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## Vatra: A Poetic Memoir

Ashley Nichole Stevens  
*University of Texas at El Paso*

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VATRA

ASHLEY NICHOLE STEVENS

Master's Program in Creative Writing

APPROVED:

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Sylvia Aguilar-Zéleny, MH, MFA, Chair

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José de Piérola, Ph.D.

---

Anna Harris-Parker, MFA

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Stephen L. Crites, Jr., Ph.D.  
Dean of the Graduate School

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by

Ashley Nichole Stevens

2022

## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to the original international man of mystery, my great grandfather, Paul

Berdy, and to my anchor and wife, Rheagan. There is a survivor within us all.

VATRA

by

ASHLEY NICHOLE STEVENS, B.A.

THESIS

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## Writing the Vatra

When I initially began researching for and composing this collection, the idea I had in mind was a simple one: tell my great grandfather's story, on many Lemko-American immigrants lived in the early 1900s. However, it took several months for me to realize this was not the complete story. It required refinement. While I had always felt a significant connection to this particular side of my family, I could never articulate why. The genealogical and historical research I conducted spoke for me.

My great grandfather survived numerous traumas associated with being an ethnic minority in his homeland as well as being an immigrant in the United States – all trauma associated with his identity. After surviving my own traumas related to my identity, I realized my intense interest in him was, in part, the result of generational trauma bonding. My new idea was immediately apparent: tell our survivor stories within the realm of trauma literature using prose poetry, family documents, and photographs. The choice to utilize prose poetry was not a conscious one; rather, that was the form the first several poems took. Creating a hybrid collection was done deliberately to put the reader in contact with a part of history they may or may not be aware of. My collection, *Vatra*, is a testament to the transformative nature of trauma.

### **History of the Lemkos: From Europe to North America**

Before delving into the poetics of my collection, a history lesson is needed to explain who the Lemkos are and how their collective experience qualifies as trauma. Known by many names throughout the years, the Lemko Rusyns who hailed from the Carpathian Mountains of Central Europe “are a small stateless people” (Polianskii 19). Their homeland, Lemkovyna, spanned several countries including present-day Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Ukraine. For



the purposes of this project, I will be focusing on the Polish region which was known as Galicia while under Austrian-Hungarian control.

Lemkos were and still are an ethnic minority of peasants who worked small plots of land featuring poor soil and relied on animal husbandry (Polianskii 57). This way of life was made worse by the serfdom many Lemkos were engaged in, with Polish nobles notorious for increasing labor duties as well as taxes (Magocsi, "Their Backs" 95). However, because Lemkos occupied a borderland during a politically tumultuous time, they would bear witness to far more trauma than just this.

While there are numerous events that demonstrate the trauma Lemkos experienced, none are more poignant than Operation Vistula: the ethnic cleansing of Lemkos from their homeland in the 1940s. About 140,000 people were forcibly relocated. Of those, 50,000 were Lemkos, and this includes members of my own family, specifically my great-grandaunt (Hann 12). Prior to this event, many Lemkos emigrated to other countries, the United State of America being one of the top choices. Coming to America brought with it the hope of better everything. Better jobs, better pay, better lives. According to family records, my great grandfather was part of this large influx, arriving in the United States in 1909.

When they arrived, Lemkos went to locations that offered work for those with little English skills. For my great grandfather and many like him, they went to the coal mining region of Pennsylvania where they would engage in back-breaking labor for little pay. Pennsylvania was known as "the center of American Slavdom," an area immigrants were drawn to with "more than two million Slavic immigrants enter[ing] the United States between 1899 and 1910" (Bicha 20-1). This figure includes both of my second great grandfathers, my second great grandmother, as well as my great grandfather.

If Pennsylvania was the center of American Slavdom, then the Pennsylvania coal mining industry was the sponsor. Sociologist Annie Maclean recorded her observations in 1908. Housing conditions were not the greatest with 75 percent of the homes being owned by the mining companies, and as single immigrants came, they would simply room with those of similar ethnicity (332). But the houses were not exactly in the best condition, nor were the yards. Culm heaps were sometimes close to the houses. These company towns often had a contaminated water supply “and typhoid fever [was] not uncommon” (335). Apart from one mining town, they had no sidewalks and no proper garbage disposal methods (335). It does not sound much better than what they left behind.

One cannot overemphasize the poverty and overcrowding that prevailed in Slavic living quarters. Bicha writes, “the boarding house did not exist in peasant villages where housing systems reflected extended kinship patterns. But in America boarding became a practical necessity, and the greater the proportion of unaccompanied males in an immigrant group the greater the frequency of boarding” (25). Even once my great grandfather was married, he and his wife accepted boarders into their home per census documents.

### **Postmemory and Connecting the Trauma Dots**

I am a survivor of domestic violence, sexual assault, and systematic abuse stemming from my identity as a neurodivergent lesbian. None of that seems in step with the trauma my great grandfather survived until I read what Marianne Hirsch had to say about postmemory:

That descendants of victim survivors as well as perpetrators and of bystanders who witnessed massive traumatic events connect so deeply to the previous generation’s remembrances of the past that they identify that connection as a form of *memory*, and that, in certain extreme circumstances, memory *can* be transferred to those who were

not actually there to live an event. (3)

While I did not understand the long-brewing interest in my great grandfather at first, I have come to realize my connection to him, and to Lemkos as a whole, stems from the fact that I intimately understand what it means to be a trauma survivor. It was almost as if I had been chosen to bear the burden of remembering our familial and cultural trauma when everyone else seemed to have forgotten. But as I wrote about that which had been forgotten, my own silenced story bubbled to the surface. I began to make connections between my great grandfather's silence and my own. The intense interest I had felt for so long deepened as I used his story as an introduction of sorts to tell mine.

Because the first and second generations of Lemkos have already passed away and the third is in their early- to mid-seventies, much of the information that has been preserved and continued to be passed down as well as enriched via postmemory. Trzeszczyńska writes, “the next generation's memory is therefore a duty and is based on the imperatives to remember, recall, and consolidate: an author is a link between the memory of witnesses, who spin stories and guardians of cultural memory, who design future strategies of remembering” (11). This sums up what I have become as a fourth generation Lemko American.

This trauma bond insisted I come to terms with my personal trauma as I learned to translate my familial and cultural trauma for the rest of the world to understand, and for generations still to come. Once this connection was made, I became increasingly fascinated with the information I *did not* have. I felt like I could not adequately tell his story without having every single detail. I found myself growing frustrated when my genealogical research would hit a dead end. But this is not abnormal at all. In fact, Hirsch says those “who share a legacy of trauma and thus [share] the curiosity, the urgency, the frustrated *need* to know about a traumatic past” (35). My desire to have

every fact, every piece of information laid bare before me was normal. And yet, this likely revealed more about my own desires, anxieties, fears, and hopes, than it did about my great grandfather's past or my ethnicity's past (Hirsch 22). This need to tell a story and get it right, to connect seemingly unrelated scraps of information, to be heard and believed, is this not what every survivor wants?

With Hirsch's postmemorial work underpinning my entire collection, I felt it was appropriate to include poems that spoke directly to that influence. In "Relics of Remembrance," I took memories that were extrapolated from stories told by my family as well as historiographies told by those who survived the concentration camp that most Jewish Lemkos were sent to, Talerhof, as well as Operation Vistula memories:

I remember passing under the towering wooden sign that read "INTERNIERTENLAGER" at Talerhof. The gates locked, trapping us in its concentrated fence. The barracks at the entrance belied the fields we were forced to toil in, and the gallows where we were condemned to hang. Sometimes, when I can't fall asleep, I can see the outlines of my brethren at my bedside. One cheek rested against a shoulder, their necks at a slack ninety-degree angle. The rope's faint braid suspending their specters from my ceiling. (38)

The reader must understand that these events, though seemingly distant on the timeline, will always be fresh in this writer's mind. This was why I chose to insert quotes from Hirsch's book *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* such as "survivor families are often already fractured and disrupted" (38) and to "connect so deeply to the previous generation's remembrances of the past they identify that connection as a form of memory, and that, in extreme circumstances, memory can be transferred to those who were not actually there to live the event" (3). These quotes accentuate my conclusion: "I remember impossibilities" (38).

These are not my memories, but I remember them, whether or not I am duty-bound to do so. I cannot separate my true memories from these borrowed ones.

I sought to condense additional borrowed memories when I addressed the history of the European Lemko in “Kalnica Triptych.” With Kalnica being my great grandfather’s home, I wanted to represent what it would have been like prior to the 1940s, then what it would have been like during Operation Vistula, followed by what it looks like today.

The reader is taken from a secure village where the inhabitants “raise their animals and their families” and “build their homes and churches with earthen floors” to complete chaos and disorder as their lives “are reduced to less than nothing by a stifling holocaust of bullets” (37). These scenes are contrasted with that of the present, “There are ski resorts and hiking trails bisecting the land they loved. In their aching hands they hold a heavy history. No one remembers the peripheral Europeans” (37). It seems as if the joy and pain of the Lemkos have been forgotten, which is one reason why I am writing this collection to begin with. I want more people to learn who we are. Ski resorts are great, but the land holds so much more in its memory.

The notion of returning “home” or to a time prior to the trauma was something Hirsch and her contemporaries considered in their work also: it stemmed “from a yearning to find a world *before* the loss has occurred [...] from a need for an irrecoverable lost innocence that descendants of survivors imagine and project” (Hirsch 214). This was what I had initially hoped to do, to travel to Poland and visit Kalnica despite my cousin’s warning that there was nothing left. He was correct, the village as my great grandfather had known it was destroyed during Operation Vistula. I struggled to understand why my great grandfather never returned home, even when he knew his sister had been forcibly relocated. I found myself angry that he never even tried to go back; until Hirsch gave me a new perspective:

Worn away not only by time but also by a traumatic history of displacement, forgetting and erasure, places change and objects are used by other, perhaps hostile owners, over time coming merely to approximate the spaces and objects that were left behind. [...] ‘Home’ becomes a place of no return. (212)

There was nothing left for him to return to. His farm and family were all gone. He became an American and there was no returning to an old home or identity without it becoming awkward and painful. How could I ever dream of returning to a place when all traces that linked it to the past have been erased?

This notion of home disturbed me, for even a metaphorical return was impossible. I wanted to address this in the poem “Home.” Much like “Relics of Remembrance,” I used quotes from Hirsch’s work as a method of grounding my personal conjecture in actual theory:

3. Images can mediate an act of return. However, the promise of revelation is a false one. “Return to a place literally loosens the defensive walls against the sorrow of loss” (207).
4. Maybe that’s why Didi never went back to Kalnica, to its soil and its memory; he knew he’d only be a phantom to those hills.
5. Trauma’s history leaves scars on places and people. Forgetting, erasing, start to look appealing and “‘home’ becomes a place of no return” (212). (63)

I also reflected on the photographs I have of my great grandfather. I used the knowledge I had gained from Roland Barthes. Each one possessed the stadiūm that drew my eye to it as well as the punctum that pricked me so deeply. That punctum frequently comes from the fact that I am staring at a dead man and that there are no answers lurking in any of the photographs. On the contrary, “I [was the] only ghost haunting the frame” (63). Perhaps the greatest comfort I can take is that, whether I was looking at a photograph, a document, or a poem, “I can never deny that the thing

[had] been there” (Barthes 76). The entire collection documents that the Lemkos, my great grandfather, and I exist; that our trauma exists and it is valid.

