

Herstory

<https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/10229-ЗАХИСНИ-РЕАКЦІЇ-herstory.html>

[...]

In general, people never cease jabbering in these buses. They are filled with life stories, a sharing of experiences of how and when the war entered people's lives: a woman from Kharkiv admits that she began vomiting right in the middle of the street after having seen Russian tanks; a woman from Dymyri complains that she was just finishing up a years-long house renovation—she was putting up wallpaper—when she was forced to quickly leave the village; a young woman from Vinnytyisa divulges that she is the only female member of her territorial defense group, which makes her boyfriend very jealous.

Do these stories told by female mouths differ from those by male voices? Most likely—yes. One can assume that the men's stories would testify about the impossibilities of retreating from one's own home and what is behind those impossibilities, about the rapidly decreasing options of free choice, about sacrificing the matters of one's own life for the sake of risking that life and one's own body, about the changes in the conscious and the transformation of the ego, about repositioning the borders of fear, about the meaning of the words "bravery", "dependability", and "dignity", and also "hatred", "cruelty", and "revenge", about existence a hair away from death, about death.

One can assume that in the women's stories would be filled with longing due to separation and much instinctual fear for children, they would tell about the silence of empty dwellings and the anguish of sleepless nights in anticipation of the sound of announcements, they would testify about the difficulty and shame of talking about rape and violence, and frustration of having to rebuild life in chaos and uncertainty, they would say a lot about love and about even more love and about losses including the loss of a life that existed earlier.

But the women's stories would also include bravery, and hatred and sacrifice and nearby death, and the men's would have love and even greater love, fear and indecision, sorrow for that which has been lost. There is no theme that belongs exclusively to women or only to men. They can even be told in similar words. The difference lies only in the voice that is uttering.

[...]

Translated by Mark Andryczyk

A Photo That Cannot Be Described

<https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/10032-ЗАХИСНІ-РЕАКЦІЇ-Фото-яке-не-опишеш.html>

Realizing the absurdity of my question and actually already knowing the answer, I ask my fourteen-year-old daughter Varvara: "You haven't seen the photos and videos from Bucha, have you?"

In everyone I see and meet on that day, after the Russians retreated from Bucha, in everyone I cross eyes with, everyone I sit at the same table with for a long time – silently, with my head bowed – I recognize a reflection of myself: an unbearable, terrible weight has fallen on each of us. It has no beginning and no end, you can't see through it, you can't name it, and you can't comprehend it.

"You haven't seen the photos and videos from Bucha, have you?" I try to ask Varvara, but this weight has fallen even on my voice. I don't recognize the sound shadow that I'm pushing out of me with an unfamiliar effort.

"Of course, I did," my daughter answers me seriously, as I become familiar with the sudden maturity in her eyes and face.

We are silent, and then I ask the question again, which sounds too weak-because everything now sounds and feels too weak: "Do you feel bad?"

"Yes, I feel very bad," Varvara says seriously and simply. "I will be sick for a very long time."

We are silent again, and Varvara continues: "Especially one of those photos. It's the most terrifying. I don't know what to do with it."

"Maybe you can tell me what you saw?" I ask her. Knowing that she will refuse me.

Varvara shakes her head in the negative. "I can't," she says. "I can't say it."

"Is there a dead person in there?"

"Yes."

"A child?"

"Yes."

"Tell me."

Varvara knows exactly what she is talking about: "It's impossible."

"You shouldn't have seen those photos," I whisper, rather rhetorically.

"I shouldn't have lived through this war," Varvara replies.

There is a vast gulf between language and its possibilities, with all its abilities to give shape and dimension, to color, to compress, to round, to bulge, to simplify and complicate, to comfort and reconcile, and what has happened and continues to happen, is happening now, at this very moment, to very specific living (they were just alive) people in so many cities and villages of Ukraine.

The words are pale, weak, helpless, flat, useless. They remain on the very surface; they convey almost nothing. They are so far away from this pain, this horror, this fear, this scream and this smell, of torn skin, of fresh blood, of blood that has hardened, of blood mixed with mud, of blood that has been driven under cold, petrified nails with neat manicures. Words simply don't exist so hopelessly deep beyond the line where a defenseless person is tortured,

stretching them out in time for many, many infinities. Where a person is deprived of his or her fragile humanity, turning into a physiology of incomprehensible levels of pain and horror. Trying to give shape to the suffering of the dead and tortured seems like a betrayal. A pathetic, feeble understatement of their suffering. After all, what does the word suffering mean [...]?

Words exist to bring order, to rationalize and logic in the midst of complexity and chaos. What words do you use to understand people from the country to the north, to describe them? How do you understand the motivation for inflicting torment on a three-year-old child-how can you make sense of it? How do you bring logic to a sick, perverse desire to invent and commit despicable violence with intellectual effort?

There is a temptation to stop seeing them as people. They can't be like us – humans are incapable of being like that. The fact that they are not human explains at least something: it explains the unexplainable. And it also justifies our new cruelty, which has been unleashed in the midst of pain.

[...]

The wound knows how to heal itself. Weak, unconvincing, pale words are not enough to tell us what is happening to us now. So many things remain unanswered, open, incomprehensible forever.

But a person is much more than physiology and words. A shaky bridge of language and tears leads over the abyss to the other side, where not everything can be named and understood. On this side, one simply finds the strength to endure the unbearable, to grieve for the lost, the killed and the maimed, to care for the weak and to protect the human.