**Writing with Foreign Blood: A Visit to Ukraine**

**Naomi Foyle**

*From the moment someone writes with foreign blood*

*they begin to write with their own*

*from* ‘From the Moment’ by Ihor Pavlyuk

translated by Steve Komarnyckyj

*If your heart has lost its way, your feet are sure to also*.

Hryhorii Skovoroda

translated by Naomi Foyle

Going to Oxford would have been highlight enough. It was a bright March day, I was staying with old friends and reading at a poetry gig in the evening – the perfect mini-break from a dreary winter in my Brighton basement flat. Jonathan Meades’s abrasive defence of Brutalism still scouring my perception of urban space, I insisted on a cycle tour of the monstrous grey jewels in the university’s crown of gargoyles and spires, further amusing my hosts by bursting into phrasebook Ukrainian whenever we sat down for tea. No linguist, I simply hoped my pronunciation was not too atrocious. Invited to join the English PEN launch tour of *A Flight Over the Black Sea* by Ihor Pavlyuk, I wanted to at least try to say *dobryi vechir* – good evening – to the poet and our mutual translator Steve Komarnyckyj. That night, my apparently singular preoccupations converged in an image that haunts me still: Ihor, clad in a traditional black and red embroidered shirt, reciting his pagan poems of sea and steppe between the slender concrete pillars of St Antony’s College. What at first seemed an elegant coincidence soon started to resonate rather more unnervingly. As Steve’s translations scattered blood and thorns into the room, the ecclesiastic, Brutalist-lite columns began to ghost a painful history, their slim grey trunks and ceiling branches evoking the dark forests of Russian Orthodox and Soviet repression that subtly shadow Ihor’s poems. An inescapable synchronicity was at work: looking back I’m not surprised that before the year was out I had been compelled again from my writer’s bunker, this time straight to Ukraine.

The audience that night were mostly members of the Oxford University Ukrainian Society, no strangers to the shots of *horilka* – traditional honey and red pepper vodka – Ihor passed around the drinks reception to fire up conversation. I was keen to talk about politics. Thanks to Steve’s kind championing of my poetry in Ukraine, I’d taken a personal interest in the Euromaidan protests, commiserating with him as a peaceful stand against corruption was torn apart by fringe elements and nightmarish state violence. Following events online, I had been astounded to see the eventual ousting of Yanukovych – a leader who had massacred his own people – vilified in certain quarters as a US and EU-backed Nazi coup. Clearly it suited Russia’s interests to conflate Ukrainian sovereignty with racist über-nationalism, but while questions about the role of the far right in the uprising needed to be asked, wherever I looked Ukrainians were giving reassuring answers. Just two days earlier a committee of Ukrainian Jews had published [an open letter to Putin](file:///C:\Users\nfoyle\Documents\Blog%20Posts\Ukraine\maidantranslations.com\2014\03\05\open-letter-of-ukrainian-jews-to-russian-federation-president-vladimir-putin\), refuting his charge of anti-Semitism against Euromaidan; in Oxford, as Ihor understood English better than he spoke it, it fell to Kyivan literary scholar Dmytro Drozdovs'kyĭ to discuss with me the transitional parliament’s proposed repeal of Russian language rights. Far from an act of oppression, Dmytro told me, the controversial law – in fact, soon dropped – was intended to reverse Yanukovych’s efforts to set up a Russian-language national bureaucratic infrastructure, a move that had raised Ukrainian fears of re-colonisation by their powerful neighbour.

These fears were hardly groundless: other talk was of the upcoming Crimean referendum, the chill of which not even Ihor’s *horilka* could warm. Since the spring, of course, the temperature of the conflict has hiked, and now plummeted, dramatically. With his annexation of Crimea and launch of a covert war in East Ukraine Putin torched the international rulebook, and fatal conflagrations were the inevitable result. Sparked by murderous attacks on a pro-Ukrainian march, the tragic Trade Unions House fire in Odesa in May killed over forty pro-separatists. In Donbas, Ukrainian forces responded to rebel rocket fire by shelling apartment buildings, the months-long conflict claiming at least 4000 lives. Though at time of writing sanctions seem to have forced Russia to reconsider the cost of intervention in Donbas, frozen conflicts take no time to defrost, and in the meantime the information war rages on. Denunciations of Kyiv as a neo-Nazi bastion have lessened since Ukraine elected first a centrist president and now a centrist parliament, far-right candidates polling less than 2% in each election, but accusations of neoliberal puppet mastery still sound loud from Russia and the global Left, and the cause of the Odesa massacre is still fiercely contested online. One thing is certain: Ukrainian voices are largely absent from the mainstream international debate – even this autumn’s Battle of Ideas panel on the conflict included nil Ukrainians. This silencing is, in its way, as pernicious as hostile rhetoric: Ukrainians are not considered experts in their own lives because it suits predetermined geopolitical agendas to cast them instead as pawns in a post-cold war game of soldiers.

Yet Ukrainian political analysts are eager to communicate. Post-Oxford I struck up a correspondence with Ihor’s wife, journalist and academic [Lyudmyla Pavlyuk](file:///C:\Users\nfoyle\Documents\Blog%20Posts\Ukraine\balticworlds.com\over-the-meanings-of-wwii\), whose articles and emails were gravely concerned not only with the threat of Russian invasion and the reality of what she called the terrorists in Donbas, but also the role of Russian propaganda in stoking the conflict. Wanting to help counter the slander of a popular revolution, I wrote up the Oxford event on my blog, gave my impression of the situation in Ukraine, reviewed Ihor’s book, and published some of Lyuda’s emails on the crisis. My blog is a modest, erratic affair and when in the summer Ihor wrote on behalf of the National Union of Writers of Ukraine to offer me the Hryhorii Skovoroda prize for my ‘poetry and essays on Ukraine’ I felt, frankly, rather embarrassed. Uncertain about accepting, I read all I could find in English about Skovoroda. Though what I learned about this eccentric eighteenth century poet, philosopher and composer suggested he would not have wanted a prize to be minted in his name, it also enticed me to become his ambassador.

