukša

After a long journey, I arrived at the Baltic Center for Writers and Translators and found its director, Lena, pruning roses in the courtyard. After all, I'm back in the town people call "the *city of roses and ruins*." The last time I visited this town was four years ago, in May; the roses had not yet bloomed. This year, in July, almost every house in the old town is covered in shrub roses.

I wanted for everything to be just as it was. The same room with a view of the church and the sea, the same people. I didn't want to get to know any new residents. I was sad that Patrik no longer worked here. Last time, when I lamented how sad I was to leave, he told me, "You'll come back. Everyone comes back," and he was right.

How could I forget about the bells? The bells of St. Mary's Cathedral ring every half hour (even at night!), and at certain hours (at eight in the morning or twelve) they play an additional melody. How are you even supposed to get some sleep here?! Christine, a writer from Gothenburg, told me that when she first arrived, her immediate thought was, *Why had no one warned her about the bells?*

July is a difficult time to concentrate on work in Visby. The town can be described the way Google describes a shopping mall at peak hours: "as busy as it gets." Now, for at least a few weeks, I will experience what it's like for those who live in the old town year-round.

On the day I arrived in Visby, news spread that the poet Aidas Marčėnas had died. I am grateful to him for encouraging me to put together a poetry collection, to enter the First Book competition, and for all the words of encouragement which, to me as an aspiring poet, coming from someone whose poems I had admired since my school years, meant an immense amount. Aidas Marčėnas is (I cannot bring myself to say "was") also the father of one of my closest friends. As I was reading "Eilėraštis Vytei" (A poem for Vytė), which my friend shared on Facebook that evening, I found tears streaming down my face.

I'm getting to know the other writers and translators staying at the residency. I feel like an impostor. Everyone else has written more, achieved more; they came here to work seriously, while I… All I dream about is getting on a bicycle and riding along the path that runs beside the sea.

The residency stands atop a cliff formed by a rocky escarpment, somewhat away from the main entertainment hubs. Yet every evening, the wind carries music from bars and concerts taking place, who knows where, making it seem as though the town is celebrating a festival every day. Christine tells me about the upcoming Stockholm Week, when the capital's golden youth descend on Visby to dance in beach clubs and drench one another in champagne.



Photo courtesy of Ramunė Brundzaitė

On this cliff, tour guides lead groups of visitors, showing St. Mary’s Cathedral and the panorama of the

old town while recounting stories of merchants' lives in the Middle Ages. Couples come here to watch the sunsets. Tourists wander around the residency building (it dates from 1823 and was once a free school for poor children), peering into the windows of those who write. I was lucky enough to get a room on the second floor, where it's pretty challenging for passersby to peek through.

I step out into the courtyard, filled with blooming roses. It's so beautiful here that it hurts. I wrote the same thing in a text from Visby in 2022. The war in Ukraine is still happening. I have just learned that Aidas Marčėnas has died. I could go on listing reasons why it seemingly shouldn't be beautiful. How do I avoid feeling guilty? How should I begin creating and believe that what I'm doing is meaningful?

The first time I return to the sea in Visby by bicycle, the view takes my breath away. How should I describe the smell of the sea? This particular sea, in this particular place. Today, the Baltic Sea around Gotland is rough; the shoreline is strewn with seaweed, stones, and pebbles, grasses grow along the edge, and no one is swimming here. People only stroll or cycle along the paved coastal path. The smell is very strong. Stopping by a bench, you can't help but notice it constantly; can't stop thinking about it. It hovers somewhere between a pleasant scent that evokes the feeling of holidays and travel and a stench (of decay? Fish? Rot?). At night, this smell rises up the cliff and reaches our residency as well. How wonderful is the night. After watching football, we stepped outside. Half past midnight. There was no one around, at least not near the residency, and the island of Gotland seemed to reveal a truer face, one less shaped by the tourist season.



Photo courtesy of Ramunė Brundzaitė

I exchange messages with Sabine, a poet from Germany whom I met this year at a poetry festival in Iași. I tell her I wish she were here, writing her blog every day just as she did in Romania, so that later I could read it with the help of automatic translation from German into English (it's not that bad). The trouble with literary residencies and festivals is that they are where I meet the most interesting people. During those few days together, we grow close, as though we had known each other all our lives. But residencies end, festivals end, and we scatter. For a while, we keep in touch, sending messages, sharing

photos, and occasionally calling each other. Yet gradually the connection thins and frays until those people remain only as memories, names on Facebook, *somebody that I used to know*.

