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## **Pregnant Pause: On Ona Šimait, Research, Writing, and Motherhood**

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# Pregnant Pause: On Ona Šimaitė, Research, Writing, and Motherhood

Julija Šukys

*This article examines the riddle (following Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, Virginia Woolf, Alice Walker, Nancy Huston, and H el ene Cixous) of how to be a mother and writer. Through its portrayal of a writer-researcher's relationship both to the deceased Ona Šimaitė, a Holocaust rescuer (her biographical subject), and to the baby she is carrying, the article poses the question: Is there room for both life and death inside a new mother? Will the birth of a child forever displace the writer's companion, this beloved ghost? Or will the trio of mother–baby–ghost, writer–life–death successfully establish a balance? Process-oriented, conversational, and self-reflexive, this article situates itself within and engages the tradition of feminist life-writing and biography.*

**Keywords:** archives / Holocaust, women's history / life writing / Lithuania, Vilnius / motherhood / pregnancy / righteous among the nations / Šimaitė, Ona (Anna) / writing

I'm a riddle in nine syllables  
An elephant, a ponderous house,  
A melon strolling on two tendrils.

—Sylvia Plath, *Metaphors*

## I

My writer's studio in Banff resembles a piece of Haida pottery, sitting round and stout in the tall Alberta grass. According to the plan that hangs by the kitchenette, there was supposed to be a hearth in the middle of the structure,

but the Banff Centre is a public institution and fire regulations would never allow for such a feature. The mornings in Banff are brisk, even in summer, and I am forced to use the furnace instead of firewood to keep warm.

Most days I arrive early enough to see a doe and her fawn outside my window. The mother lets her baby wander a few meters at a time. He still has spots and comes close to my curving porch. I slip out the door, keeping an eye on the mother. The doe's eyes lock onto mine. She's vigilant, but not alarmed. Perhaps she senses the life inside my belly, the little pea that will one day become you, Sebastian, with your laughing blue eyes. But for now, your ten-week-long presence is making me ill. The morning sickness lasts all day. I nibble crackers in bed before dragging myself to breakfast, where I force down some eggs. Protein alleviates the nausea, but the first bites are hard to swallow.

Mo(u)rning sickness. What is the connection between the being in my womb and the ghost I've been living with for six years? After breakfast each day in Banff, I face death and return to a place and time long past. Traveling away from the surrounding mountains, I go east in my mind to Lithuania and back to the forties to find Ona Šimaitė, my spectral companion.

But the journey is difficult. You resist this trip, and I find myself wading through my archives ever more slowly. Why the interest in that dusty life, you ask? That assemblage of scratchings, details of a little-remembered existence? Why so much time and energy poured into the past when the future is here, inside?

No, you can't understand the pull of the past, my darling, for you are all promise and possibility, all dividing cells, protein, and soul. You are all future and Šimaitė is all past. But like you (how many millions of other combinations of egg and sperm were possible that would not have been you?), she too defied the odds. She should have died many times over, if not at the hands of the Nazis, then from disease or exhaustion in the camps. In Vilnius, Lithuania—the country of your grandmother and great-grandmother—she was a university librarian. A Gentile, she regularly visited the Jewish ghetto of her city. She had a wide-reaching correspondence with ghetto prisoners, and hid letters, literary manuscripts, and memoirs in the attic and stairwell of the library. But from 1941 to 1944, she worked to preserve not only texts for future reading, but readers themselves. She carried children out of the ghetto, sedated in sacks, then placed them in orphanages or willing families under false names. She hid adults in the library attic or in her apartment, until she could find a safer place. She delivered food, clothes, and medicine to the ghetto, attended its concerts and plays, and supported its most desperate by listening to their fears and responding to their letters—in most cases, the last ones they ever wrote.<sup>1</sup>

Šimaitė once called her library work “the beloved profession” and stressed that every scrap of printed material was a treasure (Šimaitė 2003, 313). Librarians care for our memories and histories. They catalog the dreams we never knew we had, do not let us forget the transgressions of the past, and safeguard

our stories of love, loss, and redemption. They are keepers of the human soul. This is why we cry when libraries burn. When a library is destroyed, so are we, my love. Šimaitė understood this. To her, as to every librarian, the library stood for life itself. And under her care, the Vilnius University stacks and archives became a repository (a womb) for life.

These letters here on my desk were written by her. You see? This one is Russian, and this one, Lithuanian. I reconstruct her story from these documents, sifting the mundane from the extraordinary, and searching for the exquisite in the everyday. But how did she come to accompany me, you ask again?