Known as ‘the Russian Socrates’, and now claimed as a renowned Ukrainian, the sensitive Skovoroda paid his own deepest allegiance to the principles of radical, often unconventional, freedom. Born in Kiev in 1722 and educated at Kiev Academy, he escaped the priesthood by feigning a stutter and, in the words of a contemporary, starting to speak ‘in an extravagant, falsified voice’. As Joseph T. Fuhrmann also reports, Skovoroda then travelled in Europe for three years, adding German to his command of Latin, Greek and Hebrew. He returned to Ukraine to lecture at the Pereiaslav Academy, presumably not in falsetto. Dismissed, instead, for attempting to modernise the teaching of poetics, he worked as a private tutor until taking up a post at Kharkov Collegium. Drawing on his knowledge of the ancients, Skovoroda was developing his own religious philosophy, one which, Fuhrmann explains, ‘extended the base of Russian thought, previously oriented around traditional religious and theological precepts’. Sometimes considered a pantheist, a thinker who saw Spirit at work in ‘an infinite world of worlds’, Skovoroda was concerned, not with doctrinal arguments, but the path to happiness, which he conceived of as a kind of gnostic democracy in which personal fulfilment was indivisible from the wellbeing of all. While the Moscow Patriarchs taught that the serfs were cursed and the Czars reigned by divine providence, Skovoroda believed that ‘Our Kingdom is within us’ and ‘the sanctity of human life depends on doing good to others’. To him, all work was blessed, inequality was sinful and, unless enriched by a sense of social responsibility, rituals of devotion rang as hollow as tin bells.

Though he composed liturgical music and occasionally took the sacrament, Skovoroda was deemed a heretic by church authorities and ostracised at the college. At the age of 44, after a critical attack on his ethics course, he gave up lecturing altogether and spent his last twenty-five years living in the Russian tradition of the *yurodivy* – a ‘fool in Christ’. Travelling on foot throughout northern Ukraine, staying with friends from all walks of life, or happily sleeping under the stars, Skovododa became a folk hero, a holy *strannik* (wanderer) who, according to Gavriil’s *Istoriaa Filosophia*, ‘taught at the crossroads, at markets, by a cemetery, under church porticos, during holidays – when his sharp tongue would articulate an intoxicated will – and in the hard days of the harvest when a rainless sweat fell on the earth’. He continued to compose, contemplative songs that were taken up by blind musicians and passed into the Ukrainian folk repertoire. His only sin appears to have been once leaving a bride at the altar: when a peasant attempted to arrange the philosopher’s marriage to his daughter, Skovoroda, perhaps too polite to refuse, failed to show up at the church on the appointed day. But the philosopher’s manner of death suggests that this inconsideration was uncharacteristic. Declaring to a close friend that he had come to stay ‘permanently’, he rose every morning and went out into the woods with a spade. After dinner on the third day he stood, announced ‘my time has come’, and went to lie down to die – whereupon it emerged that he had been digging his own grave.3 Although widely distributed, his manuscripts were unpublished in his lifetime, but Skovoroda’s epitaph attests to his success in his own terms: ‘The world hunted me, but it never found me’.

I resolved that I would only accept the award if I could at least try to make myself worthy of the honour. To begin with, to reverse one of Skovoroda’s aphorisms, it became clear to me that, where my heart already was, my feet should follow. No cash award or formal ceremony were attached to the prize, but my finances had picked up since the spring, and Ihor and Lyuda welcomed my suggestion that I visit them in L’viv to receive my medal and diploma and interview writers and activists about the worsening conflict with Russia. I ruled out going alone to the newly declared Donets’k and Luhansk People’s Republics, but as it transpired not only the war in the East but Moscow itself travelled West to meet me.

Timing my visit to coincide with the parliamentary elections of October 23rd, I arrived on a cold night in L’viv to a warm blast of Ukrainian hospitality. In what felt a real treat to this frequent flyer, Ihor and Lyuda met me at the airport, whisking me back in a taxi to their Soviet-era tower block in L’viv’s ‘Sleeping Region’. The building’s grim exterior was deceptive. Though the green metal doors scraped open into an austere concrete foyer, the Pavlyuks’ top floor flat, with its parquet flooring, gleaming bookshelves and pale sofa quilts, proved a luminous writers’ eyrie. My hosts’ eldest daughter Nadia was home to greet us, and over a midnight feast of Lyuda’s home-made mushroom pie, pickled herring, dill potato salad, and eggplant with mussels, we discussed her translation studies in Europe; Lyuda’s new article on the information war; and, Lyuda elaborating on her husband’s elemental English, Ihor’s recent successes in Florida, where an avenue of birch trees had been planted in his honour, and Kyiv, where, despite misgivings about reading poems over the sound of ‘guns speaking’, he had just appeared at the Terra Poetica international poetry festival, the first of its kind in Ukraine.

I retired to bed with the festival anthology, impressed by its scope, and moved by its quaint yet arresting English translations. ‘We are cities, each one reminds megalopolis,’ read the opening line of an untitled poem by Tanya-Maria Lytvynyuk, who goes on to say:

It happens sometimes that people want to move on,  
To finally pick up their things and get freedom, become unrestrained

To start conversation with the best physician on Earth

And to hang better routes they could have, on their chests

The poem, in one sense about broken relationships, in another about the fundamental human yearning for growth, whispered to my restlessness, the part of me that had come to L’viv simply because I had the desire and freedom to do so – a sometimes lonely freedom I nevertheless preferred to the impossible demands of the romantic partnerships I had so far experienced. I wasn’t quite as far gone as Skovoroda, who Fuhrmann asserts ‘saw in happiness, disappointment; in friends, betrayal; in attire, deception; in success, emptiness’; but having recently suffered the bitter endings of a long term relationship and a twenty year friendship, I did feel the need for healing. Here in the Pavlyuks’ blissfully quiet, pearly-curtained living room, nesting between the twin branches of poetry and politics, I felt inspired and safe, as if my adventure had brought me to another small corner of home in the world.