I wonder how Slavica, the Serbian, with whom I spent time here four years ago, is doing. I should text her. There are far too few people from my past whom I contact out of the blue, just to say, "I've been thinking about you. How are you?" I could've texted or called Aidas Marčėnas in recent years; I could've asked how he was doing and what filled his days. But I didn't.

"Summer, summer is wonderful. As soon as it ends, I start waiting for the next summer," says my new friend Shota, a poet from Georgia. Shota is the only resident who smokes (normal, old-fashioned cigarettes). At lunch, he slices himself a large piece of meat. I feel less self-conscious around him, about not being quite so Western, so elegant, the sort of person who cooks proper meals and serves them to others. Shota speaks English with difficulty, but he tries very hard, and whenever he can't find a word, he makes up for it with expressive gestures. Then again, I realize that if we spoke in his native language, I would know a different person. As it is, we are left with conversations that float along the surface.

"Are you ever afraid that your writing won't be interesting to other people?" I ask a Norwegian screenwriter as we cycle along the coastal path.

"I think it's important to be open and honest with yourself, not to cut corners. Then it'll be interesting to others as well."

This stay is different from the last one. When I was in Visby four years ago, there were fewer residents, and they mostly kept to themselves. Apart from the occasional walk I took with the Serbian translator, we rarely spent time together. This year, however, I was invited to a communal dinner almost as soon as I arrived. Every evening, in the residency library on the second floor, we watched the World Cup. When there was no football on, we watched films about Bergman or films made by Bergman himself. Together we even took the town bus to the island of Fårö twice. There, we rented bicycles and set off in search of Bergman's house, the rauks (natural rock sculptures shaped by wind and sea), and the island's other secrets.

Today is hot in Visby at 27 °C, while the seawater is still only 12–14 °C (on the other side of Gotland, it's 19 °C, which is hardly fair!). So we cycled out to a limestone quarry for a swim. Nearby, a car race was taking place: lots of spectators, lots of noise, lots of dust.

"How differently people imagine leisure," remarked Kjersti, the Norwegian writer cycling beside me.

The water in the quarry was turquoise and at the perfect temperature. On the way, we passed several trucks pumping water from the quarry. One of the drivers told us that the water would be used to fill swimming pools. Gotland has limited water resources, especially in summer, and public service campaigns urge everyone to conserve water, with slogans such as "Let your car be the dirtiest on Gotland!"

On the bus to the island of Fårö, Kjersti and I talk.

"And you?" she asks, after telling me about her son and daughter.

"No, I don't have children. At least not yet, I hope," I reply, repeating the answer I had already formulated for others, and change the subject because I feel a sharp pain in my chest.

"How old are you?" she asks next.

I tell her and wonder whether she thinks I am older or younger than I am, whether she is now thinking about my chances of becoming pregnant. How I wish she would answer, "Everything will be fine. You still have your whole life ahead of you." But would that be true, or simply comforting and deceptive? All the residents here have children. They are a little older than I am, and most of their children have already finished school. The Norwegian's daughter has just passed her driving test; the Swedish writer's son is studying in Spain. They spend a lot of time talking to one another about their children. I stay quiet. It occurred to me that residencies like this one, which host people for three or five weeks, are probably easiest to attend when your children are already grown up. Or if you don't have children at all.



Photo courtesy of Ramunė Brundzaitė

The time I spend with the other residents, and our conversations and excursions around the island,

remind me somewhat of my student days in Udine, of the time I spent with my roommates, especially because I am once again reading and selecting texts I wrote back then for a book. Of course, we were twenty at the time, whereas the residents gathered here are in their forties, fifties, and beyond. Completely different stages of life. Yet being here makes me feel much the same. As though we have been pulled out of our very different lives, jobs, and routines, separated from the people close to us, and dropped onto an island, into a residency perched on that island, where for three or five weeks we can create our own time together. I see my fears recurring. I see how difficult it is before I get to know people, how I force myself to smile and be polite, to remember the kinds of questions I should ask when meeting someone for the first time. How I still feel awkward in the shared kitchen, still slightly embarrassed that I eat things that are easy to prepare, that I don't really know how to cook, that I keep dropping things and spilling food on my clothes. What has changed? I no longer drink (I regularly join online meetings for people with alcohol dependency). I am less categorical, less certain of my own exceptionalism. I'm painfully aware that the amount of time left to me, to all of us, has diminished. And when you stop to think about it, what truly matters?

