

Five Lithuanian Poets

Translated by Laima Vince



Today we're excited to feature a beautiful selection of Lithuanian poetry translated by Laima Vince (Sruoginis). Lithuanian poetry comes from a long history of pain in a country which has suffered three foreign invasions, the deportation of a third of its people to Siberia, and the slaughter of practically its entire Jewish community; ten years of partisan warfare against the Red Army that left an entire generation—the part of it that remained after the rest had fled to the West or been exiled to Siberia—shattered; and nearly fifty years of foreign occupation. These poems protest and bear witness to totalitarianism, speak about exile and war, and they are more necessary today than ever. We highly recommend Laima Vince's excellent anthology [*Raw Amber*](#) to further sample the beauty of Lithuanian poetry. Accompanying the poems are Vince's luminous gouache illustrations inspired by Lithuanian myths and symbols. Enjoy.

—*Claudia Serea and Loren Kleinman*

Jonas Mekas, from *Dienoraščiai 1970 – 1982 (Diaries 1970 - 1982)*

Damp, cold,
and like on the Western Front
Nothing has Changed.

I walk and I think
In Lithuanian—
 damp
 Sunday

the squidy corner
of a newspaper—red,
reflections of light,
a sidewalk,
America.

Have you ever walked alone
like this
on the streets of a foreign city,

knowing
that you are alone
with your wet
Autumn
raincoat—

alone, all alone
with your
Lithuanian words?

Autumn—a wet sidewalk—
wind—damp—
on the Western Front
Nothing has Changed—



Jonas Mekas is a Lithuanian-American filmmaker, poet and artist who has often been called "the godfather of American avant-garde cinema." His work has been exhibited in museums and festivals worldwide. Mekas is also a well-known Lithuanian language poet and has published his poems and prose in Lithuanian, French, German, and English. He has published many of his journals and diaries including *I Had Nowhere to Go: Diaries, 1944–1954*, and *Letters from Nowhere*, as well as articles on film criticism, theory, and technique. On November 10, 2007, the Jonas Mekas Visual Arts Center was opened in Vilnius.

Birutė Pūkelevičiūtė

From *Introitus*

A house. Just like all the other houses surrounding it, a split level.
On the verandah tomatoes ripen; they will be picked before the first frost.
A maple grows beside the house. Its leaves have already turned. Just like all the other maples.
Dova lives here. The traitor's wife.
This is the nest of Balys Arminas. Not his mother's arms.

Introitus is a coming together—white chalk marking the threshold.
Introitus is a touching of the wound with one's palm.
After that the ritual begins: Meditation.
(She loves her husband! She loves him!)
She loves the traitor.
But will it matter who we loved? Maybe it's enough that we did love—
that we were even capable of love.
Like mollusks trapped in an ice floe, we warmed ourselves by panting, and our lips thawed.
Trees, birds, beasts: They were crueler than we were.
The oceans tore at the continents with their teeth, thunder split screaming glaciers,
suicidal fish swam through the marshes, roots of grass strangled one another
within the darkness of the earth.
But we were often overcome with gentleness—even for one another.
Maybe we were another (unknown, unknowable) father's crowned children?

Maybe we did not inherit everything from the earth?
Our skin is hopelessly bare (and that gaze straight into the stars).
Our playthings are pathetic (space shuttles, pyramids, cathedrals).
The universe chuckles. But we calmed ourselves. Orphans are always the object of ridicule.
It's common.

Everything was holier than we were: clouds, fauna, bees.
Beasts mated sadly, honestly, not desiring shameful proximity.
New moons spun in the expanses of foggy space and, growing lonely, rolled off into the distance.
Everyone was holier than we were: They were born quietly, they died alone, they lived
keeping a respectful distance from one another.
But we were greedy and our love could not be sated.
When our souls met they would wrap around each other like ivy, sucking up everything.
Oh soul, oh captured mind, be my ransom! *We'll make love, stranger soul, until your soul fuses
with mine.*

And this is why we need to remember one another's crimes.
It is like breeding a blossoming bud.
Like the stigmata.

* * *

A house. Just like all the other houses surrounding it, a split-level.
Dova lives here. A woman who has taken on the stigmata.
That is why her soul is about to be sliced open like a fish.
Like the moment when the fisherman rips out the pulsating liver together with all its bloody stones.
Her soul will be cracked open like a nut. And out of the shiny hard shell the center will fall,

long tortured by dark, hidden diseases.

At this time Dova is preparing dinner. The kitchen is probably over there, where light reflects against the ceiling.

The sound of piano music wafts out the window. The Arminas twin girls are playing in the living room.

Four hands play “Solveig's Song.”

Dova is raising her girls nicely.

Still, her soul will lose its leaves and before the sun black welts will appear—hacked into the trunk.

