

I Spin Birdsong Into Story

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“Flitting from one splintered fence post to another, bathing in the rainwater’s glint like it was a mirror to some other universe where things were more acceptable, easier than the place I lived.”

—From Ada Limón’s “The year of the goldfinches”

As a writer, I tell stories about people. People who are really birds that know to begin their migration west. People who packed their nests neatly into suitcases, grabbed their babies by their hands and left their mother countries behind. They flew not knowing what would be on the other side. But they flew anyway.

My parents are the birds. The birds that worked and worked and struggled. And like birds carry survival in their beaks, I carry my family’s history. I couldn’t grow these awkward wings, couldn’t navigate this flight without my *semya*.

I carry the image of my father’s exhausted eyes after a night spent mopping floors. I carry his yawn as he wakes up three hours later for his job at the steel company. I carry my mother’s sobs when she hangs up the phone; Chernobyl’s radiation planted its roots in another one of our family members.

When the nuclear power station exploded in April 1986, it sent radioactive clouds into the air, which spanned the Soviet Union in its entirety, along with much of Europe. Ukraine was suddenly the

country that was home to the worst nuclear catastrophe the world had ever seen. The World Health Organization says more than half a million civilians and military personnel from across the Soviet Union were drafted to clean up the nuclear fallout mess, many suffering painful deaths from radiation sickness. In Ukraine, if you were a father to at least one, you were sent to Chernobyl. Had my family not hidden my father, Michael, so well, he would’ve been one of them. I carry this story that shaped my family and other Ukrainians, though it sometimes feels disjointed, like the limbs of children born after the accident.

I carry superstitions — safety pins to ward off the evil eye, sit-downs before long journeys that apparently guarantee safety, glances in the mirror after returning home for an item in fear of being cursed with bad luck. These were passed down from grandmother Valentina, great-grandmother Nadya and great-great-grandmother Galina. I carry the ringing of broken English: the rolling R’s, the excessive inflection, the sometimes forgotten articles ‘a’ and ‘the,’ the irony of hailing from *the* Ukraine. I carry this

everywhere, all the time — in my dreams, to interviews, on the drive home when there’s time to think. I have not learned to put it down. I’m not sure I want to.

In August 1993, my family left Znamenka, a city of about 23,000 in central Ukraine, though it feels much smaller when everyone seems to know everyone. The city is known for its railway station, which is still thriving today. When my parents lived there, many people worked in repair yards and metalworking factories, as well as radio and military plants, but the government closed everything. People left in search of jobs elsewhere. My parents, paternal grandmother Tatyana and my siblings — Kristina, 9, and Eugene, 12, — came to Toledo, Ohio, where my uncle and aunt had settled about three years earlier. They were part of a wave of refugees fleeing after the dissolution of the Soviet Union left their country in crisis, desperate for its own identity.

When Ukraine gained its independence in 1991, my mother with the beautiful name, Irena, says people were hopeful. They were eager for the standard of living to improve, for the growth to come.

brother

sister



Ukrainians were ready to build their country into one as successful as its neighbors.

The opposite happened. Food shortages struck. My mother says long lines wound through small grocery stores, if you could call them that; people would wait two hours for bread. It was a rarity for the average Ukrainian family to eat meat once a month, unless they raised their own livestock. Some days, the store shelves were practically empty. Small-townners like my family members lived off the land. Rural areas meant gardens, meant canning their summer harvests for the winter, meant windowsills stacked with glass jars of pickled tomatoes and homemade jams, meant survival. The country's flag represents its agriculture, the blue sky and golden fields of wheat. In big cities like Kyiv, where her cousins lived, that possibility didn't exist, and they drove down to collect food. A typical lunch people took to work to hold them over for the day was *moloko* and a *bulka* — milk and a sweet bun.

"People hoped, waited," my mother says about the early '90s.

"They're still waiting."