The height of Stockholm Week. This weekend is the last chance to feel as though you are in Ibiza while in Visby. Club music pours out from Kallis, the beach club, from morning onwards. The problem is that it carries across the entire old town. Open your room window, and you practically find yourself in the club. The sea has finally warmed up (18 °C), so I invited the poet from Georgia to go for a swim with me. The poet waded in and decided it was too cold for him. I, meanwhile, went swimming. Afterward, we sat on the shore while the club music throbbed nearby. On the way home, we stopped by the botanical garden, the bass still pounding in the background. Even with the windows shut, I can hear everything! I cannot concentrate on work. Perhaps I should get on my bicycle and tour the key Stockholm Week hotspots, gathering material for future texts?



Photo courtesy of Ramunė Brundzaitė

Short glittery dresses, high-heeled shoes with golden straps winding around calves. Tipsy girls sitting on the sand, stroking the dog of a man who looks like Hulk Hogan. A stage for dancing, multicolored

smoke, champagne glasses, loud music, mobile phones held aloft, livestreaming the party to social media. The dress code is "*golden touch*." Signs read, "VIP tables and guestlist." Beside the club stand a limousine and two police cars. So far, there is less action than there is noise, spreading throughout Visby's old town.

Similar music came from the yachts moored farther away. There, too, people dressed to impress were hosting private parties, with champagne bottles on every table. For a moment, I felt the urge to be on one of those yachts, dressed like them, drinking champagne, getting intoxicated alongside them. What if I bought a bottle of champagne or wine and opened it with dinner? No one here knows that I have an addiction. I shook the thought off. I returned to the residency and felt as though I had avoided danger, as if a car had passed me at high speed, missing me by a hair's breadth.

My last day in Visby. I wake up, no longer bothered by the bells that ring every half hour. I meet up with a former classmate whom I have not seen in more than twenty years. She now lives in Sweden and works as a doctor in a small town near Örebro; she came to Gotland for a holiday. She saw my photos on Facebook and messaged me. It feels so surreal to meet after all these years in such an unexpected place. We cycle along the path by the sea, eat ice cream, and talk as if those twenty-odd years had never passed at all.



Photo courtesy of Ramunė Brundzaitė

For my last dinner, I order pizzas. The pizzas, ordered through a Scandinavian app, take two hours to arrive. My Swedish-speaking colleagues offer to call the pizzeria and try to find out what happened to them. Eventually, three enormous pizzas are delivered, and we eat and laugh, recalling all the mishaps and absurd moments of the past three weeks. Tiina, an Estonian, says she has written a poem for me! We read it in three languages (with artificial intelligence providing translations into English and Lithuanian). Kjersti presents me with a handmade postcard signed by everyone, with a pressed clover leaf and a tiny daisy attached.

I know that a great deal of uncertainty awaits me when I return to Vilnius. I will have to look for a new job (on the last day of spring, the entire department was laid off, and I had worked there for nine years). I don't know what my position will be this autumn (if I even get one), who my colleagues will be, where I will be working, or whether I will enjoy what I do. On the other hand, one ending means another beginning. If I had not been laid off, I would not have been able to come to Visby for three weeks. I would not have met Christine, Shota, the Norwegian screenwriter, Kjersti, Tiina, and all the others. It is strange how chance brings people together in life. Or perhaps a higher power, as they say in meetings for people struggling with addiction.

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Lina Simutytė

22 October 2026
Fiction



Photo by Nerijus Cibulskas

Youth

Elena was a teenager whose maturing womanhood made itself known every month by five days of bleeding. She knew when it would begin and when it would end, and that was one of the few constants in her life. Elena liked the word *cycle*: every month, as though with a stick in the sand or a piece of chalk on the pavement, it traced a temporary circle in which she felt safer than she did in her own room, the room that her humiliated, strangely flustered parents could enter at any moment to ask to borrow the very money they had given her for small expenses. Her mother continued selling cosmetics and looking after her friends' children, while her father took on extra repair jobs around the neighbourhood. They were constantly looking for other ways to make money, but never learned how to save.

