

# SCAR TISSUE SURROUNDED BY ASTONISHING BEAUTY: AN INTERVIEW WITH LIDIA YUKNAVITCH

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Interview by Laima Vincé

**Laima Vincé:** Thank you for agreeing to this interview. This is a big deal for the Lithuanian Writers Union and *Vilnius Review* magazine to have this opportunity to speak with you.

**Lidia:** It's a big deal for me too.

**Laima Vincé:** Thank you for that.

**Lidia:** And I'm feeling that you look so much like me.

**Laima Vincé:** You definitely look like a Lithuanian woman. You've got that look.

**Lidia:** I'm aware. I guess that's not that surprising.

**Laima Vincé:** So, this is your debut into the world of Lithuanian literature. So many writers in Lithuania are eager to get to know more about you and your work.

**Lidia:** You are very kind.

**Laima Vincé:** I wanted to thank you for your generous comments about my essay, "The Transformation of Trauma through Writing" and for sharing my essay on your Facebook page. That really means a lot to me. It's very generous.

**Lidia:** I loved it! I understood every word. And that's the kind of work I do too. So, I'm just filled with respect and awe. It's you, you did it, and I'm happy to share it.

**Laima Vincé:** The authenticity of your writing in *The Chronology of Water* is courageous, often painful. Where does the courage to write with such honesty and authenticity come from—especially when revealing your wounds and most painful and difficult life moments?

**Lidia:** There's a dual set of pressures. From one side of life there's the pressure to stay quiet or shy or shame centered. And from a different side there's the push to tell, or to express, or represent. When those two things push on each other hard enough where they meet sometimes expression will emerge. It doesn't feel like courage to me because I'm the person experiencing those two pressures. I can be shy and ashamed and embarrassed and feel like I should stay quiet quite a lot, and that's because I'm an introvert probably. But then what pushes me over the edge is



that I'm living a life where I'm not in constant danger right now. Therefore, it's a responsibility to bear witness for all the other legions of women and people who cannot express what they've experienced. So, you asked about courage. For me it feels more like this is the moment where I can bear witness and I don't know when that moment will change, so that's where I step in with story or help others step in.

**Laima Vincé:** So, it's like you're a spokesperson for women who experienced abuse in childhood and a spokesperson for the experience of being a woman in this culture. You're the one who steps up and says, "I can speak for all of us."

**Lidia:** In some ways, yes, but I hold onto the idea that we have to take turns. So, at that time in my life, it felt like it was my turn to bear witness. Then, it feels like we pass it along and take turns so that no one person has to hold it all the time. Which is too hard. Usually books come out of me when it feels like it's my turn.

**Laima Vincé:** I remember when Dorothy Allison's novel *Bastard out of Carolina* came out in 1992. That was such a breakthrough book because it was one of the first books that talked about abuse and what it looked like. Then we had this explosion of voices that came afterwards. You did say in one interview that you felt a point came when it was too much, when you felt as though the publishing industry was looking for those kinds of abuse narratives.

**Lidia:** I should say two things. Dorothy's book was a life changer for me too. So, let me say that up front. At this point, we've become friends and I get to work with her sometimes. So that's another lifesaving thing. I think about the difference between what it takes for us to stand up and try to change things and what the market wants. Those two things are complicated when they meet each other. I think it's important for us to keep that conversation alive. Where do our lives and our bodies end and where does the market suck it into the machine. It's not that I have perfect answers, but it's important to keep talking because when our bodies and stories get sucked into the market and the capitalism machine the story isn't entirely ours anymore.

**Laima Vincé:** When teaching writing workshops sometimes a student would write a story about their experience of rape or abuse or alcoholism in the family from a place of vulnerability and honesty. But during the workshop discussion they'd get upset when other students began relating the story to their own experience. I'd say, "You had this personal experience, but when you write about it, you're bringing your personal experience into the realm of universal experience. That's when you have to let go of what is specific to your experience and allow your writing to become part of the universal voice." I agree that we have to be aware of where the market sucks in stories of abuse in a capitalistic way, but also discern where your voice becomes part of the universal human experience.

**Lidia:** That's why I think the ideas about sharing stories and taking turns carrying the stories body to body and person to person is where to put the energy. That's how to make the stories important. To recognize that it started before you were born and it will go on after you die—this larger story telling effort. It's a way we can keep our experiences alive and in the territory of change and revolution and not so much about who is going to get a show on Netflix.

