



Country, war, love

Excerpts from the Donetsk Diary

Olena Stiazhkina

1 March 2016

Just weeks after Ukraine's parliament voted to remove Viktor Yanukovich from office, the country's eastern regions descended into a senseless war, marking a grave new low in relations with Russia. Historian Olena Stiazhkina reflects powerfully on how the conflict has compromised Ukraine's attempts to take its destiny into its own hands.

Donetsk, 1 March 2014

Can you fall in love at a precise, predetermined time? For example, on Saturday, at 7:22pm?

I used to think that the time of birth written on babies' hospital bracelets was some sort of medical formality. But then a friend told me that it's important for horoscopes. The hours and minutes, not just the day and month. A staggering amount of variation comes from this. A person's fate depends on whether the sun is ascendant or descendant.

To go crazy - in a good way - you have to give birth.

Those numbers on the bracelet mark the precise time when love will come to you.

Probably not for everyone. But many people remember it, know it.

You take the little one in your arms, you look into its eyes - and you fall for it. You sink. With no resistance, you sink and sail away into happiness that knows no bounds.

Then, after - all those grown-up thoughts about how children mean problems and constant tiredness, how they don't grow up how you want, how they won't show you any gratitude and there's no point waiting for it, how between the diapers and the antiseptics you might not notice how life is passing by and old age is creeping in, how there's not even a glass of water or a crust of bread, how children are traitors and how if they're going to love someone unconditionally, that will only be their children, our grandchildren

...



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Then, after - almost all the predictions come true, but the hopes do not. They almost don't come true. Later nothing will be as sharp, as clear, as pure as that first time. But you won't lose that.

"It's oxytocin, all a matter of hormones", says my doctor friend. "Everything is different for men".

That's a good thing, that things are different for them. That's why they go crazy over Napoleons and Batmans.

Although my current megalomania is on a grander scale.

On Saturday, at 7:22 pm, I took Ukraine in my arms. It was a long labour, 23 years. It almost seemed that it wouldn't make it. [1]

I took her in my arms, looked into her eyes, and fell in love. My dear little one, my sweetheart, my poor little thing, my one-and-only ... My stupid happiness ... Joy ...

The diapers, tiredness, and anger are already over. Sometimes she behaves badly. But if we put every disobedient, shrieking child up for adoption, then why live at all?

So I kiss the crown of her head, breathe in her scent. I love her. Sometimes she even lets me sleep.

Your homeland is your child. Not your mother.

Something like that ...

16 May 2014

The play *Titus Andronicus* is considered Shakespeare's worst work. It's so bad that people even doubt if he was the author.

In this play there's too much senseless evil, and there's almost no logic to it. Titus takes revenge on the queen of the Goths, Tamora. The queen of the Goths takes revenge on him. Aleksander Anikst counted it up: "fourteen killings, thirty four bodies, three severed hands, one severed tongue ... " And then there's the rape and the murder of children and even babies.

And it seems like all of this is for nothing. Empty artifice, where every step only multiplies the volume of blood. And at a certain moment, that blood, drunk on itself, takes over. Blood and death for the sake of blood and death. And for the sake of a roar of laughter from the temporary victor. Senseless laughter ...

Even for the seventeenth century, this bacchanalia of horrors seemed ostentatious.

But no ...

There's nothing ostentatious about it. *Titus Andronicus* is being acted out on the stages of



Sloviansk, Kramatorsk, Donetsk, Horlivka, Luhansk.

Set design by Hieronymus Bosch. A ship sailing to hell. And a live tree in place of a mast, and a plump goose tied to it, and a broken branch for the wheel. Going nowhere and for no reason. And a church, yes. A church. Playing the lute. To hell. Sailing to hell and dragging to hell. And the faces ... faces which don't exist, which can't exist. The feverish imagination of the artist. Grotesque, you think?

He simply saw them. Faces whose existence can't be believed. Civilization hides them and hides from them. Hides from them; they're all the same, as if they were rubbed out with a dirty eraser, with mouths not meant for speaking, only for wailing. It takes centuries of faith to sympathize, commiserate with, understand these people ...

