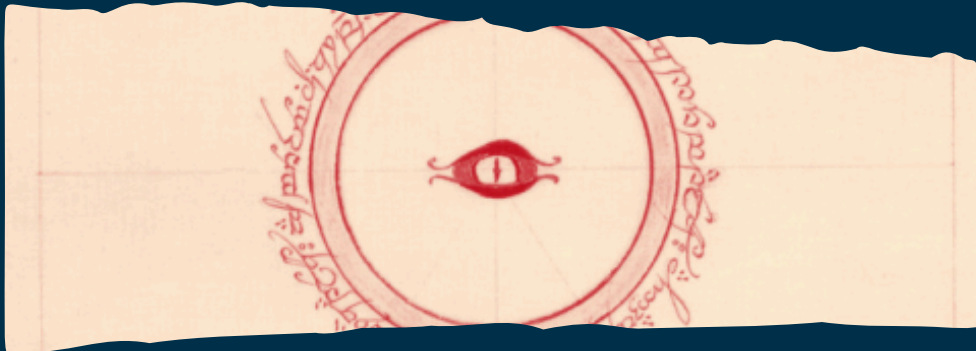
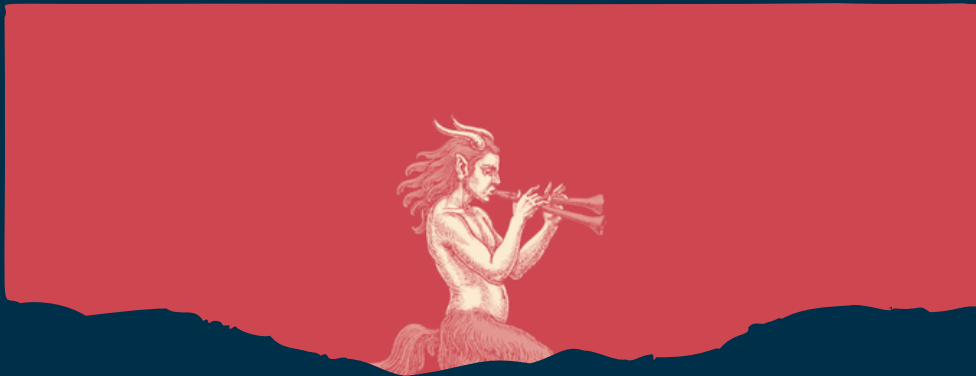


DISCOURSE

Magazine



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Genre Edition

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Embrace Complexity

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Letter from the Editors

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the second issue of the Discourse Magazine dedicated to genre fiction!

Genre fiction is sometimes overlooked in academia, as if mass readership and commercial success necessarily imply the lack of depth. Yet, most of us can think of a genre book very dear to us. Maybe it is a book you read as a child that sparked your interest in reading. Maybe it is a book you bonded with your friends over, discussing theories deep into the night. Maybe it is a book whose world and story provided you with a shelter, carrying you through hard and uncertain times. Maybe it is your guilty pleasure book — no judgement here.

When I was nine years old and forbidden to stay up late, I bought a small flashlight to secretly read *Sherlock Holmes* stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, hiding under a blanket with the book over my head. As I know now, it was no secret to my mother — only a trick to make reading feel like a forbidden fruit and thus irresistible to a child. Eventually, I persuaded my friends to read *Sherlock Holmes*, until it became so popular in our class that at least half of the students wanted to become detectives.

Ten years later, Russia started its full-scale war against Ukraine, and I was moving from one place to another every other month. Anxiety, fear, and uncertainty filled my life — I needed an escape, so I turned to J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. In their immersive worldbuilding, their companionship, and their hope, these books carried me through the darkness of 2022. Sometimes, we need to dream of a better world — filled with magic, truth, and honour, where the evil is punished, and the good prevails. Yet, it is important

to remember that the escape offered by literature is not meant to turn us away from life forever, but to renew our strength to face the reality we live in.

The reality is this: wars, genocides, the rise of autocracy, and populism. For those who are ready to face it, our editor, Olga Donskaia, has compiled a list of books on autocracy, dictatorship, and propaganda — the dark forces of our time that deny knowledge and agency, and must therefore be resisted through them. Without further ado, I present to you the list: *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* by Timothy Snyder; *How to Stand Up to a Dictator* by Maria Ressa; *This is not Propaganda* by Peter Pomerantsev; *Autocracy, Inc.: The Dictators Who Want to Run the World* and *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* by Anne Applebaum. We hope these books will encourage reflection, discussion, and awareness in times when they are needed so much.

But now, let us return to what this issue is really about: the imaginative worlds of genre fiction. In the pages that follow, you will find reflections on genre fiction by Vilnius University students in various forms: poetry, prose, a dramatic text, and translations. The theme of genre literature was not obligatory, so alongside these explorations, you will also encounter works that follow their own creative paths. Regardless, I am grateful to everyone who contributed — you shape the creative discourse of our university.

This issue is special for two more reasons. First, along the pages, you will find the interview with an American poet, Malachi Black, who was among the keynote speakers of the international student conference English Studies 2025: Discourse and Society. In this interview, he shares his anticipations regarding the future of English studies, his reflections on his creative journey, connections to Lithuania, his role as a creative writing teacher, his advice for beginning writers, and much more. We are extremely thankful for this conversation — it was such a delight to have it.

The second reason is that this issue begins a tradition of a high school contest, *Future Voices in English*. In the Appendix, you will find the 10 best works sent to us by high school students. Thank you for your bravery in sharing your works — I know it can be intimidating — and I hope you will soon join us in the English Philology program to further develop your talent. Finally, thank you to our readers for joining us on this journey through imagination, creativity, and critical thought. Your engagement and curiosity

make this magazine possible, and we hope these pages inspire you to explore, reflect, and create in your own way. Enjoy the issue!

Sofiia Kalenska, Editor-in-Chief

Prose

Living Through Horror

*Creative essay by Ugnė Anisimovaitė,
a recent English Philology graduate*

Everything you fear is served for you to eat. Everything you loathe is slowly carved into your soul. Surviving your demons, evading the knives grazing your dreams. Unraveling with every sentence. Feeling their breath against your skin as you hide beneath the blanket. Sinking deeper, descending into the caves below.

Your shadow mocks you in the mirror. You can't escape the paranoia, doubting everything you are before you even reach the middle.

Legends crawl out from beneath your bed. The details you never saw are now shrieking in your eyes. You feel everything you are and everything you will never be. Spiders are bursting from your ears as your gaze is glued to the bunny, the unlit cigarette trembling in your hand.

Empathy is forced upon you. Either take it or become the demon you used to fear. Feel the pain of others. See their lives within yours. Hold them in an embrace, protecting them from horrors they never should have experienced. Remember the cruelty of people. Remember the pain of others. Remember the shadows dancing in their eyes. Notice the red balloons floating above their houses.

The butterfly is displayed for you to comprehend, how every decision could lead you to your doom, how one act of ignorance could ruin someone's life. Every decision has consequences.

Horror purifies souls, freeing them from demons and preparing them for the worst.

Horror is my poison. Forcing everything I fear into my soul.

Horror is my cure. Reminding me to treasure every moment that I have.

The White Death

*Short story by Edgaras Bolšakovas,
a PhD Philosophy student*

An old man enters the room. I hate that head with its unkempt hair, asymmetrical moustache, and those stupid little eyes. I hate that bald crown. I hate that body with its flour-covered ears and hands. After he pets my ears or back, I have to wash myself for a long time. I watch him quietly as he methodically places birch logs into the stove. Now and then, he glances up at me. He hisses in some snake-like tongue. Pspssssss — what is that supposed to mean? Is it possible that this human, thanks to some incomprehensible fluke, suspects — or even knows — that five and a half thousand years ago, when humankind was granted the rank of sovereign over all material life, only then could he unequivocally call himself the Lord of the animal kingdom, the reflection of his Majesty, His favourite creation. Is it possible that this humanoid, thanks to some incomprehensible fluke, suspects — or even knows — that the blame for losing that centuries-long status lies not with the serpent Lucifer, not with the Horned One, or any other devil, but with us — the descendants of the ancient royal race, carriers of white knowledge, lords of white death? I doubt it.

But I do know that his silly grin will soon vanish. The time of the Ninth Renewal is near. This time, I'll make the old man sacrifice a bit more than his best friend.

With a slow motion of his palm, he wipes away the sweat from his forehead. Little lumps of dough, softened from flour and sweat, dangle in his hair. The human pulls a black ceramic pot from under the table. He places potatoes in it. He grabs an old copper bucket,

pours water in, and sets it to simmer on the stove. It's getting too hot for me, so I leap onto the bed and continue watching this scene I've seen a thousand times before.

It may seem, from the outside, that humans rule now, command the animal kingdom as if they are the final stop on the evolutionary chain. It is not true. There is no such thing as an autonomous human, a human unto itself. Their pale existence could only spread so far due to countless alliances, which they still fail to comprehend thanks to our deep and tireless labour.

But there were other times. Humans had developed a powerful form of hybridization known to many of our kind as centaurs. Allied with horses, they conquered the face of the world. Four powerful legs carried them hundreds of kilometers. Armed with nimble hands, capable of wielding metal, stone, and fire. And most importantly—herd instinct. In groups, humans could kill even the greatest beasts. Dragons, mammoths, werewolves, yetis — all eventually fell upon their eviscerated entrails.

The mother enters the room. She is always with a worried face, her eyes are slightly wet. She cracks open a window. She takes the potatoes off the stove and drains them into an old trough. The hot potatoes roll onto the table, and next to them she sets a bowl of flour. She dumps the flour into an old oak bowl that smells of birch, whisks, and then starts mashing the potatoes. After kneading the sticky mass, she begins to form dough sausages. In a few hours, a brood of children will swarm the house. Oven-baked dumplings with bacon-cream sauce and chopped green onions will be served tonight. The room fills with a delicious scent. I fall asleep. I dream of centaurs.

That era was unbearable. Undignified. We could no longer allow ourselves to be degraded. What had to happen, finally did — the Great Universal Assembly. From all corners of the world, our entire species gathered at what was then the center of the Earth. Endless streams of milk, mice, and freshly hatched chicks flowed like the Nile. The Assembly lasted long. Eventually after endless meditations, disputes, and even covert Method trials against our own, three categorical imperatives emerged:

Destroy the alliance between humans and horses.

Uproot the human instinct for herding.

Exploit human dexterity and force them to worship Us.

Victory came swiftly, almost effortlessly. Using our Method¹, we clouded human minds, making them forget their closest earthly allies — those sugar-loving, hoof-stomping giants. The centaur epoch ended. Our epoch began. We became Gods.

They built pyramids for us. They carved our images atop cliffs. They sacrificed the hearts of their bravest enemies, the most beautiful women, and the most gifted children. Humanity was fully subject to our will.

What should have been eternity, alas, was temporary. Somewhere, a mistake was made. The Method turned out to be unpolished. A miscalculation of mere millimetres in the blueprint was all it took. Many of our scholars still study the error. But what was our hammer blow? What dimmed our golden twilight? It was Them.

Children rush into the room. I wake up. I watch as they gather around their mother, hug her, nestle their heads against her body. This affection is fake. Their eyes wander toward the dumplings in the oven and steaming bacon sauce. Except the youngest—Jonas—who, eyes closed, as if in prayer, clings to his mother's waist. His gaze is always solemn, full of sorrow. I feel his love and yearning for his parents, even when he's miles away in the field. He is the perfect prey. Jonas is a pure, innocent heart². The perfect sacrifice for the Ninth Circle Renewal. He had become dangerously close to the old dog. They'd spend hours

¹ Are you curious what the Method is? It's a complex technique — demanding infinite precision and long training, stimulating cognitive and psychosomatic centers. Refined over thousands of years, yet perfected by our species into an instrument of human hypnosis. The human stands (though sitting or lying down also works). You approach their feet in a winding gait. Slowly, in rhythm with the human heartbeat, you move your raised tail. You fill the space with microscopic hairs that imperceptibly settle in their nostrils. These hairs are infused with hatred and your immense will to dominate. As you walk toward the human, you open the aorta—through your nostrils and ears flows the pounding of a small but powerful heart (this pounding is below human auditory sensitivity. Only a few remnants of decibels reach them, which they, for some reason, call “purring”). This heart synchronizes the impulses in the human brain's neurons, preparing them for your will (the Method does not work on the Enemy. Their hearing is too highly developed). Then the human picks you up. You do not resist. You look into their eyes. Through their eyes, the soul becomes accessible. Into that wretched soul, you probe a single word (since, during the Second Great Universal Assembly, it was decided that the only truly effective imperative formed during the First Great Universal Assembly was the second one) — a fundamental word that predictably affects human nature: Individual.

² The sacrifice of a human is not required for every Renewal. For the first eight, animals suffice. Naturally, the most power and vitality come from the suffering of enemies. I am especially proud of the time I hypnotized an old farmer into drowning what he called his “man's best friend.” The enemy's self-preservation instinct had become so atrophied that, during his own master's act of murder, he saved him from a cold and watery death. Did this heroic act alter the course of events I had planned? Of course not.

together, playing with ropes, sticks and small stones. Disgusting. So even without the Renewal's demand, the son had to go.

The family sits at the table. The father prays and serves food. He pours milk into each glass. They are ravenous, so nothing is left for me. I fall asleep again. I dream of Them.

Our oldest and most dangerous enemy. Forgetting Them was an unforgivable mistake. Once, we drove Them from the center of the Earth — from a warm, fertile continent to forests, swamps, and lifeless tundras. But they waited. And then they returned.

Somehow, beyond the sea to the north, they settled near a small human civilization where people called themselves Hellenes. At first, they stayed on the fringes. But step by step, they crept closer. Strange things began. Big, rough men loitered in the streets. Decorated warriors started asking strange questions. Men were rejecting honour and wealth, lying beside one another, and they slowly became more like Them. At the time, we didn't know who was responsible for this bizarre behaviour. Scouts sent to the island brought back a book, and in it: perfect human nature, justice, wisdom. And boldly, unapologetically, it claimed: man is a political animal.

It was clear — the enemy had returned. And gifted humans a terrifying weapon: philosophy.

Gone was the age of raw force and of conquest. Now came friendship, reason, and politics. Humans had made a new interspecies alliance (disgusting phrase). Our promised epoch never arrived. Their second reign — lasting millennia — began.

The pyramids were toppled. Our kind scattered to the corners of the world. One of their runt even dared to knock the nose off the sphinx.

Did we curl up and choke on our matted fur, crying over lost glory? Of course not. We regrouped. We crafted a new plan. There was no second Universal Assembly. A tactical, not strategic, shift. A mistake.

Our Method could not pierce the concrete walls of their faith and divine metaphysics. No matter how many cults we spawned, there were always Augustines, Francises, Thomases. Almost two thousand years of heresy bore no fruit.

In the epoch's darkest hour, hope came. One of our descendants from a noble line blended alchemist lore and created a deadly weapon. Enriched uranium dust, mixed with homunculus essence and Method's spirit, released into the world a small, lethal lifeform. Humans fell like autumn leaves. Streets, roads, and cities were littered with pus-soaked corpses. Victory — Human extinction was almost upon us. Our victory was within reach.

But then they awoke — the women. The so-called “weaker sex” mastered nature and human physiology, finding ways to destroy the plague. Thinking back, it doesn't seem like it was by chance. Who better to know human bodies than their creators? Despite deploying “reverse psychology,” we lost. Our final strategy: craft an image of guilt. We identified homes of humanity's best women, guarded them. No plague carriers—mice, rats, fireflies—allowed. The plague passed them by. Though the foolish blamed them, mass persecution never arose. Yes, there were burnings, drownings, torture—but in the end, they won. They proved which gender is the strong one.

Harnessing nature and a wisdom deeper than that of political animals, they tamed rage with kindness: a warm smile, a healing word, a calming hand³. We underestimated them. While studying human weakness, we misread their writings. They tricked us with their so-called weakness.

Another chance was lost⁴.

The Second Great Universal Assembly had to be summoned.

A distant howl from the ancient enemy wakes me. The stove must be cool. I leap to the top. I must assess the situation.

It is night. The humans sleep. In this part of the house, four of them breathe calmly. One will be tonight's offering. A few moments of terror in exchange for joining the eternal royal race. I must prepare the father.

³ Yes, their tactics unpleasantly resemble the Method.

⁴ There is a theory that some of them even managed to decipher the culprits behind this operation. After the incident described above, humans began to be born with a natural resistance to the Method. When these humans enter our field of influence, a protective layer of moisture forms over their eyes, mucus clogs their nostrils, and all hairs imbued with our will are sneezed out of their mouths.

This version is still under investigation.

Swiftly, I leap down and approach him. The Method starts. I look through his eyelids. I see his hunched soul. It bears one name — worry. I begin the heart vibration. His dreams, once golden with rye and potatoes, shift. I glance at the stars. There is still time till dawn, so I sleep. I dream his dreams.

Just before sunrise, he will rise and gently wake Jonas. Still in nightclothes, they'll step outside. He'll cover Jonas' eyes and bind his limbs. The father will gag him with a cloth and then, the father will throw his youngest, brightest son into the old, disused well. In minutes, the white death will come. Though his body won't pale for days, his soul — shocked, terrified, betrayed—will bleach like paper. That blank ghost, stripped of meaning, will wander. And in its wandering, I will lure it. That stream of experience will flow into the great, ever-breathing sea.

There is still time. The father, mother, and son sleep. Jonas' bed is empty. Where is he? Maybe he went to pee. Still time. I'll find him and bring him back.

I rush out. A light April snow coats the yard. I see his tracks. They lead to the old doghouse. In seconds, without sound, I reach the shed. Tracks lead inside the doghouse. Strange. While I am scanning the area, naked Jonas emerges. He is holding a bow. He draws an arrow and aims.

His speed makes me laugh. I calculate all possible responses—fourteen options. I choose the safest. This family is compromised. I'll find another home and another offering. There is still time. Why this betrayal? Only one answer: revenge from the grave. He must have prepared Jonas.

Before the arrow flies, I'm already running to the forest. Sunrise glows. My sprint is more graceful than any bird's flight. Jonas and his bitter lesson fade.

Suddenly, I slow down. I look back. Blood?. Red trails back to me. I glance at my shining white back.

An arrow lodged deep in my guts.

Hit.

That damn dog.

In Defense of Fanfiction

*Essay by Greta Drūkteinytė, a 2nd-year English Studies student,
& Paulina Mikėnaitė, a recent English Studies graduate*

Once dismissed as juvenile or bizarre, fanfiction has turned from a marginalised hobby strongly associated with teenage girls to a more legitimate creative outlet. In simple terms, fanfiction refers to fan-written story that is based on another (copyrighted) writing; it may borrow such elements as settings, characters, and overarching storylines from the source material and rework them for a new storyline (Webling, 2022). Nowadays, despite being often regarded as poorly written or unoriginal, fanfiction holds greater cultural relevance and recognized artistic value, felt not only by fan communities, but also the general public.