It was 2000. My dissertation was a goal in itself, overwhelming enough for me not to worry about what lay beyond. My pockets were empty, and I still believed there would be time enough to read all those books on my shelves. After cobbling together a couple of grants, your father and I bought plane tickets to Vilnius, where we spent a month, dividing our time between our tiny rented studio, the national and university libraries, and a handful of cinemas where we watched subtitled American films. While digging almost at random in the national library's manuscript catalog, I discovered over a hundred entries under "Šimaitė, Ona," a name I knew then only in passing. My interest piqued, I requested every letter whose entry listed the ghetto as a subject, and returned hours later to sit with the tall pile the archivist had assembled for me. Šimaitė left behind thousands of letters addressing writers, translators, revolutionaries, her sisters, and their children. After her death, these were parceled out to five institutions in three countries.<sup>2</sup> It was my first taste of the pleasure, hunt, and intimacy of archival work, and I was hooked. On that day, a new presence came into my life: A ghost that spoke through yellowed papers. In recording the details of her life, Šimaitė was speaking to the future. Perhaps, Sebastian, she now speaks to you as well. In writing her life, I write my own, and I write yours.

Buk. This is what I will call you. A short blast of a nickname homonymous with the English word "book." It comes from a diminutive form of your Lithuanian name, *Sebukas*, whittled down to its essence, its central syllable—*Buk*. My name for you suggests that I both read and write you, my little one. But this short form also has an unfortunate similarity to the Lithuanian word "*bukas*," meaning dull or blunt. I ignore this meaning, and carefully avoid it by using only the vocative "Buk!" as if I'm always calling you, addressing you, even when speaking about you. I banish the nominative suffix "-as" from your name, so necessary in Lithuanian grammar (for you, I change the language!), erasing it, rejecting any hint of bluntness or dullness. This language I change is both mine and not mine. I learned it here, on this American continent, an ocean and a sea away from the place it is spoken every day. I speak well for here, and strangely for there, but this language connects me to the women I love most—my mother and grandmother, your *Močiutė* and *Promočiutė*. Out of love for them, I speak. And out of love for you, I write.

Šimaitė's writings spoke to me in a familiar voice—her language had the cadence and vocabulary of your great-grandmother's Lithuanian. But, unlike *Promočiuotė*, who now lives in a past inside her head, Šimaitė seemed curiously contemporary. Wry, kind, funny, and sometimes angry, her letters were riveting and inspired an immediate feeling of kinship. I felt as though she were speaking to me directly—that these letters had been saved specifically for me, and that I had a responsibility to her, my friend from another era. But it wasn't only about what I could do for her. Through her letters and diaries, Šimaitė answered questions that had dogged me since my teenage years—questions about the Holocaust in Lithuania. How was it that so many people were killed? Why was our community so silent about the German occupation? Or the Jewish community in Lithuania? Šimaitė was the first person to speak to me frankly on these subjects in the language of my childhood. And through her letters, she offered a window to a place and time that had until then remained frustratingly shrouded.

Your father, who came with me six years ago to Vilnius, now holds down the fort at our home near Montréal. Sean and I talk by computer every day, and I tell him it's probably a blessing that we're spending this month apart, since the morning sickness makes me irritable. Still, I try to stay positive. I tell him about the doe and her fawn, about my beautiful circular studio, and the mountains all around me. I don't tell him about this riddle in nine syllables that swirls in my head: *How will I do this once you arrive?*

The doe and fawn disappear into the grass, and I stretch out on my couch, as sleepiness overtakes me. Energy that normally flows out onto the page diverts itself to the construction project inside me, and, paralyzed, I watch my fellow writers as they produce page after page in their studios. A wave of nausea flows over me, and I can feel my upper lip dampen. I close my eyes. When I open them, a heavy female figure is sitting in the armchair opposite me. She wears her grey hair in braids encircling her head and her crinkly eyes smile at me reassuringly. I close my eyes again and try to swallow away the acrid taste at the back of my throat. The wave passes. When I look once more, she is no longer there.

## II

I'm now six months pregnant. This is my last research trip to Vilnius before your birth and I'm calmer than usual because I'm not really traveling alone. A silent passenger, you rock inside me, a poorly concealed stowaway on a lumbering ship.

When we arrive, I marvel at how much the city has changed in the past decade—so much so that some of the streets are unrecognizable, built up with shiny windows filled with luxurious leather boots, bags, and designer clothes. Where a couple of decades ago locals lined up for hours to buy meat or milk, you can now find whatever your heart and wallet desire.

I know you can't feel it, but it is winter and each day seems grayer than the last. By three o'clock the sun sits low, just above the roof of a four-story building on a street that leads down to where the main gate of the ghetto used to open. Vilnius's ever-present pigeons toddle among cigarette butts, as I sit with you on a cold bench, contemplating the cityscape. To our left stands a building with a lovely plastered façade, probably nineteenth century. The roofs all around are tiled and the houses have been stuccoed in muddy shades of tan, mustard, and pink.

