

The Flaming East

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Introduction

How can writing a story help us learn more about the phenomenon of writing? Through our “Story about Writing” assignment in WRS 101 Exploring Writing, we hope that students find nontraditional ways of exploring and analyzing the phenomenon of writing. The following piece from Veronika Ivanytska is an example of a story produced for this assignment. In this piece, Veronika explores what writing means in the context of war. She imagines a student journalist experiencing the Russian invasion and war against Ukraine. Veronika’s story is a heartbreaking and moving text about how we can find strength through expressing tragedy in words.

Keywords: fictional narrative, journalism, personal diaries, War in Ukraine



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² *Writing across the University of Alberta* (WAUA) publishes undergraduate student writing from writing studies courses and courses focused on writing studies practices and scholarship at the University of Alberta. You can find WAUA online at <https://writingacrossuofa.ca/>.

*“Demons run when a good man goes to war
Night will fall and drown the sun
When a good man goes to war.”
Steven Moffat*

How tragedies begin. February 2022.

Daily routine works like a well-oiled machine. Clocks tick, nerves and calories burn, the sun hums its winter songs right into your ear. Suddenly, everything ceases. Calmness is gone. Every day, you pull yourself together from scratch. You are a phoenix. Brave Ukrainian phoenix, don't be too hard on yourself.

I wake up and feel the atmosphere of fear. Why? Since last week, all talks have been about the possible escalation. Russian troops approached the border closer and closer each day. America warned they would invade my country. They did.

This date is engraved in my head forever. *February the 24th, 2022*. It all starts at 4 a.m., in Hitler style. I wake up at 7 a.m. My parents did not wake me up earlier. They prolonged my peaceful, unaware bliss for three hours.

I mechanically eat my breakfast. We try to develop a plan. We need to buy as much food as possible. We need to buy medicine. We need to check nearby bomb shelters.

I cannot think. I feel numb and scared. I am chained to a chair, only concentrating on the news feed. There were missile attacks on airports across the country. They go into the offensive from the borders. Nothing is clear.

I try to read Shevchenko. Classic poetry does not help. I write my helpless poem. I feel a bit of relief.

University classes are cancelled until the clarification of the situation. We try to distract ourselves by watching films. I read out loud to my mom. We leave only the minimum lights on. It is necessary to darken in order not to become a target.

I lie down in my bed. Familiar green walls give me some confidence. Before going into messy sleep, I message my friends to check on them and to say that I love them. What if I don't wake up the next morning?

I start writing in my diary two weeks later. Words from deep in my throat easily leave and join straight, neat lines. I cannot bear it all inside anyway. But these words cannot express death, torture, and suffering. They are not able to resurrect. They have different powers. I discover this force. I touch this magic, and my anxiety softens.

My studying resumes at the end of March. It all seems useless. Professors keep reading lectures online about how to become a great journalist. True great journalists show Russian war crimes by putting themselves in danger. That's how it should be, I think. I simply leave the Zoom meetings and turn off my laptop. I get dressed quickly and go to the nearby school. There are no classes, but a lot of people in home clothes go back and forth. This place has become their home. They sleep in the gym on the mattresses in a row. They stand in a line before entering the canteen. They eat in the canteen three times per day. I can hear the echo of their voices in the hall. I smell hot, ready food. The doors are now open. People carry meals on trays. People talk to each other. People are people, even when there is only one shower in the whole school and life has become only a queue to eat.

I come to the school for a reason. I volunteer with children. I go upstairs to a game room. It is early in the morning, so the room is empty. I take a book from the shelf. It speaks to me. I am thinking of writing something like this one day. But then, other volunteers from the church come, and all thoughts about the future are washed away by conversations and routine.

Children are loud. They preserve their inner lights no matter what. We sit in a circle and play "Uno" round after round. We learn each other's names and what city everyone is from. There are some local children. They want to help as well. They want to support those who are less lucky than them. Even the volunteer from Florida comes, and before I manage to talk to him, one young girl outruns me. She is like a sun in this room. The small sun is trying to talk in English to a native speaker. Everyone is smiling. We play "Uno" one more time.

As the day goes by, we gather in a large canteen to sculpt dumplings. Handwork distracts from bad thoughts, and new school inhabitants will have something to eat the next evening. One woman shares her memories and sincerely cries as she remembers her home. I try to hold tears back. I feel the same. I feel sadness, helplessness, and anger at the same time. I am so angry I could kill any Russian soldier with my bare hands. I forcefully squeeze the dough in my fist. Go fuck yourself, Russian warship.