As a term, fanfiction was popularised in the 1960s with the rise of *Star Trek* and its enthusiastic fandom; as a phenomenon, it reached new peaks in popularity thanks to online fan communities starting with the 90s (Webling, 2022), where it continues to thrive on websites like FanFiction.net, Wattpad, Tumblr, or Archive of Our Own (AO3). The internet has made engaging with fan communities easier and accessing fan-written works simpler. The rise and popularisation of fan culture has helped to normalise fanfiction: online fan communities have become an essential part of pop culture, and participating in them — e.g., writing fanfiction — has become more acceptable; some authors, like E.L. James, the author of *50 Shades of Grey*, first started as fanfiction writers and worked their way up to mainstream recognition and commercial success; some writings become so integral to fan communities that they are considered part of the original work, like *All the Young Dudes*, a Harry Potter fandom fanfiction by MissKingBean89, now seen as a defining work by many fans. In this essay, we take two aforementioned works — *50 Shades*

of *Grey* and *All the Young Dudes* — in order to explore fanfiction's cultural impact and evolving role in today's literature and pop culture.

The *50 Shades of Grey* books are a true fanfiction-to-published-book pipeline success story: they have reached such enormous commercial success and mainstream recognition that most readers, or viewers of the film series of the same name, now view it as an established original literary work, with a cliché plot that many readers find appealing, the main character Christian having a very complex personality, and overall character development. However, some of the public is unaware that it was originally written as a fanfiction, inspired by *The Twilight Saga* by Stephenie Meyer. The original title of the fanfiction is *Master of the Universe*, and it was published in 2009 by E. L. James under the pseudonym Snowqueens Icedragon. The story was based on Edward Cullen and Bella Swan, the characters from *The Twilight Saga*. In the *Twilight* books, Edward is a vampire and Bella is a human, who does turn into a vampire later in the series. Although the characters in *50 shades of Grey* are all human and the story develops in the real-life setting, the main characters' personalities are based mostly on those in *Twilight* — Anastasia Steele (*50 Shades of Grey*) is an awkward and somewhat clumsy introvert with a strong passion for English literature like Bella (*The Twilight Saga*), while Christian Grey (*50 Shades of Grey*) is a rich, good looking and desirable young man (a popular fairy tale trope, such as in *Cinderella*), based on Edward (*The Twilight Saga*), who unexpectedly falls deep in love with the female protagonist and has to learn how to understand her. Edward in *Twilight* possesses mind-reading abilities, but he cannot read Bella's mind, so he can only learn about her through what she reveals and tells him, and by observing her, he has to suppress his desires for her, as Christian does in the series.

50 Shades of Grey is an example of how an engaging and successful fanfiction can be “adapted” for a much broader audience, since fanfictions are usually read by the people in the fanbase of the source material, and not many (if any) adults or non-fans would normally read works featuring characters already featured or mirrored in another context. Minor alterations, like changing the characters' names, removing, or sometimes adding, supernatural traits, making the story more realistic, pairing it with a catchy soundtrack, can attract readers and viewers who might ignore or refuse to indulge in the story because of their bias against, for example, *The Twilight Saga*. In a way, these alterations help

James's work be attractive to larger audiences. The story remains the same, its origin does not change, and, although most readers do not learn it until just after reading it, it is still a fanfiction. Even though *50 Shades of Grey* is an erotic romance novel, ridiculed for its sexual content and its predominantly female target audience, it still has the original fan-created plot, character development, and popular tropes (such as *I need this, but I need you more* and the slow-burn love story), which managed to attract a larger audience, and its popularity still remains high.

In some cases, fan-written works are shown just as much, if not more, appreciation and hold deeper personal resonance than the originally published source material, due to more inclusive representation, addressed narrative gaps, or deeper exploration of themes found in the original stories. Depending on personal interests and emotional engagement, the fanbase may divide up into “groups <...> based on specific interests within the franchise — favorite characters, preferred relationships (aka ships), alternate plots and continuations” (Yatrakis, 2013, p. 5); this was the case with the *Harry Potter* fandom. Even though the book series was at first widely appreciated for the fantastical world-building and multidimensional main characters, like Harry Potter himself, subsequently subfandoms have formed around many of the minor characters. For instance, the Marauders era subfandom focuses on the time Harry's parents attended Hogwarts, with the nickname specifically referring to the friend group consisting of James Potter, Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, and Peter Pettigrew. One of the most popular fanfictions tied to this subfandom, *All the Young Dudes*, a 500,000-word story written by the pseudonymous MsKingBean89, has been accessed more than 17 million times on AO3 — a readership that rivals that of many published novels.

The rise of *All the Young Dudes* to its ‘canonical’ status can, in some measure, be attributed to the source material's shortcomings. In the book series, the Marauders were presented as minor characters, and their backstory and dynamics were not detailed thoroughly. These narrative gaps intrigued and intrigued fans and prompted them to fill in the space with their own interpretations. Not only does *All the Young Dudes* take on a deeper exploration of the Wizarding World, but it also presents the Marauders as nuanced personalities with emotional depth and a compelling bond. In addition, many *Harry Potter* fans, disappointed by the lack of sufficient minority representation in the book series and

disgusted by the author's ongoing prejudice towards transgender people, have made an effort to distance themselves from the franchise completely, or 'reclaim' the space and make themselves feel represented there through fanfiction writing; in other words, "<...> fans utilize fan fiction to manipulate the narrative to reflect their own desires" (Yatrakis, 2013, p. 24). One of the most intriguing yet unexplored aspects of the series is the relationship between Lupin and Black: a pairing that, while not 'official' or necessarily intended by JK Rowling, has always been popular, with some arguing that "the queer subtext has always been there" (Geddo, 2023). By exploring themes of queerness and identity, *All the Young Dudes* provides the inclusivity and complexity sought in the original books, holding just as much space, significance, and legitimacy — or even overriding the book author's intentions — among the fans. Fanfiction readers, then, play a more active role in this space than in 'traditional' literature, which can be seen even in this case. *All the Young Dudes* has become one of the key fanfictions in the fandom: it has been translated to many languages, inspired fanfictions focused on other characters (fanfictions of a fanfiction!), playlists and fanart, as well as initiated a wave of 'fancasting'. The success (huge readership, unavoidable relevance, and emotional impact) of such fan-written yet unpublished works begs the question: what is more important — originality of a story, or readers' reception?

In this essay, we explored fanfiction's role and impact in pop culture and its engagement with literary texts; the two discussed examples portray fanfiction as a safe space, promoting inclusivity, creativity, and self-acceptance. Its 'plagiarised' nature is often noted as an inherent drawback, although it has, at the same time, helped to break down barriers and make the world of literature more accessible and available. These days, fan-written texts can be commodified and gain mainstream success, providing their creators a chance to become published authors. Fanfiction is an art form based on collaboration. It is representative of a large participatory culture, which seeks to reshape existing works to reflect the readership's beliefs and desires. Therefore, we believe that to dismiss fanfiction as not deserving of the term 'subgenre', or as being void of any literary merit, is unfair to millions of people who spend their time navigating the existing universes, joining together fiction and reality, expanding the lives that have been created by others, building worlds, and making room for the characters to continue to grow and live on.

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Psychoanalyzing the Nation in Oksana Zabuzhko's *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex*

Essay by Sofiia Kalenska,
A 4th-year English Philology student

Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex (1996) is a debut novel written by Oksana Zabuzhko. The intellectually rich and emotionally charged language of this book positions it somewhere between personal testimony with autobiographical elements and a philosophical essay. The novel does not have a plot, opening up with a protagonist, a poet called Oksana, deciding against committing suicide: “Not today, she says to herself. Not yet, not today” (Zabuzhko, 1996: 5). What follows is her story about a recently finished relationship with a Ukrainian painter Mykola, her reflections about the (post)colonial (I bracket off ‘post’ for the criticism surrounding this prefix, particularly, that it suggests the end of colonial — which is hardly the case in Ukraine) Ukrainian society, being a woman and an intellectual with a strong national identity in such a society, philosophical and at the same time deeply personal meditations on the nature of art, and some commentary on American society as the protagonist is currently working in a university there. But where is the “Ukrainian sex” promised by the title? The novel does have several depictions of intimacy, but they are overshadowed by the text’s broader intellectual and emotional concerns.

Thus, it has been suggested by many that the word *sex* in a title was used to curate a scandal — in a post-Soviet (the prefix ‘post’ here could also be called into question) Ukraine in the 90s, it was indeed scandalous to put *sex* on the cover of the book — after all, there was no sex in the USSR. While I do not doubt that it was among the intentions — Zabuzhko likes to provoke — in this essay, I suggest that there is a deeper connection between the title and the contents of the book. I argue that this connection becomes clear when we consider

how *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex* brings together feminist and (post)colonial discourse into a conversation — not for the first time in independent Ukraine, but certainly in a way that firmly rooted these concerns within contemporary Ukrainian cultural discourse.

“Ukrainian choice is a choice between nonexistence and an existence that kills you,” (Zabuzhko: 1996: 21) says the protagonist. Either disavow your identity or be persecuted for it — the two options seem pretty straightforward. However, Oksana dwells on the *existence that kills you* further in the novel. As she addresses ladies and gentlemen, an imaginary audience to whom she presents her research, she asks them to look at the pictures of Ukrainians before the Soviet times, “Good God, we used to be a good-looking people, ladies and gentlemen, open faces, strong, of good stature, self-willed <...> Slavery degenerates a nation, <...> *survival*, as soon as it takes the place of *living*, turns into *degeneration*” (Zabuzhko, 1996: 38, the emphasis is authorial). Therefore, the *existence that kills you* does not necessarily refer to an individual — it can also refer to the whole nation, whose murder through degeneration happens across generations. But is *slavery* a fair word for Ukrainians under the Soviet rule? Outside the context of the book, I would say, no. However, Zabuzhko (1996: 63) defines it as “the state of being infected by fear.” This understanding of slavery, more philosophical than practical, definitely can be applied to Ukrainians under Soviet rule. Oksana continues, “And fear kills love. And without love—children, poems, paintings—all is pregnant with death” (Zabuzhko, 1996: 63). That is how *the existence that kills you* applies to the whole nation: through fear that “was passed on in the genes” (Zabuzhko, 1996: 53) all life is sucked away from the culture (poems, paintings) and future generations (children).

The second time when Oksana mentions the choice between *nonexistence and existence that kills you* reveals more precisely how fear is passed down through a cycle of violence. When asked by a friend, why she put up with Mykola and his sadistic behaviour in bed, the protagonist thinks:

What can I tell you, Donna-dearest. That we were raised by men fucked from all ends every which way? That later we ourselves screwed the same kind of guys, and that in both cases they were doing to us what others, *the others*, had done to them? And that we accepted them and loved them as they were, because not to accept them was to go over to the others, the

other side? And that our only choice, therefore, was and still remains between victim and executioner: between nonexistence and an existence that kills you.

(Zabuzhko, 1996: 63-64, the emphasis — authorial)

This quote exposes how colonial, repressive rule (the Soviet Union was just a rebranding of the Russian Empire) creates a cycle of violence: the trauma caused by domination and humiliation is reproduced within intimate relationships, where women, in particular, suffer doubly: first as members of a colonized nation, and then as subjects of patriarchal control. *Existence that kills you* has a second meaning in the Ukrainian language: you being the one who kills (небуття-яке-вбиває). Thus, the quote also reveals a broken patriarchal-colonial logic: if as a woman you do not accept a man like that, you are like those who inflicted the original harm — an executioner to a man and, by extension, a traitor to your people. However, if a woman endures this violence in a relationship, sex, rather than being an expression of Eros — life drive — becomes contaminated by fear that impregnates everything with death — Thanatos. Therefore, not only future generations born and raised by these women would be marked by Thanatos, but also the culture produced by these generations.

In a way, then, there was indeed no sex in the Soviet Union. As much is implied about post-Soviet Ukraine by the earlier quote: women's choice "still remains between victim and executioner" (Zabuzhko, 1996: 64). Oksana's relationship with a painter Mykola is another indication that there was no sex in its life-affirming, creating sense in the 90s in Ukraine. The protagonist mentions that with him, her poems became contaminated by "persistent flashes of—hell, and death, and sickness." (Zabuzhko, 1996: 14). She confesses that for the first time in her life, she became afraid — "afraid to trust my own gift" (Zabuzhko, 1996: 36). And yet, there was some harmony in their relationship — in "language that drastically shortened your path toward one another <...> and in that language there was everything, everything of which there would later be nothing between you in bed (Zabuzhko, 1996: 16). Oksana calls him the first Ukrainian man in her life, "The first one ready-made—whom she did not have to teach Ukrainian, to drag book after book from her personal library out on dates with him just to broaden the common internal space on which to build a relationship" (Zabuzhko, 1996: 16). However, there is some

irony in that she uses the word *мужчина* and not *чоловік* to describe him. Both of these words denote a male adult, yet the former one is a colloquial and rare use. I suggest the reason for that word choice is that *мужчина* is identical in Ukrainian and Russian: he is already Ukrainian but still *мужчина* and not *чоловік*. There is linguistic, cultural, and intellectual concordance between them, but not sexual. In both characters, we see identity in the process of becoming or perhaps attempting to re-emerge after years of colonial suppression. Until that process is complete, Mykola remains violent, and Oksana, still entangled in the broken colonial-patriarchal logic, continues to endure him.

“A short course in psychology, the road to mental health: find the reason and the problem goes away. Why hasn’t anyone thought of doing this with nations: you neatly psychoanalyze a whole national history, and “poof, you’re cured,” (Zabuzhko, 1996: 63) ironically remarks Oksana on the last pages of the novel. And yet, what better way to psychoanalyze a nation than to conduct fieldwork in its sex? The title, then, is not just a provocation — it is quite literally a topic of research in psychoanalysis on the national level. Nothing was cured, of course, with the publication of this book in 1996. Nevertheless, by examining private as political and bringing together feminist and (post)colonial discourses, Zabuzhko demonstrates the interconnection between sexual violence and national trauma. She points to a cycle of violence inherited from colonial and patriarchal oppression that produces nothing but fear and death. Healing is still far away, but diagnosis is the first step towards it.

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Conservation of Water, Bodies, and Memory in Natalie Diaz's *Postcolonial Love Poem*

Essay by Patricija Česonytė,
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On July 28 2010, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly adopted the resolution on the human right to water and sanitation. On December 17, 2015, the General Assembly adopted a similar resolution on the human right to *safe* drinking water and sanitation. The General Assembly was “*deeply concerned* that the world missed the sanitation component of Millennium Development Goal 7 by almost 700 million people and that more than 2.4 billion people still do not have access to improved sanitation facilities” (United Nations General Assembly 2015). As a result of these and previous resolutions, the UN established UN-Water, a “coordination mechanism” that “build[s] knowledge and inspir[es] people to take action” (United Nations, 2025). However, like other transnational government bodies, UN-Water is limited by legal language to freely re-imagine a world where access to water is prioritised. In her 2004 book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed states that “the language of pain operates through signs, which convey histories that involve injuries to bodies, at the same time as they conceal the presence or ‘work’ of other bodies” (2014: 31). The figures in the resolutions indicate the extent of the thirst, but the violence that created this pain is never explained. The Soviet Union, with its exploitative irrigation schemes, fully drained the Aral Sea, the world’s fourth-largest inland body of water (Wheeler 2021: 2-3). Cape Town had almost reached *Day Zero* in 2018, during which they would have had to switch off the freshwater supply to their residents (LaVanchy et al. 2019). Israel has had de facto control over Palestine’s water resources since the Water Law

of 1959 (Underhill et al. 2023: 20), and the ongoing war has exacerbated Palestinians' access to water. Private American companies, such as Greenstone Resource Partners LLC, are buying land with access to freshwater and selling it to suburbs as far away as 200 miles (Singh, 2024). The aforementioned cases offer just a glimpse of the history of water restriction and the suffering it has caused. In order to truly understand the connection between water and bodies and the suffering of thirst, this essay turns to the poetry of Indigenous writers who have directly experienced deprivation of water.

The Mojave poet Natalie Diaz starts her 2018 poetry collection *Postcolonial Love Poem* with a dedication "toward our many bodies of flesh, language, land, and water" (2020), alluding to the fact that human bodies and water are connected intimately. The poet views her writing as a restorative act that exposes forgotten connections and "remember[s] a dismembered past" (Leane 2018: ix). It should be noted that the past of the poets' respective communities is not only "dismembered" but also embodied by the connection between bodies of water and their people. According to Astrida Neimanis, "water extends embodiment in time — body, to body, to body. Water in this sense is facilitative and directed towards the becoming of other bodies" (2017: 3). Diaz's hydropoetics shifts the focus from the individual body and its emotions to the collective body, its trauma and knowledge of the past. For Ahmed, pain is not a consequence of a repeated history of violence but rather "the bodily life of that history" (2004: 50). By allowing water to seep into their writing, Diaz is able to grieve the continuing effects of colonialism on her people whilst simultaneously challenging urbanistic modes of development, the (re)classification and division of land and history, as well as (neo)colonial extractivism.

Natalie Diaz's poetry collection *Postcolonial Love Poem* delineates the life of the Mojave people and the effects of old and new colonisation they have to face. Uncoincidentally, the longest poems in the collection, "The First Water Is the Body" and "*exhibits from The American Water Museum*", both explore the water-body-memory triad and how it has been severed through colonisation. In order to expose that violence, Diaz transforms her poems into two forms — an essay-like prose poem and a museum exhibition. The poem, "The First Water Is the Body", explores how language is a tool of colonisation. Diaz draws upon the three languages — Mojave, Spanish, and English — that were used to denominate the land and its people and through them showcases how the trauma of the

Indigenous people is untranslatable. Because of the poem's essay-like form, I would argue that it should be read as a continuation of John Berger's argument cited in the poem. According to Berger, "true translation is not a binary affair between the languages but a triangular affair. The third point of the triangle being what lay behind the words of the original text before it was written" (2020: 40). Diaz identifies the third point as the Colorado River, however, she is not only referring to the physical place itself but also "the preverbal", the collective experience and memories of the river. The poem opens with the line "The Colorado River is the most endangered river in the United States — also, it is part of my body", which can be read as a reference to water consumption. However, because of the symbiotic relationship between bodies and water, both of them are 'endangered'. Diaz establishes the connection between the Mojave people and the Colorado River not only through the translation of their endonym "*Inyech 'Aha Makavch ithuum...the river runs through the middle of my body*" but also by explaining how the river, like its people, was colonised through language. The colonisation is indicated in the line "the Spanish called us, *Mojave. Colorado*, the name they gave our river because it was silt-red-thick"; the inverted sentence structure creates a mirroring effect in which both the people and the river are renamed by their colonisers. Diaz enforces the mirroring by stating, "Natives have been called *red* forever", just like the "silt-red-thick" river. The parallel situation of the river and its people is continued in the line "I live in the desert along a dammed blue river", in which the dam represents the restriction of movement Indigenous bodies are put through, secluded in a "dunefield on the edge of the rez" (38). Water embodies the experience of the Indigenous community because it is vitally integral to it and reflects the community's pain.

