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## **A Young Woman Fleeing the War: In-Between Two Worlds**

### ***The first day***

The first day of the invasion caught me off guard in my home city. Zaporizhzhia appeared in the midst of things almost immediately. I followed the news with wide-opened eyes and a constant blend of fear and anxiety. In three days, Russians took Melitopol, which is 120 kilometers from Zaporizhzhia. Everyday felt like eternity, full of hope and worries. I couldn't do anything. I updated the newsfeed every single minute. I tried not to text my friends checking on them all the time. One of my friends volunteered for the army, and I felt useless sitting at home idly. I didn't have enough courage and skills to join other brave strangers in wearing protective nets or making Molotov cocktails. Among all other problems the feeling of guiltiness and helplessness gradually arised. How did I deal with this? I tried to watch something. I read books to my mom out loud. I played guitar.

### ***A Prisoner at Home***

I felt like a prisoner in my own apartment. It seemed extremely unsafe to stay outside, although there were no constant attacks. Nevertheless, the war is a totally different world. It takes time for the first shock to settle and adjust to the new reality. During that first week, we allowed ourselves short 15-minute walks and purchases in stores. When I think about it now, I can see cloudy sky above my head, empty streets in my district, the best district in the world, as it seems to me after the long parting, my school and a startling air alarm. We hurried back home. This initial feeling of fear and rapid heartbeat.

Another world of war presents familiar places under a different light. All the factories, hydroelectric station and bridges become strategic objects and, therefore, potential targets for the enemy. And all of these objects are located extremely close to my house. With this in mind, we stayed in the apartment while air alarms lasted. I played Bach and the Beatles. I went into a disturbing dream with the thought that I might not wake up the next morning. I didn't tell anyone

that I thought it would be too early to die being 17; however, I convinced myself, I would at least leave the poems after me. They could tell my story.

### ***Mariupol. March-April***

*At the beginning of March, I moved to Western Ukraine with my relative. I was safe but my family stayed in Zaporizhzhia. I was worried.*

Reading news was becoming harder and harder, not to mention watching them. Over March and April, there was always part of my mind occupied with the thoughts of Mariupol and other cities that were tortured every day. Horrible events and evidence of them did not appear in the media immediately, and then it took time to start processing them emotionally. It was hard to think of it rationally and chronologically because of denial.

There was a period of time when I went to restless asleep and woke up in the morning with the one thought: “Mariupol”. Breakfast, attempts to talk to people, walking... “Mariupol”. Mariupol, Kharkiv, Mykolaiv... Dozens and hundreds of other settlements were being destroyed every day. My hometown became an evacuation hub for people from Donetsk and Luhansk regions, being unsafe itself. Mariupol was in a blockade. Chernihiv was, too, with the elder friend of our family staying there. I tried not to think of it. It was too much. It was hard to structure all the information, to build a chronology and see the whole picture. The war consisted of ugly puzzles of suffering in my mind.

“They don’t have water, they are running out of food. There’s no heat”, “Russians bombed the library in Chernihiv where we were last summer. Do you remember the library?...” Opening the Telegram channel after the conversation and seeing, “in Bucha, the exhumation from a mass grave began near the church”, “people lost arms and legs during the missile attack on the rail station in Kramatorsk”, “people were buried in kindergartens, near swings, under house entrances. Mariupol is under siege, the Russian army razes the city to the ground and storms Azovstal, where military and civilians are staying. Russia disrupts “green” corridors, forcibly deporting civilians to its territories and offering the Ukrainian military to lay down its arms”.

Those were the days when there were no words left. The picture of wooden crosses with the playground behind - and no words at all, only freezing silence inside.

When I had time, I went to the swings in the yard near the school. Wearing headphones and swinging back and forth with the feeling of cool air towards my face, I could allow myself to get lost in thoughts, memories and emotions. On particularly bad days, I listened to the recently composed Ukrainian songs, the songs of pain and hope. At the end of April, “Okean Elzy”, one of the most famous Ukrainian bands, released the song “Misto Marii” (“The City of Maria”) about Mariupol. The lyrics were heartbreaking. Riding on the swing, I turned this song on and waited for the chorus, *“Will stand to age/The righteous Mariupol/Until over the proud Azov/The sun rises.”* Usually, the tears started flowing after this. I was sitting in front of the building silently crying and hoping that no one would exit and see me. Then the swing time was coming to an end, and I returned to school, still a tad lost and upset.

