CONTENTS

PREFACE

Most of us in the Western world have little firsthand knowledge of war. Normally, we are not forced to face war, fight in a war, flee from war. *We* don't get tortured, see our homes and schools collapse, lose relatives and friends to war, spend months locked up in basements "because this is war." When we do get involved, as soldiers, journalists, or relief workers, we *go* to war or *get sent* to war – war does not come to us. Those of us who do not *go* and have not been to war are nevertheless aware of war, sometimes at a deep level. Yet this awareness is usually indirect: it requires inference. Like with a disease, we first encounter symptoms, these heralds of disruption reaching us from regions both intimate and strange. Even as we trace the tremors and the fevers back to the original cause, the source of the disturbance itself stays hidden from view. Many of us in the West have lived with wars for significant parts of our lives, wars that mostly remained out of sight. These hidden wars have become a part of us, shaping our minds, affecting the words, images, and concepts with which we think. The ways in which we create meaning have undergone shifts and mutations in an attempt to represent this new reality, outer as well as inner. Yet our words and sentences do not just describe or explain what there is. They are also traces of what is absent, what stays distant or remains hidden. *Words for War*, then, is not only an interpretative response to war—it is also one of the many effects of the war that had been endured. Like broken furniture and mutilated bodies, these poems are traces of what had happened, as well as evidence that it did really happen. They are a form of testimony, even if what they testify about is not ordinarily witnessed historical events but rather cognitive transformations and semiotic shifts experienced by people in liminal situations.

People living in the midst of war are never abstract "people," just as the war is never an abstract "war" for them. Equally, the voices collected in this volume do not belong to some abstract "poets." These words come from specific people who dwell in a specific place. The place happens to be one that we, the editors, call home, even if we no longer go home to it: Ukraine, which on our inner map includes Crimea. It was there, in Yalta, that we first met and fell in love, and for the next two years our romance unfolded between two Ukrainian strongholds of monocultural identity, Simferopol in Crimea and Lviv in Western

Ukraine. Over the years, we have learned to navigate the precarious semiotic landscapes of these two worlds. While our American friends thought that as a Russian and a Ukrainian, we are basically cultural twins, to our relatives and friends back home, ours was a marriage of hostile traditions, and a reconciliation of opposing worldviews. The equilibrium was a fragile one, and the very tensions we saw playing out in the public discussions would occasionally unfold in our own family. We would find ourselves exchanging the conflicting slogans—about memory, history, language, violence, justice—in raised voices, surprised by the hold they have on us. When the annexation of Crimea in 2014 was followed by the large-scale eruption of military conflict in the east of Ukraine, engulfing whole cities, we knew it wasn't just a matter of one vicious leader's opportunism—it was also about the people who sought salvation, ignorant of the price they would pay for it. Alienated, resentful, and desperate to be saved from a world they had stopped recognizing as their own, they were ripe for manipulation; schooled in distrust and cynicism in their cramped Soviet kitchens, they nevertheless believed their Russian-tuned TV sets promising them a special destiny and an imperial future. For us, *Words for War* started out as a form of therapy. We sought to patch together the pieces of this disintegrating world, with its dangerously sharp yet blurred edges, and to amplify voices that rang true amid the din of fake news, hate speech, jejune Facebook affirmations, and blank-faced propaganda.

Poets are not a lofty apolitical tribe whose only concern is their literary craft. Far from remaining blind to the world of strife and conflict they inhabit, they are often the ones most radically affected—and thus changed—by it. As historically, politically, and socially situated individuals, they are also agents of change. Their acts matter, as do their words. We often find ourselves looking at the poets' lives to interpret poems, and at poems to understand their lives. Some of the poets whose work we have included in this anthology have been actively involved in the war in the east of Ukraine as volunteers, reading to the soldiers at the front, collecting and distributing humanitarian aid to the people affected by the war. Others have been less directly involved, but no less directly affected, since chaos has a tendency to spread, to change the perceived norms of life and creep into previously peaceful contexts. One poet—Borys Humenyuk—is a soldier himself. As we write this

paragraph, we reflect on Borys' Facebook post from this morning: he hates meeting new people at the front, he said, because often when he calls them a few weeks later to say hello, no one picks up. War kills, and this changes experiences that are essential to us as social beings: of building connections, making friends. But war also causes other, more insidious types of harm to human relations. Many of the poets have lost relatives, finding themselves on different sides of the barricades; still more lost friends.