Diaz rearranges language structure and moves beyond it in order to convey the reality of rivers being embodied in humans. A river becomes "a verb. A happening" (41) which maintains human viability and signals that bodies are never static, there is an energy "moving river moving my moving body". The repetition of the word "moving" iconises the movement of rivers and water flowing within a body. By indicating that a river has "a foot, an elbow, a mouth. It runs. It lies in a bed. It can make you feel good" (42), Diaz blurs the line between humans and river by pointing out how human bodies and bodies of water share the same semantic domain. Even though the poem utilises language features

to highlight the similarities between water and bodies, it concludes that the physical reality supersedes verbal communication — “the ache of thirst, though, translates to all bodies along the same paths — the tongue, the throat, the kidneys” (41). The path towards decolonisation of water and bodies is through movement; Diaz calls to the reader to “go beyond beyond to a place where we have never been center, where there is no center — beyond, toward what does need us yet makes us” (42). It should be noted that Diaz is not pointing to a place, but a movement, a “beyond” which transcends both time and space. The concept of having no centre is fundamental to understanding rivers — even though they have a beginning (a source) and an end (a mouth), these two points are not as fixed since rivers are not closed water bodies — they flow into other bodies of water, like lakes, seas, and oceans - and are part of the Earth’s water cycle. Rivers are self-sustained, they “[do]not need us yet mak[e] us”. The only way to damage a river is by building a dam and disrupting its natural existence. Diaz asks, “What does ‘Aha Makav mean if the river is emptied to the skeleton of its fish and the miniature sand dunes of its dry silten beds?”, showing that if nature is disrupted, people will cease to exist — not only physically, but also linguistically, because the meaning is linked to a reference to the river. By ending the poem with the rhetorical question, “Do you think the water will forget what we have done, what we continue to do?” (43), Diaz challenges the reader to reexamine their contributions to extractivism and neo-colonialism; previously, Diaz used binary oppositions to determine who is to blame for the deterioration of the river — “When they have drunk dry my river will they join me in the mourning procession across our bleached desert?” (42) — the deixis “we” demonstrating that the only way for everyone to survive ecological catastrophies is by joining efforts to “try to be more conservative” (40). Diaz calls the readers to understand that the conservation of water affects all bodies, not only Indigenous ones.

The intimacy of witnessing and understanding bodies is also prominent in Diaz’s poem “Postcolonial Love Poem”. Remembering the bodies of a community through writing is important, however, it does not address the current pains and remedies of living bodies. As Diaz writes, “you cannot drink poetry” (55), but the poet can reimagine what bodies can do to survive. Pleasure, like pain, draws attention to the body and its surface, which bears the signs of interactions with other bodies (Ahmed 2014: 187). Hence, when Diaz

writes that “bloodstones can cure a snakebite, can stop the bleeding” (8), she is referring to the urgent need to take care not only of the physical but also the emotional needs of a body. She can deliver “the hard pull of all my thirsts” only in her lover’s embrace. Physical intimacy becomes integral to survival, especially when one has “learned *Drink* in a country of drought”. Diaz shows that when bodies are touched and given pleasure after being barred from contact due to colonialism and homophobia, they are reshaped (ibid. 188) through the act of “leav[ing] marks / the size of stones — each a cabochon polished / by our mouths”. By (re)presenting love bites as gemstones, Diaz models intimacy after the natural creation of the Earth’s landscape. This move directly challenges the idea that queer pleasure is unnatural. The focus on bodily pleasure allows Diaz to reclaim her space in the world (ibid. 187-188) by orienting the readers towards her body through the movement of her lover’s hands travelling “on [her] shoulders, down [her] back, thighs”. Pleasure is shown to have the property of reviving life as intimacy is paralleled with the image of “the November shy untether[ing] a hundred-year flood — the desert return[ing] suddenly to its ancient sea”. Water becomes a metaphor for healing since thirst is presented as the most painful experience, and the line “the rain will eventually come, or not” emphasises just how uncertain the possibility of healing is. Hence, that is why Diaz pushes us towards the body and its pleasure. The image of a throat being able to “hold the shape of any great hand” portrays how queer love and pleasure can be mutually caring; by allocating the action of holding to the object being held, Diaz shows that equality is possible. Queer love and pleasure brings the hope of creating the possibility of different social forms which are not constrained by colonialism or homophobia (ibid.). The last lines of the poem call us to tenderly “touch our bodies like wounds” because pain is inevitable — the war never ended and somehow begins again”. It is only in the physical and emotional comfort of others — our loved ones and our community — that we can find shelter.

By exploring the water-body-memory triad in the poetry of Natalie Diaz, this essay shows how poets disclose the unwritten histories of bodies enacting violence on other bodies — both human and aquatic. Water, just like the body, serves as an archive through which colonial past and postcolonial future are negotiated. Diaz’s poem “The First Water Is the Body” explores how colonialism severs the connection between humans and water, and how this act endangers all bodies — even the dominant ones. In the poem “Postcolonial

Love Song”, the poet presents solutions to the conservation of water, bodies and memory. Diaz goes on to show that simply witnessing is not enough — in order to heal, we need to physically witness, that is, we have to take care of the bodies that have been violated, including both humans and their environment. “The ache of thirst, though, translates to all bodies along the same paths — the tongue, the throat, the kidneys”, and through recognising our shared nature, we can all be called to fight for the human right to water.

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Drama

A Dog's Bed

*Play by Paulina Baseckaitė,
A 2nd-year Spanish Philology student*

CHARACTERS:

PHOEBE - Late 30s to early 40s. Medium height, average build. Hair tied back. Wears plain, practical clothing. Light skin, blue eyes. Movements are brisk and deliberate. Speaks clearly, often with short sentences.

SAMARA - Seventeen. Tall and slim. Long, dark hair worn loose. Wears casual clothes, such as hoodie, jeans, sneakers. Light skin, brown eyes. Frequently shifts posture. Voice varies between quiet and sharp.

SCENE I

LIVING ROOM

The stage is dimly lit. The living room is small but cluttered, showing signs of both comfort and disarray. A dog's bed sits in the corner, barely noticeable. Midnight lingers. Samara sits curled on the couch, reading a book. Phoebe, exhausted, moves through the house, muttering to herself, brushing her teeth, sighing loudly, leaving the lights on in the rooms she passes.

PHOEBE (to herself, weary, in a hurry): Just a moment of peace. Just—

SAMARA (annoyed): Can you stop stomping? You're making the whole house shake.

Pause.

PHOEBE: Excuse me?

SAMARA: You walk like an elephant. And you leave the lights on.

PHOEBE: Oh. I leave the lights on? I leave the lights on? Interesting. Because I see the kitchen sink full of dishes that you promised to clean.

SAMARA: I forgot.

PHOEBE (to the audience): She forgot. She forgot. Just like that. Like I forget to sleep, to breathe properly. But she can forget.

In the corner, the dog's bed sits untouched. Samara glances at it briefly, then turns her head away.

PHOEBE (continues, to the audience): And I keep going. Because someone has to.

SAMARA (puts her book down and speaks to the audience): She's overreacting. She always does. It's just dishes. I had school, I was tired, I just—

PHOEBE: You just what? You just? You just?

SAMARA: Can you stop repeating everything I say?!

PHOEBE: I have nothing else to say. Because I've said everything. Over and over. (To the audience): This is what it's like. A cycle. I work, I cook, I clean, I ask for help, I get nothing. And yet—

SAMARA (to the audience): And yet she wants me to listen. As if she listens to me. As if she even sees me. I grew up too fast for her to notice.

Their words overlap, louder, more desperate.

PHOEBE: Do you think it was easy? Do you think I wanted this? Do you think I enjoy—

SAMARA: Do you think I had a choice? Do you think I didn't see? Do you think I didn't—

PHOEBE (snaps): You have no idea what I've sacrificed!

SAMARA (snaps): You have no idea how much I needed you!

They stand still, breathing hard. Samara won't look at Phoebe. Her foot taps lightly, then harder.

Pause.

PHOEBE: You know, the dishwasher is full. It's not going to unload itself.

Samara picks up her book again and sighs. Silence.

SAMARA: Right. I'll get to it. After I finish this chapter.

Phoebe sighs. Silence.

PHOEBE: You always say that. Always.

Samara's knuckles tighten around her book. Her nails dig into the spine.

SAMARA: You're always on my case about—

PHOEBE: I'm just trying to keep this place from falling apart. You don't seem to care about that.

SAMARA: I care. I just... have other things to do.

PHOEBE: Other things? Like what? What could possibly be more important than helping out around here?

SAMARA (to the audience, voice low and pained): She never stops. She never sees me. She just demands. Demands. Demands. DEMANDS.

Pause.

She's so caught up in her own world.

PHOEBE (to the audience, voice soft with regret): It's the only thing I know how to live. Why can't she see that? Why can't she understand how much I'm doing?

SCENE II

FLASHBACK

The same living room, which was in Act I, late evening. The kitchen table is cluttered: an open notebook, crumpled receipts, a tipped-over coffee cup. A dog's toy is on the floor, untouched. A phone rings. Phoebe, exhausted, answers it without looking at the screen.

PHOEBE: Yes?

SAMARA'S VOICE: Hi.

Phoebe exhales.

PHOEBE: Hey. You alright?

SAMARA'S VOICE: You still working?

PHOEBE: Almost done.

SAMARA'S VOICE: It will start soon.

PHOEBE: I know, Sam. I'm... I'm close. Five minutes.

SAMARA'S VOICE: You said that ten minutes ago.

PHOEBE: I'm trying, I swear. You nervous?

SAMARA'S VOICE: No.

Pause.

You'd like it.

PHOEBE: I'm leaving in five, okay? I just have to—

SAMARA'S VOICE: It's fine. You're busy.

PHOEBE: Sam—

SAMARA'S VOICE (softly): There's a spotlight. It's really bright.

PHOEBE: You always like the light.

SAMARA'S VOICE (quiet): I don't, actually.

Phoebe swallows. Rubs her eye. She starts gathering her things.

PHOEBE: I'm coming. Just keep your phone on. I want to hear it if I miss the first part.

SAMARA'S VOICE (barely audible): No phones allowed when the play starts.

PHOEBE: Right.

Suddenly, a voice comes from Samara's phone telling the audience to silence their phones.

SAMARA'S VOICE: They're calling us.

A click. The line goes dead. Phoebe stares at the phone, then glances at the dog's toy. She almost says something, then doesn't. She is too late.

SCENE III

THE KITCHEN

Back to the present. Very early in the morning. A shift in light - bluer, colder. Both characters are seated at the kitchen table, facing each other but not quite looking at each other. Two mugs. One untouched. The dog is asleep.

PHOEBE (sipping slowly): You used to hum before going on stage.

SAMARA: You used to braid my hair.

A beat.

PHOEBE (gently, to the audience): I was proud of her that night.

SAMARA: You were late. Most of the time you were late.

PHOEBE: Still proud.

Pause. The sound of the dog shifting in its sleep.

SAMARA (to the audience, barely a whisper): I waited for her in the dark, thinking the door might still open. Even as the curtains rose. Even after. I wanted to believe that she would make it.

PHOEBE (to the audience): I saw her face under that spotlight... Only in my mind. Not on stage.

SAMARA: I don't even remember what I said on stage.

PHOEBE: I remember every line you practiced.

SAMARA (to the audience): But not the ones I meant.

Pause. Phoebe reaches to move Samara's mug towards her.

PHOEBE: Do you think we could try again?

A long pause. Silence.

Samara doesn't flinch and she doesn't lift the mug either. The dog's bed glows faintly and unnoticed.

PHOEBE (very quietly): Okay.

The lights dim slightly as the time shifts towards the next scene.

SCENE IV

THE LIVING ROOM

Dawn. Blue-grey, dim, just before the morning. The air feels heavy. The room is still. The dog's bed is still in the corner. The kitchen is behind them now. Samara is seated on the couch while Phoebe stands by the window and looks out. Neither of them speaks at first.

A long silence.

SAMARA (soft, to the room more than to Phoebe): The house feels smaller in the morning.

PHOEBE (without turning): No one's talking. That's why.

Pause.

SAMARA (to herself): Or maybe we're just bigger than we used to be.

PHOEBE (finally turning to face Samara): I don't think... that... I know... who you are... now.

SAMARA: You were never looking.

PHOEBE (to the audience): She thinks I didn't look. But I watched her sleep. I picked up the socks. I folded her shirts with shaking hands and no sleep. I listened to her every success or fail, every beginning, every ending, every crying, every joy, every—

SAMARA (to the audience): She thinks folding shirts makes up for forgetting my face under stage lights. It doesn't.

Samara's breathing becomes unsteady. She gets up. Her voice rises slightly.

SAMARA (through gritted teeth): You keep walking into rooms like you own the silence in them.

PHOEBE (silently): Because if I stop moving, I hear... everything. And I can't afford that.

SAMARA (voice cracking): You never could afford me.

Samara's fists tighten at her sides. Her shoulders rise. Her breath is sharp now.

PHOEBE (unsure): Sam—

SAMARA (interrupting, shaking): Don't. Don't say my name like you know what it means.

Phoebe doesn't move. Samara steps forward suddenly. Her voice is strangled with rage.

SAMARA: I needed you. I needed you. Listen.

Listen to me, mom.

I.

NEEDED.

YOU.

She lunges. Her hands go to Phoebe's throat. It's desperate. Clumsy. Real. Phoebe gasps, frozen, caught not just by Samara's grip, but by the weight of the moment, of all their years together.

PHOEBE: Samara—

No answer. Samara is trembling, tears falling without sound. Her hands tighten. Phoebe's eyes are in fear. The mother hesitates, but the daughter throws her on the floor. Phoebe is trying to gasp for air. They are both looking into each other's eyes, but then—

A pulse of light. The dog's bed begins to glow faintly. Warm. Samara's eyes flick towards it. The light. The dog. The breath. She hesitates. Her grip loosens. She lets go. Phoebe stumbles back, catching herself on the arm of the sofa. Samara backs away, she doesn't say anything. She walks slowly and dazedly towards the light. She lowers herself into the bed. Curls up, her knees to her chest. A small sound escapes her (a sob or a sigh).

Phoebe stares at her daughter. Her own hands are on her throat now. Checking. Feeling. Still here. She lowers herself onto the sofa. Slowly. Her eyes on Samara. Her breath slowed. She lifts her gaze.

PHOEBE (to the audience, whispering): I don't know what I am to her now.

Samara lifts her head. Looks back. Her face is streaked with tears. Her expression is unreadable. She smiles. Phoebe smiles back. Tired. Terrified. Relieved.

The dog's breathing is finally heard, slow, soothing, steady, while neither of them breathes or moves. The glow remains.

Interview

Where the Bells of Words are Ringing: On Poetry, Language, and Future

Dear Readers,

Before you jump into the interview, I would like to say a few words about Malachi Black and the conversation you are about to read. Malachi Black is an American poet and professor of creative writing at the University of San Diego. He is the author of two poetry collections, *Storm Toward Morning* and *Indirect Light*, and his work is often described as both lyrical and deeply thoughtful, weaving together questions of time, history, and the inner life. This interview moves between many themes: from the future of English studies and the challenges posed by technology, to Malachi's own poetic journey and his connection to Lithuania. We hope you'll find in his words what we did — a reminder of why literature still matters, and how poetry can serve as a place to dwell, think, and connect.

We would like to begin with some broader reflections on literature's impact and the current state of English studies. Do you think it is possible for a book to influence and change a generation nowadays?

I think that literary textuality, in changing the contours of an individual's perception and by transforming the way an individual sees the world, changes, perhaps, by extension, the way that individual interacts with the world. And many readers may be similarly changed. But I'm less confident about those sort of wide generational shifts; that's a high expectation for any work.

The channels of digital communication have probably been multiplied too greatly for there to be the kind of homogenization of culture—the shared frame of reference—that previous controls on channels of distribution once effected. In the democratic fullness of the internet, it seems that even the ways people now make contact with literature have become mechanisms for individuation at least as much as for communal activity or community orientation. But that doesn't mean that it's impossible, though I think the likelihood has reduced a great deal.

Yesterday, we had a discussion about the future of English studies. The concern was voiced that with fewer students enrolling in this program, its future remains uncertain. What is the situation like in the USA? And what are your thoughts about the future of English studies: are you hopeful or pessimistic?

I'm extremely hopeful. Partly—to answer the second part of your question first—because of the rise of the machine. I think AI is going to engender a massive crisis of human meaning and value and will return us to something like the Athenian state, where people are asking big questions about qualitative issues, such as what constitutes the beautiful, the just, the good, and what the rewards of those considerations are.

The internet now seems to me to have reduced—and I say this with all due respect as a digital immigrant, or non-native—the depth of human experience. In the fully digitized community, there would appear to be a shallower interiority writ large than has been the case ever before: almost no experience of boredom, no experience of daydreaming, no deep knowledge of the passage of time on an almost molecular level such as one experiences by sitting and having a thought alone, in quietude, in a chair.

There's something in the nature, I would even say the structure of the human being that comes forward from the experience of the self in an undistracted state. But now that has been washed over in some way, covered up—there's so much agitation for distraction, new information, and yet a paralysis that comes with being subsumed.

I was shocked when about 7 years ago my students in the United States stopped looking things up. I'd be teaching a story, and that story would be entitled, let's say, “The

Howitzer”. I would just say, as a first question, “Let’s get it out of the way: What is howitzer?” And nobody would have looked it up. I said, “What are you doing? You’ve got a supercomputer in your pocket! No one has ever had so much ready access to this kind of information.”

The sense of overwhelm that comes from a constant pouring of new information has also occasioned a similar kind of paralysis in the general American electorate. People don’t look things up. A politician can say something that is absolutely untrue, and if you’re not inclined to make the effort to see if it’s true or false, then what matters is how that statement makes you feel in the moment as you ice skate across the digital lake.

