

...at an uncertain hour, that agony returns

I did not take this title from Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. I took it from the epigraph of Primo Levi's book *I sommersi e i salvati* (Giulio Einaudi editore s. p. a., Torino, 1991), which had taken those lines from Coleridge.

I could have found different lines. But it feels as if I, we, Ukrainians, live in Primo Levi's books. Because the genocidal character of Russian aggression can be denied in the silence of foreign libraries, but you cannot but see, feel, or understand it if you are Ukrainian, if you live in Ukraine.

We will deal with genocide charges during The Hague tribunal and after it.

But now I want to remember, and therefore to tell how it is to live in pain, in a catastrophe, how to live through trauma, which does not end but seems to become even stronger.

I want to tell of words, sounds, books, shame, trust, grief, time and laughter. But the full stop at the end of my text will be provisory. However one day it will definitely be real.

Speaking place

War is the place of my testimony. For me and for many of my friends, colleagues and several million acquaintances and strangers from Crimea and eastern Ukraine, the war began in March 2014. I am a witness. Although it is very difficult to be a witness to what the world "has not seen", and sometimes denied.

When, over the course of eight years, you proclaim on all available platforms: "People, this is war. There is no such thing as separatism, instead this is a blatant invasion by fair-haired Special Forces and the Russian army", then at best you get sympathetic looks. At worst, you hear whispers behind your back: "What's Russia got to do with it? This is an internal conflict, a civil war. This poor woman has simply lost her mind."

The latter is highly likely. That's because it is not difficult to lose your mind when the whole world denies what you saw with your own eyes. But the whole world is bigger than you, than your experience and your voice. My diagnosis was "lifted" on 24th February 2022. I find it difficult to say "thank you" for this.

My family, my friends, all of us left Donetsk in 2014. We fled from the Russians who slayed, raped and looted our cities.

My profession is the place of my witnessing. I am a historian. I know how to work with historical sources, but I never thought that I would have to apply these skills to myself. I am a writer. I have written extensively about trauma. I know how it works, how it changes my characters, how it defines a plot and the style of narration. But I never thought that I, detached (to a certain degree), would be analysing my own trauma, speaking its words, on its behalf.

My profession is an asset. My profession is a heavy burden.

Words

The first things to disappear on 24th February 2022 were words and their meanings. And, in general, meaning. Everything done, written, analysed, imagined and published by me lost its meaning. Everything that was reasonable and useful yesterday ceased to be reasonable and useful. My past life turned out to be empty. The only things that made sense **were** what you could do with your hands, feet, and body – mixing Molotov cocktails, exercising tactical medical skills, delivering aid for the elderly and children and blood that you can donate at a blood donor centre. And the body, which can shield children in the case of shelling. The significance of the body and blood remains just as germane today.

Together with words of the past, words of today, of the here and now, have lost their meaning. They stopped working and being able to describe anything. Pain was more than pain. Ferocity, more than ferocity. Fear, more than fear.

The silence was shared. People hardly spoke to each other. The address where you were taught to administer assistance, the gesture – “take my loaf, I don’t need two”, or a look and a nod in line for blood donation. Not words but commands, short, matter-of-fact requests, instructions on “how to provide first aid for wounds to the back.”

We just looked at each other. Words were not necessary, only actions made sense.

And foul language. Obscenities. They explained and expressed everything. Even now this works. We have a rich dictionary of obscene lexis – multi-dimensional, clear, short words.

Then words appeared. Those that were left acquired new meaning. It was very important not to miss this. The poet and translator Ostap Slyvynsky compiled [“A War Dictionary”](#). This book is now being translated into twenty languages. Apples, cotton, bus, farewell, street, station... All this sounds different now.

Words return. But the feeling of sand, cement in my mouth - after writing or after talking - remains unchanged. Pain is still more than pain. Therefore, only those who know how to handle words properly are engaged in their retrieval. Some examples:

[Andrey Kurkov](#)

[Oksana Zabuzhko](#)

[Love in Defiance of Pain: Ukrainian Stories](#)

[Relentless Courage: Ukraine and the World at War](#)

[Eva Slaetskaya You Don’t Know What War Is: The Diary of a Young Girl from Ukraine-](#)

Language

The epistemology of Russian imperialism and Kremlin propaganda resulted in the language issue being a key motivation for the invasion. That is to say, “Protection of the Russian-speaking population.” Looks like this included me. In 2014, I received the “Russian Prize” - a prize for writers who write in Russian and do not live in Russia. Today I am ashamed of it. But I am not ashamed of [what I said](#) in Moscow: Russian-speaking people do not need protection.