The war affects the whole population, but the way it affects poets warrants a special kind of attention. Through the practice of their art, poets are often uniquely sensitive to changes and shifts in how we, collectively, create meaning with words and images. In this, poets resemble well-crafted and finely tuned devices that register the relevant fluctuations with greater precision than the rest of us do. Because they work with language, it seems to happen almost automatically, involving little conscious reflection: the change in inputs simply leads to a change in outputs. As a result, even small changes register on their radars sooner, while great changes may lead to the destruction of the instrument of measurement altogether—just as looking directly at the sun can make an eye go blind. When confronted with excessive axiological shifts and intense borderline experiences, poets have sometimes found themselves unable to speak, and, in the most radical cases, unable to live.

To compare poets to measuring devices is not to deny them agency, or to repeat Heidegger's mystical insight that we do not speak language, but rather "language speaks us." Many poets are conscious of what it is they are striving to achieve: they have artistic goals and poetic projects, and they write for specific target audiences. However, poetry often requires something qualitatively different, an element of freedom. Poets describe the experience of writing as a kind of trance, involving letting go of oneself as an individual, giving up one's autonomy. Psychologists use the term "flow" to describe the intense absorption in one's work: experiments show that it involves an altered cognitive state, like falling in love or experiencing erotic arousal. There is a reason why the ancients—and more recently, the Romantics—talked of *inspiration*, of finding oneself inhabited by a being whose powers exceed one's own. It is never safe to assume identity between the "I" of the poem and the "I" of the poet. Poets often find that they don't just speak as themselves; sometimes they can't even recognize the voices they speak in. Because of their heightened sensitivity to

the reverberations of meaning in its different modalities, poets absorb more than can reasonably serve as a basis for a single individual identity—and this may lead them to project voices that could be contradictory, even immoral in the eyes of some of their readers. Their creative process reflects this all-embracing sensitivity, to the point that it may seem to amount to moral unscrupulousness or resemble a multiple personality disorder.

Revealing the cost of war is a case in point. The poets in this anthology often take on this task deliberately and self-consciously, attempting to fill out the lacunae formed by the official bureaucratic discourse. Yet accomplishing the task takes them beyond their individual perspective, and outside the scope of their explicit consciously adopted goals. The bureaucratic account of the costs of war offers a sense of mastery over the unfathomable. As we try to understand the scope of the tragedy, we find it comforting to focus on quantitative measures: the numbers of the dead, the wounded, the displaced. Poets shift our attention to the domain of the Self that survives, and the cost of its survival. One mode of survival involves the reconstitution of identity in response to symbolic changes. Like a jellyfish that takes on a tint, once submerged in tinted water; like a neuron in a lab that takes on a dye to enable the scientists to trace its connections—so a poet absorbs the changes and displays them in the body of her works. In "Decomposition," Lyuba Yakimchuk presents herself as exhausted and bled dry, suddenly an old woman, with just one fragment of her previous youthful identity remaining ("No longer Lyuba / just a *-ba*"). In her cycle "I wake up . . . ," Marianna Kiyanovska's lyrical narrator emerges as a war-bound androgynous human being, feeding death from a palm, as one would a pet—except she has cut her palm open, exposing live flesh. And in the poem "I Fly Away in the Shape of a Dandelion Seed," Vasyl Holoborodko, who fled the separatist-occupied Luhansk and is now de facto homeless, tries on different fairy-tale identities that would enable him to escape: now as a bird, and now as dandelion seed. These changes in the poets' descriptions of the beings standing behind their lyrical voice as aged, unsexed, and stripped of human form help expose war's effects on those who don't make it into our statistics. Poetry does not just mourn the dead—it exposes the losses of the survivors.