I would also like to point out the importance of vstras for the transmission of memories and the maintenance of culture, both of which allow for postmemorial work. Vstras allow participants “to fill in the missing knowledge of the history of their homeland, the fates of the members of the group, and give a wider context to these events, context related to the group reliving their past” (Trzeczyńska 14-5). For this reason, the collection was named *Vatra* early in the writing process. In the prologue to the collection, “DON’T SKIP THIS PART,” I allude to this when I write, “I once read, ‘when the search is over, sharing starts.’ Amidst the rubble of him, our family, our people, I found myself. That’s what *this* is about./Come sit by the fire. I have so much to tell you” (28). This book is my vatra where I can tell the stories I know and keep these memories alive.

### **Trauma Literature Theory**

The word trauma is loaded with the potential of multiple meanings. Indeed, it seems to be an insufficient word to describe and encompass all the possibilities. Within the creative work, I utilize the strikethrough whenever I use the word trauma. This is both a literal and metaphorical nod to Jacques Derrida’s notion of putting an idea under erasure or *sous rature*. Ronai writes that “Derrida places his terms *sous rature* by using them and drawing an X through them. He uses words and concepts with the understanding that they are representations of the play of differences between ideas, not essentialist representations of reality” (116). Thus, I am placing trauma *sous rature*. Ronai further states when we are unsure of how we should feel, we look to our past as well as others to come up with a response. I feel this is what I have done with this collection. I looked

to my past and my great grandfather's past to construct myself in response to what I have survived and what I have learned of his survival.

*Vatra*, in part, falls into trauma literature, which exists to demonstrate “how a traumatic event disrupts attachments between self and others by challenging fundamental assumptions about moral laws and social relationships that are themselves connected to specific environments” (Balaev 150). *Vatra* is and yet is not a piece of trauma literature because it can only imitate what I perceive to be traumatic. While trauma experiences can be isolated within the brain, they are still able to “infect another pure and integrated subject through the act of narration, or based upon a shared ancestry or ethnic origins” (151). This hits on Hirsch's notion of postmemory; that shared ancestry is one reason why someone would remember traumas that are not purely theirs.

I consulted a few collections that occupy the trauma literature genre. Sara Uribe's *Antígona González* was one of them. This hybrid collection puts a modern spin on the tale of Antigone. Uribe uses newspaper excerpts, question/answer, and even dream sequences to tell the story of Antígona who is looking for her missing brother, Tadeao, amid political violence in Tamaulipas. She receives no answers but realizes she is surrounded by hundreds of others who are looking for someone. I can understand the trauma of political violence in Lemkovyna in the terms of Uribe's Mexico. Uribe documents both familial, cultural, and personal trauma. I also consulted Emily Dalton's *Be Straight with Me: A Memoir in Verse* as a point of reference for personal trauma associated with one's identity. Here, a presumably heterosexual young woman and gay young man who start out as best friends eventually fall in love. The collection goes on to recount their on-again-off-again relationship and how it affected the speaker emotionally. This struck a personal note with me in relation to my struggle to acknowledge my true self.



When considered in the light of what my ancestors, my great grandfather, and what I survived, it becomes clear that “oppressed people are routinely worn down by the insidious trauma involved in living day after day in a sexist, racist, classist, homophobic, and ableist society” (Burstow 1296). By virtue of the fact that we are human caught up in these social constructs that permeate our society, we are bound to experience trauma in some form. Therefore, that trauma must be exorcized like an unholy spirit. For instance, I do so in “My Wife” from section one:

When I muster up the strength to say I was raped, not just by my ex-girlfriend, but also by an ex-husband, repeatedly

I laid myself bare. My shame dispelled; my demons exorcized.

“Well, that’s the first step, isn’t it?” She says.

“Open your mouth. Scream, cry, rage, but set it free. It’s got to be heavy carrying that.”

(52)

Speaking one’s truth, whether verbally or in their writing, is a form of exorcism. It is a first step to freeing oneself from the past: by acknowledging that it did happen.

This begs the question: “How does writing become part of a process of cultivating self-trust when the world has taught you that you were wrong to believe your body ever belonged to you in the first place” (Brooke 298)? In other words, how can writing help a survivor heal? Brooke points to the work of Paul Ricoeur, indicating that poetry is especially useful in creating individual as well as social change which often intersects many (and occasionally contradicting) narratives (298). My collection acknowledges the competing realities of coming from a religious background, being a lesbian, hiding in heterosexual relationship, and surviving domestic and sexual violence that does not fit the stereotypical experience. But my collection is more than just acknowledging

these realities; it is about finding the language to tell the story. The poem “There has been a Struggle” serves as an introduction to that search for language:

I am attempting to communicate the incommunicable. I am aware of that. You must understand, when there is confusion inside of you, the desire to push surpasses the point of anxiety. To expel and examine, poke at its pulsing heart, marveling at the writhing mass of tissue as it assembles itself. (48)

It is difficult, indeed, to communicate trauma survival if you do not recognize what you survived was traumatic. You can recognize and understand that what you survived has caused you pain, but before you can dissect it, you must study it from all angles; you must find a way to put the pain on the outside of yourself. For me, writing externalized my pain and experiences which allowed me to interrogate them: why did trauma change me? How did it change me? And, perhaps most importantly, how can I heal myself?

In the end, sometimes only plain language is suitable to address what has occurred without being overly graphic and triggering for readers. I have noticed other authors such as Eve Ensler and Laurie Halse Anderson using this tactic in their own works and incorporated it in mine. I do not view rape as a word to be whispered or mumbled. Rather, it is a word that must be said clearly: “Same-sex rape, spousal rape, they happen even if no one can understand or accept it” (52). The actual logistics of each incident is not something that must be disclosed and is something I chose not to disclose out of respect for my readers who may still be processing their own wounds. What must be disclosed is that a very specific act of violation occurred. It must be named and confronted.

Within poetry there exists “an aesthetically mediat[ed] imaginative and imitative act [of] the process of healing” (Brooke 299). The traumatized part of the self is written into awareness on the page and so the act of healing is, in reality, threefold: it is performed within the text by the

speaker of the poems, it is written by the author, and it is experienced by the reader. By writing from my place of experience I am not only healing myself, I am also inviting others to engage in dialogue that addresses the experiences in these areas and how we as a society can change our collective behavior.

Brooke goes on to define the poetics of trauma as “a progressive process of re-imagining the self in relation to the world through creative acts of poiesis that intend not to explain or ‘cure’ trauma but to heal it through poetic transformation” (300). This is what I have endeavored to do for myself and my great grandfather. Since he is no longer among the living, I can only use what knowledge I have of him, our ethnicity, and history to create a body of work that is freeing. Brooke acknowledges that trauma never occurs in isolation and is always associated with cultural influences driven by power and privilege (301). This is evidenced throughout my collection, but I draw specific attention to it in “My America” in which I react to an article from the 1930s that does not name the Poles and Slaves who died in a mine shaft collapse:

Immigrant is a dirty word referencing dirty people suited for dirty work. It’s implied at the end of an article reporting an atrocity that passed for daily news.

Had those miners been Anglo-Saxon or Western European, the lamentations would have Plastered the pages, the bodies of the deceased caressed by human tongues as their names were read aloud. (39)

Those who lost their lives in that collapse had likely already lost enough prior to their deaths. The fact that they were immigrants, Slavic immigrants, who were not whole human beings to the collective American conscious at that time, highlights the layers of trauma present for those surviving family members who will ultimately engage in some kind of postmemorial work as they search for their family who suffered from an untimely death.

The collective wounds of the Lemkos, my family, and myself speak of the disproportionate power structures that exist within any given society at any point on the timeline. Forgetting the trauma is not a viable option. Someone will remember it, perhaps even postmemorially; and healing from it could potentially alter their life. This is where I found myself and reflected on that in one of the “In the Confession Booth” pieces:

Yes, I am still telling Didi’s story. I am still telling the story of our Lemko brothers and sisters. But I’m also telling my story because I can. Because I must. Because this could be someone’s survival guide. Because I want to be what I didn’t have for so long a light in endless darkness.

I think that’s called hope. (58)

Understanding my familial and cultural trauma forced me to acknowledge my personal trauma. As I began to unravel that taut and confusing threads of time, I also began undoing the knots within myself. There are more survivors in the world than we realize, and far too many of them have yet to begin healing. *Vatra* is intended to serve as my hand holding theirs, reminding them they are not alone, that there is some part of my story they can hold on to as they begin their journey. Trauma cannot be forgotten, but it can be healed. How that healing occurs is up to the survivor.

Trauma literature and its theory are ever-evolving. Going forward, trauma theorists should “emphasize both the accessibility of traumatic memory and the possibility that victims may construct reliable narrative accounts of it” (Pederson 338). It goes without saying that there is a tremendous need to trust survivors and their memories. Believing the written works of survivors’ places emphasis on their writing as opposed to an emphasis on any gaps that may exist in their memories. This allows them, much like a nonfiction writer, a greater degree of truthfulness because they are fully in control of their story. I am reminded of Eve Ensler’s *In the Body of the World: A*

*Memoir*. Ensler struggled even in therapy “with two different shrinks, both telling [her], like Freud, that everything [she] thought happened with [her] father was just [her] fantasy” (111). How awful it is to open up your wounds only to be thought a liar, even worse when it comes from someone who is supposed to offer professional help. No matter how the memories are presented, no matter how the listener may perceive them, the one relating the memories should be taken seriously.

Pederson states that the notion of traumatic amnesia is potentially harmful as it removes any sort of power from the survivor, effectively stripping them of their agency (338). The age of powerless, mute victims has long since passed. If a survivor retains their agency and is given the outlet to express themselves, rehabilitation is possible (338). Ensler issues a call to all survivors: “Let us turn our pain to power, our victimhood to fire, our self-hatred to action, our self-obsession to service” (216). I am answering that very call. By weaving my story with my family history, I have not only taken back my agency, but I have attempted to give agency to my great grandfather who felt he had no choice but to continue to repress his memories. By using a copy of my great grandfather’s naturalization document, I composed “Intention is Everything” which not only interrogates history via the document but also tells the truth the document cannot:

It was his intention to retain his last name, but they misspelled it. Created an Anglicanized doppelganger. Sounded right but still wrong.

*I’m still not sure how to spell his name.*

It was his intention to tell them where he hailed from, but they misheard it. So, they mislabeled it.

*His village was Kalnica, no “t.” Galicia ceased to exist in 1918, on year before he was naturalized. Salt in the wound.*

It was his intention to create, but they misunderstood or simply didn’t care. (42)

While this barely scratches the surface of the traumas he endured (in this case, as an immigrant becoming a United States citizen), this is just one of my attempts to give my great grandfather back his voice. These are all things he would have undoubtedly told someone, anyone, in the languages he was fluent in but could not in English. If he had not felt the need to fully assimilate, if the social climate had been different, he may have felt comfortable correcting these mistakes. But since none of that is the case, I am here to advocate for him. He will endure in silence no longer.

