



DECONFINING Arts, Culture, and Policies in Europe and Africa

Greta Ambrazaitė

Deconfining



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These fiction texts from the Lithuanian language to the English language were translated by Olga Prisekina–Olrachs and Ieva Vaičiulienė, UAB “Bella Verba” translators and edited by Ana Kirijeva and Olga Prisekina–Olrachs, UAB “Bella Verba” translators and English language editors.

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The Island Where Anxiety People Meet

Novella

There was nothing special about this island – except what looms around it, instilling fear and horror. The island represented the grey area, but Lucia couldn't remember how it was called for the life of her. The Island, she thought? Simple as that?

Passengers from all the continents of the world were rushed into the Island by their own thoughts. Refugees, all of them. Your ticket was that familiar feeling of losing the grip on reality. And these tickets were dispersed to people of all races, all nations and religions – office workers, postmen, waiters and altar servers, superstars and lunatics, street sweepers and professors, organists and town drunks, people suffering from high cholesterol and raw vegans, singletons and mothers of five – lines and lines of never ending people crossed their individual seas of anxiety, frenziedly looking for a moment of peace and quiet. They would berth their boats in the Island's harbour and then leave the heavy perpetually-rattling chains of their unyielding thoughts behind. Like snakes moulting their skins, they would shed their old thoughts and let them sink to the bottom. Only the murmuring of the sea, like reassuring white noise, could be heard on the beach. This was paradise lost. Naked and vulnerable, deprived of thoughts and anxiety, people would then stroll down the sandy beaches like an army of shadows, looking at the sky with their hands covering their brow, drying their hair. And that's it. The Island provided them with a temporary relief needed to get back on their feet and return to their ordinary lives.

There was no sickness, no work duties on the Island. Having come there, people would lose their memories and be reborn every second – over and over again. The Island was a release, it gave its visitors the indispensable opportunity to leave their everyday worries behind. They called this journey “a luxury of escape”. This “luxury”, of course, was only possible in the most stressful of moments.

The price of the ticket was an abyss opening under your feet, after all.

Some months are typically busier on the Island than usual. More people flood to it in times of collective malice that touches the lives of many – wars, revolutions, epidemics and pandemics. The majority comes here right before midnight, when they're finally able to stretch their legs after an exhausting day, their debilitating thoughts still clinging to them like superglue. Like sirens, they entice their owners to venture into the endless ocean of the unknown.

One morning at the end of May, Lucia found out that her dad was sick. Even though coughing incessantly almost to the level of suffocation, he was adamant in his decision not to go to a checkpoint for testing. For a couple of months now, all news channels have been flooded with information about the new virus that takes the lives of numerous people every day. Dad doesn't budge: you have to trust God who is the only to decide who lives and who dies even amidst this entire madness. Lucia is persistent in her quiet efforts to tolerate her father's stubbornness. She's patient enough to take his calls. However, the path towards peace or at least clarity seems so excruciatingly long.

This became apparent when Dad started going on walks to a nearby forest and then sending her letters afterwards, filled with long lists of things he spotted lying around, discarded. Having opened her mailbox, Lucia would find another one there – and, while going up the staircase to her apartment on the fifth floor, she would open the envelope, take the crumpled piece of paper out and read the scattered words, written with a pencil: “Sweetie, here are all the things I've found today. It's crazy, how much good stuff people throw out these days. Maybe, you could use some of it, too. Call me.” The important list would be written down below. A somewhat varying collection, it would always include the main items: some kindling wood, bags, tins, newspapers, syringes, vodka bottles. Some of the rarer ones were pants, a chair, a shoe, a hat, a phone, a cent and a half-full pack of cigarettes.





On several occasions, there was also a sofa, a set of headphones, a jacket, a backpack, an earring and a banknote. Lucia would not reply to her father's letters. Conversations on the phone were pretty normal, unless the topics of television or the corrupted government that wants to make all people sick sprung up. The mental illness her father was diagnosed with fifteen years ago, which manifested by obsessive thoughts and erroneous beliefs, have become such an integral and mundane part of her family's life like taking their dog for a walk. The bouts were rear, and people around them saw her dad as an ordinary, kind person – a bit bizarre, maybe, but well-wishing in general. As the years went by, Lucia's mom started seeing him in the same light – as a simple, goodhearted man, a little strange yet benevolent roommate, whose kinks were not worth paying attention to. All objections and efforts to bring their husband and father back to lucid thinking only increased the repulsion he felt towards the world – both Lucia and her mom came to this understanding many years ago.