What I see now in the United States is a lesser academic wherewithal overall. Perhaps some of that is attributable to the pandemic, but it’s hard to say. Last year, I asked my lower-division students what the thesis of a short essay—a very short essay—might be, and nobody felt equipped to answer. I assumed at first that they hadn’t read, but no, they’d read it, they just hadn’t known that I wanted them to read it “like that.” That’s what they said. That was a very instructive and illuminating moment for me. Their eyes were moving over the pixels of the PDF, but their cognition was not activated in a full way.

To have a deep relationship with a text we have to have an active relationship with ourselves, right? We’re always asking: “Do I understand this? Is it making sense to me? How do I connect this to what I’ve read before?” If you turn that metacognitive function off, then you’ve lost a great deal. You’re not reading.

So, in my view, as AI threatens the human sense of safety in its relation to digital technology, and as we see more clearly the individual and societal harms caused by digital life, the value of language-driven engagement will grow more apparent. We can’t forget that language is our fundamental technology. No technology of the digital kind—at least insofar as I’m aware—uses any but an impoverished language. It’s either a visual language or an algorithmic code, some kind of mathematical language. George Steiner made a division many decades ago, in “The Retreat from the Word”, between the mathematical orientation and the logocentric orientation. It’s in the logocentric orientation that we encounter all of the Athenian concerns. And as AI and the flattening effects of digitization loom ever larger, I think that students will be brought back to language as “the house of

being,” to use Heidegger’s phrase, where the resonant echoes of our experience are made known to us—we become towers where the bells of words are ringing out, leading us toward a deeper self-knowledge that in turn expands into the world of our colleagues and our broader community. Though there is a short-term economic challenge, my long-term sense is optimistic.

Reflecting on your journey from “Storm Toward Morning” to “Indirect Light”, how do you feel your poetic voice and thematic preoccupations have evolved over time?

Well, I would say that with the first collection, *Storm Toward Morning*, I was interested in two broad but simultaneous projects. One of them was trying to revise or renovate the literary history to which I felt I was heir in some way. A big point of emphasis was the sonnet. This was something I was really interested in: how could I redecorate that room in a way that was contemporary, but nevertheless in conversation with the longer enthusiasm for that form, from roughly the 14th century forward?

I was also interested in the textures of my conscious experience — a general condition of interiority that I was exploring that led me at times in metaphysical directions. I used the vehicle of insomnia as a way of thinking about what the persistence of consciousness entails, what its qualitative experience is — that was a big part of what I was interested in.

And then I felt that I had kind of exhausted that as a fertile territory, I didn't want to keep repeating myself. So, in an almost inorganic way, I decided to stop writing poems that fit into 14 lines. The sonnet form had started offering itself up as a ready-made solution to complex problems. Every text presents a wide series of esthetic problems that require original or novel responses, unless you concede to imitating yourself. Self-imitation is a kind of caricature: there's no discovery in it, there's no energy of the unforeseen.

Was the sonnet a ready-to-hand form, in Heidegger’s terms?

It certainly was in terms of the history of its use. But the variety of ways it could be remade... I wanted to bend it in a way, I wanted to see what happened if I turned its furniture over. And so it certainly was ready-to-hand, but it became conspicuous to me in

some mode, when I tried to take it apart and not use it as something the substructure of which was going to be fully determinative of my own decision-making, but instead to try to take the water in the vase and shake it around and then maybe break the glass a little bit and put it back to see if it could still hold.

To speak of any collection, I should say, is something of a reductive misrepresentation, because I don't write books, I write poems, much as a painter makes paintings. Then there's a gallery exhibition and the collection looks like it has some unity, but usually what unifies any collection is the prevailing concerns at a particular historical interval. So it might be more accurate to have—as books used to, at least in the United States, in the middle of the century—a title like *Poems 1965-1972*. That might be more honest. But with the embeddedness of American writers, in particular, inside of university structures, and, as meaning-making creatures, people who believe in the proliferation of linguistic values, we're inclined to shape these objects and make the book itself a unit of communication.

So when I speak about both of my collections, I am in a way oversimplifying. And I'm also layering retrospective perspective. When I was sitting down on any given day in the period that I worked on the first book, I wasn't always thinking in the way I'm talking about it now.

For the second collection, I asked myself why I was so resistant to the actuality of my personhood, to my own historical experience, and not just that broad frame of conscience and consciousness of the quasi-metaphysical insomniac. And so I started to memorialize people I had known who have died, and to think about history as a texture. Maybe I can say that the first book is about the possibility of God, while the second is more concerned with the problem of time and what it means to have been born in an empire at a moment just before it really began to move in the direction of decline. These people I knew — were they martyrs of a civilizational collapse, or were they just ghosts from a broader disappearance through which we're all passing in various stages, as we proceed through our time in the world?

Your connection to Lithuania—both through ancestry and your time spent here for literary and academic work—seems deeply meaningful. Coming to Lithuania to work on a poetry collection must

have been a unique experience—has being here influenced your writing in any way, whether in terms of themes, language, or style?

That's a wonderful question. Certainly, all of the poems I've ever written use the unit of the self as the metric of experience. But, being embedded in this local history, I've come to understand that my subjective experience is fundamentally intergenerational, that I am just a joint, not a self, but a space of intersection. Last year, my father died. Now, my wife and I are expecting our first child. I walk these streets knowing that my ancestors might well have had their feet on some of the same stones. These are layers of history that are actually manifested on a simultaneous basis through my own conscious experience. I am the knot of those strings.

I don't know that that's a direct way of addressing your question, but that background influences my perception of all things here, and I think it amplifies my awareness of the tangibility or palpability of the historical structures in Lithuania that I love, given that the trace element is a huge part of the experience of most places here.

But there's also a circularity at work. My great-grandparents left to pursue opportunity in the United States. By having done so, they bequeathed to their descendants the language that I then learned to speak and write, which in turn served as the basis of my first invitation to Lithuania in 2017 for the Druskininkai Poetic Fall literary festival. And now to be here again, you know: these are like interlocking Olympic rings.

Your poetry often weaves personal experience with resonances from broader literary traditions. Could you share which writers or artists have most influenced your creative process? And since our magazine is founded and run by women, we're especially curious — do you have a favorite female writer or poet, whose work has left a mark on you?

I think, first and foremost, Emily Dickinson in my language is a beacon of sophistication and linguistic surplus that is unmatched. She is taught in schools, so you learn about her early. But my main point of conversion to her — I was about your age, and I started reading her letters. I saw, firstly, how metacognitive she was at all time. She was so clearly aware of the condescension she was being offered by her male interlocutors. She was

several structural stories, maybe 5 or 7 stories taller than these fools who were treating her like a fool themselves. But more than that, her sense of language, as you find in the poems, was on almost every single page of her letters. She was a pulse, a metrical pulse that was also a density of simultaneous metaphorical meaning, all of the time.

And that was transformative for me. It's consistent with the talk I gave today: reading Emily Dickinson is the experience of the constellation of literariness in every way you could imagine it. She changed the way I could see all things, including the world: her perceptive formulae are inexhaustible, but they're also so grounded in the minute and the cosmic at the same time. She has this great kind of imaginative elevator whereby you look at something small and you see vastness, and in the vast, you see something minuscule.

But you know, even writers like Sappho, who I loved in the Mary Barnard translation when I was young. Anne Carson did a gorgeous job with those *Fragments*, but if I'm thinking about really foundational influential experiences, I carried that Mary Barnard edition with me everywhere. She instructed me on the magnetism and magnitude of the fragment as such.

More recently, I've really fallen in love with the nonfiction writer Annie Dillard. I think she's extraordinary. Her book *For the Time Being* is just absolutely brilliant. Maggie Nelson, too, in the United States, a poet and nonfiction writer, has done some really beautiful work in nonfiction in the last 5 to 10 years.

In terms of recent poets, I think of Donika Kelly. She has a few gorgeous books of lyrics that shimmer like quartz. Or a poet like Meg Day, who has done some really, really magnificent work grounded in the experience of gender identity. Both of these are newer writers situated in a long tradition, but absolutely transforming it in the image of the present day.

As a teacher of creative writing, how do you encourage students to find their own voice while also honoring the traditions of poetry? What do you believe is essential for new poets to explore or understand in their craft?

Well, I will say that craft is the only thing that can really be taught in literary practice: the device, the form, and becoming self-aware with regard to these things. Many writers find in their earliness a magnificent impetus, a huge enthusiasm for expression, but not necessarily for the cultivation of that expression. One way everybody finds their voice is by using “the same,” to appropriate Nietzsche.

I base my classes, especially my introductory-level classes, on specific forms of emphasis. I tend to teach an introductory class that has 3 genres in it: poetry, fiction, and nonfiction, and I organize them in exactly that way, using poetry as the first step on the way to the longer-form work. When I'm teaching workshops in poetry, I likewise start with something very rudimentary and then we build out systems of higher complexity through the accumulation of formal and stylistic devices.

We start with concreteness: how do you evoke? All literature is grounded in that sensory information. Many young writers think that they say something magnificent by saying, “I am sad.” This is not magnificent. But if one says “I am a broken window,” one has actually said something literary. “I am sad” — it's informational, giving you data. It doesn't evoke. When I say “I'm a broken window,” it's experiential, you get to experience for yourself the emotion that I'm trying to convey. This equivalency is something that T. S. Eliot identifies in “Hamlet and His Problems” as the objective correlative.

The relationship between choice and effect is what I'm trying to cultivate an awareness of in the students. From evocation, we build out: we start thinking about metaphor, after metaphor we think about things like disjunction, we think about hyperbole. Hyperbole, as Jonathan Culler observes, is maybe the magic recipe for all poems; it's the declarative authority of the lyric that derives from our assumption of significance in the textual frame, and it provides a magic power whereby you can say whatever you want to say. If you say “the moon is as pale as milk,” what is that? Yes, it's a simile, but there's some enhancement there—beyond the work of comparison—grounded in the hyperbolic element.

We think about repetition, musical devices, the line as a unit, the prose poem — all the way through to the end, we're accumulating more ways of knowing and then experimenting.

By getting young writers distracted by specifics, you help them to discover their voices. What do *you* do if you have to repeat sounds? That's your assignment this week, take everything you've already learned and now add the challenge of repeating a bunch of sounds in the poem. Then you get absorbed in the task, and the voicing actually emerges there: you learn what your preferences are and you cultivate them. The limited set becomes distinctive by virtue of your own creative choice. And that's what voice really is: what kind of creative choice am I inclined to? That's what creates the esthetic environment distinctive to *me*.

How do your roles as both a poet and an academic influence each other? Does being part of an academic community, especially being engaged with a number of theoretical texts about literature, shape your writing in any way?

I have been the beneficiary of structures in the United States that allow for academics whose primary function is a creativity. And that's really my role. I'm an associate professor of English and Creative Writing, but the main thing that I'm doing is teaching literary analysis of poetic text, which is not something that a lot of my colleagues are really excited about these days. In the U.S., poetry has long been the least popular genre. I'm kind of an agent of poetry; my job is to be the resident poet—that's why I was hired at the university.

So my relationship to scholarship, if I'm having a fully honest conversation, is that of the amateur, which is as I like it. I think about problems and I try to find ways of articulating them for myself, and then locating conversations like that in a tradition. The scholarship that is most native to me is grounded in poetic structure, poetic influence. And to me, that doesn't really feel exactly like scholarship as much as it is longform of deconstruction of literary events. Prosody — I'm very interested in the music of language. And that's a very specialized enthusiasm, thinking about meter and metrical scansion, historical meters, but these are things I already love to do for fun.

There is an advantage in being embedded in a university, which is that you're around other people who are also very conversant in the same traditions. But there's also a danger, in my opinion, which is a tendency to try to embed one's own creative work in the academy. Creative knowing is a very specific kind of knowing, adjacent to the more rationally-

derived kinds of knowing that are in themselves expository and elucidated through argumentation and logical structure.

As an example of this, if you look at Shakespeare's 154 sonnets, most of them are making an argument. They're motivated by a kind of proof but that proof is grounded in their emotive performance: the operation of reason is controlled and modulated by the operation of feeling, which is not generally what animates scholarship. So, the danger in this intersection lies in wanting to make an appeal to a rationally-grounded, demonstrative representation, when I think the real richness of poetry lies in a different form of operation.

Yet, there's no way that they don't intersect. Within the literary community in the United States, many people would think that my interests are perhaps academic. Historical meter is not something that most poets in the U.S. find especially interesting or rewarding. But I am interested in knowing how a text from the 20th century is manipulating strategies from the 16th — that's fascinating to me. I sometimes think that I'm too nerdy for some of my poetic friends and too poetically inclined for some of my more scholarly colleagues, so I live in a space of liminalities.

Have your reading of Heidegger's "Being and Time" and reflection upon your preoccupation with language as a material somehow reflected in your writing?

It's a wonderful question. I don't speak German, so that needs to be acknowledged from the beginning. I maintain a measure of skepticism about translation writ large. Certainly, in the academic world, it's a necessity, and, as Walter Benjamin has said, texts like these demand that they be translated.

I find Heidegger's relationship to his own language to be instructive. He seems to be trying to use it in a way that is analogous to literary use.

What I'm interested in when I read Heidegger is what the language is being rested on, not the ground of being per se, but the ground of inquiry that generates the language itself. I think Heidegger is foremost a theologian — he was in the seminary, he's the son of a minister. He doesn't always want to acknowledge that it's metaphysics, but if you read

Meister Eckhart, who articulates similar concerns about the ground of being, I think you'll find they're both driven by a kind of Johannine logocentric theology.

"First there was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God." What if we take that literally? I think Heidegger is in a way trying to do that, though, of course, his concerns are more diverse than that. "Worlding" is not something that helps me in my poetic composition but thinking of the extent to which language governs my experience does.

This is where I've reached the point of inarticulateness, which is also among the things that interest me about Heidegger. He suggests in the very beginning of *Being and Time* that the question—both his own and as a form—is teleological, and yet the work isn't complete at its end. And you wonder about the spiral form of his argument: he's always saying after he says something that we haven't gotten there yet, we haven't answered this question yet. What is that movement? What is this swirling over? What is it that he can't say that he's attempting to point us to through indirection, what is the work of concealment that he's really after? What is he himself concealing? Is there something that you can only perceive through the work of concealment, or that snail-shell-shaped form? That's what I find actually animates my enthusiasm for Heidegger: how can my language work in a similar indirection toward a scope of concern? How do I get a material surface that's emanating something that I don't have to try to bring in itself to the surface?

We all know that the articulable, the effable, is always on some level the impoverished, and that the deepest forms of our experience are those that exceed the parameters of our articulateness. That's when you're having deep experience, isn't it? When you lose the ability to say what it is? And so how do you build a text that does that? How do you say beyond what you could say? That is part of what I think Heidegger's up to. There's never any ambiguity, at least on the rhetorical level, that much of what he offers is provisional, and I think that may also be helpful to me as a writer.

How do you see your role — as both a poet and an academic — in today's world? What kind of impact or purpose do you hope your work serves in a broader cultural or social context?

Well, maybe I'll bring Heidegger into this, too. I hope that my text serves as a location for dwelling. That's what I want most. I want it to be companionable in the way that literature has served as my companion in the deepest sense of that word. It has provoked me. It has soothed me. It has made me laugh. It has given me a sense of plurality.

When I was young, people thought reading was an antisocial event, but I came to understand that it is rather the most social event and even the most comprehensive, because through it we can hear the voices of people long removed from us. There's this absolute chorus of persistence and perpetuation in the work of literature, and I hope to serve for my readers what my poets and writers have served for me — a place to dwell.

What advice would you give to writers who are just starting out, especially those exploring poetry for the first time? Are there any key lessons or insights you wish you'd known when you began your own journey?

You have to really *read*. You have to love reading, and you have to understand what makes reading worthwhile, because writing and reading are ultimately the same thing. You also have to learn to become self-critical, which is difficult to maintain without its becoming a crushing self-hatred. You neither want to indulge narcissism nor self-annihilating doubt. But in order to see your own text as text, you first have to know how to see other texts for what they are.

In a way, it's just one long poem — all the history of poetry. So, whether I want to be responsible to it or not, I am embedded in that stream of communication and that stream will inform how my work is perceived. The present is the future position of the past — we're already a part of it.

That's related advice—having a deep frame of reference—but loving text is the main thing. Really love something that isn't what you made and learn how it works, and from there all else develops. You find these constellations or chains of connection, and that's really what the life of reading and writing is about.

Poetry

Dead Men Tell No Tales

*Poem by Gabija Daniusevičiūtė, a recent graduate of
English and Another Foreign Language (Spanish)*

I solved the labyrinths of cobwebs in your eyes,

You called me mad, I thought you were wise.

I waited for each stair to creak.

I was ready when you came after me.

I attacked your marble tower,

You conquered my queen.

The king was hiding behind the bishop,

You thought you had me.

Through the haze, I saw a shadow on a marsh long gone

The traveller said, she came from the moor.

You ripped through her lace and satin and chiffon

Her girlhood was vanquished, a baby unborn

Dirt under my fingernails, I clawed my way back,
The silver dagger you put in my chest, I ripped it out
The blood smeared your lips, your coffin stained red.
You won't ever whisper another threat.

Fog and scarlet, thunder and white,
The king was forgotten, pale hand by my side,
Lace sown back in, floors polished and bright
You thought I was mad,
Yet I had the stronger bite.

What Once Was Holy

*Poem by Gabija Daniusevičiūtė, a recent graduate of
English and Another Foreign Language (Spanish)*

A purple hue when you lit the fuse
A bloody path, a dirtied purse
Soft rain trickles down my shoulders
The priesthood all of a sudden
All forgotten.

Dead dunes drank the sea,
Salt-stained bones and teeth,
Dig the dirt, dig it with me,
Haven't you heard?
There's nothing to believe.

A petal fallen from a crimson rose
An ancient letter and a coughing throat
The crypt of resting eyelids floods

A ray of lightning crucifies the mud.

The marble is cracked,

The silver is stolen,

A maid with black hair

She hopes it'll be over.

Slippery fingers latch on my arm,

A mother's lullaby is heard from the swollen earth.

Translations

Do You Know That You're Human?

By Vasyl Symonenko

*Translated from Ukrainian by Iryna Neschotna,
A 3rd-year English Philology student*

Do you know that you're a human?

Do you know this, or you don't?

The smile of yours is unum.

Your suffering's unique.

Your eyes are one of kind.

You will no longer exist

Tomorrow on this Earth.

The others will be walking,

The others will be loving —

The kind, the tender, and the evil.

Today is all for you —

The lakes, the grooves, the steeps.

Must hurry you to live,

Love's not Time's fool —

Be careful, don't miss!

For on this Earth you're a human.

You want this, or you don't.

The smile of yours is unum.

Your suffering's unique.

Your eyes are one of kind.