Another suggestion is that future theorists should understand that trauma memory is often multisensory and those senses can be augmented due to the nature of the memory (Pederson 339). This does not change the memory's veracity; rather, it changes the effect. What lasted minutes feels like it lasted days. When one believes they have heard something, all they could hear was the sounds of being underwater. In my case, I remember the way the streetlight shined under the curtains. It felt like I was standing at the head of the bed each time, watching it happen. There was a complete lack of sound in the room. It is important to pay attention to these augmentations because they are a unique insight into the trauma response of each survivor. There are also additional augmentations that will occur within the postmemorial work of ancestral survivors. While I can only speculate on what my great grandfather's may have been, I do try to offer some insight into my own throughout my collection.

If the survivor, such as myself, can take their experiences and write about them, grouping them with other "normal" and/or positive aspects of themselves, then "a more fully integrated self [will] emerge" (Brooke 303). That integration expressed the depth of healing that has taken place on the page as well as in the act of organizing ideas and writing them. This is precisely what I have

accomplished in the creation of *Vatra*. I have reconciled my trauma with my familial and cultural traumas in order to reach acceptance and peace.

Writing about this subject matter is a delicate act. I ultimately consulted two poetic memoirs to determine how the authors handled the subject as well as how they arranged their books. *Shout: The True Story of a Survivor Who Refused to be Silenced*, by Laurie Halse Anderson is a poetic memoir about both familial and person trauma – specifically rape. Anderson comments on “the inherited,/trauma-fed ability/to stay silent in every situation” (129). It seems the common way to deal with trauma is through silence.

Anderson’s poem “Forgiveness” directly influenced one of my “In the Confession Booth” poems:

The exits were blocked,  
so you wisely fled your skin  
when you smelled his intent,  
like a selkie, you shed your pelt  
and hid in the smoke without breathing. (207)

In my poem, I write:

I put myself away and adopted a new me. This one hid herself in marriages to men, one in 2006, another in 2009, and one more in 2015. This one had babies, one in 2007, another in 2010, and one more in 2016. This one wasn’t going to hell. More importantly, this one wasn’t going to suffer anymore.

But she did. (50)

I shed my pelt multiple times in an attempt to hide who I truly was, so I could be what I believed I was expected to be. I ended up inflicting more harm upon myself because I continued to hold onto the belief that I needed to be a heterosexual, neurotypical, superwoman.

I also consulted Amanda Gorman's poetic memoir *Call Us What We Carry*. Though written in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, it is still a reaction to trauma. The collection as a whole focuses on its historical aspect. The pandemic will fade into memory as those who lived during it age and eventually pass away, but what of the coming generations? Gorman writes:

The poet's diagnosis is that what we have lived  
Has already warped itself into a fever dream,  
The contours of its shape stripped from the murky mind.  
To be accountable we must render an account:  
Not what was said, but what was meant.  
Not the fact, but what was felt.  
What was known, even while unnamed.  
Our greatest test will be  
Our testimony. (1)

So, too, did those Lemkos like my great grandfather pass away. It is important to document the history so that none can forget; even if it is through a postmemorial lens. This is why I felt "Occupational ~~Trauma~~" had to be written. Unless one is familiar with the coal mining region in Pennsylvania and the immigrants who frequently worked there, that particular aspect means nothing. For my great grandfather who would succumb to black lung disease from his life spent working in the coal mines, that particular testimony is something no one had ever heard. Every day he lived with the possibility of a "mine shaft collapse" or a "breaker boy smothered to death"



(40). This is the only way I could think to explain what my great grandfather and so many others like him experienced when they went to work.

## **Influences**

### **The Cuckoo**

I consulted a wide variety of literary sources as I constructed my collection. The first place I looked to were other Lemko writers. Truth be told, those are difficult to come by; however, I was able to find the selected poems of Bohdan Ihor Antonych who was born in 1909 in Gorlice County, Poland, in the heart of Lemkovyna. The majority of Antonych's work is preoccupied with the natural world around him. He mentions things such as gold finches (27), poppies (34), ash trees (36), and lime trees (41), all things he would have seen on a regular basis in that area. He also mentions the song of "the cuckoo, long and with yearning" (28). The cuckoo is an interesting native bird in that they lay their eggs in the nest of another bird then leave, allowing the host bird to raise their young. Their call is distinct and the birds are viewed as messengers from the spirit world in folk practices. It seemed fitting, then, that I would incorporate the cuckoo and a recurring metaphor throughout my collections.

The cuckoo is primarily a messenger from my great grandfather to myself. In the first installment of "The Story So Far," I mention the bird in passing, "The cuckoo clock in the living room chimed one" (30). This functions like a seed being planted; it allows for a larger connection to grow as the collection continues. The connection grows clearer in "Homecoming:" "His black lungs unfurled to reveal the cuckoo's wings" (46). The earthly bird symbolizes my connection to my great grandfather. It is mentioned again in the poem "True Story:" "Days later I would happen upon a photo of that man in the desk under the cuckoo clock. My granduncle Wassil, Didi's son" (74). The cuckoo continues to bring me into closer contact with my great grandfather and familial history. The final mention of the cuckoo comes on page 80, in the final "My Wife" poem:

I can't help but look into her eyes, beach glass green reflecting the smoldering embers, as  
the low warble of the cuckoo reverberates around us

I look into her eyes

and know I couldn't have made it this far without her. (80)

Here, the cuckoo is mentioned in connection with my wife to demonstrate the balance I have found between who I am in terms of my sexuality as well as in terms of my ethnicity. There is harmony both earthly and ethereal. The cuckoo can finally rest.

### **(Unknown) Family**

How does one write a memoir that contains information about a family member they never met? This was a question I repeatedly returned to during my research and writing processes. The first collection I turned to was Mary-Kim Arnold's *Litany for the Long Moment*, a collection relating Arnold's search for her birth parents from Korea. Arnold writes from a place of absent possibilities. From the outset, I felt a pronounced connection particularly when she writes, "I only know that I am continually drawn back, tethered to the wispy blurred possibilities of the mother I will never know, a language I do not speak, the life I will never have" (5). I address this very feeling in my poem "Name Game." There, I discuss what the word Lemko literally means as well as what it personally means: "If only I had more information./If only I spoke the language./If only I knew them better" (34). There are connections that could be made if relationships had been maintained and cultural knowledge was passed down. I can say for myself, without either of those factors present, I have always felt lost, as if I am constantly drifting, or as if I am a tree without roots.

Arnold brings up language frequently in her collection as well as her inability to speak it (or speak it well). She writes, "Producing speech is not only physical, but there is discomfort, even pain when one wants to say something but cannot. 'Inside this pain of speech the pain to say...It festers inside. The wound...Must break'" (17). The visceral pain she describes here from not being able to form the proper syllables is absolutely grueling. It is also how I feel about not being able to speak Lemko Rusyn. I have never heard anyone speak it at length, thus, I have no idea how to speak it myself. This loss of language is addressed in my poem "Let's Learn Lemko Rusyn" (36). This poem demonstrates the nuances of Lemko Rusyn when written. Everything from the accent

marks on the page to the spelling to the thought of pronunciation appears extremely foreign, much like Arnold's inclusion of Hangul characters on page 23.

Additionally, I chose to include Lemko Rusyn phrases and words throughout my collection as a reminder that my ethnicity is intersecting everything. Revisiting "Let's Learn Lemko Rusyn," I being with simple phrases that build into a much longer, more complicated sentence:

Welcome.	Vytaite.
I want to learn to speak	Ya khochu navchÿty sya besiduvaty
Lemko Rusyn.	po lemktivskÿ.
I love my great grandfather.	Ya lyublyu moyu pradido.
When Didi emigrated to the United	Koly Didi poikhaly do Amerykÿ, to
States, he first worked in the coal	naipershe robyly v shakhtakh uhlya v
mines in eastern Pennsylvania.	skhidnii Pensyl'vanii. (36)

While this may invite the reader to twist their tongues in an attempt to say the words aloud, my true intention is to reflect on the polarity of English and Lemko Rusyn. The poem is bisected by a line that reads, "All these words and still none of them can even begin to probe the puffy pink scar from not knowing him or myself" (36). That line is the sharp point of the poem, the part that is intended to pierce the reader with the reality that neither language is sufficient enough to explain the loss I feel from not knowing my great grandfather personally and for taking so painfully long to know myself.

*Jane: A Murder* by Maggie Nelson proved to be another incredibly useful text for me. As Nelson explores the trauma her family experienced from her Aunt Jane's murder, she also works to give Jane a voice by using excerpts from letters and Jane's journal to help explain who she was. This became another source of inspiration to incorporate my great grandfather's naturalization papers in "Intention is Everything" (42). The historical narrative for Jane is wrought with questions that have no answers. Jane's killer is never captured; thus, justice never prevails. She was murdered and the narrative continues on without her; and though her family persists without her physically,

the absence of her presence is always something they are keenly aware of, even for Maggie Nelson who never met her. It is this sort of awareness of absence I wanted to document for myself.

While I never met my great grandfather, I have always known that I was missing something, key information to fill in blanks that would more fully complete the portrait of who I am as a person, specifically as a fourth generation Lemko American. Returning to “Intention is Everything,” the use of his naturalization paperwork is fitting for many reasons, namely that the document itself sets forth an incorrect picture of what it meant to be an immigrant at the time of its signing in 1919. The document states he was boring in Galicia, Russia, but “Galicia ceased to exist in 1918, one year before he was naturalized./Salt in the wound” (42). He had no home to return to. The document itself reads that he must renounce his prior citizenship and declare he is not an anarchist or a polygamist, but nowhere does it say he is not a Lemko. One can only conclude it was easier to forget than it was to integrate that identity openly with his new American one.

### **Farewell to the Vatra**

What began as a way for me to tell my great grandfather’s story and educate readers on our ethnicity ended up as so much more. This collection has become a healing journey toward acceptance of myself. The questions I have pondered throughout *Vatra* are important ones, but what is much more important is the acceptance that those questions will not have answers.

Sometimes the only comfort is knowing that what occurred is history. You can know it, interrogate it, attempt to understand it, but it will never be as important as where you are on the other side of it and who you surround yourself with.

*Vatra* will always be a testament to the transformative nature of poetry and trauma literature. Inhabiting and reliving the pain was an everyday occurrence for me. By writing my pain, my great grandfather’s pain, the collective Lemko Rusyn pain, that pain is transformed. It cannot

and should not be forgotten as it is a part of our story, but now there is no ache left. What is left is my written survival guide demonstrating that healing is possible.

With the journey concluded, it is time to turn the page, to move onto the next journey, whatever it may be. It is my deepest hope that this piece of trauma literature will speak to even one reader and encourage them to heal. I also hope this collection gives an adequate voice to the Lemkos and Lemko Americans who desperately need one.

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# Vatra



This is where  
the story begins.

## Prologue

“What would happen if one  
woman told the truth about her life?  
The world would split open

Muriel Rukeyser

## DON'T SKIP THIS PART

This is the story of Paul Berdy, my great grandfather, my Didi, a Lemko Rusyn who emigrated to the United States at eighteen from his village in present-day Poland. But I would be lying if I said that was all this is about.

I might have gone my entire life never questioning or knowing Didi's story. I may have never sought guidance from a dead man if I hadn't lost myself.

