Rachel Galvin: Can you tell me the story of how you began writing the poems of *Still City*, your new poetry collection just out from Carcanet Press, which is your first collection written in English?

Oksana Maksymchuk: I started writing the poems in the months preceding the invasion, without any certainty that it would happen, not believing that it was possible. My generation of Ukrainians—those who were born in the eighties and experienced the Chernobyl catastrophe as kids and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in their tweens or teens—grew up thinking of war as something that happens "elsewhere." The closest memory was Afghanistan through the late eighties—many Ukrainian men were called up to fight there, and those who returned were stereotyped as heavy drinkers and troublemakers. We have such a man in our own family, a former Soviet army pilot, who hauled corpses of dead soldiers ("Cargo 200") on a small plane over the mountains. Distant war was a part of our lived reality growing up. But the idea that there would be a war on our own land was inconceivable. Acts of terror, state-orchestrated oppression and violence, maybe. We were very much alive to the possibility of being shot at by the state militia at the protests during the Orange Revolution of 2004–05, for instance. But what our own grandparents experienced in the late thirties and forties—the destruction of cities and towns, the execution and torture of civilians, the millions of refugees—it was inconceivable that it could happen within our lifetimes.

Yet, as a poet, I am as interested in what is possible, as in what is actual. So I was trying to imagine: how would it happen and what would it do to us, as a family, as a community? And logistically, what would it look like: A ground invasion and subsequent occupation, followed by waves of arrests and political repressions, like Russia had managed in Crimea? A series of nuclear explosions? Or a barrage of missiles destroying the infrastructure, followed by the ground invasion? While the mechanisms of invasion are never explicitly discussed in the poems, I did imagine a world in which the invasion unfolded in

different ways as a sort of suppressed background against which I cast the scenes and moments presented in the poems.

RG: You have spent a significant amount of time during the past decades thinking about war poetry broadly, as well as translating and editing Ukrainian poetry of war, as in the important volume you published with Max Rosochinsky in 2017 titled *Words for War: New Poems from Ukraine* and your outstanding 2021 cotranslation of Ukrainian poet Lyuba Yakimchuk's *Apricots of Donbas*. You also published a powerful translation of Marianna Kiyanovska's *The Voices of Babyn Yar* (2022) with your cotranslator Max, which was awarded the MLA's Aldo and Jeanne Scaglione Prize for a Translation of a Literary Work. Did any of those poems you translated keep you company as you were writing and editing and shaping your own book of war poems? Are there other poets or writers or artists who you had in mind as you were writing and revising *Still City*?

OM: The poets I have translated are part of my literary DNA; I think of translation as an original, albeit constrained, act of writing. I learn from translation as much as I do from my own creative practice. For instance, both Lyuba Yakimchuk and Marianna Kiyanovksa, whose collections we translated prior to the full-scale invasion, use little to no punctuation, which works quite wonderfully in Ukrainian: it's a highly inflected language, with seven cases for nominal declension, so you're never really confused about who does what to whom and in what order. By contrast, in English punctuation is sometimes essential for parsing out "relationships" between different sets of subjects and objects, so in translating them, we made sparing use of punctuation. In my own writing, I have followed this habit, acquired mostly through translation: I rely on the line and stanza breaks to do some of the punctuating. Yet I love punctuation so much in my nonpoetic writing! I overpunctuate to a fault.

The contemporary Ukrainian poets—including the voices we presented in *Words for War*—have been very important for me: they form a chorus within which my own voice resonates most clearly. In English, it may sound like a solo, but I chose my pitch and melody in this larger unfolding context, making sure I was not muffling anyone else's words or replicating anyone else's tune. As a younger poet, I

remember only ever being very serious about the classics and the so-called major poets, those who shaped the tradition I considered authoritative for me. I longed to be in dialogue with them, more or less ignoring my peers. Over the years, I've come to recognize the extent to which one's contemporaries are important for a poet. Yet I am still partial to those who came before us.

In the months of awaiting the invasion, I found that I yearned to reconnect with the generations of authors from my hometown of Lviv and the nearby towns whose lives had been imperiled during the previous war: Zbigniew Herbert, Bruno Schulz, Debora Vogel, and Adam Zagajewski. The year of 2021 was celebrated in Lviv (also known as Lemberg) as the Year of Stanisław Lem, and my son, husband, and I took part in events commemorating his 100th anniversary. I took Stanisław Lem's situation very closely to heart: he was practically a next-door neighbor, and his family, which was well-to-do and certainly could have fled, chose to stay in the city. Lem spent much of the German occupation in hiding, separated from his family members, and unsure of whether he would survive. His memoir about his life under the occupation—the *Highcastle*—was an important reference point for me. Interestingly, I didn't even read the memoir itself—I heard fragments here and there at various events, which gave me a lot of freedom to reinvent some of the experiences in my poems.

