

# The Scars of Ukraine's War, Illuminated in Fiction

Two newly translated books highlight everyday lives transformed by conflict.

By Jennifer Wilson

March 29, 2022



Ola Jasionowska

**LUCKY BREAKS** by Yevgenia Belorusets | Translated by Eugene Ostashevsky

**GREY BEES** by Andrey Kurkov | Translated by Boris Dralyuk

In 2019, I read about a condition called uterine prolapse; it occurs when weakened pelvic muscles cause the uterus to detach, drop down into the vagina, and in some cases, even slip out. I learned that more cases than usual were being reported in a city in the Donbas region of Ukraine, where skirmishes between Russian-backed separatists and the Ukrainian Army had left the area war-ravaged long before the full-scale invasion currently strangling the country. A gynecologist in Avdiivka, a suburb of Donetsk, told The New York Times that the uptick in cases was most likely due to a combination of stress and heavy lifting; damage to pipes and other infrastructure forced residents to carry pails of water up flights of stairs. One woman with the condition, Liudmila, said she now had to decide between an expensive medical procedure and repairing her roof, which had been destroyed by shelling. “The winter is coming,” she said, “and I am going to stay either without a roof over my head or with my uterus falling out.”

In “Lucky Breaks,” a newly translated short-story collection by the Ukrainian writer and photographer Yevgenia Belorusets, battle scars are more often psychological than physical. Her characters, much like Liudmila, have not been afforded the time or space to attend to the shocks of war; life, or something like it, must go on for these women. Many are internal refugees who fled the brutal fighting that first broke out in east Ukraine in 2014, and have resettled in a Kyiv that regards them with apathy or suspicion. Rarely do we get the details of what happened to these women in the Donbas; Belorusets smartly conveys the invisibility of their trauma by making it likewise invisible to readers. In the Kyiv metro, we meet a jovial woman named Xenia who appears enthusiastic about her new career selling stationery on the subway. Advertising double-sided markers, she yells to the passengers, “They highlight the main idea!” When someone shoots her a dirty look, her veneer of happiness rapidly disintegrates, and she collapses. The narrator makes vague reference to “all the other sorrows that had vexed her over the last two years,” without explaining what they are, because, after all, no one has bothered to ask.



Given the timing of “Lucky Breaks,” it might be tempting to describe these stories as *urgent*. The irony is that at the time of writing (the book was first published in 2018), Belorusets was in fact turning her attention to an overlooked population — poor women in Ukraine’s industrial east — within an overlooked conflict. Before Russia’s invasion in February, over 14,000 people had already died in clashes in the Donbas, and a million and a half had been displaced. Today, amid blanket media coverage of the war, the sense of forgottenness that permeates the emotional landscape of “Lucky Breaks” is jarring. A beloved manicurist goes missing, but no one notices at first; another woman disappears into a forest.

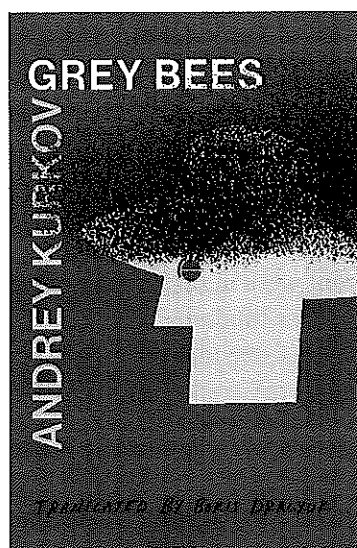
At other times, “Lucky Breaks” feels almost uncannily in dialogue with the present. Recently, Prince William said it was “alien” to see a war in Europe, despite his own family’s involvement in many of them. One can imagine a character in “Lucky Breaks” addressing him when, during a nightmare in which she’s drinking the blood of the dead, she says: “At that very moment I felt that I was turning into a completely different person — a European, an inhabitant of a great and ancient land.”