The days of invasion turn into months. How predictable. I get used to the flow of school volunteering and asynchronous studying. Writing in my diary becomes a form of escapism. I dive into my notes anytime I can. It is my personal, free psychotherapy. I feel guilty about being tired of war. I am not a soldier; I do not fight with the enemies. I do not sleep in the trenches. I sleep in a cozy bed. I eat, read, write, and even go to the theatre, as normal. I use the Internet daily. Not a lot has changed from an *external* point of view. And I cannot tell anyone, except for the paper of my diary, what has changed from an *internal* point of view. I interrupt pessimistic thoughts. I scroll down the webpage. Finally, I have found something useful. There is an internship for journalism students. I see it as a great opportunity to gain real experience. I will need to go through the East to interview people. I will be able to contribute to the victory, at least in some philosophical sense. I immediately decide that I will go.

Izium Forest, Kharkiv Region, Eastern Ukraine. September 2022.

I go through the dark forest. All I can see are trees and dry mud under my boots. But we go further and further. Soon, wooden crosses become visible. My heart refuses to process it, but my mind already understands what I am seeing with my own eyes are graves. I cannot cry. This sight is beyond tears. It is beyond everything. I stare at the graves unconsciously. There are a lot of emergency workers around. They must dig into the ground to open graves and show the truth to the entire world. This earth was betrayed.

The exhumation begins. I am surrounded by thick silence. Police look at the bodies inside the grave. It is their job, the core of their daily routine, but even they are not able to bear this grief. They walk away. I mechanically do the same, almost like a robot, and nervously talk to myself.

All these people did not just die. They were tortured. They were killed mercilessly. Civilians, soldiers. Men, women, children... "It is unfair," I repeat to myself, "It is unfair, and it cannot exist in the twenty-first century." It exists. It is our reality.

When I go on my first business trip, I do not completely understand what I had signed up for. It turns out to be an emotional mincing machine. How can I express what I saw in the forest? What is the purpose of living in a world where common graves appear in the heart of Europe? People eat in cafes or restaurants. I have eaten almost nothing since Izium. The smell of corpses haunts me. I think of some citizens and soldiers who died because of hunger. I stare at the aisle in the supermarket as if it were an enemy. I go outside. Crowds walk on the narrow streets. It looks like nothing happened. I think about the many people who used to

walk here, smiling and chatting with each other, but now will never return. I listen to the songs in my headphones. It starts raining in sync with my mood. Nature has its mourning. Music and rain drown out this reality.

Kharkiv, Eastern Ukraine. September 2022.

I write and fall into a pit, almost like Alice in Wonderland. It becomes hard to think. Sometimes, you simply do not want to analyze and be rational. Let it go. Let it go. Let it go.

After two hours of driving, our team enters “the city of students and science.” We are a group of students ourselves, and every member of this team has to grow up too fast and wants justice. We want justice and rebuilding for all cities of heroes. Everyone in the car stays silent while we approach North Saltivka. Familiar grey residential buildings sadly look into an autumn cloudy sky. I get out of the car. Ugly black flashes cover buildings. In some spots, they turn into black holes. Crashed windows, destroyed flats and floors remind us of grief without words. It looks like a ghost town at first glance. I have come to talk to those who do not want to leave their home under any circumstances.

Anna returned to her native Saltivka in May. She looks disturbed but ready to tell her story and even show her flat.

“How does Saltivka live now?” I start with a general question to let the woman express herself freely.

“It seems like life returns here. Some people came back from the evacuation. We returned from Western Ukraine ourselves.” Anna describes how tough it is to leave home and to be displaced without any idea of what can happen to your city and your house. She pauses, and I can hear the tension in her voice. I read between the lines: Kharkiv is healing its wounds. People try to do the same, step by step.

“I am sorry, Anna.” I look into her eyes to show that my words are not just formal and empty. “My mom is Anna, too. It is a great name!”

She smiles. My goal is achieved. She continues. “In the summer, they renewed public transit in our district. Groceries and markets are open as well. Not too bad, you know, not too bad...” She looks around and pauses her glance at another damaged building. Not too bad...

