Photo from personal archives

I AM HERE: AN INTERVIEW WITH THE POET DAIVA CHESONIS

Interview by Laima Vincė

Introducing North American Writers of Lithuanian Heritage

Over the following months, this series will introduce North American writers of Lithuania heritage who write in English but maintain ties with Lithuania and honor and reflect on their Lithuanian heritage. This series defines writers of Lithuanian heritage as people who have ancestral roots in Lithuania, whether their religious faith is Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Pagan, or agnostic. It is not necessary to have 100 percent Lithuanian blood to participate! We live in a global era and while Lithuanian-born Lithuanians are traversing borders and can be found on virtually every continent and in every time zone, Lithuanians born abroad are coming home—either in a cultural sense or literally and physically—to the Homeland. All this movement makes for some very interesting writing that I hope to explore in this series. In a word, this series aims to break down the traditional barriers of who is a Lithuanian writer and what is important to Lithuanian writers. I do not profess having any definitive answers, but instead my goal is to ask a lot of questions.

I will ask writers over the next few months to share about their ties to Lithuania and to reflect on what it is in their writing that is uniquely Lithuanian, and whether it is even possible (or relevant) to seek such a definition. To better understand North American Lithuanians, it is useful to become familiar with an overview of Lithuanian emigration to North America. There have been three major waves of Lithuanian migration to North America over the past three centuries. The first wave took place in the mid to late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century when both Christian Lithuanians and Litvakes (Lithuanian Jews) began immigrating to North America while Lithuania was part of the Russian Tsarist empire. The second wave of emigration to the United States and Canada took place at the end of World War II, when Lithuanians escaping Soviet terror and Lithuanian Jewish Holocaust survivors sought refuge in the democracies of the West. The third wave of emigration from Lithuania into the United States, Canada, and elsewhere, has been taking place since Lithuania reinstated its independence in 1991.

Laima Vincė

Interview with Daiva Chesonis
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Photos from personal archives

Laima: Daiva, you grew up in the Baltimore/Washington DC area. What brought you to Colorado?

Daiva: I was building chairlifts at ski areas on the East Coast after I finished my Bachelor's degree. I did not go to graduate school then as I had planned because I fell in love with the mountain lifestyle in western Pennsylvania. I moved there after I graduated from university just for the summer and ended up staying five years. In the winters I started doing part-time work at small ski areas. I got onto work crews that were decommissioning aging ski lifts which led to building new ski lifts. Because I was a rock climber, I wasn't too afraid of heights, and comfortable with working up in the air. There was a new resort going in called Whitetail and I was on the team that built all the lifts. After that job ended, I received a call telling me that I would be going to Telluride, Colorado, to work on a crew for two years to build the gondola transportation system. I thought: *Wow, Colorado! A two-year contract! I'm moving West.* I packed up my Isuzu Trooper and drove to Colorado. The moment I topped out in the Telluride valley I looked at the clock on my dashboard and took note of the time and it was 10:56 am. I knew that I needed to

remember that moment because it was sublime. I've now been in Colorado for 31 years, since June 3, 1992. While working for CTEC, I realized that the world comes to Telluride and that I was not about to dry up in a corner with no social life. The Joffrey Ballet of Chicago would be in residence every summer. Mycologists from all over the world come to Telluride. One of the biggest bluegrass festivals takes place in Telluride. After the gondola gig, I stayed on in Telluride. I became engaged with the local theatre company, began writing poetry, got an M.A. in Diplomacy & International Conflict Resolution, and raised a daughter.

Laima: Now you live in Norwood, Colorado, about a half hour drive from Telluride. Describe the place where you are living now.

Daiva: Norwood, Colorado is in the transition zone between alpine and desert. It is called high desert. It snows and yet cacti grow here. You can ski and head into the desert all on the same day. To the west there is Moab, Utah, and to the east there are 14,000 feet peaks (4,267 meters). Junipers grow here. Norwood is a Dark Sky Community, which means that you can see a vast number of stars at night, including the Milky Way. We are situated on a mesa. In the box canyon of Telluride you can't see much to the sides because you are surrounded by steep mountains. Here, it's vast, we call it wide sky country. You cannot see another house from our patio. We live on 35 acres (14 hectares) on a canyon rim. There are foxes, coyotes, bears, and mountain lions that wander the property. We have turkeys on our land that look like dinosaurs. It's a ranching community here but with recreational opportunities in every direction.