Yevgenia Belorusets  
Olga Tsybulska

Some of Beloruset's characters still live in the disputed territories, working as hairdressers or florists, eking out a life against the backdrop of active warfare or its devastating aftermath. Beloruset emphasizes the surrealness of such an existence through magical realism. In one story, "The Stars," horoscopes in the local paper advise when it is safe to walk around outside based on readers' zodiac signs: "It turned out that Pisces could be sure of their well-being and safety from 3 to 5 p.m. that day." The conversational rhythms of the prose are attentively preserved by the translator and poet Eugene Ostashevsky. The main text was written in Russian, but Beloruset's publisher requested she write the first of two prefaces in Ukrainian, Ostashevsky explains in an afterword. This duality, at a time when language has been weaponized by both Ukrainian and Russian nationalists, is an enriching subtext that by default is lost in translation.

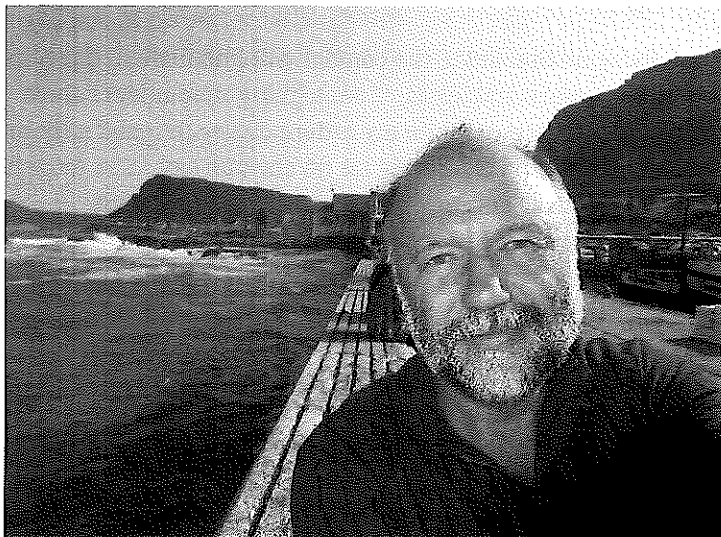
Readers looking for clarity about the political factions and internal divisions that led to the conflict will find instead hazy dream sequences, witchcraft, a woman who loses the ability to walk in Maidan Square and jokes, "I am a living monument." Such profound narrative absurdities readily evoke the Ukrainian-born Nikolai Gogol's (despite my ardent desire to resist national typecasting). We learn that a florist has joined a partisan unit, but which side she is fighting for no one can say. "She must be fighting on the side of the hyacinths," an old customer jokes. At times, this disorientation recreates the sensorium of misinformation that has defined this conflict. In "The Stars," some believe they're being bombed by Canada; apparently, Trudeau is after their coal. In these spellbinding stories, Beloruset is more interested in effect than cause. What's the use of finding out how we got here when we know we'll be back again?



**The novelist Andrey Kurkov** has said that while he is ethnically Russian, he considers himself "politically Ukrainian." Kurkov was born in 1961 in St. Petersburg (then Leningrad), but moved to Kyiv as a child. Russians, he told Agence France-Presse in February, subscribe to the "collective mentality." For Kurkov, the czars, the Bolsheviks and now Putin have been trying to impose this worldview onto Ukrainians, but "Ukrainians are individuals," he says. It's unsurprising then that displaced collective animals are a favored motif in Kurkov's humorous novels about political life in post-Soviet Ukraine. He is best known for "Death and the Penguin" (1996), a satirical crime thriller about an obituary writer named Viktor living in 1990s Kyiv whose sole companion is his pet penguin. Like the post-Soviet man, the penguin has been cut off from his collective (back home in Antarctica) and is adrift in a free world. It shouldn't work, but it does.

In his new novel, "Grey Bees," Kurkov has hive-minded insects do the work of explaining where he thinks humankind has gone awry. The book is about a beekeeper named Sergey Sergeyich who lives in Donbas's "gray zone," between areas controlled by the Ukrainian military and those in the hands of Russia-backed separatists. (Interestingly, Gogol's breakthrough work was "Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka," a story collection narrated by a Ukrainian beekeeper.) Firmly neutral, Sergey has no dog in this fight — just his bees. One of his most prolonged considerations of new political realities is what will happen to his regional society for beekeepers if Donetsk were to become independent. "Was there a society in Donetsk these days?" he wonders. "If there was, it wouldn't be the region's, it would be the 'republic's,' and that meant he was no longer a member." Kurkov's translator, Boris Dralyuk, renders the warmth of Sergey's inner voice from the original Russian without letting the earnestness creep into the saccharine.

