

The Ground I Write From

War splits time. There's a before. There's an after. You don't always notice when the break happens. It can feel slow, like something slipping just out of view. But later, it shows itself. In memory. In dreams. In language. The things you thought were gone begin to rise. "And this I know: all these things that now, while we are still in the war, sink down in us like a stone, after the war shall waken again, and then shall begin the disentanglement of life and death." Remarque wrote that in *All Quiet on the Western Front*. I read it when I was young. At the time, I thought it was poetic. Now I know it's simply true. This work, writing what wounds us, is older than theory. Long before the word *trauma* existed, people told stories to give shape to loss. *The Iliad* holds a single rage and stretches it across a continent of grief. Achilles' wound becomes the weather the army marches in. Every death echoes inside it. The poem repeats because grief does too. Even the similes pause the killing to name the world: birds, storms, a tree in spring. Naming these things is a way of insisting the world still exists, that it's still worth being named. Without that, too much disappears, not only people, but the shape of what they loved as well.

Modern war shattered the old containers, the scale changed and so did the language. Sentences that once moved smoothly began to stammer; meaning broke under pressure. "April is the cruellest month," Eliot wrote (*Waste Land*), and if you have lived through a spring after loss you understand why. Remarque gave us boys turned old before they had a chance to live, and the knowledge that the real reckoning begins only after the guns fall silent. On the page, the sentences didn't line up anymore. They broke apart, scattered like belongings after a hurried escape. A moment here, a sound there, scenes out of order. I've seen that kind of scattering. I've lived it. And I see it now in the work of others, like the Ukrainian poet Julia Musakovska, who writes: "the metaphors withered and fell to pieces / before they could bloom / the metaphors are buried / in children's playgrounds." I believe an artist is a moral witness. As such, they begin by looking long enough for the bruise to show and speaking plainly when it does. This keeps faith with the dead by naming them and serves the living by making a record that cannot be rewritten. It also means refusing the heroic gloss when facts say otherwise, and refusing revenge dressed as justice.

Later I learned there were names for what literature already knew. Cathy Caruth (a leading theorist in Trauma Studies) calls trauma "the story of a wound that cries out." The cry is late and stubborn. When I write, I keep a record of what keeps coming back and leave room for what stays silent. The wound speaks in the body first, in sleep, in routes chosen, in what I avoid, in what I carry without noticing. Only later does it reach the page, even though some stories never leave you. This one, compiled by Gazmend Berlajolli from the testimonies of raped women, became this poem.

Blackbirds (tr. Robert Wilton)

I don't know if I'm alive anymore,
everything in me was murdered.

My mother witnessed
savages dumping their filthy seed
inside me for twenty one days in a row.
Her voice is the only one I hear
crying out my name like the call to prayer
whenever I get near the well.

Nine times I tried to take my life.
But death has many doors.

[...]

In the land of rotted roots
rotted are the living.
I don't want to take my life anymore.
A sip of water is all I want.

The war changed me before it changed my writing. I sleep on the side of the bed closest to the door because I like the exit near. Keys sit in a bowl I can find in the dark. In cafés I take the seat with my back to the wall. I clock the exits without thinking. Sirens startle me. Fireworks, too. My phone battery must always be above forty percent. I text when I arrive and when I leave. When people speak, I watch their hands. These habits exist whether I write or not. The poems follow them. My craft is not an aesthetic choice alone. It is what remains of a life reorganized by fear. If the lines are lean, it is because the person who writes them has learned to carry only what can be carried and to set the rest down. I let verbs work and let adjectives rest. On hard days I write what the hand can hold: salt, onions, potatoes; a small list steadies me. I want the poem to keep a human measure: a kitchen table, a cup cooling, two people trying to say what cannot yet be said.

My son was born after the war. He knows it happened, in the way children know what their parents don't say. I haven't told him much. Not the details. But something of it lives in our house anyway. And though he has never lived through war, he lives with someone who did, and it leaves a trace. He checks his phone battery before leaving the house. He double-checks that his ID is in the same pocket. He texts me when he arrives, and again when he's on his way back. I used to say thank you. Now I say, "You don't have to do that every time."

He says, “I know,” and still does it. I don’t know if I’m protecting him or passing it on. Maybe both. Maybe that’s what survival looks like.

In Kosovo shops open, children walk to school, neighbors argue about football and politics. The past still shows up, just in other corners. A knock after ten at night means everyone goes quiet for a moment. A pause falls on certain names. At borders we overprepare: passports, printed copies, even digital copies. We work and celebrate and make a lot of jokes, but the heart remembers that home is not a guaranteed sanctuary. We say our full names less than other people do and always put documents back in the same folder. We leave early for everything, just in case. Even good news makes us cautious. Joy is always followed by a glance over the shoulder. That’s how it is across the whole region. Someone once said the Balkans make more history than it can consume, and sadly, it feels true. History here does not stay buried. Each country carries its own ghosts, and the borders hum with old grudges.

In a supermarket in Germany, I stopped at a small aisle labeled “Balkan Products.” Three shelves gathered countries that could not be good neighbors at home. I stood there with a cart. Behind each label I could feel a story I could not eat. That image refused to leave me.

Balkan products (tr. mine)

Look at us.

Exiled and shelved, side by side on a supermarket shelf,
simmering with unshed blood,
no longer armed to kill or
first claim to the ruins.
Pride, bleached out.
Nationalism, vacuum-sealed.
We’re barcoded under one name: Balkan products.

[...]

But the Balkans’ finest export is flesh.
Bright minds, white coats, steel nerves,
vacuum-sealed and shipped abroad.
Our bodies ground by wars, rebranded
by diplomats as “conflicts,” or “tensions.”
And when exile aches like hunger,
we search the supermarket aisle
for something labeled home.

Writing does not close the wound. It keeps it from being misnamed. If a reader years from now recognizes the stone that wakes and knows it as human, not only mine, the page has done its work. And this is the ground I write from.