In the morning, again belying the humble layout of this two bedroom flat with its walk-in bathroom, Lyuda spread the table with roast rabbit, rye bread, grapes, apples, and cottage cheese the likes of which my mouth hadn’t watered for since my undergraduate days queueing up at the counter of Toronto’s Kensington Market Cheese Shop. Early on in my correspondence with Steve I’d realised that I felt at home with Ukrainian culture because of my upbringing; though born in the UK, I grew up in Saskatchewan, where Ukrainian immigrants had been drawn in waves to farm the Canadian steppes, escaping repressions including the [Holodomor](http://www.holodomor.org.uk/), the Soviet-engineered famine of 1932-33 that killed at least three million people and is now increasingly recognised as genocide. In Saskatchewan, this persecution lingered on in other forms: growing up I could never understand why Ukrainians were always the butt of jokes about supposed stupidity, but now I wonder if this was a legacy of the historical Russian belittlement of their culture. On me, the local Ukrainian community made a bright impression, their batik Easter eggs, embroidered smocks and tales of bold men on horses vividly patterning my childhood imagination: when I recall making *pysanky* at school, I can still smell the melted beeswax and feel the stylus scratching the shell. Here in L’viv, eating Lyuda’s moist cheese and crisp dill pickles, I remembered my friend Howard, a gifted chef who still treasured his aunt’s handwritten recipe book, and tasted again the tangy determination of an agrarian culture not just to survive, but thrive.

I couldn’t lounge around all day beneath the Pavlyuks’ icon paintings. Nadia’s godfather Volodya had arranged a meeting of activists in the old city, including visitors from Donbas and Moscow, and Lyuda and I were invited to join them. Volodya, she told me as we bundled up against the cold, was famous for having once walked, in his youth, from L’viv to Kyiv in quest of fair lady – an amorous marathon that had had lasting ill effects on his health. Still an idealist, Volodya had recently given up his job for pro-Ukrainian activism. His son had volunteered for active service in Donbas region and the family was currently rallying around the young man’s best friend. This lad of nineteen, Lyuda said as I pulled on my gloves, had returned to L’viv an amputee after pro-separatists, offended by his ‘Glory to Ukraine’ tattoo, had cut off his hand.

Outside, the weather was aptly sober, the sky a damp grey sheet draping the crumbling tower blocks, snowflakes blotting out the chrysanthemums newly planted by the residents’ committee. Lyuda and I waited opposite the bulk market for the bus, the semi-rural nature of the L’viv suburbs evident in the wooded verges, rutted road, and our companion at the stop, a sturdy old woman armed with a carrier bag full of cauliflowers. The tractor-yellow mini-bus seemed of Soviet stock: I was certainly not in Canada, and if I squinted I might easily not be in the twenty-first century any more. We hopped on at the back and, with a tap on a fellow passenger’s shoulder, Lyuda’s folded bills made their way up the seats to the driver. Was that fifteen pence each for a bus ride? Apparently so. For twenty minutes or so I was, in fact, in heaven, staring out the window at crenelated concrete and staggered brick edifices that would bring Jonathan Meades slavering to his knees. The old city was no less marvellous, my tourist head turned this way and that by L’viv’s majestic Opera House and baroque chocolate shops, a horse and carriage driver chatting on his mobile and, as Lyuda hurried me through the cold cobbled streets, the watery warbles of a clay bird pipe salesman pitching his wares.

Our meeting place was an art gallery café, its high walls hung with a colourful clutter of photographs and paintings – fiery shots of the Euromaidan protests jostling against a bold beach nude mysteriously lacking a FEMEN slogan, a wry young woman in an autumnal headdress and bandit mask, and a small lavender-tinted village scene I now wish I had asked the price of. Half a dozen people were sitting around a broad table at the back. Volodya leapt up to take my coat, as with Ihor the language barrier nimbly crossed by his attentive concern, a tweedy gentleman kissed my hand, and the gallery owner Oxana, a lively-eyed blonde in a patriotic turquoise dress with yellow embroidery, summoned refreshments from the kitchen. Introductions made, the table spread with platters of cheese, smoked fish, rye bread and raw garlic, a solid, weary-looking man in a red, blue and white puff jacket began to speak into Lyuda’s microphone.

Oleh was from Donets’k, but now an officially registered refugee in L’viv. Separatists objecting to his job as the head of Interregional Exchange, a programme that guides Western Ukrainian high school students around Donbas, had kidnapped him in the summer and stolen his apartment keys. Within four hours of his capture Oleh was being tortured in a basement: not just beaten, but sprayed in the eyes with chemicals, his torso subjected to electric shocks. As Volodya’s son’s young friend had suffered, the treatment was a punishment for holding pro-Ukrainian beliefs: ‘Why do you tell children about Ukraine and not about Novorussia?’ Oleh’s captors demanded to know. After three or four days in the cellar– it was hard to tell which – he was taken to work as a slave in a canteen for separatist forces. Though his physical treatment improved, he was exhausted by his ordeal and eventually, too weak to work anymore, released. His apartment key was never returned to him and his bank account had been emptied, leaving him destitute. While the interview was no trial, Oleh produced a phone photo of his bruised, swollen face: injuries that explained the sagging skin beneath his right eye.

No one expressed surprise at Oleh’s story; I was not sure if the others had heard it before, or if they all simply now expected such horrific accounts. Knowing that Ukrainians take for granted things Western observers only allege, I posed my first question, asking Oleh if he’d seen Russian soldiers in the canteen.