As we cross the former ghetto threshold, I study the buildings on each side of the street. To the right, a flower shop nestles between a café and strip club, and on the left, where more buildings once stood, there is now a park. Its trees sport red berries and people huddle in threes and fours, drinking from large cans. A young man with his back to us takes a piss by a bush, and over all of this looms All Saints' Church, with its rose-colored towers.

Despite the shiny windows, life here is still hard for some people, Buk.

As we wind our way through the cobblestoned lanes, we come across a Yiddish sign, a remnant of a prewar store, painted above an archway—a rare relic of Jewish life and the Yiddish language that flourished here when the magnificent Strashun Library still stood. The Germans pillaged and destroyed its contents, sending thousands of precious books to paper factories. Crumbling garages and fluttering laundry now clutter the courtyards that were the playing fields, marketplaces, social clubs, and execution grounds of the ghetto. A woman calls down to me from a balcony and asks if she can help me find something. When I answer that I'm just looking around, she nods and tells me that tour buses often come through here. "Jews used to live here, you know." "Yes, I know."

When we are not wandering the former ghetto, we spend our days in the university's manuscript reading room, sifting through thousands of letters. All around, students hunch over fragile Russian books and old Lithuanian texts. It is stuffy and smells of perspiration. The desks are small and many of the power outlets don't work, so I have to tread carefully around computer cords that snake from one station to another. There is far more material than expected, and I have to work hard to get through it all. The letters draw me in and I forget you for hours at a time, until you remind me of your presence with a kick. I think you spend most of our time in these quiet, sweaty archives sleeping. Yes, sleep, my little one. Growing a body is hard work, too.

Women are in charge of almost every aspect of archival life here. They worry for you, these librarians, and offer pots of tea and scold me when they think I have been sitting still for too long. I drink the tea standing in the hallway, rubbing you through my belly or swaying back and forth. As I rock you, I study the windows across the way and wonder in which rooms Šimaitė used to hide people.

On the second or third day, while looking for a working outlet, I notice a plaque that hangs on the back wall of the manuscript reading room:

Elena  
Eimaitytė-Kačinskienė  
1906–1989

Assistant to the Director of Vilnius University Library (1940–1944)

I photograph it a few times, though in the low light of the room, the images come out blurry. Even so, these pictures prove Elena Eimaitytė's existence outside of texts. Until now, I have only known of her through Šimaitė's letters, so the simple engraving startles and reminds me that the story I am tracking exists outside of me, and is not a secret that I share only with you and Šimaitė.

In 1941, Eimaitytė was a thirty-five-year-old librarian. Like Šimaitė, she too had arrived in Vilnius a year earlier to reinvent the formerly Polish Stephen Batory University, transforming it into the Lithuanian institution of Vilnius University. In 1944, Eimaitytė left Lithuania for America, married a mathematician, and continued to work in libraries.

Is it death that draws women to libraries, I wonder? To become librarians? Writers? Librarians and midwives have a lot in common, it seems to me. Both act as go-betweens, intermediaries between life and death. Both are guides to the unknown and require enormous patience, whether to wait out a long labor or to catalog books. And both are traditionally female professions. *The future is here inside*, you whispered to me in Banff. Yes, but so is the past, my darling. Midwives, librarians, mothers, and writers: Within us time collapses. But when I begin to read about Šimaitė's beloved profession, I despair at what I find.

Rather than a rare space where women call the shots, as appears to be the case in the Vilnius University Library today, a bit of reading reveals that libraries, and especially academic ones, most often operate on a "harem" model, where men lead and women facilitate their work, toiling at their sides.<sup>3</sup> This was certainly true of the Vilnius University Library when Šimaitė worked here. Vaclovas Biržiška, the university rector's brother, was the library director, and all around him were the women of the library.<sup>4</sup>

All the usual discrepancies hold in the economy of the library: Women earn less than men, receive promotions less frequently, and hold fewer positions of authority. Library hierarchies, it seems, have developed according to assumptions about women's competencies and interests, perhaps most notably in the case of the cataloger. Cataloging requires attention to detail and the endurance of boredom, repetitive work, and even pain—characteristics traditionally considered to be feminine.

So, Sebastian, here's the rub: Slowly, my brave, revolutionary librarian is being transformed for me as I read. I get a sinking feeling when I realize that not only did she work within a harem structure, but that she was a *cataloger*—the lowest of the low. The most repetitive, unprestigious position reserved for women and our fiddly little talents. I realize, too, that she probably earned about half of what her male colleagues did, though she probably worked harder. And

although she treated her job as a vocation and considered libraries sanctuaries, maybe she only worked among books because to her, as a woman, it was one of the few avenues open. Perhaps, I suddenly realize, my affection for her has started to blind me. I'm far from the first to feel this way. Like other women writing the stories of foremothers, my affection—my love, even—for my subject obscures my vision. To what extent do we not see what we don't like?<sup>7</sup> We want to save our subjects, preserve their traces, dignify their memories. The risk is hagiography. I promised Kęstutis Šimas, Šimaitė's nephew, that I wouldn't turn her into a saint. "No," he said, "she would have hated that." I must be careful.