For us, now, everything is all Shakespeare and Bosch.

Existence is difficult for people. In choosing it, you have to consent to suffering. "To be or not to be" - it's a question for every day, every moment. Freedom is an unbearable burden, where the endless "you" bears responsibility for the endless world. It's probably this weight that makes us say and write so much. It's the roll-call of the universe: "We're here, we're here, we're here ..."

It seems that non-existence is easier.

Maybe. But that means death. That's death calling out, "Hear the Donbas". These people don't exist. They don't exist among themselves. And all these years never happened.

Yanukovych, in reality, is their president. It was through him that they multiplied their emptiness and magnified their personal non-existence in the world. We are like him, he is like us. He is ours. He is us. Not me.

There is no "I" here. It hasn't been cultivated, fostered, recognized as possible.

Collective coalescence above the abyss. One more step and you're gone - maybe you weren't conscious, but you were alive. Every living thing knows of its own death. Somehow in the first or last fiber of its being. And death cackles, weeps and cries out: "Listen! I'm here. I've come for you."

Yanukovych's place was filled by Russia and Putin. Not by itself.

To be is a burden. Not to be is hell.

On the road to an invented, non-existent Russia, they were given weapons. They saw it and prized it. And through those weapons they entered reality.

The eternal nobody, the eternal zero, picked up an AK and became a soldier. Then an officer, a commander. That wailing death has become incarnate. It has begun to act ...

No one attacks them, but they sleep with a machine gun. Because an AK has a voice. It



has its own intonation, even meaning. They, in contrast, they can only wail, with the pain of poverty, bad schools, the impossibility of living like someone's son.

They are not sons, friends, brothers. But there have never been any other means of social mobility in the Donbas, and there still aren't.

Plundered and cast away. Forgotten in cities that could be the sets for movies about any given war or any man-made catastrophe ... forgotten in their homes, where half of the windows are busted. Forgotten in their beds, which can't even remember sheets or blankets.

They are twenty, forty, sixty. They are women, and they are men.

In their collective "we" there is weeping for justice, for incompleteness, for the impossibility of living like this. And for ignorance there is weeping: what does it mean to live? What does it mean to be? As ourselves?

They need someone in charge. A chieftain or a leader, it's all the same. They wander in cold darkness and cuddle up in whatever arms seem kindred.

The USSR was their Golden Age country.

The West has never felt such an acute desire to go "backwards". The last image of "backwards" was painted by Hesiod, and over time that has come to be taken as a fairy tale.

But fairy tales are cruel. They are talismans for the naked, who try to crane their feeble necks for the sake of the past. Tom Thumb in the woods, because parents can't feed their children. Little Red Riding Hood eaten by the wolf. And if it hadn't been for the woodsmen ... An evil mirror in the hands of a stepmother. Kai, turned to ice on the whims of the Snow Queen.

The past is dangerous, dear children. Things are worse in the past than they are now. Even if you have a fire starter, there's no guarantee you will win.

The USSR is an eternal fairy tale. A lure. A trap. An invented country calls out like a siren to come back and fall asleep. To die.

Russia does not exist. It has dissolved into a past that it deceives itself with, just as it deceives these weak ones.

It is impossible to hear death. But you can listen to it: the cries of those killed, the machine gun fire, the salvos. The conquering laughter. The clicking of camera lenses. Capturing another's death for posterity. To be precise: another's, and yours.

Titus Andronicus on the deck of the Ship of Fools.

19 May 2014



Franz Boas noted that in a single society at any given time there can be several chronological paradigms at work. To put it more simply, people live in different historical eras, even though everyone's calendar reads the twenty-first century. Its fourteenth year.

Foraging as a way of life is one of the most widespread approaches in the Donbas. It only seems as if there's nothing useful in the abandoned mines and torn-up asphalt. But there is. For example, there's metal – both colourful and black. There are manholes, the remnants of equipment, railroad tracks overgrown with grass but still made of solid cast-iron.