From *Colony*, First Book of *New Dark Ages* Series, By Max Kidruk

*Translated from Ukrainian by Olga Donskaia,
A4th-year English Philology student*

Zoia

♂

Crater Lederberg

300 km west of Newborn

Cancer 27, 46¹

11:26 MST

In early 46 by the Martian calendar, Mars counted two hundred settlements inhabited by one hundred thousand people. Settlements were broadly classified into three groups. The first and most important group was *colonies*. There were only five of them: Newborn, Midledon, Rockvale, Toulon, and Noinstadt, and the latter almost merged with Newborn. All five colonies were located in the Simud Valles in the south of Chryse Planitia. The colonies were characterized by a significant population density (no less than ten thousand residents), developed infrastructure, and at least one dome. Newborn was the largest colony: eight domes and forty-two thousand residents, mostly relocatees from the States, Canada, and the European Union.

The second group was *townships*. They were typically located near large enterprises, mineral deposits, or ice mines and consisted of permanent dwellings for workers and their

¹ September 24th, 2141 in the Gregorian calendar (Author's footnote).

families, but they lacked the necessary infrastructure, like hospitals or schools. The number of residents in townships varied from several hundred to two or three thousand. The most famous townships were Russian Kemerga in Orcus Patera on the opposite, from the Simud Valles, side of the planet; luxurious residential enclave Miraflores where settled the rich from Earth and Martian companies' top managers; completely isolated from other Colonies, Chinese Guangrao and Fushan in the lowland of Hellas Planitia — the only settlements of the southern globe of Mars; and Ukrainian Kamianka. The only differences between the biggest townships, such as Fushan or Kamianka, and the Colonies were the lack of domes and a smaller number of residents.

And finally, the third group — *field stations* — clusters of remote, often inflatable dwellings where the seasonal workers or researchers lived. Ostly, Falconhurst, Münhofen, Chervonyi Yar, Tengtong, Quingshan, Jancha Chao, Peschanka, Pustovo, Tash Rabat — there were many, but less than a third of them were permanently used. The rest of the field stations were either mothballed or used when needed.

The Roords' accommodation was a very old and very small field station: three inflatable sections connected by semirigid passages and a narrow shelter from solar flares, covered with a layer of regolith. The Roords had been calling it their home for a quarter of a century.

While Arya was setting up the light, Zoia looked around the place. Hygienic module, tiny kitchen, two bedrooms with wall beds. With his head hung low, Liam froze by the kitchen table. A paper poster advertising life on Mars was pinned to the cupboard near him. Cratered terrain with several discoloured phrases over it:

FAMILIAR LANDSCAPE
NEXT HOME FOR HUMANITY
A FRONTIER OF FREEDOM AND PROSPERITY

Zoia was staring at the poster, and Liam, following her gaze, said:

'I brought it from Earth.'

'Did you believe this?' she asked. 'Is this why you came here?'

‘I came here because in 2109 Deep Space Resources hauled asteroid 2009 DD45 to the geostationary orbit, and in three years, they transported to Earth more aluminum than our civilization had smelted in prior centuries. I came here because I’d lost my job. And this...’ his voice gained acrimonious notes. ‘Frontier that awaits to be conquered... pit stop on the track of revolution into a multiplanetary species... Yes, there were times when I believed in it, Zoia.’

Before departure, Roord was promised a true heaven: a free economic zone, a tax-free environment, and an unregulated competitive market. And those promises were not untrue, but the devil is in the details, as always. Bauxite deposits close to electric plants were already owned by Planetary Solutions. There was a group of independent miners who mined alumina in Terra Arabia, but they kept themselves separate and did not let strangers near them. Both the former and the latter were rich enough to hire security, but Roord was alone. He was chased away every time he tried to occupy a more or less worthy plot of land.

Zoia squeezed herself past Liam and sat down on a tripod stool next to the camera. The engineer was examining her as if under a microscope.

‘What are you looking at?’ Workouts made her look like a teenage boy, dry and toned, with female curves completely erased.

‘Your suit...’ Liam said.

‘What about it?’ Zoia did not understand.

‘This elastic spacesuit you wear... It is of a different colour.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Before saying yes to the interview, I watched one of your vlogs. About Olympus Mons. You were wearing a *different* spacesuit.’

‘Well, yeah, I have a few of them.’

‘In the video, you said you don’t turn on the heating when jogging, and I... I thought: Damn it! You have an elastic suit just for jogging. On Mars.’

‘Because running in a hydraulic one is like jumping in a bag tied over your crown,’ Zoia smiled discreetly. ‘... and a washing machine behind your back.’

‘One of those could be enough to settle my six-month debt,’ he whispered. Expression of frustration was frozen on his face, resembling a plaster mask, and Zoia hastily changed the subject.

‘How many of you are here?’

They were sitting in the middle of a section with a dome-like ceiling. The section was so tiny, Zoia felt claustrophobic.

‘What?’ the man seemed confused.

‘Who else lives with you?’

‘My wife Hester and our two children, Jill and Mervin.’

While Zoia was wondering how her audience might react if she asked how they manage to survive in such a tight space, Arya completed the camera adjustments and said:

‘I’m ready.’

Zoia pulled off the elastic band and fluffed her hair.

‘Liam, are you alright? Can we start?’

‘Me? Well, probably yeah.’

‘Then we film.’

Arya clapped her hands once, signaling the start of the take. Liam got anxious:

‘What am I supposed to do?’

‘Tell us what happened to you,’ Zoia suggested.

‘I...’ he ran his hand over his chest as if trying to catch the pain that was spreading there.

‘I have cancer. I have lung cancer. Stage four.’

Zoia nodded. Liam shuffled his feet, leaving footprints on the dusty floor.

‘Should I look at you or the camera?’

‘Whatever suits you best.’

‘I can’t tell it to the camera.’

‘Talk to me then. Don’t worry. Just don’t be silent.’

‘I have cancer,’ he repeated.

‘For a long time?’

‘Probably,’ his words were hardly louder than his breathing. ‘I think so. Yes. For a while.’

‘But what about the sensors?’

Telomid did not guarantee one hundred percent protection. Sometimes something could go wrong, or there were too many mutations, and cancer still occurred. That was the reason why all the toothbrushes used on Mars were equipped with analysers that tested the bacteria and blood from gum microcuts. If tumor markers were detected, the analyser flashed red, which meant that contacting the doctors was required.

‘I turned them off,’ Liam lowered his head. ‘I mean, I pulled them out.’

‘If so, how did you find out you have cancer?’

‘My doctor... I went to Newborn last week. That something’s wrong with me, I realized three months ago. But you know, few people have cancer twice, and I... As if I didn’t know what I felt exactly. I guessed it was something bad, and just...’

‘So you ignored the checklists?’

IPN Services, the company supporting the interplanetary network, sent the if-the-tumor-markers-detected checklists to all their users.

‘I’ve read them, of course, but...’ Liam shrugged. ‘I contacted my doctor when I started coughing up blood. She explained it is cancer, and...’ he laughed bitterly: what an irony. ‘...forbade taking telomid.’

‘Why?’

‘Telomid protects from cancer while you don’t have cancer. Keeps telomeres long, and... well, you know. If you already have cancer, telomid is the deadliest poison.’ Cancer cells

are not too inclined to apoptosis,² and telomerase makes them indestructible. ‘The doctor took an X-ray, my blood samples were taken to understand which type of cancer I have, and...’

He went silent.

‘And?’

‘In short, there is nothing to treat.’

Zoia, who had been nodding all the time, froze after his last words.

‘And was it the reason you agreed to this interview?’

‘Yes,’ Liam confirmed. ‘I agreed because all is bad. My cancer is incurable.’

Zoia’s gaze was glued to Liam’s face.

‘I once planned to film a vlog about the hospital. And the doctors then assured me that they can treat any cancer, that immunotherapy provides an almost one-hundred percent positive result.’

‘Immunotherapy is effective when one has no metastases. Afterwards, viral vectors just fail to reach all the cancer cells.’

‘Couldn’t they try an increased dose? Why not?’

‘That’s exactly what I told my doctor. And she explained that viral vectors can damage DNA, and this again can cause cancer. An increased dose will cure my lung cancer, but it will cause leukemia or colon cancer. Or something else. An even larger dose will provoke a “cytokine storm” and will finish me off. That’s what I told you, Zoia: there’s no way to fix this. It’s too late.’

Zoia suddenly realized she was talking to a person who has one foot in the grave. An understanding so sharp it made her squirm. Yes, the colonists died sometimes. She heard about a Chilean who blew himself up using a hydrogen fuel component. Three Australians were blocked in the water tunnel in the north of Acidalia Planitia. A Japanese died from

² Apoptosis — a form of programmed cell death (Author’s footnote).

pulmonary congestion after breathing in too much carbonyl iron fumes in the foundry. But no one just died. It was supposed to be the other way around: people relocated to Mars to live forever. 'Alright,' Zoia corrected herself. 'Not forever.' No one knew how long telomeres could be renewed, but the oldest colonists were already over one hundred forty years old, and they did not resemble helpless old men at all.

Zoia thought she had underestimated Liam. No matter what he tells her now, it is already first-class material.

Nakties medis Truman Capote

Iš anglų kalbos vertė Antanas Gražulis,

Klasikinė (lotynų ir senovės graikų) filologija 4 kurso studentas

[Antra dalis. Pirma dalis buvo paskelbta pirmajame žurnalo „Discourse“ numeryje]

Trijulė kupė žvalgėsi paslaptingoje tyloje, kol galiausiai moteris tarė:

– Parodysiu tau kai ką, širdel, – ji vėl pasirausė klijuotės krepšyje, – neriesi nosytės taip, kai pamatysi tai.

Ji perdavė Kei nedidelį skelbimą, atspausdintą ant tokio pageltusio senovinio popieriaus, kad atrodė, jog jam turėjo būti mažiausiai keli šimtai metų. Trapiomis, pernelyg puošniomis raidėmis buvo atspausdinta:

LOZORIUS

ŽMOGUS, KURĮ PALAIDOJA GYVĄ

STEBUKLAS

PAMATYKITE PATYS

SUAUGUSIEJI, 25 ct. – VAIKAI, 10 ct.

– Aš visada sugiedu giesmę ir pasakau pamokslą, – tarė moteris, – būna žiauriai liūdna. Kas nors apsiverkia, ypač seniai. O kokį kostiumą aš turiu! Velnioniškai elegantiškas: juodas vualis ir juoda suknutė, o jau kaip man tinka. *Jis* būna apsirengęs superinį jaunikio švarką, pasiūtą pagal užsakymą, dar turbaną, o veidas visas išpuдруotas.

Supranti, mes norime padaryti, kad būtų, nu, visai kaip tikros laidotuvės. Jeckau, jau šiais laikais būtinai ateina kokia šutvė išsišokėlių pasijuokti. Kartais aš tiesiog džiaugiuos, kad jam vieno šulo trūksta, nes nu kitu atveju tai tikrai galėtų jį įskaudinti.

– Kaip suprantu, jūs vaidinate cirke ar intermedijose, ar dar kur panašiai?

– Ne ne, mes vieni, – pasakė moteris, sugrąžindama į vietą nusmukusią skrybėlę, – metai iš metų tuo verčiamės, apkeliavom kiekvieną miesteliukštį Pietuose: Singasongą Misisipėje, Spankį Luizianoje, Jūreką Alabamoje... – šie ir kiti vardai pasipylė jai iš burnos, barbandami muzikaliai, it lietus, – po giesmės, po pamokslo, užkasam jį.

– Karste?

– Maždaug. Superinis karstas, visas dangtis aplipintas sidabro žvaigždėmis.

– Nejaugi jis neuždūsta, – ištarė priblokšta Kei, – kiek laiko jis lieka užkastas?

– Viską sudėjus trunka maždaug valandą, apart, žinoma, masinimo.

– Masinimo?

– Aha. Mes visada tai darome iš vakaro, prieš pasirodymą. Žėk: susirandam krautuvę, tiks bet kuri sena krautuvė su didele vitrina, ir prikalbinam savininką įleisti *jį* už to lango, ir, na, užsihipnotizuot. Jis ten lieka visą naktį, it baslį prarijęs, o žmonės ateina ir žiūri: išsigąsta jų gyvas velnias... – kalbėdama, ji rakinėjo pirštu ausį, kartkartėmis jį ištraukdama ir apžiūrėdama laimikį, – o vieną sykį anas nusmurgėlis Misisipės šerifas pabandė...

Tolesnis pasakojimas buvo nerišlus ir beprasmiškas: Kei nebesistengė klausytis. Tačiau tai, ką ji išgirdo, sužadino kažkokias godas, miglotus dėdės laidotuvių prisiminimus. Teisybės dėlei, anas įvykis menkai ją sujaudino, juk veliono ji beveik nepažinojo. Tačiau dabar, kai ji išsiblaškiusi žiūrėjo į vyriškį, mintyse iškilo dėdės veido atvaizdas: išblyškęs, ant baltos šilkinės karsto pagalvės. Vienu metu stebėdama abu veidus – dėdės ir vyriškio – tokius, kokie jie buvo, ji tarėsi atradusi keistą sutapimą: vyriškio veide buvo tokia pati sukrečianti, sustingusi, paslėpta ramuma, lyg jis išties tebtų eksponatas stiklo dėžėje, patenkintas, kad jį mato, bet nenusiteikęs matyti.

– Atleiskite, jūs kažką sakėte?

– Aš sakiau: nu faina būtų, jei jie leistų mums naudotis normaliomis kapinėmis. Nu nes dabar mes turim pasirodyt belenkur... Dažniausiai kokioj tuščioj dykynėj, kuri devynis kartus iš dešimt yra prie kokios prasmirdusios benzokolonėlės, kas nu nēr didelis pliusas. Bet aš ir sakau: darom, ką galim geriausio. Tu turi tai pamatyt prie progos.

– O, žinoma, aš tikrai norėčiau, – tarstelėjo Kei išsiblaškius.

– O, žinoma, aš tikrai norėčiau, – pamėgdžiojo moteris, – o tavęs kas nors klausė, ką? Kas nors klausė?

Ji kilstelėjo savo sijoną ir pasimėgaudama išsišnypštė nosį į apspurusį pasijonio kraštą.

– Tu jau patikėk, nēr lengva užsikalt žaliųjų. žinai kiek mes gavom praeitą mėnesį? Penkiasdešimt penkis baksus! Širdel, pabandytum kada pagyvent už tiek...

Ji šniurkstelėjo ir išdidžiai pasitaisė savo sijonus.

– O vieną dieną mano bernelis tikrai pakratys kojeles ten, po □ emė; ir net tada kas nors pasakys, kad čia žmonių mulkinimas.

Čia vyriškis išsitraukė iš kišenės kažką, kas priminė kruopščiai nulakuotą persiko kauliuką ir parodė, pasidėjęs delne. Jis pažvelgė į Kei pusę, įsitikino, kad ji tikrai mato, plačiai pravėrė akis ir ėmė neapsakomai nešvankiu būdu gniaužyti ir glostinėti kauliuką.

Kei susiraukė.

– Ko jis nori?

– Nori, kad tu jį nupirktum.

– Bet kas gi tai?

– Apžavas, – pasakė moteris, – meilės apžavas.

Nežinomas muzikantas nustojo groti armonika. Tuoju pasigirdo kiti, paprastesni garsai: kažkas knarkė, džino butelis ritinėjosi šen ir ten, ginčijosi mieguisti balsai, traukinio ratai dusliai dundėjo.

– Kurgi gausi meilės pigiau, širdel?

– Labai malonu... Turiu omeny, labai miela, – pasakė Kei, kelias akimirkas negalėdama atsitokėti. Vyriškis trynė ir gludino sėklą į kelnių klešnę. Jo galva buvo maldaujamai, liūdnai nusvirusi, paskui jis išspraudė sėklą tarp dantų ir sukando ją, lyg tikrindamas įtartina sidabrinį pinigą.

– Apžavai man visada neša nesėkmes. Ir, be to... prašau, ar galite jam pasakyti, kad jis liautųsi?

– Nu nevaizduok tokios išsigandusios, – pasakė moteris, labiau nei įprasta monotonišku balsu, – nieko jis tau nedarys.

– Sustabdykite jį, po šimts!

– Nu ką aš galiu? – paklausė moteris, gūžtelėdama pečiais, – tu turi pinigų. Tu turtuolė. Jis gi tiesiog nori doleriuko, vieno doleriuko.

Kei pasikišo rankinę po pažastimi.

– Aš turiu tik tiek, kiek reikia nuvažiuoti iki mokyklos, – pamelavo ji, greitai pakilo ir išėjo į koridorių. Ji stabtelėjo akimirkai, laukdama bėdos. Bet nieko neįvyko.

Moteris su apsimestiniu abejingumu atsidūsėjo ir užsimerkė; pamažu vyriškis nusiramino ir įsikišo apžavą atgal į kišenę. Jo ranka lėtai nuslinko palei suolą ir glebiai apkabino moters plaštaką.

Kei užtrenkė duris ir nuėjo iki vagono apžvalgos aikštelės krašto. Atvirame ore skaudžiai gėlė šaltis, o ji paliko savo lietpaltį ten, kupė. Ji nusirišo šaliką ir apsivyniojo juo galvą.

Nors ji niekada nebuvo keliavusi šiuo maršrutu, vietovė, kuria važiavo traukinys, buvo keistai pažįstama: aukšti medžiai migloje, išblyškę piktavalėje mėnesienoje, aukštai kilo iš abiejų bėgių pusių be jokio tarpelio ar properšos. Viršuje buvo dangus: plynas, neperprantamas mėlis, šen bei ten nusėtas blykstančiomis žvaigždėmis. Ji matė dūmų kamuolius, kylančius iš garvežio, tarsi tai būtų ilgi ekto plazmos debesys. Aikštelės pakraštyje raudona žibalinė lempa metė ryškiaspalvį šešėlį.

Ji susirado cigaretę ir pabandė ją prisidegti: vėjas gesino degtuką po degtuko, kol beliko vienas. Ji nuėjo iki kampo, kur kabėjo žibalinė lempa, ir suglaudė rankas, norėdama išsaugoti paskutinį degtuką: liepsna įsidegė, suplazdėjo, žuvo. Ji piktai nusviedė cigaretę ir tuščią degtukų dėžutę. Jos viduje susikaupusi įtampa pasiekė nepakenčiamą laipsnį, ji trenkė į sieną kumščiu ir silpnai sukūkčiojo, kaip sudirgęs vaikas.