### III

It was the week of the ghetto's creation when Eimaitytė approached Šimaitė with an idea. Would she be willing to enter the ghetto to visit university colleagues and friends, and bring them aid, news, and messages? Šimaitė had already been searching for a way to penetrate ghetto security and jumped aboard when she heard the plan: The library would ask permission from the Ministry of Jewish Affairs to allow her to enter the ghetto to collect unreturned library books from students. That same morning Šimaitė held the permission document in her hands, and only days later began regular visits to the ghetto.

Why did she risk her life this way to help others, you ask? It's a surprisingly hard question to answer. A few years ago, I sat and listened to a roomful of historians discuss this very issue. The general consensus was that the motivation was simple: Money. Gentiles helped Jews, they argued, because they had profited by doing so. The discussion left me profoundly saddened. Nothing I had read by or about Šimaitė suggested that she had acted out of greed. In fact, the opposite was true; Šimaitė received no payment for her actions, and was even uncomfortable with the idea of seeking compensation from the Germans after the war. In a 7 July 1957 journal entry, she wrote:

Everyone's after me to apply for compensation from Germany for the time I spent suffering in the camps. They say that I'll get millions and my troubles will be over. Of course, this makes me laugh inside. No one is given money that easily, especially such large sums. And where is the ethical side of all of this? I will not allow anyone to pay me for what I did during Nazism. And I would be ashamed, I just couldn't ask for compensation for that. And to testify how the Nazis hit me, spat on me, broke my bones? No, I can't relive that by recounting it to strangers. And even if I decided to apply, how much would I really get for four months' suffering in the camps? (Journal 18)

Before the war, Šimaitė had ties to the Leftist Socialist Revolutionaries. The party was illegal in interwar Lithuania, so they held secret meetings that Šimaitė sometimes attended, although, according to her nephew, she was never a member of any party. Many of her friends were imprisoned during the



1920s and '30s for their underground political activity and writings, so Šimaitė supported them by sending letters and books while they were in prison.<sup>6</sup> She did the same for Lithuanian POWs of the Spanish Civil War. She rejected the concept of citizenship and was happy to live stateless in France after the war. (Incidentally, Buk, your paternal great-grandfather was also stateless by choice, but for different reasons.)

Šimaitė's journals record that she had little patience for government and bureaucracy, which she condemned with colorful formulations, including this 2 April 1958 entry: "May the leaders of all states and administrations be damned. With his dramas about kings and run-ins with the leaders of institutions, like it or not, Shakespeare will turn you into an anarchist. There's no need to read a single ideologue's work" (Journal 28). As late as nine months before her death, she wrote again in her journal: "Like it or not, I'm still becoming an anarchist" (10 April 1969, Journal 28). Šimaitė was becoming (always in process, it seems) an anarchist in the sense—some might say the true sense—that she believed above all in individual responsibility, in doing what one could to help the weak, and in taking care of oneself whenever possible. But she lived according to her convictions, Buk. She went into the ghetto to help people, not out of some sense of holiness or righteousness, but because it seemed the obvious and human thing to do.

But for an anarchist, Šimaitė carried a lot of self-doubt, self-judgment, and even self-hatred. In this respect, she was a good Catholic. Either sexually repressed or simply asexual in temperament, Šimaitė was silent in both her letters and diaries on the subjects of sex and physical pleasures other than good food or a nice bath. The polar opposite of anarchist Emma Goldman, who embraced sex and shunned conventional marriage, Šimaitė's comments on the subject underscore her birth into a conservative Catholic tradition and recourse to a vocabulary of sin and morality:

I read Françoise Sagan's *Dans un mois, dans un an*. . . . It's about physical love. Without any spiritual experience they get together and split up, and then start all over again. Just as in her first two books, here too she depicts youth as devoid of any morality, without any ideas. Bourgeois youth. But, to be fair, it must be said that even the greatest idealist and moralist searching for eternal and singular love—does he not give in easily to the body's desires? Everyone has so much weakness and sin. This is why we can't throw stones at Sagan. Who among us is without sin? (27 January 1958, Journal 19)

Šimaitė's pronouncements on women's biological fate are unequivocal: In her 21 April 1956 journal entry, she calls menstruation, childbirth, and menopause "an endless tragedy, a catastrophe, and a barbarity of nature" (Journal 11). Is it possible that while trying to escape biological determinacy (marriage, motherhood, dependence on men), Šimaitė nevertheless got caught in another trap? Had her body become such a burden that it "seemed easier to shrug it off and

travel as a disembodied spirit” (Adrienne Rich, qtd. in Smith 1982, 126)? Had she become a ghost even before I started to think of her in this way?