Indian summer arrived, and one of her father's colleagues took the family to an isolated farmstead outside the city, surrounded by vast stretches of apple orchards. First, they were introduced to the owner of the orchard. She was large and tall, and so wrinkled and scarred that she resembled a canvas sack stuffed with dried apples, liable at any moment to split open and fall apart. It was not only the woman herself that was scarred, but her voice too, rough as sandpaper. As she walked through the enormous farmhouse, opening and closing heavy wooden doors that creaked and rattled, and recounting disjointed stories about the people who had lived there, the pumice stone of her scarred voice seemed to scour away at the walls beneath their several layers of paint, walls hung with portraits of the dead in oval frames – it seemed that the old woman, who had lived here for many years, might have erased some of the building's spaces or rooms, or perhaps even other people who had once lived there.

Elena couldn't take her eyes off the woman's fingers – they were disproportionately slender for her hands, not only because of the many gleaming rings set with tiny stones that resembled the roe of shimmering fish, but also because of her ivory-coloured skin, which instantly mesmerised Elena in the same way as an old film her father had rented on video, which she would often replay in her mind when she couldn't sleep.

Elena went to the farmstead several times with her parents and Nikita, and later they would drop her off there on her own. She picked apples, sorted them into different boxes and stuck labels on them with the names of the varieties, but in reality she was making plans to escape – plans that would allow

her to break away from home and, once she had earned enough money, leave for the capital. Elena knew the way to the bus stop, had calculated how long it would take her to reach it on foot, and agreed to work there at weekends – helping the old owner look after the house and orchard and prepare apples to be taken to the juice press. At that point, she would probably have accepted any offer that allowed her to escape her gossip-ridden town. She had lost all hope: remembering that filthy crows nested in the strip of trees separating the music school from the park, she decided to test one of her mother's absurd superstitions: if a bird marked you, you would become rich. And so, on one of those countless occasions when she couldn't stop thinking of ways to get rich, Elena stood in the triangle of crows until she had been shat on from head to toe. Of course, it didn't help – on the contrary, her mother complained about the unexpected load of washing and the detergent it had used up.

Even so, she lasted only a few weekends in that house. When the two of them were alone, the old woman would sit down at a large dressing table with its many lockable drawers, pull-out mirrors of different magnifications, metal chests and wooden boxes carved with scenes of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, and perform her evening toilette. As she slipped off her rings one by one and placed them in different boxes, Elena could see up close the lions and panthers emerging from the surfaces of the wooden carvings, the walnut trees and towering palms, climbing roses and birds, their feathers coated in layers of varnish and gold. There were pomegranates, bright water lilies, fountains sprayed in vivid colours and vines inlaid with tiny stones that could be mistaken for snakes – in the carving on one of the boxes, flora and fauna merged into a single whole, at once spilling luxuriantly from the amphora depicted there and entwining themselves around it like a magnificent lichen.

Once she had put away her countless pieces of jewellery in their designated drawers and boxes, the woman would let down her hair. Her long grey hair settled over her shoulders like a dirty cloud saturated with smoke, which Elena then had to carefully break apart with a comb. The closer she came to the woman, the stronger the pungent smell of medicine, liquorice and decay became. The smell had permeated every corner of the house – the heavy, suffocating bedding stuffed with chicken feathers, the hollows of the silver spoons, every cupboard in the kitchen and the wardrobe in the bedroom, from which the old woman would take out dresses and ask Elena to iron them for the following day.

But her evening toilette didn't end with her hair combed and the next day's dress prepared. The culmination was her gaping mouth, from which Elena, using a special pair of tweezers, had to remove one by one all thirty-two worn teeth screwed into her jaws, wipe them clean with a cloth soaked in alcohol, and place them in the designated box – where she discovered several more spare sets of teeth. The stench from the woman's open mouth was so strong that Elena held her breath every time. But the woman would stare at Elena's tightly pressed lips and ask her to smile so that she could inspect her teeth and remember that she herself had once had teeth like those – back in the days she recalled with the deepest nostalgia and would gladly have turned into objects, trophies to be arranged behind glass in elegant display cabinets beneath a label that read *youth*.

For lunch, Elena would make stews and soups according to the woman's recipes – vegetables that had been frozen no one knew how many years ago, tipped into a pot of boiling water, would soon disintegrate and come to resemble the contents of the woman's diaper. Several times a day, Elena would hear her draw oxygen in through her nose and hold her breath, as though oxygen were something edible, something that had to be digested; for a few seconds later, having passed the gulp of fresh air through her failing digestive system, with its paper-thin liver and shrivelled stomach, she would expel it through her anus. The loud sound echoing through the rooms would signal to Elena that she could start running the bath and prepare the diaper, while the usual smell of liquorice, medicine and decay was joined by the stench of decomposed vegetables and ammonia.