Right now Dova is placing bread, meat, vegetables, and milk on the table.

It is time to eat.

(But where is the Arminas's son, Liucijus? Their first-born?)

Everything in Dova's kitchen is cozy and homey—the speckled pots, shiny creamers, the spice rack, the pepper mill.

A yellow sponge hangs from the spout of the teapot—

The sponge is there to catch droplets of tea and it is cut in the shape of a butterfly.

The sponge even has little wire whiskers. A fun sponge!

It is cozy in Dova's kitchen.

The coffin stands in the bedroom. At the foot of the bed.

Be damned Dova, the traitor's wife! Before your bed a coffin will stand always! You alone will see it and you alone will know who is lying in it.

(Who put the curse on her? When? Where? Maybe no one did...)

But the invisible coffin is there.

And Dova knows who is lying in the coffin—Leonas. The man who also once loved her.

The bedroom lamps are covered with apple-colored fringe—like green eyelashes.

Light plays luxuriously on the lover's bedding, the traitor's and his wife's.

(Dova stretches a soft lamb's hide across her side of the bed, so that the hide's texture might give her body more pleasure).

A triptych mirror, crocheted bedcovers, silk sheets, fragrant skin creams, crystal bottles of perfume.

And the coffin.

Always.



Birutė Pūkelevičiūtė (1923-2007) was one of the most colorful and diverse talents in the Lithuanian literary world. She was an actress, director, poet, playwright, novelist, memoirist, literary translator, and author of plays and poems for children. Like many other writers, she fled Stalin's Siberian concentration camps first to Germany, then to Canada, and finally settled in the United States where she established herself as a novelist. In 1998, she returned to Lithuania and lived until her death in Vilnius.



Vytautas Bložė

Translated by Laima Vincė

The Jewish Cemetery

For Shalom'ke, my childhood friend

during the Great War the pub burned down
bramble pickers flew to the forests
a girl called here-pigeon-pigeons! to doves shot dead
but the doves fell straight into the Jewish cemetery

later stones remained alone
no one divided them—burdensome furniture
someone is sleeping in those same beds, as before death
fallen asleep in the cemetery, they wait still for their children

but their children have turned to smoke
become wildflowers in the wood, the Jewish dynasty

is broken. Only stones
scatter wind and stars erase stone

the river skips before us. I hold onto it with my hands
waving from the corner of a handkerchief to those left ahead
now I am a Jew and wear
a yellow star on my back, like their glances and their talk

as they carted the graves' stones to the crematorium
a storm approached, and Moses on an ashen mount
spoke with God in the language in the deaf and dumb
till God slammed the window shut and toppled under the table

only two nightingales didn't know Yiddish
two nightingales—I carry them in my pockets
resting on indecipherable stones
in the cemetery, whose people have vanished

1966

When We Said Good-Bye That Time

When we said good-bye that time—because you
Wanted to defend yourself and not love—
Do you remember, on the top of the sickly
Chestnut tree the black thrush shrieked.
Inside the rooms I could hear the speechless rustling
Of clothing. I did not know
If one day I would be afraid to meet you
Eye to eye because right now I'm afraid.
Not only of you, but of myself, and everything
That was ours: Our past.

I live alone here and busy myself
With household work done alone and with my own
Life and death. I measure the oil
In time that is not cramped by the clock and the calendar.
Sometimes I go out to the town,
Where no one ever looks you in the eye,
And no one ever answers. They are only open
In the cemetery, where indiscreet
Crosses and sedge born of the dryness
Give away their names, but already too late.

That's why I decided to stay here,
Where everything is like huge
Frozen eyes that stare at me day and night.
But being forced to be quiet is much easier

Than the freedom to pray to foreign gods.
(There are no other kind). I sometimes cry: not over you—
But over me: that I never even knew anything
About you except your name,
And that until now you've left me only your voice
From across the river, which I can't lean on
In my loneliness.

Baltimore, 1976



Vytautas Bložė (1930-2016) was an iconic dissident Lithuanian poet and translator who lived in hiding in



Lithuania throughout the post-WWII period. His poetry was banned by the Soviet regime and up until 1981 none of his work was published and his name was deleted whenever it appeared in an article or periodical. Later, he published an impressive number of collections that he was able to hide before and translated the works of Lermontov, Pushkin, Schiller, Heine, and many others into Lithuanian. He was known as the “grandfather of free verse” because he broke away from the traditional rhyme and meter, aggressively

manipulating language to suit his poetic needs.