Uncannily, I also felt that these glimpses into the past were portals into a possible future. For example, on a guided Lem tour I learned that the prison that sits at the end of my street—a former monastery of the order of St. Brigid, commonly referred to as the diminutive "Brygidky"—was where Lem was forced to cart the corpses of the political prisoners from the courtyard, where they had been executed, to the street, and load them up onto trucks to be hauled away. Most days, I would write at a futuristic coworking space on the top floor of the building overlooking that very prison courtyard—the narrow rows of windows, the serene eggshell texture of the wall. And so, as I was crafting the earliest poems, I kept thinking of Lem and what he had to do to survive.

It was a confusing period filled with contradictory beliefs and conflicted emotions, and many of the poems reflect the uncertainty. On

the one hand, I didn't even want to acknowledge the invasion as a possibility, as if that acknowledgement would help usher it in. On the other hand, I was looking up pictures of Lviv from 1939 to 1945, the period during which it lost eighty percent of its prewar population: a tank in front of the modernist department store on my block; women assaulted by soldiers against the background of familiar buildings. I also kept viewing footage from Syria: Russian bombs destroying distant buildings, shaking up the phone—or the hand, or the person—that was making the recording.

I placed most of the poems from this period near the beginning of the collection, but some of the vignettes are so clear-eyed about the surreal, terrifying reality of siege and occupation that I found they fit better near the end of the collection, after the speaker has lived through the war, the displacement; the waves of terrible news from family and friends in the occupied territories.

On Valentine's Day, ten days before the actual full-scale invasion, we boarded an overnight train to Budapest, carrying three small backpacks. We dropped off our cat at my dad's. We left our apartment as it was, not even unloading the dishwasher, leaving the fridge full and the reading lamps on. We said we'd be back in ten days. Much of the collection took shape in the months that followed as we moved between Budapest, the US, Vienna, and finally settled down in Warsaw for the year, which afforded me an opportunity to visit Lviv and to host frequent visitors from Ukraine.

RG: In your life, you've spent a good deal of time living both in the Ukraine and the US—especially in Illinois—and have traveled back and forth between them. What is the experience like for you to live in Chicago, now, in this context and at this moment? How has the time you have spent here since the summer of 2023 affected your writing? Has it had an effect on the way you revised or edited the poems of *Still City*?

OM: I finalized the book here in Chicago, which added another dimension to the collection, I believe. You see, in Lviv, I would walk home during an air raid, alone, in the middle of the night, during wartime, and feel more or less safe. I would not venture a similar feat here in Chicago. Seeing off my child to school every day this year, I have a

similar sense of dread: statistically speaking, he'd be no less safe at his school in Lviv, which conducts a solid portion of its lessons in the bomb shelter it renovated for this very purpose, than at his school here in Chicago, or in any American town or city, for that matter. I think being immersed in a war actually brought it home to me how much I have already grown used to this sense of danger, or terror, from having lived in the US for half my life.

The terror I experience in Lviv has its own distinctive flavor, though. For example, many of my friends in Ukraine, poets and writers and cultural figures, have confessed that the years of war have also felt like the most meaningful, intense years of their lives. It's not like they're subjectively happy, but they feel like they're thriving and "really living." And many are also seen and heard internationally, for the very first time, due to the attention that Ukraine has been drawing on account of its heroic resistance. By contrast in the US, the terror is something you resign yourself to, learn to bear. It's isolating and silencing. There's a hopelessness and a passivity in it: that things cannot be changed, cannot be improved, at least, not by us. There's also a distrust of one's fellow citizens, a general disagreement about what is in the country's long-term best interests. In that sense, I feel the terror is very different from the context in which the existential threat is external, encouraging the society to unify around the common goals and values, which, I feel, should always be measured against the extent to which they ensure the safety and well-being of the vulnerable.

RG: What is your writing practice like now? Are you continuing to write poems about the war in English or Ukrainian or perhaps both?

OM: Now that the collection is complete, there's still a trickle of poems. Because it's not over, and things keep happening. I don't know, for instance, whether we'll have a home by the end of the year—it's likely, but not certain since apartment blocks just like ours in Lviv have been struck by missiles in the past few months. Will my father and grandma survive this war? There's a whole generation of older folks who will die sooner than they should because of the war-induced trauma. And then there's the day-to-day, the normalcy of the disaster. For example, both my mom's and my stepdad's families in Kherson are staying in the city, despite daily bombings and casualties. They

cannot take public transit, cannot wait in a line without fear that they would be struck since buses and queues are frequent targets. My grandma's sister lives in a flat with most windows now boarded up with plywood—the glass panes got shattered by the blasts, and there's no point reinstalling them for now. Half of her apartment lost electricity, but the other half still has it, so they moved the fridge into the living room, readjusted the lights, and moved the appliances. A building across the street got struck by a missile: that's now her view into the world.

Or take my aunt: she is now a primary caretaker for her granddaughter, who woke up one morning to find her own mother dead by her side. This happened while Kherson was under the Russian occupation, and the morgue refused to perform an autopsy, so we'll never know why she died. The doctor on staff said that they'd seen a surge of similar deaths of young women—in their twenties and thirties—due to the use of sedatives to reduce anxiety. These indirect casualties of war are not part of any statistics. They leave lacunae, broken lives. The poems cannot heal or make sense of this, but they can commemorate and tell the stories that are lost and suppressed due to their sheer enormous quantity. The poems are also how the living can bear witness to the fallen, the silenced, and the forgotten.