Laima: You are married to the well-known American nature writer Craig Childs. Tell me about your work leading writing workshops together.

Daiva: I always enjoyed engaging with people about books. Craig was teaching writing in two low-residency MFA programs in Alaska and New Hampshire. He loves teaching and finding that kernel in a student's work. One day sitting here, I just said, "I feel like I'm a million miles away." That was that aha moment when we started creating workshops in tandem with artists and people from other professions, Writing+. We called our workshop location *Million Miles Away*. Then Covid hit and we couldn't bring people together anymore, so we transitioned to Zoom. Now we are looking to rent fun venues and lead writing workshops again.

Laima: How many books has Craig written?

Daiva: Seventeen. He's under contract for two more.

Laima: What are his books about?

Daiva: They are about science, nature, human nature, humans in nature, how nature moves humans, rock art, landscapes, inner and outer. He's an expert on the desert, on archeology. He's written about the Ice Age, Native Americans, ancestral culture in this area. He writes to live and lives to write.

Laima: What do you do out here on those long nights in this vast landscape?

Daiva: We get the woodstove going in the winter. We read and sip whiskey. Or we write. We check in with each other: Should we go for a walk? Do you have a deadline? Or can we talk?

Laima: Tell me about your Lithuanian family?

Daiva: My father was born in either 1940 or 1941. Somewhere along the way when the family fled Lithuania, they fudged his birth date. His mother was interested in medical school but the family fled. She came to America and since she could not speak English, she became a seamstress. Those kinds of jobs were readily available for immigrants then. My grandfather was a mayor of a small town in Lithuania. I didn't know him. He died before I was born.

Laima: Were your family in the Displaced Persons camp?

Daiva: Yes, my father remembers being in a large warehouse with multiple families with each family sharing a cot. He remembers that people got along, and they were not hungry. I wish I could ask my father the details now, but apparently in the DP camp his tonsils swelled up so that he could not drink or eat food. The story goes that his hands and feet were tied to the cot, my grandfather cauterized a knife, and cut out his tonsils. You did what you had to do to survive. But can you imagine having to do that now? I wish I could hear the story from him now.

I told my daughter this story when she was five since I heard the story when I was her age. My daughter started repeating this story and other such stories at slumber parties and playdates. I received phone calls from other mothers about these heavy stories she was telling to their children. I apologized, realizing that if I am going to pass my family stories responsibly, I needed to think about how those stories will be perceived.

Laima: When did your father come to the United States?

Daiva: I believe in 1949 when he was nine. At some point my father's family name had an "h" added to Česonis, to make it easier for Americans to pronounce. They came into Camden Yard which is now the Baltimore Oriole Stadium. Whenever we'd drive past it my father would point and say, "That was my first step of freedom. That is where I first stepped onto free land."

My mother was born in 1943 in Kaunas. She was the oldest of four siblings, one born in Lithuania, one in Germany, and two in the United States. When the family fled, she only had one shoe on, so she embarked to Germany with one shoe. They created a shoe from newspaper and string. My mom was about seven or eight when she came to the United States. She landed in Philadelphia and was part of that community. They had family, who had come to America earlier who was able to sponsor them. Her father had been an engineer in Lithuania, and her mother a housewife who loved to sing opera. She always sang at all the Lithuanian functions. She had the most beautiful dresses and opera gloves. I would sit beside her at the piano when she practiced. I remember how odd it was in the suburbs to hear that operatic voice coming out of the house.

Laima: Tell me about your Lithuanian heritage?

