# Selected Poems by Contemporary Ukrainian Writers**[[1]](#footnote-1)**

## Poems by Vasyl Holoborodko (1945-)

### I PICK UP MY FOOTPRINTS

I stoop to pick up my footprints,

somebody seeing me might think

I’m gathering mushrooms,

healing herbs,

or flowers into a bunch,

but no—

I collect my footprints,

my traces everywhere

I walked for many years:

Here are the footprints I left while herding sheep on the steppe.

Here, I took this path to school,

and these are my steps from my route to work.

“I’m gathering my footprints here

so that strangers won’t trample them,”

I tell anyone who’s curious.

(Epiphany:

a footprint is—

a symbol, by definition, of:

“something rooted in the past”)

In my mind, I slip my footprints

between the pages—

now whenever I read a book,

I chance upon an old footprint:

I study it for a long time,

the footprint I left as a child

walking beneath a cherry tree.

All the footprints gathered so far,

an entire footstep herbarium in books—

if I put them all in one row,

their path wouldn’t lead me home.

*Translated from Ukrainian by Svetlana Lavochkina*

in *Words for War* pp. 24-25

## Poems by Ivan Malkovych (1961-)

cf. [poetryinternational.com/nl/poets-poems/poets/poet/102-5521\_Malkovych](http://poetryinternational.com/nl/poets-poems/poets/poet/102-5521_Malkovych)

### BIRD’S ELEGY

children

are most like birds

brothers to angels

they still haven’t learned to fly

safely fluttering about in their nests

chirping revealed in their voices

you remember of course children’s

puzzling passion: burying birds

beneath earth and constructing

a make-shift cross at the head of a grave

(as if in the frozen bird’s mound they created

a sanctuary for their own bird-like spirits)

………

but remember the dilated pupils

those eyes wide with grief

for the bird—then isn’t the madness

of cruelty lessened in children—and tenderness

suddenly and stealthily streams into what

we call the soul—this is the greatest moment

when an angel becomes a person—

achieving perfection…

ask your friends then let them ask

to your amazement you will

comprehend the number

of birds’ graves filled by the hands

of children—in other words how much

tenderness should exist on earth—so tell me

where does it go? why doesn’t it grow with us?

why is it given to everyone only once

and only a handful to the soul?

so all masons that inhabit the vertebrae

stubbornly lift our bones

raising our heart higher and higher

(as if our heart could see further)

………

through the years only this inconsolable sadness

limitless sadness with the eyes of children

that slips into us—slowly but steadfastly

substitutes itself for our ruined soul—

fills it and immediately reigns on its own

over our quiet hearts

………

every time in testament

we leave a sadder soul

more alone more despondent

become the generations of

people

birds

trees

*translated by Olena Jennings*

in *The White Chalk of Days* pp. 224-225

### THE VILLAGE TEACHER’S LESSON

This may not be the most essential of things,

but you, o child,

are called upon to defend with your tiny palms

the fragile little candle of the letter “ ï ”[[2]](#footnote-2),

and also,

stretched out on your tiptoes,

to protect the small crescent moon

of the letter “Є”[[3]](#footnote-3)

which was carved out of the sky

along with a tiny bit of thread.

Because they say, o child,

that our language is like a nightingale’s song.[[4]](#footnote-4)

And they are right.

But remember,

that one day

the time may come,

when our language

will not be remembered

by even the smallest nightingales.

That is why you cannot depend

only on nightingales

child.

*Translated by Mark Andryczyk*

in *The White Chalk of Days* p. 230

### \*\*\*

The black parachute of anxiety grows

in your chest and opens up—and clenches so much

that it squeezes your heart through your throat…

Out of the shell of the body little brother Brutus

breakfasts on my soul (on purpose even

using a tiny silver spoon); you are tasty, little Ivan.

Bloody ants. Sweet briar. A slaughterhouse. Lechery.