### ***Tiring Routine***

Despite nature and nostalgia, this routine was tiring. However, it kept me occupied enough and left less space for side thoughts, including anxiety and overreacting. My emotional self occasionally returned, overwhelming most of the rational side. At such times, writing helped me a lot. At least part of my sorrow, anger and whatever else I felt went into my poems. Similar to what I had to process emotionally after reading the news or talking to my family, every poem was composed painfully and painstakingly. It was hard to concentrate on rhymes and metaphors. It was hard to believe that war crimes could be described in words.

There was no poetic word for genocide. I tried to focus on my feelings and describe them. I felt nothing and everything at the same time. In a strange way, I was mourning everyone who died because of the invasion. It was too much to bear. As psychologists said, if one mourned for specific people they knew, it was bearable. It was a local pain. But if it were for one's people, for the whole nation, it became impossible to bear. It all perfectly made sense to me while I was reading it. However, there was a big question of how to cope with this in real life, and how to maintain a shaky mental balance.

### ***Localizing Pain***

The war was good at raising questions, providing heartbreaking answers and localizing the pain. One morning I opened the news and saw the familiar name. Not the closest one. Still, I couldn't believe it. It was a distant acquaintance of mine, and, as far as I knew, she was staying in a nearby city just a couple of kilometres from Truskavets. How could it be that she died in Kyiv? I called my mom, and things became even more tragic. This woman went to the capital for family reasons and was killed during a Russian missile attack. The rocket went straight into her apartment. Being a journalist, she became a 23-rd media worker who has been killed since the Russian invasion began. The pain was localized. The local freezing was not provided though.

It happened the week before Easter. I bought traditional Ukrainian Easter cakes. Ihor did his best to make a celebration at school for those who were staying far away from home. On the day of Easter, the breakfast began with the priest entering the cafeteria to sanctify the festive food. Easter cakes and pysanky were served. The town was celebrating as well, decorated and full of church bells ringing. Life almost felt better among the crowded streets and huge lines of locals and displaced people like me who waited to sanctify their Easter baskets. Whenever I went, bells followed me. It sounded almost like magic, and the poem was written.

### ***“Aurora” and Admission Offer***

Once I applied to the University of Alberta in April, dangerously close to the deadline, the only thing left was to wait. Starting in May, I checked my inbox every day. I was so excited to have my new university's email. I received limited access to the library website and asked my friends if they needed something. And, most importantly, I waited for the decision. I was worried because of my test score. I felt insecure about my English.

At the end of May, one of the mornings started with the usual inbox-checking routine. The inspection was successful. "Congratulations on receiving admission to the University of Alberta, a leading Canadian and world university..." My eyes widened. I followed the link to the launchpad. My eyes widened even more. I received two admission offers! I applied to different programs, one of which was located not on the main campus, but in Augustana, a much smaller

campus in the town of Camrose. I had to choose between the programs and between living in the city or town. Living in Canada!

Once I calmed down a bit, I re-read the letter and noticed the "Bridging Program" line. I had yet to find out that my concerns about the score were not so groundless, and I had to improve my English level before starting the actual program. After I calmed down even more, I opened the Telegram channels to go through the news. I didn't like what I saw at all.

“Broken windows, the mall and houses. Russia shoots missiles on Zaporizhzhia”. With this in mind, I was going to school with a strange mix of fear and excitement. I called my mom, starting with my good (excellent!) news. We briefly discussed it. It was clear that none of us could be joyful after the attack on Zaporizhzhia, especially considering the fact that my parents woke up from the explosions. One woman died going out of home earlier to be the first in line for humanitarian aid. This mall meant quite a lot to me. On the top, there was a movie theatre, “Multiplex”. We were there with my friend in January. Popcorn, a crowded hall and a Christmas tree in the corner. Now it all was gone, shattered with glass and wrecks. Memories were gaining more and more weight, precious and unrepeatable.

## **June**

### ***Student? Tutor? Both?***

At the end of May, I received an offer to tutor English to a teenage girl. I gave the idea a thought - and agreed. Such an agreement made me an even busier person. It was time for final exams, the second university finals in my life. I had some courses automatically graded, but there was still enough to prepare for. In addition, I had to prepare to teach my own lessons. It was my first more or less formal experience with teaching, as well as my first consistent part-time job. I felt extremely nervous before the first, free and introductory, session. I even thought of cancelling it and refusing tutoring overall. Still, I got a hold of myself, opened my laptop and started the Zoom meeting. The girl on the other side of the screen bore the name Marharyta, going by “Margo” and being a serious teenager for almost thirteen. I was so scared that I hardly remember the first lesson.

