

INTRODUCING THE *SRPR* ILLINOIS POET:  
OKSANA MAKSYMCHUK



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Oksana Maksymchuk is a bilingual Ukrainian American poet, scholar, and literary translator. Her debut English-language poetry collection *Still City* is the 2024 Pitt Poetry Series selection, forthcoming with University of Pittsburgh Press (US) and Carcanet Press (UK). She is also the author of two award-winning poetry collections, *Xenia* and *Lovy*, in the Ukrainian. Oksana won first place in the Richmond Lattimore and Joseph Brodsky-Stephen Spender translation competitions and was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts Translation Fellowship, Scaglione Prize for Literary Translation from the Modern Language Association of America, Peterson Translated Book Award, and American Association for Ukrainian Studies Translation Prize. Her poems have appeared in *AGNI*, the *Irish Times*, *Paris Review*, *Poetry Review*, and many other journals. She co-edited *Words for War: New Poems from Ukraine*, an anthology of contemporary poetry; and co-translated *Apricots of Donbas* by Lyuba Yakimchuk and *The Voices of Babyn Yar* by Marianna Kiyanovska. Oksana holds a PhD in philosophy from Northwestern University.

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## Arguments for Peace

How could there be a war in this city with  
cobblestone streets, glowing stars  
in the windows, festive  
dogs in felt deer antlers?

In a central park, children sled  
down the hills, making sharp joyful noises  
and the clusters of snow that fall  
cover up their tracks, landing gently  
on hands and faces

Perfectly formed cakes  
in the lit display cases  
are yet more proof  
of the goodness of the universe

In the glowing interiors, we dip  
noses in whipping cream  
on purpose, and pretend not to notice  
when somebody's phone lights up with  
a face of a foreign leader  
warning of invasion

What's a missile to do with  
a concert hall full of children?

What's an air raid to do with  
a holiday celebration?

With glasses of sparkling wine  
we gather around lit trees

We say it couldn't be

War wouldn't dare come  
seeing how happy we are  
how good our lives  
and all that we've got to lose

We love our children too much  
We love our homes too much

and so, we argue, time and again

there'll be no war  
there'll be no war

## Soul Is a Sieve

Day in, day out, I lose  
a word or two  
from the texts you composed  
under the occupation

Here and there, a poem  
emerges that mirrors  
what you have said—  
a ripple of a distortion  
changing the dim reflection  
with every act of remembering

*I forget I forget*

Was this the phrase you used  
or did I invent it  
in this act of translation  
between tongue and  
language, between  
eye and screen, heart  
and hand, between your  
terror and my inadequacy?

Please forgive me  
all I got wrong

every precocious word, each  
precious typo

flattened into a poem  
like roadkill

## Marquise of O

When they dragged her out  
of the cellar  
she lost consciousness

only coming to  
flashes of light  
the sounds of voices

that bounced against her  
like hard tennis balls  
unstoppable

By the hoarseness in her throat  
she recognized she was screaming  
as if through a deep sleep

Two months later, when the verdict  
was read by a foreign doctor  
she cried in surprise

How could it be?

Nothing happened to her  
but a dream!

And wouldn't anyone  
suffer from night terrors

lulled to sleep by the sirens  
on the floor of a cellar  
listening for explosions?

## **Mother's Work**

The remains  
buried hastily  
in the yard  
recently ran about

with a shaggy dog  
sewed a dress for a doll  
bombed at Scrabble  
sang a lullaby

## The Rites of Moloch

Somebody's kid  
slits another kid's throat

Somebody's kid's  
throat is slit by another's kid

What, the kids jeer on  
Never had your throat slit before?

What, the kids keep on  
Never lost your head before?

Gamy kids, somebody's kids  
in the wilderness

offered all that a war can give  
taking it in

large empty eyes  
stacked on the platter like bonbons

What of the kid forced to devour its own raw arm?  
What of the kid boiled in its mother's milk?

They look in the ruins of buildings, behind  
scorched mutilated trees

dancing around the mine fields—  
a secretive hide-and-seek

victim in search of victim  
passing through fire