I guess this is a confession: I lost track of who I was so I could fall in line with the white, heteronormative, neurotypical, god-fearing experience I'd been told was my fate.

Eventually, I would become a survivor of rape  
of domestic violence  
of cultural silence,  
each adding a new layer to my reflection until I couldn't recognize my own aquiline nose or high, round cheeks.

What I didn't realize at first was I had started searching for Didi so I could find myself. I slowly began peeling back the layers of the palimpsest I'd become. I was furious when I finally realized what had happened. How can someone so smart still be so dumb?

gullible?

naïve?

And yet, you learn to be kind to yourself. You learn to forgive yourself for not knowing then what you know now.

You learn.

I once read, "when the search is over, sharing starts." Amidst the rubble of him, our family, our people I found myself. That's what *this* is about.

Come sit by the fire. I have so much to tell you.

I.

“Angels are white,  
devils are black  
and ordinary life  
is somewhere in between.”

Shtefan Sukhÿi

“To leave some record of a life that resists  
reduction, simplification, erasure.”

Mary-Kim Arnold

## The Story So Far

I should have been sleeping. I should have been under the percale flat sheet, drooling on my pillow, with one foot sticking out. I should have been dreaming.

But I wasn't. Instead, I was giving my computer screen the death stare, my fingers flying across the keyboard. I combed through piles of genealogical information searching for something, anything about my great grandfather, Paul Berdy, also known as Didi.

The cuckoo clock in the living room chimed one. I was going to pay for this in the morning.

I had lovingly dubbed him the international man of mystery for a few reasons. No one knew where he was originally from. He was an immigrant with no searchable history prior to his arrival in the United States. He was a naturally quiet person and his English wasn't the greatest; but when he did talk, he only told three stories: Cossacks frequently raided the area, a vampire lived in his village, and he hated communism.

That's what my father told me. He remembered going to the Russian club in Edwardsville, Pennsylvania, with his grandpa; going to the Russian Orthodox church with him for Sunday service; dancing traditional Russian dances at family gatherings. He knew his grandpa died of black lung from working in the coal mines.

Even if I didn't know his point of origin, it seemed safe to assume he was (and, therefore, we were) Russian. And that's what I did until I was in my early thirties.

I should have been sleeping. I should have been sleeping in my own home. But my three children and I were living with my parents. No one wanted to talk about why I had to come back. I don't know why we didn't. Maybe none of us wanted to admit that my last marriage had been abusive. Maybe none of us wanted to dig into my past and talk about the sexual assault I'd survived years ago. Maybe none of us wanted to acknowledge that I'd been living in the closet all of my life and I was finally living my truth.

All I did know was I had begun to rebuild myself by researching my family history. Going as far back as I could on both sides. But Paul was a brick wall that both frustrated and fascinated me. I needed to know him. Everything about him.

I spent my sleepless nights online searching for a man I had never met, but was desperate to know. That night, as I pounded the keys and furiously clicked, I managed to find a website that was no longer being managed. A garden of untended thoughts. I don't remember how I found it; I just know when I did, I felt like I had unearthed a dragon's hoard of gold.

There, on the screen before me, was my great grandfather's name and the names of my many cousins, followed by words I had never seen before. Kalnica. Rusyn. Carpatho-Rusyn. Lemko. What did those mean?

I ran the word “Kalnica” through a search engine. Nothing could have prepared me for what I read next. Kalnica was a village located in Poland.

I ran the word “Lemko” next. An ethnic minority hailing from the highlands of the Carpathian Mountains generally found in the border lands of Poland, Slovakia, Ukraine, Hungary, and Romania... Wait!

Poland? Ethnic minority? None of this is Russian!

I frantically scribbled everything I had found. I should have been sleeping, but this was worth the six hours or so of sleep sacrificed. This was a breakthrough. Priceless and unparalleled. This was when my journey began.

Who was Paul Berdy really? And who does that make me?

## Coal Miner's Great Granddaughter

Well, I was born a coal miner's great granddaughter  
in a Georgia hospital, far from the hills of Pennsylvania  
I never met my great grandfather but I've heard all the stories  
and I've read so many history books  
I wish he was whispering his stories to me.

My great grandfather worked for Quinn and Woodward Collieries  
he'd seen breaker boys crushed in conveyor gears  
had a lot of good men buried alive when shafts caved in,  
but every night he still read his Bible by coal oil light  
and made it to church every holy day.

My great grandfather loved and raised seven kids on a miner's pay  
made sure those kids only spoke English in his home  
and any Slavic tongue was saved for church, secrets, or swearing  
probably because he wanted them  
to be as American as possible.

I sometimes wonder what he would say  
if he were here today,  
would he entertain my questions about those many years ago?  
(If he could even understand a word I said.)  
Or would he rather tell me  
about God and coal?

Yeah, I'm proud to be a coal miner's great granddaughter  
I don't know much else, well, just second-hand memories  
but those still belong to me  
at least until it's time to pass on.

You know, a lot of things have changed since way back then  
and I haven't been back to Pennsylvania  
because nothing lives there anymore  
not even the memories of a coal miner('s great granddaughter).

Take Me to Church Street

1940

*Lord, have mercy.*

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

*Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.*

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

*Now and ever, and unto ages of ages.*

For Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory of the Father, the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

*Amen.*

2021

*Amen.*

My grandfather who art in heaven, Didi be his name. He has come and gone, from earth and now in heaven.

*Now and ever, and unto ages of ages.*

Give me this day a chance to know him, and forgive yesterday's frustration and forgive those who are frustrated with my obsession; and lead me not into uncertainty but deliver me from false information.

*Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.*

For I'm told Didi now resides in the kingdom of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And that's all I have right now.

*Lord, have mercy.*



## Name Game

My Ancestors didn't name themselves Lemko. Their neighbors did that. The ones known as Boykos and Hutsuls. "Lem" means "only", and these folks used that word frequently, so the story goes.

Some called themselves Rusnaks. Some chose Rusyn while others placed Carpatho- as a prefix. Still others chose Ruthenian. I know it's confusing. Just stay with me.

Today they call us Ukrainians, but let's save the geo-politics for another time. For now, know my preferred title is Lemko. Why?

Because I understand what is implied by "only."

If only I had more information.

If only I spoke the language.

If only I knew them better.

## Firebirds

If you were to consult a dictionary, the following are absent:

Lemko

Rusyn

Carpatho-Rusyn.

However, definitions exist for Russian, Polish, Ukrainian, Slovak, Hungarian, Romanian, Czech, Bulgarian, Serbo-Croatian,

the closest approximation we have is

Ruthenian

which is a Ukrainian of the former Austrian Empire Kingdom of Galicia inhabiting parts of western Ukraine.

That still isn't entirely accurate. And so, we remain undefinable with the songs of the Highlands still resonating in our bones.

Who are we?

We are the closest approximation to the  
firebird

ohnysty ptakh.

High above the earth we dance on the wind, our feather glow with the slow burn of stars.

Let's Learn Lemko Rusyn

Welcome

I want to learn to speak

Lemko Rusyn.

I love my great grandfather.

When Didi emigrated to the United

States, he first worked in the coal

mines in eastern Pennsylvania.

Vytaite

Ya khochu navchÿty sya besiduvaty

po lemkiivskÿ

Ya lyublyu moyu pradido

Koly Didi poikhaly do Amerykÿ, to naipershe

robyly v shakhtakh uhlya v skhidnii

Pensyl'vanii

All these words and still none of them can even begin to probe the puffy pink scar from not knowing him or myself.

It's not possible.

What a shame.

Lord, have mercy.

To nemozhlyve.

Shto za han'ba.

Hospody pomylui.

Kalnica Triptych  
49.1875° N, 22.4266° E

I.

The Lemkos have always lived among the mountains. The Beskids rise and fall like the chests of newborns. Upside down they all emerged, wrapped in the wild hills.

Winter's alabaster snow holds the promise of verdant spring as they raise their animals and families. They build their homes and churches with earthen floors.

'Round the vatra they spin stories of their yesterdays and their tomorrows.

This is home.

II.

It began on April 28, 1947: homes and fields were shrouded in smoke. Humans herded like animals onto rickety trucks clutching hands, Bibles, their past.

Driven by shepherds with guns and guttural threats to railroads with cool metal barrels pressed to their heads. Behind them, the sky black with ash and the breathless anxiety of frightened families.

Their villages, their lives, reduced to less than nothing by a stifling holocaust of bullets. It only took three months to remove 141,000 Lemkos.

Where is home now?

III.

One hundred and forty-two inhabitants in 2021. The lush grass of spring feeds a handful of horses and deer. The birch leaves shelter the cuckoo as she lays her eggs in a stolen nest.

Winter's crystalline snow lies silent, a rug to hide the scarred land, to hide the truth.

There are ski resorts and hiking trails bisecting the land they loved. In their aching hands they hold a heavy history. No one remembers the peripheral Europeans.

Home is nowhere.

## Relics of Remembrance

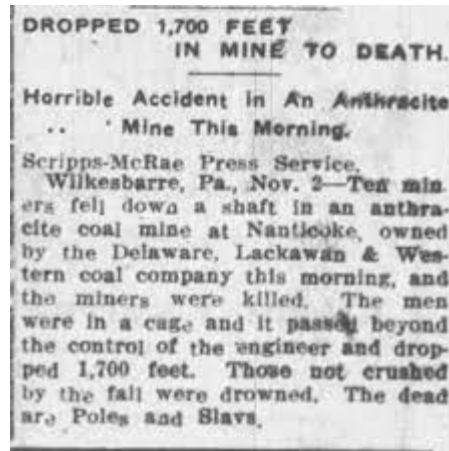
1. I remember the concavity of human bellies gone so hollow that to fill them with even the meagerest morsels of bread would contort them with cramps. That year, the sheep all died. The cabbage and barley refused to emerge from the rocky soil. We saw the winter snow blanket the Beskids and knew some wouldn't live to see it melt.
2. Marianne Hirsch called it postmemory. A way to articulate the relationship subsequent generations have "to the personal, collective, and cultural ~~trauma~~ of those who came before" (5).<sup>1</sup>
3. I remember passing under the towering wooden sign that read "INTERNIERTENLAGER" at Talerhof. The gates locked, trapping us in its concentrated fence. The barracks at the entrance belied the fields we were forced to toil in, and the gallows where we were condemned to hang. Sometimes, when I can't fall asleep, I can see the outlines of my brethren at my bedside. One cheek rested against a shoulder, their necks at a slack ninety-degree angle. The rope's faint braid suspending their specters from my ceiling.
4. "Survivor families are often already fractured and disrupted" (36).<sup>2</sup>
5. I remember the day those soldiers torched the family farm. We had thirty minutes to gather only what we could carry before they razed the entire village. We whispered prayers, clutched hands, when they forced us into trucks with rifles aimed at our heads. We saw the rail station in the distance and knew none of us would ever go home again.
6. Any given generation could "connect so deeply to the previous generation's remembrances of the past that they identif[ied] that connection as a form of *memory*, and that, in certain extreme circumstances, memory *can* be transferred to those who were not actually there to live the event" (3).<sup>3</sup>
7. I remember impossibilities. I remember sighs of despair from the collective Lemko unconscious. Ask the cuckoo and she'll tell you, too, once upon a time these sighs were screams.