Perhaps it is not strange that those whose mother tongue was Russian still remain a “point”. An example. People who should be asked about this.

Even before the February invasion, I had decided not to write in Russian anymore. My conversion novel was published in 2021 as ‘[Cecil the Lion had to Die](#)’. Volodymyr Rafeienko, formerly a Russophone writer, made the same decision, likewise before the full-scale invasion, with his [novel *Mondegreen*](#).

It is no longer possible for me to write in Russian. The Russian language slays and rapes, deceives and deprives. Theodor Adorno said, “To write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric”. Following him, I can say: “to write in Russian after Bucha and Mariupol is barbaric”.

If anyone thinks that this is our trauma speaking, let them think so. For us, this is about a conscious choice.

Sounds

The whole world now sounds and is heard differently. Language too. In the British television crime drama series “Inspector George Gently” based on a novel by Alan Hunter, there is an episode in which one of the characters, who was captured by the Nazis in Dunkirk and who learned German there, was asked: “HOW was it for you to speak German?”, he answers: [“It’s OK to speak it, but impossible to hear it”](#).

The sounds of the Russian language, the sounds of a Russian accent - audible and very different from the language spoken by Ukrainians – are the sounds of torment. Sound itself is torment.

There are others. The loud slamming of car doors, firecrackers, motorcycles, thunder, simple summer thunder, a bursting balloon, a tumbling rubbish bin... When people hear these sounds, they cover their heads and sometimes even fall to the ground. But many people can also hear the sound of a falling leaf. This sound seems loud, but it’s not as loud as an air raid alarm.

People began to speak quietly. And since words are a problem, a quiet voice and a look are enough. Tears are also quiet.

At the end of the year, new, kind sounds appeared. All of Kyiv is beginning to purr. Louder than cats, but still congenial. These are generators installed near houses, cafes, pharmacies,

hairdressers, and shops. You can navigate the city by its sound - from generator to generator. Where you hear a rumbling sound, there is light, warmth and the rest. Other necessities.

Of the sounds that are allowed to be loud, probably only songs remain. "[Oh, there's a red viburnum in the meadow](#)" performed by Andriy Khlevniuk and Pink Floyd, or a little boy singing in front of his house.

Time

My friends joke that last year [2022] only had two months. January and February.

And that's how it was. We missed the spring. We saw the weather, which became suspiciously warm, only in the summer. At the end of August, while buying some sorrel, I thought: "Oh, winter is already over, and I haven't once made myself some green borscht." Winter ended in August, and in October - after new mass rocket attacks on Ukrainian cities - it began again.

In the first months, it was difficult to determine dates and days of the week. However, everyone knew exactly what day of the war it was. Eight years plus... twenty, one hundred and thirty-one, two hundred, three hundred and eleven days...

The new perception of time also involved the idea that everything that needed to be done had to be done between air-raids. That's seven or eight days. Sometimes ten. Everything had to be fitted in between air-raids.

Stages of grief

There are several theories concerning the stages of grief (e.g. the authoritative works by John Bowlby, Colin Murray-Parkes and Elisabeth Kubler-Ross). Specialists argue about how many there are, whether they are consecutive or whether they can be simultaneous and recurrent, and whether it is possible to consider acceptance of trauma as the beginning of the healing process.

We have no chance of reaching the acceptance stage. No chance of reporting our post-traumatic stress disorder. Today we have little (or no) chance of ceasing to be victims of aggression. We will definitely win. But today - trauma, grief and pain continue, and are repeated.

Perhaps, at first, there was denial. Like a kind of numbness. And then - frenzy. We call it *lyut* after the name of the month *Lyuty* (February) when the full-scale invasion began.

Just frenzy. It is the source of strength and resistance. No bargaining, no acceptance, no complacency. We live and fight, feeding off fury. At first, it looked like this could not go on for long. But it turned out it could. With each rocket, there was yet more frenzy. With each dead and molested person, with each child buried under the ruins of houses, with each targeted school, more and more frenzy.

And no, it doesn't eat us up from the inside and turn us into monsters. But yes, frenzy overcomes fear, despair and emptiness.

Denial goes hand in hand with frenzy, it is its child, its continuation. And this is not a denial of the situation. Of all the denials we recognise, we encourage only the denial of Russian culture. We cancel it as the alpha and omega of Russian imperialism.

We do not burn books; we do not throw them away. On the contrary: books continue to live in libraries, awaiting their readers. I hope nobody will ever read them. Because Russian culture, in which Raskolnikov kills in order to understand whether he is a human being or a trembling creature, brings thousands of new Raskolnikovs to Ukrainian soil, who go on slaying, again and again.