Each session gave me more sense of routine, and we both felt more comfortable. She was excited about the creative tasks I prepared, like songs or games. But not everything was perfect. I had another person to share the classroom with, a displaced man from the Luhansk region who worked remotely. It was strange to lead an online lesson with someone else in the room. It made me nervous.

A more significant “unperfect” detail was the war background standing in the way of normal studying. I wasn’t okay with the news myself and couldn’t imagine what the teenager would feel staying in Zaporizhzhia. She was visibly tense during the air alarms but didn’t go to the shelter. As for the most Ukrainian houses, the only possible shelter was most likely just a regular abandoned basement, not intended to stay there for a long time. One of the lessons was particularly hard. I accidentally locked myself in the classroom and didn’t feel great about it.

So, in my “locked state”, I was conducting the lesson as usual. One of the topics we had to cover at that time was countries and nationalities. We were following the textbook. When “Russia” and “Russian” came up, I apologized that I wasn’t the one to put it there. Margo smiled, and I continued explaining something. Soon, I noticed that something was wrong. I looked at the screen closer and noticed that the girl silently cried. I stopped abruptly and said that we could stop the lesson if she needed some time. Or we could simply reschedule it. She refused and stayed in front of the screen. I didn’t really know what to say. It wasn’t a regular situation, like a teenager crying because of her love life or school. The reason was the war. The reason was the word “Russian”, a curse and a tragedy. I knew that I couldn’t help *her* because no one and nothing could help *me*. We were all going through it in our own ways, being locked in the classroom and silently crying.

## **August**

### ***Szczecin***

*Time to go to Canada came soon. It was a long and hard journey, with over a day spent on the bus and four layovers awaiting for me on my first flight. I bid farewell to my parents and went off.*

I stayed there for only two days and a half, but these were two extremely memorable days. Staying with the friends of my family was the best decision I could make. There were weekends, and my friend, another Sofia, had the opportunity to spend some time with me. We walked through the city, observing all the landmarks historical Szczecin had to offer, going to the cafe and, of course, talking. Sofia fully corresponded with the meaning of her name and was always wise and rational. Since they had arrived in Poland, she worked extremely hard, working full-time, getting a double degree at a Ukrainian university and attending Polish language courses. Despite all the efforts, her salary was enough to cover the rent only.

When she heard that I was going to combine two universities, her immediate advice was, “Don’t do it to yourself.” Another thought, the one I took into consideration a long time after, sounded like, “With all the changes and interactions that await you, you will become more extroverted, or more introverted.” Back then, I replied that, of course, I would become more extroverted. If things worked this simply...

Philosophy apart, Poland was great, Szczecin was amazing, and my friends took good care of me. I enjoyed all the architecture, river, port and food. I was almost a tourist. “Almost” was the right word. The time of my first flight came too soon. We took care of the tickets to the airport the day before. My friend’s mother tried to ask something in Polish regarding the tickets, “Przepraszam,” she hesitantly started, not sure of her language skills herself, and was suddenly cut off by the woman. “No ‘przepraszam’ to me, I’m Ukrainian!” she exclaimed, and we laughed. The taxi driver turned out to be Ukrainian as well. We talked about his life during our short road to the bus station. In no time, we were on our way to Goleniów as there was no airport in Szczecin.

### ***Edmonton: No Festivals for You Today. First Adaptation***

Time flew fast given the size of my to-do list that grew longer and longer. In a week, I solved almost all documentation-related questions. I bought a SIM card, I applied for a health card, I stood in a huge line to get my SIN number and got lost downtown. I took my medical exam. I opened a bank account. After doing this, I could only lie in bed and sigh, but it felt nice to check

the boxes and be on track. However, major concerns had not yet been solved. I nervously waited for my study permit as the start of the Fall semester approached.

## **September**

### ***Dollarama and Canadian Guys***

Once I could relax a bit, first of all, I slept in. Jet lag slowly retreated. I thought that it would be good to prepare for the upcoming academic year, so I went to "Dollarama", a Canadian dollar store, to buy stationery. I chose something from my limited range of clothing (I sent my parcels to the business address, which was impossible for international parcels coming to Canada, so there was a big issue with my belongings that I tried to solve) and went to the store.