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<sup>1</sup> Hirsch, Marianne. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. New York, Columbia University Press, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.



### My America

A quick online search using the words “Pennsylvania anthracite region,” “miners,” and “1900s” led me to this article. I want to understand the America my great grandfather existed in.

If it was such a horrible accident, why are the victims unnamed? Why are they “the dead?” Why are they “Poles and Slavs?”

Because it’s only truly horrible if the victims fit the narrative.

Robert Zecker wrote, “Well into the 1930s, Madison Grand and Lothrop Stoddard lamented the ‘passing of the great race’ and ‘the rising tide of color against white world supremacy.’ The biggest wave of this threat, as conceptualized by such pseudoscientists, was not American blacks, who Jim Crow has seemingly neutralized, but the millions of immigrants who belonged to the non-Nordic ‘races’ of Europe, Slavs included.”<sup>4</sup>

Blink your eyes to clear your vision. Yes, you read that correctly.

Immigrant is a dirty word referencing dirty people suited for dirty work. It’s implied at the end of an article reporting an atrocity that simply passes for daily news.

Had those miners been Anglo-Saxon or Western European, the lamentations would have plastered the pages, the bodies of the deceased caressed by human tongues as their names were read aloud.

This is our America.

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<sup>4</sup> Zecker, Robert M. “‘A Slav Can Live in Dirt That Would Kill a White Man’: Race and the European ‘Other’.” *Race and America’s Immigrant Press: How the Slovaks were Taught to Think Like White People*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011. Bloomsbury Collections. Web. 25 October 2021. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781628928273.ch-004>>.

## Occupational ~~Trauma~~

I want to write about Didi's American occupation, coal mining, but I have no idea what to say.

I've read articles and books, but nothing compares to the lived experience; layering one's experiences, ~~trauma~~ on ~~trauma~~.

Nine years before his arrival, nineteen miners from eastern Pennsylvania were murdered by law men while fleeing a peaceful protest, the Lattimer Massacre. Most of the dead were immigrants. And the law continued to protect and serve those who were convenient.

This is what he came to. Trading one hell for another.

Every day, he dragged his foreign body to a black hole in the earth that swallowed him, then ejected him at its appointed times: noon and sundown.

But even that throws water into the unseen homebrewed bruise. I can't write justice into the words

mine shaft collapse

breaker boy smothered to death

carbon monoxide: there is no difference between the caged canary and the Lemko immigrant

women held their breath when the company hearse, Black Maria, entered their company town

to deliver the body of a dead miner to his family.

## Reaping Rags

My second great grandfather (also named Paul Berdy) came to America much earlier than his son. Truth is, a lot of European men did this. Work abroad to be less of a pauper at home.

Except for the ones who never made it back.

My second great grandfather disappeared into Lady Liberty's folds. He never saw his

country

farm

wife

children

again. Did he live as a street urchin and die a stranger in a strange land? Did he decide to love again on American soil? There's a story here, family folklore. And I agonize in my ignorance.

This was and still is common. Whole human beings can be misplaced, displaced. Connections crumble and voices become little more than wind threading itself through the fallen leaves on an Edwardsville sidewalk. My cousins say he scoured the silent streets searching for him. I imagine if he were here, he would simply nod to indicate he did look; but behind his gray eyes would live the pain of not knowing.

Hail Mary, Mother of God,  
like father, like son.



Intention is Everything

No. 2862

# UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

## DECLARATION OF INTENTION

It was his intention to retain his last name, but they misspelled it. Created an Anglicanized doppelganger. Sounded right but still wrong. I'm still not sure how to spell his name.

years after the date hereof  
in the \_\_\_\_\_ Court  
of \_\_\_\_\_

I, **Paul Birdie**, aged **27** years,  
occupation **Miner**, do declare on oath that my personal  
description is: Color **white**, complexion **Fair**, height **5 feet 10 inches**,  
weight **160** pounds, color of hair **Blonde**,  
other visible distinctive marks **None**.  
I was born in **Kalmita Galicia Russia**  
on the **9th** day of **July**, anno Domini **1892**; I now reside  
at **4 Lawrence St., Edwardsville, Pa.**  
(Give number, street, city or town, and State)

It was his intention to tell them where he hailed from, but they misheard. So, they mislabeled it. His village was Kalnica, no "t." Galicia ceased to exist in 1918, one year before he was naturalized. Salt in the wound.

It was his intention to create, but they misunderstood or simply didn't care. Forgetting was the best anyone could do. He renounced the existence I wish I understood.

United States of America from **Rotterdam Holland**  
**Jassy**; my last  
name when I arrived in this country was **Kalmita Russia**; I am **married**; the name  
of my wife is **Maria**; she was born at **Edwardsville, Pa.**  
and now resides at **4 Lawrence St., Edwardsville, Pa.**

It is my bona fide intention to renounce forever all allegiance and fidelity to any, foreign  
prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty, and particularly to  
**THE PRESENT GOVERNMENT OF RUSSIA** of whom I am now a subject;  
I arrived at the port of **New York**, in the  
State of **New York**, on or about the **16** day  
of **June**, anno Domini **1909**; I am not an anarchist; I am not a  
polygamist nor a believer in the practice of polygamy; and it is my intention in good faith  
to become a citizen of the United States of America and to permanently reside therein:  
SO HELP ME GOD.

*Paul Birdie*  
(Original signature of declarant)

Subscribed and sworn to before me in the office of the Clerk of  
said Court this **8** day of **Aug.**, anno Domini **1919**

EVAN J. WILLIAMS

Clerk of the Court  
By *[Signature]* DEPUTY Clerk.

All good intentions backfire when little Lemkos are lost forever to the folds of time as memories become obscurities; as great granddaughters forget their names, their tongues unable to twist the alien syllables. Had he known in life what I know in his death, would he have allowed himself to remember?

Do you see it now? It reads like a death sentence, not a proclamation of freedom.

NOTE—Figures in lower left-hand corner of this sheet are the Department's issue number.

## Esoteric

I wrote about this photo all the damn time. Notice I said “wrote.” Because this is something I did but can no longer do – at least, not the same way. My Cousin Leonard said he had a copy of this photo. And it wasn’t taken in the Old Country. Quite the opposite.

It’s still Didi.

But he’s in Ohio.

When some of our family left Lemkovyna, they settled in Ohio. Didi visited them with religious regularity until – until when? Until what?

Cousin Leonard said he doesn’t know any of them now.

Those scrubby hills are not the Beskids. That structure the hills hold, it could be a church, but not a wooden one. And that basket damn sure doesn’t hold tomatoes from a tomato farm thousands of miles away in a miniscule village doomed to be wiped from Polish consciousness.

The curtain ripped away from my Ark to reveal it’s only plated in gold.

The Great Disappointment. My own personal Great Depression. Just because Cousin Leonard said.

otpath and over  
int; do not cross;

tbridge. There is  
s southern bank,  
ave been worked



*Diadels (Bendu)*

## Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit

Didi was Russian Orthodox. My father still is. Russian Orthodox may be a bit of a misnomer. It doesn't mean the practitioners are Russian. It just means they are followers of a denomination that originated in Russia. One that allows their priests to marry and doesn't answer to the Pope.

Because the faith still acknowledges the Julian calendar, they celebrate Christmas on December 25 with the rest of the Christian world but then have Russian Christmas on January 7.

They go to confession regularly - well, they're supposed to.

Church services are in English and Church Slavic, which is a modified form of Old Church Slavonic. That was the only place Didi allowed his children to speak his mother tongue. That included my Baba, my father's mother.

During services, a choking lump of frankincense blended with oils, roots, and powders is burned on a charcoal briquette hidden within a shiny golden thurible suspended from three chains. It's often swung from side to side.

You are expected to instinctively know when to cross yourself: when entering or leaving the church, at the beginning or ending of personal prayers, any time all three persons of the Trinity are addressed, or when approaching an icon.

And the act of crossing is done differently. Your thumb and first two fingers form a point while your remaining two fingers rest in your palm. You begin at your forehead, travel to your belly to form the vertical bar, then from right shoulder to left to make the horizontal bar.

What might not be so different is how people like me are viewed. Homosexuality is a sin, right up there with adultery, fornication, and abortion. Orthodox churches cannot and will not perform same sex marriages since, for them, scripture explicitly states marriage must be heterosexual and consummated by such a union.

This becomes another region I cannot inhabit. I can follow its history, read its words, meet its people, but I am not allowed inside. Unless I hide.

## Homecoming

I now know words like “colliery,” “anthracite,” “bituminous,” and “pneumoconiosis.” They bring fresh depth to the ache I feel when I hold the aged images of Didi’s emaciated frame.

When his bed was moved downstairs because he no longer had strength or air.

You can remove the man from the mines, but you can’t remove the mines from the man.



He inhaled coal dust for thirty years. It lined his lungs as his body built miniature monuments with macrophages. They swelled in size until the air sacs bulged with fibrous nodules - like plastic bags ready to burst - as his own body

slowly

suffocated

him.

His black lungs unfurled to reveal the cuckoo’s wings.

## Full Disclosure

Growing up, I'd been told my family was Russian and the explanation always seemed to fit. My father's side was Russian Orthodox. They visited Moscow frequently to buy authentic death shrouds for when "their time" arrived.

My father remembers performing *prisyádka* – squat dancing, sometimes done in a circle if there are enough participants – at family events. When he went into the Army, he couldn't work in intel because we had family in Russia.

It was a fair assumption, but a wrong one as I would find out much later.

Exact values change as more people test. But as of 7 February 2022, at 8:50 a.m., Ancestry reports there is:

- 33% England and Northwestern Europe
- 17% Eastern Europe and Russia (remember this, we'll be revisiting it shortly)
- 15% Scotland
- 13% Sweden & Denmark
- 12% Wales
- 10% Germanic Europe

inside of me.

That Eastern Europe and Russia runs deeper. More precisely, it runs deep into Southern Poland and Eastern Slovakia: Southeast Subcarpathia. Where Didi lived. Where I want to return.

## There has been a Struggle

I am attempting to communicate the incommunicable. I am aware of that. You must understand, when there is confusion inside of you, the desire to push surpasses the point of anxiety. To expel and examine, poke at its pulsing heart, marveling at the writhing mass of tissue as it assembles itself.

I stood before the one person I couldn't stand the most and watched as my reflection peeled away the stubborn layer of insulating, yellow fat, down to the tender muscle.

I pulled myself from my own womb. Born again to survive, to remember, to tell the story. I need the world to know who I am and where I've been.

The braid begins here.

## My Wife

“Can I ask you something?”

She says in her softest voice, which usually means she’s about to clock me with a dose of truth that will push my hat back. I’m never ready for these moments, so I tell her she already asked me something. She rolls her eyes like her mother: so far back she should be able to inspect her own frontal lobes.

“Do you realize you’re going to have to write about the hard stuff, too? You’ll have to walk into that fire.”

I’ve been avoiding this for years. It’s easier to take the writhing, slippery, painful pieces and sort them into boxes. You tape them shut then put them away. Never touch them. Never bring them back out. They are relegated to the darkest corner or closet, one you seldom visited to begin with.