If you break them off or saw them off, if you steal or filch them out from under your neighbours' noses, you can turn them in at the scrap yard. Get some money. Live off of it.

Stealing is not good. But stealing means taking from your own kind. And a manhole cover is just part of nature.

Nature belongs to everyone. And gives to everyone.

The local policeman might not agree with this. But not because he is upset over the loss of state property, but because he's in charge. The head honcho. You have to share with the head honcho. And then your hunt for manhole covers, for graveyard fences, for railroad ties will be successful.

The head honcho has connections "at the top". Somewhere up there, in the sky, live the gods, with whom he must share. They're called Procurator, Judge, Mayor ...

For your hunt to be successful, the gods have to be satiated and smiling. And they do smile: from election campaign posters, on television.

And people understand: the gods are satisfied. Our hunt will be successful ...

Not only iron and metal. There are also kopankas, little illegal coalmines. Often deep. But with no light, no insurance, without any equipment ... Well, a pick, I guess. It's dark. Scary. And this is also nature. Nature gives some people fish and bananas. Others get coal. A bit of coal. It's pulled out of the kopankas in buckets. And carried in them. Not home. You can't eat coal. They take it to working mines. The director is also a head honcho. You have to share with him. He doesn't pay much, but he records the coal as belonging to the mine.

A foraging economy has no "tomorrow". The future is unclear, fluid, and dangerous. The future is a threat. And no one is equipped to deal with it. Every day of these new Ukrainian years was worse than the last.

That's why there is a "great yesterday". A golden age. These people who are stealing manhole covers were once metallurgists or miners. They got paid a salary. The head honcho sat in the Kremlin. He was just and strict. Very strict. Under his rule, the previous ruler, no one would have stolen.

And there was enough, things were predictable. It was good.



Cash advances and salaries. A lunch break. If you were late, you got a stern talking-to ... Chronic absenteeism would lead to being fired. And maybe even prison. But in prison they feed you. And there's a daily schedule. And penal labour. No one is afraid of labour. Not prison, either.

Not everyone remembers the "great yesterday" anymore. A new generation has grown up, and they know it only through pictures and stories.

This generation is the one that is hopelessly stealing manhole covers and climbing down into the "hole" at twelve years old. And together with their fathers and grandfathers, they dream of going back. Looking out of an airplane window, the plain of the Donbas looks like the surface of the moon. Craters like kopankas. Kopankas like craters. And nothing more. Adam and Eve. Expulsion from paradise.

But these people don't know what sin they've committed. They think that the past was simply taken from them ... By some enemy of the human race, someone evil, merciless.

Not someone from here. Someone else.

Longing. Such longing ...

20 May 2014

Did you know that tribes that forage don't have bad gods?

Angry, irate, wrathful. But not bad.

If a god is out of sorts, the people are at fault. They did something wrong. And that's why you have bad luck while hunting, and your firstborn is a girl, and there's no rain ...

You have to placate your god. And listen to him. Intuit his moods, his intonations. Give. Give away. Sacrifice. And meekly wait: will it be accepted? Will he take it? Will he deign to?

Your own gods are never bad.

Only other people's.

Other people's gods are always bad. They're the ones who stole, deceived, mocked, destroyed.

Other people's gods seem stronger than your own. More wrathful and more ignoble, with a tendency towards betrayal and quick reprisals.

Compared to them, your own gods are children. And children have to be defended. People vote for their own, to save them. They are their gods. Otherwise there will be no hunting. The rail ties won't buckle and the coal from the holes in the ground will stay in its buckets. And there won't be anything to eat.



We know little about contemporary industrial paganism. We deny it with some strange sort of haughtiness.

But what if your god was killed, died or was driven away by others – how do you live?

15 June 2014

Is acceptance of another as your own possible?

If he is as strong, formidable and severe as a thousand of your own, then yes.

Other gods can't be good. People here don't believe in what they've never seen. They've never seen good. They don't know it. They don't believe in it.

