War, Poetry and Valor: An Ode to Odessa

By Laksmi Pamuntjak

But in the secret history of anger—one man's silence
lives in the bodies of others—*as we dance to keep from falling,*

between the doctor and the prosecutor:
my family, the people of Odessa,
women with huge breasts, old men naïve and childlike,

all our words, heaps of burning feathers
that rise and rise with each retelling.

--Ilya Kaminsky, "In Praise of Laughter", in Dancing in Odessa
(Massachusetts: Tupelo Press, 2004)

1.

Since 2019, my then husband-to-be and I have been celebrating his birthday every February 24—once through a video chat with me aboard a world cruise, on its second leg from Bali to Yokohama, and him in Jakarta, but mostly together, and almost always in a restaurant (with the exception of 2020, the year that wasn't), with his parents and his sister, the other loves of his life.

The date has always had a special ring to it, because the following day would be my daughter's birthday—my one and only daughter now living in Boston. We are not superstitious, but something about this serendipity feels akin to fate.

On February 24 this year, the four of us—my husband, myself, my mother-in-law and my sister-in-law—were having dinner in an Italian restaurant in a faraway suburb in North Jakarta when the news started to flash all over our phone screens. Video clips of billowing black smoke darkening the first light over Kharkiv and Kherson. An explosion in another part of the country caught on a cell-phone video camera. The face of Volodymyr Zelensky as he tried at once to calm and fortify his people—this comedian-turned-president who would in a mere brace of days "galvanize his people," as David Remnick of the *New Yorker* puts it, "through the clarity of his language" and has "assumed, at the most consequential hour in Europe since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the role of Winston Churchill."

Russia had invaded Ukraine.

"Troy has fallen," I remember saying. I can't help it, for in the fall of 1935, the French, having watched Jean Giraudoux's play *La guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu*, had learned to think of their country as vulnerable Troy while Hitler, sinister and armed to the hilt, was "The Tiger at the Gates." A lover of mythology, I always thought these analogies apt.

Ironically, Giraudoux later became minister of wartime propaganda in 1939; he even had the audacity to put the 'one hundred thousand Ashkenazis, escaped from the ghettos of Poland or Romania', ahead of the Nazis at the top of the list of the most pressing danger to French security. But no one knew better than him that truth was always the first casualty of war. "Everyone, when there's war in the air," he had his suffering Andromache say in his play, "learns to live in a new element: falsehood."

2.

It is impossible not to. Look at us in the past two weeks: history is shifting at such startling speed, and caught in the upward spiral of conflicting information, misinformation, reporting and analyses, it is impossible for us to keep up with, let alone

comprehend the full picture of *this*—what is possibly, in Thomas Friedman's words, "the most transformative moment in history since World War II."

Yet it is incredible how much we already knew before February 24. We knew that Putin claimed that the West was using Ukraine as a pretext to invade and destroy Russia. Rehashing false stories of Ukrainian barbarity against the Russian-speaking minority, he justified himself again and again for backing the separatist forces that had held parts of eastern Ukraine since 2014.

As Clare Malone laid out in the *New Yorker* what many on the ground are calling the 'Tik Tok War", the sequence was pretty clear. President Biden told us repeatedly that Russia would invade Ukraine and that the US would not be intervening militarily. Ukraine is not in NATO and Russia demands it stay that way, while NATO is increasing its forces in Eastern Europe. Macron stepped in, tried to de-escalate the crisis, but to no avail. The US and its allies started imposing tough economic sanctions against Russia, but this seemed only to strengthen Putin's resolve. Germany remained its pragmatic self for the most part and kept its distance. (For most Germans, the idea of going into war with Russia was—and perhaps will always be—

inconceivable, though Chancellor Olaf Scholz would change all of that soon enough.)

Yes, all the dark portents had been there—they always are. Yet what makes this conflict so quite unlike any other conflict we've experienced before is that the coverage had been, and continues to be, so immersive, thanks to social media. Whatever the veracity of the content, what is real what is hoax, what is true citizen war journalism what is a scam, we are hooked. For not only has Troy not fallen, she is fighting back.

It is also here, on our phone screens, that we are truly witnessing the transformation of Volodymyr Zelensky, the first Jewish Ukrainian president, into an all-inspiring heroic figure. He is capable not only of subverting the traditional image of a political leader but also radically changing attitudes of the public—from the average citizen to the powers that be across Europe and the world—in just a week.

Suddenly, in his telling, 'democracy,' 'autonomy' and 'peace' are no longer abstractions; they are a call to action, a call to fight for and defend them as our rights. The world woke up. Scholz

did a stunning volte-face at the Bundestag, sending weapons to Ukraine, with an astounding 78 percent support from the German public.