Daiva: My Lithuanian heritage is something I treasure dearly. I am the oldest of three siblings. I grew up with very young parents—I believe they were 21 and 23 when they had me. They'd only been in the United States 12 or 13 years when I was born. They met at a Baltimore-Philadelphia Lithuanian youth picnic, of course, because that's what Lithuanian emigres did back then. They organized picnics and social events so that their children would meet and marry each other and create Lithuanian families. The struggle for Lithuanian independence had to be fought on our side of the world as well. Those of us who were outside of Lithuania felt we had to keep the language alive, the

dances, the songs, and the traditions. That's because inside of Lithuania all of that was being squelched by the oppressive Soviet regime. We spoke only Lithuanian at home. Being the oldest, I went to elementary school in Baltimore not speaking English. Why would I know English? We spent our time at the Lithuanian Hall, in Lithuanian church, at Lithuanian functions. I really didn't know that another world existed outside of Lithuanian events. So, when I came to elementary school for the first time I wondered: What language is everyone speaking? Soon I realized that there was another girl who didn't understand what anyone was saying because she spoke French. So, she and I stuck together. As five-year-olds we knew we were different from the rest of the children, but somehow, we communicated. I also knew at that age that we were making trips to a place called Washington. My parents would be protesting in support of Lithuania, or they'd be speaking at a protest. I went on to first grade and I still didn't speak English well and I couldn't write or read English. Poor Sister Helen in this Baltimore city school had to teach me while teaching 29 other students. She didn't know what to do with me, so she put me against the wall with my own desk, singled me out, and for the entire school year handed me coloring books. Then we moved to the suburbs between Baltimore and Washington DC and the second-grade teacher there was surprised that I was way behind speaking, reading, or writing English. It was suggested that we watch the children's program Sesame Street to learn English. I remember the black and white TV warming up, so that we could watch *Sesame Street*. My younger brother and sister didn't have the same surprise when they went to school that there was another language out there. I am forever grateful to Mrs. Hagen—and *Sesame Street*—because she got me ready for third grade, even though she had the other second graders to teach.

My double life started in the suburbs when all my neighborhood friends would have the weekend off or got to play on sports teams, but we'd be getting in the car very early in the morning because my mother was the principal of the Lithuanian Saturday School in Baltimore. It also meant that on Friday nights they weren't sitting at home completing their Lithuanian School homework like us. You can't not have your homework done if you mom is the principal! On Sunday afternoons we drove to Baltimore for Lithuanian folk-dance practice. It was a double life living in suburban Maryland to have your father call you in for dinner shouting: *Daiva-Nida-Dariau vakarienė! Oh Tėte, we wish you wouldn't do that!* That made it a little tough to adapt in the neighborhood.

I loved going to Lithuanian School and having a second set of Lithuanian friends. If my friends at English school weren't being very nice, I had another set of friends if I needed them. That also meant I didn't go to the summer camps that the neighborhood kids went to. I went to Lithuanian camp. I loved my time at Camp Neringa and at Lithuanian Scout Camps. I showed up in rural Colorado with a lot of useful skills that I learned as a Lithuanian scout. I knew how to set up an outdoor kitchen and how to build a multi-tiered bonfire. I don't think my parents would have sent us to become American girl scouts or boy scouts, but because there was a Lithuanian version of scouts, then we had to do it!

This double life was my life. When I talk to people who grew up in the Polish or Ukrainian community they say, "Oh yes, that was my life too!" Our holidays were different. Our Christmas Eve traditions were different from those of Americans. I started to realize that all these differences made me unique. I started to not want to hide my Lithuanian life from my American friends. I wanted to talk about my summer vacation and what I did. For example, in camp we reenacted the deportations to Siberia. At night they would gather us out of our bunks and trundle us off to "Siberia." We played these games to make sure that we understood our families' histories. Our camp counsellors wanted us to understand why we were at a Lithuanian heritage camp. Otherwise, we might as well be at an American camp. There were traditions to get Lithuanian kids together. We had pen pals. I wrote to so many Lithuanian boys and girls growing up, which made it easier to start dating as a teenager because I already knew so many other Lithuanian Americans. Then you realize that it's happening again. You're trying to keep this bloodline going and not because of some sort of purity, but because we needed to keep the language and traditions alive because they cannot do that in Soviet-occupied Lithuania. Now that I look back, I realize that the closer you lived to Washington DC or to New York where the United Nations is located, the more responsibility you had to advocate for Lithuania's independence. It was a big responsibility for our family to speak up and to take part in protests and

marches. We learned to lobby the government while still in high school: *"Hello, my name is Daiva Chesonis. May I speak to your legislative aid on foreign affairs?"* Now what 13-year-old does that on a regular basis?