So, for Lucia, the only way to live her life was to ignore what's been happening. To pretend there's no elephant in the room. To persuade herself that her parents' home looks quite normal, and that Dad's room is not brimming with various rummage, utensils and plain garbage, and that there's no shame in having a friend over or bringing your partner to meet the family, if such a need arises. Having come to her parents' apartment, Lucia would wander around, her gaze fixed on different piles of dirty stuff that would never be used and should be immediately taken to a recycling point or a garbage container. Lucia didn't blame her dad for this situation. Nor her mom – forced to live in a home like that, she may have lost her peace of mind years ago. But inertia is stronger than grudge or rebellion. This person was sick, let's not forget that. Just one year ago, another diagnosis was added to his medical records – compulsive hoarding, also known as hoarding disorder.

So Lucia kept this charade of pretending not to care for many months in a row. Secretly, she hated that forest and that apartment which was slowly but surely becoming a hellhole. She couldn't wrap her head around the fact why the place wasn't creeping with hordes of mice and cockroaches. Dad has started checking the garbage bin for his "treasures" that might have been secretly thrown out. When his daughter came to visit, he'd take her to his room and

show all the new findings with pride. Irrespective of their true value, he loved them. They were free, after all, and, in Dad's mind, this quality signified his ability to hustle and go about life in a smart way. Lucia hated his favourite phrase "It might come in handy in the future, you never know" and her mom's constant teaching "Just ignore it". But her dad's educational reprises were the hardest to bear: "Those stores are only trying to rob you. You can find the majority of things free-of-charge." Yeah, like somebody's trash thrown out in the forest that you keep bringing home.

On the 16th of May, Lucia received another letter:

Sweetheart, this is today's catch. Soon you'll have to wear a facemask while going to a store. So I'll grab some for you too, ok?

- | | |
|--|-----------|
| 1. A bottle | – 2 units |
| 2. A button | – 1 |
| 3. A facemask | – 3 |
| 4. Men's trousers, warm, size 40,
just my size but could fit John, too
(ask him) | – 1 |
| 5. A grocery bag, small hole
next to the handle | – 1 |
| 6. A fishing rod shaft,
broken but fixable | – 1 |

Which things should I put aside for you? Call me.

Dad

Facemasks. He started bringing used disposable facemasks home. Lucia was shocked. Running up the stairs to her apartment on the fifth floor, she grabbed the phone to call Mom. Not to inform she needs the used facemasks, of course, but to get a feel on the graveness of the situation.

"Mom, what's happening? He's sent me a letter saying he's found some facemasks in the forest."

"Lucia, darling, he did, yeah, but it's not a big deal. You know your father. I'm just happy he hasn't started dragging old furniture home yet."

"But, Mom, it's dangerous, think about it – what if infected people have worn them? He's touching them, maybe, even putting them on his face."

"Let's not go into this, it's his choice, there's nothing you can do about it."

"At least be careful – please, Mom."





“Oh, I am, darling. Couriers¹ bring us food. I almost never leave the apartment anymore. And your father can’t infect me, because the forest is the only place he goes to. All the fresh air there, it’s healthy. He has nothing else to do. And I like him out of the apartment, that way I don’t have to deal with him all the time.”

This time Lucia hung up the phone without even saying goodbye.

She felt restless and out of place all evening, trying to cope with the rage and hurt brought about by helplessness. Finally, when she managed to go to bed, her mind was tormented by a slew of never ending horrible images: ambulances, lung ventilators, her mom or dad lying in a hospital bed, resuscitation, a call from the hospital informing “We’ve got bad news. I’m sorry, there was nothing more we could do.” All night, she kept tossing and turning in bed. Lucia didn’t look at her phone, so the hours went by unnoticed. Terrified to face tomorrow, she kept crying, with her face buried in the pillow, feeling no sense of control, losing the grip on reality, fixating on the single thought – the worst-case scenario of her parents dying. When the tears finally stopped rolling down her cheeks, Lucia vacantly stared into the ceiling. It was flickering with solitary shadows, cast by the trees outside her window. And that flickering started swaying her as a gentle dance of waves. She heard the gentle murmur of the ocean, a refreshing caress of white noise washed over her. Lucia’s eyes began to close. “Sleep is a luxury that lets you escape reality,” was her last thought before the dreams came.

Soon Lucia was enveloped by warmth that made her body feel as a weightless buoy gently rocking in the water. Her body dislodged itself from the shore – from the fear and anguish she felt about her parent’s lives, from other worries and concerns, and floated away towards the horizon. Then Lucia reached the Island, a blissfully calm place. There were no diseases. No perturbations. Just light. And peace.