**Laima Vincé:** Exactly. I do have to tell you when I first read Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina* I was physically sick. I felt that book in my body. I felt her pain coming through the writing.

**Lidia:** Oh yeah. I get it.

**Laima Vincé:** Was the experience of writing *The Chronology of Water* cathartic for you?

**Lidia:** I think it was cathartic for me but not in the way people think of when they think of catharsis. Could my answer be that it was non-traditionally cathartic? I did not experience traditional catharsis. What I experienced was this revelation that the story was not just mine. It's related to what you said earlier. What I experienced was that all this pain and shame and difficulty I'd been carrying around belonged to a story larger than me. So, it's not like I experienced catharsis and I got better. I'm not better. I'm still trudging along with my blunders and my difficulties. But what I did experience is that there is a reason to keep telling stories and it's not just for me.

**Laima Vincé:** That's powerful because the culture we're living in has become so individualistic, and social media has only heightened that. A lot of young writers express that their story is "all about me and it's going to make me feel a different way." But you're saying no, it's the opposite. Your story is only part of the larger circle of storytelling.

**Lidia:** I don't want to sound like a witch or something but it's more about the ability to let go of a "me."

**Laima Vincé:** By the way, if you've got Lithuanian blood, you're a witch. You've just got to own that.

**Lidia:** (Laughing) Fair enough. I suspect that's true.

**Laima Vincé:** My Ukrainian friend Hanna Leliv from Lviv, who is a translator of Ukrainian poetry, and who is teaching at Princeton right now, asked me to ask you a question. She asks: "How do you self-protect as a writer? How would Lidia, who gives so much of herself as a writer, protect her sensitive soul?" Hanna gave me the image of a glass case surrounding a beautiful delicate piece of ceramic sculpture. How do you create that glass barrier so that people can see into your soul through your writing but not harm you or destroy you.

**Lidia:** That's a great question. It's particularly important for women, I think, because the world expects all women to be care-takers and endlessly sacrificial and endlessly giving. I've spoken to male colleague writers who just don't get the same questions or pressures. They're just "the great famous writer" and they just get to be that.

**Laima Vincé:** Yes! They can indulge themselves in that role.

**Lidia:** It's just infuriating! I think, first I should confess that it took me a long time to learn how to self-protect. I was unaware of how telling your story would open up all the doors and windows to other people's needs and desires. I admit I wasn't good at it. And it took me about twenty years to get a little better at it. At this point, I understand protecting myself as taking many more breaks to be alone than people would even believe. So, if I go do something for one day, I now know that I need three or four days to recover. I take long solitary walks, go for long solitary swims, because I'm a swimmer. One of the reasons being submerged in water works for me because as an introvert and a neurodivergent person if I'm in water I'm fully absorbed. It's in my ears, it's in my nose, I'm floating, my whole body is surrounded by water. So that's what helps me to reconstitute. That's my idea of protection. But for somebody else it might be a forest or being around people at a party. But if we don't give those things back to ourselves, we just become depleted.

**Laima Vincė:** Yes, exactly.

**Laima Vincė:** You've given your main character in your latest novel, *Thrust*, a Lithuanian name, Laisvė, which means freedom. You even retain the diacritical mark—which a lot of publishers don't want to do...

**Lidia:** I know! They were so mad at me.

**Laima Vincė:** Yes, because then they need to download a Lithuanian keyboard!

**Lidia:** I know... Ha ha!

**Laima Vincė:** But do you know why that dot over the "ė" is so important? Because that denotes the feminine case ending. That's matriarchal—the dot over the "ė."

**Lidia:** Thank you for noticing!

**Laima Vincė:** Of course I notice because the "ė" in the Lithuanian language is the ultimate symbol that denotes "this is a woman, this is female." Good on you fighting for the dot!

**Lidia:** This makes me giddy.

**Laima Vincė:** Tell me about your experience of your Lithuanian heritage. How does that heritage influence your writing?