The contrast between Zelensky and Putin cannot be more striking: double portraits in the media show how different they are in style, in speech, and in how they say what they say. Perhaps, what we see as the personal bravery and resilience of the former vis-à-vis the stiffness and paranoia of the latter says something not just about us but also about the times we live in. Gillian Tett of the *Financial Times* tells of a conference dinner she attended in which an 'impish with delight' Zelensky delivered the after-dinner speech. "In Ukraine, postmodern is more about surreal humor, creative resistance to invasive Russian autocracy and moving way beyond 20th-century identity politics," she wrote.

The Ukrainians should know.

3.

And so do we, I would wager, in Indonesia, halfway across the world. Dispirited far too long by the pandemic and the lack of

true grit in our own leadership, we do know something about the value (and force) of valor and humor. We too are fed up by atrocity and brutality, and are prepared to call them what they are.

“Putin is so stupid, so sick,” said my mother-in-law somewhere between the *antipasti* and the *primi piatti*. At 84, a survivor of two world wars, she watches Tik Tok as much as she does cable news and is well-versed in current affairs.

Meanwhile, my own very politically-minded 77-year-old mother has her own firm ideas about the causes and consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. She tends to blame the West for Ukraine’s current predicament and sends me YouTube videos of various public intellectuals’ analyses to support her stance. She is also concerned about how the war might affect Indonesia. Only a few days ago, she talked about rising wheat prices—Ukraine being the largest importer of wheat to Indonesia in the past three years—and how it would have a negative impact on the production of our staple foods.

Yet there is something, I sense, about the idea of Moscow spin doctors trying to control and direct the course of history that equally disturbs her. It strikes her, I suspect, as old, stale, and, ultimately, futile. She detests imperialism of any kind. Although she was only born in late 1944, two years into Japan's three-year occupation of Indonesia, and a year before the Dutch attempted to recolonize our country, her life was directly affected by war. Most of us have never experienced war.

"But Putin won't stop," the birthday boy said. "He will double down and escalate the war until there's nothing left of Ukraine."

We fell briefly into silence. Somehow the pizza did not taste as good as it did a week ago, when we vetted the place. I thought of Ukraine's 7.5 million children, half a million of whom had fled the country to neighboring countries now pleading for humanitarian support from the West to harbor them properly. Many of these children had been killed, wounded, unsheltered and unfed; some who had not escaped were bunkered in metro stations or inside train cars with their families, freezing and terrified. Some do not want to leave on principle. Yet there we were, eating and talking. And that is likely what we will continue doing, eating and talking, without

“I was in Ukraine six years ago,” I said. “And it is one of the most moving, most complete experiences of my life.”

4.

It is one of the endearing peculiarities of the writers’ world to have a meeting of the minds, often of the lasting kind, in the most blighted, most beguiling spots on earth, to suddenly find ourselves returned so ferociously to those places through provocations so different from what brought us together in the first place (like the prospect of an imminent war). Perhaps it is not so surprising given that humanity is our subject: we write of our follies, delusions, entitlements, atrocities, mediocrity, propensity for violence, and capacity for falsehoods, but also seek beauty even in pain—in notions of valor, resilience, solidarity, perhaps forgiveness.

How else to describe an experience such as the 2016 Odessa Literary Festival? Though founded only a year earlier, the festival has quickly become part of Ukraine’s cultural fabric and a hub for the Eastern European literary circuit. Yet what gives it its true shape and charge is its unique positioning in a bilingual country divided between the Russian-speaking East and the Ukrainian-speaking West, where language is continuously being contested and politicized.

As I later learned, ‘the language issue’ has been frequently used by the government as an excuse to perpetuate hostilities and conflict. When the corrupt Yanukovych regime was toppled in 2013, Putin sent troops to Crimea on the pretext of protecting the Russian-speaking population and ended up annexing the territory. And yet both languages are spoken just fine, life goes on and many of Europe’s finest authors come to the festival year after year.

At the time, I was still dividing my life between Berlin and Jakarta, working on a novel set in both cities. I had not been to Ukraine, nor to Russia for that matter, and I had always wanted to go. I have to add here that a lot of credit must go to Ilya Kaminsky’s poetry, especially *Dancing in Odessa*, his

devastating, glorious poetry collection that I read for the first time in 2006.

Among my first memorable impressions of the invitation was the theme of one of the panels they proposed. It was a comparative study: to look at our experiences of living by the sea—as I did in Jakarta, and as the other two panelists did in Greece and Argentina—and to see how they had shaped our lives, how much had changed between then and now, how quickly our cities were shrinking and why.