¹ Since the very start of the lockdown, people started massively ordering food online. This was a way to avoid the virus spreading through different surfaces and stay away from grocery stores as much as possible.





Us, Eating Our Own Tail

An essay

All the archaic, anachronistic forms are there ready to re-emerge, intact and timeless, like the viruses deep in the body. History has only wrenched itself from cyclical time to fall into the order of the recyclable.²

Jean Baudrillard

Each day, we feel the urge to seek comfort and oblivion in the thought that everything is the same, everything's in place, tomorrow is going to be just as today is – you wake up, take a shower, clothe yourself, drink your coffee, eat breakfast, grab an empty yoghurt container from the table, take it to the garbage bin, extend your arm to throw it away, and then suddenly, out of the corner of your eye, you see a coiled snake eating its own tail at the bottom of your yoghurt container. It asks you what is this morning about, and then sinks its sharp teeth into your skin so as to remind you that today is indeed different. Through the bite, it infuses you with confusion. Actually, the plastic container you've just eaten your yoghurt from does not have a tail-eating snake – the Ouroboros – in it, it's just the universal recycling symbol, an arrow moving in a circle. But from that second on, everywhere you look you see the Ouroboros³.

How haven't you noticed sooner? Ouroboros is the most mundane, the most common mythological creature that exceeds all others in its popularity. *Re-cycle*. Restart the circle. As “in the case

2 Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, trans. Chris Turner. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994, p. 27.

3 Ouroboros, emblematic serpent of ancient Egypt and Greece represented with its tail in its mouth, continually devouring itself and being reborn from itself. A gnostic and alchemical symbol, Ouroboros expresses the unity of all things, material and spiritual, which never disappear but perpetually change form in an eternal cycle of destruction and re-creation. In the 19th century a vision of Ouroboros gave the German chemist August Kekule von Stradonitz the idea of linked carbon atoms forming the benzene ring. (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*)





of a circle, beginning and end are the same”⁴, according to Heraclitus. The arrow – on glass and plastic containers, beer or trash cans, on posters and social ads – is always eating its own tail.

In the 21st century, the Ouroboros speaks to us in the medieval alchemist language, which has always remained relevant. The need to turn one material into another, to transform one thing into something else has never been more significant. What a unique goal – individual but universal – which distributes personal responsibility to each human being in a boundless global crowd and, at the same time, allows to disappear in it entirely: if it’s inconvenient, your conscience can be silenced, if you’re tired – you can give up, lose your enthusiasm and determination, if you’re too lazy to recycle – drop this habit and erase this routine from your everyday life. I know people who’re not able to see any Ouroboros at the bottoms of plastic containers. The same way people don’t notice that their bodies have skeletons – until they break a bone. According to them, everyday recycling is futile, because corporations pollute our environment to unimaginable extent. Thus one person’s efforts remind them Don Quixote’s fight with windmills⁵. However, in this case the “windmills” are very real. The threat they pose to the planet’s future can be noticed in the constantly fluctuating temperatures, earthquakes and extinction of species.

In the 21st century, the Ouroboros is a symbol of hope. It provides certain comfort. It can be compared to an archaic prophet, fighting his way into the modern times. However, prophets typically warn us about global catastrophes, not slow mundane flows, as we like to imagine it. We want to see it in a much more moderate form: the message it brings talks about repetition, perfect cycles, eternity, eternal dynamics, constant rebirth and healing – in space, on Earth, in nature. The Ouroboros represents renewable resources that

reminds us of how feelings and thoughts keep renewing themselves in a person until their last breath. Maybe, this is where we should be looking for stability and order, or, in other words, the face of God, reflected on the world? In sunlight, wind, dancing waves, bubbling steaming geysers, thriving greenery, flowing rivers and their tides. In everything that circulates and has the power to recreate itself. In our latitude, this is the way the seasons change: first comes spring, then summer, autumn, winter, and then spring again – each starts where the previous ended, eventually they all disappear into each other. In many different folklores, spring is typically associated with childhood, summer – with youth, autumn – with maturity, and winter – with old age. But what happens, when summer comes too early? When, because of the climate change, youth stumbles upon your childhood, autumn becomes horribly short, and it begins to snow in October? The 21st century makes us question many similar common metaphors of the past. I don’t want to indulge in futurology, but people of my generation are hesitant to compare the chronology of their lives to any kind of natural cycles, as all cycles have become pretty unpredictable nowadays.