We climb the stairs to the sixth floor of her building. The elevator, of course, does not work. Only electricity is present in the house. Heating lines were damaged by shelling.

“Our family lives in one room now. I heat the room with the electric heater. And we bring water from a nearby spring.” We enter the flat, and I understand why they live in one

room together. The fire has burned the furniture, and the walls are covered in smoke. “Our house burned five days ago. We thought there would be nothing left.”

I do not know what to say back. “Do you plan to stay here for winter?” I finally ask.

“Yeah, we plan to stay. I don’t want to go anywhere. At home, even the walls help,” Anna concludes.

After the interview, I feel exhausted. I flop into a chair in my tiny room and stare at the dusty wooden table. I take a pen and notebook out of my backpack (how old-fashioned) and dive into today's notes. I must intertwine bare facts with tearing-soul-apart impressions; I have to catch thoughts before they freeze. Kharkiv, the city of students. Kharkiv, the city of great architecture. I met this city today. The city of suffering. The city of destroyed buildings and dreams. A page quickly becomes black with my handwriting, reminding me of the tragic black soot on the buildings I saw today. How to escape from the closed cage of pain? There is no answer. Just write.

Kharkiv to Zaporizhzhia. Memories and Thoughts.

It feels like I am always on the road, on my way from city to city. In just one day, life was divided into before and after. I am in between two worlds. I miss my home.

I close my eyes and see summer. The Sea of Azov shines under the bright sun. The sound of waves soothes me. Cheeky seagulls move in the sand like they own the beach. I jump into the salty, cool water and swim. The sea is my home.

My native Berdyans'k is full of tourists in the summer. It is quiet and calm in the autumn. The sea is special during the winter, and the city centre looks irresistibly beautiful in the spring.

How does it look now? Berdyans'k looks ugly with the Russian flags on the streets. It has been almost a year since my city of sea and seagulls was occupied. There is no freedom of speech and no human rights left on the land invaded by Russian soldiers. My Sea of Azov is not safe to swim freely because of the mines they put there, and the beach is empty. Whenever I have time, I look at old pictures and try to remember. Memory is everything I have, after all. I look out the window.

This highway looks better than the previous one. I still can see some houses without shutters, dark buildings, and no people around. I turn my head to the right, where a burnt car remains. The owners did not have time to take it somewhere. No wonder.

I am on my way. I can work in any place. I learn to write whenever I have such an opportunity. It makes a difference. It releases me and presents an unmistakably fresh image. Drive, road, drive. The chain of associations is on repeat in my head. So many other places to write about and to show people the ugliness of invasion and the beauty of freedom. How it is to fight and lose, to fight and win. Life has both sides; I have both sides. I write; I am on my way.

Zaporizhzhia, Southeastern Ukraine. October 6, 2022.

This industrial city knows how to greet autumn. Gold and red watercolours are reflected in the old Dnipro River. My favourite square is much emptier than what I remember. C'est la vie.

I go to the very top of the familiar five-story, Stalin Empire-style building. I open the door of a familiar flat and walk in. I used to come here so often. Those were happy, carefree days when I visited my friend to watch movies, laugh, and eat pizza. Now, these days are gone. My friend moved abroad with her family once all this started. I cannot blame her for it.

I see the same living room in white colours, the same pictures on the walls. Even her cello is in the corner. The flat looks abandoned and sad without its hospitable owners. I go to my friend's room, covered in posters and her drawings. I always called it "a bedroom with character." I open the window to let fresh air inside. The glass is crossed with tape in case of a shock wave. Just in case.

The night comes soon. I spend time editing and thinking. I have never been in this apartment on my own. We celebrated so many happy moments here. I spent last Christmas Eve with their family. The flat seems odd and awkward without Christmas, philosophical talks, and tasty food. It is a silent, lonely fall, and crows cry outside.

The next morning does not start with coffee. Those bastards invented another means of waking civilians up. The loud explosion breaks the silence and relative peace around 5 a.m. The air alarm starts wailing after the explosion. I get up rapidly to see the window has crashed. The house shakes. I am trying not to panic.

I wait for half an hour. I cannot do anything. I hear another explosion. It is close. My hands are shaking. Waiting and uncertainty are killing me. I decide to go outside and check what happened with my own eyes.