I’ve come to believe that Šimaitė lived a celibate life like a secular monk or nun, one devoted to a contemplative life, to poverty, and to the service of others. In earlier times (despite my vow not to write hagiography), I believe she would have made a good saint. By the time she arrived in France her body bore scars of torture, and she had come very close to martyrdom: Death for her beliefs. For Šimaitė, her body seems to have been little more than a vessel for her mind.

The cool, dry life of celibate librarian versus the warm, wet, pulsating one that is mine right now. Can these two ways of living be bridged? Whereas women like Šimaitė, in her place and time, were most often forced to choose between books and children, writing and mothering, for me, these engagements remain bound to each other. Soon after returning home from Vilnius, I will finally admit to your father that I am afraid I won’t be able to write once you come. “No,” he will tell me, “you’ll now have so much to write about, you’ll never get stuck for ideas again.”

#### IV

Vilnius is a small place, and soon I have a list of individuals to contact who knew Šimaitė. It takes all of my courage to make the phone calls. Far easier to have a conversation with a ghost or with you than to reach out to a complete stranger. But everyone on my list receives me with kind curiosity.

First, we visit an aging professor who corresponded with Šimaitė for a decade. He lives in a building called the Scholars’ House, and every inch of his apartment walls is covered with books and paintings. His wife invites me for lunch, and the professor gives me a copy of one his books.

Next, we visit an oncologist who got to know Šimaitė after the war. We drink tea and munch biscuits in her surprisingly warm Soviet-era apartment. After a long day at the library, I find the visit restful and comforting. She can’t tell me much that I don’t already know, but describes Šimaitė’s limp to me.

Finally, we visit Eglė, the daughter of the poet Kazys Boruta, who had been a good friend to Šimaitė. When Eglė was a child, Šimaitė called her “Grasshopper.” She shows me a photograph of Šimaitė I’ve never seen before and later e-mails me a scanned copy of it (fig. 1). In it, Šimaitė wears a dark beret and heavy coat. It is 1934 and she sports a chin-length hairstyle and holds a bouquet of wildflowers in her hand. From the view over her shoulder, you can see that she is sitting in a boat on a river. Although she is very young in this picture, her body has already thickened and her face has taken on its characteristic fleshiness. Although certainly not an ugly woman, few would call her beautiful—not that this mattered to her. Šimaitė, of course, never wore makeup and believed that whether a woman used cosmetics told you something about her character. In later years, she grew her hair long, allowed it to go grey, and wore

it in two braids wrapped around the crown of her head in a style borrowed from the nineteenth-century Russian revolutionary Maria Spiridonova. I leave Eglė's house feeling newly rich with stories, images, and a purse full of sweet apples from her orchard. "For your baby," she said, pressing the apples into my hand. "No pesticides. They'll be good for both of you." She was right.

But let's get back to the story.

In April of 1944, shortly after the liquidation of the ghetto, the Gestapo arrested Šimaitė. Either her luck had run out or (as she believed) someone had betrayed her, but, in any case, the authorities learned that the birthplace of a girl she had brought to an orphanage did not exist. Soldiers seized her, then ransacked her apartment. The notes, manuscripts, and printed texts she had been hiding perished in the search. The Gestapo held her for twelve days. They hung her upside down during her interrogation, beat her, and burned the soles of her feet with hot irons. The Germans condemned her to death, but the university rector, Mykolas Biržiška, managed to raise enough money to pay a ransom for her life. Instead of the gallows, Šimaitė was sentenced to imprisonment at Dachau. When they heard of her fate, university friends gathered warm clothes and sent a librarian to deliver them to her in prison. The colleague found Šimaitė only half-conscious, her wrists bandaged following an apparent suicide attempt. (Yes, it's a terrible story, my little one. I am sorry. But this part is almost over.)

The Germany-bound train sat in Kaunas for many hours. People approached Šimaitė's car and offered to deliver news of her deportation to friends and family. But as her nephew explained to me over tea (for me) and vodka (for him) in Vilnius, Šimaitė had trained herself to forget names and addresses as soon as she delivered people to safety. She had confused her memory so much that she could no longer recall the names and addresses of loved ones in Kaunas. The train departed, and she left no messages to deliver on her behalf.