When increased shelling starts to disturb the hives, Sergey loads them into his Lada and starts driving from town to town, eventually making his way to Crimea. Over the course of the novel, his resolve to stay neutral is shaken, particularly when he sees how Russian occupying forces have treated his beekeeper friend, a Crimean Tatar named Akhtem. There are hints of an awakening. He notices his bees, which he had once heralded as a species that had achieved pure communism, refusing to make room for a newcomer from another hive. Suddenly their communalism looks like little more than cruel tribalism. Sergey reprimands them: “Why are you acting like people?”



Andrey Kurkov  
via Andrey Kurkov

In a novel about neutrality and so-called gray zones, the Russian characters in “Grey Bees” come off to me as eerily cold, almost monstrous — snipers, cops, Putin apologists — as if the actions of the Russian government were in some ways reflective of a deeper national character. It recalls Kurkov’s professed view of Russian and Ukrainian people as fundamentally different, each with a unique “mentality.” As Putin tries to justify his occupation on the grounds of a shared history, there is indeed a strong current within Ukraine’s intelligentsia toward highlighting what makes the cultures and literary traditions distinct. Any suggestion of syncretism or co-influence feels tantamount to treason.

Yet this divvying up risks underselling the diversity of influences on Ukrainian literature, as well as the indelible imprints that writers from Ukraine have made on Russian letters, from Gogol to Isaac Babel to Vasily Grossman. As Ostashevsky puts it: “Russian language and literature were often influenced by, or simply made in, Ukraine.” As shown in these two books, written in the same language by one Ukrainian author and one Russian, gray areas are where two sides blur into each other. Now, Ukrainians are fighting for the right to be many people, speaking many languages, refusing to be separated.

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#### **LUCKY BREAKS**

By Yevgenia Belorusets

Translated by Eugene Ostashevsky

186 pp. New Directions. Paper, \$14.95.

#### **GREY BEES**

By Andrey Kurkov

Translated by Boris Dralyuk

318 pp. Deep Vellum Publishing. Paper, \$15.95.

## THE WOMAN WITH THE BLACK, BROKEN UMBRELLA

March 2016, Kyiv

I DON'T WANT to write about her; I have no wish to recall her. She forgot her umbrella at the bus stop—believe me, there's no need to recall that incident—then she was making her way to the bus stop in the pouring rain to retrieve it—if I remember correctly—and then, when she finally took it into her hands, couldn't manage to open it.

Apparently it was her last umbrella.

Can anything be more affecting than events of this sort? Lacking an umbrella, striving to possess it, a fluttering hand extending in its direction. Perhaps only the need to think and speak of such insignificant, trivial things.

A man's umbrella, medium-sized, semi-automatic. A black inkblot.

The bus stop: a transparent cage. She was making her way to that spot of black in the rain, stealing toward it, and in the meantime, as she communicated to me afterward, remembered a recent incident, not long ago, in another city, when she was making her way to retrieve a black rag under fire. She recalled her tremors, her stupidity. This woman moved to Kyiv from a region where the war raged—but here, against any common sense, she continued with her wartime habits, her wartime tricks of desperate relations with objects, things, the streets.

I didn't want to talk about her; it's painful for me to recall her face, sharply cut by thin rifts of wrinkles. She said the same things too often. But lately I've been doing that too. She made overly insistent attempts to explain her despair to me; she wanted even more—for me to put a high value on the pain, anxiety, and fear that do not let her rest.

I will never manage to shed light on that clinging *bewilderment*, the distract-  
edness that does not let go. I can only try to reproduce it, to list its existential forms: the sudden lurch from the house to the bus stop for the umbrella; the fit of wrestling with it; the engagement that launches away a coat button, recently bought and re-sewn, while the spokes bare themselves and poke out, casting shadows across the face. The umbrella will not open. It is abandoned out of wrath on the bus stop bench as the abandoner rushes to the closest café for a breather. Although it's not really a café but an unprepossessing kiosk on the Boulevard of International Friendship. Here they offer bad coffee for 8 hryvni, and for 6 a glass of tea. Our eyes meet each other. She commences her eternal lament; she sings her sorrows to the kiosk woman. The kiosk woman looks at her with envy, for she is a free woman whom the rapacious and venal kiosk owner doesn't hold between her claws.