Laima: Tell me about your first diplomatic mission to the Soviet Embassy at age five.

Daiva: When I was five, in 1970, Simas Kudirka, a Lithuanian seaman and radio operator, jumped from the Soviet ship, the *Litva*, onto the *USCG Cutter Vigilant*. The Soviets were allowed to come onto the Coast Guard boat to take him away and they beat him savagely. The news broke and we protested in Washington DC. My parents hung a placard around my neck that read: "Will Simas get my package?" I really didn't understand the words in English, but I knew that Simas Kudirka was a political prisoner and that as a prisoner he had a right to have packages delivered to him and we had these packages that we wanted the Soviet Embassy to deliver to him. They reasoned that if Simas received the packages he would know that we knew what was going on and that we were working on getting him out of the prison camp about 160 km from Moscow. Everyone agreed: "Let's put the five-year-old with the pointy hat alone at the gate and maybe they will open the door for her." My parents sent me to ring the doorbell to the Soviet Embassy. I rang that doorbell but they wouldn't answer and open the gate. At that moment when I was ringing the doorbell with my little mittened hands I saw a window covered with a lace curtain. Then I saw a hand part the lace curtain, and then I saw the lace curtain close. I knew as a five-year-old that they were not going to open that gate. That sent a message to me, "Oh, so this is how this game is going to be played."

So, you grow up protesting, with dissidents coming over for dinner and hearing their stories—and I was always allowed to participate in the adult conversations. If you were interested in what was going on all you had to do was to listen and learn. I realized that this was the way of the world. To a young mind there is intrigue in that and that intrigue led me to want to study Soviet Studies and Diplomacy in college. I wanted to be someone who would free all the occupied republics, not just Lithuania. I had the language and the culture and traditions in me from my parents and that made me feel that I could pull it off. So, I earned my degree from the University of Maryland. Many of my professors were busy at the State Department during the day and classes were held in the evenings.

Laima: What did it feel like when Lithuania finally declared independence and became free?

Daiva: I was glued to the TV because that was all we had then. I was talking to my father about what was happening. I will never forget that the celebrations started in all the Lithuanian communities on the Eastern seaboard. CNN showed all the Lithuanian communities celebrating and they showed Lithuanian Hall in Baltimore. And there on the TV screen I saw my father. There are many tall Lithuanian men, but my father was very tall. And there was my father sticking out of the swaying crowd celebrating. I saw in that moment his joy that independence came true in his lifetime.

Laima: Have you visited Lithuania?

Daiva: I've been to Lithuania five times: 1983, 1995, 2006, 2012, 2022. In 2012, the family went to Lithuania to spread my father's ashes. My first visit was in 1983. When I graduated high school my parents sent me to Lithuania to meet the family. I had sat through so many slide shows of our relatives when other family members traveled to Soviet Lithuania. I had to memorize who my aunts, uncles, cousins were. When relatives would go to Lithuania, they never knew how many days they would be allowed to stay. I was given a visa for eleven days. That was a lot in the Andropov era. When I landed, my relatives opened a bottle of champagne right there in the airport parking lot and tied a *juosta* (sash) around my shoulder. Then they took me on a picnic in the woods because it was the only place to have a private conversation in those days. On that trip I brought eye surgery instruments that doctors needed

to do surgery. Those small instruments were hidden in the lining of my suitcase. I brought two blood pressure monitors and two huge bottle of Tylenol—we always packed such items in duplicate because we knew they would take away one in Moscow. In the woods, I handed over the suitcase packed with goods to my relatives.

Laima: You grew up in a very patriotic and active Lithuanian family. What did it feel like to be on holy Lithuanian soil for the first time?
(When I asked this question, Daiva began to tear up.)