I close my eyes—it grows dark in my head,

the light disappears: from the depth the wicked

sickle of the moon turns silver. Above your ear. Somewhere here.

*translated by Michael M. Naydan*

in *The White Chalk of Days* p. 233

### THE MAN

He puts on a jester’s mask—

they recognize him.

He dresses in the robe of a merciless judge—

they implore:

“Stop it, you can’t fool us.”

He changes into a fox—

they yell:

“We recognized you long ago.

Enough.”

He wraps himself in Don Juan’s cloak—

they laugh:

“Wrong style.”

He stretches on a chameleon’s mask—

and tears off that façade himself:

comical

lost man—

he can’t understand

that every mask

has a slit

for eyes.

*Translated by Olena Jennings*

in *The White Chalk of Days* p. 235

## Poems by Marjana Savka (1973-)

\*\*\*

We wrote poems

about love and war,

so long ago

we could have gone grey three times over—

in the days before we had war,

it seemed love would never burn out

and pain was in the offing

Yes, there *were* wounds there,

not just cracks in a chocolate heart,

but they managed to heal

and we went on living.

It wasn’t mocking,

or some deliberate game.

We read the signs

on palimpsests of old posters,

on the walls of blackened buildings,

in coffee grounds.

What changed, my sister?

Our hot-air balloon

turned into a lead ball.

The metaphor – died.

\*\*\*

january pulled him apart

february knocked him off his feet

spitting blood into the snow

he waited for his march -

but didn't know what shore

he'd be able to cling to

god, what a calendar -

blow after blow

his heart scarred

by such weird months:

Deathcember, Sorrowtober, or Bittertember

where even the trees grow

upside down, crowns up into roots

so young he barely lived

yet dying his death fully

then one day

the war died with him

and he was born again in may

amidst the grasses

or maybe he didn't really die

but just lay in the grass

under a wide open sky

under the sky everyone's alive

*Translated from the Ukrainian by Sibelan Forrester and*

*Mary Kalyna with Bohdan Pechenyak*

in *Words for War* 128, 130

## Poems by Ostap Slyvynsky (1978-)

### LOVERS ON A BICYCLE

She rides sitting on the frame, like a bird

perched on a branch, puffed-up, mature,

with two clenched

knees that signal sweetly

to the truck drivers passing by.

Him we don't see clearly, but we hear

his flask clanking against the seat with every

pedal stroke. He's humming a ditty,

where did he pick it up, which war zone? No one's heard it here.

She holds a handful of hazelnuts and feeds him

without turning - she passes them back and he

catches them with his mouth, which resembles

a fringed brown patch.

On the way back from the station she'll be alone,

looking like a paper doll,

dry, straight, two-dimensional,

used to making do with this love, as she

is used to making a meal out of nothing -

a dash of tea, a couple of potatoes.

She will ride through the first bout of rain,

reeling with her feet the over-exposed film - an endless

blank frame, where he runs into the living room

and spins her in his arms.

So it goes, this empty language of love, bargaining with hope,

like a one-legged chair with a stove: let me be

at least until midday. I won't

live through the night.

### A SCENE FROM 2014

"For years I would wake up

when he returned from his night shift, around three or four

in the morning. He showered for a long time

and went to bed just as black, coal-like,

almost invisible

in the dark. Did he simply dissolve one night?"

We're silent.

In a moment she bursts into laughter: some kid

runs past us, trips

and falls - right on top of the fiour sack that

he's carrying,

and his sneakers fly up high

in the heart of a little white cloud –

so white, this explosion,

she says, so quiet.

### ORPHEUS

But really this whole story

has a backstory, and it is about

a kid who was afraid of water.

But he would still go with everyone to the beach and clamber up

the long rock,

and when the boys jumped into the sea, he stayed behind,

standing there, skinny and lost,

and watched them grow distant,

their heads in ruffles of splashes,

with the single hope -

that none of them look back.