‘Did you hear that Oleh is speaking Russian?’ Lyuda responded. I had to blush – I am in no way able to distinguish written or spoken Russian from Ukrainian. But Oleh was a native Russian speaker – one of those Ukrainians Putin is purporting to defend – and, by their accents, he knew that many of his captors were Russian citizens. Hoping I wouldn’t seem naïve, but also anxious to answer criticisms I had encountered in arguments with friends, I pressed on, asking Oleh if he thought any pro-Russian grievances against Kyiv were justified. Donbas region Russian speakers are caught between two worlds, he replied. Many feel a historical loyalty to Moscow, heed Russian media, and are vulnerable to ‘artificial fears’ of being oppressed as an ethnic minority; they also, however, have access to the internet and an open global society. The pro-separatists must be given time to be persuaded, was his stoic conclusion.

Oleh, stripped of livelihood and home, is currently living on benefits and the compassion of fellow activists. But his is a far more fortunate fate than that of Volodya’s son’s friend, or Oleh’s local councillor, who was kidnapped after trying to stop the erection of a Russian flag, and later found dead with a ‘cut stomach’. The phrase did not need elaboration: ‘yes, a terrible death,’ Lyuda replied to my alarmed expression. And more harrowing news was to come, from the afternoon’s other main interviewee, Muscovite [Elena Vasilyeva](file:///C:\Users\nfoyle\Documents\Blog%20Posts\Ukraine\balticworlds.com\gathers-information-about-soldiers-killed\%3fs=Elena).

A large, graceful woman, exuding a potent blend of humour and determination, Elena is a professional ecologist turned activist for ‘Load 200’ – a code word for Russian soldiers killed abroad and returned home by train, adopted by a group who work to establish the truth about Russian deaths in Ukraine. Currently, the official story is that over nine hundred Russian Army soldiers have died ‘in training’ near the Ukrainian border: healthy young men who have all apparently dropped dead of heart attacks and strokes. Elena, who had just been in Donbas interviewing Russian officers and troops well on the wrong side of the border, has no hesitation in calling this an outright lie. In Donbas she had earned the trust of local people who helped her locate the mass graves where her young compatriots lay decomposing, their bodies never to return to their grieving families.

Later I learned that there is a Russian term for corpses dumped in winter woodland only to surface in the spring: “snowdrops”, the title of a Man Booker short-listed novel by former foreign correspondent A.D. Miller. Events in East Ukraine have given rise to another entry in the macabre lexicon of ditched bodies: ‘buoy’, referring to Russian soldiers tossed into shallow lakes. Quite apart from the human tragedy and political travesty these hidden deaths represent, these bodies are a serious environmental hazard. As an ecologist, Elena was trying to warn the separatists of the risks to public health such heedless burials caused: so-called ‘Novorussia’ could die in a single spring if its toxic ‘loads’ cause land and water pollution and outbreaks of disease. But no one was listening. The separatist militias were largely high on drugs, she told us: so immersed in their own violence they often even took pot-shots at the Russian troops sent to help them.

All this was intermittently gripping to hear: though I took notes when I could, much of the detail I only learned later from Lyuda’s transcriptions. Noticing, perhaps, that my face was starting to stiffen, Elena handed me her iPad. In between snaps of her posing at checkpoints in combat gear was a photograph of a packet of lard. Donated by a snack shop, the fat had saved her and her local guides from ravenous hunger after being chased by armed militias into the fields. When, a few days later in a plush restaurant, I encountered the menu item ‘three types of lard’, I laughed, but – remembering also the Holodomor – I knew why it was there. In the café, I passed the iPad to ‘also called Vladimir’, an elfin man with graven cheeks whose angular frame sported a punky orange jacket. This Volodya was a Muscovite who had lost his flat to corrupt officials, gone on hunger strike to protest Putin’s policies, and was now seeking political asylum in Ukraine. Putin, he said to the table, is ‘modern evil in its most dangerous form’, a man who would stop at nothing – nuclear weapons, the invasion of Europe – to enforce his will.

We had been talking for nearly three hours. Oxana called for more food and over heaped plates of chicken cutlet, carrot salad and a buttery turnip mash, talk turned to the parliamentary election – the Ukrainians at the table proving to be mainly social democrats who accepted their ‘chocolate oligarch’ Poroshenko as an interim leader, necessary to steer the country away from Russian domination. After all I had heard from Oleh, Elena and the Russian Volodya, it was a balm to see them eat, but though I polished my plate, Volodya’s statement stuck in my throat. ‘Putin is the worst kind of evil’ is not a quote to settle arguments – more like bound to start them – and yet I could not sensibly swallow it down to the acid brew of realpolitik. I am no fan of Western imperialism or neoliberalism, but weighing in the balance not only Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, but also its support of Assad, war on LGBT rights, crackdown on dissidents, and efforts to forge a Eurasian Economic Union of despots, I too believe that Putin darkly outshines his co-stars in the current world order.

In the West, our political system is corrupted by vested interests; in Russia, corruption *is* the system. Opposition candidates, Russian journalist Anna Arutunyan reports, are routinely harassed, beaten up or arrested, and at the booths ballot stuffing is the norm. She is not the only one concerned: the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe ([OSCE](file:///C:\Users\nfoyle\Documents\Blog%20Posts\Ukraine\osce.org\odihr\elections\88661)) ruled that fully a third of polling stations in the last Presidential election suffered ‘procedural irregularities’. OSEC also declared the Crimean referendum unconstitutional and, like the UN afraid of violence, did not send observers to monitor what was basically an election held at gunpoint.But Russia is not simply lawless, run by thugs; even more disturbingly, what little law is left has been gradually concentrating like a dank *logos* in the figure of the President. As Arutunyan argues, Putin, far from aerating the traditional Russian loyalty to the ‘strong man’, has driven a tap root deep into it, embedding himself into the post-Glastnost landscape as a twenty-first century Czar. In his increasingly totalitarian, expansionist regime, freedom of speech, human rights and due process are all public enemies. Few news outlets dare criticise [the Kremlin](file:///C:\Users\nfoyle\Documents\Blog%20Posts\Ukraine\opendemocracy.net\od-russia\elisabeth-schimpfossl\reporting-on-russian-television) – an entirely sensible silence, as over three hundred journalists have [died or disappeared](file:///C:\Users\nfoyle\Documents\Blog%20Posts\Ukraine\en.m.wikipedia.org\wiki\List_of_journalists_killed_in_Russia) during Putin’s reign – while the trial of Pussy Riot made it clear that [Russian justice](file:///C:\Users\nfoyle\Documents\Blog%20Posts\Ukraine\opendemocracy.net\od-russia\svetlana-reiter\russias-dead-end-prison-system) is as cruel a joke as the Soviet variety (in no small part, recognising the sheer absurdity of his situation gave Solzhenitsyn the mental strength to survive the gulag). Prisons everywhere are a crime against the human spirit, but in Russia rehabilitation is not even on the agenda, probation services barely exist and vegetarians subsist on bread and water. Locked up for trivial crimes in over-crowded labour camps, sleep-deprived people are forced to work fourteen-hour days and use freezing cold toilets, one inmate recently made, as [Nadezhda Tolokonnikova](file:///C:\Users\nfoyle\Documents\Blog%20Posts\Ukraine\theguardian.com\world\2014\nov\13\pussy-riot-in-london-on-protest-prison-and-putin) reported, to stand in icy water at the cost of her feet and fingers.