I was right in the middle of choosing notebooks. Most of them were crumpled, and I wanted to pick the best ones. I grabbed a pile of notebooks to check the quality and heard the male voice behind me: "You write a lot?". I turned around to see a smiling young man with curls and mumbled something affirmative. We talked, despite my insecure English. I wasn't even sure if I got his name correct. We checked out our purchases and decided to take a walk.

The walk and talk continued. "How do you think you spell my name?". Of course, I had no idea how to spell it. "S... h..." Well, I got at least two first letters right. It was "Shane". Shane was fast, energetic and humorous. We went on campus. He read to me the excerpts from his book in progress. It sounded like a live podcast, although I couldn't understand most of it. We discussed whatever for a good couple of hours before an awkward parting.

The next day, I was going downtown to find my future academic building. I didn't trust my navigation skills. Shane was going downtown, too, so I had an opportunity to look at the city with another Canadian (not exactly local as he wasn't from Edmonton). Every five minutes I asked Shane to take a picture of me and the bridge, me and the legislature building, me and the river... He laughed and teasingly called me a "tourist". I did feel like a tourist. Even the first couple of months didn't feel like immigration as much. Now I'm glad to have these pictures. With the flow of time, pictures turn into memories, becoming a part of my personal history.



So, Shane and I met up every weekend. Campus, libraries, parks, shops and, finally, his apartment. We did a couple of movie nights together. One of them ended with a kiss and we started dating. We had to discuss the age difference question. It was hard for me to freely express my thoughts and feelings in a foreign language, especially when emotions were involved. I managed to do it, but not as in-depth as I wished I could.

### ***One Spoon of Happiness, Two Spoons of Sorrow***

These relationships became a great support for me. September was intense, including my adjustments and tragedies back home. I painfully reacted to all the news. Some days just passed by in a fog, so it was nice to have my personal 'sun', as I called him, by my side.

At the beginning of September, one of the regular mornings ceased to be regular. I received a text from Sofia in Truskavets. "Dmytro died." "I feel like a vegetable." And their last picture together, a screenshot from their family video call. And another one, of their kitchen table with a candle on it. He was killed somewhere in the Kherson region. He passed away like a true soldier. I was invited to a wedding that wasn't *meant* to happen. I couldn't go to the funerals that were *about* to happen.

I tried to get a hold of myself, went to my language classes and did my best to act normal. It was the day of shock. No one should die being 23 in the battle, let alone a friend's brother. Skipping the stage of witnessing the funerals was a bad thing to happen. It all seemed much scarier in the distance. Death is always scary, but, mixed with guilt and anxiety, it becomes poisonous. I couldn't hug my friend. I couldn't be close. Nothing was the same, and nothing could possibly be the same. Anytime I return home, there will be Dmytro's grave to visit and his parents' unbearable loss.

## **October**

### ***Destroying Memories and Building New Ones***

I always loved autumn. It was my time of inspiration, with tons of leaves and poems. The fall on campus was beautiful. The weather was sunny. Shane and I went to Elk Island and even saw the bison quite close to the car. It reminded me of Khortytsia Island in my hometown. In my

understanding, Elk Island couldn't compete with my favourite place back home. They were similar and different. I visited Shane's friends and family. As I realized later, it was too early for me to do so, both in personal and language terms. Sometimes cultural differences got in the way, and I didn't have the time and energy to analyze them. Sometimes it was just personal, my lack of experience and idealism.

Sitting in the company of native speakers was certainly a challenge for me. With too much slang and Canadians talking over each other, it was like a second or third shift for my tired brain after working on the assignments from two universities. The topics for conversations were different as well, and from time to time I couldn't understand how people could discuss it for so long.

However, I saw that it was important for Shane, and I did want to get to know his circle, as well as Canadians in general, better, and practice my language skills. Still, it was quite stressful and awkward for an introverted person. I also spent time with Ukrainian students on campus. It was nice to talk to people in my native language and discuss similar challenges that we faced.

Together with the relationship development, studying and getting to know other Ukrainian students, news from Ukraine came. There were constant attacks on Zaporizhzhia. It hurt. One time it was a historic building in the city centre, near my friend's apartments and my music school. One of my friend's apartments was seriously damaged, and her mother had to move to another city (fortunately, they owned a place there). Not all people were so lucky to have a backup option, and they had to live in government-provided shelters like kindergartens or stay in their damaged homes.

I was standing in front of this particular building almost every evening while returning from my music school and waiting for the bus. Such little things mean a lot to me, and it felt like even my memories were damaged, and I couldn't do anything. It was a helpless state of another round of silent cries. The building was split into two parts after the attack. Other damaged buildings looked terrifying, too. Another time was the attack close to our apartment. The apartment building was projected the same way. It looked like our house was being destroyed.