Daiva: That first time I came, when my relatives took me out to the forest, I felt deeply connected to both place and people. How could I have such a connection to a place I'd never been to? Last Autumn, when my husband Craig and I traveled to Lithuania, that happened to me again. Here I was, with my beloved husband of two years, who was so interested in learning about Lithuania. We went to Palanga to see the sunset. We walked to the water. It was the end of September, and we went to put our feet in the icy water. And in that moment, I just said, *Tėtė, aš čia* (Father, I'm here). I've brought the man I love to Lithuania. *Aš čia, aš čia*. I was so connected. How is that possible? To have such a deep connection to Lithuania? And at age 17? I was saying, I'm finally here, first generation born in the United States. I didn't have any choice. If it were not for war, I would have been born there, in Lithuania.

Laima: That is exactly how I always felt.

Daiva: It's alright for me to feel that Lithuania is my homeland. I don't know how that is perceived by people who are born and live in Lithuania. But I know that the amount of work that was put in on behalf of raising us to be fiercely proud Lithuanians is deeply ingrained in me. I know that my entire life up until age 17 was dedicated to a small country across the ocean. I knew on that first visit that I was going to go on to college to study to become a person who would help free the Baltic States. I felt it was okay for me to feel that way. All those songs that say the word, *tėvynė* (homeland), which come from the word *tėvas* (father), *tėvai* (parents), connected Lithuania with my parents. I never thought about how I was perceived there as an American who happens to speak Lithuanian well enough, thanks to my parents.

Laima: I had that same feeling of deep connection when I first went to Lithuania. I felt as though I should have been born there, that my family should be there. What was I doing somewhere else?

Daiva: And yet, at the same time, I love my life in the United States. My parents instilled in us a pride in being Americans because they were accepted here. America said, "Yes, you may come." You needed to have a roof over your head, people who are sponsoring you, a job—but all that is just prudent on the part of the government—but you could come. People call it the American Dream, and my father believed in America. My father would say, "How am I, a refugee child, now a chemist who works for the United States Army as a camouflage specialist." He wanted to be a soldier, but he was blinded in his left eye at age nine, so he found the next best thing—the nerd route into the military so that he could do his part for the country that took him and his family in. If you've worked so hard to become something and you have aligned yourself with that feeling, then you should feel that way.

Laima: I've interviewed so many North Americans of Lithuanian descent. After you've talked to so many people, you start seeing patterns of people having similar feelings and experiences and you realize that one of the beautiful things, at least for our generation, of being Lithuanian American is that we were taught by our parents, by our schools, by our society, to hold in balance a love for America and being an American and everything that meant and that love for Lithuania. Sometimes I meet immigrants who come from Lithuania to America for economic reasons

who quickly lose that sense of being Lithuanian. Their children absolutely have no sense of themselves as being Lithuanian. I've seen how you can choose to become a part of another country and lose your heritage. Therefore, it's remarkable how our parents and grandparents managed to instill in us a deep love for Lithuania.

Daiva: They had the choice to completely remake themselves because they came to an entirely different country and culture. Each family landed on new soil and had to make a decision—are we going to change our name and start fresh? They could have made the decision for their children's future to not have a tough life because they were still linked to the homeland and their circumstances. But both sides of my family chose to be very vocal and engaged with the Lithuanian community.

Laima: Does your daughter speak Lithuanian?

Daiva: Her father is American, so for the first nine months of her life we tried bilingual parenting with him speaking English and me speaking Lithuanian, but it was exhausting. When you're a new mom, it's hard, and you want your child to understand what you're saying. So, then I sang to her in Lithuanian, and I taught her a few words. Now she is studying Lithuanian and learning because we are traveling to Lithuania this summer. She will meet her cousins and relatives in Lithuania again as an adult and rebuild connections.

Laima: Does your daughter perceive herself as Lithuanian?

Daiva: She very much does. The night before her father and I were married, his maternal grandmother blurted out that her father was from Vilnius. What a fabulous wedding gift! My daughter is very proud to have 62.5% of her bloodline Lithuanian.

Laima: There are not many Lithuanians in Colorado. Have you built a Lithuanian community here?