Across the table Elena crunched a garlic clove. She knew all too well the risks she was taking: one of her colleagues in ‘Load 200’, a seventy-two year old woman, had just been arrested and charged with fraud; another, Lev Schlosberg, had been attacked and left brain damaged. Yet Elena cheerfully continued her campaign to alert her fellow citizens to facts she hoped would one day make them feel ashamed of their government. Vloyda too, thought that Putin’s ‘unexpected’ attack on Ukraine might help revive internal resistance to the Kremlin. Hope, though, felt as thin on the ground as the snow dusting the streets outside. Russia, Elena declared, echoing Arutunyan’s assessment of a country which squeezes a tiny educated middle class between fat oligarchs and a mass of impoverished workers, is a feudalist society. And one that aspires less to democracy than theocracy: the President, Elena informed us, is not simply revered as a contemporary Czar but worshipped as a new messiah, Putin icons now appearing in Orthodox churches.

Jokes about Putin’s international ‘Gay Icon’ status aside, it was a depressing thought: the man pleased to be described as ‘a man without a soul’ installed as a new national saint. Come back, Hryhorii, I silently petitioned my *genius locii*, Socratic*‘*Fool in Christ’ . . . Vladimir needs you. For from Arutunyan I had gleaned that the *yurodivy*, emerging in the sixteenth century as a response to the absolute power of both church and state, had developed a remarkable ability to challenge the Czars. Unlike the European jester or the Hindu *saddhu*, the *yurodivy* held no position at court and, apart from poverty, embraced no asceticisms; rather, Arutunyan reports, they simply behaved abominably to neighbours and rulers alike:

They stripped naked or wore rags, they wandered about their own communities throwing rocks at the nobility and the clergy, and casting insults at state officials. They danced naked and yelled in churches. They inverted social norms and etiquette; when offered wine by those coming at them in kindness, they would pour it on the ground; when approached by the Tsar they would curse at him; when the rest of the community

fasted, they ate raw meat. By doing so they invited unspeakable abuse.

And yet, despite their chaotic vulnerability, the *yurodivy* were on occasion able to halt the excesses of power. During the 1570 sacking of Novgorod, the recluse Nicolai emerged from his filthy, untended farm to personally command Ivan the Terrible to ‘stop spilling Christian blood’. The Czar, ‘who had killed higher men for lesser things than that, turned and left’. Ivan, in fact, identified with the excesses of the Fools, and his tolerance led to the peak of the phenomenon, the canonisation of their great paragon – if that is the right word – St Basil. Though the *yurodivy* were banned from entering churches in 1677, and later persecuted to near extinction, as the life of Skovoroda demonstrates, the cultural influence of these deranged naturists was impossible to erase.

The young philosopher’s hoaxed stammer was not the only way he thwarted Kiev Monastery’s desire that he become ‘a pillar and adornment of the Church’. Skovoroda’s written reply to the Holy Fathers, cited by I.P. Holovakha, was unequivocal: ‘Reverends, I do not wish to increase the creation of pillars with myself. There are enough unhewed pillars like you in the shrine of God’. The rejoinder speaks down the centuries, not only to Putin’s self-aggrandisement, but also to my memory of Ihor reading his poetry amidst the Brutalist spires. Furhmann gives another example of Skovoroda’s daring: petitioned later in life by Catherine the Great to join her at court, he demurred: ‘Tell our little mother [*matushka*] that I will not abandon my homeland. My reed pipe and sheep are dearer to me that a sovereign’s crown.’ Far from taking umbrage, Catherine later visited him, another Czar at least momentarily compelled by the moral force of the holy *strannik*.

Pussy Riot, with their *bouffon* clown masks and taboo antics with chicken carcasses, have invoked the *yurodivy* in self-defence; if their punk prayers have not yet had appreciable effect on Putin, they have at least succeeded in drawing attention to his war on dissent. Wondering how long some of my new friends would remain free to chat around café tables, I took photos before we parted, orchestrating an activist propaganda shot of Oxana, in her bright blue and yellow dress, next to Oleh in his inadvertently Russophile red, white and blue jacket. Ukraine is a sovereign country but its culture and history are inextricably bound up with Russia’s, and speakers of both languages are courageously defending their right to co-exist here. As Lyuda and I stepped back out into the cold, even the whirling snow seemed determined never to give up.