The kiosk woman says, "These blocks of butter here have almost melted. I would have liked to butter myself, I would have smeared the butter all over me, I wouldn't have spared even my hair, because in this kiosk your skin turns to tin."

I both live and sleep here, I'm cooped up here the whole week. Only sometimes for a half hour I dash off to the house next door—to brush my teeth, wash my face—otherwise I'm here, there's no going outside, like a bunny in a terrarium.”

Both women are anxious. Neither knows what to do with herself. As for me it is by chance that I happen to be near them, and we succeed in holding a conversation for some pitiful fifteen minutes.

And the woman who had been making her way toward her umbrella, who has just now caught her breath, again wants to take off from where she is, to run through snow and ice to the bus stop for her umbrella, which she abandoned in the middle of an iron bench where it lies like a black stain, like a crushed tube of paint, or a nebulous ink spill. She left it there at the bus stop though the umbrella had allegedly gone through unbelievable hardships with her—the things that umbrella had seen over the past year, what hadn't it lived through.

The kiosk woman tries to hold her back, appealing to her common sense, reason, dignity, honor, and pride, and to her not having finished her coffee.

The woman throws us a cunning look in which I see pity and disdain, and says that in any case she must buy some milk near the Lybidska metro and she will now proceed in that direction, past the bus stop, naturally.

She tears herself from us. Quickly, stumbling and jumping over small obstacles, as if dashing for the next shelter, she careens to the bus stop, takes the umbrella into her hands, and attempts to open it. We've seen it all before! Pointless.

But now she doesn't throw the umbrella back on the bench; she takes it into her hands and starts walking aslant, in the direction of a small park, and I follow behind her for some reason, gradually nearing her.

I hear what she says to her umbrella: “You black scab. What did I buy you for. You always go about dirty, sick, infected. You can never be by yourself. You're all gnawed up by illnesses and infections, you're a scab, and I'm going to get rid of you, believe you me. I won't act like I'm sorry for you anymore. I carried you into the park yesterday, I left you on a bench by the trash bins, but you laid out your terms, you bastard, you abortion, you waited me out. But today I'll carry you into such wilderness that lying around will get you nowhere, you'll be lying around for nothing, you thankless wretch. When I asked you to be like everyone else, to do what you're told, you just had to have it your way, you wretch, you. When I was cleaning, washing everything around me which means you also—it was like zero fudge, you just went on being yourself. That's what you care about. To be yourself! But I can't do this anymore! I'm at the end of my rope! I forgot the last time I was myself! I'm exhausted! I'm sick and tired of tending to you everywhere, sick and tired of coming to your rescue. So you just stay where you are, friend, I'm going off to the Lybidska station. Believe me, it'll be easier that way for you and for me.”

She disappeared behind one of the buildings. I did not follow her any longer.



## CHRONICLE OF A REVOLT

*From a conversation with Katerina N.*

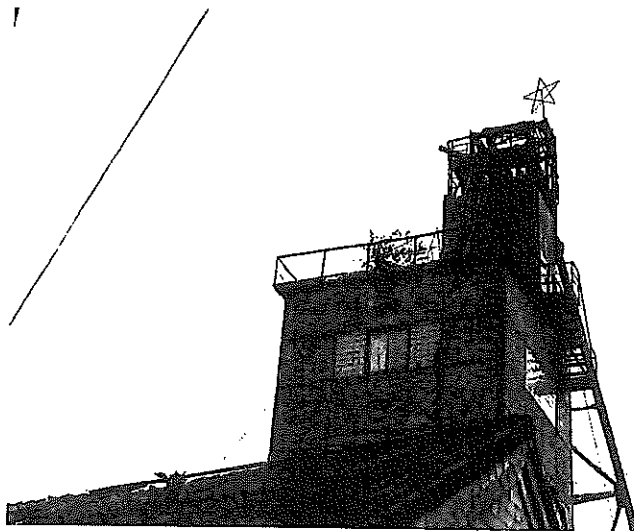
IN 2015, IN the course of judicial proceedings against hairstylists, manicurists, and other workers at the Pyramid Beauty Salon, the examining magistrates, if they may be styled as such, voiced a question that, for the government of the city-state of Anthracite, ought to have cleared up, if only a little, the causes of the revolt.

