

Apricots
of DONBAS

poems

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APRICOTS OF DONBAS*a long poem*

Where no more apricots grow, Russia starts.

the coalface

with eyes sea blue
and hair flaxen yellow
faded a little
it's not a flag
it's my father
standing in a flooded mine
water up to his knees
my father
his face, like coal—
with a print
of an antediluvian field horsetail
trampled by years
the sea hardens into salt
the grass hardens into coal
and father turns like feather grass
gray

he's a man
and men don't cry—
so the saying goes
his cheeks are trenches
chopped up by the mine
and the coal
from my Father's face
burned in Donbas bonfires
and ovens

and somewhere high up
there stands a terricone
the terricone snarling
like a dragon

like a sphinx
defending its Tutankhamun
and it's only me who knows
that the pit heap in the middle of the steppe
is nothing but caps from the bottles
that Dad drank
and ashes of the cigarettes
that Dad smoked

the terricones of breasts

these stalks are
like colored pencils
stuck along the road
just now and then
a truck will pass
amid the steppe in the copse
Donbas! Donbas!
the chimneys hiss
into the whorl of the sun's ear

you stand
in the uniform
of a coal agent
and smell perfume-like
of reagents:

—I'm a woman
my element is water:
this is not just for making tea
or washing the dishes—no!
although women don't work in mines—
but at factories they very well do
coal handling
and I wash the coal
like I'd wash my braids
I crush the coal
like I'd cut potatoes
or grind meat
in the factory blender
and drizzle it over with oil
melted—
that is, over this borscht
I pour reagents
you know, all these compliments
to Donbas girls on their beauty

make sense
if you see those factories
if you go down into the mine
or bathe in the poisoned waters
of the sumps
where the broth is dumped
from this borscht of mine
climb up the terricone
and tumble under its blanket
namely, down its colon
but before that
catch a glimpse of the apricot blossom
supple white apricot blossom
and in the fall
see their yellow curls
from the height of the mine trolley's flight

SL

decomposition

nothing changes on the eastern front
well, I've had it up to here
at the moment of death, metal gets hot
and people get cold

don't talk to me about Luhansk
it's long since turned into *hansk*
Lu had been razed to the ground
to the crimson pavement

my friends are held hostage
and I can't reach them, I can't *do netsk*
to pull them out of the basements
from under the rubble

yet here you are, writing poems
ideally smooth poems
high-minded gilded poems
beautiful as embroidery

there's no poetry about war
just decomposition
only letters remain
and they all make a single sound — rrr

Pervomaisk has been split into *pervo* and *maisk*
into particles in primeval flux
war is over again yet peace has not come

and where's my *deb alts evo?*
no poet will be born there again
no human being

I stare into the horizon
it has narrowed into a triangle
sunflowers dip their heads in the field
black and dried out, like me
I have gotten so very old
no longer Lyuba
just a *ba*

OM/MR

SUCH PEOPLE ARE CALLED NAKED**unshaven leg**

I shaved my right leg but forgot to shave the left leg
habitually, I put on a white blouse
a short skirt
black earrings
red lips
and went to a work meeting
sat down and crossed my right leg over my left—
the shaved leg on the unshaved

—oh, but you are a feminist! they whisper to me
I see your legs are unshaven!
dear colleagues, let's be fair
my right leg is shaved, but my left leg is not
hence, you can't possibly say
that both of my legs are unshaven
black hairs stick out of my left leg
but my right leg is fully all right
one leg is feminist and hairy indeed
but the other one is patriarchal and silky, it really is

—how can you combine that? some (women) say, hurt
—how can you walk about like that? some (women) say, bemused

back home, I tell all this to my lover
with my legs crossed—
the feminist over the patriarchal
and then the other way round
the patriarchal over the feminist
and my lover kneels before me
kisses my legs and whispers,
—but I love you both shaven and unshaven
as well as half-shaven
and stark naked

SL

such people are called naked

you took off your t-shirt
I pulled off my dress
you unbuckled your belt
I unhooked my brassiere
you let down your pants and kicked off your socks
I freed myself out of my panties, so scanty
that I'd better call them scanties
and now we lie in bed
two strips
like two white bread loaves
facing each other

you touch my cheek with your hand
you run your hand lower down my neck
you trace my collarbones with your fingers:
how nicely everything is made here!—you utter
but suddenly
from behind your shoulder your mom peeks out and says
—Andryusha, did you wash your hands?
you turn to face her, show your hands
she offers you fruit compote and goes to the kitchen
you turn back to me
put your hand back where you got interrupted
from the collarbone it slides down to my breasts
softly as sea sand
and here
I feel my dad's breath on my nape:
think with your head, child
he whispers loudly
I turn away from you
and see his unshaven face very close
and reply that
I always think with my head!
I turn back to you
and now my hand slides along your chest

and its downy hair bends under it
and now
behind your back the bed creaks:
Andryusha, have some fruit compote
you turn away from me
kiss her sonorously and say:
mom, I want to be alone for a little while!
and she replies, offended:
it doesn't look like you're alone!
and she goes off again
and now
you are with me again
and your hand on my stomach
glides slowly down
so it gets close and tender
so it gets so
and now
I hear my grandmother's groaning
she says behind my back:
I knew it! You're not a virgin anymore—
see how your look changed!
and I
take your hand off my belly
turn halfway to my granny
with your hand
I straighten out her purple kerchief
and say in a loud voice:
—I'm still a virgin, nan
and will remain untouched forever!
I turn back to you
and here, over your shoulder
an old lady in a yellow kerchief peeps out
this time, your granny:
—what female name ends in a consonant
as if it were a man's?—she asks
the answer is—mine, but I keep quiet
and take your hands off my hips

snow falls between us
and like two toy soldiers
we lie like this till morning

and in the morning a cleaning lady comes
shovels away the snow mounds between us
and I look into your green eyes for a long, long time
and you look at my brown nipples for very long
then I say:

—let's get undressed.

and one by one, I take off:

my dad

my grandma

my mom

my sister

and you take off, one by one:

your mom

your brother

your childhood friend

your pick-up coach

and we're bare now, wearing nothing at all

such people are called naked

SL

false friends and beloved

even the translator's false friends
become just friends one day:

you say *kochana* — *my beloved* —
and a blast inside me forms
the cap of a mushroom
I ask, are you drunk?
do you know what this word means in Ukrainian?
because there is the word *kochanie* — cutie
that you said to me yesterday
as if addressing a little girl

you reply I'm just a dear to you, not a beloved
you articulate not in Ukrainian but in Polish
that I'm your *kochana* — that is
a friend, or more precisely, a female friend

you know, I say, in Belarusian they also have problems with love
in Belarusian it's not like ours at all
their *любоў* is calm and tasty, like love for food
like love of a country when it's not at war
how on earth can they live without love
as we have it?

you say:
love is like a gust of wind
you never know what will happen to it tomorrow
for example, in French, *baiser* —
is no longer *to kiss*, as we'd learned at school
now it means *to make love*

what if you spoke not Polish but French
and said the word *baiser* that you had been taught wrong
and I agreed
because, at school, I had also been taught wrong

what would have happened?
for the body knows language better than the mind does
the body will not let you down

my beloved!
this relationship is so uncertain
all this love from language to language so changeable
today to kiss—tomorrow to make love
today love me—tomorrow—love a country
beloved, *je t'embrasse*—
I kiss
I only kiss you
on your cheek
faux
lover
of a translator
that is
of a poor translatress

SL

neither pea nor peanut

language never keeps up with life
adapts way too slowly
learns to curl its fingers
but does not grow interdigital webbing

as humanity gradually turns to veganism
language remains carnivorous

my friend, a vegan, is indignant
that there's nothing for her to eat at restaurants
every dish contains if not flesh, then fish
if not eggs, then milk
and I ask, what about language, is there enough for you
to speak, to think?

ha, this language is neither fish nor fowl, she admits
can't kill the worm without eating the dog
but if you never tried fish or flesh
even eating a dog feels like cannibalism
all of us mammals are alike
don't you get it?
from a family home language turns into a hostel

I will invent a different language for you, I promise
science-based and vegan!
a language without aggression
and immediately I take the bull by the horns, grasping
language by its idioms

and the restaurants start serving vegan dishes
every gas stop sells falafel
coffee without caffeine with coconut milk
and even McDonald's comes out with a vegan menu

so my friend comes to demand a new language
and I say
you know, our language is
neither a pea nor a peanut
(that's what you get in the place of fish and fowl)

I know what I'm talking about
I cut my teeth on this avocado

see, I grasped a two-wheeler by the handles
and upturned the virgin soil
and grew a new language for you
without violence against animals

one could say: this language is perfect
if not for one small problem

what to do about those who are full of ginger?
will they become "full of bacon"?
and whenever you try to pull out a bean stalk
somehow you end up cutting it to the bone
so I'll be straight with you and say
that I've got no new language

only this one—carnivorous
gritty, with fresh memory
of idiom
yet not idiotic
it stays close to the body
regardless of what this body feeds on
so please don't skin it alive
just put your mouth where your heart is

OM

I have a crisis for you

you lit up a cigarette
but it wouldn't burn
it was summer
and girls would light up from any passer-by
but I didn't light up from you anymore

—our love's gone missing, I explain to a friend
it vanished in one of the wars
we waged in our kitchen
—change the word 'war' to 'crisis,' he suggests
because a crisis is something everyone has from time to time

remember the Second World Crisis?
correspondingly, also the First World
Civil Crisis—to each his own
I forgot about the Cold Crisis
it seems they also came in twos
also the Uprising Crisis
it sounds so good—
the Uprising Crisis of 1648–1657
write it down in the textbooks
a crisis that liberates
releases forever

my great-grandfather fell in the Second World Crisis
possibly by the hand of my other great-grandfather
or his machine gun
or his battle tank
but it is unclear
how they conducted this crisis with each other
perhaps it was the crisis itself that killed them, like a plague
for nobody is to blame for the crisis
it is inexorable like death

and when our own domestic war
turns into crisis
does it get better?
does it hurt less?
do birds come back to us from the south
or maybe, we come out to meet them?
why is our language like that—
we lack words to describe our feelings
only crisis and love are left
as antonyms

but if love is bound to be so complicated
with these blazes and smolderings
like blood and pain
(and blood is not like periods
but some new feeling of mine)
(and pain is yours)
if love is made up
of two different feelings
then soon love will also be called crisis

I have a crisis for you, darling
let's get married
it'll be easier for us both

we've got a crisis
we'd better split up

SL