I think that Šimaitė spent around four weeks in Dachau, but I can only estimate since I have found no official records. She rarely mentions the camp in her journals or letters. This passage from a 5 February 1958 letter is the only explicit mention I have found:

Perhaps one day I will write about my arrest, interrogation, and experiences in the concentration camp. As long as I'm alive, I'll never forget how, after 10 or 11 hours of hard work, they used to lay the Roma children down on trestles and whip them. It's so horrible to remember it. Sometimes I'd like to believe that it wasn't a real experience, but just a terrifying dream. Together with me they transported Roma to the camp, young men, strong like oak trees. But after three months they were invalids, and could only walk with the help of sticks. As soon as they could no longer walk home, a black truck would drive up and they disappeared without a trace. Or again, that horrible "aufstehen," when the guards would beat on the doors with truncheons at 3:30 in the morning. (Čilvinaitė Papers)

So rarely does she speak of Dachau that some Lithuanian journalists have suggested that Šimaitė never actually spent any time there. But her nephew rejects this suggestion, citing a postcard she sent from the camp on a return visit to Germany in 1960. The postcard's short message describes her return there: "Today I'm at Dachau. I had to come here to cry it out of my system, and I've never prayed as hard as I did today. . . . It's difficult to write. I'm still breathing in tears and blood" (Šimas 2006, 59).

The Germans transferred Šimaitė from Dachau to a small camp in a village called Ludelage in occupied Lorraine, whose military barracks served as a prison for Russians. How or why they transferred her isn't clear. Her nephew told me that they did this because she was ill. Another story is that the camp was full, so they moved out non-Jewish prisoners like Šimaitė to make room for those whom an even more terrible fate awaited.

When Americans liberated Ludelage in September 1944, Šimaitė began her trip southward to the Soviet internment camp at La Courtine in the Limousin region of France. Four months later, she left La Courtine for Toulouse. By then, Šimaitė was only fifty-one, but felt old beyond her years. Pain, her "gift from the Gestapo," was now her constant companion, and ever-present fatigue only made matters worse. Nightmares and insomnia robbed her of rest. Besides the letters she wrote every night, all that mattered to her now were daily trips to the market after work, Sunday concerts in the city's churches, and the sound of a flickering candle.

Toulouse had suffered terribly from the war. It had always been poor, but now the city found itself straining under an influx of refugees. With no job or decent place to live, Šimaitė began to search for a better situation. A year later she moved to Paris, where, with the help of friends who had also survived, she secured a modest income. At first, she did laundry in return for room and board until eventually she moved into a place of her own, a *chambre de bonne*, containing only the bare necessities: Books, paper, sewing supplies, a hotplate, and a few food items. She owned only two dresses, which she alternated on washing days.

Despite her Spartan existence, Šimaitė loved Paris. She marveled at how even a person of the most modest means could partake of its cultural riches: Museums, theaters, cinemas, concerts, libraries, parks, and gardens. When, in 1953, she left Paris for Israel (where she was offered lifelong accommodation and a pension), she regretted the decision almost immediately. After three cultureless years, she boarded a ship and began the long trip back to her beloved Paris.

In a few months, you and I will go there together to walk Šimaitė's streets. We will visit the park where she strolled every night after work, and we will find the building she lived in. I will change your diaper on the platform at the Gare Saint-Lazare and nurse you in the metro station. You will be a good travel companion, most of the time: Portable, flexible, and engaged. And why not? You are already a traveler and have seen the light and shadow of Vilnius through the stretched skin of my belly. I have felt you jump with surprise at the

loud drumbeat and shouts at the theater, and flip deftly as I stride up Gedimino Prospect, hurrying to the library before it closed. But now, my child, it is time to go home. At Vilnius's airport I have to talk my way onto the plane, assuring the woman who checks me in that I am many weeks away from needing a doctor's note to travel. My belly has grown a lot, and this time strangers smile at me as I board. The gray-haired woman sitting beside me during the flight says nothing during the whole trip, but murmurs what I take to be a blessing over you as we descend into Montréal.

## V

I plan to spend the final two months of pregnancy reading Šimaitė's manuscripts and laying the foundations for chapters to come. My work progresses well until three weeks before you are due, when, for the first time in an otherwise perfect pregnancy, our midwife sees something that gives her pause. My blood pressure has risen. I have to stop working. And so, utterly unceremoniously, without so much as a word of farewell, I abandon Šimaitė in mid-sentence. Instead of spending my final pregnant days with her, I turn my attention to resting my mind and body and prepare to welcome you into the world.

You come four days early. Your father takes credit for starting my labor with the olive-stuffed duck breast he made me for dinner, but I point out that the spicy kimchi we ate at lunchtime could also be the reason. We watch most of an old, arty movie until my contractions become too distracting, then I spend much of the night in the bath. We decide to head to the *maison de naissance* (birthing center) at three in the morning. Sean, armed with his learner's permit, and with me as his supervising, fully licensed driver, navigates his way over one of the bridges that spans the Saint Lawrence River. Between contractions, I coach him on his gear shifting and warn him that the first exit comes quickly.

You don't (come quickly).

In my twenty-third hour of labor, Zaza convinces me to give her a little more time, before we decide on a transfer to hospital. Later, she will tell me that your head was tilted to one side, preventing you from descending properly, and this is why it took so long. Your father supports me from behind, and around me, in addition to Zaza, sit four other midwives. The lights are low and from time to time I open my eyes to see Marie smiling at me like an angel. Her face glows. I am frightened and exhausted, and I feel myself falling asleep between contractions. One of the midwives tucks a few granules of a homeopathic remedy under my tongue. "Pour la peur [For the fear]," she says. I nod without opening my eyes.