The next day the snow had vanished, the sky a bright golden bowl suspended above the tower blocks and their park of tall autumnal birches. Nadia had gone to stay with her boyfriend, and her younger sister Olesya was charged with helping Lyuda prepare breakfast. I was not allowed in the kitchen at any point in my stay, and sat meekly on the sofa with my laptop as Lyuda came in and out with coffee, fruit and articles on Ukraine. After having at first worried that I had imposed myself on Lyuda, who had skived off work to look after me, I was starting to relax and greatly enjoy the company of my host. From our emails I had suspected I would – as well as being a trenchant political analyst Lyuda is deeply interested in dream analysis and the intricacies of the English language. But of course there is only so much one can tell from emails. Standing in the queue at Gatwick, observing bottle blonde women in furs and skin-tight jeans, one teetering in toeless ankle boots with three inch heels – *toeless* winter boots? – I had wondered how a Ukrainian lecturer and wife of a famous poet might style herself. Would I, with my slap dash makeup and sensible footwear, violate all her feminine norms? Not at all, it transpired. Lyuda’s delicate features were simply framed by long brown hair and a fringe, her turtlenecks and corduroy trousers reminded me of my late mother’s comfortable fashion sense, while her needle-sharp mind kept me up on my own snugly socked toes.

As I sipped thick Ukrainian coffee, Lyuda appeared in the doorway brandishing a sack of flour. ‘Look,’ she demanded, shaking her head. ‘This is also a casualty of the war.’ It was a rye flour from Donbas, no longer stocked on her supermarket shelves after, the cashiers had told her, pro-separatists had ambushed a lorry convoy, killing a driver. Lyuda could not accept this loss, fretting against it just as she mourned the fact that the country was now cut off from Crimea’s natural resources. Not only did Crimea provide a cornucopia of produce to Ukraine, every summer victims of Chernobyl had gone there to recuperate in its fresh sea air and temperate climes. If not for Lyuda’s own health issues, she told me, she would have gone herself to fight in the East. I understood her tireless need to speak to me about the war instead. There are so many underreported dimensions to the conflict. We had discussed Chernobyl before, Lyuda writing in an email I published on my blog that the current crisis had complicated her usual opposition to atomic power. For though the risk of attacks means that military resources have to be diverted to protect nuclear plants, the country’s atomic energy program is also a hedge against the danger of dependency on Russian gas.

Ihor came in and out of the room too, a dressing-gowned *pasha* opening windows and arranging my schedule of telephone interviews. A writer in Donbas wanted to speak with me, as did an ex-MP in Kyiv and the director of the Terra Poetica festival. These conversations took place over the next few days, in between trips to the election booth, markets and marvellous Old L’viv cafés. The writer, a gentleman in his seventies who did not wish to be named, was simply relieved to be connected to the rest of the country again: for months the telephone posts had been down. He spoke at length to Ihor about literary matters and his grandchildren, answering my question about how he had kept his spirits up during the bombardment. Literature was also the subject of Lesya Mudrak’s rapid fire conversation – as the director of Ukraine’s first ever international poetry festival, she was proud of her efforts to ‘extend the horizons of what we know is a hermetic phenomenon’. Problems had been encountered, but surmounted, she told me: though some guests were afraid to come, those who did were met by huge audiences and a moveable feast of readings, held each day in a different city. As a poet who moonlights in science fiction I was impressed by Lesya’s commandeering of the Museum of Cosmonauts as a festival venue – because ‘poetry and space are inseparable’.

As are politics and moral quandaries. To the ex-MP, Volodymyr Karpuk, formerly of the Viktor Yushchenko-associated Our Ukraine–People's Self-Defense Bloc**,** I put questions about the conduct of the Ukrainian government in Donbas. *The Guardian* had reported the shelling of civilians by both sides, but Karpuk dismissed this criticism, citing the deliberate placement of Russian and pro-Russian forces in residential areas, intending to draw fire and turn the population against Kyiv. In East Ukraine, Karpuk told me, the government had set up humanitarian corridors, and if people didn’t leave it was perhaps because they hoped the situation was temporary. In at least one case, Lyuda argued later, an evacuated woman had returned to be with her husband: knowing the risks but choosing to take them.

It was a diversionary argument, I knew. Russian provocateurs and paramilitaries had been on Ukrainian soil for months, and Ukraine had clearly been forced to mount a military response in the East, or lose even more of its territory. War creates one trap after another, but when I asked Karpuk how the West should oppose Putin, he replied not exactly as an ‘EU coup’ conspiracy theorist might have hoped. Sanctions were good, he stated, but not enough; NATO and UN military support, however, would immediately give grounds for accusations of outside influence. Better would be allowing the Eastern region time to shed the old Soviet mentality, and for this technical and economic assistance, providing opportunities for young people to travel and study, would be welcome. To critics of the use of soft power, he replied that the source of the current crisis was not acquiescence to a Western agenda, but Ukraine’s rejection of a centuries’ long domination by Russia. It was also a mistake, he said, as if reading my troubled mind, to link the invasion exclusively to Putin’s ambitions; rather, the war revealed the mentality of the whole Russian establishment, for whom the loss of Ukraine spelled the loss of the country’s imperial ambitions. And imperialist Russia, he warned, reinforcing all my anxious conclusions, was a threat to the entire world.

If there was a positive feature to the war, though, Karpuk concluded, it was that all Ukrainians had now clearly seen the extent of Russian domination, and had united in favour of stronger relations with the EU. As indirect evidence for this claim, he cited a recent poll showing that 80% of Ukrainians had donated to the military effort. ‘A good neighbour can be closer than a relative’ he said, quoting a Ukrainian proverb, ‘but with such neighbours it is not possible to maintain good relations.’

I felt touched and, again, a trifle unworthy when Volodymyr bid me farewell with another proverb, calling me a true friend of Ukraine: ‘for only true friends come to visit when times are hard’. Though it had been hard to hear Oleh and Elena’s reports, their stories were also motivating, and my personal experience in Ukraine was the opposite of difficult. The Pavlyuks were pampering me like a Persian cat; for some reason the frequent sight of cabbages was bringing me great joy; and Lyuda and I were starting to develop a little line in cross-cultural humour. At first bemused by my cabbage obsession, soon she was giggling as well at the vegetable’s munificent omnipresence in the life of L’viv: in a parking lot we encountered a mountain of green orbs lashed to the roof of a battered old Lada; on the streets, a giant photographic group portrait covering the side of a bus; in the tower block, we met plastic sacks of pre-pickled sauerkraut shreds being hauled out of the elevator on trolleys. Other times the joke was on me. As we left a supermarket one evening – I had bought the household several massive bars of Willy Wonka Poro’s ‘Roshen’ brand chocolate, and taken advantage of the favourable exchange rate to stock up on dental floss – Lyuda suppressed a small grin and innocently asked, ‘Do the English know that the English do not say goodbye?’ Baffled, then embarrassed, I learned another Ukrainian saying, stemming from the presumed English obliviousness to the people who serve them – something I, at home, make a point of combatting, even if I end up telling a bored cashier at the start of her shift to ‘have a nice day’. Chastened, I vowed to work a little harder on *do pobačennja*.