I have been on many festivals around the world, and I have had my share of panels whose themes are insipid, politically incorrect or plain crazy. But this one somehow piqued my interest. Even though I grew up, in the seventies, in a residential suburb closer to the heart of the city, some 25 kilometers away from the coast, the idea of living in a city by the sea wasn't altogether alien to me. In those days, my parents used to take me to the beach on alternate Sundays, when there was hardly any traffic, and we would easily spend half a day there. So I told the festival committee, *yes, I'd love to go*.

5.

As my plane approached Odessa the following month, two things struck me through my window view. The first was the sheer beauty of the sea: how vast, how deep a blue, how peaceful. And how odd it was that I'd forgotten, coming after all from an archipelago of 17,000 islands, how at once mind-blowing and humbling a bird's eye view of the ocean and its gradual descent onto land could be, and what it could do to your sense of being in this world. You feel so small and insignificant, barely a blip in the universe.

But no sooner had I wanted to sit back and enjoy this feeling, when the second thing hit me. Of a sudden: an onslaught of disconcertingly ugly high rise buildings dotting the coast it could very well be a replica of present day Jakarta. It is perhaps worth noting that inner Jakarta, a city of 11 million at the time—with a population growth of around 3.7 percent a year—had reported the highest return of investment for luxury real estate in 2014 compared to any other city in the world. It was not difficult to imagine similar challenges in Odessa in terms of water supply, sanitation and transportation, exacerbated by

climate change and a growing population jostling for already insufficient and poorly-managed resources.

Later on, during the panel, we discovered, not surprisingly, that we were plagued by the same problems: corruption (for which both our countries are infamous), a bloated bureaucracy (this too), politically-motivated allocation of resources and a clear lack of planning on how we would like our city to evolve in the next fifty years. The state budgets were often patchy, infrastructure such as sewage systems, storm drains, and electrical power inadequate at best. Then there was the more poetic though no less disconcerting matter of both cities gradually sinking against the sea level (and we are not even Venice).

It is incredible—how some panels bring you together that much more quickly than others.

6.

In one of his letters, Pushkin, who lived in Odessa between 1823 and 1824, wrote of it as a city where "the air is filled with

all Europe, French is spoken and there are European papers and magazines to read." This was still very much in evidence during my strolls in Primorskiy/City Centre, after all a city that had benefited from the artistic touches of Duc de Richelieu, who, after his escape from the French Revolution, had served in Catherine The Great's army against the Turks and become the city's governor.

On the second day of the festival, I started walking the city with some of my new writer friends. This included the leisurely stroll along the writerly streets—Pushkin Street, Bunin Street[1], Zhukosgovo[2]--before finally arriving at the Odessa Literary Museum, where most of our sessions were to take place.

Among my new writer friends was the Greek novelist and the festival's keynote speaker, Amanda Michalopoulou. She was also on my panel the day before, and we had bonded over my story of the lush tropical island my parents used to take me to when I was in my teens, whose stunning coral reefs were fish-bombed to near death a couple of years ago (and so destroyed one of my happiest childhood memories).

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[1] The short-story writer Ivan Bunin was the first Russian to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1953.

[2] Named after Vasily Andreyevich Zhukovsky, widely credited as one of Pushkin's mentors.

We talked about death, yes, but also about life, about Homer, and about how, on the eve of Hitler's invasion of Poland, the two Jewish French philosophers Simone Weil and Rachel Bespaloff (Bespaloff was born to a Ukrainian Jewish family) both used the *Iliad* as the source text of their seminal essays on man and the nature of violence, and on how mythology gave us the courage to make sense of history repeating itself.

Earlier in the day we went on a boat ride with some of the other writers. To get to the pier we had to walk down the famous Potemkin Stairs, the giant stairway immortalized in the movie *Battleship Potemkin*, which was sparkling under the mid-morning sun. From the waters the city did not look as tumbledown as the view from the streets; it was strangely dense, lively, and somewhat confident in its assorted kitsch and high-rise monstrosities.

However, for all its historical splendor and new money, much of Odessa was gray and dreary; we found not a single Asian restaurant or a place with good coffee—the embarrassing markers of a globalized 21st century lifestyle—and the streets were indented with broken pavements and overflowing rubbish

bins. More potently though, it felt to me like how Michael Lewis described his Reykjavík: a city perched on top of bombs. “The bombs have yet to explode, but the fuses have been lit,” and something about the memory of this feeling welled up in my chest when I heard, as I write, that Russia was going to bombard Odessa soon.

“There is Odessa in Things,” said my friend Aleš Steger, the Slovenian poet—and he said it twice, on one of our early strolls around the city and before we parted at the end of the festival. He believes that there are things outside the physical realm—such as when we desire things—made of spiritual qualities that matter to us, what creates sense and nonsense, what is autonomous even to its own, let alone our narratives and intentions. It is for that reason ‘things’ of that kind are stronger and more persistent than human forgetting and destruction. In his telling, “we can destroy objects, documents, traces, but certain ‘things’ and certain ‘Odessas’ we cannot.”

