

ESSAY

Flowers Stay Fresh

by tony lashden



"Last Gasp" by David Goodrum

This essay starts on September 25th. The rent is overdue, and I'm lying in the bedroom calculating how many days we have before our landlord starts sending reminders about the payment. The calculation provides no solace, and I reach out to my phone.

This essay starts with a knot of shame deep inside my stomach, it starts with my message: "Hey, just wanted to let you know that the payment might be a couple of days late. We are trying a new way to send the payment directly from my bank." Are we trying the new way of sending the payment? No. Scarcity is sour, and so is lying; I swallow their acid taste.

This essay starts as a spike of anxiety, a spasm in my hand caused by constant checking of the bank account (Has the money arrived yet? How about now? And now? And now?) It's almost midnight; the bank day is over. I take two pills to reduce stress. I count to a hundred and then back. I listen to the sound of the rain in the forest.

I count money all the time; I don't remember the last time I felt carefree about it. When I go to the shopping mall, I visit each store at least three times. First, I identify what I need to buy, then I compare price, and only during the third visit I might buy something. Each item I buy translates to hours of under-paid work I need to perform to substitute the financial loss. I see everything in workhours: a book is two hours, a sweater is ten hours, new pair of boots – a full working week.

On September 25th, in my bed, instead of having sex, or reading books, or enjoying the movies, I count money. I combine the rent, and the food, and the upcoming payment for the car repair, and then, already exhausted and nauseated by the estimated amount, I add the surgery I need to take in three days.

With this grand total shimmering in mind, I sit down to write about precarity, queerness, and embodiment of marginalisation.

I think it's only fair to ask where the money is. "Why is the payment delayed again?" I ask my manager the next day, and she doesn't know. Sometimes it happens, she explains. Invoices slip into the cracks, people don't pay attention to the pay-date, but this should be fixed soon.

I call an activist friend of mine to talk about this, and we laugh in our high-pitched hyena's voices. My friend lives in another country, and because of me not having the documents and her not having the visa, and us not having money, we haven't seen each other for two years. Only those who are well-off can afford not looking at the pay-dates.

I have started working with them in March, right after I had to move from another country to my current place of residence. Why am I faltering here? Why wouldn't I write directly: I move from country A to country B, from city X to city Z? This is what fear of political persecution does to a person: it erases all sense of safety and substitutes it with constant self-policing. I'm always on the guard, even in this essay which is directed toward me and me only.

The abrupt move burned the last savings I had. I had to hire three different realtors to find me a place to live. Even with that, the whole first week I was searching for the apartment I was close to full-blown, corporeal hysteria that nested in my throat. Each time I opened my mouth, I wanted to howl.

I was dismembered by anxiety and tiredness. I was a container for psychosomatic disorders which only piled up: pain in the stomach, pain in the muscles, headache, nose bleeds, a glorious return of the eczema which I thought was cured in my adolescence. A weak, drained body; a shattered, frail mind — that's me in March.

Since March, I haven't received a single payment in time from my workplace.

When I began to work in the nonprofit sector in Belarus, my first boss warned me: the money will never come in time, and sometimes the money will not be the same amount as originally promised, and I might need to invest significant time to remind people to pay me. But at the end of the day, everything will work out.

I haven't been employed full-time in the Belarusian nonprofit sector for many years now. People might say that I have managed to build an impressive career where I can comfortably lean on my middle class stability and the privilege of being employed in the Global North. And yet, the basics stay the same. The money never came in time, and sometimes it was not the same amount as promised, and I had to invest significant time to remind people that this was, in fact, the full-time job that I had, not some random professional detour that I was taking while my parents were paying for my livelihood.

By the end of September 26th, I filed four different letters. I wrote to the financial department, to my supervisor, to the executive director of the organisation, and to the HR. I tried to sound angry and frustrated in the emails to convey the urgency of the situation, but I was, in fact, neither angry, nor frustrated.

I was scared and sad.

I have migrated —

I wanted to give a number, a solid, impressive number of how many times I had to pack my belongings and leave countries which I considered to be my home. But I pause. I let myself take a step from this compulsion. What do I want to achieve by outlining how many countries I had to leave?

I want to shock, to provoke pity and maybe guilt trip the reader a bit — oh, poor thing, they had to leave everything behind, not once, and not even twice, but three, four, five times! The avalanche of my forced exile rumbles. But this essay doesn't have a reader. It is only me who is being buried under the memory of my loss.

