

Beloved Bones

Excerpts translated by *Dalia Cidzikaitė*

Motė. The Birth of Ona. September

I was born in the fall, on a Thursday evening, in the basement sauna of a five-floor apartment building, like all the children of Pašilai. For this, in the stairwell by the mailboxes, Vanda killed a black hen with a ladle and right there, heated a pot of broth on the stove. Father had already returned from his shift, the neighbors had come home from work, everybody knew, and everybody felt restless, because they didn't get to take a bath as usual, and nobody left soap and hot water for the laumės, the fairy spirits, that night, for there were more important things to attend to.

Motė is combing my hair and recounts the story, she goes through it again, always from the beginning. I listen, I imagine my mother, white as cheesecloth, and ask what her skin is like, what she smells like, but Motė strokes my head and smiles, look at you, she says, it's all inside you, and it has stayed. And my father says the same. Day and night, mocked by the other geezers, he carries me on his shoulders wherever he goes, he drives me on the trolleybus, perched next to the driver's seat. He says he'll never let go of me, he says that he dreams of my mother, and that they then rejoice, dance and sing together about their little cone—me. You're a miracle, my father tells me.

Motė is throwing strand upon strand, pulling my hair and braiding it. I listen, make no peep. Tell me more, please. Then she continues about how my mother began turning white and passed out, how Vanda, still a little lassie then, lamented the hen, and how Motė hurried her and forebode—there was no other way to honor goddess Laima, only this. Maybe she didn't kill the hen at the right time, maybe not the way she was taught, maybe not with a ladle, maybe she got scared and mixed things up, it didn't save my mother, and I ask, did she really do everything right? Motė says it doesn't matter now. Vanda cooked that soup the first time, after that she knew how to cook it, she cooked it for all the mothers, for everyone who gave birth after my mother. Every time on the same stove, on the first floor, just when you walk in from outside. We crouch down there in the winter, when the women bake bread, but then, the neighbors came down and went up, and someone wandered in with a towel, in a shirt-sleeve, not having heard that it was a special evening, that they weren't allowed to go to the sauna. They trampled the hops and grass lined from the door of our apartment through the four floors, all the way to the sauna. I keep thinking that if I hadn't been born on Thursday, and instead, the next day, during working hours, when everyone had gone out, if they hadn't trampled and annoyed Laima, maybe my mother would still be alive.

Motė gets up, walks with difficulty to the stove, like a loaf of bread herself, you can't tell where the soft, engorged breasts end and the belly begins under the light clothing. Only in the sauna can one see how many layers of skin and flesh blanket each other, how

many folds. It's hard to imagine that there's still a skeleton deep inside, bones, maybe tiny bones, who knows, but they would have to be made of iron to support such a body. The other women praise her when they wash her, admire her. Her breasts are eternally, endlessly full of milk, the little ones suck on them, drawn by their smell in the sauna.

Motè pulls her hair again, the braid must be tight, you're such a happy child, she says, don't think anymore, wear your mother's memory and just live.

A Saint. Ona Is Nine. July

I'm squatting in the landing, lurking to see what kind of people have moved in, whether there will be livestock, maybe even children. A boy, when he sees me, smiles, dimples surface on his cheeks, I'm Lukas, he says. Lukas and his mother, no one else. He's cute, tanned in the sun, with thin legs, like a grasshopper.

In the evening, we meet in the basement sauna. I'm ashamed, Lukas should go with the men, but his mother is alone, so she takes him with her. Later, she'll let him go alone, when she gets acquainted, when she gets used to a new place, but now she pulls him by the hand, soaps him, tells him not to stare and to look at the floor.

I am sitting on the lower level, hugging my knees, my legs are squeezed, so that nothing reveals, I catch Lukas' gaze. Who would stare at the floor as breasts sway and buttocks swing around. He's soaping up in the corner, peeking. His mother tugs on his ear, yells and pushes him out, wrapped in a towel. Wash yourself from the well in the backyard. Then they both will go up to the second floor, to their new home, the things are still unpacked, so many bundles are left in the landing. I'm standing on my toes, looking out of the small basement window into the backyard. The boy dives between the cars, by the well, he climbs into the water trough for animals and, throwing off his towel, splashes himself with icy water. I'm convinced that the neighbors of the other apartments are also standing at the windows, on the balconies, curiously gaping at the newcomers. Lukas doesn't care, the towel stays in his hand, and he passes right by my nose in the window, naked as a newborn. At the entrance, he says hello to the neighbors bringing in the cow and disappears into the building.

