Excerpt from «(Не)дитячий погляд на війну: Збірник життєвих істрорій» (*A (Non)Child’s View of War: A Collection of Everyday Stories)*. Edited by Taras Oleksyn. Lviv: ZUKTs, 2018.

**Home**

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*Kharkiv*

O dearest mine, forgive me now,
That I did dare to part from thou!
I dream about your sweet embrace;
How could I do something so base?
At night I dream of you, my dear,

Your quiet homes and waters clear,
Be quiet! I did not deceive.

I miss you, oh how much I grieve!
I hear noises but no laughter,

Every corner I remember.
The freezing cold, the piles of snow:
Who took it all so long ago?!
O home of mine, I miss you so,
You are so dear to me, you know.
The news informs me: you’re alive,
You carry on, you firmly strive.
Do not give up, you must hold strong.
While from afar I’ll sing your song.
Equip yourself with patience, dear;
Your victory in battle nears!

It all started with the seizure of the regional department of the Ukrainian Ministry of Internal Affairs. At that point you could feel for the first time that something wasn’t right. The soldiers, the fortifications, the stress of locals saying that it would end soon. Later a curfew was introduced. But at the time it was still hard to believe that there would soon be a war. Nature was in bloom, new entertainment centers were being built, children were smiling, and senior citizens were chatting near their porches.

We were awaiting our graduation exams, and then graduation itself. Those days were truly one-of-a-kind, some of the happiest of my life. All of us were talking about the future. Some said they wanted to enroll at DonNTU, others at the Horlivka Institute for Foreign Languages. But none of us could have imagined what happened next. Nobody knew that this would be the last good thing in our lives, that we would feel and watch our dreams be destroyed within a few weeks, and that many of us would not be alive within a few months.

In June my six-year-old brother and I went to Urzuf. We were only there for one day because in the evening we learned that the occupation of Mariupol’ had begun. We went home the next day. We traveled quickly so that we’d have enough time to get there. Entire convoys of military vehicles passed us nearby. There was a humming sound as the road trembled. I’d never seen anything like it before. Little tears came to my eyes, but I couldn’t tell if it was out of fear or great pity. At the time I still didn’t believe it; I wanted to close my eyes and open them to see a normal day. But no. When we arrived home, I saw several suitcases by the door and my mother with red, tear-stained eyes. At night, we were waiting for a train to take us to Kharkiv. It had been delayed for four hours. We stressfully waited for it in constant fear as shots could be heard somewhere in the distance. Our father refused to go, so the three of us went. This was the last time I saw my home in four years.

After reaching Kharkiv, we stayed there for a few days and then left.

Still, my mother persuaded my father to come to Kharkiv, but it was at this time that active hostilities began. They were driving around in cars, which made it even more dangerous. There was shooting everywhere, they were driving KAMAZ trucks and armored tanks. It was a miracle that they stayed alive.

It was during this time that the terrible events began as well. It was like a piece of my soul was torn off with each dead person. Within a week I learned that my teacher had been killed; my friend died a few days after that. What it was like to realize that literally a month ago I was studying math and solving equations with my teacher. And this friend and I would come up with plans for the holidays when I was in secondary school. I couldn’t believe they were gone: these young people who were completely innocent and had their entire lives ahead of them. But it didn’t end there. Artillery shelling killed dozens of people every day. People were literally ripped apart. Rivers of blood flowed. A woman’s head was blown off and her child was torn limb from limb at a bus stop. Shells fell on residential areas. People couldn’t go out onto the street, there was barely any food, and small children cried in fear, yet they understood, at just three years of age, that you had to hide in the cellar if the shells were flying. Day after day innocent blood flowed as both the elderly and promising young people were killed. So many little kids perished! They shot at them, they fired artillery at them, and they exploded. So many of them were left crippled: some without arms, some without legs, some were left lying in a coma. The hospitals were overcrowded, there was hardly any medicine. People delivered the wounded and their mutilated bodies every hour.

I can’t even begin to count how many of my acquaintances and friends died. I’ll never see or speak to them again. I won’t be able to come home and peacefully walk through the streets. I won’t be able to dream and enjoy the simple things anymore. But it is what it is …

Nothing will be as it was before. There is only darkness. Yes, I managed to leave all that, but I was left without so many friends, and so many of them stayed there! There, where there was already no future. And then there was me, with feelings of great loss and emptiness. Every day something inside me bothered me. The attitude of Kharkiv residents was even more traumatizing. They didn’t understand. They simply said that we were to blame and that nothing was happening. It was impossible to rent an apartment or find work because we were migrants. There was the impression that a “migrant” was some kind of thief, a monster.

But what were we guilty of? Were we guilty of the fact that they took away our home, our property that we acquired over the years, so many of our relatives? We were indeed guilty of this in the eyes of many. They had everything, they weren’t there, they didn’t live there. They didn’t understand what it’s like to lose everything and start over from square one: to start over from a place where you’re everyone’s enemy, where you don’t have the right to live as everyone else.

The first two years were unbearable. It was so hard to live understanding the loneliness, pain, and pity for everything that happened while having to adjust to my surroundings at the same time. Only after two years of living in Kharkiv did things get a bit better. But Kharkiv can never replace my home. Nobody will return my friends, and nobody will give back those happiest moments of my life. Besides, I’ll never be able to return there because nobody *lives* there: they *survive*. And unfortunately, nothing will change.

I recently went to Horlivka for two days. I wanted to see my home, the streets I once walked, the conservatory where I once studied. When I arrived, my heart sank even further. A gray atmosphere and stores with half-empty shelves. Ruined buildings and empty streets. There were a few small children with their mothers, or elderly folks with eyes filled with grief. There were so many people before: people who went to work or to class, who dreamed and realized themselves, who simply lived! But that was in the past. The city died. It died with all the innocent lives that perished. And my hopes for the restoration of the city, along with that smallest bit of happiness that I might return home, died along with them.

To this day I live in Kharkiv. I live with memories of my home and all the kind people that are no longer with us. Life is a bit easier for me now, but on the other hand I find it frustrating and incomprehensible that some people could just forget about what happened and that it’s still not peaceful there. That now and again they keep shelling, and that people die. That people still don’t want to hire migrants or give them a place to rent. But at least here it’s peaceful; here there’s a chance to live.

I can only hope that they will make many memorials for the deceased children and all the other deceased, and that people will remember them. That people will remember this war. That they will show respect. That they will understand that we are all united and that the same blood flows in our veins. That we are not different from each other in any way. And most importantly, that this isn’t only an issue in Donetsk and Luhansk. This is an issue in all of Ukraine that must touch every heart.

Such is the life of a migrant: such is life “from square one.” Such is life in a new environment where you have nothing, where you aren’t welcome anywhere, and where there is only pain and memories behind you.