

A sample of Olena Huseynova's fiction writing

Ashamed

Translated by Mark Andryczyk

Everyone in Lviv knew Torobi. Although he first arrived here only on February 26th. Everyone knew and loved him. Even when they realized that wine could also be purchased in Sokilnyky. And even when the ban on alcohol consumption no longer considered wine to be dangerous. One could procure wine from Torobi. Not purchase it—because Torobi never sold his stash of red and rosé. And not because he was wary of the ban on alcohol. Wine could be obtained from Torobi by means of exchange. For the phone number of a good hair stylist or dentist, for a car ride, for a spring coat, for a dinner invitation, for an offer to stroll through Striiskyi Park, for anything that could make one recall that, at one time, life seemed boring and mundane. The first exchange for a bottle was made by me. We met up in one of those Lviv restaurants into which, just a half a year ago, we tried not to visit because nobody wanted to sit in a basement. The name of the restaurant was “Beirut” and it featured eight types of hummus. I went in there with the foolhardy attempt of ordering some wine. My notions of searching for wine during a ban on alcohol were limited to bootlegging schemes lifted straight out of low-brow gangster movies. And this basement restaurant was the perfect place for them. And then I saw Torobi, who was trying to convince the waitress that it is a bad idea to close the kitchen at 5PM. The waitress was holding a credit card terminal in one hand and an empty bottle with a wide neck, in which tap water for the table was poured, in the other. I understood that it was futile to ask for wine in “Beruit”, where at 5PM one couldn’t get even one of those eight types of hummus. Even if you’d imitate bad dialogue from a bad film and say something like “listen honey, just pour some white right into this bottle and we’ll just say it’s water with lemon”. Air alarms forced the waitress to keep us in the basement and treat us to plain hummus. We sat at the only free table. The waitress brought some lavash and deep plates in which hummus was generously drizzled with olive oil and sprinkled with chickpeas.

Torobi tore off a piece of lavash and scooped up some hummus.

“Not bad, but the name “hummus” sucks,” he said, “I would call it “chick paste”. And they should serve it in those half-circle containers that come with a cover and let you eat it with your fingers. Or with a teaspoon.”

Well this sure ain’t Reiterska, I thought to myself.¹ We chewed in silence. Me—who had come looking for wine, not hummus—and Torobi, about whom I knew nothing. Perhaps, like everyone else, he was hiding out from the war and from patrols bringing blank forms in which your last name, first name, and patronymic, your date of birth, your passport number, and its place of issue are entered and which urgently recommends that you show up at the enlistment office, the address of which can be found on the website. March had not yet begun and it seemed to all of us that were not afraid of death while we no longer felt like we were alive. In our heads we assembled lists of unfinished business, things left behind. We planned on training how to drive a stick shift, on going to the shooting range, and looking for instructions on YouTube for how artillery functions. But we did none of this. Instead we

¹ Rieterksa is the name of street in Ukraine’s capital Kyiv.

searched for wine and were hoping to share it with our friends. Torobi came to Lviv from Kyiv. He escaped like I did.

“How did you get here?” I asked Torobi.

A classic conversation between escapees. There were two possible ways—by car or by train. There were also two stories—one about village roads which had never experienced such traffic and another about trains stormed by passengers. And there were also stories about things left behind and habits. Every time we shared them with one another and became overjoyed that these stories would be so similar, even to the most minute details, we wanted to feel a burning shamefulness, we wanted to feel how we didn’t hide anything from—and that we knew everything about—one another. I came by car and my story was about village roads and about a random box of grandma’s Czech crystal wine glasses, which, on February 24th, I was supposed to take over to Karyna, who would buy junk and then sell it on Instagram.

“I came in a baggage van,” Torobi continued.

I was not surprised. I saw scooters on the road. This was also shameful and inconvenient.

“Refrigerator Class A”, Torobi added.

I wanted to say that it didn’t matter—everyone came in whatever manner that they could and there was no need to make excuses. That is, you needed to make excuses for why you escaped, but not for the manner in which you did it. However, Torobi quickly added: “But my wife, son, and cat stayed behind. Well, my former wife, and her son. The cat too.”

I was becoming uncomfortable. Because having found this out I didn’t possess a phrase similar to “Forget about it” or “It’s fine” after which we could continue to eat hummus in silence and wash it down with tap water.

“It would have been cold for them in the refrigerator car,” Torobi continued as he set aside the lavash and the hummus and carefully looked at me.

I need to get up and leave, I thought. Screw the air alarms.

“Don’t be scared,” Torobi said, “there are no dead bodies there. +12C does not work for dead bodies. My life is there. I trade wine.”