For another god to win, he has to be menacing, strict, and vicious. Not necessarily just. Justice is a pitiful characteristic for a god.

Cruelty and murderousness are customary.

The army took one town three times. Every time it left it, in peace and quiet, leaving a checkpoint behind, people started shooting at that checkpoint with a mortar gun. From somewhere amongst the apartment buildings. Every night from somewhere else.

One of the men stationed at the checkpoint was a local. He said, "That's it! Enough mollycoddling!"

That night he constructed – go ahead, look to the heavens – ten gallows. He modelled them on photos from World War II. Nothing complicated.

He constructed them and put them in the centre of town.

The next morning, local residents came up to the checkpoint. They brought cherries, dumplings, kvas and potatoes with onion.

"So ... boys ... We apologize on behalf of the whole community! ... "

"And what the hell are these night-time shenanigans of yours?" the guys asked severely.

"Well ... you know ... We didn't actually know that you're in charge now ... And how are we supposed to get by without someone in charge? There's no way!"

"So we should take down the gallows?"

The locals grew embarrassed, whispered among themselves, and made their decision:

"Leave them be. Without them we might get spoiled ... "

For another god to become yours, he ought to put a gallows on the town square. And then, next to it, a school.



And only in that order.

Because a school is something good, justice. And that would mean weakness ...

15 July 2014

We're not dealing with militia anymore. It's a war. With foreigners in it. Sorry, Russia. We haven't been brothers for a long time now. I don't have to ask why. I know why. And you know, too.

We are listening to a walkie-talkie. Over its airwaves, aside from hate, there are pay rates. The mercenaries get paid by the day. The locals too. But there are five hundred locals. Only five hundred - for seven million people. And they get paid less. The convictions of my compatriots cost significantly less than the professional work of yours. Just killing - what an interesting job.

I speak with a drawl. Earlier, whenever I was in Moscow, I always tried to "pick up the pace", speak more quickly. Blend in. Now I ask myself, "Who did I want to resemble?" Your news anchors?

Recently they invented a crucified boy. A three year old boy, crucified, and his mother, gunned down by a tank. In Sloviansk. On the main square. Hm. In front of a huge crowd of people. [2]

You don't have to stop there. The boy ought to be resurrected. And come to his killers.

As an adult man, with a beard and a Caucasian accent. Just a few more months and you, Russia, will have written a new Bible. The story of the crucifixion is more or less ready.

My speech is slow, drawn out. Let it be as languid as honey. As the heat of the southern wind. As milk straight from the cow. As life. Why should I have to pick up the pace and speed up life?

I am a Russian ukrainka. The stress is on the "i". The "i." [3]

And now I want to distinguish myself, separate myself from that fast and hard articulation of sounds.

Carl stole coral from Clara. What good is that to me? I no longer want to be a part of this language that sounds like machine gun fire.

17 July 2014

You don't necessarily have to be poor or poorly educated to have no self-awareness whatsoever and not value yourself.

The lack of selfhood is a complicated problem. Somewhere back in childhood there was an absence of love and a toxic sense of shame.



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“You are bad. There’s no one worse. You don’t exist ... ”

We’re talking about death again. A childhood death is felt acutely. You can’t forget it ... the mantra “I don’t exist. I really don’t exist” remains a call sign for your whole life.

But some manage to escape. Maybe not in perfect health, but with a bearable and even good life.

Others don’t. A stern or vacuous look from your parents magnifies the death you die daily.

To get a foothold in life, those “others” zealously search for emblems of success.

A degree. Career success. Money. Applause. Fame.

But if you don’t have you, then all of this is nothing. The biggest thing of all is missing.

The bigger the non-existence, the more wide-ranging the search for emblems.

Russia is wide-ranging.

You can hide all your inadequacies under your love for Russia. She feels like a mother whose gaze was always gentle.

The great return to the womb. To a foetal, dark and extremely dependent existence. So you’re an infant again, inside her belly again. “I’m in my little house”.