Trust

In searching for the traumatic stage of acceptance, I found trust. Trust and anger, solidarity and frenzy. Rage could not handle pain on its own. Something else is needed. And this "something" turned out to be trust.

It's everywhere: "you can bring money for coffee later", "I'm going to Lviv, scribble me a note about who or what to take. I have two spaces and my boot", "we will take your children to a shelter and help them with their homework", "how much do I need to add to buy a Mavic drone?" In 2014, I measured my salary in Celox, a hemostatic agent of which there were shortages on the front. Our army has become stronger over the years. Now I measure my salaries, stipends and royalties in Mavic drones and buses for the front.

Trust is when I transfer money to the account of a volunteer whom I have never seen in my life. But I know his work and trust him infinitely. Trust is when, for one's birthday, instead of a wish list, a person distributes to their friends a list of volunteers who need help.

Trust and frenzy come together when, after or even during shelling, we hand over money to the army, to fund frontline medicines and hospitals and to help refugees.

Guilt and shame

I have never been to Kherson. I have never been to Mykolaiv. I have not been to many cities in Ukraine. But now, when Russian rockets fly into these cities, when rockets hit houses, universities, museums and hospitals, I feel these explosions as if they were happening near the house I live in. When missiles are shot down over Kyiv but are not shot down over Zaporizhzhia, I feel a sense of guilt. Not only I, but many of my friends and colleagues too, are ashamed because we did little for the frontline, because we spent less time sitting in shelters than the inhabitants of Kharkiv, because we did not starve like the people of Mariupol, because we did not pull our relatives out of the rubble. We are ashamed of being alive. We are ashamed that we are alive, and many of our people are not.

I write in my diary every day. For over three hundred days now. [The diary of the writer](#) of children's books, Volodymyr Vakulenko, ended in March. He buried it in the ground by his

house, in an occupied village near Izyum. He asked for it to be handed over to the Ukrainian army when it came. Handed over to his people. Volodymyr Vakulenko was arrested on the street by the Russians. I don't know what the charge was. Because he was a children's writer? The occupiers called him a "nationalist". He was shot with a Makarov pistol in April. And his body was found only in the autumn after the Kharkiv region was liberated - among the bodies of other executed Ukrainians. A DNA examination of Volodymyr's body was undertaken in November.

I didn't know him. But I am writing in my diary, and he is not. As I speak these words, I feel breathless.

I know this is the guilt of those who escaped. Survivor's guilt. I also know that this is the flipside of solidarity. Bitter, but, I think, correct. I do not know most of the people who died so that I could live. But I know that I am guilty in their eyes, and in the eyes of their families. I feel their pain. The pain of people, cities, bridges, houses... The unfamiliar has ceased to be strange.

Guilt and shame are a huge ocean in which everyone is ashamed of everything: for leaving their country with their children, for their neighbours being killed, for the fact that this city is safer than another, for having no experience of occupation and not being able to imagine its horror, ashamed because of the pain of prisoners and the wounded, and because of the unfulfilled hopes of those waiting.

Guilt for everything, every day.

Laughter

In 1794, when it hadn't even crossed Pushkin's mind to be born, Ivan Kotliarevsky wrote in the Ukrainian language (which, according to the Kremlin, does not exist), a poem called "Aeneid", a travestied, burlesque version of Virgil's original. From the first lines, Aeneas, transformed into a Cossack, together with the author, laughs at his enemies, even when his enemies are the gods: "[But wicked Juno](#), spiteful hussy, Came cackling like a pullet fussy: Dark hatred smouldered in her mind. For some time now her wish most evil Had been to send him to the devil Till not a smell was left behind".

One of the creators of Ukrainian literature, Lesia Ukrainka, laughs despite everything, "No, through all my tears I still shall laugh, Sing songs despite my troubles".

Perhaps these are echoes of the laughter of [the Zaporizhzhian Cossacks](#), who responded to the threats of the Turkish Sultan with devastating sarcasm: "You Babylonian busboy, Macedonian mechanic, Jerusalem beerbrewer, Alexandrian goatskiner, swineherd of Upper and Lower Egypt, Armenian pig, Tatar goat, Kamenets hangman, Podolian thief, grandson of the Evil Serpent himself, and buffoon of all the world and the netherworld, fool of our God, swine's snout, mare's a[ssho]le, butcher's dog, unbaptized brow, may the devil steam your..."

Perhaps these are the body's defence mechanisms - mechanisms of the national body of the Ukrainians. A cultural code in which the spirit of defiance and freedom has been preserved throughout centuries of Russian colonialism.

