

Poems by Iya Kiva

eight years of saying: back home there's a war
so I finally accept it: my home is a war
it's a slow train cross-country east to west
where death transports life

night falls to the ground with the spasms of wilted flowers
and lies down in our mouths with its rotten teeth of silence
now our language is volunteer-refugee chatter
where sirens sing songs to Odysseus

now our memory is freedom's stained *vyshyvanka*
her long walk from heart to heart

translated from Ukrainian by Amelia Glaser and Yuliya Ilchuk

dance the freedom tango
while winter piles up at your windows
while memory's mine fills
with toxic groundwaters

we never played toy soldiers
we played musical instruments
Pretending we were old time singers
in those shifting underground pockets

pull the freedom tango
from the arthritic accordion
like a stubborn goat by a rope
from right rib to left eye
from bottom to top

until the swamp sucks our voices
through a straw like an *ukraina-libre*
belching out burnt meat
and ancient Cossack songs

oh holiest god
what were we thinking

translated from Ukrainian by Amelia Glaser and Yuliya Ilchuk

I am unlearning to think in my mother tongue
I keep telling it, go away I don't know you

your mutterings – just like a rampant weed –
gnaw away at my land
with the red blossom of war

grains of memory that burn in my throat

the force of your words become a field of violence
as long as a torn-off branch of the river
where death lies in hiding

you can slap my cheeks – both left and right –
I'll never forgive your wild silence

you can stick your fangs in me – as sharp as pain –
but you'll never have me crying

the mine of childhood offers no shelter anymore
like the neck of a dried withered flower
poking out between the teeth of a history books

I'll stitch your mouth shut with rough twine
so I can speak

so I cannot speak any longer

translated from Ukrainian by Riccardo Durante

somewhere between the ribs a spike appears –
a pointed ray of October turns into a torture tool of hope
while forests are closing our eyes with the dead leaves

time is the child we carry around on our backs
like clods of earth to which we tie our love with ropes
to retain the salt on our cheeks on the way to the river

but the lines of the lullaby that Grandma sang after the war
are forgotten – through the sputtering of blood in the throat

we hear our own voice like the creak of the door
broken out from our memory along with the empty city of trust

how strange it is to carry flowers among the dead people
like the cheap stuff at the local train station
that no one wants to buy – yet someone has to take care of the garden
of our sorrows that are growing everywhere like the weed

yet someone has – like that dog in the boat –
to cross the field of the half-broken sunflowers in order to light
the tiny flame of fire between the trees of night and the unease of oblivion
to call this place, afterwards, a migratory bird of home

and to write down – I'll never let the filth of hatred even as close as under the nails
even if the long shadows of these days are deeply ingrained in my skin –
in the diary that would get lost during a removal

translated from Ukrainian by Eugenia Kanishcheva

experience or news -
that's the choice not to be avoided

will it be a life
that will close your eyes with asphalt

will it be a life
all in patches like in pond-lilies

will it be your father's orchard
with the dead apples of love

or will it be the choice
not to be avoided

when you are saving the child's view of the world
waiting for a non-existent train

on the sidetrack

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translated from Ukrainian by Eugenia Kanishcheva

it's so strange that Facebook asks what's on your mind
and so rare now that people ask what's on your mind
whom you love now what you're reading
do you like the music of Johann Sebastian Bach
do you love Brahms do you listen to Sofia Gubaidulina
which of Van Gogh's self-portraits do you treasure the most

they ask how you are is everything fine
you answer as if agreeing ok everything's fine
the water in the tap repeats ok everything's fine
everyone around understands that it's not all fine no

even you yourself can't say what's on your mind
music school five years of the department of philology cultural studies
the human being as a freebie tacked on to postmodernism
neither necessary nor required for anyone to study
if you write what's on your mind you'll become a text
maybe they'll read it maybe even share it
leave a like or a smiley face comment

while you sit in the black square of a tiny room
with a low ceiling an uncomfortable mattress Soviet furniture
taxing your brain with the question of what's on your mind
thinking you think there's nothing on your mind

translated from Russian by Katherine E. Young