

Reflections on Trauma in Writing

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Writing Trauma from Within the Trauma

Speaking of War

Nothing can prepare you for a full-scale war against your homeland: neither knowledge of history and the aggressor's unpunished invasions, nor clear political forecasts, nor even the bad premonition that has been gnawing at you for so long.

Your first reaction is shock, followed by numbness, and then a rapid grasp for survival: equipping your air raid shelter, helping friends evacuate from the most dangerous areas, ensuring those who cannot leave have essential supplies, and assisting army volunteers in getting the ammunition they need.

If you are a writer, language is your most familiar weapon. But in times like these, it breaks into countless sharp fragments. You must gather them, wounding yourself in the process, piece them together, and learn to speak anew. You might no longer believe in the power of words, but your vitality depends on them. I know this: a writer writes to breathe — at least a poet does. And one must be heard to be helped.

The Duty of a Writer

But what gives you the right to speak for an entire country? Is it when you bury a long-time friend killed in action, the same friend you had hosted at your New Year's party, drinking champagne together only months before? Or when a murdered colleague's striking resemblance in a funeral photograph makes you feel as though it is you lying in that closed coffin? Is it when you clutch your child, trying to shield him with your body while explosions thunder outside? How much personal suffering is enough to legitimize your words?

I recall the first weeks of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, when I was turning down invitations abroad for speaking engagements. I felt I was in no position to represent my people; those who had been forced to flee their homes or survived occupation seemed more deserving to be that voice. Living in a city far from Russia's borders, where missiles and drones rarely

reached, made me painfully conscious of my relative safety, stirring both doubt and guilt. And, still, remaining silent felt even more impossible.

After a panel discussion and poetry performance in Vilnius, which I had reluctantly agreed to, a displaced Ukrainian woman approached me and said: *You speak for all of us. We can't find the words or the strength to do this. You are more resourceful.* That moment made me realize I had a duty to continue.

In truth, a writer has no right to speak on behalf of others. However, they are somehow perceived as if they do — both as a figure of integrity at home and as a representative of their country abroad. A writer is never a solitary voice. Like *a drop in the ocean* — a phrase that became a slogan during the 2014 Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine — one drop can embody the strength of the whole.

An artist, and even more so a poet, as a person of deep empathy, cannot remain indifferent to the suffering of their nation. The need for creative response is often both healing and destructive. The artist and servicewoman Marharyta Polovinko used her own blood as paint in her wartime works, so profound was the pain she felt for her country. She was thirty-one when she was killed in battle. As artists, we transform our agony into testimony so that the aggressor can never rewrite history again.

The Unforgotten Traumas of Ancestors

Although no one wants to be defined by trauma, in many ways we are shaped by it. The Bosnian poet Adisa Bašić writes about her trauma with bitter irony: *"That's the only valuable thing I have."* We have yet to process the traumas of previous generations, and now, as Ukrainians, we carry our own — brand new and shiny. Our parents and grandparents were often unwilling to speak of their traumas, fearing this knowledge might hurt us. Instead, they left them to us like family jewels, carefully locked away in boxes.

My grandmother, an ethnic Ukrainian, was deported together with her parents and siblings from their village in Poland at the end of World War II, during an exchange of populations initiated by the Soviet Union. The regime believed a monoethnic majority would be easier to control. My grandmother's family was loaded onto a cargo train with minimal possessions and sent into the unknown — the Ternopil region in Ukraine. Uprooted, they had to start anew, while my great-grandfather was forcibly drafted into the Red Army. He returned with typhus, which soon claimed his life. My great-grandmother became a young widow with two children, struggling to make ends meet. My grandmother never spoke of the deportation; I learned most of it from my mother and aunt.

In her twenties, my grandmother met my grandfather, an Armenian who had survived both the war and service in the Red Army. But his relationship with his conservative mother did not survive his marriage to a Ukrainian. His family carried trauma of their own. They came from

Nagorno-Karabakh, a region in Azerbaijan mostly populated by Armenians, long marked by disputes. Seeking a better life, they moved to the capital, Baku. To do so, had to change their last name to Azerbaijani, adding a Russian ending – to conform to Soviet policy of Russification. Only in Ukraine did my grandfather finally feel at home, and he spoke of these events only briefly toward the end of his life.