The pungent nausea of those days was soothed by the orchard – the complete opposite of the house, its old owner, the empty cavities in her stinking mouth and the diaper soaked with faeces, dissolved salts and layers of intestinal gas. As Elena picked the gleaming apples, their thick, almost lemon-yellow skins revealing patches of crystallised sugar beneath, she would think that the hundred-year-old apple trees had seen everything a thousand times over. They had absorbed the storms that had swept through here and torn the roofs from the buildings of the settlement; countless times their trunks had bent, knelt and lain prostrate before the shapeless yet all-powerful bodies of the elements, only to straighten again. Once the cycle had traced another circle in the earth with an invisible finger, the apple trees would shed their leaves again, let them rot, and then ripen fragrant apples whose freshness could be matched neither by the fruit of the great pear trees in the yard, nor by creamy bananas, nor by tinned pineapple.

The White Transparents, light and almost papery, as though fashioned from gusts of wind and summer rain. The Canada Reinettes, massive as rubies. The Raspberry apples, acquiring a marble sheen in the full glare of the sun, their skins suffused with spreading crimson. The autumn apples, conical and ribbed, with thick, waxy skins streaked with pink that seeped towards the flesh like watercolour soaking into heavy paper. Countless thousands of apples, hundreds of different varieties, theories of their origins and instructions for their care, which she could read on the signs hanging nearby – and one Elena. For the first time, away from home, closer to another world. All she had to do

was press herself against an apple tree and close her eyes – on those long October afternoons filled with a vibrating electric rustle, the orchard itself became an elemental force, more thrilling than any erotic scene she had ever seen in a film or imagined in her mind. And so she was never alone here – the orchard was a place where she could become an inseparable part of everything.

When she returned to the house in the evening, the woman would greet her with an even more pungent stench. After changing her diaper, Elena would prepare dinner, and during the meal she would begin to feel tired – she would go to lie down before it was even dark, and the woman, her face strangely illuminated, would cover the teenager with heavy bedding. Elena knew that she watched her sleep, but she couldn't resist – a cool drowsiness scented with apple flesh would approach like an inevitability she had no strength to fight. Her sleep was deep, her dreams damp and sticky, bursting with apple juice. She dreamed of herself grown together with the trees; she could feel the branches bending from within into incomprehensible shapes and forms, reaching into cavities that had opened in the trunk, dripping with slick, gluey resin, and filling them with the sugar of the fruit. Elena wanted it never to end. The dreams were a sweet ecstasy induced by some obscure mixture of medicines the old woman had given her, to which she became instantly addicted and had no desire to give up.

Elena would wake drenched in sweat, while the woman sat in a round armchair with wooden armrests, smiling as though she knew what the teenager had experienced. At those moments Elena would feel a tenderness towards the old mistress of the house – as though she had unlocked one of the rooms erased by the pumice stone of her scarred voice. But one time she woke to find the woman's fingers in her mouth. Elena's body was still asleep, petrified like a lump of resin or a giant piece of amber, while the old woman pinned her against the mattress, preventing her from closing her mouth. Her ring-covered hand, with its strong fingers, resembled the tentacles of a squid pulled from the water, clotted with roe, probing her mouth for open mollusc shells containing pearls. Elena screamed and hurled curses into her face, but the woman couldn't understand them. Elena's lips, tongue and entire throat were paralysed.

Her body woke in the night. Blood returned to her lips, her jaw regained its usual shape, and her tongue could move again. By then, the woman was asleep in her own room. Holding her breath, Elena sat up and quietly climbed out of bed. In the bathroom, she was afraid to turn on the light, not because she might wake the woman. She was afraid to see what she had done. The lights built into the mirror didn't come on immediately, so Elena had time to feel the throbbing pain. From her jaw it spread to her ears, from her ears to her forehead, and from her forehead it travelled down the vertebrae of her spine, into her pelvic bones and legs. As the light grew brighter, she saw her face. It resembled a Raspberry apple, suffused with spreading crimson, except that the red came not from its waxy skin but from dried blood from her gums. She opened her mouth. Two molars were missing. The same number as the rings set with glittering gemstones that Elena found slipped onto her fingers.