And then he would head for the nearby

buildings, slashing thistle heads, helpless,

different from everyone else here -

resembling a copper string, accidentally

weaved into a basket.

You know this kid?

You know at what point

music comes out of anger, like a butterfly

emerging out of a frostbitten cocoon?

You know where he was until morning, when

his parents found him in the grass, sweaty,

with clenched teeth?

And tell me this: how much anger can a poem hold?

Just enough to

drown out the sirens?

*Translated from the Ukrainian by*

*Anton Tenser and Tatiana Filimonova*

In *Words for War* pp. 134-135, 144, 145

## Poems by Anastasia Afanasieva (1982-)

### \*\*\*

she says

we don't have the right kind of basement in our building

I had to leave, no one can hide in there

we couldn't leave for a whole week straight

men elbowed us out

we were weaker, there was no room for us

in the past we thought about nice furniture

home improvements and such

now we think

our basement doesn't work

it won't protect us, it'll collapse on us

it's worse than sitting outside

we dragged our mattresses and pillows onto the floor

so that we could fall down as soon as it all starts

we fell down and lay there

my husband stayed behind

someone had to stay home

otherwise there'd be no home to come back to

there may be nowhere to go back to anyway

he watches the apartment

so no one moves in and takes our things

he calls once a week from some high-rise

where he magically gets cell reception

he says a few words and hangs up

I am alive

call back next Saturday

when a four-wheeler with a mortar

passed down the street

we didn't ask who are you

whose side-are you on

we fell down to the floor and lay there

on our way to the market

the bullets whistled over our heads

we arrived here with a single-bag

there wasn't enough room for people, let alone things

she speaks

as the August air

enters the room

in the yard

my coworkers are gathering overripe plums

last year those were perfect

this time around

we missed our harvest

now it's too late

I listen, and I don't know

if heaven 'and hell really exist

they must be separated by a journey

in a-minivan, packed full of people

where plums ripen in silence

where people fall to the ground

and we're experiencing these moments

after death

*Translated from the Russian by*

*Oksana Maksymchuk and Max Rosochinsky*

in *Words for War* 2-3

### SHE SPEAKS

1

I'm fed up with my own fear

Tired of living in a pigsty

Garbage trucks don't come anymore

They fear gunfire

So much trash

It's just not right

Rusty cans

Brown rusty cans on white

Snow

Who will take them away if not us?

Are we supposed to live in a landfill?

We walk across the field like living targets

Picking up cans,

Putting them in trash bags,

Rusty cans

Wedding bands

Vests

Boxes

The crows' black bodies

These bodies our own

Scattered remains

Fed up with my own fear

Fear also reaches some kind of threshold After which something new begins

A dance with rusty cans in a white field

Housecleaning

Laundry

Snuggling in our sleep

Up to a certain moment

When time flares up like paper

Then crumbles into bits of ash

But there's no more fear

Never again will there be

Fear

2

She speaks, lit by winter sunshine,

The picture smears, disappears

Now only static remains,

Her words peck me like crows,

Peck at my heart, fed up with my own fear

Fed up with my own fear

Fed up with my own fear,

In a field

Half-eaten

By shell craters

As if by smallpox

She stands

With a shovel

And a bag

Full of trash

An interview

A blue microphone

Fed up with my own fear

Life beyond fear

Fearlessness on the verge of death

*Translated from the Russian by Olga Livshin and Andrew Janco*

in *Words for War* pp. 8-10

### \*\*\*

1

That's my home.

There was a bridge here.

Now there isn't.

That's my home.

That's my yard.

It's still here.

Where a bridge stood,

there's a river.

No more bridge.

Where there was once a pass,

now there's a line.

We live here,

on the line.

In the devil's belly,

that's where.