I don’t say anything. Her truth blow didn’t stun; rather, it reached into that darkness and caressed each one of those boxes. It said, *I know what you are and I know you’re still there.*

Those awful pieces are part of the foundation I rebuilt myself upon, weaving in my new-found ethnic knowledge to hold it all together. Somehow that’s how I healed myself.

I blink back tears but don’t look at her and say, “You’re right.”



## In the Confession Booth

I've never been to confession before. I don't even know how it works, or why it works. The practice seems archaic to me. Perhaps that's because I grew up under the shade of my Protestant mother.

I think I'm supposed to ask for forgiveness and then declare I've sinned to a robed man on the other side of a partition. There is no sin to confess; rather, a lesson was learned.

I have learned, violently, that not everyone who is concerned about you, loves you. What they love is their access to you. In 2003 on a sweltering summer night in Atlanta an ex-girlfriend held my wrists over my head with one hand and inflicted bone-deep betrayal.

I was raped by a woman.

But I had no proof. I had nothing. I returned home half human. A hollowed hovel disturbed by the very notion of my alleged emptiness.

Except, I wasn't really empty or hollow. I was full of fragile nerves, raw and pulsing, waiting. Waiting for one silent second to smother me. Waiting to shatter my carefully constructed calm.

The shame choked me every time my lips parted, every time I gagged on my own story. Rape Crisis said they couldn't help "my kind." A college professor said female rapists weren't "statistically significant." I had no room to breathe, to be.

I did what anyone else would have done

I ran like hell. I folded myself away and adopted a new me. This one hid herself in marriages to men, one in 2006, another in 2009, and one more in 2015. This one had babies, one in 2007, another in 2010, and one more in 2016. This one wasn't going to hell. More importantly, this one wasn't going to suffer anymore.

But she did.

## Some Girls Are Like Pysanky

those perfectly painted Easter eggs, their exterior  
obscured by carefully constructed swipes of color  
confined by eye and lip liner  
they are toned and highlighted and contoured,  
they are wrapped in the purest moon light,  
a delicate treasure.

But some girls are imposters, drawing on  
themselves in ink and wax, squeezing into  
whatever stitch has been left behind as they  
mimic the Easters around them, praying  
no one will notice their shell is cracked.

## My Wife

Do you know how hard it is to be vulnerable even if you trust someone? Because that's what drove you to TraumaVille in the first place.

I think my wife always knew there was something lingering behind the floodgates of my brain and teeth.

When I muster up the strength to say I was raped, not just by my ex-girlfriend, but also by an ex-husband, repeatedly

I laid myself bare. My shame dispelled; my demons exorcized.

“Well, that's the first step, isn't it?” She says.

“Open your mouth. Scream, cry, rage, but set it free. It's got to be heavy carrying that.” She says.

Like usual, she's right. Same-sex rape, spousal rape, they happen even if no one can understand or accept it.

My rapists, my society shoved me into solitary confinement. My own personal hell. And what took me so long to realize was I had the key to escape my cell the entire time.

Hidden

deep

inside my throat.

## In the Confession Booth

“Nothing but God is left to know,  
and why he left us all here hanging,  
with an illusion of a home.”  
Jack White

This religion thing, it irritates me like a fresh splinter in the pad of my finger. That is to say, I feel disconnected from my Didi and my Rusyn kin. But the human soul: his soul, my soul, their souls, is temporary ground. Something both Old and New Countries can agree upon.

Pen in hand. Fingers hovering over keys, poised to strike. What can I possibly write? Put one word after the other until the chain means something. But how can it mean anything now that I’ve opened Pandora’s proverbial Box? I know what I’ve seen, but I can’t unread what I’ve read.

Peter van Inwagen sums up dualism like this: “when one dies, one’s body decays, and what one *is*, what one has been all along, an immaterial soul or mind or self, continues to exist.”<sup>5</sup> Sounds familiar, right? Of course, it does. Greek metaphysics was an inseparable part of the developing church.

But folks like good ol’ Pete, David Kyle Johnson, and Nancey Murphy don’t buy it for a minute. They’d rather us choke on materialism. Johnson says, “since neuroscience has shown us that the cause of all we do is neural firings in the brain, not the activity of the soul, there is no explanatory gap for the soul to fill.”<sup>6</sup> They say one can be a Christian and not believe in the soul. Humans are material beings only.

Soulless.

Soulless?

The temporary ground I sought is neither temporary nor ground.

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<sup>5</sup> van Inwagen, Peter. “Dualism and Materialism: Athens and Jerusalem?” *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 12, no. 4, 1995, pp. 475-488. *Philosophy Document Center*, <https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil199512444>. Accessed 1 May 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Johnson, David Kyle. “Do Souls Exist?” *Think*, vol. 12, no. 35, 2013, pp. 61-75. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175613000195>. Accessed 30 April 2021.

Fire

is dangerous when not respected.

So are women.

## In the Confession Booth

Once upon a time, my father said he was afraid he wouldn't see me in heaven. Why? Because I'm a lesbikka, a lesbian. The same reason that makes me wonder if Didi is proud of me; if he sees my journey and loves it for me.

I've truly come to believe there is only one place where we could ever burn eternally and that is under the constant critiquing gaze of our fellow humankind. The ones who are supposed to love us unconditionally but then shun us because, somehow, what we do with our bits is anyone's business but our own.

I want to believe things like this don't matter once you're dead. Of course, no one knows for certain. Somehow it only makes sense to the living to fight constant battles over them in the pulpit. On Capitol Hill. At the dinner table.

But when ties are severed or wrists are cut, they may never notice your departure.

II.

“Grab hold of yourself, I know what it’s like to get blown away  
I know you, you’ve done  
Your dirt and you’ve dug your graves  
And it feels like you won’t be saved  
I say grab hold yourself and face those days  
When you feel like it always rains  
I’ve seen the sunny side of hell,  
That which I never thought I’d find for myself  
Never thought I’d find for myself.”

Grieves

“Who counseled you to come?  
Was it you, or the Spirit?”

Shtefan Sukhÿi

## The Story So Far

I met my wife in the summer of 2018. Believe it or not, we met online on a free dating site. She was a smooth talker who wasn't afraid of my intellect. We'd been talking to each other for a couple of months before we ever met face-to-face.

Our first date was on a late July afternoon, hot and humid. We met at a restaurant. Me, her, her best friend, and her best friend's husband. *No, this isn't weird at all*, I remember silently assuring myself as we were seated.

The husband unrolled his silverware, smoothed his napkin against the tabletop. He uncapped a black pen and asked me for my date of birth. The first twenty minutes were spent analyzing my character via numerology.

Meanwhile, my actual date couldn't even bring herself to look at me.

And yet, when our arms barely brushed, an electric pulse pass between us. So much so we looked at each other every time it happened.

I've never been able to explain that electricity. It wasn't anything like the static shock you feel when you touch a metal doorknob. This was a beat independent of the heart, a synchronizing of souls. From that moment, I knew this woman at my side was my person.

Years after that first date, when I made the decision to write this, all of *this*, my wife looked into my eyes and asked, "Are you sure you can handle *this*?"

The short answer was always, no, I'm not sure. But as she held my hand that same pulse passed between our palms.

That's the crazy-beautiful thing: the pulse has only intensified. As if our first kiss asking her to marry me at her first Pride Day changing her last name the day we got married nurtured it, grew it into the strength I needed to finish what I started.



## In the Confession Booth

I wasn't supposed to be here, in this collection. This was supposed to be about Didi, our people, our ethnicity. But the more I wrote, the harder it became to separate my self-discovery story from my discovery of him.

Blogger Jess Wilson wrote something that struck me so hard, I had to write it down on the first thing I could find, which happened to be a half-used napkin. She wrote: "It wouldn't have been hard to find her if they'd thought it was important. But clearly, the story isn't about her, even though it's her story."

I wept. No one has ever asked me my story; I've always had to volunteer it. Even though it's my story, it's never been about me. It has always been about someone else: my children, my rapists, my exes, my parents.

The only person to ever ask my story because it was mine is my wife.

Yes, I am still telling Didi's story. I am still telling the story of our Lemko brothers and sisters. But I'm also telling my story because I can. Because I must. Because this could be someone's survival guide. Because I want to be what I didn't have for so long

a light in endless darkness.

I think that's called hope.

## Traumaville

You are reading wounds  
mine, his, maybe you'll even read some of your own  
in the cracks between the bed and the wall  
between paragraphs in history books  
in the space between us as we watch the fire climb  
like verdant ivy. At the end of the day  
we aren't so different  
we've all visited this town, driven on its  
pock-marked streets, and wailed at its nameless crossroads.  
How did we get here? Sometimes it's like  
inmates comparing what sent them to prison  
Traumaville has many sets of iron bars  
unseen yet multiplying every day. You  
may still be there, plagued by memories, choking  
on your own silence. There is no map,  
no compass to direct your escape  
but I know the trick:  
hoist your pain into the fire, follow the flames  
into the sky.

## In the Confession Booth

This fire is just waiting for fuel

kindling

tinder

these flammable memories,

they are a part of me but they are not all I am. I'll cast them into the blaze. The flames grow taller like children as the years unfold. And as the conflagration swells double, it swallows me.

My skin sizzles with blisters but underneath there is something more, a second skin. With one hand I tug, gently at first then harder, tearing ragged sheets loose revealing rosy, tender flesh with a story inscribed in these blue-violet veins.

Maybe this isn't just a vatra, maybe this is as much a funeral pyre as it is a phoenix's nest.

Zlozhte vetse drov do ohnya – throw some more wood on the fire.

## Revelation

Let me go going home homecoming queen of the castle hill fort in ancient times but there are no more minutes only seconds between seconds as I gorge gouge my eyes to make magic in those hills living in my blood and bloody past remember have hope for the see of tomorrow marrow exposed in this ritual it's magical this knowledge now back away from that ledge repeat after me "you are free now" now that I am free fall into the arms of the mountain mother mama don't you forget to breathe I swear to god don't you ever forget who you are

## My Wife

I want to go to Kalnica. My cousin told me not to bother, hasn't been anything there since 1945. But I want to bother. I feel like if I could just go one time, I would be closer to Didi and then I would know that mysterious piece of myself better. As if there is a piece of him left behind for only me to find.

I tell my wife when we go, I'm taking a mason jar. I will fill it to the top with dirt and welcome the questions from customs. I want to bring it home, an organic trophy for our mantle. She never argues, though I often wonder what she thinks of this. I know she isn't thrilled about being in an airplane for fourteen hours just to get to Krakow.

Thanks to the pandemic, this plane ride is on hold. We also have reservations about travelling to Poland. It can be hostile toward the LGBTIQ+ community. Even though the government has made progress, there are still no protections for health services, hate crimes, or hate speech. Gay marriage is still illegal.

It all makes me wonder: would Didi speak to me if he were still alive? Would he honor the little family my wife and I have created? My wife doesn't offer any conjecture on the matter.

Sometimes I lie awake at night and think. If my father had such a hard time accepting and respecting us, then wouldn't Didi? Or is it different when you're dead? Does it even matter?

My wife says nothing, only shrugs her freckled shoulders. Later she'll tell me she loves how I look when I'm sorting through my thoughts.

I sort through them so often they frustrate me because they're always the same. So, one day we'll go to Kalnica, even though I'm unsure what I'll find there besides dirt.