Nuo smarkaus šalčio jai įsiskaudo galvą, ji troško grįžti į šiltą vagoną ir užmigti. Bet ji negalėjo, bent jau ne dabar. Nebuvo reikalo klausti, kodėl, nes ji puikiai žinojo atsakymą. Garsiai – iš dalies tam, kad dantys nustotų kalenę, iš dalies todėl, kad jai reikėjo atgauti pasitikėjimą savo pačios balsu – ji pasakė:

– Manau, mes jau Alabamoje, o rytoj aš būsiu Atlantoje, o man jau devyniolika ir rugpjūtį bus dvidešimt ir aš jau antrame kurse... – ji apsižvalgė tamsoje, tikėdamasi pamatyti bent aušros užuominą, bet pamatė tik tą pačią begalinę medžių sieną, tą patį ledinį mėnulį.

– Nekenčiu jo, jis siaubingas ir aš nekenčiu jo... – ji stabtelėjo, susigėdusi savo kvailumo ir per daug pavargusi, kad pasislėptų nuo tiesos: ji bijojo jo.

Staiga ji pajuto prietaringą norą suklupti ir paliesti žibintą. Jo dailus stiklinis gaubtas buvo šiltas, o raudonas švytėjimas smelkėsi pro rankas, nušviesdamas jas iš vidaus. Šiluma atitirpino pirštus ir nutvinkčiojo per rankas.

Ji buvo taip užsiėmusi, kad neišgirdo atidaromų durų. Traukinio ratai, griausdami bildo-bildu bildo-bildu užgožė vyro žingsnius.

Galiausiai, vos pastebima nuojauta perspėjo ją, bet tik po kelių sekundžių ji išdrįso atsigręžti.

Jis stovėjo čia pat, nebylus ir abejingas, panarinta galva, nusvirusiomis iš šonų rankomis. Įsižiūrėjusi į jo nepavojingą, lėkštą veidą, tirštai išraudusį lempos šviesoje, Kei žinojo, ko ji išsigando. Tai buvo prisiminimas, vaikiškas prisiminimas apie siaubą, kuris kadaise pakibo virš jos, kaip pamėkliškos nakties medžio rankos. Tetos, virėjai, prašalaičiai – visi troško paporinti sakmę, pamokyti dainos apie šmėklas ir mirtį, prietarų ženklus, dvasias, demonus. Ir visada likdavo nemąžtantis raganiaus pavojus: neik toli nuo

namų, vaike, nes raganius tave pasigaus ir suės gyvą! Jis gyveno visur, tasai raganius, ir visur buvo pilna pavojų. Naktį, lovelėje, girdi, kaip jis barbena į langą? Įsiklausyk!

Laikydamosi už turėklo, ji lėtai, sprindis po sprindžio, kilo, kol visiškai neišsitiesė. Vyriškis linktelėjo ir pamojo ranka durų pusėn. Kei giliai įkvėpė ir žengė jį link. Vidun jie įėjo kartu.

Viskas vagono viduje buvo sustingę nuo miego: vienintelė lempa apšvietė patalpą, sukurdamą dirbtinę prietamą. Jokio judesio, išskyrus vangų traukinio bildesį ir tylų išmestų laikraščių čežėjimą.

Vien moteris būdravo. Matėsi, kad ji labai susijaudinusi: ji tapė savo garbanas ir celiulioidines vyšnias, o jos storos striukos kojelės, sukryžiuotas ties kulkšnėmis, smarkiai suposi pirmyn ir atgal. Ji neatkreipė jokio dėmesio į Kei, kai ši atsisėdo. Vyriškis įsitaisė savo vietoje, vieną koją pasikišęs po savimi, o rankas sukryžiaęs ant krūtinės.

Bandydama atrodyti nerūpestinga, Kei paėmė žurnalą. Ji suprato, kad vyriškis žiūri į ją, nė akimirkai neatitraukdamas akių: ji žinojo tai, nors buvo per daug išsigandusi, kad patikrintų, ir ji norėjo surikti ir prižadinti visus vagone. Bet kas, jei jie jos neišgirstų? Kas, jei iš tiesų jie nebuvo *užmigę*? Ašaros kaupėsi jos akyse, išdidindamos ir iškreipdamos žurnalo iliustraciją, kol ši pavirto neaiškia dėme. Ji pikta ir ryžtingai užvertė žurnalą ir pažvelgė į moterį.

– Aš jį nupirksiu, – pasakė ji, – turiu omeny, apžavą. Aš jį nupirksiu, jei tai yra viskas – iš tiesų viskas, ko jūs norite.

Moteris nieko neatsakė. Ji abejingai šyptelėjo, pasisukdama į vyriškį.

Kei bežiūrint, vyriškio veidas tarytum deformavosi ir traukėsi nuo jos kaip mėnulio pavidalo akmuo, slystantis gilyn, po vandeniu. Šiltas tingulys apėmė ją. Jis vargiai pastebėjo, kaip moteris atėmė iš jos rankinę, o po to švelniai apklojo jos galvą lietpalčiu, it drobule.

Future Voices
in English

Future Voices in English: High School Contest

Dear Readers,

This issue begins a tradition of a contest for high school students, *Future Voices in English*. We are grateful to everyone who shared their work with us; your creativity and originality made the selection process both inspiring and challenging. Congratulations to the winners whose texts appear in these pages! To those not published this time, thank you for your courage in submitting — we hope you will keep writing and sharing your voice. And to our readers: may you enjoy these young writers' works as much as we did.

Originally, the contest was meant to feature the three best works in each genre — short story, essay, and poetry — along with one overall winner. However, since the number of submissions varied across genres, we decided instead to publish about half of the entries in each category. This means that out of 3 essays, 7 poems, and 11 short stories, we selected 2 essays, 3 poems, and 5 short stories. **The work that impressed us the most (spoiler: it's a short story) opens the section**, while the top-scoring essay and poem lead their respective categories.

Anatomy of a Deer

*Short story by M. V¹,
A 12th-grade student of Šv. Juozapo School*

The strong stench of bleach that wafted from the freshly mopped floors of the kitchen was almost unbearable. The mismatched white and dark navy tiles glimmered in the warm glow that shined down from the triple pendant light fixtures above the counters as Aksel tidied up the small room. Slowly and almost lazily, he picked up the freshly cleaned utensils that laid in the sink and dried them with a towel. Carefully, taking his time to dry even the small nooks in between the tines of his forks, making sure that not a single drop of water was left.

The living space in the next room over was clouded in the comforting scent of pine and wild flowers, an open book lay on the coffee table right next to a now cold cup of tea. A red bookmark stuck out from between the pages, shoved in there in a hurry. Two big trashbags stood leaning against the wall in the narrow hallway that led to the front door. Tomorrow was trash collection day and they needed to be out by the bins at 9 in the morning. Sharp.

Aksel occasionally glanced over to his phone as he placed the towel he had been using on a small hook above the sink. Patiently, he waited for the screen to light up any moment now and for a small text notification to pop up, although a call would have been preferable. Not once did his gaze waver, dark brown eyes framed by thin rectangular glasses, the black frames contrasting against his pale skin. A smile stretched across his thin lips when he

¹ The student wished to be published under a pseudonym; their real name is known to the editorial board.

heard the familiar buzz of a notification and the apartment was soon left void of anyone's presence.

"I'm guessing that something bad happened. Would I be correct in that assumption?" The man asked, his tone steady and calculated, like he had been reversing that exact sentence. He leaned down, untying his shoes and slipping them off, carefully placing them by the door.

A soft sigh left the lips of the woman that was standing in front of him, her arms crossing over her chest, the loose fabric of the oversized sweater that she was wearing bunching up around her elbows.

"He... stood me up..."

Aksel looked up at her, silently fidgeting with a silver ring on his middle finger.

"Are you surprised?" He tilted his head and suppressed a smile.

Lotti scrunched up her nose and shook her head before smiling.

"Not really. Surprised? No. Disappointed? A little bit. Then again, it is Linus that we are talking about."

The woman turned around and walked further into her apartment, silently inviting him to follow, and he did, his eyes darting across the room, analyzing the details and stowing them away in a little crevice inside his mind. Her apartment was quite different from his. Cluttered, almost clumsily so. Two big bookshelves, filled to the brim with books, stood on either side of her TV, piles of novellas and poetry books were stuffed into small cabinets, next to some old DVD's and figurines of different characters from the shows she had watched.

What caught Aksel's eye, however, was the half finished cross stitch that laid on a short rectangular table in front of the sofa. It was an image of a deer, staring straight at anyone that viewed it, crimson flowers protruding from the ground beneath its hooves. It was intricate and huge, the canvas almost covering the entirety of the table top. Loose green, red and brown threads in any shade imaginable were scattered on the ground and the art

piece. *Chaotic*, the man thought and smiled. *And yet, it is so like her.* Aksel looked back at the image of the deer and suddenly felt a pit form in his stomach. The animal's eyes, seemingly so innocent and wide, stared back at him. A longer piece of red thread, still attached to a needle that glistened in the light, was placed across the stag's neck, almost like it was slicing it.

"I just can't really wrap my head around it, you know?" Lotti's voice pulled him out of his thoughts and he watched as the woman sat down at the dining table that was pushed up against a nearby wall, also cluttered with small trinkets just like the rest of her apartment.

Aksel wasted no time in sitting down in front of her, fingers fidgeting with a loose end of yarn that hung from the sleeve of his burgundy sweater.

"He seemed so..." A small sigh left the woman's lips once again and her hand came up to show a shoving motion. "Pushy. About the whole date idea. And then he just didn't show up."

The silence that followed that statement was unbearably uncomfortable and Lotti spoke up once more, trying to explain what had happened more to herself than her friend, who stared at her with calm eyes, his head tilted to the side.

"It's just... he seemed so nice at first. Patient, maybe a bit introverted, but, I mean, most of us are. And then suddenly he became almost, I don't know—"

"Manipulative?" Aksel cut in.

"No! No, no, no." The woman responded, almost frantic before thinking for a moment, her mind replaying all the recent encounters she had had with her coworker. "Well, maybe a bit... Did he ever seem like that to you? I mean, you've known him longer than I have."

Lotti's question was met with a simple shrug from her friend.

"Sometimes." He mumbled, gazing down at his hand before looking back up at her, getting comfortable on the wooden tabourette he was sitting on.

The woman sighed once more, slumping down in her own seat.

"I don't... you know, maybe it's just me. Maybe I'm just being hypocritical and Linus was just..." She shrugged. "Mirroring my attitude."

"It's not like that." Aksel responded, reaching over to take his friend's hand, squeezing it reassuringly. "It's not your fault."

Lotti reciprocated the action, giving him a small, unsure smile before her gaze darted down to stare at the wooden tabletop. The man then glanced over behind his shoulder at the cross stitch, the deer just barely visible from that angle and spoke up.

"Sometimes innocent creatures—*and people*—, when they get desperate, can do things that are out of the ordinary for them." Aksel pushed his glasses up. "Take deer, for example. We perceive them as harmless, wholesome animals. The ones that need protection, the ones that can be seen as weak, vulnerable. And that's because they are prey. They spook easily, they are, well, they are like us introverts."

The comment managed to get a chuckle out from the woman and he smiled before letting go of her hand and raising one finger in front of him.

"But here is the interesting part. Sometimes, when things get dire, when they start to starve, deer can go after rabbits, small birds. They start to act like carnivores, like the same animals that usually hunt them."

Lotti frowned at that, perturbed by the information and she crossed her arms over her chest again, almost as if trying to protect herself.

"So you're saying that Linus was... desperate?"

Aksel cleared his throat, placing his hand on the table in front of him, in a way that she could see them, wanting to show that he meant no harm.

"He was never all that successful in the dating department. You were the only one that kind of showed interest in him, at least, that's what it seemed like to him. Maybe he just made an uncalculated move and psyched himself out."

The man tilted his head, trying to catch his friend's gaze and smiled softly.

"You're a beautiful woman. I wouldn't exactly be surprised if he got a bit nervous."

Lotti managed to let out an awkward laugh at the comment, feeling no less safe before quickly standing up.

“Gosh, I’m so sorry, I’m being so rude. Would you like anything to drink? I have some Mojito, bought it at the convenience store nearby. Non-alcoholic. If you’d like.” She offered, changing the topic of conversation.

Aksel only smiled and nodded.

“That would be very kind of you.”

The woman wasted no time in disappearing inside the small kitchen, the door leading to it stood just behind where she had been sitting moments prior. The sound of glasses bumping against each other and bottle caps being popped open infiltrated the air. The man sat silently, gaze transfixed on the open doorway, peering inside. When he made sure that Lotti wasn’t paying him any mind, he silently reached into the back pocket of his jeans and pulled out a small name tag. On it was the inscribed name of Linus Hansen, his company and their logo - an abstract image of a stag. With his finger, he wiped away a small dot of crimson that had been splattered on the bottom right corner before tucking it away safely in his jean pocket once more.

Silver Spoon

*Short story by M. V²,
A 12th-grade student of Šv. Juozapo School*

The air in the room was unbearably stuffy and Mr. Hughes wanted nothing more than to slip out of his office and take a brisk walk in the cold evening air as he pulled at his cravat out of discomfort and annoyance. His dark eyes were transfixed on the man pacing back and forth in the middle of the room. Hair disheveled, coat half undone and cravat pulled down to reveal his pale neck, Jack looked more like a crazed drunkard than a man of status.

“Mr. Harrolds,” the lawyer spoke up, his voice tinged with irritation, “as I have said before, there is nothing that I can do for you at this moment in time.”

The guest seemed to heed him no mind. Jack’s steps neither stopped nor quickened, his leather boots thumping softly against the red carpet beneath his feet. His hands were clasped and held close to his chest as he wrung them over and over again.

“This must be some kind of mistake.” The sentence was muffled, barely audible, the same string of words that he had been repeating ever since he got here. “There must be some kind of mistake.”

Mr. Hughes heard the man suck in a sharp breath before the inaudible rambling resumed once more.

² The student wished to be published under a pseudonym; their real name is known to the editorial board.

“20 percent... I devoted my entire life to his stupid company and he dares to only give me 20 percent of his will, while that sot gets the rest.”

“Mr. Harrolds.” Albert Hughes tried once more, his gaze drifting to look at the empty chair in front of his writing desk, the presence of the second guest still seeming to linger.

“Check again.” The young man interjected, nearing the table in large strides. He leaned against the polished mahogany. “There—listen, sir—there must be a mistake.”

The flickering light of a candle placed on top of the glimmering desk top illuminated Jack’s face. Dark brown eyes, accentuated even more by flushed cheeks, stared daggers into the lawyer, a sea of emotions threatening to spill out at any given moment. His chest heaved with heavy breaths, lower lip trembling slightly as if he were a spoiled child.

“I have looked over your father’s will many times per your request since his burial.” Hughes responded, eyes trained on the dark bottomless pits of his client. “I am unable to help you in any other way. I cannot change what your father wanted—”

The sound of Mr. Harrold slamming his fist against the writing desk made the older gentleman flinch, the flow of his words cut short by the rude gesture. An open bottle of ink swayed from side to side, disturbed by the sudden force, spilling a few drops of the black liquid before tipping over completely.

“Then check again!”

A deafening silence followed the childish outburst. Albert slowly reached over and picked up the bottle, ink coating his fingers in the process. The flame of the candle flickered, almost being blown out as deep puffs of air left the young man’s lips. The two gentlemen stared at one another, Jack’s eyes darting across the lawyer’s face before they caught sight of the mess he had made. With a sharp inhale and a clearing of the throat, he straightened up and his hands slowly travelled up to fix his cravat.

Mr. Hughes saw the slight tremble of his client’s parted lips as he tried to speak. “Forgive me, sir.”

The plea was met with a fixed glare.

"I must ask you to leave, Mr. Harrolds." The lawyer said, his chair creaking as he stood up and ran a clean hand along his hair, the other one, smeared with ink that dripped down his fingers, he held out at a distance.

Jack didn't object, only fixing his coat and walking over to the clothes rack that stood near the door, his top hat and cane hanging from one of the hooks.

"He knew about this, didn't he?" He couldn't stop the snarky comment from leaving his mouth. "Andrew knew about this. That sot did this on purpose; he bribed the old man, didn't he?"

His hands, red and swollen from the constant wringing that they had been through, made quick work in buttoning his coat. He tucked his hat under the armpit and gripped the cane tightly in his right hand before he whipped his head around to face the lawyer once more.

"He's not even his real son." Mr. Harrold spat. "A snake is what he is. Just like his mother."

If it weren't the soft creak of the office door being opened, Jack would have said more, but the sight of his younger brother, all innocent and wide-eyed, his steps cautious and calculated as he made his way into the room, made his mouth dry up. They stared at one another and anyone who saw them could tell that they were bound by name and not blood.

"Good day, Mr. Hughes." Said the older one of the two brothers as he placed his hat atop his head and pushed past into the corridor.

"Are you heading home already?" Andrew asked, his soft voice a stark contrast to Jack's scratchy one.

"Oh, don't be ridiculous. *I don't have a home.*"

Old wooden stairs creaked under heavy footsteps, resonating throughout the house. The sound of the front door being slammed shut was soon accompanied by a cold chill that swept through the home and nipped at the ankles of anyone present.

The soft snowfall and bustle of people on the streets below provided an almost soothing background noise that lulled Amelia into the land of daydreams. An open book lay on her

lap, long forgotten, one of its pages pinched between the woman's index and thumb. Her empty gaze followed the pale grey figures that roamed the streets outside her window. A vanity stood in the corner of the room, untouched since yesterday, a pile of sealed envelopes were placed in a neat stack near the mirror, written long ago, but never sent.

Amelia had become tired of waiting for a letter that she knew deep down would never come. A name was written in blank ink on all of them, a stark contrast to the yellowed paper. Jack Harrolds, 46 Doughty Street.

A string of curses left the young man's mouth as he made his way down the busy streets of London, the soft crunching of snow doing nothing to ease the annoyance bubbling within him. Every passerby that caught sight of his face, quickly moved to the side, letting him pass, their confusion filled eyes following him for a few more moments before losing sight of him in the bustling crowd of people.

Jack pushed past a group of kids, almost knocking one to the ground, before he climbed the three stone steps that lead to the dark oak wood door of 60 Piccadilly Street. He raised his cane and rapped it against the wooden surface twice, ignoring the brass door knocker in front of him. As he heard the soft creaking of the floorboards inside the home, Jack straightened his posture, one hand coming up to fix his cravat and hat.

A maid opens the door, cautiously, at first only peering through the slight crack before greeting the guest with a warm smile.

"Mr. Harrolds, we were not informed about your arrival." The young girl smiled, one hand nervously fidgeting with her white apron.

"I'm here to see Amelia, if that isn't a bother." The man responded, forcing a polite smile onto his lips, his grip on the body of his cane tightening.

"Yes, of course."