In the poems collected in this anthology, war is rarely the focal point. More often, war causes a sort of a semiotic ripple, transforming the page

into something different than it appears at the first glance. More precisely, not just something different, but something additional to what the page offers initially, in the same way that the duck-rabbit is an image of *both* a duck and a rabbit. This ripple is not merely thematic, nor is it confined to semantics. There are shifts in prosody, in punctuation, syntactical breaks and cracks. In a Facebook post in 2016, Lyudmyla Khersonska noted how the war has plunged many Ukrainian poets into a state of innocence, a second childhood, in which they confront the need of learning to speak the language anew. Khersonska's own poems—now taking the perspective of a refugee girl trying to make a home for a "refugee" cat, now of a child that sees uncannily disfigured toy soldiers encircling her in her dream (to protect? to harm?)—epitomize this tendency. The need to remaster a language that had lost its previous vibrancy comes with the recognition that this language has acquired a new quality: now it's crisper, sharper, and with the potential to turn toxic. This emerging language needs to be handled carefully, responsibly; and expertise in this language is not to be taken for granted—it must be earned.

Poetry is defined not only by what it is but also by what it is not. In times of conflict, it is vital to resist easy answers—yet it's precisely such answers that we most crave in uncertain times. Ideologies seduce by generating surrogate or simpler meanings for terms we normally take to be multifaceted and complex: "good" and "bad," "normal" and "abnormal," "citizen" and "parasite." As society grows more polarized in response to the agenda pushed by ideologues, there is a growing psychological pressure to conform, to identify oneself as "one of us" and share the beliefs and values of the dominant group. Ethically problematic treatment of the supposedly undeserving "others" only increases one's commitment and sense of loyalty—in a similar way that shared experience of shame and guilt promotes intragroup bonding. Ideology manipulates *our* emotions and pushes *our* buttons—the personal pronouns it operates with are mostly plural. By contrast, an experience of reading poetry can open us up to another as an individual, letting us experience another's private world as our own. It lets us hear voices that the ideological loudspeaker had previously muffled or distorted. But ideologically motivated poems can also implicate us further, which attests to poetry's great power to shape desires and beliefs, to crystallize fears and anxieties. Since ancient times, epos was successful in consolidating political alliances and imperial allegiances; and odes promoted

identification with particular leaders, and solidified personality cults. Poets, like most people, can be seduced by power, and must tread carefully in deciding what to throw their weight behind.

While poets do not always succeed in retaining their personal integrity in the face of ideological pressure, they may nevertheless remain great artists. Poetic language often reveals that our present situation is only one of many possibilities by helping us envision other ways to be, think, and feel. It reminds us that the world is not simply given to us—we are involved in making it what it is. In reflecting on the current experiences, poets often manage to create the language for future ones: the experience of surviving the war, of fixing up homes and rebuilding relationships, of healing and forgiving. It is in their words that we will find ourselves expressing grief and solidarity, anger and love.

In selecting the poems for this anthology, we have attempted to represent a variety of voices: young and old, female and male, somber and ironic, tragic and playful. We have tried to pay special attention to poems describing women's experiences of war: as mothers and daughters, soldiers and victims of war crimes, spouses and lovers, citizens and experts. The voices we assembled in this volume belong to some of the most prominent Ukrainian poets writing today. Yet our selection is by no means exhaustive. Many important and honored poets were left out. And over the two years that we have worked on the project, new and compelling voices emerged. Recognizing that the poetic response to the ongoing war is dynamic, we will keep introducing these new names in the online edition of this collection. We ask readers to refer to the anthology website for fresh translations, essays, and latest discoveries.

Oksana Maksymchuk
Max Rosochinsky

BAROMETERS

1.

My family huddled by the doorframe at 4 a.m., debating whether or not to open the door to the stranger wearing only his pajama pants, who'd been pounding on the door for at least five minutes, waking the whole apartment complex. Seeing the light come on, he began shouting through the door.

"Remember me? I helped you haul your refrigerator from Pridnestrovie. Remember? We talked about Pasternak on the drive. Two hours! Tonight they bombed the hospital. My sister is a nurse there. I stole someone's truck and drove across the border. I don't know anyone else. Can I make a phone call?"

So the war stepped its shoeless foot into my childhood two decades ago, under the guise of a half-naked man gulping on the phone, victim of an early post-Soviet "humanitarian aid" campaign.

2.

During a recent visit to Ukraine, my friend the poet Boris Khersonsky and I agreed to meet at a neighborhood café in the morning to talk about Pasternak (as if he is all anyone talks about, in our part of the world). But when I walked up the sidewalk at 9 a.m., the sidewalk tables were overturned and rubble was strewn into the street from where the building had been bombed.