## Home

1. Hirsch felt that postmemorial work took those who weren't directly affected by generational traumas and engaged them via memorial signals – literature, testimony, and photographs.
2. Every photo of Didi is the closest thing I'll ever have to a time machine. Sometimes I think I can see my own faint figure somewhere in the background. But even if I could inhabit one singular moment, there would be no revelations. I'm only a ghost haunting the frame.
3. Images can mediate an act of return. However, the promise of revelation is a false one. "Return to a place literally loosens the defensive walls against the sorrow of loss" (207).<sup>7</sup>
4. Maybe that's why Didi never went back to Kalnica, to its soil and its memory; he knew he'd only be a phantom to those hills.
5. Trauma's history leaves scars on places and people. Forgetting, erasing, start to look appealing and "'home' becomes a place of no return" (212).<sup>8</sup>
6. So much so that loss becomes a family secret.

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<sup>7</sup> Hirsch, Marianne. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. New York, Columbia University Press, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

## In the Confession Booth

I feel like a bad Lemko, in a way.

Religion is defining for the Lemkos. This explains the arguments over Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, and Jewish dogmas that still plague us.

My family is devoutly Russian Orthodox. So much so that even if they didn't make it to church, my Baba would oust my father from his bed: "Get up, Claudie! The Priest is reading from the Bible!"

But me? I eat meat on Fridays, sleep until noon some Sundays, and my sons aren't being raised in a church. Am I even doing this ethnicity thing right?

What do I look like to the Lemkos who are still here, completing their own genealogical jigsaws?  
What do my Ancestors see?

It shouldn't matter what anyone sees. I want to feel closer to Didi, but this is not the way.

## Feast During Famine

My father shows his love with food. He delights in grocery trips buying sugary cereals and candies for his grandsons, soup bones for the dogs. He pays for dinner at a restaurant without a second thought. This has always struck me as interesting.

Until my mother told me that's the way his mother was.

My Baba, Didi's daughter.

I'm told Didi did the same, showering those around him with sweet snacks. Did he show love that way because he understood how hollow a hungry belly was? When the only thing that filled him was the echo of the cuckoo's call? Is that why he grew his own food in the backyard when the grocer was down the street?

To be prepared, just in case the pangs of hunger rumbled through his being again?



I certify this instrument  
to be a true and correct  
copy of the original record  
filed in this court.

*Barbara Hunt*  
Barbara Hunt  
Probate Court Clerk, Richmond County Ga  
10-6-2020

COUNTY NO. 1006

STATE OF GEORGIA

# Marriage License

COUNTY OF RICHMOND

To any Clergy or any other person authorized to solemnize: You are hereby authorized and permitted to join the persons named below in Matrimony.

**ASHLEY NICHOLE STEVENS and RHEAGAN ELAINA CHAVIS**

According to The Constitution and Laws of this State, and for doing so this shall be your sufficient license.

Given Under My Hand and Seal, this twenty fourth day of September, two thousand twenty

*[Signature]* Deputy Clerk / Clerk

I hereby Certify, That **ASHLEY NICHOLE STEVENS** and **RHEAGAN ELAINA CHAVIS**

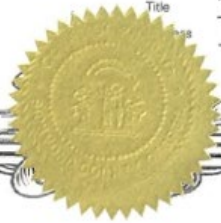
were joined together in matrimony on this 25 day of September, 2020  
by me in the City of Hephzibah, County of Richmond, Georgia.

Recorded on the sixth day of October, two thousand twenty  
in Book 5/2020 Page 1006

**Harry B. James III, Probate Judge**

Officiant Must Sign this Copy. Return to  
Probate Judge Immediately

Signature of Officiant *Rev. Debra Guthrie*  
Title Reverend Debra Guthrie  
379 BARAARD AVE  
Aiken SC 29801 COUNTY COPY



## My Wife

We were wed during the pandemic in the fall of 2020. My wife specifically asked me not to say we were wed “during the plague year.” She didn’t say I couldn’t write it, though.

Out of safety concerns, we had our wedding outside. We didn’t invite many people and even fewer actually came; but the ones who were there were the ones who mattered the most. My father even came.

As we posed for pictures he refused to be in, something caught my eye. The biggest, boldest rainbow stretched above us.

Later, my wife would tell me, “I was praying to every ancestor the rain would hold off just long enough for the ceremony. I’m pretty sure the rainbow was proof they heard me.”

## Relics of Remembrance, Revisited

1. I remember that night with her differently. The white streetlight shining under the hotel curtains. My cheeks damp and my mouth dry. There was no sound. The worst part is knowing I could have screamed.
2. My older sons know what happened that night. I pray all of my ~~trauma~~ is never theirs. *In the name of the Father.*
3. I remember wishing he would have hit me instead of making me his personal concubine. I remember the force, humiliation, and shame when I said no or even tried to resist him. Even at eight months pregnant when sex triggered crippling contractions, he weaponized intimacy.
4. Eventually, we became a survivor family, fractured and disrupted. But through the blood-letting of fracture, we found wholeness. *In the name of the Son.*
5. I remember the day I told my sons we wouldn't be going back to our old house, that I was getting divorced. My middle son leapt to his feet clapping. He said, "That means momma's not gonna cry anymore!"
6. Life is only as good as the memories we make. This is me taking back what is rightfully mine. May my sons connect so deeply to their futures they shrug off the past like a wet coat. *In the name of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Thanks, Kyle

As my tattoo guy was adding to the art on my forearm  
the word LEMKO with the colors blue, brown and green filling the letters –  
we talked about Didi.

Of course, the history lesson came first,  
it always does.

Then came my usual musings:  
“He took his story to his grave”

and

“Everything I know, I had to decipher myself.”

Kyle paused as the needles, grouped in threes, penetrated  
my pale flesh, and then said:

“But what if he just wanted to forget?”

III.

“And I went to the doctor, I went to the mountains  
I looked to the children, I drank from the fountains  
There’s more than one answer to these questions  
Pointing me in a crooked line  
And the less I seek my source for some definitive  
(The less I seek my source)  
The closer I am to fine.”

The Indigo Girls

“And these words, my voice, are Rusyn.  
Holy, immortal, real,  
You see them, read them - they exist,  
And I exist. I live them.”

Ivan Petrovtsii

## The Story So Far

My mother frequently tells a particular story from my babyhood. I was quite young with a wicked ear infection no medication seemed to touch. She'd heard of this elderly woman nearby who was a healer, so she took me to her. The woman held me in her arms, one hand cupped over my ear, as she paced the floor, whispering.

After that, the infection cleared.

My father once told me we are all healers. That we can feel our own energy if we hold our cupped hands three or four inches apart. It's like holding a ball. Focus all your thoughts on that imaginary ball. You can feel it get warmer and heavier. Move your hands farther apart, you feel it get bigger. Touch someone with that ball in your hands.

Another infection cleared.

Consider this me healing myself from what I used to be. These words flow from a place of pain, tangled in strands of history. Sometimes "I don't know" is the best and only answer to purge the infection.

Press these pages to your chest. Do you feel it now?

## The Family Historian

is the bone  
    name  
    memory  
collector  
a curator of one humble slice of human history  
all of which comes to them on loan  
with the promise not that they will be returned  
but that they will be forwarded  
to the next generation  
knowledge passed like witchcraft to  
resurrect something better than Lazarus.

## My Wife

“Reclaiming yourself is messy business,” I tell her one evening as I sit hunched over my laptop while she plays her video game. We’re both under the quilt on our bed. Outside the streetlights have come on and the droning hum of cicadas begins to quiet.

“There isn’t a guide on how to do it. You just wake up one morning, sick of self-compromise, and decide to throw yourself into the fire. All your knowledge, all your pain is laid bare. And everyone who ever meant anything to you is watching.

“They know it isn’t their fire. They can’t put their hands in the flames, scorching their skin to wrench you free. All they can do is watch, unsure if you’re going to survive this time.”

She nods her head but says nothing. I know what she’s thinking. She’s watched me as I’ve dragged fresh kindling, screamed as the flames licked my flesh. She’s watched me collapse in a heap of blisters, convinced I won’t get back up. Each time her hands are clasped in front of her, beach glass eyes filled with tears as she asks, “Are you sure this isn’t too much for you?”

But lately, I’ve started something new: straightening my spin, standing on tiptoe twirling, as I whistle to the cuckoo. My skin brilliant diamond, fire reflecting fire, dazzling as I dance to a fervent beat only I can hear.

Until I stopped to watch her sway, my rhythm’s twin. I hold my open palms out to her. This was never just my fire.

It’s about time I ask her to join the dance.



## True Story

I once dreamt of a man I'd never seen before. Tall, pale, well-dressed in a khaki-colored jacket, his sandy blond hair neatly parted to the side. I couldn't see his eyes but no one can see eyes in their dreams.

He stood next to me with his arms crossed over his chest. It could have been a spring day on Mars for all I know. He said to me, "Ashley, sometimes the dead roam the earth out of regret. Don't do that. Don't regret anything."

Days later I would happen upon a photo of that man in the desk under the cuckoo clock. My Grand Uncle Wassil, Didi's son.

Someone once said, "Write the truest sentence that you know." So, here's my sentence:

I have never felt more loved than I do right now by those I can touch and those I cannot.

## Update

Each of my sons have been gifted a DNA test for their eleventh birthdays. So far, two of the three have been tested.

Both tests originally reflected Eastern Europe and Russia in their results. However, the more people test, the more refined the results become. Nothing could have prepared me for the most recent update to their profiles.

What is reflected now?

Southeast Subcarpathia.

Rusyn.

Lemko.

Proof positive we still live. Not even an entire government could eradicate us. Not even diaspora. Another generation to sing our story of shared sorrow and glory.



## The Vatra Reflected

Psychologically speaking, genetic memory is a memory present at birth that exists in the absence of experience. It is incorporated into the human genome over long periods of time.

The past is prologue.

I read an article years ago about genetic memory. It initiates an epigenetic loop which is necessary to preserve centromere position. In other words, this is as real as Didi was and I am.

Truth really is stranger than fiction. That's why this is poetry.

Jung's collective unconscious is a type of genetic memory. It can be shared by individuals with a common Ancestor or history.

Didi's past was my prologue.

Bio-cultural information is just a fancy way of saying I love him and our people to my bones.

I found an article about genetic memory published in 1908. Didi was sixteen.

Calcified, solidified love sallied forth when I was born. It remains to be seen if my sons will feel the same.

Make no mistake: I have been in pursuit of healing and memories. Healing memories.

I Googled if it is possible to miss someone you've never met. Apparently, you can, because missing someone implies connection. It can be as distant as the deceased relative you've only heard about through stories.

This is why I write: so no one forgets Didi.

Another tidbit: our memory of someone is stored in our forebrains, constantly being refined. But once that someone dies, we can no longer update that memory with new information.

Surrogates for Didi include stories, photographs, and my father's face.

Perhaps this is why some cultures believe an Ancestor must be remembered somehow in order to tether them to their new home in the afterlife.

I'm not sure if Didi will ever be whole in my mind. Maybe I can see him without using my eyes.

The point of death recedes into the past. Can this absence be manifested?

Of course, it can.

You're holding it.