It's a learned trick, a muscle reflex of always performing the suffering, narrating my story in simple terms of being a victim, a collateral damage of state repressions, the war, the political crisis. Long ago, when I was in my early twenties, I was invited to speak on a panel about young feminist activism. The moderator of the conversation asked what the situation on the ground for queer organisers in Belarus was. I was interrupted mid-sentence describing my diverse movement. "But it is dangerous, isn't it?" The moderator asked, "You are being hunted by the police, correct?"

Apologies for forgetting that I was hunted by the police and thinking that my life was not only a legacy of my violators.

Yes, I was leaving several countries, but I always planned to come back. I have loyally paid the rent for the apartment in Kyiv which I had to abandon in February 2022 for the whole year under the delusional assumption that I will return promptly. I'm still paying the utilities fees for the flat in Minsk, though in September it was precisely two years since I last stepped into that space. Last month, my utilities fees in Belarus amounted to 100 euros — a price one pays for the uncured nostalgia, for a fragile fantasy of homecoming.

I didn't leave out of my free will. Though I tried to resist, my intermittent trail of existing was forcefully erased. During the summer, I was reading the *Copenhagen Trilogy* of Tove Ditlevsen. In "Youth," Denmark is occupied, and the auto/fictional narrator explains that though occupation affected the tempo of life and imposed some limitations, she was too busy with other things to get involved in politics.

While reading this, I felt that my face was numbing from envy. I was trapped in a queer trans body that unfortunately, by itself, was political. I never had a chance to opt out. I woke up each day and was already enmeshed in politics.

I was surrounded by politics, I was trapped in politics, I was suffocating in politics.

On September 27th, I wake up from acute pain below my stomach.

I wanted to dedicate this paragraph to a description of pain: its chronic, teeth gritting nature. I wanted to write how pain becomes a perpetual part of reality, and eventually one gets so accustomed to it that they lose all memory of life before the pain.

I wanted to write that I haven't seen doctors for a year and a half. I didn't know the language; I didn't have ID documents; I was afraid of prejudices against trans and queer people. I didn't have the money; I didn't know where to go. I didn't have the insurance; I didn't have time. I was too impacted by depression and PTSD — I can name a dozen different reasons why I couldn't attend a doctor, so by September 27th my situation became quite urgent.

But then my English stumbled.

I sat in front of this essay for several hours. I was searching for words to capture the burning wound that I cradled in my stomach; the way I was lying in bed crying, afraid of the tiniest move. I crawled to the kitchen to take painkillers, where I sank on the floor stunned by the complete shut-down of my body.

I didn't know a way to describe the physicality of my pain using this language. Instantly, I felt the need to connect this private experience to a broader range of texts, terms, and frameworks to justify its existence. What did Sara Ahmed write about queerness, ache, and inclusion?

I exploited my English (and consequently, my trauma) to produce two master's degrees in European universities. One could say that this is a fair market exchange, yet after all these years of narrating my pain in purely academic terms, I'm so alienated from it that I no longer remember what I experienced in the first place. I recall events happening to me as premises that informed my feminist *standpoint*, my *positionality*, aiding me to better reflect on the *systems of power and exploitation*.

I've learned this language and I have repeatedly translated myself with it. I alternated my reality to better fit into the reports on human rights violations, shadow reports to the UN mechanisms, and regional statistics on hate crimes. I annotated and interpreted my life so that it was clear, accessible, and engaging to people who made decisions about my future. Was my story convincing enough to grant me a visa; enough so that I won't get arrested? Was it compelling enough to give me a scholarship, so that I can pay for the medications and

rent? In English, I'm always chiselling myself, erasing the complexity and entanglements.

What can I write in English about my life as a queer migrant: a politically persecuted feminist activist, a survivor of violence, and a nonbinary trans person? What can I write as a national of a country who officially stated that I'm no longer wanted in that country and will be criminally charged if I decide to come back?

My existence only had meaning and value when it was connected and extraposed to what was happening in the Global North. How can we use "Gender Trouble" by Judith Butler to discuss queer migration from/in Eastern Europe? How can notes of Audre Lorde on her trip to Russia inform my solidarity with Black liberation movements? None of these texts were written about me. But struggling with the emptiness and horrific violence that I was subjected to, I gaslighted myself to think that they were.

And now, when I'm finally writing about myself in English, I'm at loss for words.

What is this if not an attempt to speak into the void, to make the void my *modus operandi*?

By the late evening of September 27th, while I still haven't received my salary, I reach out to my activist friend.

I ask for the money.

She doesn't reply, and I wait until midnight before trying to go to sleep.

September 28th starts when I enter the hospital at 10 o'clock and she sends a bank receipt.

"Sorry, took a bit longer than I expected. I added an additional 20 euros. Buy yourself something."

When the surgery is over, I buy a bundle of tulips in the lobby.

The flowers stay fresh for another week when the salary finally arrives.