A crowd, including local media, was gathered around Boris as he spoke out against the bombings, against yet another fake humanitarian aid campaign of Putin's. Some clapped; others shook their heads in disapproval. A few months later, the doors, floors, and windows of Boris's apartment were blown up.

There are many stories like this. They're often shared in short, hurried sentences, and then the subject is changed abruptly.

How can one speak about, write about, war? "Truthful war books," Orwell wrote, "are never acceptable to non-combatants."[1]

When Americans ask about recent events in Ukraine, I think of these lines from Boris's poem:

> people carry explosives around the city
> in plastic shopping bags and little suitcases.

3.

Over the last twenty years, Ukraine has been governed by both the Russian-speaking East and the Ukrainian-speaking West. The government periodically uses "the language issue" to incite conflict and violence, an effective distraction from the real problems at hand. The most recent conflict arose in response to the inadequate policies of President Yanukovych, who has since escaped to Russia. Yanukovych was universally acknowledged as the most corrupt president the country has ever known (he'd been charged with rape and assault, among other things, all the way back to Soviet times). However, these days, Ukraine's new government continues to include oligarchs and professional politicians with shrewd pedigrees and questionable motivations.

When the standoff between the Yanukovych government and crowds of protesters first began in 2013, and the embattled President left the country shortly thereafter, Putin sent his troops into Crimea, a Ukrainian territory, under the pretext of passionately protecting the Russian-speaking population. Soon, the territory was annexed. In a few months, under the pretext of humanitarian aid, more Russian military forces were sent into another Ukrainian territory, Donbas, where a proxy war has began.

All along the protection of Russian language was continually cited as the sole reason for the annexation and hostilities.

Does the Russian language in Ukraine need this protection? In response to Putin's occupation, many Russian-speaking Ukrainians chose to stand with their Ukrainian-speaking neighbors, rather than against them. When the conflict began to ramp up, I received this e-mail:

> I, Boris Khersonsky, work at Odessa National University where I have directed the department of clinical psychology since 1996. All that time I have been teaching in Russian, and no one has ever reprimanded me for "ignoring" the official Ukrainian language of the

> state. I am more or less proficient in the Ukrainian language, but most of my students prefer lectures in Russian, and so I lecture in that language.
>
> I am a Russian language poet; my books have been published mostly in Moscow and St. Petersburg. My scholarly work has been published there as well.
>
> Never (do you hear me—NEVER!) did anyone go after me for being a Russian poet and for teaching in Russian language in Ukraine. Everywhere I read my poems in RUSSIAN and never did I encounter any complications.
>
> However, tomorrow I will read my lectures in the state language—Ukrainian. This won't be merely a lecture — it will be a protest action in solidarity with the Ukrainian state. I call for my colleagues to join me in this action.

A Russian-language poet refuses to lecture in Russian as an act of solidarity with occupied Ukraine. As time passed, other such e-mails began to arrive from poets and friends. My cousin Peter wrote from Odessa:

> Our souls are worried, and we are frightened, but the city is safe. Once in a while some idiots rise up and announce that they are for Russia. But we in Odessa never told anyone that we are against Russia. Let Russians do whatever they want in their Moscow and let them love our Odessa as much as they want—but not with this circus of soldiers and tanks!

Another friend, the Russian-speaking poet Anastasia Afanasieva, wrote from the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv about Putin's "humanitarian aid" campaign to protect her language:

> In the past five years, I visited the Ukrainian-speaking Western Ukraine six times. I have never felt discriminated against because I spoke the Russian language. Those are myths. In all the cities of Western Ukraine I have visited, I spoke with everyone in Russian—in stores, in trains, in cafes. I have found new friends. Far from feeling aggression, everyone instead treated me with respect. I beg you, do not listen to the propaganda. Its purpose is to separate us. We are already very different, let's not become opposite, let's not create a war on the territory where we all live

> together. The military invasion which is taking place right now is the catastrophe for us all. Let's not lose our minds, let's not be afraid of non-existent threats, when there is a real threat: the Russian army's invasion.

As I read the letter after letter I couldn't stop thinking about Boris's refusal to speak his own language as an act of protest against the military invasion. What does it mean for a poet to refuse to speak his own language?