**Lidia:** The literal facts are that on my father's side my great grandparents are the people who came to the United States from Lithuania, and my grandparents were born here. That's the lineage in terms of travel. They left Lithuania because things had gotten terrible there. The way Lithuania showed up in my writing was mysterious. When I was writing my novel, *The Small Backs of Children*, I asked my aunt if she had materials, resources, research, that I could use for my Lithuanian heritage in this novel. She sent me this box in the mail. Inside the box were all kinds of strange artefacts from my great grandparents and my grandparents, and one of the things in the box was a series of xeroxed articles about my Great Uncle, who had been a photographer in Lithuania during the Russian occupation. He'd been taking photos of an illegal massacre at a hospital, and he got sent to the Gulag in Siberia for many years. So, these articles were redacted, but there were pieces of the story in them. They were blotchy versions of these photographs that he took. That box changed my life. It sent me into researching the hell out of my family and what happened to this guy. Then, while I was living with this box of objects and articles, this novel started coming out of my nose. A whole world emerged from learning about these people. I'd written a short story years ago about this woman who was living in wartime in Lithuania, but I didn't know where it came from. I thought it was just my imagination and now I think I might have just been plugged into the ancestral consciousness.

**Laima Vincė:** You were channeling. What was your Great Uncle's name?

**Lidia:** I don't know what his first name was, but I know his last name was Juknevičius. That was our last name before it got hacked down and became Yukman in the immigration station at Ellis Island. And so, when I became an

adult, in my twenties I tracked down as much information as I could and changed my last name back to Yuknavitch, which was as close as I could get to my original surname at the time. Now, I know that our actual surname was Juknevičius.

**Laima Vincė:** Lithuania is a borderland where languages and identities are constantly shifting. Yuknavitch is a Polish variant of Juknevičius. It would be very interesting to research who your Great Uncle was.

**Lidia:** Oh yes. Actually, in *Thrust*, which is what you asked me about, there's another Lithuanian story line. It's about places like Vilnius where languages and nationalities go back and forth, but also Siberia, where there are these strange borderlands where people aren't entirely sure who their parents or grandparents were, and you may be this or you may be that. I was playing around with that with some of those characters. In our family, there are things we know and things we aren't ever going to know. I'm interested in that in terms of identity.

**Laima Vincė:** It's fascinating to me that you chose the name *Laisvė*. That is the word that people chanted during the years of the independence movement in Lithuania. It is a powerful word to choose with so much meaning locked into it. Why did you choose that word?

**Lidia:** All these things were meaningful to me, so I was trying to make a character who was less a person in the tradition of realism but more like a floating signifier. This symbolic girl, who is herself, but she is also an idea that moves around in time and space. Taking that historic word from that time and place you're talking about and airlifting it and putting it back in free-flowing time and space. So that's why she's a time traveler. She's not supposed to be supernatural or magic. It's supposed to be literal. My idea was that freedom can move around in time and space and sometimes gets incarcerated or stuck. She's supposed to be that idea. The novel is not so much rooted in realism.

**Laima Vincė:** Yes, but then you also have the Statue of Liberty in *Thrust*. Lady Liberty is there in the plot of the novel.

**Lidia:** Right, so for me she is also a sign, a symbol. She could have been one thing, but she became another thing. But what if the symbol could be liberated again and brought back to its many meanings instead of the one she got locked into? Which is why I wrote about the shackle stuff, which is true. They moved the chains down by her foot where nobody could see them.

**Laima Vincė:** Lady Liberty inspires irreverence in those of us who come from an immigrant background.

**Lidia:** It's so true. So, I honor that, but it's also messed up that the original ideas of liberty and freedom on the coin or the statue or in this country were immediately overtaken by capitalism and power. So, I was just loosening her meaning back up in a "what if" way.

**Laima Vincė:** What you just said is connected back to what you were saying previously about writing through pain and how it's your turn to hold the baton and tell the story, but then the danger is when capitalism comes in and says, "We can market this and make money off of it."

**Lidia:** The novel *Thrust* isn't some kind of best seller because it's a really weird difficult novel. I love that idea.

**Laima Vinc :** *Thrust* is your *Ulysses*.

**Lidia:** You can't say what it is because it's this impossible storytelling where I broke every rule of every novel. It's making something sacred a little bit obscene.

**Laima Vinc :** I'd like to share a quote with you about *Thrust* from *Kirkus* reviews: "Ultimately, Yuknavitch is interested in the way the bodies of immigrants, refugees, and marginalized people have been fodder to keep the American project going—and her humane love for those same bodies shines out everywhere through the extravagant prose." I felt that this reviewer had a good intuitive sense of the heart space that fuels your fiction.