2

I came back

Barely made it

Took a while to get everyone out

I have a big family

My parents are old

Then there are mv

Brother my sister my

pregnant daughter

I got them all out

Out of that damned house

Just imagine

There's a river

There was a bridge there

Now it's destroyed

On the one side of the river these people

On the other side, those

Whoever they are

Between them, our house

It took me so many trips

There and back

For each person

I barely got them out

A big family

These on the one side, those on the other

The house stands like a shadow

As though lead passes through the walls

Or the house contorts its beams

So that it can dodge the hail of bullets

It twists left and right

What it took me, a woman

To get all of them out

You can't imagine

One by one

Right from the belly of the beast

Coming back every time,

Diving into all of that,

Not knowing

If there will be a way

But I got them all out

And now my daughter

Yes, the pregnant one

Says she wants to return

She's headed back tomorrow

She has someone there

A man she loves

See, he stayed back there

And love, well

You know how love goes

With those young people

You know how it is for them

Anything for love

*Translated from the Russian by Olga Livshin and Andrew Janco*

in *Words for War* pp. 14-16

### \*\*\*

Can there be poetry after:

Yasynuvata, Horlivka, Savur-Mohyla, Novoazovsk

After:

Krasnyi-Luch, Donetsk, Luhansk

After

Sorting bodies in repose from the dying

The hungry from those on a stroll

Long after

Poetry devolves to "autistic babbling"

Lips mating in the darkness

I ask

Half-awake

Is poetry possible

At the moment history stirs

Once its steps

Reverberate through every heart?

Impossible to speak of anything else,

Talking becomes impossible.

As I write this

Very close to me

Every hope is being ended.

*Translated from the Russian by*

*Kevin Vaughn and Maria Khotimsky*

in *Words for War* p. 17

## Poems by Kateryna Kalytko (1982-)

### \*\*\*

They won't compose any songs, because the children of their children,

hearing about this initiation, will jump out of their beds at 4 a.m., frightened

by the echo in their spinal cords. Separate parts of death

cannot form a whole: a quarter of fate or of body is always missing.

The map is worn at the folds.

The doors of the house rust hopelessly, you are on night watch.

At dawn saliva becomes poison in every mouth.

All these piles of ashes still have names

and they keep repeating their persistent calls

sharp like panicked bird shrieks, too extreme for a song

about a field torn apart by a hail of bullets,

about the *chornozem* that God will rub off in his hand afterwards.

### APRIL 6

You are not just sleeping with this one man, but with his whole life,

and sometimes it wakes you up and snatches him out of your arms.

For, you see, war often comes along and lies down between you

like a child

afraid to be left alone in the dark.

War, he says, involves many numbers, let's see -

two relatives equal one sack of bones,

one thousand three hundred ninety-five days of siege,

three packages of humanitarian aid: butter, canned goods,

powdered milk, three bars of soap.

Four armed men come for you,

show you their orders and then escort you out into the night.

During the walk across the city

you hear missiles fiying over your head - twice.

... Five times they take you out of the barracks

to a ditch where forty-three lay rotting

and each time you think: I will finally die

and tell God that it was a lame joke.

But they throw you face down into the dirt

and take their sweet time pressing a gun to your head.

Since then, he says, I don't like to dream,

these kinds of memories, they aren't fitting for a man.

You run through the woods, they shoot at your back,

a bullet hits your thigh but all you feel is this dirt on your face.

That's when a leafiess tree of pain grows

in your chest, pulsating.

And I don't respond because what do you say to that

I just keep wiping the dirt off his face, over and over again,

even while he's sleeping,

even while he's away.