Is language a place you can leave? Is language a wall you can cross? What is on the other side of that wall?

4.

Every poet refuses the onslaught of language. This refusal manifests itself in silence illuminated by the meanings of poetic lexis—the meanings not of what the word says, but of what it withholds. As Maurice Blanchot wrote, "To write is to be absolutely distrustful of writing, while entrusting oneself to it entirely."[2]

Ukraine today is a place where statements like this one are put to the test. Another writer, John Berger, says this about the relationship of a person to one's language: "One can say of language that it is potentially the only human home." He insisted that it was "the only dwelling place that cannot be hostile to man . . . One can say anything to language. This is why it is a listener, closer to us than any silence or any god."[3] But what happens when a poet refuses his language as a form of protest?

Or, to put this question in broader terms: what happens to language in wartime? Abstractions very quickly attain physical attributes. This is how the Ukrainian poet Lyudmyla Khersonska sees her own body watching the war around her: *Buried in a human neck, a bullet looks like an eye, sewn in.* The poet Kateryna Kalytko's war is also a physical body: *War often comes along and lies down between you like a child/ afraid to be left alone*.

The language of poetry may or may not change us, but it shows the changes within us: the poet Anastasia Afanasieva writes using the first-person plural "we," showing us how the occupation of a country affects all its citizens, no matter which language they speak:

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 on the floor and lay there.

5.

On another visit to Ukraine, I saw a former neighbor of mine, now crippled by war, holding his hand out on the street. He wasn't wearing any shoes. As I hurried by, hoping he wouldn't recognize me, I was suddenly brought up short by his empty hand. As if he were handing me his war.

As I walked away from him, I had an eerie feeling of recognition. How similar his voice, the voices of the Ukrainian poets I've been speaking with, to the voices of people in Afghanistan and Iraq, whose houses my own tax money has destroyed.

6.

In the late twentieth century, the Jewish poet Paul Celan became a patron saint of writing in the midst of crisis. Composing in the German language, he has broken speech to reflect the experience of a new, violated world. This effect is happening again—this time in Ukraine—before our very eyes.

Here is the case of poet Lyuba Yakimchuk, whose family are refugees from Pervomaisk, the city which is one of the main targets of Putin's most recent "humanitarian aid" effort. Answering my questions about her background, Lyuba responded:

> I was born and raised in the war-torn Luhansk region and my hometown of Pervomaisk is now occupied. In May 2014 I witnessed the beginning of the war . . . In February 2015 my parents and grandmother, having survived dreadful warfare, set out to leave the occupied territory. They left under shelling fire, with a few bags of clothes. A friend of mine, a [Ukrainian] soldier, almost shot my grandma as they fled.

Discussing literature in wartime, Yakimchuk writes: "Literature rivals with the war, perhaps even loses to war in creativity, hence literature is changed by war." In her poems, one sees how warfare cleaves her words: "don't talk to me about Luhansk," she writes, "it's long since turned into *hansk* / *Lu* had been razed to the ground / to the crimson pavement." The bombed-out city of Pervomaisk "has been split into *pervo* and *maisk"* and the shell of Debaltsevo is now her "*deb*, *alts*, *evo*." Through the prism of this fragmented language, the poet sees herself:

> I stare into the horizon
> . . . I have gotten so very old
> no longer Lyuba
> just a –*ba*.

Just as Russian-language poet Khersonsky refuses to speak his language when Russia occupies Ukraine, Yakimchuk, a Ukrainian-language poet, refuses to speak an unfragmented language as the country is fragmented in front of her eyes. As she changes the words, breaking them down and counterpointing the sounds from within the words, the sounds testify to a knowledge they do not possess. No longer lexical yet still legible to us, the wrecked word confronts the reader mutely, both within and beyond language.

Reading this poem of witness, one is reminded that poetry is not merely a description of an event; it is an event.

7.

What exactly is the poetry's witness? The language of poetry may or may not change us, but it shows the changes within us. Like a seismograph, it registers violent occurrences. Miłosz titled his seminal text *The Witness of Poetry* "not because we witness it, but because it witnesses us."[4] Living on the other side of the Iron Curtain, Zbigniew Herbert told us something similar: a poet is like a barometer for the psyche of a nation. It cannot change the weather. But it shows us what the weather is like.