In ecology, there are numerous cycles and self-supporting systems – like water, carbon and nitrogen cycles. Each and every one of them spins the circle in different reservoirs of life, present in the atmosphere, the oceans or plants. Just like the Ouroboros, all these cycles are interconnected and self-sufficient. The Ouroboros is life itself, its essence is the principle of survival – organisms in the different levels of the food chain become dependent on one another to survive. Predators feed on prey, the prey feeds on plants or other beings from the lower levels. In nature, each organism plays the parts of being a predator and the prey at the same time – the Earth keeps devouring its tail but never loses balance. The climate is also a closed system with many different factors in constant interaction, which keep the temperature relatively stable. If the balance of the cycle is disrupted, the Ouroboros is disrupted as well.

However, nowadays human beings tend to go to extremes. Today, the Ouroboros is in the middle of the chaos that has spread throughout the civilization created by our species. The period after the global industrialization has been marked by rampant consumption and a way of life that doesn’t

4 Fragment 45. Heraclitus. *Fragments*, trans. M. Adoménas. Vilnius: Aidai, 1995, p. 90.

5 Don Quixote’s fight with windmills is, most probably, the most well-known episode of the novel *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha* by Miguel de Cervantes. The main character of the book is a member of the lowest nobility, an hidalgo named Alonso Quijano, who embarks on an adventure-filled journey to fight evil. After reaching La Mancha, he sees several windmills there and, thinking they’re evil giants with huge arms, pointlessly attacks them.





acknowledge the past and doesn't recognise the possible future. The imbalance in the Earth's climate systems, caused by human activities, is disrupting many cycles and systems that are necessary for life on our planet – the chain of water, carbon dioxide and food. So then the Ouroboros smashes the Earth with its tail, and suddenly you understand that, compared to what the climate change has caused and will cause in the future, the coronavirus pandemic is only a merely a lesson in survival. I vividly remember the news footage of numerous huge fires on the West Coast of the US in 2020, the smoke of which even travelled to the Northern Europe. But that wasn't the end of it. Then we had massive fires in Europe – Turkey, Greece, Spain, Italy, Malta... Are heat waves, air pollution and floods just temporary chaos, caused by the poundings of the Ouroboros' tail, or is it our new permanent reality? Will 2002, when one of the biggest icebergs in human history (the size of which would approximately equate to 10 percent of Lithuania's territory) broke away from an ice shelf in the Antarctic, be one of the most significant dates of the Anthropocene Epoch? Not in terms of the extent of the event, but more as a symbol. 2002 is already called "the year zero", which marks the point in time when the consequences of the climate change started becoming apparent. Maybe, the Ouroboros' scales represent the sequence of the passing time, and some of the patches have been already irrevocably damaged. And that could be the reason for its rage, regular slaps of its tale or bursts of fire from its mouth that melt the glaciers and destroy entire forests. So the Ouroboros in my yoghurt pot is not just a symbol for recycling. It's also a warning about the dangers that await when balance is disrupted.





A Monologue of a Soul Reincarnation Office Worker, Written Down With a Lead Pencil in Space During the Years of the Coronavirus Pandemic

An essay

Taking all the risk factors into account, your decision to catapult yourself to Earth this year – when stocks are on fire, people are dropping dead like flies and dolphins are flying above water in Venice – is a bit strange. Long story short, we have a serious case of disrupted balance.

And there are also those who claim nothing is happening: the record numbers of people dead are total nonsense, and the word “conspiracy” is thrown around a lot. Hold on for a second. We are obligated by our regulations to explain all of this to you. The message that’s been coming through the megaphones of the universe is clear: the interdimensional bridge is slowly collapsing, soon transmigration will no longer be possible, because Earth has been slipping from the hands of *Homo sapiens*. There’s only one cycle left in the world of human activities – the one of pollution that leads to extinction. However, they’re quite good at ignoring it, so I’d wait if I were you.

Have I understood you correctly? You’re saying it won’t get better and you want to be born in order to change the world? Really, you’ve been inspired by the pandemic? Ok, we can forget the dolphin thing, but the weather in China has changed dramatically, that’s true. The weather in New Delhi, India, has never been fairer – the sky has literally become blue again. You’re right in this case.





Numbers is what you base your opinion on? The amount of particulates – smog, carbon monoxide, dust – has dropped by half. What is more, the levels of nitrogen dioxide have decreased by 72 percent there. Carbon monoxide emissions have dropped by 88 percent. This is the data collected by environmental monitoring stations...

