

Iya KIVA

Poems

eight years of saying: back home there's a war
so I finally accept it: my home is a war
it's a slow train cross-country east to west
where death transports life

night falls to the ground with the spasms of wilted flowers
and lies down in our mouths with teeth rotten from silence
now our language is volunteer-refugee chatter
where sirens sing songs to Odysseus

now our memory is freedom's stained vyshyvanka
her long walk from heart to heart

13.03.2023

translated by Amelia Glaser and Yulia Ilchuk

is there hot war in the tap
is there cold war in the tap
how is it that there's absolutely no war
it was promised for after lunch
we saw the announcement with our own eyes
"war will arrive at fourteen hundred hours"

and it's already three hours without war
six hours without war
what if there's no war by the time night falls
we can't do laundry without war
can't make dinner
can't drink tea plain without war

and it's already eight days without war
we smell bad
our wives don't want to lie in bed with us
the children have forgotten to smile and complain
why did we always think we'd never run out of war

let's start, yes, let's start visiting neighbors to borrow war
on the other side of our green park
start fearing to spill war in the road
start considering life without war a temporary hardship

in these parts it's considered unnatural
if war doesn't course through the pipes
into every house
into every throat

2016

translated by Katherine E. Young

[refugees. the station]

1

the long road home to a home no longer there
lays breath tracks through the station in Lviv --
people with death faces gaze at their empty lives
the way last year's snowmen gaze at the war's first flowers

tears collect in their eyes like dried glue --
you can only remove this ordeal along with their eyes
to embed the black apple trees of time
in the dusty pathways of their palms

the rain greets the exiles with postcards from family albums
where war is always sitting in all the chairs
a bullet-hole in its mouth, smiling at the birdie of death,
as if at a joke that others can't crack

the world has studied the photo captions countless times
mariupol hostomel irpin borodianka chernihiv bucha
this cyrillic music hangs in the air like a long flame
that sticks under your nails with the dirty water of shame

2

just one step, death, and we'll eat you for dinner
our rusty tin-can lives aren't your cup of tea
just one step, death, and you'll never leave this table
like a cracked tray strewn with free people's hair

3

people step in puddles because there are no other paths
except to accept defeat like the free bread at train stations
into which volunteers slip the keys to future lives
if only we can find the strength to look love in the eyes

4

:war is the great defeat of culture:
words whisper on all the book covers
but the grass rust of war crimes grows in their mouths --
and the amber of silence gathers troops in its cheeks.

5

we hammer the evidence like nails into children's hands and feet
like nighttime talk that no one remembers later

look closer
the ash of this piece of paper
was once called Mitenka

(April 4, 2022)

translated by Amelia Glaser and Yulia Ilchuk

[refugees. theater]

the first night in the safe place – this is what we call the west of the country –
you are lying on the theater floor like props
for the war you can watch for free
in all the eyes at once of the animals frightened to death

[you still have time to buy a ticket in the first row of the third world war –
wrote a well-known western journalist on the eve of the Flood]

the stage-light falls well
so the world can notice dirt under your nails
and your too-long hair, not cut since poland,
that crackles with jewish family branches
when the chalk of good puts a cross on it

you have no manicure – have not done it for eight years –
so when you are reading “this one is for the woman from Bucha”
(will they teach at school about this photo?)
in someone’s cherry orchard on the well-groomed fingers
you ask the red color if it is ashamed of this comparison

but we, like the daffodils sold by old women on tram stops,
from now on will never feel shame of being or not being
the bitter bulbs of the trees that grow by the roadsides of history

well, in a couple of days you will walk down the avenue of freedom (not a metaphor)
to drop all your prophetic dreams on the floor of the barbershop –
but this will not save you: for memory, like a madman with a razor of longing in his hand,
is leading you along a dusty field full of dead potatoes
and so long is this field that you see dirt instead of eyes in children’s faces

but for now you are lying on the theater floor like props
and shuddering at the jingling of the trams –
these civil singers in the choir of military aviation –
and you cannot take wax out of the ears of the modern music lovers

translated by Eugenia Kanishcheva

you've got an unabridged explanatory dumpster in your mouth
this scratched-up chest of paper weapons
which can no longer make a hole nor make whole -
death's iron water wells up beneath your eyelids
you flip through words, empty as white pupils,
that stink of war like an old disease
and you don't understand how the world
kept the bonfire of culture lit so long without burning down

you bring the list of the living to the post office of love
and you can't master the language of bitter silence --
time catches in your throat like history's broken clock
and gets covered by the dust of withered lives

you walk like a stray dog with a cross in your teeth
annoy the world with your excess presence
pull the night by its long bell-like tongue
lick the earth's body with your numb tongue

translated by Amelia Glaser and Yulia Ilchuk

The wild rose grew in this town so
That in the dark it's indistinguishable from some threat,

And you quietly touch its tenderness,
Blood streaming to your throat
Falling beneath the legs of a heartbeat
Embroidered with pain;
With the shadow of shadows imperceptibly
Pierced by your eyes

And the song of roses deluged with flowers of snow
Stiffened in red pots of savagery
Like rage, our daily bread now, on the palette.