I guess fortunate, chance meetings do exist, I thought. To escape from Kyiv, where the Russian armies are approaching, get stuck in the middle of an air alarm and a ban on alcohol in a Lviv basement hummus joint, and meet a crazy wine wheeler-dealer.

“By February 23rd the wine was ready. You know how well off I am there! I’ve got corrugated boxes, fasteners, and pallets. And neither the temperature nor the sun’s rays get in there, no matter where you are parked.”

I didn’t care what it was made of, I thought and counted the cash, asking whether Torobi would be ok with getting Euros. I imagined that I would return to our improvised shelter with a case of wine. I imagined how happy Lina, and moreover Alia, would be. That we could

invite Liokha and Kristina and Sofiika, who had let us live in the office, and Ihor, who gave us all of his mattress pads and sleeping bags, and Taras, in whose jeans and sweater I now sat. And we'd get the Czech crystal from the trunk.

“But I won't sell it. I am ashamed.”

And he told about how, a year ago, he sold his car and apartment and went to live with his former wife, her son and cat, bought a baggage van-refrigerator, found an Austrian winery, ordered 400 liters of red and 400 liters of rosé (because he didn't like white), how this wine was poured into bottles in Transcarpathia, and how he himself came up with a super-cool label. And then, on February 23rd, the wine was ready.

And then war arrived.

“What kind of wine?” I asked.

“Zweigel,” Torobi said.

His refrigerator was on Pasichna st. Torobi pulled out a box, and from it—a bottle, and offered it to me.

I shined on the label with my phone. Against a red background I saw a big letter Z. A week later, Torobi's former wife was living with us in the shelter, with her son, and their cat.

Run Away

Translated by Mark Andryczyk

I found Uwe Timm during my night shift. My night shift starts at 9PM and lasts until 9AM—twelve hours at the microphone. Ukrainian Radio has been working like this since February 24. The broadcast no longer gets interrupted, the night isn't filled with repeated airings of earlier daytime programs—the night is filled with news from our television colleagues and our voices. And I recall those whom weren't able to catch my shows for years, whose night is my day and whose day is my night—those who live in the US or Canada. I now work live from 9PM to 9AM and write invitations in which I emphasize “I can call you at a time that is convenient for you.” Over the past week I managed to talk with Marko Robert Stech about Displaced Person's camps and Aleksander Motyl about the collapse of Russia. 1 But even a convenient time may turn out to be inconvenient. And today I was not successful in finding a collocutor on the other side of the ocean. But I found Uwe Timm. A boring article from the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences' journal, scanned and tossed into the internet, mentioned two books—one about Hamburg at the time of Germany's capitulation and the other—an autobiographical reconstruction of the story of a brother, who died on the shores of the Dnipro river, and was a member of the SS Panzer Division Totenkopf (Death's Head Units), that same one that controlled the concentration camp system, and that same one that, according to a historical encyclopedia, handled other functions during the occupation. I download both Timm books and begin reading them. Their plots are intertwined—Hamburg in the days before capitulation, bombed-out buildings and random things that are salvaged from them, the search for news and gossip. These are all things that my friends in Kharkiv, Sumy and the Kyiv region can also talk about. That is why I sought out Uwe Timm. So that the written about and real worlds would make sense. To assure myself that all of this has happened before, that it is has all been written about in these books. However, the reading stops. Uwe Timm mentions the fairy tale about Bluebeard. This tale is often utilized when there is a need for a prosaic allusion in stories about domestic abuse or about dangerous silence. Uwe Timm also brings it up in such a manner. In front of him lies a box containing the personal items of his SS member-brother, which was sent to him by his parents directly from the hospital in Ukraine, and he is afraid to open it because it includes a diary which may contain horrific things about which Uwe Timm is

ashamed. Uwe Timm is afraid of reading the diary although he knows that his brother served in one of the first three units of the SS—the Totenkopf Division—that took part in combat, and not occupying, activity. Uwe Timm is scared, he knows what the SS did on the shores of the Dnipro river, but he doesn't know yet whether his brother did those things. And, while the box remains closed, you can simply remain afraid instead of deciding what to do with that which you now know. And thus, Uwe Timm is afraid. And he recalls that he was similarly afraid to hear the fairy tale about Bluebeard when his mother would read it to him up to that moment when the young wife inserts the little key in the door of the forbidden room. Uwe Timm repeats this

1 200, 000 Ukrainians lived in Displaced Person's camps in American, French, and British zones in post-WWII

Germany and Austria. Marko Robert Stech is a Ukrainian-Canadian scholar and writer.