The first thing I hear outside is screams. Next, I smell smoke. I go out into the familiar arch and freeze in shock. The great historical building was torn apart. There is a gap between the two parts. People are trapped under the rubble. The rescuers are already here. I

stand at a screeching halt. I do not know how much time has passed. The world around me seems to be black and white.

Finally, I can move. I see a child near the buildings who looks as helpless as I am. Fortunately, he does not seem to have any injuries. I ask questions (where his parents are, where he lives). Together, we try to find his parents. I discover his name is Taras, and he likes books (young Shevchenko, I joke to myself). We find his mother, and I feel at least a bit of relief. One day feels like a month. I do not have any energy to write. Sleep. There will be another day.

Kherson, Southern Ukraine. November 9 to 11, 2022.

Good news always accompanies bad. They go hand in hand, like old friends. A huge crowd gathers in the central square, near the cinema proudly named “Ukraine.” Ukrainian flags and symbols are everywhere. People are chanting loudly, “Glory to Ukraine! Glory to the heroes! Glory to the nation! Death to the enemies!” They hug and kiss Ukrainian soldiers. A woman sits on top of a moving car and waves a Ukrainian flag. It is the third day of Kherson’s liberation. It had been occupied for 255 days.

It took one week for Russian soldiers to occupy this city. Dark times came. They shot civilians who just walked through the streets or drove their cars. They stole food, gadgets, and lavatory pans from shops. People stood in breadlines, and Russian tanks passed them. It was almost impossible to get out of the city. Pay 600 dollars or wait for volunteers. The road passed through the places of hostilities. There was a high chance that any car on the road could be shot with a machine gun.

The response followed soon after. Ukrainian symbols appeared around the city during the occupation to remind Russians they were not going to stay here for long. Before the occupation, Kherson was considered a pro-Russian city. People hear the Russian language and glue labels. There is a long history full of tragedies most of them prefer to ignore. During the occupation, citizens of this port city proved to be true patriots of their country. Kherson is Ukraine. The first weeks of the occupation were noted by rallies. One was special because of a brave man who mounted a Russian armoured personnel carrier as it went along the main street. It reminds me of the motto “Be brave like Ukraine.” What happened to this man after? A lot of men were taken and forced to fight on the enemy’s side. Hundreds of children were taken to Russia. They were forced to live there and support the idea of the “Russian World.” Children were turned into tools for propaganda. It hurts.

I cannot stop taking notes and pictures. In contrast to recent events, bright happiness rises in the air today. People tell their stories. They cry, they laugh. They are true, sincere,

and genuine. These brave citizens hid Ukrainian flags under the tiles in their houses and now take them out again and show them to the whole world, “We are Ukrainians, and we are proud of it.”

Kyiv, North-Central Ukraine. December 31, 2022.

Downtown Kyiv looks so unusual without huge crowds, bright, welcoming lights everywhere, and a prominent Christmas tree. Anyway, I am happy to see my friends after a long apart. The girls look the same but different. We all became older over the past year. We head to a tiny flat in the suburbs.

This time, it is a celebration in “dancing in the dark” style. And it's not our decision. Blackouts are constant. It is a fortune wheel. The power is out almost all the time. We count the days marking when we last had electricity. We light the candles, and the magnificent smell of needles reminds us of the upcoming New Year. The mood of celebration enters this cozy living room where my closest friends have gathered. We share stories, laugh, and put on classic Christmas songs. “*War is over if you want it,*” Yoko Ono sings, “*War is over. Happy Christmas.*”

I go out to buy groceries. There is always something to buy for the New Year's Eve table right before dinner. The air alarm starts. Moms with strollers continue their slow walks. Acquaintances who accidentally met each other still talk. Nothing special. It has become so ordinary. The alarm has taken root in our daily routines.

I return to the flat, and we hear loud explosions. Firecrackers? Fireworks? Is it a New Year's greeting from Russians? Is it how to say “Happy New Year” in Russian? “Let's shoot civilians on New Year's Eve”?

We prepare traditional Olivier salad. My hands act mechanically. Boil eggs and potatoes. Chop pickles and cooked sausage. Chop boiled eggs and potatoes. Mash everything and, of course, add mayo! The taste of my New Year is ready.

No one can ruin this New Year for me. There is always something special in waiting for chimes, decorating a Christmas tree, and making a wish. This year is different; there is no balance between grief and happiness. I am afraid to think about the future. There is only one wish possible. I do not lose hope. My name is Vira, and it means “faith.”

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