So the cry becomes craft
And poetry, carpentry
And the bush, a tree,
Its branches barbed wire thorns

All together catching at the air
The way a bird catches the verge of freedom
With its wing:

They grip the maternal breast of the December sky
As if they do not want to accept this rebirth
Like love's children from an abandoned paradise

While the wild rose continues the story.

12/12/2022

translated by Stephen Komarnyckyj

the grapes sway wildly
vine supplanting tree
like a gilt frame over an icon

signs of presence
in the wasteland

punctuation marks
median markers
roadways marred

you take a symbolic step toward water
but she arches her back
turning me roots-up

branch shoots or rank stripes
of a pungent defeat
settle on your shoulders

icon of a tree
icon of grapes
transparent targets of this August
that cuts summer's dusty braids

a paper figurine of a man bearing your name
lying in the palm of an earthenchild
to hide among her dark toys

while the world tightens a moment of silence
around the neck of the next war

translated by Amelia Glaser and Yulia Ilchuk

So a point suddenly appears between the ribs
October's sharp ray becomes that torturer's tool, hope
While the forests cover our eyes with dead leaves,

Time is a child we carry on our shoulders,
Like a clod of earth to which love is roped so not to lose
the salt on the jowls on the road to the river,

Although we have forgotten the words of a lullaby
Grandma sang to her after the war
Through the blood gurgling in our throats we hear our voice
Like the creaking of a door we erased from memory
Along with the empty city of trust:

It is so weird to distribute these flowers of words among corpses
Like cheap goods, which no one buys at some suburban station
However someone has to take care of the garden of our sorrows
Which like weeds sprout everywhere

Someone, like that dog in the boat must cross
The field of broken sunflowers to kindle life's fire
Between the trees of night, the restlessness of forgetting
So that we might later call the migrant bird's nets home,

And to record: I will not allow the dirt of hatred to lodge
Even under my fingernails however the long shadows of these days
Eat into the skin of being-

Into a diary that will not be saved as I keep moving.

translated by Stephen Komarnyckyj

i :says Marina: am a refugee-person
juvenile sea of shame of a war of blame
attacking the body of the sleeping city

i'm a hare in a circus in a khorovod
dancing on my sole remaining leg

do you hear how time's floorboards creak
my lost paws cross themselves
at the root out of sequence

i :continues she/it: am a hell-person
night drilled a pupil in my eyes

i stand on the world's scales
and swing alienable proofs

the act of violence began so long ago
that shoots rose from its every motion

i :it insists: am the swollen pit
in the mouth of a flaming grape
the planned deflowering of glands

i don't recognize the speaker, but animals
with an abundance of tongues once roamed these voids
and walked about trapped in a warped cone of light

and now the doors of the grass are closing
the thin film of brightness flies backwards
i find myself in the belly of an unending road

here mercury flatware gleams beneath each border
and it smells treacherously of the scorched sugar of home
and like a candle my cooling trail burns in the snow

translated by Katherine E. Young

a frozen sea of people rolls stones in a mouth
this dead language of time into which we'll turn into
when the wind cuts the thread of life like a flower
and weaves it in a long night of oblivion

the dead say: we look for houses like for light
but couldn't find them, and the earth placed us at the table
and now we eat the dirty music of silence every day
dark flashes of memories passing them from mouth to mouth

the dead say: to fight for memory is the business of the living
we hold onto inscriptions on the graves
like trees with their withered roots hold onto air
but in the palms of their children they sting like snakes

the dead say: everything we knew became so strange
our streets went under ground like us
and now we have no way out of the ghetto of history
for our past is a dead poisonous water

the dead say: the living drink hope from our bones
but we lost the seeds of hope along the way
and stand full height in the throat and hide their eyes
like stones that fall hard under the tongue of the living

translated by Amelia Glaser and Yuliya Ilchuk

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you stand in the middle of a foreign city
in the middle of its famous cemetery
you read the inscriptions in Polish
hear the hum of Polish tourists
a tomb a tomb *grobowiec*
searching in Polish for somebody's death
you search for somebody's death in Ukrainian
your ancestors could be buried here
were they not made into echoes
to roam Donbas searching for death in Russian
so that right at this moment across Ukraine
a girl with long black hair
would move her lips, translating the language of death
searching the graves for lines about your family

translated by Amelia Glaser and Yulia Ilchuk