Daiva: In Telluride, being that fiercely proud Lithuanian, I became the token one. First of all, because of my name. I was the only Daiva in Telluride. For many years, one of the sixth-grade teachers would bring me and a first generation US-born Korean woman into the classroom for a week to teach the students about our countries and what it was like to grow up as children of immigrants. I would start my class with these words: "Grab whatever you can, whatever is in your pockets, and walk to Utah." Which was really just a smidge of the distance that many immigrants walked. I would have them empty their pockets and tell them, "That's all you have now. Do you have a pet? Sorry, you've left it behind." They'd look at me confused. Then I'd explain that is what my family did. The kids were riveted. The thought of leaving everything you know, everything you had, and walking into the unknown made a huge impression on them. They chose Lithuanian names, we cooked Lithuanian food, sang simple Lithuanian songs. For years afterwards, whenever they saw me, even as young adults, they'd call out, *Labas Daiva*!

Then, many young students from Eastern Europe started coming to Telluride to work in the hospitality industry. When young people from Lithuania would come, the locals would send them to our bookstore. I would give them my cell phone number, talk to them, and tell them if they had any difficulties at all, they could come to me, call me at any time. I would ask where they were from and I could say to them, "Oh, I've been there." They'd say, "How does this woman in Telluride, Colorado know about my small town in Lithuania?" and I'd say, "It's because I'm interested."

Laima: You were the poet laureate of San Miguel County in 2019 – 2021. I'd like to ask you a few questions about your work as a poet. How does your Lithuanian heritage inform your work as a poet?

Daiva: I'm not a poet by training or education. Poetry is something I began to pick up and do because a friend of mine in Telluride was leading a poetry program at the library. Every week we'd get a cassette tape (!!!) of a poet's work and you'd listen and then come back and discuss. That got me started writing poetry. I just thought it was a great way to get all my weird thoughts down and harness my energy, put it all under the guise of "it's a poem." That poet started writing a poem a day, so I started writing a poem every morning and soon I had 60 to 70 poems. With minor editing they became poems I could perform. I became a performance poet. Living in Telluride there are ample opportunities to do Spoken Word.

When I was a child, I had so much to say. My father would say to me, "Daiva, say half." I feel that the other half that is left unsaid is what comes out in my poetry. Some of my poetry no one will ever see and some of it I am happy to share. Once, driving toward Telluride, where there are steep mountains all around, I saw the full moon. I just started saying to myself: *"Kalnai yr Dievai, mėnulio vaikai"* (the mountains are gods, the moon's children). I thought: *"Did I just write a line of poetry in Lithuanian?"* I realized then that I could also write poetry in Lithuanian. I've taken some of my poems written in English and translated them into Lithuanian. Translation is a great way to massage and caress language and use it in interesting ways. I also do that with English. I make up words, new hyphenated concoctions that seem to hold the richness of Lithuanian description.

Laima: Poetry is an oral art form. Poetry really comes to life when it is spoken out loud, when it is memorized, when it is sung and performed. In our era of the written word, we tend to sweep that aspect of poetry under the rug. There is something beautiful about remembering the oral traditions of Lithuanian poetry we grew up with in the Lithuanian diaspora. I also know that you love to sing Lithuanian folk songs, and that you sing *sutartinės* (polyphonic chants). Do you think there is a connection between your heritage of folk song and the performance poet you became in Telluride?

Daiva: As a kid I always thought that lyrics were poems, so they were performed. It took me time to realize there was this thing called songwriting. People ask my husband all the time, "Where can I read Daiva's poetry?" And he tells them, "Nowhere." I'm working on putting together a published collection of poems. Maybe because I love the fact that if you weren't there to hear my poem in person, then sorry. Maybe I keep putting off writing my book because I'm enjoying the anonymity of the stage. The microphone is a tool. You can use it to whisper as well. I'm currently part of a troupe called *The Telluwriters*. We travel the Western Slope of Colorado. That's been great fun, performing with our other Poets Laureate.

Laima: Let's talk about your bookstore.