Father. Ona's Childhood

My nest is in my father's trolleybus. For as long as I can remember myself, I'm always there. The names of the stops mark my summer holidays, the unpleasant rainstorms after school, the rush on Christmas Eve, with the snow blinding the side mirrors. My mother's sodas, a straw decoration, is swaying from the ceiling of the cabin, my father's fur vest reeking of a wild beast is spread in my den. He didn't drive before I was born, he worked as a conductor. Left alone with me, still a little worm, he consulted Motè, or perhaps she told him sternly to keep the child close. Then he thought of driving. I got my nest where the ticket collector or the driver waiting for his shift usually sits. The other drivers looked askance at my father's idea, a snotty little sprog might push buttons that don't need to be pushed, distract, but Motè's word was the final word, but even without it, my father would carry me on his hump to the end of the world. For him, raising a daughter

at the wheel was all fun and joy. I was squatting peacefully and was growing up, Moté had told him that I'd be like that. And why not, I'm counting the stops, the scenery is changing under my nose, I'm not bored. My memory is full of pavements, meadows with a power line running along them, factories, solitary apartment buildings districts, sad five-floor buildings in the fields.

We both know the passengers by heart. We laugh, we discuss, we say hello to each other. Everybody likes my father's trolleybus no. 7 and me, the big-eyed little dumpling next to the driver. I always get sweets or bacon to chew, to drool on, someone's always shoving baskets of carrots and potatoes to me and my father, cheese, freshly made, the matrons say, it's very tasty, and if you add goat milk, it's not only food, it's a real medicine for a growing little daughter, just give it to her. The bundles of outgrown clothes never end—I'm growing, and they're growing too—whether we asked for them or not, they always turn up at some bus stop.

My father coordinates his shifts with my lunchtime nap, later with my school schedule, and has even changed the route, so that the lines of the trolleybus would always run along my path. Everybody likes him, because he's the only one who allows to take an animal for a few stops if they need to, even though this is strictly forbidden. Little shepherds must graze only in the surrounding meadows where the owners of the livestock live, and old men and women with one goat must also graze only around their balconies and playgrounds, no further. But things happen. If the rain starts unexpectedly on one's way home, or if one walks further afield and doesn't have the strength to return, or if the shepherds run late, my father stops and whistles to them, making sure they get in quickly and don't attract attention too much, calms down the passengers if they start to grumble or bleat louder than the animals.

Once we had a cow traveling with us, late in the evening, with no one to witness it. I curled out of my nest and stroked its wet snout. The shepherdess squeezed some milk into my cup, warm, reeking of udder. I don't really like this kind of milk, but then, settling down on the back seat, I drank it to the bottom and fell asleep right away, stretched out across the entire back.

A Saint. Ona Is Twelve.

I only have Lukas on our landing—it's the old people's house, the younger ones built a twelve-floor apartment building with an elevator next door, and everyone who were with the little ones moved out. My father decided against it, and Lukas' mother took that small two-room apartment when the building became less crowded.

We always tease the animals of the new twelve-floor apartment building, we make them to bellow under the balconies, after they're brought back in the evening. There are still some who have not got used to it, they look frightened around, crawl back into their rooms even in the summer, and come to our water trough after grazing. Although as time goes, the number of calm younglings, having already been bred in the new building, has increased.

I love Lukas, it's impossible not to love him and he loves me, but we don't talk about it, we both dream about the couple to be, we discuss what they could be, what they will

be, but for now we've lent ourselves to each other. Sometimes he says, Ona, you're not angry, aren't you, and smiles, and those little pits in his cheeks, those dimples, I'm telling you, it seems, I could love him for the rest of my life.

Lukas is special, that much is already clear, but also because of the pancakes, the salty Lukas' waffles. His mother bakes these pancakes, but she says they are her son's cure, but she won't say how or why. There are those who think his mother is a witch, others say that she casts a spell on them, or maybe it's Lukas himself, but who cares, what matters is that they instantly bring down fever and headache, clean out parasites in the stomach, and they help when nobody knows what to do, all one has to do is eat them. There's always a queue of people begging, asking for them, after work, Lukas' mother spends all evenings in the kitchen, mixing dough, baking away. I haven't seen Lukas stirring or casting a spell, but his mother says that all that remedy is her son's doing. That's what she says, but I've never asked Lukas.