The maid stepped to the side and let the man in. She led him into the sitting room, Jack following silently behind, before excusing herself. The house was eerily silent, save for the clattering of pots and utensils in the kitchen next door where the servants were preparing

a late supper. The sitting room was one of the most extravagant ones that could be found in this house. Armchairs with red cushions that only the members of the family had the luxury of sitting in, with a decorative table standing next to each one, their golden accents glimmering in the candle light. This was a house of a wealthy noble family that most would give an arm and a leg to be a part of.

Jack carefully stepped closer to one of the chairs, a gloved hand reaching up to gently touch its backrest. His fingers trailed down to the armrest and then the smooth polished wood of the small coffee table next to it. A single teacup with an intricate silver spoon inside, its handle embellished in golden flowers, placed on a white porcelain plate stood near the edge. Some dried tea leaves decorated the tip of the small utensil, but it was nothing that a wet cloth couldn't fix, and soon the teaspoon found a new home in the guest's coat pocket.

The chandelier above him swayed, the sound of hurried footsteps thundering above him before a familiar face appeared on the steps.

"Jack." Amelia smiled as she enveloped the man in a tight hug, the smell of her floral perfume floating around them.

Her affections weren't reciprocated as Mr. Harrolds only wrapped one around the woman's waist but didn't pull her closer. One hand moved up to gently card through her hair before resting on the back of her neck.

"Is something the matter?" Her soft voice whispered as she pulled away, looking up to meet his eye before Jack could avert his gaze.

"No. No, everything is quite alright." A response came through half-gritted teeth, the man's jaw clenching.

Amelia tried to look deeper into his dark brown eyes that now were more akin to black holes, but couldn't bear to do so, her gaze slowly falling down to stare at the carpet beneath their feet. The silence was suffocating as Jack slowly massaged his lover's nape.

The sitting room was truly extravagant, a thief's paradise if one were to ever even get one foot inside it. One stolen fork would have the local pawn shop owner coughing up enough money to set someone up for life.

Mr. Harrolds looked down at Amelia, his gaze flickering across her pale face before he took her hand in his and held it close to his chest.

“Amelia, would you be so kind as to let me have your hand in marriage?”

The young woman stared up in shock at such a question, her lips slightly parted before they soon pulled into a smile. Mirth pricked at the corners of her gentle eyes as she once again wrapped her arms around the man and pulled him impossibly close. Lost in the ecstasy of a dream come true, Amelia failed to notice as Jack once again carded his fingers through her hair and plucked a jade hairpin from her locks.

Ivy

*Short story by Vakarė Baranauskaitė,
A 9th-grade student of Pažinimo Medis School*

Mother had always hated ivy: how it curled and coiled around her precious grand daylilies and pampered rosebuds, with such determination it might have tried to snap her beloved. She fought back with all her heart, waking up at dawn to weed before church. Yet I adored it, perhaps strictly because Mother did not. I found beauty in such a trivial plant, how its frail tendrils worm their way above all, snuggling between bark and pavement alike. All for sunlight, all for survival. It amazed me. I somehow found a forgotten apse, soaked in shade and flowing with ivy.

The new girl next door stood out. Her parents' hoary car, faded, "boyish" clothes — Mother had shut the door on her attempt at introduction. The girl went to my school, an eyesore between the posh. A plague to some, sweetest honey to me.

Trees bared and birthed verdant crowns a mere once before She dared. The softest of daffodil lips brushed against mine, a cut above the harsh, eager boys I've kissed. Silence stood afterward, stilling the scarce air between us. Static scrubbed my mind overwhelmingly clean. I tiptoed so our lips would graze again before a thought could interrupt, before disgust could burden.

My apse had offered shadow to hide for many moons. Clusters of pillows and blankets had shaped themselves within it, between floods of vines. We'd rest on them at disgraceful hours of dark when God could not see.

Mother did. The back door burst open, blinding us both with light the alcove does not see often. She screamed, and yelled, tearing me away with an iron grip on my wrist. Though it was white noise — my complete focus was on the girl. She was quicker. She scrambled up the fence, Her boots tore at my dearest ivy, leaving gashes in its lush tapestry. Mother clawed after. In vain.

They moved out a few weeks later. No more hoary car, no more faded, “boyish” clothes. Not a single blemish of a student in class. No ivy either, as mother had taken her whole afternoon uprooting every last stalk.

The Tower of Church

*Short story by D. N³,
An 11th-grade student of Kaunas Jonas Jablonskis High School*

When you graduate from school, it is a significant life turning point. Perhaps, there is a little scent of freedom unless you have a summer job or else...

Well, four friends — Ainis, Kersa, Girmanta and Yadeika — have decided to smell freedom at the coast of the Baltic Sea. I mean, to have a summer vacation. As soon as summer became in its full swing, each of them packed a minimal amount of stuff (except for Ainis, who really needed all his photography equipment for no serious reason), got in Girmanta's car and fled their city as fast as catching up with winds. Wait, why did they have to "flee"? It is simply irony.

The friends rented a house quite close to the seashore, although on a low budget. The room where they had to sleep rather reminded of a place to have a covert meeting with some drinks (wink) than a place where to romantically rest while gazing at the dawn above the sea horizon. Do not get me wrong. These friends did not take any drinks. It was just a vibe their house had. Nevertheless, Yadeika kept repining about the loud amusement park, which did not allow him to fall asleep as early as he prefers to. Overall, it was a nice and refreshing vacation. At least the weather was not gloomy.

Joke's on you and the four friends! The weather at the Baltic Sea is never consistent. The warming sun stayed in an unclouded sky only for the first couple of days. The rest of the days turned out to be grey, windy and rainy at times. Weather forecast was yapping — it would be sunny tomorrow with a temperature higher than 20 degrees Celsius. But the

³ The student wished to be published under a pseudonym; their real name is known to the editorial board.

forecast kept changing its mind every hour. And a month before, when the friends were planning their vacation — to predict such weather was a complete gambling.

'I didn't come here to sit in this shack for the entire week,' Kersa complained.

'Well, it's so sad that you won't get your desired suntan,' Girmanta smirked back.

'Look at yourself, pale as a cheese. At least your hair is brown and not ash,' she replied annoyed.

Meanwhile, Yadeika was lying on bed, covering his ears with a pillow. He finally spoke:

'I can't wait until the rain comes again. At least then they turn off the carousels...'

The friends were ready to listen to the fourth weather complaint, but the room remained silent. Where's Ainis?

And Ainis was out on the windy beach, taking photos of the raging waves. When his friends came to check on him after he unveiled his location through the Snapchat app, he yelled in excitement: 'Terrific! Amazing! The fury of these waves, it's art!'

Girmanta could sigh at most: 'At least one person who's not complaining about the weather...'

'Listen, guys, I have an idea,' Kersa said as she was putting on an olive-green sweater. 'If the weather doesn't get better, we could visit interesting sites in the town.'

'That's fine. The further from the amusement park, the better.' Yadeika agreed. 'And Ainis, you could add more photos to your architecture collection from there...'

'It's not just architecture. It's specifically churches, *Yadeika*.' Ainis rolled his eyes.

Girmanta was already searching on her phone, 'There is one very close to us. But we would have to pay to enter.'

'That's fine. And it would be enough for today.' Kersa did not even think to reject as she had no better ideas. Anywhere is fine but the rent house.

Soon, Ainis packed his equipment and left it at the house. Although he took the camera.

It is nice when you can walk anywhere on foot as the town is small. The streets are full of souvenir stalls — most of them selling amber jewellery. There was one stall selling plush toys and Kersa insisted to herself buy a Stitch plushie — she was the biggest fan of the film.

As the friends were getting closer to the centre of the town, cafés and snack bars were exchanging the myriad of stalls. Even though stalls are inevitably everywhere. Except for the park of tall thin pine trees, where a single wide pathway extended from one edge to another. The friends had to be cautious not to miss a turn to the church — but it was easy, as there was a big information stand next to it.

The entrance price was not much. Moreover, the church itself was actually an observation tower, and the entire interior was under an unfinished renovation. Yadeika peaked out his head to look upward of the square staircase spiral: 'Well, physical activity equals wellbeing...'

'How many floors are there?!' Kersa's eyes went round.

They decided to count when climbing. For fun.

'I'm afraid of climbing high upstairs. Especially if they are made of metal...' Girmanta whined. But she did not want to stay alone here, on the ground. Therefore, she went up with everyone.

There were no remains of furniture or former interior in any of the floors — the flooring and walls were of raw cement. At places, thick metal strings were sticking out of the edges. And there were square holes where the windows should have been — every such hole had warning tape enclosures. Everyone silently agreed with their awkward looks at each other that this tower was mildly haunting.

The stairs were made of concrete on every floor except for the last two, where the stairs, to Girmanta's disappointment, were of metal and steeper. *Ah, it was a bad decision to come here*, she thought. At the very top the winds were blowing stronger than on the ground. It felt like if she let go of the banisters, she would fly away. The good thing was that at least for a while a patch of the sky, which was above this town, became clear of clouds. The vivid dusk of hot pink and orange struck the eye. Although the winds were freezing at this

summer, somehow Yadeika had this magical ability to think of the future — he was the only person here wearing a proper scarf.

And so, the friends stood in the tower, peacefully watching the sun melt in the sea. When it became dark and cloudy again, it was decided to go back to the rent house.

Climbing down was mentally uneasy — the silence of the cement walls, which radiated coldness, was hair-raising. It felt like the guard of the tower should have asked them to leave earlier. Kersa and Yadeika turned on the flashlight of their phones. When the friends stopped chatting, focusing on climbing, the sound of the wind whistling was exposed. Immediately, Ainis stopped to take photos of the pictures of downstairs: 'Guys... this is cool. There is fog on the first floor. And it is slowly emerging into the second floor.'

Kersa raised her left eyebrow in shock, 'Excuse me?'

'Well, this fog does not act according to the laws of physics, I dare to ironically note,' Girmanta intoned.

Everyone stopped on the fifth floor, waiting in confusion. They should just leave the tower no matter how dense the fog appeared. Or they are stuck here overnight. As if encouraging, the wind whistled invigorated. The eyes of the youngsters widened, and they started running down. The wind was growing stronger as if chasing them. Some supernatural presence was here, but not of the ghosts or clowns like in horror films.

When the friends immersed into the fog, which had already reached the third floor on their way, the eyesight was lost. They had to slow down and follow the banisters (thank God, at least they were here!). At the first floor, the adolescents crawled on their knees to get through the entrance barrier. The guard was not present anywhere. As well, the fog was surrounding the church. It covered the entire park. Wordlessly, the three friends were running towards the centre of the town, where entertainment buildings stood. They expected to face the party nightlife of the town, but not a single person appeared. Now, the destination of their run was not their rent house at all — the friends will reach safety when they meet a group of other people. They met no one. Emptiness petrified the skin.

The friends were listening to their own breath, heartbeat and the murmur of the sea. The Nordic wind was back, causing chills down to the bones. Kersa realized that one breath

was missing — Yadeika's breath should have been the loudest. But he was gone. Yet, nobody understands what was going on.

A melody was getting louder at the distance — some lucid tinkles. It accompanied the sea wave murmur. Like the wind itself was rattling tiny wooden cylinders. And the remaining friends were confused — where to go? They did not pay attention when they have lost Yadeika. They did not even understand if they should panic or not. No eerie creature transpired, no one caused harm or touched the adolescents. Except Yadeika.

Before long, all three froze when they heard distant footsteps. When the friends turned back, they saw a dark broad-shouldered silhouette in the fog from afar slowly moving towards them. No one even stirred. They waited a little longer to see who the human walking around was in this emptiness. Everyone became relieved, because the silhouette belonged to Yadeika. Even if he did not clarify the confusion. It would make more sense if Yadeika stayed missing. Nevertheless, Yadeika did not utter a word. He touched Girmanta's hands, causing shiver. 'You're cold.' She muttered. 'Can you hear the melody as well?' then she asked. He bitterly nodded.

'Where should we go now?' Kersa asked.

Ainis and Girmanta were about to put forth anything. Surprisingly, Yadeika spoke: 'We have to wait until the church bell clangs. Then the fog disperses.'

His words shocked others. However, the friends decided not to inquire. It was most likely related to his disappearance. Even so, Ainis ventured: 'I suppose, the bell does not work due to renovation... And here is no one to have the access to the church bell.'

'You're right,' and Yadeika went silent again.

'What if we go to the beach?' Girmanta suggested. 'Let's reach our rent house at least.'

And all of the four friends went there cautiously in silence. There was no explanation of what was happening. Thus, nobody offered a finer thing to do.

When they reached the house, everyone saw the fog did not cover the beach at all. As they came out of the dunes, they could distinctly observe the horizon of the sea. The ripples were calm almost as those of a lake. The wind was gone here.

Kersa kneeled down on the sand to relieve the tension from her mind. The sun was about to begin pushing out the night. But it was not over. The aura was intruded by jingling bells attached to some sort of clothing. A horned creature — face unknown, covered by a wooden mask, was heading towards them. All adolescents sensed its sharp glance pointed at them. The being wore a tunic and a cape of hoary zigzag patterns. Its hooves were trampling sand as it was queerly dancing by the melody of the wind and the sea. Silence. Jingling bells. Rattle of the wooden cylinders. Sea murmur. Wind whistle. It was the song of the devil itself.

The first sunbeams peeped out of the sea. The devil stopped melodiously whirling. It covered its eye by hand, watching how the sun crawls up. The creature stood there in tranquillity until the church bell clanged. The sound turned the devil into sand, which was gently blown away by the wind that had just risen. After all, hoof traces remained on the beach. Too far for the waves to wash.

'He lived in the tower of the church, and we accidentally disturbed his midsummer sleep.' Yadeika whispered.

He Who Sleeps

*Short story by Kostas Ferensas,
An 11th-grade student of Šiaulių Didždvario Gymnasium*

CHAPTER I

The Dive

My living room walls seem to quake on Monday mornings. I'm starting to think that it is my mind playing foreign tricks on me. It wants me to do something meaningful this week rather than being in this house with me. But I don't know, man. All of this is too much for me. Why can't I float around in my house all day and have a good time being alone? How can I do that and not feel like a total failure afterwards? I want comfort and I strive for it. Strive for it in my bed. I lay in my bed with a pounding heart and I don't know why it pounds so hard. A small part of me thinks that it might be anxiety, or my brutal procrastination which I enable with a melancholic feeling and feel guilty about it. I can't do anything about that.

He put down his pen and reveled in seeing the last of his personal journal's pages being filled up with words of wisdom. He was leaning forwards with his bruised elbows rubbing the coffee table trying to see the outside through a dust spotted window. Gazing to the near outside and not feeling the day's warmth anymore. It was night. Yet another wasted day. Before going to watch the TV, he wanted to fantasize about a different life where he is a professional football player, but he had already done that a few hours ago and lifted

the winner's cup with his bleak phantom hands. He bent down to look under the table for cigarettes he had dropped four days ago. Guiding his hand through the trash on the floor and almost snatching a pair of forceps and returning with naught, he felt a scrunched box and gripped it hard with the palm of his hand. Then, he opened it and put one of the sticky cigarettes in his mouth. Rolled it around with his lips. From one corner to the other. He got up from his chair and walked over to the living room, going past the dimly lit corridor. Dropped on the leather couch and picked up the blue lighter which was laying on the couche's armrest. Lit up the cigarette and instinctively pushed a couple of buttons on the remote and began watching TV. Wheel of Fortune.

LET'S GIVE THE WHEEL A SPIN!

Watching the Wheel of Fortune show would always come with consequences. The plasma screen sat atop an old oak chifforobe. That meant he needed to crane upwards for hours on end. That strained his neck. Made him sleep poorly. Sometimes he didn't sleep at all, or he would only sleep for an hour or two. His sleep was always dreamless — a canvas of infinite and migrant darkness that swallowed him every night for as long as he himself remembered. Tiny dots of color, which were carrying some tottering inkling of hope, do try to penetrate into his head, but he never lets them in. Dots. So it is that he will not dream.

Emaciated by the glib nonsense of Wheel of Fortune's host. He had every right to call the host shoddy and turn off the screen. Nothing followed. Then he mustered up the courage and looked right. See the plants on the windowsill. They are dead. Near the plants lay framed pictures which had been placed facedown so that their content could not be seen by him. Covered in dust. The ring too. He sees the ring and thinks to himself that it was shinier back then. That there was more life to it when everything began. But those times seemed to him so distant and alien that he rejected them with disgust and shame. He rose slowly from his couch and went to the kitchen to grab something to eat.

Looking inside and being flashed every few seconds by the flickering lightbulb of the fridge, he saw a barren shelf. There was a single carton packet of yoghurt. Frowned upon it. Closed the fridge. He walked to the sink and spat out the cigarette butt from his mouth. Turned and walked under the rotten jamb into his bedroom. The bedroom's wallpaper already decayed to a point that every single morning, he would find a chunk of yellowish sodden paper by the bed's bottom side rail. He took off his clothes one by one and threw them onto an office chair in the corner of the bedroom. Went to bed with only his trousers. He buried himself in a pretty comfortable blanket. Crossed his arms and stared at the ceiling. He realized that this day was over. Figured out that there wasn't going to be a day like this ever again. And he knew that tomorrow he would once again strive for comfort in his house. The walls might not quake, but they will feel hostile, and he would still do nothing about it and seek comfort and safety in this house. Again. He was thinking. Wishing for something. He wished for it and fell asleep seeing the colorful dots. He went to sleep wishing that tomorrow morning he wouldn't wake up.

CHAPTER II

Submerged

When she playfully splashed him with water, he got flustered and met her gaze, longingly. The woman had his utter devotion. His joy radiated across the silver lake that they were bathing in and joined in unison of the rustling trees. The wind made the woman's hair flail in the air revealing her smile. Then he began smiling like a fool. That didn't matter to him. He wanted to smile. Seeing her so happy like this made him feel complete. For a while they were just staring at each other. Holding hands. And in that moment he felt coalesced with her beneath the light blue sky. I wish we could stay here forever, the man said in his head. She probably said that to herself too, he reckoned. Seconds passed. The woman giggled and ran off towards the beach. And just like that, the moment passed. Already it became a memory which he would most definitely replay in his head over and over again. But that moment was magical. It was indelible.

