

In Lieu of an Audience-friendly Poem About Violence.

A personal reflection for the Stockholm Conference on Belarus

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Sometime after year of no return, 2020, after my many interviews, essays, and calls for international solidarity, a British journalist asked me to contribute a poem to be used as the final touch in a radio program about Belarus. She told me she wanted a “short poem about violence, but not too depressing, preferably with a nice metaphor.” “A nice metaphor about violence?” I asked. “Yes,” she answered eagerly, “something striking and clear, but, you know...” and here she laughed, “we won’t want people to kill themselves after listening.”

And I thought: Who am I? How did I turn into a supplier of short, audience-friendly poems about violence? For most of my poetic life, I felt like a grieving, musical animal, yet, often had to play a role of a poetic megaphone, valued for rhetoric, collective voice, and irony, while all the time I yearned for what some call beauty, others sublime, others sacred.

Here I am making a statement at a political conference, yet a poet dwells in self-doubt, a poet asks questions and gives no answers, a poet rejoices in saying “I do not know.” A poet says, justice – sure, democracy – sure, new history books – of course, torture prisons turned into museums of totalitarianism – cannot wait, the rule of law – why not, solidarity – obviously, but... shouldn’t there be more?

Don’t we long for more than that, for more than even justice and fairness, for something hidden, unnamable, unspeakable? These moments, which are often the moments of the highest joy and the highest grief connect us not just to national ancestors, but to the ancient, uncivilized world that we still carry in us no matter how civilized our country of residence is. And this primordial world resides not in words, but in moments when we are lost for words.

This is exactly why Plato didn’t want poets in his Republic. For every Plato that devises a

great social system, there is a poet who instead of writing a short poem against violence, will ask: Who am I? Am I even real? And isn't all of this so strange? Why, riding home from the center of Minsk to my gray microregion, on a public bus crawling along the blocks of Soviet flats with lit and gleaming windows, amid sleepiness and exhaustion, suddenly, I, a child, so often felt a burning love for all the people moving in their gleaming apartments in the night? And why did that love always felt like grief?

Home isn't a place, neither it is a system of institutions; home is a physiological experience of growing up, of light, of raspberries, of grass, of the smell of libraries, of the rhythm of public buses. The state takes this reality into its own hands and offers a description incomparable with mine, the state wants me to forget my own life. The state wants a poet to belong to motherland, nation, history. But I belong to a raspberry bush behind our summer house. I cannot explain why those raspberries tasted like no other raspberries in the world.

As an artist, I'm called to go to war over the nature of descriptions, over the nature of reality. I'm called to keep describing it against oblivion. And so, home is a place where political and private are constantly fighting each other, and a poet is there to ensure that in the end, the private wins. The country I describe in my work is not Belarus. The country I'm from stretches from the body of my grandmother to the body of my daughter, and all of it is covered with raspberry bushes. And no stability, no welfare will fix my raspberry country's masochistic insistence on the taste of pain in the moment of joy, and the taste of joy in the moment of pain.

Why am I defending these moments of sublime speechless at a political conference? Because the opposite of sublime speechlessness is the twisted speech of power. A poet defends a private speech against the speech of the state. To defend poetry means to defend doubt against dogmatic certainty, to defend doubt means to defend thinking, to defend thinking means to defend inner freedom which is the foundation of all freedom, and to defend inner freedom means to defend dignity and human rights.

Once, at a concentration camp, Primo Levi reached out for an icicle hanging outside of his cell. A prison guard knocked the icicle out of his hand. Why? Levi asked. There are no whys around here, the guard answered.

Why am I telling you this story? To say that for almost a century, a place where I come from has been a place without whys. A place that forbids whys is a place that forbids thinking.

Now, there is a different kind of silence that I'd like to place next to the sublime speechlessness.

It is the incommunicado status of many political prisoners in Belarus. Our inability to hear from them and to be heard by them is the result of a obscene state power.

In the stories, smuggled out of Belarusian jail, a Belarusian lawyer and now an incommunicado political prisoner Maxim Znak describes a snowman built by prisoners, or, rather, a snow maiden because, using some crushed brick, the builders give it red lips. The guards come out. The guards don't need to question the prisoners about this snow maiden with red lips. And the maiden's red lips are silent, naturally. The guards topple the snow maiden with brutal force. Why am I telling you this? To say that the opposite of sublime speechlessness is a group of grown man silently fighting a snowman because of its silent, Maria Kalesnikava-red lips.

I wasn't fully honest with you when I spoke to you of my raspberries. I know that my raspberries were so sweet because there was a shiver of tragedy in them. The tragedy of history out of which they grew: dislocation, war, and oblivion all were in those raspberries. An ecological catastrophe was in those raspberries. If one doesn't feel the shiver of history in the trees, flowers, rivers, and morning light that poets put into their poems, then we, the poets have failed poetry, we've failed the art in which aesthetic and ethic are inseparable.

I know that even in the most fair democracy, transparent and just, there will be some people who would find themselves transported not by their country's well-functioning transportation system, but by the morning light or by the shouts of children running in twilight on an August night, or by a trembling shadow of a linden tree, or, in the moment of great happiness, they would feel an unexplainable spasm of sadness, and, on the contrary, in the moment of sadness, they would suddenly become overwhelmed with gratitude for being alive. They will treasure these moments of strangeness because they are the moments of inner life, and it is only on the strength of our inner lives that we endure, and overcome the unfreedom and injustice.

And so, I say to nobody and to myself, isn't it strange to be born into the radiation of the past, into the mysterious melancholy of apple trees, into the strangeness of laughing from pain, the strangeness of the stories we make up and believe in, the strangeness of how we bond with each other, we, people who were born without any reason to be born, and yet, here we are, we cry and laugh together, we get obsessed with memory, we forget to notice how our hearts change.

Grief is also a kind of a radiation. It takes generations to go away. It means that for generations to come, we'll eat the sweetest raspberries and know that we are eating our grief, which is our history, which is our memory. And as long as we have memory, we are free.



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