

For the lighthouse and the nightingale

1.

Beyond the rubble of the Berlin wall
in maybe ninety three or four,
we took a bus from Warsaw to Kiev,
to waste our time, up on the shattered steppe.
Then southward to the dark Odessan sea
and a crossroads down near Mayaky.
And though this year I've tried, I still cannot
find Mayak, "The Lighthouse," on any map.
The plywood bar where Mykhail our host
taught us how when drinking, Ukrayintsi toast.

The first one was, "za zustrich!" for our meeting
and though our time there would be fleeting,
with smuggled vodka, beer and other booze
we made the next to friends, "za druzba!"
The third he taught us is, and always was
for love. In Ukrayins'kyy, "za lyubov!"
Though every slavic dark eyed girl we saw
is older now and in a state of war.
Like Yaryna, who's name, she said, means peace,
who raised a glass, "za simyi!" to families.
By now she'll have a husband, daughter, son,
a family in fear like everyone,
since Putin brought another bitter war.
All too familiar here and just one more;
from the Mongols to the Wehrmacht,
to the Cossacks, Bolsheviks and Poles,
from Adolf Hitler's genocidal ranks
to these Russian brothers riding tanks,
each one leaves another generation dead,
rotting under flags of gold or black or red.
But from the fetid corpses in the streets,

something old but newly felt accretes
its self around the treasured holy land Ukraine
and we could taste it in the air back then.

In Pavlo, who sang Dylan's protest songs
in Ukrayins'kyy, though if the words were wrong,
no one's English was good enough to tell.
Then drunk, he taught us how to curse as well.
"Poshol na khuy, ty Rosiys'ka pyzda!"
is *fuck you, Russian cunts* or something like that.

Although his youthful anger and bravado
meant nothing to Mr Tereshchenko.
"You boys wave your dicks like bayonets.
I'm from the heyday of the Soviets.
I saw Stalin's purges and this town's mayor
hung from that lamppost over there.
We lived through famine and world war two,
raised the swastika with your gold and blue.
Though in a year we'd have welcomed back the Tsar,
with a hundred thousand dead in Babi Yarⁱ.
So to hell with Ukrayintsi, German and Rosiys'ka,
pour another vodka, "za babushka i diadushka!"ⁱⁱ"

So we drank to grandparents, who in recent days
I've seen dragged from moonscape craters on the news,
mystified and grey with livid ash and age.
A war foreseen, and in that bar in rage,
Anna raised a glass, but just to slam it down,
for her boychild, slaughtered in Afghanistan.
"Za bat'kiv i materiv!" The father and his wifeⁱⁱ
who'll lose their children in the coming strife.
And for a moment she united everyone
to toast the living and the loved and gone.
"Za vtrachenykh rodychiv... na zdorov'ya!"ⁱⁱⁱⁱ

Heads now full of talk and song and vodka,
we stepped out beneath a sky of pure obsidian
arcing from the Bering to the Baltic to oblivion.
And since liquor and the hour had made us tired,
we sprawled out by the roadside in the quiet,
and the gentle plum-wine scent of spring,
and listened to a nightingale sing.

Without love of nation, creed or war machine,
we drank only from the blushful Hippocrene
and tasted nothing there to kill or die or curse for.
So our friends Ruslana, Ilya and Oxana
raised a last one to our wishes for the future.
Their toast, "ostanya dlya nashi bazhannya!"

And though a man of doubt I wished that everyone
could be transposed to pure transcendent song.
Our lives offered as libations to the gods,
like liquescent birdsong rising over yards
and fields and towns, where all existence
is a prayer ascending in the heavens.

But all that was nearly thirty years ago,
before Borodyanka, Bucha, Mariupol.
And though we drank, "za myrin!" to peace,
it's hard to raise a glass in times like these,
when Ukraine is tied and raped and on her knees,
and not to toast the warriors, "za voyiny!"
So we drank another for the road, "na pososhok!"^{iv}
and knew despite our promises, we'd not be back.
But for what it's worth tonight, I'll drink a little vodka
for Ilya, Oxana, Anna, Pavlo and Yaryna,
for Mr Tereshchenko, Ruslana and Mykhail
for the Lighthouse and the nightingale.

2.

Za zustrich i druzba, za lyubov i simyi.
Za materiv i bat'kiv, za babusi i didusi.
Za vtrachenykh rodychiv, na zdorov'ya.
I odyn dlya nashi bazhannya.
Za myrin, za voyiny, na pososhok,
Ostanya za solov'ya^v i za Mayak!

ⁱ Babi Yar is a ravine in Kyiv and the site of the massacres carried out by Nazi Germany's forces during world war two. 33,771 Jews were killed there in just two days in 1941 and it is believed that between 100,000 and 150,000 people were murdered there by the time the German army withdrew two years later.

ⁱⁱ "Za bat'kiv i materiv!" translates exactly as "To the fathers and the mothers".

ⁱⁱⁱ "Za vtrachenykh rodychiv... na zdorov'ya!" is not directly translated in the text of the poem but means literally "For lost relatives... Cheers!"

^{iv} "Na pososhok" translates as "for a staff" or "for a stick." Presumably a stick with which to take to the road.

^v "Solov'ya" is in English "The nightingale."

Note: Other translations are indicated in the text or by the context of the poem and apart from the word "Ukraine" which retains the standard English pronunciation all Ukrainian words are spelt phonetically.