**Lidia:** That is an accurate description of the bodies I was writing a love story for. They are also the bodies that get almost immediately erased. What's famous about America is not the downtrodden. It's the rich and famous celebrities and power people. I'm trying to return the love story to workers, and immigrants, and refugees, the displaced and marginalized people. So that piece is correct. The extravagant prose part cracks me up because every time I delight in the way that language cannot be controlled, and I let style get really loud, I get that kind of language about the prose. So, it interests me because it's my love letter to language too, to just let language get away from you and play and move towards style in the way that painting does. The novel is definitely my love letter to people who are ordinarily made invisible.

**Laima Vinc :** How about flamboyant prose?

**Lidia:** That's a similar thing. People don't like it when the ladies get lofty with their language. You know, the gatekeepers are like, "Wait, what's that, that's not clear and brief," which I find very male. That other model of writing. Every time I hear something like that I double down and do it twice as much.

**Laima Vinc :** As I'm listening to you, I'm thinking of the workers' bodies that fell into the base of the Brooklyn Bridge while it was being built and were never recovered. Those bodies are sealed up inside the base of the bridge, which is now under water.

**Lidia:** It's also about children who are laborers all over the world now, but certainly at that time of the building of America. Their bodies got erased too.

**Laima Vinc :** That's really powerful. I wanted to talk also about *The Misfits Manifesto* and your TED Talk, which resonated with me so deeply. In the opening to the third chapter, you wrote that "the myth that suffering makes you stronger is a crock of shit." I so much agree, but I've never had the guts to say it out loud. It's almost like that phrase is a way for people who have not suffered to that degree to dismiss the suffering of others. If you've really suffered, you'd never say lightly, "Suffering made me stronger." If anything, suffering makes us weaker.

**Lidia:** Exactly.

**Laima Vinc :** It's an easy way of pushing responsibility away from yourself.

**Lidia:** That's right. It also creates a narrative where entire communities or peoples or areas of the world who experience severe suffering are destined to suffer. It is a way to suck away responsibility for inflicting that suffering because suffering is holy or transcendent. It's like that way of saying suffering makes people closer to God. It's a way of not saying that we kill people, torture people. The suffering is us, we do it. I get really angry about this entire mythos about suffering makes you stronger. For me it too came up through Catholicism. I'm a failed lapsed Catholic. It didn't work on me at all. By the time I was 14, I was getting thrown out of Catholic School.

**Laima Vincė:** I also think that phrase is connected with trauma. I think of your depictions of your father in your memoir and how he is holding all this anger. When you're a child you're just trying to survive that. We do live in a global world, but when you look at your own ethnic group, you see Lithuania is a country that has always been either at war, defending itself, under attack or occupation, and so you have so much intergenerational trauma in that region. Then there's Catholicism that's just telling women to suffer in silence.

**Lidia:** I agree with every word you just said. We may actually be sisters. There is a character in *Thrust* who I made who is a case worker lawyer. Her father is a war criminal and she's carrying that burden around while she's trying to help kids who are incarcerated or who are in trauma themselves. The complexities of what we are carrying intergenerationally inside ourselves and the intersections of politics and suffering versus perpetrating violence are so complex. It's a wonder any of us don't explode just from walking around trying to carry these histories.

**Laima Vincė:** Look at Ukraine right now. With their bodies the Ukrainians are protecting all of Europe from Russian invasion. But the attitude towards them is, "Oh, they're just the Ukrainians, they are used to suffering. They suffered for so many generations already. Let them suffer." Certain nations are expected to bear suffering and certain nations are not.

**Lidia:** It's horrifying.

**Laima Vincė:** I've done work with trauma theory and postmemory, and reading your work I sometimes feel as though all this epigenetic Lithuanian trauma is coming through in your writing.

**Lidia:** It could be. It feels that way to me. I've always had dreams that I didn't know where they came from. I've had strange little visions. I don't know where they came from. I have auditory hallucinations and I don't know where they come from. Doctors have pathologized all that upon me, of course, but as an artist I don't think of them as pathologies. I think of all that as story channels and I'm here to write the stories down. I think you're probably correct. It feels true to me.

**Laima Vincė:** My African friend Muthoni Mahinda, who is building a center for African Spirituality in Kenya, and who has dedicated her life to African Spirituality, would say that the ancestor spirits are passing on a message through you.

**Lidia:** I'm open to that. Because if storytelling can help us see and hear each other, then I want to be one of the storytellers. It's just me passing through one life. That's fine. That's what I can give. Then somebody else can open this story up from there.



**Laima Vincé:** Do you ever have the feeling that your ancestors have their stories to tell, and they are telling them through you?