The examining magistrates inquired after the fashion by which mutinous ideas and thoughts grew and took root in the heads of the beauty salon workers. This question was interestingly answered by Xenia Semyonovna, one of the leaders of the revolt, senior specialist in men's hair arrangement, also known city-wide as master of the Pageboy and the A-line bob styles.

"We recently saw, each of us saw, no one missed any of it, how many townships have been disturbed, homes turned upside down, women left to litter the road, frightening passersby with their uncleaned bodies, how many conquests and reconquests had been carried out in the name of freedom and independence. We've seen it all—the Miners' Revolution, the Orange Revolution, the Revolution of Dignity, and our own Anthracite Revolution. We've witnessed the making of deeds and the acquiring of titles: somebody transferred the title of the stables in the village of Dyakovo; somebody appropriated the deed of the municipal market and two gas stations. But we're broad-minded people—we've never been petty. They want the gas station? They can have the gas station. They come to get their hair done but show us no respect—it's on their own conscience. That was how our minds took everything in and we, too, learned to arrange revolutions."

Xenia Semyonovna's address alluded to the political and military events that deeply disturbed the daytime and nighttime routines of Anthracite, in consequence of which the city briefly seceded from the Luhansk Region, as well from the newly formed state of the Luhansk People's Republic, to become a state unto itself, ruled by a Cossack host with atamans at the head.

In all probability, reasoned the examining magistrates, after a series of events which will probably not be mentioned here at all, Xenia Semyonovna herself and her entire beauty salon fell party to the changes that were taking place right in front of their eyes. At some point it even became evident that the Pyramid Beauty Salon was not the sole organization to grow aware of the necessity of change. An entire series of other hairdressing establishments, a fitness center, and two supermarkets in the neighborhood also opted for mutiny! We have yet to investigate all this in the most meticulous fashion, to draw up a court record, and to do everything conceivable, everything that lies within our human reach, to ensure that such events do not repeat. It is not the right time to be lenient with the likes of Xenia Semyonovna.



All the same, it does not seem possible to describe Xenia Semyonova as a mutineer or revolutionary in the classical understanding of these words. After all, ordinary mutineers, viz. the Ukras, the Bandera Bandits, or simply the Dissatisfied, create an environment of their own. They tear themselves away from the rest of city people, turn inward, immerse themselves fully in what they do, take to procuring unauthorized flags from who knows where and addressing each other in prohibited languages. They often walk out on their families, stop seeing loved ones, rupture relations with their habitual milieu.

Yet Xenia Semyonovna and the workers of her salon never disengaged from their environment. They went about their business, cut hair, manicured nails; they knew many people in town and socialized with anyone fate carried into their salon. Their readiness for mutiny did not contradict their usual way of life; each of them maintained that she wished to make Anthracite *better*. Whose patronage and influence the city found itself under was supposedly a question that lost all meaning for them. They insisted that they had risen *above politics*.

Nonetheless, for all the rebels' shared if rather vaguely defined ideas, they still had not developed a single ideology, whose emergence, as any schoolchild knows, is a requirement for revolutionary organizations. Neither the enhanced interrogations, nor the scrupulous study of the social networks of the detainees, have disproved that hypothesis. The arrested women entertained a rather broad range of opinions. They had received entirely different educations and owned up to an astonishing variety of preferences and perceptions of life and the world. The



beauty salon workers included a former student from the department of philosophy of the University of Luhansk, an accountant, an actress, a professional pastry chef, only one professional manicurist but several certified master hairstylists, who, moreover, belonged to different and even mutually hostile schools and traditions of the art. Some of the salon workers composed fluent letters, open or personal, in which they swore never to repeat such a truly fatal mistake, and requested in emotional tones to be let out of the cellar and returned to their families, to their husbands and children. But others—especially the two sisters, Angelica and Albina—wrote with the crudest solecisms, unable to adequately express a single thought. Constantly straying into old, petty squabbles, they argued that they had been systematically underpaid for haircuts for several months already, and that, if it were not for that constant humiliation, they never would have helped Xenia Semyonovna, even though she stood godmother to their children.

It is thereby evident that rebel ranks harbored representatives of well-known and respectable families in Anthracite, as well as entirely unknown women from the provinces, who had moved to Anthracite from adjoining villages in search of a better life.