Perhaps because I can write in both languages, I am currently choosing English—as an act of "reaching out" and bringing in those strangers whose empathy, I know, is essential for my imperiled motherland's sovereignty and survival. Sometimes I think of my poems as a sort of testimony, based on a lived experience I have as a member of the affected family and community. Yet the US is also my homeland, a homeland which has sometimes found itself on the wrong side of history, whose possible future leader has a passion for authoritarian leaders and unscrupulous dictatorships. So I think it's essential to transmit what happens to individuals and communities affected by an assault on their freedom, dignity, and integrity; and to what great lengths Ukrainians are going to defend what my fellow countrymen here in the U.S. may be willing to give up all too lightly. *Still City* as a collection intends to evoke the predicament of those trapped in any besieged city, overcoming the particularity of geography and time period. Because it is composed in English, it has the added, suppressed

aspect of a prophecy that hopes, through an act of utterance, to change the future and thus to undermine itself. In composing it, I also kept thinking of the women of Troy, and perhaps most poignantly, of Cassandra, fated to see the future without being able to change it.

RG: I'm curious about your choice to write poems in English, and how and when that began for you, what the practice was and is like for you. You once described it as feeling like "self-translation." What did you mean by that? What, if anything, changed for you in writing poems in English instead of Ukrainian? How did it affect your relationship to the Ukrainian language?

OM: I moved to the United States in 1997 with my mom. She came to the U.S. to join her fiancé, who had left Ukraine two or three years ahead of us, as a refugee. I was accepted into Uni High, a laboratory school on the UIUC campus in Urbana. The school was tiny, but had an amazing selection of classes (their foreign language offerings alone included six or seven languages). So in my very first year there, I signed up for a poetry class. It was taught by my teacher of sophomore English, a handsome bearded Birkenstock-wearing Greek American. He ran the class as a workshop, and we did a lot of our own writing. Some kids did autofiction, or experimental prose, or short stories. I mostly worked on poetry. I developed a close friendship with another student—a young woman who was recovering from a long-term illness, and had lost her hair during therapy—and she introduced me to her parents as a kind of "genius," based on those writings I produced for the class. I'm guessing they were quite experimental and made little sense, which must have seemed very impressive. It's those earliest writings that I think I would characterize as self-translation. My English was good enough, but I wasn't truly bilingual yet.

I did continue writing in English through the end of high school, but went back to Ukrainian in college. My first folio was published in a major Ukrainian literary magazine in my sophomore year. I now suspect the change had a lot to do with my friend group. In high school, my best friends were usually American or first-generation Americans: young women born in China, Iran, Vietnam, raised by immigrant parents. In college, my friend group consisted of international students, mostly women from Eastern and Southern Europe

and the former USSR. That may have been part of the reason for my "return" to Ukrainian—spending time with these distinctively "foreign" women made me very nostalgic for my lost identity, and made me question my younger self's desire to blend in, to melt in the proverbial pot. I remember reading Eva Hoffman's tongue-in-cheek "exotic is erotic" and thinking to myself I have discovered a compelling code of conduct to follow! Funny thing is, I was not able to go back to Ukraine for six years; I, too, was an international student on a student visa, and there was no telling if my visa would be reissued if I were to leave, since my family had no funds to show to substantiate my visa request. In the year we left, my mother, a gastroenterologist working at a prestigious state clinic, was making six dollars a month. My dad, an accomplished and highly decorated actor working at the national theater, was making twice as much. My maternal grandparents, both of them medical doctors who worked double shifts for their whole lives, saw their own life's savings evaporate in a flash during the massive post-collapse inflation. In short, my family had no money to speak of, and so I didn't travel back until I got my green card at the end of my junior year in college. The long separation made the reunification all the more intense: that very first summer, I went to Yalta (Crimea) for a poetry conference, where I fell in love with my future husband, a Russian-language poet from Simferopol. In contrast to my rigidly academic American student life, it all felt so transgressive, so decadent—very end-of-the-century!

RG: And you also continued writing poems in Ukrainian quite seriously, such that your relationship with the two languages has crisscrossed.

OM: Yes, when I moved back to Ukraine in 2004, I applied myself very seriously to working on my poetry and published two collections, both of which won awards and were highly praised by literary figures who shaped me since childhood and whose work I deeply admired. I have developed close ties with constellations of Ukrainian poets and writers of different generations, so I felt there was never going to be any turning back for me. But life has a way of surprising us. I started writing in English again in 2016, almost twenty years after I first arrived in the US, when I made the choice to switch to English with my then-nonverbal son, who was five. Initially, I viewed poetry as tangential

to what I did professionally—namely, academic philosophy. The more I wrote, the more I came to appreciate that poetry is my favorite way of writing philosophically. *Still City* would have been a very different collection if it had not been written by a bilingual poet who is bearing witness, in her second language, to an existential catastrophe that may well destroy her homeland. Which "homeland"—that's also, perhaps, up to the reader to decide.