Judita Vaičiūnaitė

From *Žemynos vainikai (Earth's Wreaths)* 1996

Ghetto

Six in the morning
 when the kiosks
 and milk bars are closed
six in the morning
 in the streets of the Vilnius ghetto
 dandelions open
a golden dust settles
 like yellow stars of David blooming
pushing, breaking their way through splitting cobblestone
 above underground cloisters
 about grotesquely defined arcs
deep blackened passageways
 redolent still of garlic and fish,
rising through courtyard cellars and rubble
 the dandelion's golden halo spreads.
Six in the morning
 an amber light flows into a blind alley
a dirty courtyard
 where a Jew's forgotten shadow
is maybe praying, maybe muttering a curse.





Judita Vaičiūnaitė (1937-2001) was considered one of the leading female voices in Lithuanian poetry and had a prolific writing and publishing career. She has been dubbed Lithuania's "city poet" and published 18 collections of poetry, four collections for children, in addition to plays and her editorial work for several prominent Lithuanian journals. She translated the works of Achmatova, Bergolc, Maksimovich, Lewis Carroll , and others into Lithuanian.

Justinas Marcinkevičius (1930-2011)

How Freedom Is

1.
I can no longer bear
 my thoughts of you!
Like an apple tree,
 heavy with fruit,
my arms are laden
 with loss.
But you say to me:
 "Stand tall,
 as freedom stands."

2.
My journey towards you
 is never-ending!
Like a rock
 crumpled along the roadside,
I hide myself beneath moss,
 slumbering like a slate-gray sky.
But you call out to me:
 "Just go, walk,
 as freedom walks."

3.
So, hold me fast,
 within you
 my homeland,
like death
 stops a hymn

in the throat,
like nightfall
stops twilight.
And you answer me:
“I am your freedom.”

Translator’s Note: I was asked to translate this poem by the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs as part of a project to commemorate 25 years since independent Lithuania was diplomatically recognized by the nations of the world. During the month of August, my translation of Justinas Marcinkevičius 's poem, alongside the original poem, was displayed along the length of the glass panel of several bus stops in Vilnius. Justinas Marcinkevičius 's daughters have given me explicit permission to translate this poem and to publish it. The poem was written in the seventies as a protest to Soviet occupation. During the years of the struggle for the reinstatement of Lithuanian independence this poem was set to music and was sung as mass rallies all over Lithuania. My challenge was to translate the poem so that the rhythms, meaning, flow of the poem matched the well-known popular song, a song that even now, twenty-five years later, brings Lithuanians to tears. I could not falter, not even on a single syllable. I even had a Lithuanian singer play the piano and sing my English translation to match the rhythm of the original Lithuanian poem.

—*Laima Vince (Sruoginis), translator*





Justinas Marcinkevičius (1930-2011) made his debut as a poet in 1955 with the publication of his first collection of poems, *I Plead for a Word* in 1955. He has published fourteen collections of poetry, three historical plays, two collections of essays, a novella and various translations into Lithuanian. For most his life, Marcinkevičius lived and wrote during the complex times of Soviet totalitarianism. He defended the cultural self-awareness of his nation. The poet brought

back humanistic ideas and wrote lyric poetry. He valued the aesthetic side of literature, as opposed to the heroic and propagandistic style of socialist realism. Marcinkevičius was an outspoken leader of the Lithuanian independence movement. He died in Vilnius on Lithuania's prewar independence day, February 16, 2011.

About the translator:



Laima Vince (Sruoginis) is a writer, playwright, poet, and literary translator. She earned a Master of Fine Arts in Poetry from Columbia University (1994) and a Master of Fine Arts in Nonfiction from the University of New Hampshire (2013). She is the author of four works of literary journalism: *Digging a Hole to China: A Memoir on Teaching and Traveling*; *Journey into the Backwaters of the Heart*; *The Snake in the Vodka Bottle*, and a novel *This is Not My Sky*. As a playwright, she has written: *The Interpreter (Vertėjas)*, *A Mong Kok Romeo and Juliet*, *How Many Ways Can You Break A Woman's Heart*, *I Always Lock My Doors in Portland, Maine*, *Chaos@Chungking.Mansions*, *Friday Night Live in Hong Kong*.

Laima Vince has been translating from Lithuanian since 1988. She has translated two collections of the poems of Lithuanian National Poet, Marcelijus Martinaitis, *The Ballads of Kukutis* (Arc Publications) and *K. B., The Suspect* (White Pines Press). She has translated one novel and six works of nonfiction, including Juozas Lukša's *Forest Brothers: An Account of the Postwar Armed Resistance Against the Soviet Union* (Central European University Press). She has also edited, translated, and compiled three anthologies of contemporary Lithuanian literature: *Raw Amber* (University of Salzburg Press), *The Earth Remains* (East European Monographs, Columbia University Press) and *Lithuania in Her Own Words* (Tyto Alba). She [blogs on Huffington Post](#).