Nevertheless, they all clearly desired to undertake some activity in the name of either the future of Anthracite, or its present. This readiness of theirs invited suspicion, making them stand out among the other inhabitants of the city.

And yet, in the course of this investigation, the distance that is usually in evidence between apprehended or captured enemies and their examiners did not arise between the rebels and the Cossack specialists from the Anthracite secret services.

There was no class barrier.

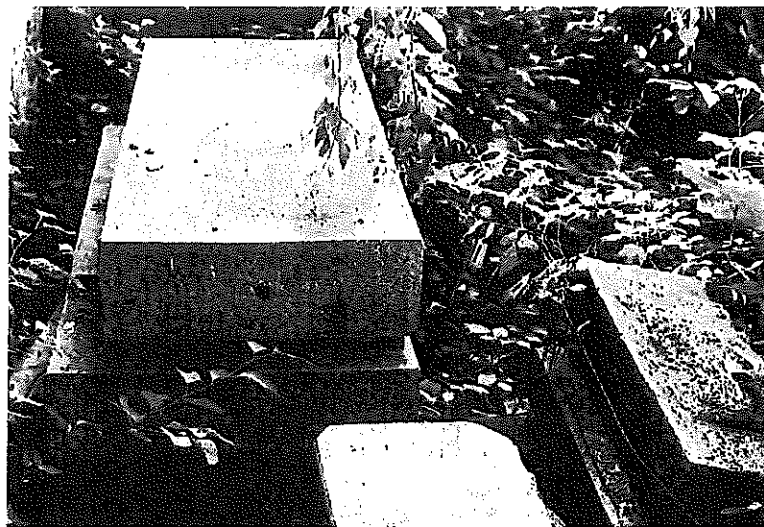
For example, a fascinating contradiction was observed in the case of the said Xenia Semyonovna. Her husband, Stoyan Sergeyevich, codename "The Appropriator," was an independent soldier, militia man, amateur martial artist, and activist for the sovereignty of Anthracite and its secession as a city-state.

He conducted agitation among the students of the Professional High School of Automotive Transport, exhorting them to join the Managed Spring Movement and the battles for the city's independence. He furthermore served as the personal consultant of the highly respected ataman Kozitsyn, a man capable of wide-ranging, historically informed ratiocination. Finally, due to his gifts in the field of diplomacy, he often traveled to Donetsk and Luhansk in order to establish intergovernmental-communication relations for Anthracite.

Stoyan Sergeyevich—the very same individual!—abetted the people's cause with all his considerable talents, yet did not notice the alien elements under his own nose, in his own family, a fact he subsequently deeply bemoaned.

Stoyan Sergeyevich's statement of contrition became a key event in the court proceedings against the mutineers. Indeed, for its breadth as well as for the profundity of the issues touched upon, his repentance eclipsed the verdict and sentence, the justice and humanity of which astonished even the issuing magistrates, who

did not expect of themselves a corresponding delicacy toward the enemy, manifested moreover at a moment of historical significance for the city-state, as it pursued a war of liberation against two townships, several neighboring city-states, and states properly speaking.



*Gravestones used in 1996 to pay back wages to Novovolynsk mine workers. The remains of these wages can still be found on the grounds of one of the mines to this day.*

## THE STARS

**THE DAYS DRAG** on with no meaning. It's really quiet in A, where we live. Nobody shoots at anybody; nobody asks for explanations for no reason; roadblocks don't work the way they do at B. Here, you can drive through a roadblock unmolested, especially if you are taking a jitney bus or taxi.

I don't orient myself well in the city where I've spent my whole life.

I don't understand who these people are: the ones I consider my friends, the ones I get together with every Thursday to play cards for small change while consuming a mountain of cookies and candy. What scares me most is stability. There's a quiet, but an unsteady kind of quiet, giving way, like a bog or a swamp. That's it, a swamp. Not a soul around. I am searching for my husband in the forest, in the middle of water, knee-deep. Did this happen to me? Or did none of it happen? You're going to laugh. It happened not to me but to my neighbor. For some reason I always find myself in her place when I tell her story. Don't chalk me up for crazy. I often have dreams that I'm by a line of trees, gallons of blood running everywhere, a cart completely covered with bodies, they're shooting us down, a firing squad. It must have come from a history textbook. I have nothing left to do but to climb into the cart, hide under the bodies, and smear blood over my face so that they count me as one of the dead.