*Translated from the Ukrainian by*

*0lena Jennings and Oksana Lutsyshyna*

In *Words for War* pp. 62-64

## **Poems by Lyuba Yakimchuk** (1985-)

### poems from APRICOTS OF THE DONBAS

### *THE FACE OF COAL*

With eyes sea blue

And hair flaxen yellow

Faded a little

It’s not a flag

But my father

Standing in a pit

Water up to his knees

His face like coal—

With the imprint

Of an antediluvian field horsetail

Trampled by years

The sea hardens like salt

The grass hardens like coal

and my father turns like feather grass

Gray

He’s a man

And men don’t cry—

So they say in the the ad

His cheeks are like trenches

Chopped up by the pit

And the coal taken

From my father’s face

Burned in Dobas bonfires

And ovens

And somewhere high up

A pit heap stand

Snarling

Like a dragon

Like a sphinx

Defending its Tutankhamun

And it’s only I who knows

That the pit heap in the middle of the steppe

Is nothing but corks from bottles

That my father drank

And ashes of cigarettes

That he smoked

*Translated by Svetlana Lavochkina with Michael Naydan* in *White Chalk of Days* pp. 322-323

### *MY GRANDMOTHER’S FAIRY TALE*

When tears

Turn to rock salt

When the sea in the stomach

Turns into a coal mine

Mammoths die

And hearts are born on the sleeves

They swap mettle for liquot

And are hired for labor

Wait!

This coal mine will swallow you

This ebony beauty

Of stone

Maybe it was for her that the Cumans carved statues

Unshaven like miners in the steppes,

Wait!

She’ll give birth to a dead sea

Her waist in not sixty centimeters

Her breasts droop to her belly

Don’t go inside

You may not return

Like the child of a mother

Who doesn’t want to give birth

He plunged into her once

And came back with tears in his hands—

He plunged into her—a second time

And came back with salt in his hands

He plunged into her—a third time…

And hands full of coals

He was pulled down to the bottom

Of the underground sea

Apricot trees stretched their hands to the sky

Apricots put on hard hats, yellow-hot

and now when you eat apricots

You find coals in their core

This is the end of the tale

*Translated by Svetlana Lavochkina with Michael Naydan* in *White Chalk of Days* pp. 328-329

### DECOMPOSITION

all is quiet on the eastern front

well, I’ve had it up to here

at the moment of death, metal gets hot

and people get cold

don’t talk to me about *Luhansk[[5]](#footnote-5)*

it’s long since turned into—*hansk*

*Lu* had been razed

to the crimson pavement

my friends are hostages

and I can’t reach them, I can’t do *netsk*

to pull them out of the basements

from under the rubble

yet here you are, writing poems

ideally slick poems

high-minded gilded poems

beautiful as embroidery

there’s no poetry about war

just decomposition

only letters remain

and they all make a single sound—rrr

Pervomaisk has been split into *pervo* and *maisk*

into particles in primeval flux

war is over once again

yet peace has not come

and where’s my *deb, alts, evo*?