Alexander J. Motyl is a

Ukrainian-American scholar and writer.

several times. Bluebeard's room is as terrifying as the box with the SS member-brother's things. It's like his diary in that box. And I stop. I will not scroll down that book file any further. I

was never scared of that story about Bluebeard. I sympathized with Bluebeard. Because it's easy to sympathize with someone you know nothing bad about. I knew nothing about the past dead wives of Bluebeard and about the rivers of blood in the forbidden room. Because my mother made edits when reading me this fairytale. She cut out this sentence: "The sisters also feared him because he had been married many times in the past but no one knew where his previous wives had disappeared to." And that room—where the bodies of those wives and the rivers of blood were—in my mother's version, was empty, and the key simply fell and got dirty.

I guess that's probably often the case with those who only listen. With those that trust every word. With those that miss the very beginning (and that sentence about the missing wives is the tale's second). For me that fairy tale was about unfair losses. Bluebeard lets his young wife

into his home, shares all of his great and small things, all of his silver and gold, and all of his old

and new objects, which probably took him a long time to assemble. And basically gives her all

the keys to all the doors of his building. "Open everything that you want," he says. "Go wherever you want". Except for "the small room", he says. For me he is a man with a blue beard, with enormous wealth and generosity, but without several missing wives.

Only with one, who snuck into the little room and damaged the key. And she summons her heavily-armed brothers, they fly in on white horses, kill Bluebeard, and move into his home,

walk along his carpets, commanding his servants, and harness his horses to coaches. And as the last sentence, that my mother did not cut out, says—they didn't even make a mention of him. And they don't mention the secret room either. It fades from the text. I first saw that second sentence and found out about Bluebeard's missing and dead wives when I came to read Angela Carter and Clarissa Pinkola Estés. I ended up having to read the fairy tale on my own. So now I know about Bluebeard's dead wives. Although I don't understand how the first one got into that little room. If Bluebeard killed his wives because they looked into that little room and saw the dead wives then what did the first wife see? Carter and Estés convince me that the little room is amazing. It's full of wonders created especially for me. It just that they had been hidden from me and that now I need to rebel, to overcome superstitions and enter that little room. And then, I guess, run up to the tallest tower of Bluebeard's building and call for the brothers on white horses or dragoons and musketeers, like in the initial version of the tale. My night shift continues, I walk out into the corridor and see a white window—at the beginning of March dawn comes at 4:30AM. I look into the window and forget about the second sentence in the tale about Bluebeard. I think about the brothers on white horses, dragoons, and musketeers who, without pause, rush his beautiful building with its rugs, goblets, carriages, and horses. And I look at the brightening March sky and shout straight into it, to Bluebeard: "Run away!" Of all of your dear things grab the first things you come across. Like the parents of Uwe Timm during Operation Gomorrah, when their four-story building caught on fire: a smoking table, a few towels, a duvet, two porcelain statuettes, one porcelain plate and a suitcase, which they thought contained valuable things but that turned out to be filled with old Christmas ornaments. I know that Bluebeard will not manage to escape. I know that for many, many years Uwe Timm's parents, at Christmas tables, during card games, as they drink wine, while smoking cigars, will not talk about that which they should have done so that their older sons wouldn't have become members of the SS and wouldn't have died on the shores of the Dnipro but will, instead, look for reasons why they failed to be victorious. They'll replay battles, give directives, shuffle generals and will even remove Hitler from commanding the army. I continue looking into the window and, in my thoughts, transfer Operation Gomorrah 2,106. 59 kilometers east and imagine what parents of a young man, who, at this moment, is dying somewhere on the shores of the Moshchunka river, are grabbing to take with them. And I toss Bluebeard into the

village of Moshchun itself—he stands in his house, looks as the March sky dawns, and can still
escape. My next night shift is in two days. I will not continue reading Uwe Timm—let him find
the guts to open the box of his SS-member brother, who died on the shores of the Dnipro, without me. I will download “The Walking Dead”. In it, there is no doubt with whom you should
sympathize, whom you should fear, and when to yell “Run away!”

From the book of poems "Night Air"

Translated by Yuliya Kostyuk, with Professor Hugh Roberts and Professor Helen Vassallo.