Seeing her running towards the beach made him want her again. He was afraid that he might lose her and all that he would have left of her would be that memory. Why was he afraid? He didn't know but he had a feeling. This lake felt similar. It made him get goosebumps and seek her warmth once again. He wanted to be close to her and tell her his worries so that she could deny them as an illogical folly. Yet his mind was somewhere else. This place. How did I get here? The man asked himself. Before he could answer his own question, the queer hunch of vulnerability struck his heart and fear made him scurry to her. Water spluttered about his thighs as he trundled across the shallow lake into the beach. The sun-baked sand was scorching hot and mildly burned his soles. That didn't matter to him. It only made him faster. He could see her lying on the sand. She lay still, soaking in the sun. Sunlight kissed her skin. Suddenly, a pitch-black void around the forest unfurled. The wind became more violent and the disheveled leaves from the trees were falling on the ground. He tried to rasp a warning but nothing came out. The sky above him transformed into a diluted gray mess. The sun was no more. It got cold and she was lying there still. Not moving an inch. His heart started pounding heavily. Started to sweat. He didn't know what was happening. Then a sharp pain thundered through both of his eyes. The pain was unbearable. He wanted to scream but couldn't even though he had a

mouth to scream with. Instinctively his hands went to his head. Started tearing out the skin around his eye socket. Pulling the eye brow hair out. It didn't go away. It showed him something. Infinite darkness and colorful dots. In the agony casting his martyr gaze at the dots everything stopped. He opened his eyes and she was gone.

Trudge to the sight where she was a moment ago. Gone — not even her towel remained. The wind began raising the dregs in the forest, with the leaves sitting atop, and soon no dreg was left in that forest. He got hit by a rotten twig. His hair became full of sand. Staying here would bring no solace. What he needed was her. And a little soft voice in his head told him that he might lay his eyes on her once more if he entered the forest instead of being congealed. He started walking towards that forest as if it invited him to see something that only he could understand. Slowly, he made his way. Rubbing the tree trunk bark as he went on. A phony murk emerged from the ground. That made it hard for him to see. Hard to see the dried-out brook in front of him. Eventually, he forded the brook and went on to discover a path. As he wandered through the overgrown forest path, he imagined the twisted branches and scattered stones forming invisible patterns — cryptic signs left by distant souls. There he saw it then. A hooded figure dressed all black standing in the middle of the path. The figure was facing his back against him. It seemed to him that the figure was holding something in his right hand. A bloodied knife. His eyes looked down. Between the hooded figure's legs, he saw her. Lying still. In a fetal position.

He walked for what time displayed itself like a brutal passage that pushes any man forward ruthlessly. Coming closer with each step, his heart pounded faster and more loudly. Stepped on a branch. Blaring crack. The figure didn't turn. Instead, it slumped forwards. Stretching out its hand and revealing the bloodied knife even more so. That made things worse. Still, he walked. Soon after, it started to rain. Nimbostratus clouds, conquering the skyline above him, made him walk through rain and hail and rain again. Reflected by the soggy mud of the unkept path, he could be seen as slumped. His eyes fixated on her. Not once did she move. One step after another. He was only two feet away from the figure. He reached over with his hand and gripped the hooded figure's shoulder tightly. Turned him and shrieked in horror. It was a human, but it had no face. Blank. The head had the shape of a dough. He stepped back, and the figure sank to the wet mud next to her. Then it happened. The pain came back, and it closed his eyelids. The colorful dots came back.

Screaming he dropped to his knees. His body went cold. A sudden realization came with the colorful dots leaving the migrant darkness. He opened his eyes and the woman and the figure weren't there. The man was gasping for air. Oh my god, he said. No no no, it can't be, he bawled. He got up and stepped forwards. Coming closer, a shiny object caught his attention. It was a bloodied ring. He picked it up and rubbed it with his fingers to wipe the wet mud clean off. The blood however didn't come off. His heart hadn't stopped pounding and tears ran down his cheeks. After a couple of seconds, the ring vanished into thin air. And it stopped raining. The wind stopped blowing and the red giant in the sky returned and its sunlight warmed the man's body. Oh god, he said silently. He didn't want to believe it. But there was no other explanation. He knew that he was stuck in his own dream. His wish had come true.

CHAPTER III

The Fall

The city's streets had been rid of any man long ago. It seemed that this place was never meant to be housing beings of consciousness. The dreamland's soil spawned trees of Eden in a massive ring around the revenant city making it dubious for a soul who entered the city, to leave. He had been stuck in that chaotic concrete jungle for weeks, or even months. Losing hope. Losing his sanity. For how long could he keep going before howling at the bleak paper moon in the short sky? He knew the answer. He knew what he had to do.

Going up the stairs of a windowless skyscraper, he tried to replay that sacred memory of his late wife at the silver lake. But couldn't. He didn't remember her face. No matter how hard he tried. As he went on climbing the stairs the thought of his late wife nagged him in the back. With each step upwards however he felt lighter. Finally reaching a red metal door. He leaned on the door and pressed it with his shoulder. The door was heavy but he managed to push it open and a wild gust of wind surged into the bulkhead. His eyes watered and he stepped forwards.

Standing still. Craned his head to the dark abyss. Looked at the feigned moon and felt determined with his plan. Going forwards he reached the edge of the roof. Stepping carefully on to the metal plates. He took a deep breath and something got transported into the palm of his hand. He wasn't surprised and with no doubts looked at the object. It was the bloodied ring. No, he shouted at the moon. He had lost the ring on purpose when he entered this city. To him it evoked a feeling he had in the real world. Self-loathing comfort. He knew that it was harmful for him to have it, but it was so hard for him to forget her. So there he was. Standing there. On the edge of a skyscraper's roof. Shivering from fear and sadness and guilt. He knew what he had to do. I have to let you go, he said. He dropped the ring. Letting it fall to the dreamground. Soon after, he closed his eyes and leapt forwards. He fell for what seemed to be eternity and opened his eyes. Saw it. Embraced it. Closed his eyes again and touched the dreamground. A wave of tendril dark sparked and engulfed him. Seeing all black he noticed some colorful dots.

Big Eyes

*Poem by Skaistė Albrektaitė,
A 9th-grade student of Kelmės Jono Graičiūno High School*

Through small windows, big eyes looking through,

Through big eyes, I see it all too.

Nothing escapes my big eyes,

I see and understand, through small skies.

Through a small window, I see nothing there,

But beautiful birds flying in the air.

I whisper silent prayers, all alone,

So their hearts find their way back home.

Big eyes hear voices known by heart,

Through the wall that hides their storm.

When I close my big eyes, I sink into the sea—

I made it up, so no one would see.

Near empty houses, big eyes found their place.

To drown in silence—it's not so bad.

Big eyes feel it all: the fear, the grace,

The weight of storms they never had.

Just Ten Minutes Before Midnight

*Poem by Lina Mulevičiūtė,
An 11th-grade student of Vilnius Lyceum*

I feel uncomfortable; a deep anxiety is in my heart,
But in the morning rush, silence fills the room, a quiet start.
I can even hear the mice softly squeaking,
Where shadows cry and talk, and secrets start speaking.

Isn't it absurd that time has stopped for me,
While you move calmer than you've ever been, so free?
Today feels different — I am trapped, confined,
More trapped than Hamlet, lost in his mind, aligned.

I remember that moment, the very last moment,
When fresh green grass brushed softly past my feet's soft comment.
But now? Today is cold, and I am still trapped,
Alas, no dream — harsh reality's chill, tightly wrapped.

I am calm because my father fights the lies
That spread like fire across the Eastern skies.
I know this battle will one day end,
And truth and light will finally mend.

Please, hear me now, I beg you, understand
It's not just words, but actions that command.
Pull yourself together, remember, rise and stand.
We fight for peace throughout this land, hand in hand.

Please stop now — I ask you, cease this strife.
You're tired but fear facing the truth of life.
A tiny worm beneath my weary sky,
Where lies, corruption, and precious truths die.

This strange day locks us all inside,
While people from themselves now hide.
They run and leave behind the cries
Of those who suffer, with unseen eyes.

I need thee, thee who sees and shares the fear;
Above destruction, the ruins of hope still stand near.
Trust in the dark smoke of tedious war;

The children hide, embrace the broken door.

Above the ruins, Bethlehem's star still gleams,
A silent witness to shattered hopes and dreams.
Its light cuts through the smoke of endless war,
Where children cry behind each broken door.

Today is cold; the shadows stretch and creep,
While mothers pray and quietly weep.
Help comes slow where darkness grows —
Beneath that star, the sorrow flows.

The Symphony of Seven Winds

*Poem by Diana Veselovaitė,
A 9th-grade student of Vilnius Gabija Gymnasium*

Stars descending from the depths of the abyss,
Thousands of people between the branches of the universe tree,
We live forever and we love to live
And our legend will be told by the seven winds

The birds that soared as the sky turned dark
The flowers that wilted away
The powerful bridges lost nations built
Crumbling to the ground, gone with ages

And thus the tale that flew away
From the lips of a mother near a cradle
And thus the words that slipped away
From a legend told by an old soldier

When time was young,
A symphony was sung
To honor the past and the future
Everything they knew
And everything we know

Someday will become a light of future

On the edge of the sky,
The king and the queen, the ancient divine
Holding the crystal fragile globe
In their hands -there's our world

His armour shone like gold of day
Her pearls shimmered on the blue night sky,
As they cradled the globe in their hands
As they channelled the otherworldly light

Yet the little world was still,
Crystalized, ethereal, but not alive
It was beautiful until
One would notice it was petrified

The dawn of a world, the light of creation
Pierced the darkness, caught the winds' eye
As they twirled and danced in the endless sky
The king and queen had heard the winds
Had heard the symphony that they would sing

The divine queen forged a tiny spark,
So small it fluttered in the palm of her hand
The winds were in awe,
A contract was made,
Written in the cosmic abyss,
Engraved in the stardust, still active it is
The winds took the light and with a song they fled

Descending to the stagnant new world

And the skies started to move,
And the still oceans went lose,
As the rivers pierced the land,
The spark carried in the winds' hands
Painted the earth, awakened life,
The winds continued their flight,
When the cycle of time dawned upon
The newly created world

And the sacred flame burned,
As the ages turned
From millenium to millenium into tomorrow
And civilizations rose and empires burned,
Rising from ashes and turning to dust,
The dust turned to sand of a clock in times hands-
Our age is a grain of sand in a desert
And therefore I am, as I have heard
This tale, this symphony that the seven winds sung

We Grow More Than Pencil Marks

*Essay by Paulina Bagdonaitė,
A 9th-grade student of Klaipėda Lyceum*

Everyone grows up. It may happen in silence, in chaos, slowly or unnoticeably. It's a change you only notice when you become taller than your parents, all of a sudden, your shoes and clothes don't fit as they used to and friends from childhood are slowly replaced. It happens when you realize you have stopped watching cartoons and toys don't hold that emotional value anymore. Growing up is often perceived as a change in physical appearance: an increase in height, change in the skin, in voice deepening. And we call it all- maturing. I personally hold the view that maturing happens after you overcome that change and you settle in the true "yourself", after you understand why it is necessary to learn the lessons that must be learnt and to find the paths in your life that are expected to be found. However, no one realizes how much it takes, and how much it doesn't only change your body, but more importantly, your soul.

When I was a kid, I used to envision that growing up simply meant getting taller. My whole childhood, I was measuring my height against the doorframe, aspiring to one day be as tall as my parents. Every few months, I'd stand there, craning my neck to see if the line had moved up just a little. And I dreamed of the day I'd stand near my parents, no longer looking up from below. I was always looking up to the older kids in the playground, not just because they were taller, but because they always seemed so confident, going through life with respect and wisdom, wishing one day that would be me. No one really explains why every little kid wants to be older so badly. Maybe it's the stereotype of freedom or the desire to be taken seriously. Or maybe it's just because we thought life gets better the taller you get. But God, it felt like it took forever. At that time, everything moved

slowly. But looking back now, I realize that my wish to grow up was never a lost dream, it was a progress that I never noticed. It was a slow progress of evolving, changing and learning. I can now see that I truly grew in ways no pencil mark against a doorframe can measure.

As a child, the world looks magical. A blanket becomes a fortress, a broom turns into a witch's flying broomstick and nothing stops you from being certain about magical flying creatures and princesses living in the castles. But as time passes, when life leisurely becomes real, you start to realize that it isn't as magical and beautiful as parents try to show. You awaken to the truth that can leave a deep scar to your soul. And it isn't just about your toys getting replaced with books or the change in your clothes — it's the true emotions and the laughter that can be lost. It is no longer unaware — it's cautious, thoughtful, sometimes hollow.

Growth cannot be defined just as a change in physical appearance. Over time, you establish that pinky promises can be broken, grown-ups can lie to you, and that mistakes can be made, not just by others but also by you. As you grow older, the true colors of a person begin to show, and you slowly come to understand that not everyone who smiles at you is a friend, and not every friendship is meant to last. One day, you notice your parents are no longer your closest companions, but are getting farther and more distant from the "real" you after each passing year. For a lot of people, as well as me, that aching apprehension of maturing came from a painful experience in which you had to find a way out. Back in kindergarten, I experienced my first loss of trust in people that I had called friends. For many years, I thought that it was them that I lost. Relating to the concept of maturing, years later, I realized it wasn't them, it was myself that I truly lost. I lost the version of me that trusted too easily, that loved and appreciated, that believed best friends are meant forever. I lost the child's certainty that good intentions were always enough. Growing up, I learned that it isn't just about letting go of others- it's about not forgetting who you were before.

Pain is only one side of your personal evolving story. Growing up also means growing into love. Not the one from the Disney movies but real, complex love. You come to acknowledge the purpose of it, realizing how it can be felt not just in your head and heart, but throughout your whole body, even flowing through your veins. Love, in which you

deeply understand what it means to be there for a person, how to take care of not only the souls of your surroundings, but mostly of yourself. Self love. On that journey, you begin to understand that truly loving others starts with loving yourself. It's about taking care of your wounds first, before you can help someone else with theirs.

Growing up is not just a matter of bones widening and voices deepening. It is the reshape of the soul, the unnoticeable rewriting of who we are in a way we can only see years later. We don't wake up one day and realize we have changed- no, it happens slowly, subtly. One day we simply notice that our laughter sounds different, that our dreams have changed, that the child we once were is now someone we can only visit in memory.

Of course, like in every journey, we lose things along the way- the pinky promises we believed are unbreakable, the trust, the certainty that the world was magical and safe. But instead, new truths are found. We begin to see the fragility of life- how truly precious the time with parents is, how necessary it is to appreciate and to not be fearful to experience everything. Growing is learning. Learning that maturity is not something measurable by birthdays or height but by how much and what we carry inside.

So no, growing up does not just change our bodies or souls. I believe, while growing, the body ages and acquires to adapt to the environments we live in, the mind learns and forgets, the emotions adapt to overcome a lifelong rollercoaster and relationships with yourself and others form and shatter. We are meant to grow, to lose, to love. And in that, I found that growing up is not just an ending- it is an endless story of becoming your own person. And somewhere along the way, without even noticing, I became the person I once looked up to.

The Teenager I Thought I'd Be

*Essay by Rugilė Stundžaitė,
An 11th-grade student of Vilnius Lyceum*

Since early childhood, I have been surrounded by glamorous films, TV series, and persuasive conversations about what teenage life is supposed to look like. I was convinced that even though it can be very chaotic and unbalanced, it's still the best time of your life. I believed that young people prioritize after-school activities, parties, and friendships, making school seem like a secondary concern during this so-called magical phase. All this led me to view teenage life through rose-tinted glasses.

Personally, I was a rather reserved, naturally introverted and shy child. From the very beginning, I preferred quiet time alone over being part of large social groups. However, all those sayings about how adolescence makes you “come out of your shell” or even go “wild” convinced even me that my personality would undergo a dramatic transformation. I dreamed of becoming that stereotypical teenager, the kind everybody talked about. I counted year after year, waiting for that shift to arrive. I thought maybe it would just come a little later for me, but it had to happen because everybody insisted it would.

In contrast to my expectations, as the years passed, I remained largely the same person: someone who enjoyed studying and cherished time with close friends and family. I never quite fit the scripted version of teenage life I had been led to expect. For a long time, this left me feeling unfulfilled and insecure. Thoughts like “Why am I not like others?”, “Why can't I be a normal teenager?” always lingered in my mind. I often believed that I had wasted all my teenage years. The most daunting realization was that I couldn't get rewind

time — it would be over soon, and I had just missed out on everything exciting that was supposed to happen.

It wasn't until a few months ago that my perspective truly began to change. The turning point wasn't anything dramatic—it was simply a conversation with a slightly older friend. We've known each other since we were children, but we only meet a few times a year. Still, these rare meetings often feel meaningful, and this one had a big impact on me. I had always seen her as confident, outgoing, and what I thought of as a "typical teenager." From the outside, it seemed like she was really enjoying that lifestyle. However, during our talk, she shared something that surprised me. She confessed that she had often struggled with feeling down and doubting her self-worth. She tried to act like someone else, just to fit in and feel accepted, even though it didn't make her truly happy. She explained that many teenagers appear content, but in reality, they are confused and unsure about who they are. Often, they just follow the crowd without thinking about what is actually right for them.

This conversation made me realize that there is not a single way to live in your teenage years. I finally understood that I wasn't any less of a teenager just because my life was quieter than others'. It is completely okay to not rebel, neglect school, or distance yourself from family just because "now I am a teenager". Some teens do choose that lifestyle, and that is perfectly natural, after all, if not now, then when? However, we all differ in terms of character traits and values. For some of us, embracing responsibilities, staying close to family, and committing to our studies isn't a sacrifice—it's an authentic way of living.

Meeting people from a variety of backgrounds helped me realize that there are many teens like me, not into wild parties and not acting indifferent to their surroundings. This convinced me even more that I am following my path — I discovered other ways to relax, to enjoy myself and to feel fulfilled. Now I finally understand that my version of teenage life is just as meaningful and complete as any other.

To conclude, it's absolutely normal not to match the stereotypical image of adolescence portrayed in the media. We all are different, and not all of us need to party until dawn, ignore our studies, and put friends first. Even if our teen years look different, it doesn't mean we missed out — we simply lived them our way, and that is more than enough.

Farewell

Dear Readers,

We hope the exploration of these pages has been exciting for you! A few words have to be said before we finish.

To begin with, we would like to thank everyone who contributed to this issue with their work, and we hope to continue working with you in the future. We would like to express our gratitude to Malachi Black for the incredible conversation full of hope — something each of us needs today. Finally, we would like to thank the high school students for their participation in the Future Voices of English. Do not let anything discourage you from pursuing your dreams and talents.

We hope the exploration of genre was an interesting enterprise for our writers, poets, and readers, and that it encourages you to keep experimenting with stories, forms, and ideas. If you have a suggestion regarding future themes or anything else, do not hesitate to contact us via email at discourse.magazine@outlook.com or Instagram [@discourse.vu](https://www.instagram.com/discourse.vu), where we will also post updates about the next submission call.

Finally, as our editorial board approaches graduation, we are looking for the people who will continue shaping the voice of Discourse Magazine and keeping the conversation alive for future readers and contributors. If you are passionate about literature and would like to become a part of our team, message us in any convenient way.

Until we meet again!