Daiva: I came to Telluride in 1992 and bought the bookstore in 2010. I grew up in a house of books. Although my father was a chemist, he loved books. His favorite thing to do was to sit in his armchair with his moccasins on, his *pypkė* (pipe), and read, read, read. If you had any question, he knew what book to go to, what page, and there was the answer. So, I learned to love books from my father. *Between the Covers Bookstore* has been around since 1974. When it came up for sale, together with my business partner, we bought it and became the third set of owners. At that point, she was already the manager, and I the buyer, so a great ownership team already ingrained in the "literary industrial complex." The bookstore had a great history in Telluride. It was located right on Main Street, and it's the first place many visitors go to when they arrive in Telluride. That's what I do when I go to a new place, I look for the local bookstore. I absolutely loved being a bookseller. We owned it for 12 years and then passed it on. We had planned to run the bookstore for 10 years, but with Covid it became 12 years. We learned a lot during the

pandemic. Grocery stores, liquor stores, and gun shops were deemed essential and allowed to stay open in Colorado. We deemed ourselves an essential business and reopened in May of 2020, but very cautiously, with only three people allowed in the store at a time, lines on the floor, curbside pickup. We knew families needed us.

Laima: Did you have good business during the pandemic?

Daiva: We did. For a ski town the height of the season is in March, so we were stacked to the gills with new books when the pandemic hit and had to shut down. It turned out that we could not get any more books because of no shipping during the pandemic's beginning. We started something called SOS—Shop Our Shelves. We would tell customers that we could not order anything new, but what we have on our shelves is yours. Families needed books for their kids and adults needed to escape through reading.

Laima: You can watch movies to pass the time, but it's really a book that is going to sustain you.

Daiva: I think that people fell in love with reading again during the pandemic. After a while, you could have binge watched all of Netflix, but soon you realized that there was nothing new being made. We are a better society if we read—whether it's fiction or nonfiction … or poetry. Independent bookstores were there for people during the pandemic when they needed us.

Laima: You also had a reading series where you brought in writers.

Daiva: We brought in many writers to do readings and to have talks with readers. A lot of authors enjoy the opportunity to meet their readers. I was very fortunate to own a bookstore and host readings in Telluride. Again, the world comes to Telluride. When Ken Burns's new books would come out—usually on the Tuesday after Labor Day—we would have Sidewalk Signings with him while he was in town for Telluride Film Festival. As an example, his National Parks book sold 325 copies in two hours. That event alone paid our rent for two months. But even if it's a lesser-known author, it's worth it. You might just have 12 people in the audience. But then you might have a really good discussion and that connective takeaway is for those that show up.

Laima: As a bookseller, were you able to predict which books would be successful?

Daiva: Yes. Well, most of the time. As a buyer you have relationships with publishing representatives from all the major publishers plus university presses. They get to know your store and your readers. Our store was a tall narrow Victorian building that did not have a lot of counter space. Our bookshelves went from floor to ceiling. We could carry about 13,000 books. They might offer a book that was a "sleeper," a book that might find a home in a place where people ski, where politics are liberal, and so on. What made our bookstore so interesting was that not only were we serving the locals—around total population in the school district—but we also had skiers and travelers coming into our community constantly. So, I had to know what books they might have heard about and would want or what book they forgot in the airplane seat pocket. I had to read all the time and know what people wanted to buy and read while on their vacation. It was a buying game, guessing what people flying in from New York, Boston, Washington would want to read. It's a game of matchmaking. It's a challenge to go out into those stacks and find the right book for either a customer or their gift recipient. Craig would say, "When you walk into the bookstore, you walk inside Daiva's brain." Of course, the International Relations section was quite buffed out, and the Mountaineering section. I selected and bought most every book in that store. The Mycology section was the largest collection in the nation averaging 222 titles about mushrooms, in tandem with the annual Telluride Mushroom

Festival. We sold Ruta Sepetys's book, *Between Shades of Gray*. The publishing representatives were pushing that book very hard. I saw all the statistics as a buyer. I was very excited about that book because it had Lithuanian characters. I put that book into the hands of many children.

Laima: Did you sell books in translation?