And no one comes to you and asks, “Why the hell did you buy your degree? Why did you steal that honour? Why did you rob the city?”

The warmth of your mama, the soft noise and your own heartbeat ... in unison with hers.

Rivers, expanses, snow, victory ...

Lullaby ...

Sleep. Death.

It’s strange – saving yourself from death through death. But this death is collective and reliable.

“Mama is going to come; she’s going to thrash you all ... ”

I know people whose material well-being can’t be called into question. But they cry for their mama, because they can’t make it on their own.

Or they can, but badly. Their academic articles are full of plagiarism; their healthy bank accounts don’t contain a single cent they’ve earned themselves; some relative is driving their political careers.



At moments of self-revelation – and even the most hopeless people have them – at these moments, which are difficult even for me, you know everything about yourself.

Good, but not excellent. In places just satisfactory, especially in English ... And you could be a better mother. And daughter, too ... And that passage there in your book is so-so, and that one is also not so great ...

I don't envy those moments in the heads of people who've taken what doesn't belong to them.

The fear of disgrace. The fear of being unmasked. The boy pointing at the naked emperor. Or a different, bloody boy, standing in front of your eyes ...

This fear searches for a reliable cover. And that's exactly what Russia seems to be.

Russia seems.

It doesn't exist. Just like these "others", it doesn't exist for itself.

But it doesn't have anywhere to hide. And in its fleeting, murky moment of conscious revelation, it prefers to die in public.

Misery loves company.

But meanwhile we're dying ...

26 July 2014

You can also think about all of this from the point of view of love. From a human point of view.

Forgotten children. A forgotten regiment.

The world the Donbas entered in the 1990s was incorrect and unwanted.

And yes, very unjust.

That world put an end, once and for all, to the vision of the future painted by the utopians, in which the rule was "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need".

Capable, smart, honest people no longer seemed needed by anyone at all.

It is practically impossible to adopt a model where the law of force and the law of idiots is decisive. But if you believe that all of this is only temporary, not for real and not forever, then why not?

It's just a game of sorts ... Bad parents, usually mothers, have been playing this game for centuries. They leave their children in the forest, by the side of the road, at the train



station, and they tell them to wait. Sit and wait. Days pass, weeks, years ... The children are waiting. They find something to eat, they beg, they find shelter somewhere, they grow up, and they start stealing for real. But they don't leave that spot. They sit. They wait.

Mama will definitely come. You just have to be patient.

You could also explain it in army terms. Here's a regiment, a target. The commander said, "Take that target and keep fighting, down to the last bullet. Reinforcements are coming". And then he left.

This is again followed by days and weeks and years. The ammunition is long gone. The local women have given birth to children. There's nothing to shoot with, other than maybe words. They hold on to the target and shoot with whatever they can. They eat local food, sleep with the natives, but in their hearts and minds they still live in that country that sent them to capture this spot. Someone forgot to tell the soldiers that that country doesn't exist anymore. And the Kursk, which waited for help in exactly the same way, sunk long ago. [4]

For 23 years many people led a make-believe life. Some of them became "bad", because circumstances encouraged them to be bad. But that's no big deal. Because it's "make-believe".

Do you remember why Pechkin the mailman [5] was so angry? Because he didn't have a bicycle.

Russia is that dream of a bicycle. The dream of a means to become good, not angry, whole, placated. An external means. As simple as a gift. And as unstoppable as fate.

Russia will come and everything will change.

It's just that "the first person you meet at the station in Paris will be yourself ... "

Our waiting soldiers and waiting children don't read Dvlatov. [6]

They believe that this "bicycle" will magically transform them into good people. That it will finally bring together the outer and inner mirror.

What we have is not a civil war. There are people who want to live in Russia. It was the same way in the United States, in the eighteenth century. There were people there, too, who were sincerely devoted to the English crown.

But the Civil War happened when some people saw the future of the States without slavery, while others thought it was essential to that future.