But no one believed her. Not her mother, before whose eyes the mistress of the house had once again transformed into an innocent old lady. *Maybe those teeth would have fallen out anyway; you eat all sorts of rubbish.* Nor her father, who brought her home on Sunday along with twenty tonnes of apples Nikita had picked. Together they unloaded them from the lorry beside the remaining furniture from the closed-down second-hand shop. Nikita intended to sell the apples, and her father said: *You're lazy, so you make up all sorts of excuses just to get out of working. If he weren't ill, your brother would have stayed.*

Elena kept the rings in her backpack and showed them to no one. Eventually, she dared to climb up into her uncle's attic. If the carpet – the only possession from the days when Ksaveras had been a designer that he had not traded for ink – had not been nailed to the floor, it would have torn itself free and flown away – just like Elena when she found out where she could get the most money for the rings.

And one night, when the house had fallen so deeply asleep that it seemed to be snoring, she put on her father's steel-toed work boots and went down into the former shop. In the half-light gleamed the apples Nikita had picked, still brimming with freshness and carrying the scent of the hot August winds – apples he intended to take to the press and sell the juice at the market – and she couldn't resist. She stamped on them for as long as she had the strength. She stamped on them imagining the whole world, in which she longed to be alone but no longer could: the world had already poisoned her. She stamped and kicked at them all – the light, papery White Transparents, the Canada Reinettes gleaming like rubies, the Raspberry apples coated in melted pink wax, the conical, ribbed autumn apples – one after another the apples vanished, dissolved, burst beneath her feet. Elena was part of everything, an inseparable whole that she wanted to crush, though she didn't yet know that this was impossible.

More than anything, what she really wanted to stamp out was her blossoming womanhood – the surges of desire she felt so distinctly as apple juice ran down her thighs, the sticky dreams filled with heat and the wetness gathering between her legs as she imagined touching the firm trunks of trees. She wanted to pluck off her rounding breasts and buttocks, every swelling curve – to gouge them out with woodcarving chisels and leave them to rot. She already knew what old age was and how it stank; she had seen what it meant to wither and conceal a failing body beneath glittering gemstones. She

already understood that she could condemn herself for ever to watching younger women and to the searing daily confirmation that everything ends with youth, with that blossoming, poisonous lily-of-the-valley flower whose scent, if inhaled for too long, begins to smell like urine.

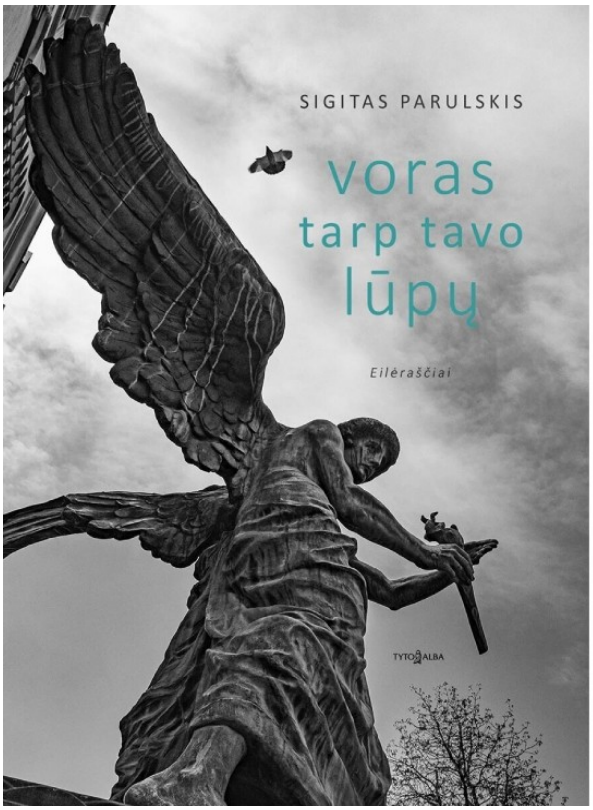
That night Elena knew so much that she promised herself she would never become a woman and would avoid everything associated with it. But she was lying to herself, just as experienced juice makers lie when they swear to their customers: *no sugar, no preservatives*. She didn't yet know the most important thing – that her body, swollen with the desire that frightened her, would soon become a chisel she would use to carve herself into other people's skin, trying to turn passion into a porcelain figurine and place it alongside glass perfume bottles, naïve love letters kissed with easily extended lipsticks, and gleaming eyeliner pencils in the columbarium of youth.

After all, her youth was only just beginning.