Other jests masked more significant differences. As we sat on the bus, passing what might have been a small walled city, but was in fact a Catholic seminary, I asked Lyuda if Richard Dawkins was popular in Ukraine. She frowned for a moment, but did recognise the name. No, she answered – people had had enough of atheism being stuffed down their throats by the Soviets. Everyone knew you could be a rational being and also hold spiritual beliefs. I liked the thought of ‘Comrade Dawkins’, but my titters were soon silenced as Lyuda admitted that, in her view, Pussy Riot had deeply offended Russian believers, causing real hurt. I had some sympathy with her argument, but surely Pussy Riot, I said, had not been intending to offend, but to highlight the growing links between Putin and the church. Sending the two women to the gulag only confirmed the need to protest that nexus of power. Lyuda agreed with the latter point, though I’m not sure I convinced her of the former, and other times I know she found my harping on Western media tropes frustrating. As a professional journalist, she sees more than enough space given to these views. I persisted though, and after several days of tension on this point she accepted that I needed to ask questions in order to be prepared to answer them on my return.

One such point was Kyiv’s controversial decision to put the Ukrainian Communist Party on trial with a view to ultimately banning them, a move seen by many on the Western left as a full frontal attack on freedom of speech. I understood that the Communists were being tried for actively supporting the illegal referendum in Crimea, a legal challenge perhaps comparable to the British Equality and Human Rights Committee’s decision to take the BNP to court over its racist constitution. I was also aware that by no means was a ban a foregone conclusion, or even widely supported. Poroshenko had stated that he preferred to take the fight to the ballot box, a judgement vindicated during my stay when the Party lost all of its seats in the parliamentary elections. Still, its legal fate remains a live issue. When I asked Lyuda’s opinion of the trial, she forwarded my question to a colleague, Professor Ihor Vdovychyn of the L’viv Academy of Commerce. Vdovychyn’s reply, worth quoting in full, clearly indicates that people who have lived under Communist rule might see the situation rather differently from Western leftists:

It is not an easy question. I have always favored an idea of “Nuremberg – 2” for the Communists. The communist system was as criminal and anti-human as Nazi regime: it killed huge amount of people who were defined (framed) as social and ideological “enemies”, and it caused enormous moral devastation. One important reason of current Russian aggression against Ukraine is that the communist regime has never been condemned in post-Soviet Russia. According to Putin, “Collapse of the USSR is the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century,” and no wonder that he began, very “consistently”, to restore the totalitarian empire. The radical refusal of communist ideology and its symbols is necessary for our society, in particular as a counter-measure against Putin’s “fifth column” in Ukraine.

However, eradicating communism should be done through analytical, symbolic, educative means rather than strictly juridical procedure. The appropriate moment for charges against this party was (is left) [sic] in early nineties of the last century. Now a struggle for the ban would look as a distracting target, something that refocus attention from much more important security and economic issues. Any persecution will immediately result into loud cries about anti-democratic policies in Ukraine. Besides, the prohibition will have no significant effect for near future. Much more important was the citizens' “court” decision, when the Communist party was not elected to the parliament this year – and this is a real sentence, close to the capital punishment, for this organization.

The answer, with which Lyuda agreed, chimed with another key insight I had taken from *The Gulag Archipelago*: Solzhenitsyn’s outrage at Russia’s failure to acknowledge, let alone redress, its twentieth century crimes against humanity. Now, as Stalin is rehabilitated in Russian schools, and tanks roll into Ukraine, it appears that Putin and his cronies are recladding the rotten vessel of Russian imperialism. Where exactly the new post-Soviet empire might sail after Ukraine is not hard to guess: [Polish intellectuals](file:///C:\Users\nfoyle\Documents\Blog%20Posts\Ukraine\spiegel.de\international\europe\culture-leaders-in-poland-report-growing-fear-of-russia-a-1006372.html) are already calling the current conflict ‘Europe’s war’, while [Steve Komarnyckyj](file:///C:\Users\nfoyle\Documents\Blog%20Posts\Ukraine\euromaidanpress.com\2014\08\14\a-strategy-for-damaging-russias-propaganda-machine\), writing for Euromaidan, warns that Putin ‘intends to dismember the EU into easily dominated fascist statelets and has made progress with regard to Hungary’. Neither do I take comfort from Yale historian [Timothy Snyder](file:///C:\Users\nfoyle\Documents\Blog%20Posts\Ukraine\pulsemedia.org\2014\11\25\ukraine-from-propaganda-to-reality\)’s observation that when the Kremlin calls the West ‘decadent’ it does not mean ‘self-indulgent’ or ‘licentious’ in a boys-doing-boys in togas, HBO *Rome*, sort of way: it means ‘decaying’ – that is, dying – and in need of being swept away.

As Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek has argued in the *London Review of Books*, this ominous judgement contains a seed of truth. A self-proclaimed ‘Christian atheist’, whose YouTube clips include a lecture given half-naked in bed, Žižek is a near *yurodivy* himself, but when it comes to geopolitical analysis, the guy is no clown. The EU, he asserts, tainted by xenophobia and economic elitism, is fast betraying its founding principle of equality-in-freedom, and if these darker realities prevail, Europe will prove no beacon for anyone:

Only by leaving behind the decaying corpse of the old Europe can we keep the European legacy of *égaliberté* alive. It is not the Ukrainians who should learn from Europe: Europe has to learn to live up to the dream that motivated the protesters on the Maidan . . . The Maidan protesters were heroes, but the true fight – the fight for what the new Ukraine will be – begins now, and it will be much tougher than the fight against Putin’s intervention. A new and riskier heroism will be needed. It has been shown already by those Russians who oppose the nationalist passion of their own country and denounce it as a tool of power. It’s time for the basic solidarity of Ukrainians and Russians to be asserted, and the very terms of the conflict rejected. The next step is a public display of fraternity, with organisational networks established between Ukrainian political activists and the Russian opposition to Putin’s regime. This may sound utopian, but it is only such thinking that can confer on the protests a truly emancipatory dimension.

Reading Žižek’s article after my return home, I felt, for a moment, touched by the holy foolishness of hope. I had brought back from Ukraine ample evidence that such calls are not impossible to heed, but reflect precisely what is happening on the frontlines of the conflict: Russians and Ukrainians working together in support of universal human rights. Perhaps not so ironically, given the technocrats’ grip on Brussels, it has fallen to those outside Europe’s borders to most vigorously defend the European vision of a post-nation state world.

I came home too, as from my 2012 trip to Palestine, with yet more personal evidence that acting according to utopian ideals is my own ‘best physician’. I had made dear friends in L’viv, conversing with Ihor as only two poets who don’t speak the same language can, talking with Lyuda about writers from Anna Akhmatova (born near Odesa) to Ukrainian national icons Taras Shevchenko and Lesya Ukrainka – who didn’t need a feminist campaign to get her picture on a banknote. I had also become more than a little enraptured by Ukrainian cuisine. Every time I sat down in L’viv something I hadn’t known I’d been hungering for years for was placed in front of me. There was buttermilk, frothy and sour, and borscht, a deeper shade of red in each restaurant; there were *varenyky*, cheese and potato dumplings I’d known in Saskatchewan as *perohy*, smothered here too in fried onions and sour cream; there were pancakes swimming in cherry sauce, there was kasha for breakfast, my god, *kasha* – the name of my cat in Toronto . . . I loved and ate it all, with more raw garlic cloves, with half-moons of lemon that Olesya sucked dry without flinching; with shots of homemade plum vodka, brought to the flat by Svetlana, an old friend from Ihor’s home region. I even consumed Hryhorii Skovoroda.

Imbibed his spirit, that is. My laminated diploma and small gold medal, a cameo of Skovoroda hanging from a blue and yellow crest, were presented to me at an informal ceremony around the Pavlyuk’s dining table, in the presence of their friend Lana Perlulaynen, a Finnish born, Russian-speaking poet who now writes in Ukrainian. Though her English was on a par with my Russian and Ukrainian, Lana and I communicated well, exchanging poetry books and bonding over her decisive reply to my question about her views on the conflict: ‘Putin Kaput’. Ihor was also imperative that night: ‘in accordance with Ukrainian military tradition’, he exhorted me not to wear my medal, but drop it into my red wine. Knowing I would not be offending the memory of the philosopher – whose various asceticisms did not include giving up wine and brandy – I did as I was told, and there Hryhorii bathed all evening as the conversation flowed and my glass was constantly refilled. If I now on occasion randomly spout the teachings of a gentle Ukrainian sage, I can at least explain that my blood is infused with his spirit.

The next morning I wiped Hryhorii clean and added him to my shrine of souvenirs: a collection that grew to encompass a cloth doll with a pale blue and yellow cross for a face; three bright wooden *pysanky*; a little ceramic frog from Svetlana; a cloudy glass mug printed with the various names for L’viv - Leopolis, Львів, Lwów, Львoв, Lviv, Lemberg; a doormat printed with Putin’s face the Pavlyuks thought in poor taste, but I am thoroughly stamping on; a local history magazine from the Ukrainian Volodya, and poetry books by Ihor and Lana. It was humbling to think that I had started this journey in thrall to monumentally perverse architecture, and was now mooning over coffee mugs and kitschy doormats, but as I packed my tourist knick-knacks away in readiness for my seven am departure flight – to which the Pavlyuks, proving Ukrainians know how to say goodbye, both escorted me – the trinkets seemed to glow like treasures, golden emblems of both past and future. They were, after all, souvenirs of a visit during an [election](file:///C:\Users\nfoyle\Documents\Blog%20Posts\Ukraine\theguardian.com\world\2014\nov\27\ukraine-new-parliament--war-east-mps) that returned over fifty percent first time MPs and four (of six) entirely new political parties: a result offering fresh hope of a free and prosperous Ukraine to which no one would be afraid to travel.

It was another utopian moment. While such visions can sustain a liberation struggle, they are just that: visions, ideals to strive toward, never to fully attain. As Skovoroda wrote in a Blakeian moment:

The world has a splendid look

But within it lies the unsleeping worm

Woe unto you, world. You show me laughter

But within your soul you weep in secret

Skovoroda, though, also proposed remedies for the world’s ills. A proto-Marxist, he claimed that the world is ‘a feast of the raving, a festival of the swaying, a sea of the worried and a hell for the suffering’ essentially because people are alienated from their labour. The purpose of art, in his view, was to promote individual self-awareness, in order that we may radically awaken to the full potential of human life. Thus, he asserts in a more optimistic vein, ‘We will create a better world and make the most happy day’.

What I am starting to learn from my own attempts to ‘write in foreign blood’ is that, while justice may remain elusive, peace and happiness are not destinations, but modes of travel. As Skovoroda discovered on his long wanderings, kindness knows no borders and when one’s heart is open, one finds friends. For me, travelling with the desire to understand how other people experience life creates reciprocity and trust, feels like building a strange intimacy with the world. As Ihor Pavlyuk, translated by Steve Komarnyckyj, puts it in ‘I am at Home’:

Yesterday the cranes called again,

In the sky or perhaps my dream,

And I breathe with compassion

Or anguish, like

A snowflake

Caught in your hair.

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