The economy was crumbling, the government was corrupt, the politics were in turmoil and people were sick and poor. "Government officials were only concerned with stuffing their pockets with money," she tells me. Another reason they left was to avoid the likely possibility that my brother would've had to join the army at 18. My parents predict that if they would've stayed, Eugene would've been drafted for the Second Chechen War. When I visited Kirovograd, Ukraine, (renamed Kropyvnytskyi in 2016) about a decade ago, musicians were playing on the street, raising money for young men injured in battle.

When the economy began to diminish, so did the people. They turned to heavier drinking and drug use. Illnesses from Chernobyl were killing them. This poor quality of life has continued to tear Ukraine apart, even 26 years after my parents left.

When my mother had me in 1997, she wasn't yet a U.S. citizen. She and my

father are the hardest-working people I know. They spent the four years before my arrival doing just that. They were working on their English, and at the same time, working as babysitters and dishwashers for meager pay. All of this to save up for a car — in 1994, they finally bought a white Ford Taurus — to get to their crummy jobs and to get the kids to school. They were working to pay back Jewish Family Services for their plane tickets and the rent they covered for the first 90 days. They were working to be Americans.

And there I was, born on this starry soil, an automatic American.

When people finally get to know me and learn that I speak Russian, I straighten my posture a little bit and say, "Yeah, my parents are from Ukraine." I smile with my whole face when I say this, my cheeks blooming with pride like the poppies that grow in the Ukrainian countryside. I smile because they are the same as my mother's. Then sometimes, this guilt, this reminder of privilege, this feeling of otherness settles in. I'm like some bird stuck in migration, unsure of which direction to go. Across the Atlantic, to the motherland that isn't my own, to *Gvardeyskiy Pereulok*? Or here, but forward, into this all-American sky? Can one me be home, and another me be in another home?

I remember when I visited my parents' old country and met their friends from when they were young. I remember my father introduced me as the third child (some don't know of my existence because of the wide age gap between my siblings and me) and his friend responded, "Oh, the American? Can she speak our language?" And I remember how I fumed. There was a longing to belong with the others. Like one of my mother's favorite musicians, Elena Vaenga, sings, "*По одной реке плывем, да лодки разные*" — we float along the



same river, but we are in different boats. I felt a confusion surrounding the life that was given to me with such ease, an ease that sometimes feels too painless, and I wonder if it's really mine to have.

Journalist-me walks through life looking for answers to difficult questions. I search for facts, things I know are for sure. And then I think,

My parents raised me to work hard, but I know I'll never have to work as hard as they did.

I have no facts to back this up. Some things I just know.

Around four months after my family arrived, a retired Toledo Blade journalist would show up at 9 a.m. every Sunday to help them with their English. He (my parents cannot remember his name) would read passages from Writer's Digest to my parents, and they would read the words back to him. My mother laughs as she remembers this and says she felt like a small, babbling child just learning her first words. Who knew 20 years later I would be doing the same with Akron's immigrants and refugees.

Poet-me spent a semester at Kent State teaching English through poetry workshops at the International Institute of Akron. I worked with people from Afghanistan, Brazil, Bhutan, Burundi, Jordan and Morocco, all with varying language skills — people like my parents.

Opposite journalism, contemporary poetry encourages free thinking and rule breaking. Non-native English speakers have unique ways of pronouncing and pairing words. Now that I'm older, I'm realizing I grew up hearing that. I corrected "Haw are you?" to "How are you?" and "worm" to "warm" in text messages. I reminded my father he needed the word "do" in the phrase, "What you mean?"

Then they spoke to one another in Ukrainian, which I can understand but pronounce in a fragmented way like they do with English. Ukrainian is more melodic than Russian. More songbird. More let me say it with beauty. All these years, my parents and I have taught each other to listen, say it like me and write it down. What I once saw as incorrect words and mispronunciations spilling from the mouths of my mother and father, I am now seeing as poetry. Imagine if all of America saw it this way.