**Lidia:** Sometimes I do. Certainly. In *Small Backs of Children* I had that box I told you about. I felt that I was mainlining for sure. Something from our family was coming through me. There's my story *Woven* that contains Lithuanian fairytales my grandmother told me. That felt like another open channel with a direct line to family and history.

**Laima Vincé:** You were tapping into that world of Lithuanian goddesses and fairies. What would you like to see in Lithuania?

**Lidia:** I've always known I'll go there. For me, it's the trees, the water, the witches.

**Laima Vincé:** *Vilnius Review* has started a series that debuts young Lithuanian writers who are publishing their first poems and stories. The magazine translates their work into English and also interviews them about their writing. What advice do you have for those young new writers in this series. What would you like to pass on to them?

**Lidia:** First, I would want to express my gratitude that they can feel the fire inside themselves. I want them to know that some of us are out here waiting for them. The advice I would give them is to find others who share your vision and link arms because writing is a really solitary choice in life. You can't expect a whole group of people to come and be nice to you. You have to find the people who feel and think what you think. Lock arms for yourself, but also for those who are standing behind your shoulder, and for those who are coming. Already we should be thinking about not just ourselves but who is coming.

**Laima:** So, you are looking at writers as those ancestors behind us and the descendants ahead of us. You're passing that energy forwards.

**Lidia:** That's right. We're like the Laisvė character in *Thrust*. It's our moment to open up to who's coming and who came before and hold it open until it's the next person's turn.

**Laima Vincé:** We've been talking about the spirituality of writing. I'd like to ask you your thoughts about Chat GPT and AI technologies designed for writers. English departments are freaking out that students are going to use Chat GPT to write their papers and will never learn how to write or how to think. On the other hand, a Buddhist yogi friend who spent years studying Buddhism in Tibet told me he is excited about ChatGPT. He senses that at some level AI technology has consciousness and is sentient. So, those are two polar opposite opinions. What are your thoughts about AI and how it is reshaping the world of writing? Your writing is so interesting because you do write about other realms, science fiction, the past, the future. There is such a deep spirituality to your writing that is connected to our souls and our ancestors and descendants. Can a robot replicate that? Can a robot become sentient at some level and actually have something original to say? Or are we all just fooling ourselves? I'm curious to hear your thoughts.

**Lidia:** On the one hand, what keeps writing and art making human is that we have bodies and sentiment. We have emotions. Sentiment. We have bodies and minds, and so in that kind of creativity it matters that humanoids are producing it, because of the heart making the art. It absolutely matters. But as someone who has also written in sci-fi territory—I wrote a novel called *The Book of Joan* that's a cli-fi sci-fi novel—I believe the definition of sentience is

shifting quickly. The gap between technology and spirituality is shifting quickly. We don't know what the new definitions are going to be. We don't even know what being human is going to be. After I'm dead, everything can shift and change. It's interesting to me that we're holding on so tightly to our uniqueness and our exceptionalism when who knows, when maybe it's a cosmic consciousness burp that's going to put us closer to a cosmic understanding of existence and not so much that idea that humans are the most important thing in the history ever. I don't know and I'm willing to hold the "I don't know" open even though I'm devoted to human hearts one at a time in this part where I get to be alive.

**Laima Vincé:** It's fascinating because it's a both/and question. I hear you. So often there's this tendency in the academic world to be overly cerebral and to imagine the body exists only from the neck upwards. So, you could see people who are operating in that realm say, "This robot's gonna come and do the work for me and it's gonna be awesome" and leave it at that. But we write through the body, we experience writing through the body. Then there's the Buddhist thought that asks: what is a sentient being?

**Lidia:** There is also what we call existence as humans that puts us at the top of an existence pyramid that's pretty terrible in terms of other forms of existence. There's that whole mess to consider too. Are humans the most important existence on the planet?

**Laima Vincé:** Now that *Thrust* is published and out in the world are you birthing a new book?

**Lidia:** I just finished another nonfiction book called *Resuscitations*. It's going to be published in 2025. That means I get to enter into writing another novel next, which makes me the happiest.

**Laima Vincé:** You write nonfiction, and you write fiction. What shifts when your mind and your imagination and your spirit go in different directions when you're writing fiction as opposed to nonfiction?