This is my throat,
a scarf around it,
now not held tight,
it slips away
and drifts with the wind
to the south
this is my throat
it swallows
dust smoke mist
black columns
of the First Tank Corps
68th Military Corps
this is my throat
it releases
hedgehogs
birds
with sharp stones
in their beaks
snails
if only I could stop time
twist it into a spiral
clockwise
make it round
and smooth
press it with my tongue
to the palate
but time flows
it escapes from my throat
moving in a circle:
fourteen buses departed —
only three arrived
fourteen departed —
three arrived

this is my throat
there's a voice in it
it becomes heavy
and breaks free

flies past
oesophagus and ribs
but clings
to the buses
that didn't arrive
I count from one
to eleven
my voice
rises upward
like a volleyball
falling into intersecting hands
and I pronounce:

"Evacuation planned
from these points:
Port City and Lunacharsky Ring.⁵
Once again, repeating:
Lunacharsky Ring and Port City."

The gods of these waters emerge every evening,
enter every courtyard in this village,
because all belong to them here—
all wells,
all waterwheels,
all buckets,
all street hand-pumps.
The gods of these waters bring *it* to the surface,
icy,
like your palms.
The gods of these waters carry buckets to the river,
carry and dump out,
carry and dump out,
and dump.
The gods of these waters vanish by morning,
dry up until the next evening,
and then you step into the river,
you walk,
and the water reaches
your knees, your chest, your neck,
and it will never be red again,
never again.

At first, you asked
to come every Monday
I'll buy brie for us on the way in Fora
supermarket
and lollipops - for your son.
At first, there was a plan
to drink coffee with brie,
not to talk about men,
or about work,
sit by an open window,
look at the pines,
and fish
for rudds from the still water
and sea urchins.
We noticed when it walked
onto the balcony.
It sat on the edge of an empty chair
casting a shadow
on our coffees and on prices for low-cost flights.
Then you asked
for it not to be there at all
but it had already come into
the room and
crowded the air.
Then you asked
for it to step into the shade,
away from the window,
and lean against the wall.
But it was already
touching the ceiling with its head.
Then I asked,
for it to stand quietly.
Then I screamed:
- 'Go blind and mute,
so that I could see.
See nothing, say nothing,
like a Greek singer,
whose song moves the city,
its strong walls,
the piercing wind,
and the shining river
into Asia Minor.
And it went blind and mute

like an archaeologist
who removes layer after layer
of soil
until he finds
our sea urchins
and a rudd.
It lies on the shore,
its scales are cracking
and scattering
"Troy is now excavated
and there will be no other"
Now write
with ink made of fish ash.

Royal fancy

The sun rises, and she shakes
white powder
on her grey face, grey shoulders, and breasts
bountifully - three layers
and one more to make sure
no-one can know
about the blemishes on her belly
swollen overheated knees
twisted fingers
no-one can see
how her body spills outwards
spreads out like gossamer
presses her knee up against the Gulf of Finland
leans an elbow on Chernihiv
treads on the Livonian coast
clenches the Arctic seas in a fist
She is the mistress of the unforeseen
A wife without talent
She rolls out life
like endlessly long jeans
never stepping back
by the time the sun rises you can be wading in dew.

War is whimsical:
it walks naked
it eats with its fingers

it screams

I would put it
in my best dress
I would feed it by hand
I would cover its mouth

I would scatter it
in Lost Property
in Central Station
in the metro
in Ministry of Internal Affairs

I wish I could forget it
Somewhere nobody can see
Somewhere nobody can hear

it will fight
against steel walls
hone its body
on a sharpening stone
it will eat up all twilights and dawns

but I gaze
at the bare body
dirty hands
a red throat

I have my whimsical ways: -
to pierce it in the heart
with a pin
sharp as a night that begins
at eight in the evening
To see how black blood
floods its eyes
To hear it say to me:
"I'm afraid of you"

About translators

Mark Andryczyk is an Associate Research Scholar in Ukrainian studies at the Harriman Institute. Since 2007 he has administered the Institute's Ukrainian Studies Program and has taught courses in Ukrainian literature in Columbia's Department of Slavic Languages. He has a Ph.D. in Ukrainian Literature from the University of Toronto (2005). He is the author of the monograph *The Intellectual as Hero in 1990s Ukrainian Fiction* (2012) and is a translator of Ukrainian literature into English. Andryczyk is editor of *The White Chalk of Days*, the Contemporary Ukrainian Literature Series Anthology (2017) and of *Writing from Ukraine: Fiction, Poetry and Essays since 1965* (2022). Among his other published translations are essays in Yuri Andrukhovych's *My Final Territory: Selected Essays* (2018) and Volodymyr Rafeyenko's novel *Mondegreen: Songs about Death and Love* (2022). He recently guest-edited a special issue of *East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies* (vol. 9, no. 1, 2022) focusing on Ukrainian culture and the Donbas war.

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