The greenhouse effect has been lessened – it's a miracle, isn't it? A true miracle! Let me be honest with you, being an employee in this particular office, I've always felt peculiar interest in this word. First of all, people call the birth of a child (or, in other words, the transfer of our client into their human body) a miracle. However, the steam engine was also considered a miracle once. Such machines were called miraculous by the new type of workers, who used to repeat the same movement day after day, and thousands of others, similar to them – numerous cogs in the endless factory system, scattered around different parts of the world. A TV is also a miracle, because it invites people from thousands miles away into your living room, where you can listen to their stories. Even the telephone was once a miracle to many, but in this case, not only are you able to listen to somebody's story, you can tell your own as well. Coming back alive from a war zone is a miracle, finding a way to avoid mobilization is also a miracle, just like a day without a war is. But what do you expect? Numbers will tell you everything.

Too many miracles? Or not enough? The times we're living in are strange – a temporary decrease of pollution nowadays is a bigger miracle than progress in artificial intelligence solutions or travelling to Mars. I really hope there won't come a time when I'll be jobless, as there will be nothing else for me to do. I hope I won't have to sit alone under a starry sky, rolling a cigarette, my gaze fixed on the lifeless fruitless Earth far away, devoid of anything that grows, just spinning in a slow and lonely manner. I hope I won't have to remember all of those who once lived there and feel myself washed over by sadness and astonishment. It's a miracle, how they were able to screw this up entirely.

So, if you're really sure about your decision to change the world, I applaud your determination. On the agreed date, you will be issued a new body. Come again, if we're still in business! Good bye.





Growing Closer Through Isolation

Novella

According to a popular opinion, instead of separating people from one another, the lockdown and the isolation that followed it had an opposite effect – it reminded people of what really matters and made them closer to their family members. The shocking death rates became a reminder of how fragile time is. The lockdown taught many to spend more time with the ones they love and appreciate them more.

A doorbell rings, a door opens and then closes, and, suddenly, there's a barefoot boy standing in the middle of your room. He's wearing grey ragged pyjamas and looks familiar. Having walked towards a blooming poinsettia, the boy understands that Christmas is just around the corner, or maybe it has just ended, or will soon end. His gaze fixed on the view outside your window, the boy just stands there for hours.

Like an ever-changing live painting, the light-filled rectangle in the wall above your bed reveals a kindergarten playground. Nevertheless, you can't quite grasp which year it is now, because the five-year-olds outside, who've been diving in heaps of snow, keep ducking behind the trees, lost in a new game. You can't just simply open the window and yell, "Hey, kids, maybe you know which year it is? We locked ourselves inside in 2020, and tomorrow morning we're about to have a very long conversation, the first of its kind and maybe the last in our entire lives, and we'd like to know where has it brought us to."

The barefoot boy grasps the window handle with all his might, but it doesn't budge. He keeps wiping the window glass until the skin on his palm reddens, the world outside seems so distant in terms of time, but so familiar nonetheless, you might even think that, instead of growing up, the kids outside have hidden somewhere, feeling suddenly scared. The boy keeps slapping the glass with his palm, slap, and one kid jumps up from a bench, slap, another one chases a tabby cat into a gazebo, slap, a group of girls scurry by, we can see their miniature hats down below, slap, the boy





smacks his memory, slap, he remembers running down that path and then ducking underneath the balconies to find a glove he'd lost, slap, now his hands are red, just like the hands of the three kids next to a metal swing, who are scratching the frozen ground with leafless sticks. But all of this doesn't help you understand which year it is, because there are no gleaming numbers, dates or time on the screen of your window, even though you've inherited that window from your dad, and he – from your grandma, the window has never been cracked by all the images the previous generations saw through it. You can never know what's actually being broadcasted through that window, as – no matter what you actually see – it's not definitive proof that today is happening today. You are standing here, in this room, and in the room, together with you, there's the barefoot boy in his pyjamas, who's grown up during the Soviet times⁶, and all the other things and the place the boy has come from is somewhere further, not here and now, because now there's the lockdown and anguish and hospitals brimming with sick people.

It might be that you learned about the view outside your window and the group of children playing in the yard from your grandma, whose kids – your dad being one of them – as chance would have it, just started kindergarten: the building was quite ordinary, but the teachers who worked there were some of the meanest around, not only were they total slackers, they kept stealing the food meant for kids and hauling it home in bags, can you believe it? So it's only natural that your grandma, being the outstanding mother she was, used to check up on her sons twice a week, peeking through the kindergarten fence. The things she had noticed through her window would have been enough though. You can see that image even now: your dad is standing there with a blue scarf on, one of its ends is almost touching the ground, the other is barely holding on the hood of his jacket, the child's naked neck is showing, and this wide patch of uncovered skin immediately transforms into a pulsating sin of the kindergarten teacher, a catastrophe waiting to happen, when this twenty-year-old girl with an apron underneath her coat, who is now leaning over a sandbox, is startled by

the shrill voice of your grandma – twenty two at the time and already with two kindergarten-age children, and you don't have any kids, the times were different then.