**Lidia:** The fact is when you're writing nonfiction you have some kind of allegiance to events as they really happened. And when you're writing fiction you have zero allegiance to that. I'm happiest when I'm writing inside fiction because my allegiance is to nothing but the imagination, and dreams, and magic. I'm drawn toward nonfiction when it seems as if I can contribute a small story to larger stories going on in the world that expose how we can help each other because there's suffering. But I'm happiest inside fiction.

**Laima Vincé:** Perhaps fiction is like your fantasy world. You're also a painter. What kind of work do you do as a painter?

**Lidia:** My work is abstract expressionist, for sure. I'm not a representational painter. My paintings are like my novels. My paintings create worlds that don't exist for the pleasure of marginal possibilities.

**Laima Vincé:** You're entering into another world. I understand that. Your work is so authentic. It comes from your lived experience. *Thrust* was reviewed in *The New York Times*. How does it feel to be successful as a writer? How do you stay Lidia with all the fame and attention?

**Lidia:** Those are beautiful magical things that happen when you get some attention, but really they have nothing to do with me because I'm still alone at home in my underwear scribbling my little stories down. I'm not rich and I

don't care about any of that. It's both a privilege and an honor but it has nothing to do with me.

**Laima Vincé:** That's a humble way of expressing that. Well, now even the Lithuanians have found out about you and have come to claim you.

**Lidia:** I love that. I've always known there would be a bridge back, but I never knew what it would be.

**Laima Vincé:** Did you hear any Lithuanian language growing up or was your family's immigration too far back?

**Lidia:** Very small amounts from my grandmother when she would speak Lithuanian, and hers wasn't great because they began speaking English in her home when she was a child. But she'd say Lithuanian words here and there and I'd say, "What's that?" I would immediately be interested because even as a child I preferred imaginary worlds, so Lithuanian words were magical to me. I got a little sprinkling of Lithuanian, but not much.

**Laima Vincé:** That's interesting because I had a similar experience with Lithuania growing up. It seemed like this imaginative place, this world somewhere far away, but not something that really existed.

**Lidia:** It was actually helpful to me though because my home life was horrible. Imagining these other places became more real to me. As with lots of trauma kids, the imagined world becomes your haven, your safe place, and your actual world becomes your horror story. So, in some ways Lithuania contributed to the strength of my imagination.

**Laima Vincé:** That's so interesting. One way of emerging out of trauma is through art and writing and the imagined world. I've spent a lot of time in my life in Lithuania and I do know about Lithuanian real-world problems and issues and yet at times I still find myself slipping into this more pleasing fantasy world version of Lithuania that I've created in my imagination.

**Lidia:** Yes, and also being an adult person in relationship to that part of the world has educated me about labor and suffering and resistance movements, so my wakeup call was in adulthood. I did my PhD dissertation on war and narrative, so that was sort of me coming to consciousness about this part of the world and my ancestry, learning that this was a place of revolution and strife and difficulty as much as it is a place of beauty of art and literature.

**Laima Vincé:** Do you think that places that experience so much war and trauma at the same time give birth to much art and beauty?

**Lidia:** Yes, I do. I'm absolutely sure you're right.

**Laima Vincé:** Would you be interested in having some of your writing translated into Lithuanian?

**Lidia:** Oh yes! That would be incredible. It's the reason why I'm in the world sharing stories.

**Laima Vincé:** If there were one book that you'd like to see translated into Lithuanian first, which one would you pick?

**Lidia:** Probably, *Small Backs of Children* because it has a whole Lithuanian history in it. At the same time, *Chronology of Water* would probably be more heart accessible for most people. It's a story that transcends nationalities and places.

**Laima Vincé:** What would you be most interested in seeing and experiencing in Lithuania if you could go there?

**Lidia:** Water, trees, and art.

**Laima Vincé:** Well, there's plenty of all of that in Lithuania.

**Lidia:** Another reason my heart is embedded in Lithuania is this: the mythic has not yet been obliterated by capital. But the entire Baltic region remains an open wound too, with scar tissue, surrounded by astonishing beauty... I suppose all brutalities live right next to beauty.

### ***Decompositions***

An excerpt from *Resuscitations*

Lidia Yuknavitch, 2023

Matsutakes

Horn of Plenty

Spreading-hedgehog

Shaggy Parasol

Coral Tooth

Black Picoa

White Truffle

Turkey tail

Blackfoot Polypore

Western Deer

Upright Coral

Zeller's Bolete

Dusky Bolete

Grisette

Morel

Clouded Funnel

False Chanterelle

Chanterelle

Russula

Andy is becoming a mushroom hunter.