We laugh in the face of the worst threats. As well as at the threat of nuclear weapons voiced by the Kremlin in September-October 2022.

We were scared. We knew then and we know now, that in the agony of a dying empire, there is no place for common sense, only death.

But after several days of muteness, [a group called "Orgy on Shchekavitsa"](#) was organized on a social network. Burlesque and carnival banished fear. Over the course of a few days, there were advertisements for catering, postal and communications services, sale of seats for observers, instructions including "how not to bring children", season tickets for regular members, offers of musical accompaniment, complaints about the discrimination against older people, and requests to sell the brand to other cities of Ukraine.

Surviving every attack - we laugh; listening to Putin's threats - we laugh; spending hours in bomb shelters and dark houses - we laugh.

I don't know if there are similar ways of surviving trauma in history. Methods which entail a victim - the size of David or Harry Potter - fighting back against a giant, incessantly laughing at him. And at that moment he ceases to be a victim because he conquers fear.

Another tomorrow

Laughter does not rescue us from muteness. Munch's scream is still greater. But he lacks the words to talk about himself.

On the 16th of March, the Russians dropped two 500 kg air bombs on the theatre in Mariupol. In front of the theatre, there was a large inscription "CHILDREN". It was visible from the sky. But that did not stop anyone. And we will most likely never know how many children died in the theatre. The Russians demolished it and poured concrete over the remains of the dead.

In April, a Russian rocket [killed children and adults at a train station in Kramatorsk](#). Peaceful people who wanted to escape the war. A plush horse. A blood-stained toy. A toy stained with children's blood.

In July, a Russian rocket flew into the centre of the city of Vinnitsa. A hospital, shop, parking lot, hotel. Among the victims was [a sunny four-year-old girl Liza](#))

In September, a bomb fell on a Dnieper house, where two children lived, their mother, grandmother and two dogs. Nothing was left. Of the house, of the bodies. Only a dog called [Krym miraculously survived](#). After the explosion, he came to the ruins, lay down and cried. Cried. When rescuers took him away, he continued crying. And two weeks later he died. He went to his people - to his family, to the dead children and to his friend - to a dog called Jack.

The boy Sergei from the Zaporizhzhia region was two days old. That's all he managed - two November days in his mother's arms and a name. And then there was a Russian bomb which hit the ward of a maternity hospital. A boy called Serhiy did not have time to receive his first document - a birth certificate. Instead, he immediately got a death certificate.

The boy Sergei is like Paul Celan's "as smoke you'll rise in the air then you'll have a grave in the clouds there you'll lie at ease". Or is it not so yet? We are half a step away from gas stoves but do not have them yet, simply because it is more reliable to kill Ukrainians with missiles?

From the first days of the invasion we said 'God appears in the uniform of the Armed Forces of Ukraine' But over Christmas, other questions started to be asked: 'why didn't God see the sign 'children' in front of the theatre?', 'Where was He when nothing remained of people's bodies, not even ash?', 'why did He turn away, refuse to save us, why didn't he bring down his deadly wrath on these enemies of humanity?' Does He exist at all, and what do we believe in?

These questions were asked during the Second World War and remained unanswered after it.

We live through trauma. And convulsively, chaotically we find words, often flat and dry, akin to protocols and dying whimpers.

With words that seem to no longer exist, we are trying to understand what really has no explanation. It is impossible to comprehend the evil in which the killing of children is a goal. None of us can become the Virgil of hell and no one will go to hell together with us. Frenzy, our rage, our bloody laughter - nothing leads to catharsis.

The hell that came with the Russians remains ours. It is like Auschwitz after Auschwitz, which has no end, because the Erinyes, as Primo Levi wrote, carry out the work of perpetual torturers, depriving sufferers of rest.

We will live with all this. If we can. Because Tadeusz Borowski, Paul Celan, Jean Amery, and Primo Levi could not. They found hundreds and thousands of words to narrate their experience, to help others get out, survive and learn to breathe, hear and feel something other than pain. Just to remember.

I need to use a full stop somewhere. But there is no place for a full stop. We are surviving trauma. And the majority, I believe someday even if not very soon, will survive it.

In the meantime, there are waves and cycles of wordlessness, silence and time that has stopped and, if it does go on, then somewhere inwards, where there are national ideas, where our roots are. Cycles and waves: muteness follows upon verbosity that explains nothing, a deafening roar after silence, a missed spring and a summer forgotten in an emergency suitcase. Laughter and pain. More pain. And more death. At the moment there is more of death