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Things Were Shitty Even Before the Big Bang

28 October 2026
Reviews



SIGITAS
PARULSKIS

Voras tarp tavo lūpų

Sigitas Parulskis is one of Lithuania's most prolific writers, having made his debut with the poetry collection *Iš ilgesio visa tai* (All that is due to longing, 1990). Any introduction to Parulskis must take his generation into account. A closer look at Lithuanian poetry from the past three decades reveals that the generation of poets born in the 1960s is among the most influential and widely acclaimed in contemporary Lithuanian literature. Having grown up under the Soviet regime but still relatively young when Lithuania regained its independence, this generation feels no nostalgia for the former era and bears witness to the country's double "post-" condition: postmodernism and postcommunism, both of which shaped various aspects of life, including the arts. Therefore, it is no surprise that Parulskis's poetry is often described as postmodern, marked by a distrust of, and a critical stance toward, human ideals and professed values. His work reinterprets religious and mythological narratives, reflects on the collapse of agrarian culture, which had served as a foundation for older generations, and explores its lingering remnants. The resulting lack of values causes the narrator pain, horror, suffering, and helplessness. The language of the poems is rough, unafraid of vulgarity or irony. At the same time, there are moments of open longing, unshielded by irony, for all that is absent and unattainable. Where does this come from? From the experience of growing up within a communist system, serving in the Soviet army, confronting the great tragedies of the twentieth century, and being unable to find answers to pressing existential questions.

In *Voras tarp tavo lūpų* (A spider between your lips), Parulskis's voice remains instantly recognizable, both in terms of content and style. Yet the changes brought about by the considerable gap between his poetry collections are equally apparent. In this book, Parulskis continues to immortalize the past in verse, to provoke through his writing about the present, and to look toward the future, which invariably ends in death. Each of these directions of the poetic gaze is painful.

Throughout the collection, doubts about humanity repeatedly surface. Although people are not inherently evil, life seems to corrupt them. In the poem "Klasiokai" (Classmates), the narrator reflects that each person is born with a blank canvas that is later stained with bodily fluids (p. 60). This idea is complemented by the recurring motif of trash. In the poem "Šiukšlės" (Trash), the narrator admits that throughout his life, he carries himself piece by piece to the dump (p. 70). The image of trash is one of the most expansive in the book, inviting deeper reflection. According to the philosopher and professor Mintautas Gutauskas, trash (which was once a useful object or part of one but has since

become unnecessary) has turned into a fundamental phenomenon of human existence, capable of occupying a place within human consciousness: "... on one side, ordinary consciousness, which is limited to its field of attention and pushes trash beyond it; on the other, hyperactive ecological consciousness, which understands that trash does not disappear beyond the horizon but continues to wander uncontrollably around the planet in various forms."[1] In other words, the narrator deliberately chooses to see within himself that which many people overlook: things that are no longer needed, discarded, corrupted, or broken. Personality traits, intellect, and erudition (p. 33), qualities ordinarily valued and celebrated, are described as inner trash. Parulskis transfers a mode of thinking enabled by the Anthropocene into poetry, transforming hyperactive ecological consciousness into a hyperactive critical consciousness and, in doing so, finds yet another way to express his distrust of what humanity chooses to exalt.

Art should stand as a counterweight to human imperfection; however, this poetry collection doubts that. In the poems "Tiesa mus išlaisvina" (The truth sets us free) and "Tuščias avilys" (Empty hive), the narrator is self-aware because he reflects on the act of writing a poem and concludes that "nothing good would come of it" (p. 13). He questions his entire bibliography (p. 66) and dismisses all words as hollow. For many years, Parulskis was a literary critic, and although he no longer writes reviews, he has consistently maintained certain convictions. The collection contains many ideas he has held for decades. Reviewing books by the canonical poets Marcelijus Martinaitis and Sigitas Geda in 1998, Parulskis characterized the predicament of his own generation: all that remained to them were the "sucked dry, hollow words"[2] left behind by their predecessors. In a review of Dalia Bozytė's book, published in the same year, he questioned the very notion of the professional poet, arguing that such a thing does not exist.[3] The same idea reappears in the poem "Poetai profesionalai" (Professional poets): "there is no such thing; a poet is an eternal / amateur, one who enjoys, one / who savors, tastes, overeats and shits himself, / one who falls under the table and rises again" (p. 23). I have deliberately quoted more than necessary because the passage reveals an attempt to deny poets their professionalism as well as to bring them down to earth, to restore their humanity. I admit that this poem stands out somewhat awkwardly within the collection and is mildly irritating, much like "Bandymas būti šiuolaikiniu" (Trying to be contemporary). It tries a little too hard to demonstrate its own exceptionalism and disregard for contemporary fashions, yet it serves an important purpose. Strangely enough, a romanticized and spiritualized view of poetry and poets still persists in Lithuania, even among younger poets. The narrator's message is that poetry is nothing sacred. He shifts it from the realm of the sacrum to that of the profanum through provocative, edgy, politically incorrect imagery that the editors would probably hesitate to present to an international audience. Thus, although it is difficult to take pleasure in either the poetics or the narrator's point of view, we, as readers, have to acknowledge the poem's message.