It was after these events that my parents decided they had to move somewhere. They couldn't sleep and had to sit in the corridor during the night, thinking of the inevitable. Fortunately, Dmytro offered his help. Their Kyiv apartment was empty, and he invited my parents to stay there at least until the summer. It was a perfect solution. My parents packed and were in Kyiv for a couple of days. I sighed with relief. I tried to enjoy my Canadian "firsts".

## **November**

### ***Cold, Challenged, Contented: Let It Snow***

November started as a challenge. Winter came at the very beginning of the month, and it was a shock for me. I looked at all the snow and weather forecast in disbelief, sent tons of pictures to my loved ones back home and ordered warmer clothing hurriedly. My Ukrainian coats soon were not of much use. I was weather sensitive, and sometimes it was hard to get up and do anything. My body wanted nothing but to sleep. My schedule wanted nothing but for me to study and send assignments on time.

Language courses intensified as I entered the new stage with a different instructor, and there was more for me to learn, although it still felt a lot like high school. This time, I was the only Ukrainian in the group among Chinese and some Japanese classmates. The teaching methods were quite effective though, and sometimes I met Shane after the long studying week and could express my more complicated thoughts, which felt like a success every time. Some days were simply not English days, and I had to come to terms with this fact.

Good news happened from time to time. Kherson was liberated, and it was something we celebrated. On the other hand, it was clear that the price of this liberation was high. The price of human lives. I thought of Dmytro. Attacks continued, too, with the constant blackouts across Ukraine. It allowed me to value what I had more. The level of comfort I had, the amount of support I received from my family, friends and boyfriend, and, of course, the peaceful sky above my head. It was freezing cold, but there were no air alarms. Sometimes I still instinctively reacted to any sounds that reminded me of the alarm. Sometimes I shivered from loud sounds or even when the towel fell to the floor.

## December

### *(Not So) Merry Christmas*

Closer to Christmas, only one exam was left. We were going to celebrate Christmas with Shane and his family. It was a hard time for all of them as his grandmother was in the hospital, and the doctor's forecast was disappointing. She died soon after. I was surprised they still organized the celebration and invited people. In my culture, we would most likely cancel anything.

Later, I analyzed all of it and felt like I wasn't supportive enough. Apart from my own exhaustion and lack of experience in such situations, it was something the war did to people. The perception of death changed in a strange way. Did someone die not because of the missile attack? Well, it's not too bad... They were not tortured, raped or famined before? Once again, it's not a bad death. They could be buried or cremated in a normal way? Even better. It did sound awfully cynical but that was the logic that subconsciousness generously offered.

Back then, I didn't think of it. I sat in the dark car as we talked and I repeated my exam material from time to time. This was the last one and an easy one. The road took almost four hours. It was my first visit to Shane's family house and I looked at everything with great interest, feeling even more shy and introverted than usual.

We talked to his family for some time. My exam approached. We were going to stay in the basement. I positioned myself with the laptop on the leather couch. The basement was freezing cold. I was supplied with a USB-heated blanket. As always after these late-night exams, I was like a sleepy fly. I was happy that my double exam race ended, but I wasn't really ready to socialize. I always needed a "human break" after the intense events. I mostly lay down on the couch listening to warm conversations and enjoying festive foods. I lacked such a family atmosphere. It was my first Christmas season so far away from my parents and friends. I called them to greet everyone.

The Christmas celebration itself was quite subtle, considering the situation. Other relatives came over. Lots of talks and foods. I felt too sleepy again and went downstairs to take a nap and woke up when all the quests were already gone. We watched a movie with snacks and went to bed. The

next morning, it was time to open gifts. The Christmas tree looked huge with all the decorations and boxes around it. I never celebrated family holidays in a big circle, so it was all new to me. Christmas days passed in the lazy fog, and soon it was time to return to Edmonton.

On the way home, we talked, and I could feel the tense feeling appearing in the car. It wasn't surprising given the circumstances, and I thought it would be temporary, just something to go through. I could feel the first symptoms of the cold. A couple of days in the chilly basement and my intense studying gave its fruits. I had a raised temperature, cough, running nose and weakness. It was quite unfortunate to get sick right before the New Year.