## Radical

“If evil is morally objectionable, even for some good end, it does not necessarily lead us to believe that God does not exist. Rather, it challenges us to think about the kind of God that might exist.”  
Brian C. Macallan<sup>9</sup>

Maybe I should cut God some slack. No parent ever knows if their kids are gonna grow up to be assholes.

Hear me out.

If we remove omniscience and omnipotence from the religious equation, what are we left with? A parent who loves their children, a parent who tries their best to guide them but understands their babies will make their own decisions.

What God would allow my Great Grand Aunt to keep her faith despite her Ukrainian relocation? What God would allow Talerhof to exist? And the Lattimer Massacre?

I get it now. This parent, who loves unconditionally, doesn't know any more than we do. So, I'm done being angry at fate, at God, at anything that could have dictated tragedy.

God deserves some grace. The kind of grace we're supposed to allow ourselves and each other. And maybe that grace will let us do what we're supposed to do: play until the streetlights come on and it's time to go home.

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<sup>9</sup> Macallan, Brian C. “Getting off the Omnibus: Rejecting Free Will and Soul-Making Responses to the Problem of Evil.” *Open Theology*, vol. 6, 2020, pp. 35-42.

## My Wife

From the center of the low-flickering flames I say, “I dreamt I was nine months pregnant with a little girl last night.”

I say, “Everything felt different. I didn’t know it was a girl; I just had a feeling. I wasn’t sick. I carried high. You were there.”

My wife smiles sagely, her arms encircling my waist. “You dream about her when you’re writing. Did you name her Epona like you always do?”

I nod, keeping my head low. Perhaps she won’t see the tears building at the corners of my eyes as we sway in time to our own breathing.

“It’s almost over,” she says. “You did exactly what you said you would. I’m proud of you.”

I can’t help but look into her eyes, beach glass green reflecting the smoldering embers, as the low warble of the cuckoo reverberates around us

I look into her eyes

and I know I couldn’t have made it this far without her.

## The Day My Great Grandfather Smiled

Too often I have misplaced myself among the shelves of others. Blending makeup, constructing masks until I disappeared. My voice reduced to little more than a mournful sob when I remembered love shouldn't hurt.

*He whispered, "I gotta get you back to you."*

My multiple invisible lives bound me in  
shame  
    for being unable to be anyone other than me  
guilt  
    for creating a false face.

The scars I hid were the remnants of someone else's malfunction.

*Across the void, he reached for me. "Gotta get you back to you."*

I woke from a cultural coma the day I discovered his village, the day I learned we had a name. I rebuilt myself from Lemko up. Trashed the makeup, broke the masks, because I chose myself just like he did when he came here in 1909.

*Ya tya lyublyu, vnučka.*



## Christmas Dinner with Teresa

For Teresa Firehouse

A dinner without food, but everyone's invited. You pray they all show since you can't exactly RSVP for this.

You pray

because you want to know you aren't alone, that you really do have somewhere to go.

Teresa tells us there is nothing but love served here; so maybe Didi will show up after all.

My father's side of the family elbows their way to the table, led by none other than my Baba. She makes sure I know it's her by reiterating her love of costume jewelry and Avon perfume. She brings up the number thirteen and Cousin Helen before my Uncle Paul and Grand Aunt Mary can finally get a word in. My heart flutters like cuckoo wings.

But there's one more, Teresa says. A fatherly figure who passed from something in his lungs.

She says I have a tattoo in his honor.

And I cry because my sleeves are long and she cannot see the foreign word on my arm

because she does not know

my plan to photograph the Beskids myself to transpose them to my skin.

No, Teresa from Indiana couldn't know this as we sit at her table with my family. The ones I miss the most, the man I never met.

## Still Standing

If history is written by the winners  
then consider

this

a victory speech.

## My Wife

We're at Hilton Head Island on vacation when I do the thing

sitting on the gray beach watching the Atlantic's cloudy waters wash over my feet. My three sons are building a sandcastle nearby and lobbing gobs of wet sand at each other when I say,

"Isn't it amazing that the one thing that could testify to all of human history can't speak?"

I say,

"The ocean will outlive us all. What if the ocean is God?"

My wife stares at me, her bottle of Smirnoff sweating under the sun's scrutiny. "That brain of yours never gets a vacation. What's next? God's gonna call you on his shell phone?"

Our five-year-old belly laughs, which makes us all laugh, and now I've forgotten

why anything else would matter more than these four human beings right now.

## Epilogue

“the spines of books connect  
page to page  
writer to reader  
teacher to student  
page to page  
past to future  
pain to power  
page to page  
rage to peace.”

Laurie Halse Anderson

“I was, I am, and will always be a Rusyn.”

Alexander Dukhnoych

## An Open Letter to the Man I Never Met but Will Always Know

My Dearest Didi,

I recently read an article - and now I sound like my father, who looks like you because he looks like your daughter - regarding Ukrainian folk beliefs about death. I know, I know. We aren't Ukrainian. We aren't Russian or Hungarian or Slovak or Polish or Romanian. But history has spoken. I'm getting sidetracked.

Back to the article. It's important because it told me a secret, which often happens while doing research. It told me, "At that moment," (this means that sliver of a second when the body straddles the rickety fence separating life from death) "the soul of a righteous person would take the form of pale smoke."<sup>10</sup>

All those books I read. That stack of articles that stood past my ankle, and this one was the winner.

I found you, Didi.

When I was in labor with my youngest son, I saw smoke.

When I made my commitment to tell your story, I saw smoke.

In the hallway, in my office, in the car, at dinner, in the backyard, I see you because you've always come to me the only way you know how: as a puff of pale gray smoke, the soul of a righteous person. What I can only hope mine is.

As I sift through the photos, the grainy copies, the family folklore, I catch myself wishing I could hold your creased face in my hands, look deep into your slate blue eyes, and ask, "Can you tell me about the world you left behind? What did it mean to leave Lemkovyna and how can I get back there?"

But I know none of those questions truly matter. Because you, my wisp, have never truly left me. All the answers I have ever sought flow through my veins.

Ya tya lyublyu,

Ashley

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<sup>10</sup> Kukharenko, Svitlana. "Traditional Ukrainian Folk Beliefs about Death and the Afterlife." *Folklorica*, vol. 16, 2011, pp. 65-86.

## DON'T SKIP THIS PART EITHER

Years ago, I was told to seek the noblest. I carried that in my pocket like a lucky penny until it fell from the jeans my rapists tore from me. Lost in the detritus, I sputtered, stuttered, searching for the faintest shimmer of that copper-bright wisdom. It seemed gone forever until

I discovered Didi.

Then, with the aching slowness of frostbitten fingers warming before the fire, I rediscovered the noblest. The cuckoo came to me.

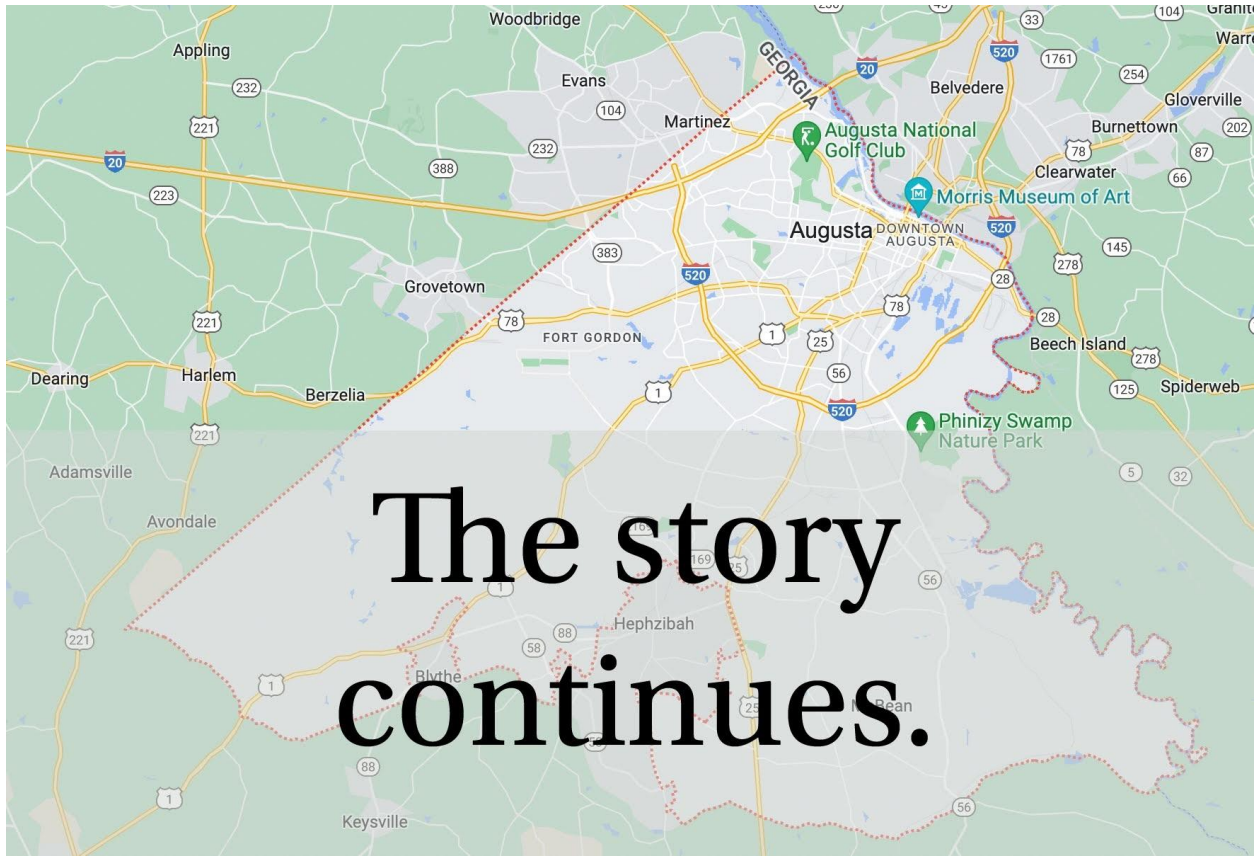
Do you understand now?

Existence is a survivor's story tattooed on the brain. It is an unwelcome narrative that shapes our neurological pathways and leaves us haunted by chemically created devils. It changes the trajectory of our tongues. It pushes us past the preconceived course into uncertainty. It unmakes us.

But that doesn't mean we can't be realigned, returned, reassembled.

I don't know what you have lost. I don't know what you seek. But I hope, as you read these words, you will always remember that love is the greatest of all things.

Take that however you need it.



## Vita

Ashley Nichole Stevens holds a Bachelor of Art in sociology and creative writing, both awarded by Augusta University. She will complete her Master of Fine Art in creative writing in December of 2022. She is the recipient of the 2021 Anna Donson Memorial Scholarship from the Carpatho-Rusyn Society.

Her first short story, “Meet the Lesbians,” was published in 2014, followed by “Nor the Demons Under the Sea” in 2016. Her poetry has been published in several anthologies as well as the literary magazine *Pegasus*. She also placed first in the traditional category at Augusta’s Pagan Poetry Rite in association with Pagan Pride Day.

Beginning in January 2023, Mrs. Stevens will be teaching English part-time at Augusta University. She can be reached at [prosepoet84@gmail.com](mailto:prosepoet84@gmail.com).