You're watching all of this, unable to recognise any of them: neither your grandma nor your dad, they seem us unreal as the other characters, who have already shed their childlike bodies like snakes. In order to get a better view, the boy in pyjamas stands on his toes, and it is his lips that tell you about how, half a century ago, your grandma stormed into the playground, saying she wanted to bring some old wallpaper she'd found at home for the little ones to draw on, and, "you won't believe this, suddenly I see my kid with a runny nose just standing there, that's why I can't get rid of his constant cough for the life of me, how can he get better when you let him run around outside like that, what the hell are you thinking, I'm not blind, I see the type of people that work here, all you do the entire day is run around back and forth like crazy, carrying buckets of soup and trays with rolls, and the kids are left entirely to their own devices, all the neighbours are talking about it, we will get authorities into this, you'll see, to take damn control of this place, then you'll think twice before letting the kids run around outside almost naked, you damn twat", and after some time that damn twat, without everybody knowing, became my dad's stepmom.

You ask the boy if he can see or hear what's happening now. The teacher, he says, denies ever stealing any food⁷, because she's not even twenty and has nobody to take that food to, but there's this other woman who works in the kitchen and does it constantly, as she has four mouths to feed at home, she was doing it secretly at first, but soon started hauling home everything she could get her hands on, in the same pots, so as not to have a bunch of different dishes to wash later. When the head of the kindergarten found out about this – the teacher kept swearing by all gods to your grandma – nothing really happened, the head just asked the thief to do it more discreetly and stop running around the yard with trays and buckets, where

6 Lithuania was occupied from 1944 to 1990 by the Soviet Union.

7 During the Soviet times, there was a huge shortage of everyday goods, so it was common for people to steal food or other products from their workplaces, as it was the only way to get it.





other people like you can see her, and you can stop pretending you don't know her, she lives in your apartment building. And then the teacher added, or proudly announced, to be more specific, that she doesn't need to steal anything, as there are many generous parents, especially fathers, like your husband for instance, who brings her things like bananas, cans of green peas and other stuff, she's even gotten a bag. And then she remembered another incident last winter, it was December or January and the weather was very similar, but she kept certain things about it to herself though: during naptime, she went somewhere, nobody knows where, maybe to meet some man or what not, and she left a window open on purpose so that the children sleeping inside would get sick and stay home for the rest of the week. So, your grandma undoubtedly was able to read between the lines and understand what the teacher meant, because model mothers and wives are able to read the minds of such stuck-up big-eyed girls, and not just for the hell of it, but for a particular reason – to create an opening in time many years into the future and help this barefoot little boy in grey pyjamas step into your room and tell you the story about the divorce of your grandparents. After long months of not seeing each other, this window is a skylight into the past, you finally start talking to each other, and then you suddenly understand why his life is as grey as his pyjamas. We've been so busy, we didn't have time – until now.

Only now, yes, now, you finally remember where you've seen the boy, who is gently caressing the red petals of the plant your mom's sent you through a courier service. Until now, you weren't sure whether Dad would like to tell you all of this himself, but you met him when it was snowing, you were furiously chasing a tabby cat around the yard that day, unable to see anything else around you, but then a new kid joined your group in the kindergarten, and, instead of playing, he kept sobbing. Hugging him, you started to cry as well. This day reminded you of that, but it hasn't helped to understand which year was then and which year is now.

When you hug your dad after not seeing him for a long time, it seems that the long months have turned him back into that barefoot boy, and his heart has softened underneath the weight of several decades, and then you sit together like two kids, and you both cry. But this time there's no

kindergarten teacher who would shame him for sobbing, there are no children to laugh at him and call him a cry baby, and nobody is going to forbid all tears whatsoever starting tomorrow. Because once you had to swallow down any lump in your throat, except that one time, after a week or so, when the teacher announced that Khrushchev⁸ had died, what a great leader he was, so everybody was forbidden to laugh that day, we all had to be very sad.