New Year was always a bigger holiday in my family than Christmas, so I was looking forward to it. We planned to do a true New Year party with my Ukrainian friends, with potluck and Secret Santa. I did my best to cure myself in time for the party. I was almost successful in it, having just a little bit of after-symptoms. My mood went up as I started picking my Secret Santa gift for the friend I was assigned to. Then I opened WhatsApp and my mood deteriorated immediately.

Shane couldn't make the New Year's party, which would be understandable, but the second message sounded like a break-up, and that was a totally unpleasant surprise for me. We were going to discuss it on the 30th. A couple of days before it felt like an eternity, with my thoughts going back and forth and tears. That was a disadvantage of being an emotional poet. The 30th finally came. I went to the biggest mall in Edmonton together with my friend and tried to enjoy the holiday atmosphere and all the decorations. I bought myself some gifts as if from my parents and smiled.

The evening came soon, and it was time to go to Shane's place. There was sad news back home, so I was already in the platoon. Listening to music on the train, I was ready to cry, which was something I did soon at Shane's place. I wasn't proud of my little 'concert', but everything all together was just too much. I hoped we could talk it out, but we didn't. Shane drove me back to the dorm. I was upset but we still talked quite cheerfully. I came back upstairs on my own and any cheerfulness vanished. I almost didn't sleep.

The next morning, I woke up late and tried to get a hold of myself before the upcoming celebration. I rejected the thought not to go anywhere that appeared in the back of my mind. It was New Year, and I was going to have fun with the notes of sadness. Because of the time difference, the Ukrainian New Year came faster, so I greeted all my loved ones back home and in Europe.

The evening came soon. We were going to celebrate at the professor's house where my friend was cat-sitting. I was the first one to come. I didn't want to stay one-on-one with my thoughts. We talked, set up the music and checked the pizza. Slowly, other guests appeared. The celebration was perfect, with karaoke, traditional dishes and philosophical talks. Secret Santa was an important part of the night. We could almost forget about all the sorrows that this year brought, and, at the same time, we couldn't. It would mean betrayal. Everyone had their own story to tell or to hide.

*Не один втонув тут човен, та не кождий  
же втонув;  
Хоч би й дев'ять не вернуло, то десятий  
повернув.  
А хто знає, може, в бурю іменно спасешся  
ти!  
Може, іменно тобі ся вдасть до цілі  
доплисти!*

*Many boats were sunk here, but not all of  
them sunk;  
Although nine of ten haven't returned, but  
the tenth one has returned.  
And who knows, maybe it is you who will be  
saved in a storm!  
And maybe it's you who will manage to get  
to the goal!*

We jointly sang this song by Odyn v Kanoe, a Ukrainian band, and tried to believe its wise lyrics a couple of minutes before the chimes. A brand-new year, my first one in Canada, was just about to begin.

## **I am Ukrainian. Conclusion**

People can show their brightness during tough times. People tell brilliant stories even if they do not intend to. People tell stories with their actions, their emotions and, of course, their words. These stories are precious in their sincerity, and I will bear them through my whole life. I am happy that I was able to touch on my recent past in such a creative way. Writing became my friend. Writing can be whoever we need it to be. Writing can become a therapy, and poems saved me many times. Writing is never easy, but writing is worth it.

I wrote about things that are hard to say out loud. That's not something one would answer to the simple question like "How are you?" or "Where are you from?" I am from Ukraine, the best country in the world according to myself. I am proud to be Ukrainian and share my culture and experiences with other people far away from home.

We don't talk about our concerns and grief because we don't want to seem ungrateful, and because it is deeply personal. The war is all about loss. People lose their loved ones and their homes. People lose their health. In a certain sense, people lose themselves. Those who stay in Ukraine lose themselves in the constant air alarms and sleepless nights. Those who are abroad lose themselves in homesickness and guilt.

I am Ukrainian, and I am homesick. It has been over a year since I was in Ukraine last time. It has been a year and a half since I was in my hometown last time. I miss everything. I want to hug my family and my friends. I want to see the imperfect city that I love unconditionally, walk through its streets, and greet its brave people.

I am Ukrainian, and I cry at night. Since the full-scale invasion began, four people I knew were killed, and one died. Some of them were people of my age who just started their adult journey. Two families lost their homes. All of them could still live happily if not for Russia. The war is all about loss: broken lives, memories, and plans. It is also about hope. I am lucky that I have a place to come back to and to whom. I am lucky to breathe, to think, and to write.

I am Ukrainian, and I cry at night. But then the morning comes. I get up and smile because we all have to fight our own battles, and we know what we are fighting for.