Between pushes, Sean has to pry my hands off the rails of the birthing stool. I hear myself make noises that scare me, and I push harder than I ever imagined possible. Zaza tells me that you are blond, and has me reach down to feel the top of your head. She tells me to look in the mirror under the stool to watch the birth of my son, but I can't. Through my lashes, I look over Zaza's head to

the corner of the room. There's another midwife I haven't noticed before. She sits with her hands pressed into her lap. Of all the faces in the room (I can't see Sean's), hers is the only one that looks worried. I close my eyes and with the next push you are born. Beautiful Sebastian. When I look again, Šimaitė is gone.

The memory of pain will remain for many months, but just as I begin to doubt the adage that all women forget, I find I can no longer recall the sensation of birth. Only images and small scars remain.

## VI

We are nearing the end of a summer-long research trip, planned in the early weeks of your life, between feedings and diaper changes. You are six months old when we decide to travel from our rented house near Toulouse to see Le Camp de la Courtine, where Šimaitė was interned after the war. Now that we have reached France and my part of the journey, I find that I have horribly miscalculated the distances between the places I'd like to visit. It turns out that Šimaitė covered a lot of ground, and we will have to drive four hours each way to visit La Courtine.

The dead accompanied Šimaitė throughout her life in the form of whispering ghosts and unwritten texts. For six years, Šimaitė has accompanied me in similar form. She is the voice of my own unwritten text, and she comes with me to libraries, appears in my dreams, watches over me, and walks beside me on my travels. Before your arrival she and I circumnavigated the globe together, my box of photocopied letters growing heavier with each archive visited, until I could no longer carry it onto the plane and was forced to check it as baggage. And life has been less lonely with her. But now, I must admit, she has been slipping away from me. Despite my best intentions, fatigue and the demands of a new baby have made it impossible for me to visit with Šimaitė the way I used to. Since your birth, entire days go by without my sensing her presence. Instead, you take up more and more of me; life is overtaking death, and I am no longer sure if I have room for both. I miss her terribly. I want her back. So, even though it means that we will have to cross close to half of France, I'm determined to see La Courtine.

The drive is terrible. Uncharacteristically, you howl for an hour without stopping: Sometime over the past eight weeks you have decided that you hate riding in a car. (After we return, a friend whom I tell about your episode suggests that perhaps you knew where we were going, and that you were crying for Šimaitė.) Your father still doesn't have a driver's license, so his job is to try and calm you while I take the wheel. It doesn't work very well, and by the time we reach the camp, the two of you are in a black mood. Even so, I'm excited to explore it.

It is still a working military base and the barracks where Šimaitė lived are now stuccoed mint green, though when she was interned here they would have been plain stone. Two-and-a-half stories tall, with fourteen windows running

down each side, the barracks are long and narrow. By holding up my camera right to the glass, I get a clear photo of a room where prisoners like Šimaitė underwent reeducation in preparation for their return to society. There is no vegetation around the barracks, only gravel, so the straight lines and repetition from building to building, each one exactly the same, creates an impression of desolate and soul-killing tidiness.

The drive back to Toulouse is wet and arduous. You cry and cry as we descend from the Plateau of the Thousand Cows (I translate this because it will make you laugh) and only stop once we reach our stone house. As I put you to bed, I search the darkness for the familiar silhouette and reassuring eyes, but they are nowhere to be found. The tears have exhausted you, and your breathing quickly relaxes into a heavy sleep. We are alone.

Last stop: Paris. We fly into the city one glorious sunny morning, and the next afternoon we meet a dear friend in Parc Monceau in the 8th arrondissement. She is pregnant and radiates with anticipation and happiness, and we find a corner on the grass to sit upon and catch up. We have come to Šimaitė's park by accident. Only later do I realize that she lived only a few streets away, and that this green space would have provided a natural shortcut to the metro. She lived alone in the 8th until her aching legs and back made it impossible. Even for us, the metro is a challenge because of the stroller, stairs, and barriers. By the end, a simple metro trip became a huge challenge for Šimaitė, requiring mental preparation.

She spent her final years in an old-age home that the Russian community established for its exiles in the suburb of Cormeilles-en-Parisis, located a short train ride outside the city. Although necessary, the move resulted in a near total loss of independence and marked the beginning of a period of great unhappiness for Šimaitė. On 1 March 1966, she wrote in her journal:

I live in a building where 80 elderly people have been squeezed in. Many are 94–95 years of age. Among these six are insane. A good number are blind and deaf. . . . The atmosphere here weighs on me terribly. Everything is done according to a schedule. And I'm such an individualist, I can't stand living in these barracks. . . . If I could, I would abandon it all to live all alone once again in the worst conditions in Paris. (Journal 26)

You accompany me to the nursing home. After getting directions to the Zagor House from the local police station, we arrive as lunch is being served. The doors are open, so we enter without difficulty and present ourselves at the main office. The director looks at me curiously when I explain why we have come, but arriving at an old-age home with a baby is always a popular move and you don't disappoint. This time, you are all smiles and pave the way.