So then all of us five-year-olds sat in complete silence and listened to the sirens blaring outside, and I was doing my best to orchestrate that sadness within me. And now, what the hell are people talking about, the times have changed and everything is so great now, except that little thing called the pandemic. Dad, but sometimes it seems that everything's going too fast, and we keep forgetting important stuff, because we never have time, we keep losing the connection, something always interrupts it, we're in a constant vortex of ever-widening gaps, have you thought of it, I didn't know any of this for such a long time, and I've forgotten so many things, but you remember them and still don't want to bother me with it.

Today he's spending the night in your room, as movement to and from different districts in Lithuania has been restricted during the holidays because of the pandemic. It's difficult for him to comprehend how you can manage to live without a TV, but he'll get used to that.

And then he'll walk towards his childhood window and feel surprised why there are so many things he never seemed to have time or chance to tell you about.

8 Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev (15 April 1894 – 11 September 1971) was the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1953 to 1964 and chairman of the country's Council of Ministers from 1958 to 1964.





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Journal / autofiction

16 March 2020

Today is the official start of a lockdown in Lithuania. So another day spent at home. I've started wondering how hard it will be for two people to spend so much time in one room – from morning till night – without getting into conflicts about something or trespassing each other's personal space. I'm wondering how the working from home part will go. By the way, our lease agreement is also coming to an end.

Talked to Mom – she told me that physicians at the clinic have been given one disposable respirator each for emergencies only, and they're most probably not getting any more in the foreseeable future. The clinic's administration claims it's not their responsibility, and the respirators are very hard to get nowadays anyway. Some patients laughed at the physicians for believing in the existence of the coronavirus, in other words – they're stupid to trust the government's propaganda...

Dad's unable to come back from Hungary, his flight's been cancelled. But he thinks it's better that way – to stay in Hungary instead of waiting at the airport and then going through the process of self-isolating in Lithuania. I mean, he'd have to rent an apartment in Vilnius for two weeks then.

It's been almost a month of living with the virus, and we've come to realise that the majority of things are actually pretty insignificant, they've slipped into a certain memory gap in the emotional sense. I've been feeling kind of weird today – the day seems so long, but then the time just evaporates somewhere. My daily routine, which always used to be chaotic, have become a complete mess, as I can't stop myself from constantly following what's been happening in the world, the news about the virus, various prognoses, etc. Today's Monday, we've ordered some groceries online, but they'll only arrive on Friday. First I wanted to start

complaining about that, but then almost laughed – is a couple of days without cheese enough of a reason to whine about? So, in short, everything's ok.

16 March 2021 (1 year later)

So it seems we're getting that loan after all and soon will be moving into a new home. Today we've filled out all the necessary documents in the bank, no problems with that. As far as I understand, it's easier for married couples with no children and higher education degrees, so my Master's diploma has finally proven to be beneficial. They didn't say anything about our little daughter that's about to come into this world though. We decided to celebrate this unexpected success by eating out.

16 March 2022 (2 years later)

Today, in the library, we had the presentation of the book I've translated. The whole event, followed by a true feast, was organised by the Sakartvelo Cultural Centre. We've been invited to come to a literary festival that's going to take place in Tbilisi this fall. Haven't decided yet. Dominick would go together with me, and Mom could take care of the baby while we're gone.



**19 March 2020**

If nothing changes, compared to just going to classes, we'll have to work twice as hard during the lockdown. We can't get our hands on any books, because the librarians at the university have to spray each and every one of them with a disinfectant – this helps to prevent the spread of the virus. So if we need some books for our theses, we can only take home a couple and those also have to be approved by our supervisor in writing. Mom's exhausted because of the calls that've been pouring into the clinic. So we don't talk or text much these days.

19 March 2021 (1 year later)

More and more, I keep coming back to the thought that identity is similar to intuition. It's a certain consistent path which could do without distractions and collisions. But that could also pose a threat of limiting yourself extensively, building walls around that would prevent you from seeing the things that are happening outside your alleged personal reality. "People are different". If they're that different, is inner truth worth to be explicated? And where's the limit – which sentence creates the breaking point? To which point should you keep on talking, and when should you stop in order not to become laughable, like a lion on a circus bike?

19 March 2022 (2 years later)

I've emailed some schools in Spain about a possible internship in a Lithuanian school. Did it out of complete desperation, but this fear and horror have become a new normal these days, as each morning I wake up fixated on what's been happening in Ukraine, and this is the last thing I think about before falling asleep. I look at flight tickets online every day. Keep imagining clutching my baby to me, while we run to hide in the basement. How she keeps crying, even though we have to be quiet, and we can't get out, and some neighbour starts yelling at me to shut her up... There are no designated hideouts in Vilnius. You can try to hide in church basements, but, in case of an air-raid warning, we wouldn't be able to reach it in time with a baby in our hands.