8.

One of the first responses I received to my desperate messages that it was a matter of time before Odessa would be decimated

was from Amanda. She sent me a picture of us sitting on the foot of the grand staircase of the Odessa Literary Museum—that unique shrine to literature—and all the images came rushing in.

The rooms devoted to Gorky, Mayakovsky, Anna Akhmatova. The gilded green room dedicated to Pushkin. The Golden Hall, the most august of them all, where after the discussion of my novel with the German critic Michi Strausfeld, I took my time sitting around old rolled up manuscripts laid on big tables next to the grand piano. (It had the reputation for being the city's best chamber concert hall. My late father, who played the violin quite well, would have loved to watch David Oistrakh in his regular performances there.) Meanwhile, the "Odessa School" of Russian writers of the early 20th century—who had been instrumental in fashioning the "Odessa language", a mix of Russian, Ukrainian, Jewish, German, Polish, Greek and Italian—were packed together in one room, presumably due to their peripheral status in the eye of the Soviet regime: a bit of Kataev here, a bit of Ilf and Petrov there. Even Isaac Babel, Odessa's favorite native son, did not get too prominent a display.

Although now a little frayed around the edges, the museum had grand origins: it began life in 1898, as the Odessa Literary Artistic Society, in the palace of Prince Gagarin, but it wasn't

until 1977 that work began on the museum through the singular vision of one Nikita Brygin. A former KGB officer, he used his wiles and his connections well in order to surmount the challenges of opening an authentic literary enterprise in an oppressive regime. Although the museum was not opened to the public until 1984, it was indeed impressive: there were some three hundred writers featured in this museum who each in their own way had a relationship with Odessa: the canonical and the avant garde, those who visited and wrote or were born in the city. "I just wish they'd fix the ceilings of this place," said one of the staff as I was getting ready to leave the session with Michi. "But the state has no money for us."

But now the exasperation regarding the ceilings not being fixed has been superseded by the horror of the prospects of the museum's entire treasure being damaged altogether if Putin did attack Odessa. And what about the contents of the 54 public libraries strewn around the city and the not inconsiderable legacies of modern Jewish literature kept in the city's Jewish Library? Cultural heritage is often the least realized casualties of war and among the hardest to protect.

Yet some memories of the festival do sustain, such as our evenings, when the poets came to life. They would first read their own poem in the original language, then we would all listen to an actor reading it in Russian and in Ukrainian. It was

to be one of the enchantments of my life to hear one of my own poems read thus. Ignorant of both languages, and even more oblivious to the language war raging on, I thought both beautiful, especially the latter. Somebody whispered that the Ukrainian language had distinct similarities to the Polish language, but to my classical music-trained ears (and vodka-sloshed heart) it just sounded a little more melodious. After all, "I will praise your madness, and/in a language not mine, speak/of music that wakes us, music/in which we move."[3]

And of course at the end of these readings we danced, as people do in Odessa, "to keep from falling."[4]

But more than this, what those six incredible days gave me was a glimpse of the Ukrainian spirit and toughness in adversity, the qualities Zelensky recently described in a televised speech as 'freedom and heart' as he spoke of waning Russian morale to his people. And how much, in the end, pain, like grief, is about language, the failure of language and the grasping for language.[5]

From this point on, being asked what we were doing on February 24 #febr24 would be like being asked what we were

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[3] The lines can be found in the 7th and 8th stanzas of "Author's Prayer", in Ilya Kaminsky, *Dancing in Odessa* (Massachusetts: Tupelo Press, 2004).
[4] Sixth stanza of "In Praise of Laughter", op. cit.
[5] Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Notes on Grief* (New York: Knopf, 2021).

doing on 911—or, for every nation and people who have lived through other wars, real wars, regardless of whether or not they are to be found in the history books or discoursed on cable TV news and the TikToks of the world, the day that war began. In the case of Ukraine—or Odessa to those of us privileged to know something of its pain, valor and dignity—we will not forget neither certain 'things' nor the place itself. We cannot and do not want to. As Rachel Bespaloff, a native daughter, told us, "Sometimes (wo)man attain her/his highest lucidity at the point of destruction."

"... The city trembled,
a ghost-ship setting sail.
At night, I woke to whisper: yes, we lived.
We lived, yes, don't say it was a dream."[6]

And lines like these live in memory, as deathless poems and places do.

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#febr24

[6] From "Dancing in Odessa", in Ilya Kaminsky, *Dancing in Odessa* (Massachusetts: Tupelo Press, 2004).