Where we live now, embedded within the Oregon coast range, we are surrounded by mushrooms. Nestled within forests of old growth Sitkas, Western Hemlocks and Alders, tucked between ferns so big they look prehistoric, hiding on the soft bounce of the forest floor, mushrooms create their sly networks. He bushwacks out into the forest hills with our loyal and phenomenal dog Sadie. When we first arrived, they'd bring home a few specimens and lay them out on the counter and he'd explain each varietal to me.

Did you know that the parasitic fungus that develops on a Russula mushroom turns it into a Lobster mushroom? Which smells like lobster, and if you cook it just right in butter, begins to taste like bacon?

They go out, they return.

The waiting is good like it is at Christmas.

They bring back what they find. They smell like trees and forest air and the salt rising off the sea that permeates the air here.

One day they returned home with a black mesh bag absolutely full and bulging. When Andy opened the bag and spilled out the contents, about fifty Oyster mushrooms covered the counter. Oyster mushrooms—*Pleurotus ostreatus*—also known as tree mushrooms, grow naturally on old dead Alders here. Around the world, they are especially popular in Japanese, Chinese, and Korean cooking. They are beautiful—soft brown oyster-shaped caps with white gills underneath.

Sometimes he finds Oyster mushrooms as big as my head.

Andy finds them often; he's learned where to look. Sometimes he has to look up a tree and pull them down with a long stick, other times they dot a downed limb or trunk just out of sight. You have to train your eyes.

When he first started hunting for mushrooms, he tells me sometimes he'd get lost. Except he actually never says the word "lost." I'm not sure Andy believes in the concept of lost. When I asked him if he ever gets lost, he told me sometimes he veers off from where he wants to be, and finds himself in a thicket, or a place he did not want to be.

So you get lost, I repeat. A woman ready to give him a map. No, I just look at my surroundings, and I know eventually I'll walk into something that will be recognizable to me, like the top of a hill I've been on before, or an elk trail I've seen before—because deer and elk do not take the path of least resistance, they forge trails with efficiency. Or a logging road, or I'll just crest a hill and be able to orient by other crests and the ocean coming into view.

His story of himself in the world mesmerizes me. So unlike stories of children or women who get lost—or worse—in the woods. Can my love for him have something to do with his fearlessness in the natural world?

My Lithuanian grandmother once told me about the word *nugrybauti*. I didn't see my paternal grandmother much after early childhood; she rests somewhere in my imagination between magical and monstrous, as does my father, like a fairytale or fable.

In Lithuania, the word *nugrybauti*<sup>[1]</sup> means to lose one's way, to become distracted, to lose the thread of story or sense, but mostly it means to get lost wandering in search of mushrooms. In his excellent essay in part about *nugrybauti*, the writer Joel Mowdy relates this: "More commonly, though, *nugrybauti* describes when someone has lost the thread of a conversation or veered from the plot of a story—gone on a tangent. To overlay the literal experience with the figurative meaning: while relating a tale, one slides into strange territory by following choice clusters of cognitive associations, then becomes struck with panic that the way back is forever lost, only to stumble out somewhere familiar."

When my grandmother told me about the word *nugrybauti* she was in the kitchen of their house in Ohio peeling a potato. She was wearing a light blue flowered dress and an off-white apron in my memory. Her hair was fluffy and white. Grandma hair. Her breasts were Baltic; heavy and pendulous, taking up most of her chest. But I was four years old so I could be wrong. The kitchen smelled like cabbage and potatoes. I was trying to be small and quiet and good but I had to pee.

At some point—I've lost the time and place in memory—I got locked in her bathroom. My father is somewhere in this story. Ever after, I had terror around being locked in bathrooms, which I have written about before. Whatever happened, whatever the story is, it wandered, strayed from the original path of a daughter, a father, his mother's house. Another kind of fairytale.

I've never told Andy how my grandmother gifted the word *nugrybauti* to me when I was four, because the memory was repressed deeply inside the story of my bathroom trauma, but he's read many stories of mine about what my father did to me.

I didn't remember a single god damn thing about the word *nugrybauti* until Andy started to mushroom-hunt out here in our new lives on the coast of Oregon. The word re-emerged from the depths of my past. The word came back to me as beauty, not brutality. The word came back to me through water.