no poet will be born there again

no human being

I stare into the horizon

it has narrowed into a triangle

sunflowers didp their heads in the field

black and dried out, like me

I have gotten so very old

no longer Lyuba

just—ba

*Translated by Oksana Maksymchuk and Max Rosochinsky*

in *White Chalk of Words* pp. 333-334

1. Handout compiled by S. Lubkemann Allen, Professor of Comparative Literature, SUNY Brockport, 9/2022. The poems come from two recent anthologies of Ukrainian poetry written during and in response to the Russian invasion and war in Ukraine dating back to 2014, expanded in 2022: *The White Chalk of Days*, compiled and edited by Mark Andryczyk (published as part of the Contemporary Ukrainian Literature Series by the Kennan Institute/Columbia Harriman Institute, Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2017/2018) and *Words for War: New Poems from Ukraine*, edited by Oksana Maksymchuk and Max Rosochinsky (published by the Ukrainian Research Institute at Harvard University with support from the National Endowment from the Humanities, Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2017). See <https://www.whitechalkofdays.com/> and <https://www.wordsforwar.com/> for brief biographies of the poets, further poems in the original and English translation, and commentary from translators Some of these poems are included in <https://www.poetryinternationalonline.com/ukraine-feature-words-for-war/?fbclid=IwAR3502c4CNfUulorlCBu-mdCWrVU_-AHGUSVKXqHJYVFCxLzcSrKC_ymRsA>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ukrainian letter Yi (Ї ї; italics: *Ї ї*), a character of the [Cyrillic script](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyrillic_script), is derived from the Greek letter [iota](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iota) with [diaeresis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greek_diacritics" \l "Diaeresis" \o "Greek diacritics). It was the initial variant of the Cyrillic letter [Іі](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dotted_I_(Cyrillic)" \o "Dotted I (Cyrillic)), which saw change from two dots to one in 18th century, possibly inspired by similar Latin letter i. Later two variants of the letter separated to become distinct letters in the Ukrainian alphabet. It is used in the [Ukrainian alphabet](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ukrainian_alphabet), the [Pannonian Rusyn alphabet](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pannonian_Rusyn_language#Writing_system), and the [Prešov Rusyn alphabet](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rusyn_language" \l "The_Carpathian_Rusyn_Alphabets" \o "Rusyn language) of Slovakia, where it represents the [iotated](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iotated" \o "Iotated) vowel sound /ji/, like the pronunciation of ⟨yea⟩ in "**yea**st". As the historical variant of the Cyrillic Іі it represented either /i/ (as **i** in *pizza*) or /j/ (as **y** in *yen*). In various [romanization systems](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romanization_of_Ukrainian) of [Ukrainian](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ukrainian_language), *ї* is represented by Latin letters *i* or *yi* (word-initially), *yi*, *ji*, or even [*ï*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%8F). In Ukrainian, the letter was introduced as part of the *Zhelekhivka* [orthography](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ukrainian_alphabet), in Yevhen Zhelekhivsky's Ukrainian–German dictionary (2 volumes, 1885–86). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ukrainian letterYe (Є є; italics: *Є* *є*), a character of the [Cyrillic script](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyrillic_script), is a separate letter in the [Ukrainian alphabet](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ukrainian_alphabet) (8th position since 1992, 7th position before then), the [Pannonian Rusyn alphabet](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pannonian_Rusyn_language#Writing_system), and both the [Carpathian Rusyn alphabets](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rusyn_language#The_Carpathian_Rusyn_Alphabets); in all of these, it comes directly after [Е](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%95). Until the mid-19th century, Є/є was also used in [Romanian](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romanian_Cyrillic_alphabet) and [Serbian](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serbian_language). Other modern Slavonic languages may use Є/є shapes instead of Е/е for decorative purposes. Then, the letter is usually referred to by the older name Yest (which also refers to the conventional [Ye](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ye_(Cyrillic))). If the two need to be distinguished, the descriptive name Broad E is sometimes used (in contrast with "Narrow E"). In Ukrainian, Є/є commonly represents the sound /je/ or /jɛ/ like the pronunciation of ⟨ye⟩ in "**ye**s". Ukrainian Ye is romanized as ⟨je⟩, ⟨ê⟩, or even ⟨e⟩. (from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ukrainian_Ye>) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Though the White Stork is the national bird of Ukraine, the Nightingale (*Luscinia*; Ukrainian соловейко/soloveiko) is commonly invoked in folk songs and folklore as “creator of sweet sounds, builder of homes, harbinger of spring” and *soloveiko* is a term that connotes intimacy, endearment. A small Eurasian song bird, nightingales are pervasive in Ukraine: the wester or southern nightingale (*Luscinia megarhynchos*) is found in the Crimea, Transcarpathia, Polisia, and western regions of the forest-steppe; the easter or common nightingale (*Luscinia luscinia*) is found throughout Ukraine; and the blue-throated nightingale *(Luscinia svecica*) is found everywhere except the Crimea, Carpathian mountains and steppe. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Luhans’k, Donets’k, Pervomais’k, and Debal’tsveo (Deval’tseve) are cities in Ukraine’s war-torn Donbas region. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)