There is a commotion in the dining room, as the waitstaff eject a resident. "Il l'a fait exprès, je l'ai vu! [He did it on purpose, I saw him!]" cries a voice from around the corner. Monsieur Le Ciché has a habit of breaking glasses at people's

feet, and this time they have caught him in the act. Outside the dining room a woman cries in a nurse's arms. She wants a cigarette, but isn't allowed to smoke until after the meal.

This kind of surveillance enraged Šimaitė. She, for one, ignored her doctor's orders and continued to prepare the fried fish and onions she loved on the hot plate in her room. Its aroma drifted down dark hallways and spread throughout the building, but Šimaitė would promptly eject unwelcome nurses and staff with a sharp word if they dared try curtail her freedom to eat and live as she saw fit. In her November 1969 diary entry, Šimaitė described her explosive interactions with health-care workers in hyperbolic terms: "I've been sick since October 17. . . . With one exception my most difficult memory has remained my present and past encounters with so-called nurses. They either scold me or give me harsh orders, and yesterday they even threw such blame onto me. They surpass even Hitler's Gestapo, even they couldn't give orders and throw blame like that" (Journal 29).

On 17 January 1970, the secretary of the Zagor House found Šimaitė clinging to the wall outside her room. A letter of Vytautas Kauneckas dated 7 March 1970 relayed the scene:

She took Ona by the arm to help her to her room. But she was getting heavier and heavier, so the secretary called for another staff member to help, and take her by the other arm. But Ona fell to the ground. They called the nurse, who gave her an injection to keep her heart beating, then she was taken to her room on a stretcher. When the doctor arrived, he confirmed that Ona had died. Her heart was exhausted. She was very heavy, and her heart too weak. (Šimaitė Papers)

In accordance with her wishes, Šimaitė's body was donated to the faculty of medicine in Paris. I have always considered this final act to have been both a generous gift and a heart-breaking display of self-abnegation. Disdainful of waste and dismissive of worldly possessions and riches as she was, Šimaitė's desire to be useful and instructive even after death was entirely in keeping with her character.

But now, Sebastian, I wonder if there isn't more to it. Šimaitė has no grave. I wonder if her rejection of burial was one more way of saying that, to her, the body did not matter. To her, as a librarian, archivist, and writer, what mattered most were the printed text and the written word. Bodies, she would have said, do not endure and are therefore not worth burying, not worth archiving. "Only what is written," Šimaitė once wrote, "will never die" (Boruta Papers, letter dated 12 April 1934). And while I understand her and respect her ultimate gift, I see that things are different for us. For you and for me, bodies do matter. Mine gave me you. The scars I have from the night of your birth give me a different voice and a new way to write, whereas the scars Šimaitė had from trials I will never know silenced her.

Perhaps, on second thought, the body mattered to her more than I realized.





Figure 1. Šimaitė around 1934. These are the photographs Eglė gave me. Private collection.

## VII

It is now autumn in Montréal. The leaves are turning for the first time in your life and we take long walks to admire their colors. As we move under the rustling branches, I feel that we are not alone. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the flash of a black hem disappear behind a tree. Moments later, I catch a glimpse of a heavily stockinged ankle. You see it too, I think, and wave your arms and squeal in its direction. She is here, her presence unmistakable.

Perhaps she has not abandoned us, as I feared, but will wait for us to solve the riddle and make room for her again. Perhaps, Sebastian, you will learn to love her, too. Perhaps (as I suspect) you already have.

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## Notes

1. For more on Ona Šimaitė in English, see Šukys (2007, 2008), Šimaitė (2003), and Friedman (1957); in Lithuanian, see Stankevičius (2004), Šimas (2006), and Raguotienė (2000).
2. The YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York, Hoover Institution in Palo Alto, California, Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, Vilnius University, and Mažvydas National Library in Vilnius.
3. For more on the “harem model,” see Brugh and Beede (1976), especially pages 943–47.
4. Genovaitė Raguotienė’s *Greta įžymiojo Vaclovo Biržiškos* (2000) offers fascinating portraits of the women surrounding Biržiška at the library, but even the title, which means “Beside the influential Vaclovas Biržiška,” confirms the women librarians’ positions of metaphorical concubines.
5. For more on this, see Ascher, DeSalvo, and Ruddick (1984).
6. The poets Kazys Boruta and Kazys Jakubėnas are two examples.

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