Humans and the art they create are this particular way because, in the collection, the world itself is shitty, full of suffering and pain. The world's evil is generalized and abstracted. The book does not conform to the dominant tendencies of contemporary Lithuanian poetry, offering no specific references to present-day realities such as the wars in Ukraine or Palestine. A refugee from war appears only once, and even then without further elaboration. Humans are trapped in the world like dung beetles and must carry on with their shitty tasks day after day (as in the poem "darbas kaip visi" [a job like any other]). And if humanity were not inherently evil, then the world would have been doomed from the start. Existential anguish can be found in all of Parulskis's books, yet this time his gaze seems to extend somewhat further, beyond the confines of the individual's inner world. In this respect, *A Spider Between Your Lips* feels like a breath of fresh air. It does not speak of the moral degradation of our age or the decline of values (as some of Parulskis's reviewers have argued), nor does it idealize the past. There is nothing new because things have never been better. The poem "Big Bang" should put such interpretations to rest once and for all. There, the narrator describes existence before the creation of the universe: "Only darkness and pain / pain piercing and uniform / from end to end" (p. 62). Therefore, there is no reason to proclaim an apocalypse (as right-wing political activists are often inclined to do) if this condition has persisted throughout the entire lifespan of the universe. The narrator yearns to escape it, striving toward the light, yet never succeeds. In other words, humanity longs for a light that no one has ever experienced, while things were already shitty long before the Big Bang.

Time is a crucial theme in this book. The passage of time is registered through memory and the transformations people undergo in their lives. The narrator encounters signs of time's relentless advance: parents die, and after that, there is nothing (p. 27), children grow up, which means he himself is drawing closer to the end (pp. 44–45). The inseparability of past and present is captured in the poem "Klasiokai" (Classmates): "children's faces frozen into the old people's faces ... young and old at the same time" (p. 60). The friends of the narrator's youth become mirrors reflecting the continuity of time. In a few poems, the narrator shares memories of his younger years: a friend killed in the Soviet-

Afghan War and the eccentric, humorously portrayed villagers of “Ežeras prisimena pavasarį” (The lake remembers spring). This poem is intertextually linked to Parulskis’s novel *Kaip aš mečiau* (How I quit, 2024), repeating the scene involving the fisherman Ladzis and the way human lives end and communities disappear. This shows that Parulskis’s prose and poetry are not separate domains but form a unified creative whole. The poems “Skylės pilnos kišenių” (Holes full of pockets) and “Paskutinė nuotrauka” (The last photograph) declare that everything is temporary, and there is no way to resist it. In the latter poem, we see the abundant listing of nouns, which is characteristic of Parulskis’s earlier poetry. In the poem “dantys” (teeth), the narrator acknowledges that he is weaker than death, and there are even traces of a certain reconciliation with it: “I am stockpiling reserves of dreams / for the sleep of eternity” (p. 46).

The collection also includes photographs taken by the author himself. Some resonate with the book’s recurring themes of memory and the passage of time. They show sculptures that immortalize their subjects yet have themselves been worn down by time, becoming chipped, weathered, and covered in moss. In this way, the images highlight a paradox – even objects created to preserve memories are not immune to time’s effects. Other photographs repeatedly feature wooden objects: old, worn, and no longer useful. A chair standing by a river, a damaged wooden chest, a well, which is most likely unused, a fragment of a wooden structure held together with nails, and ruins. The photographs suggest that neither stone nor wood can escape decay.

Parulskis’s latest poetry collection, *A Spider Between Your Lips*, is a painful book about the passage of time, the decay of all things, human imperfection, and the world’s darkness and suffering. These are conditions that people must learn to live with. Even though literature is called into question and words seem hollow, this book feels like an act of resistance, an attempt to discover something deeper and more meaningful. As the book returns to the Big Bang, it rekindles the light so desperately needed.