Daiva: Works in translation only began to be represented very recently by independent book sellers. In Telluride, people travel a lot during the off-seasons (April, November). I really tried to bring in more translated books because what better way to get to know another culture than to read its literature? But, when I first started buying books for the bookstore, very rarely were books in translation offered by publishing representatives. Now, for the first time, I see write-ups about translators in the trade catalogues. In my opinion, these people are very special because they are taking a work of literature and producing a high-quality translation while also thinking of ways to translate that work from one culture to another. Laima, literary translators like you are very special people. Was it a mission for you to translate?

Laima: Yes, it was a mission for me. I felt that collections of poetry that I translated, like Marcelijus Martinaitis's *The Ballads of Kukutis* or Matilda Olkinaitė's diary and poems, contained important cultural messages about Lithuania for the world.

Photo from personal archives

Go! Go now.

Grandmother wakes
Pulls the afghan closer to her chest
Stares wide-eyed into dim darkness
Bottom lip and jaw slack and hanging
Go! Go now.
Go! Go now.

Second oldest grandchild
Nestled up against the other five
Sits up
The only one roused by the urgent beseech
Go! Go now.
Go! Go now.

Confused
First by the command
Second by the language
—English—
Rarely uttered when the matriarch's awake.

The young one turns to look at what the old eyes see across the room
At what the outstretched arm is reaching for,
Those gnarled arthritic fingers that knit beautiful sweaters.

Močiute, kas yra?
Grandmother, what is it?

Močiute's fearful face warms and softens
The peril expiring.
Their eyes connect in the looming light of the coming morn
A 30-year gap microwaves into tethered understanding
Forced migration and first gen American corralled onto common ground.

Močiute swallows hard, smiles weakly,
Lowers her hulk back into the sofa
Back into a secret world that shouts out in the night.

Go! Go now.

Our elders, these vessels, they hold so much,
A hothouse of nightmares that burst with heirloom pride
These are the remnants, the cobbles upon which we stand in gratitude
on this day and into tomorrow.
Go! Go now.
And I did, I went …
Went into her displaced past
A timeline of running between fronts marching,
Of hiding in forests, surviving on mushrooms.
Of chancy bribes at another checkpoint, doorsteps toward freedom.

April 20, 2016

Rubberband Ball

For Močiute, who I physically lost in 1988

Streets of Baltimore
Sweaty bus stops
A grandmother and her three

Glints and hints of milky red or green, the odd blue
And that classic CPR dummy flesh-tone tan

“Put on wrists until we get home”
Then the routine of adding the squigglies to the rigid roundness

Wondering what this one, from the errand to Lexington Market, once held together
Imagining that another with inky markings was on a newspaper from New York City

We saw it as a ball but she had no use for sports
Potatoes and mushrooms and bacon shmear her game

It sat on a windowsill, but sometimes I saw it in her big Močiute purse
Where’s she going that she needs so many all at once?

As we grew taller, the ball grew rounder
and she, older
Time elastic

It, and the little red teapot are all I took from her house when she rolled into the beyond
It still bounces, though the edges are drying into an atrophy
that I know is coming for my own muscles and tendons

Now on my windowsill, I roll it over sometimes so another side of it sunbakes
taking in a warmth just like her meaty arthritic palm gave
A reminder to stretch my life to the point of almost snap and tear

Baltimore bus stops and hoarding rubber bands,
such a beautiful immigrant thing.

January 21, 2018

Burnt Out

They built a fire
it burned hot
the way they liked it
    They added log after log after log
    until all the logs were gone
        So they burned the wooden spoon
        and the graying water pail
        the dusty windowsills
        the overly ornate picture frames
        and the corner table on which they sat
Next came baskets, once filled with mushrooms
her homestead clogs

his lacquered cane
        As the pencils went in
        so did their books
        and her grandfather’s letters
        that spoke of drought and famine and deep ruin
Bedframes, chairs, the birchbark ladder
the doors and the floors
the handles of axes, shovels and hoes
the ivied fence and the crooked gate
        Til all that was left were two naked people
        huddled hungry at the mouth of the stove
        now quiet and cold in a tall ring of ashes
They kissed once
and stepped in

September 24, 2022 - In a Lithuanian forest near the Belarus border