Whereas in real life, rather than in a dream, here's what happened. Last year, my neighbor went searching for her husband—they had taken him prisoner, but then they said they had let him go. She searched for him day after day for many days, and in the end found him in the forest! It took a while. She started in the nearby villages, then she searched in town, and then at his relatives' places. Finally, she took to wandering around the forest, calling him by name until he answered. The forest is a good place to shout out somebody's name. You can even howl.

They held hands and walked through our vast forest. Whenever I remember my neighbor's story the forest strikes me as impenetrable, gigantic. The trees of the forest rose high above them like ship masts. Sergey, her husband, walked beside her; they moved very lightly, with cushioned tread, as if they had feathers on their soles, or a layer of moss. She said that the moss in the forest began to understand them. The moss spread out before them and became their compliant ground, carpet, and pillow for their every step, each step so soft no one heard them. They found a path that, in three hours, brought them to a roadway, and from there the town was close at hand. Night had fallen but they nonetheless learned very quickly how to see really well in the dark. And despite the cold they learned not to feel cold.

I learned that, too: how hot my hand has become. A guy I know was riding his bike and saw them, the way they were walking on the road, but he didn't stop.

Many people say that the most important thing for us is to have peace. But I'm going to say to you that peace doesn't matter. Something else matters. But I don't know what. I just know peace isn't it.

While the war was going on I felt calm, because I was living from one shelling to another. I wasn't living day by day, but minute by minute and hour by hour. My friends were with me. No matter what they talked about, their words lacked any kind of importance. In those troubled hours and days their words were inaudible. Once uttered, they became objects, things—something solid and possessing form rather than meaning.

Right on through the gluey green wall of rain, a neighbor in a blue dress ran to the entryway: ran to save a hen. They called the hen Vika. She survived the war, she became a victor, and so they named her Victoria. The neighbor survived, too. The hen sometimes hid in the basement of our building. She would approach many of us and she lost her fear of human beings. On one of those days the neighbor announced that she couldn't bear it any longer, sitting below ground and guessing about what was going on above—with their house, with that birdbrain Vika. We laughed at our neighbor, at her inability to sit still. Then the neighbor showed us a page from the paper, *The Town News*, and there was a horoscope printed there for each day. Some signs were given hour by hour.

It turned out that Pisces could be sure of their well-being and safety from three to five p.m. that day. And so my neighbor, a pure Pisces without any additions, could easily leave the basement. There might be rumbling somewhere up above but nothing would touch her, almost for certain.

Pisces kept Victoria company, and they had a good time together. Everything felt surprising to me that day and I even believed the rumors it was Canada that was waging war against us—over the discovery of new deposits of valuable coal. Some of us were already deeply convinced of the fact. We sat in the basement thinking about Canadian aggression, about how greedy, vindictive, and heartless other countries could be. "Those bombs are made in Canada," the whisper swirled around the cellar, and for some reason we found it comforting.

We all started to study the horoscope. Scorpio was safe tomorrow from noon until almost evening. That was how I went out for my first stroll. I walked around a city where that was both smoky and bright. The streets were empty, the windows had no glass, the ground seemed to tremble a little, while the thin trees curled down under the weight of their leaves. We've never had such quiet before.

By the dumpster I met an alcoholic I knew. He was totally sober. Like me, he stood there, looking around in surprise. It turned out he was a Scorpio. Naturally his instinct for self-preservation brought him up to the surface. I didn't encounter problems returning to the cellar. We started making calculations so that we may go into town during safe hours. Nothing happened to us—nothing special, nothing terrible—because we always went and came back in the breaks between shooting.

These days I, too, am reading the horoscope. Today, after six and until nine, I'm advised to "seek seclusion and privacy at a time appropriate for reflection and

best spent at home." This can be interpreted as saying the time would be unsafe above. Believe it or not, with such veiled recommendations, the horoscope informed our whole building when there would be immediate danger to life during a shelling. The shelling has been over for a long while now. Still, the horoscope keeps giving the same recommendations, the wording unchanged, but we no longer understand it.

The stars used to be on our side: you might say they worked for us. Now it's as if everything has broken down, the sky does whatever the sky wants. Time has turned its back on our city. There's nothing happening.