If someone wants to live in another country, if the word "Ukraine" makes someone physically ill, if looking at blue and yellow burns their eyes like acid, then I'm sorry, but what sort of civil war is that?



24 August 2014

I don't know what's going to happen in ten minutes. Much less what will happen tomorrow. Will my city be intact? Will my house - the blue-grey one; turn left on Treneva, then straight, almost to the end of the courtyard - still be standing? Will I be alive? My family. My friends? Where will they be, and will they be alive? Who, where will be the beneficiary of the peacekeeping "hail" or the "humanitarian" land mine? Who else will they manage to capture, and who will be able to save themselves ...

I don't know.

But there are two things I understand perfectly.

The first is simple and old. Like the apple tree my great-grandfather planted in Konstantinovka before that war.

The Ukrainian state can be defeated. Generals steal, bureaucrats shave budgets and live off the deaths of soldiers, politicians lie and are afraid, tremble for their seats, their mandates ... The state is coughing up its long non-existence, but these parasitic worms have massive experience of surviving. They eat and eat. They keep eating until the living thing dies.

The Ukrainian state can be defeated.

But the nation cannot.

It's a very simple thought. There's something irrational in it - truth, faith, strength, prayer ... And something completely pragmatic - the people, acquaintances and strangers, who today and tomorrow and forever will stand together with me along this long road - all the way to the horizon line, and maybe even farther ... They will feed, save, build, forgive, give, heal and defend. As much as necessary.

We are going to do this. And thus we cannot be defeated.

The second thing is a bit more complicated. It's a personal thing.

At the end of February, I fled to Rome to escape my birthday. A city that has nothing to do with me. Nor do I with it. And, perhaps, it's precisely because of that that I could live there.

My husband and I were walking along the Campo de' Fiori, where the statue of Giordano Bruno is. He's standing with his back to the Vatican. There is a lot of dignity and freedom in that confrontational pose. Yes. A statue. But statues can also be free.

Here, on the Campo, there's a market, restaurants, and cafes. A young waiter spotted two women, talking to each other in Russian, and cried out cheerfully, "Russian, Russian. We have a Russian menu ... "

They walk past. Keep talking. They're smoking. And then one of them suddenly turns her



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head and says with a mixture of annoyance, bitterness and pride, "Exactly. I am not Russian. I am Georgian".

I give these words a try. I understand that they are the right ones. I like them. I repeat that phrase about myself. I smile, completely light-hearted. I rejoice ...

Rome has nothing to do with me. Its streets are still roamed by Scipio Africanus. And Caesar and Constantine ...

And Augustus, who wanted to be deified, and so he visited the Sibyl. She lit the divining fire and in its smoke ... both of them saw it: both the Sibyl and Augustus. "The divine one has already been born", she said. He, the emperor, didn't want to acknowledge that. He called himself divine.

How was it that I recognized the Sibyl in this small woman with a funny knitted purse? How did I see in her cigarette the smoke of a divining fire?

Ukraine has already been born. In me and in others.

Exactly. I am not Russian. I am Ukrainian.

We are Ukrainians.

Something like that ...

Or more accurately: precisely that.

Footnotes

1. At 7:22 pm on Saturday 22 February 2014, the Ukrainian parliament voted to remove president Viktor Yanukovich from office.
2. A falsified story of the crucifixion of the son of a Ukrainian militiaman in Sloviansk was circulated by the Russian media. See "Lies: Crucifixion on 'Channel One'", *Stop Fake*, stopfake.org/lozh-raspyatie-v-efire-pervogo-kanala (in Russian).
3. The word *ukrainka*, Ukrainian woman, as well as other adjectives and nouns derived from "Ukraine," is often mispronounced with the stress on the first "a" rather than the "i".
4. The Kursk submarine sunk following an explosion during a naval exercise in the Barents Sea in 2000.
5. A character from the popular Soviet cartoon Three from Prostokvashino.
6. Sergei Dovlatov (1941-1990), Russian journalist and writer who emigrated to the United States in 1979.

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