My father carried his own trauma. I always sensed he was hiding something — the arguments between my parents behind closed doors, the swiftly changed topic whenever I entered the room. In the 1970s, he was confined to a mental hospital — a Soviet tactic of repression, supposedly meant to “cure” young people drawn to Western culture. Those who, like my father, learned foreign languages, read Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, or listened to the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. Tasting the forbidden fruit could bring severe punishment.

The “treatment” was torture through heavy medication and electroshock, intended to break one’s spirit and damage health, sometimes irreversibly. Unlike several friends, my father recovered but was unable to complete his university education. He had to take a factory job. He shared his story with me only during his struggle with cancer – he believed it might be his last chance. At first, he forbade me to speak of it publicly. I wove it into some poems in my collection *The God of Freedom*. Thankfully, poetry allows us to conceal and reveal as much as we choose.

These individual tragedies reflect broader historical patterns. The Soviet occupation now seeks to return to Ukraine as a Russian neo-empire, waging a genocidal full-scale war in its fourth year. Torture, kidnapping, deportation, forced mobilization, and Russification are reported all across the occupied territories. According to the UN, over 95% of Ukrainians released from Russian captivity report having been tortured.

By drawing on their own experience, writers tell their nation’s story, offering accounts that readers trust above all. Russia’s war against Ukraine seeks to erase our identity, dignity, and freedom, silencing our voices. Writing itself becomes a form of resistance, a way to affirm truth and presence.

Confronting the Trauma

My generation of Ukrainians strives to confront our trauma. We attend therapy, take prescribed antidepressants, and work to raise our children in a spirit of trust and calm, despite the harsh realities of wartime. Our children, in turn, face their own traumas, becoming “children of war,” just as our grandparents were. Though the senseless guilt of not protecting my son from this experience is always there, I can still help him build resilience.

I do not know what he will remember. Probably, the frantic runs to the shelter in the middle of the night, the whistling of drones flying dangerously close, followed by the gunfire of our air defense. My tears at the border with Poland in the freezing March of 2022. A girl evacuated

from a frontline city in his class, often screaming and knocking things from her desk. I hope he remembers how we read books aloud and sang songs during electricity cut-offs. At times, I wonder if I should encourage him to write down these memories so they do not haunt him later. Perhaps this, too, will become part of our nation's story.

As Ukrainian writers, we carry the trauma of massive physical and cultural erasure — the early loss of those who came before us: the victims of the 1930s Executed Renaissance, the dissidents later persecuted under the Soviet regime.

The silencing of Ukrainian voices is ongoing. “*Whose working title and biography are now crammed onto a grave marker?*” asked the poet and soldier Artur Dron’ in his poem *Ukrainian Literature*. He refers to a New Executed Renaissance, which, since 2014, counts hundreds of cultural figures — documented cases only. These were our colleagues and friends.

As writers, we carry the trauma inflicted on the Ukrainian language itself, systematically suppressed and banned over 400 years under the Russian Empire and Soviet occupation. Putin and his propagandists absurdly claim it is a distorted form of Russian, even though Moscow was founded seven centuries after Kyiv. To write in Ukrainian is to preserve this beautiful, endangered language, to continue its rich literary tradition, and to defy the aggressor.

Facing the Unthinkable

A writer turns to writing to comprehend the unthinkable. Yet Russia's war in Ukraine is not over, and the unthinkable repeats, testing the limits of human endurance.

My latest Ukrainian collection, *Stones and Nails*, features poems from the first two years of the full-scale invasion. The poetry speaks of the occupier's war crimes, destruction, and suffering — but also of the love and resilience of my nation. The book is modest in size, and these days, I write even less poetry. Some ask me why. Writing about trauma as it is inflicted again and again can feel like echoing the same words. The sharp edges blur, and the intensity flattens.

I was once optimistic about the power of literature, believing it could awaken nations and move people to action. Now I realize we are largely alone in this war for our nation's survival, even as Ukraine defends global democracy against a growing axis of evil. This realization comes as another heavy trauma to process. In this solitude, writing may seem a desperate quest for justice. Still, surrender is not an option and neither is silence.