20 March 2020

Writing academic papers now seems meaningless. I used to read additional literature for my MA thesis in the manuscript department, as you're not allowed to take documents from the vaults anywhere else. But now I'm not able to do this anymore, so a part of the sources I need for my research is no longer available.

Going through my emails, I sometimes get this feeling that people consider staying at home during the lockdown as succumbing to manipulation: "Let's fight not only the physical but the mental virus as well!" And maybe this schizophrenic reality is the saddest thing about the lockdown: if you try to stick to the rules, you're wrong, but if you don't, you're one of them.

20 March 2021 (1 year later)

Went to the clinic to do some tests. Ultrasound was good, we're having a girl in September.

20 March 2022 (2 years later)

They've already reported more than 10 million Ukrainians having left their homes, and this is the biggest refugee crisis in the modern history. What's more, around 800 thousand Russian citizens have already left Russia after its invasion in Ukraine, and it's the biggest emigration wave since the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.



**22 March 2020**

Today has been a good day – we’ve made sushi. Small victories. Now that I think about it, it’s strange that we haven’t done it for such a long time. If not for the lockdown, we wouldn’t be doing this type of stuff on a day off and just go to a bar instead. By the way, I’ve registered as a volunteer at the National Public Health Centre.

22 March 2021 (1 year later)

I felt my baby move for the first time! I’ve written my darling daughter a poem.

NAME

I imagine you not like a growing thread
putting on flesh until the X-rays pick it up,
and not like a little red fish in a crystal bowl –

can it be that you’re a miracle
(I always hear this word),
not a real one, but as if, as if it were
a question of belief

the belief or knowledge that you are
an independent
heart’s pulse, viscous dust quickened
by lightning

it’s not for nothing that we are named
after cycles, after
wild grasses and trees
(that which turns in a circle, repeats,
returning without purpose, surpassing
all miracles) –

girl’s names of rue and bird-cherry,
chamomile, fir and linden,
of storms and mists, mornings,
dawns and sunshine

a flash of greening leaves and a sun-truth –
the even flow of reality
on the other side of miracles

22 March 2022 (2 years later)

It’s the twenty seventh day of the war on Ukraine. Director Nikita Mikhalkov, one of Putin’s minions,

has accused Ukraine and the us of trying to eradicate Russians by infecting birds with viruses. Recently the same nonsense has been repeated by general Konashenkov, the chief spokesperson for the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation. Nobody knows though how the infected birds were able to fly only to one direction and spread the viruses exclusively among Russians... 2000 investigations have been started regarding war crimes done by Russian soldiers, among which are rapes and murders of not only adults but kids as well. God, I hate them!

**31 March 2020**

Even going to a store for groceries has become a challenge, but there are still some professors among those, who coordinate the studies, that send regular emails, urging as to “keep writing”, and reminding that “the deadlines remain the same”. I have zero motivation. I’ve registered to two different volunteer organisations, but still no news. Maybe, the attempt at volunteering is just a way to avoid my true responsibilities, and not a sincere desire to help control the spread of the virus?

I talked with my grandma on the phone for three hours today. This conversation infused me with strenght and reminded me of what really matters. Conversations with her are always fun and sad at the same time. Grandma’s hoping to find some old medical facemasks in the closet, as nowadays you can’t find them in any store.

31 March 2021 (1 year later)

Oh God, how I wish to be able to go to the seaside to think everything through. The present requires being more organised, and I do comprehend that these essential changes is something I must adjust to, and understand myself anew.

31 March 2022 (2 years later)

Going through my old journals now, I see how many things have drastically changed. The happiness of everyday life is so fragile, so precious. Days without a war are the days of bliss. And yet they are given to us for free – like diamonds or manna falling from heaven which you can simply come and gather. And cherish every piece you’ve got. Each day, when all of your loved ones are ok, and there are no bombs exploding outside your window. Each





day, when you're not forced to leave your home and hide. Each day, when you have enough food or water, and all your family members are next to you. I used to think that the coronavirus pandemic was going to be the worst thing our generation had to endure. God, how I was wrong. We all hoped to make up for the lost time afterwards – to travel, enjoy life and each day. It's been less than two years, and now Ukraine is fighting for the freedom of all Europe. Life is so strange and unpredictable. In the face of war, numerous things lose their perceived value – minor stuff that used to bug us and cause drama seem laughable now. The last several years have taught us a crucial lesson about the meaning of time and the value of life.





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