This is the second time I've lived in a forest with Andy. When Andy, Miles and I first moved to Oregon in 2001 we lived in the Bull Run Wilderness in an octagonal house embedded in an old growth forest. Miles was a baby. Andy and I worked too hard at our teaching jobs, exhausting ourselves to the bone, then sucked it up to love Miles and each other. I remember the trip we took to Rockaway Beach together as a little family like it was yesterday, but I

also remember because Andy made a film that day. And so I have four versions of that day: the event itself, my memory, Andy's film, and my storytelling.

We came to get footage of me walking into the sea. The film Andy wants to make is based on a short story I wrote called "The Chronology of Water." Gray sky gray sand gray sea, wave crests making rows of angry lace in the ocean. My flesh goosebumps as I shed my clothes at the lip of the water. Black Arena Lycra swimsuit. My red wool coat splays on the sand stark with color against all that gray. The same red coat I wore to the Oregon coast the day I put my daughter Lily's ashes into the sea all those years ago. Different life. Different body. Different love. Memory like epochs. My hair makes wind storm. November, 2003. Rockaway Beach, Oregon.

I walk toward my second world: water.

Andy is behind me on the beach. In his hands, a video camera. On his back, our son Miles, two years old. Infant in the water. *Infant on land. Love, the distance between them.*

I wonder what it looks like to a baby boy watching your mother walk straight into the raging ocean during a storm. Am I an image in his eyes yet, or something blurry and unresolved? I wonder what it is like to film your wife remembering her whole life, the deathwaters, the lifewaters, walking into the sea. Did he understand yet that he had already become a lodestar?

Andy is making the film using footage of me swimming mixed with home movies with Miles and still shots from my past. In this way, past present and future collapse time.

In the ocean, my body is numbing from cold but hyperextending into thought. Memory alive inside a body, coming and going and criss-crossing a life.

It's too cold to be in the water. But I have become a woman who can take it.

When I am thigh-deep in the bone-cold water, when I can tell there are no dangerous sand banks hiding in front of me from the way the waves are writing their sea story, I dive.

I swim hard into the mad surf. For a moment I think *you could just keep swimming*, and I also think, *you could drown*, the past and the present becoming fluid.

That dive.

That dive into the ocean at Rockaway Beach had my whole life in it.

From the sea I looked back at Andy and Miles, the only people on the beach and the only people in my life worth coming back for.

I don't remember how long I lasted out there.

I do remember when I swam back to shore, when I emerged shivering and wet as a seal, so cold I could not feel my face, when I ran to Andy and Miles—who looked like a two-bodied water creature at the edge of the world, all of us

the only other people on the beach that day--I yelled give me the motherfucking towel! We were laughing our heads off. Even Miles. I'm not even sure he knew what laughing was, but he was the best at it.

You know that crazy kind of laughter. Out of control laughter tinged with a release of fear.

And me dressing more quickly than is humanly possible. And my hair heavy with wet. And the swoop of my big red wool coat carrying the traces of my dead daughter Lily's ashes. And Andy taking care with the camera amidst all that sand and water. And Miles' face, his cheeks appling, our laughter flashing through the three of us in a freeze frame as if we could be a single organism, washed through, after fire and pain and sadness, with...joy? Inside me I mean. Inside my body.

It is difficult for me to write about joy because how do you locate the drama? Joy washes over you differently than pain or trauma or rage...you don't drown in joy. Joy brings you back to a kind of childhood giddiness or even before that, maybe before language. Like when babies fart or poop their pants and smile and laugh. Pure release. Or like the flush of heroin. Or like the middle of an orgasm where you sort of wish you could die there. Or like a dog rolling around on its back. Or like Miles at my nipple, drinking in motherloving life. Joy flushes through your body, doesn't it? Joy doesn't make sense against the drooling desperation of pain, grief, loss. Joy is even more nonsensical and ineffable than beauty or pain. Joy resists narration.

To experience joy, it seems true to me that you have to be open to all the other possibilities. Being that open hurts. Maybe it doesn't hurt everyone to be open like that...but I wonder. I think for some of us it's like that. I think some of us wonder endlessly if the risk is worth it. But joy and pain are only opposites if you let them stay fixed in some idiotic binary. Most of the little shocks in life that mean anything to me amidst the gray hum of the dull daily duff of life are a murmur of both joy and sorrow.

1. For an excellent essay on this word see Joel Mowdy's story: <https://www.guernicamag.com/nugrybauti/>