"How can there be belief / when the people don't want to open the heart wide

open," wrote Fatima Mardi, a Moroccan immigrant. She wrote of Americans who don't welcome newcomers like her during a lesson I crafted after Nikki Giovanni's poem, "No Heaven."

Journalist-me is drawn to stories of struggle, stories of overcoming. I think this version of me is trying to get closer to the life my parents lived before I existed. So I search for my parents in the people I interview. I listen for the language of birds.

During the fall of my junior year, I got to know Usama Halak, a 54-year-old Syrian refugee. He was a student in a poetry workshop taught by my professors and peers, where he wrote about the 12 years he spent in the notorious Tadmur Prison, even though he was innocent. Syrian government security forces came looking for his brother, Ahmed, suspecting he was involved with a group protesting then-President Hafez al-Assad and the

dad's
sunglasses

dad



Some Russian words were mentioned in the essay. Here are their translations:

Semya — family

Gvardeyskiy Pereulok — the street name of my mother's childhood home

Borscht — soup made of beets (which give it the red color), other vegetables, cabbage and meat

Pirozhki — baked or fried bun filled with potatoes, meat, cheese or a combination

Blinchiki — small, buttermilk pancakes

Derybasivska — famous walkway in the heart of Odessa, Ukraine

Syrian government. When his brother wasn't home, they arrested Usama, 16 at the time, instead. In prison, he endured the worst torture and pain of his life.

I decided to write his life into a story. Usama and his wife, Hanadi, brought me coffee and chocolate cake when I visited their house. They smiled and looked into my eyes as I sipped and chewed and asked Usama to remember a time in his life he was trying to forget. Hanadi reminded me, for a moment, of my mother. Mom's questions vary every time I return home, but they always sound like some version of this: "Are you hungry?" "Have you eaten?" "I made *borscht* and *pirozhki* and *blinchiki*." I was raised to understand food is an expression of love. My mother's love is colossal.

When I was little, I remember hearing the phone conversations she was having in the next room with her own mother and grandmother an ocean away. They're gone now, and my mother cries as she plays back what Nadya told her: When the country was getting better, the new grocery store was like a museum of meats. She would weave through the aisles and look at the art, the shades of red, but she would never buy it because

who had money for art? Who, over there, had money for the thing that fills the belly and the void? My mother was always crying and sending money overseas for those kinds of things.

When I finished interviewing Usama at a Dunkin' Donuts in Akron, he lit a cigarette. He told me of how army planes polluted the sky and explosives rained down on his people. How his city, Aleppo, crumbled to pieces in front of him. How he sat among the rubble that was once his pharmacy. And how he says everywhere he goes — Turkey, Egypt, Akron — he tries to build something again.

For a brief moment, he reminded me of my father, who, too, cannot stop building a life for his family. Now that the kids are out of the house, my parents continue to grow their home and stretch their love, always tending to their five grandchildren. On breaks from building, Dad smokes. He has smoked since about 12 years old.

In my dream one night, I am in the passenger seat of my father's car. The smell of cigarettes and coffee waft through the air. We are driving to Odessa, Ukraine, where his father is from, as if we could get there by car. Then suddenly, I am younger, and we are walking the

port city streets, the cobblestone of *Derybasivska*. We are swimming in the frigid Black Sea. We are smelling the fresh fish women sell at the bazaar that stretches for miles along the coast. The dream is a rerun of my life. I was here before, and I want to go back.

When I set out to write, I choose stories that are not always good for me. What I mean is they are deeply felt and necessary. And stories that demand in this way are an expansion of emotional energy, a weight on the heart. With these stories, I hold my breath until they've been written. Then, and only then, can I set them down. Step away from these destructive, miraculous things. Feel fulfilled, like some writer-healer. Like some mother these people trusted to cradle their pain in my arms for a while and shush it to sleep. Like this is journalist-me and poet-me and *me*, like every bit of me. This essay, this outpouring of memory is me getting to know the truth that has been unraveling inside for 21 years. This is me pointing it up to the light and looking right through it. This is me learning to hold it. But when will I breathe?

