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Play ЩО ТАКЕ ВІЙНА (ua)

Original name /
translated WHAT IS WAR? (en)

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Language of
translation English

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портал сучасної української драматургії

The project is implemented with the support of the International Relief Fund of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Germany and the Goethe Institute within the project "Theatrical windows. Work in progress" implemented by the NGO "Teatr na Zhukah" (Kharkiv).

What is War?

Andriy Bondarenko

Translated by John Freedman with Natalia Bratus

I deleted most of the Telegram news channels; I have plenty of time to read most of the news from the front.

I went to the movies, and watched the first half hour of the new Batman. Then an air raid siren went off. I thought I'd finish watching it at home, but I didn't.

Yesterday I heard from a friend that the war will continue for another five years. As such, we will all have our time at the front, he concluded.

Bitcoin is falling.

I deleted most of the Telegram channels.

I have forgotten how to ride trains; I have learned to go anywhere.

Yesterday evening a friend invited me to go for a walk around the city. Her photos were beautiful, the city was dark, the sky was barely light. An empty city.

I didn't go. I couldn't. I had no time. My life was on pause in March, now all kinds of things are piled up.

What is war? It is when death becomes habitual, when people die at arm's length, when you can reach out and touch hot metal, a cold, cramped body, the scattered Earth, a burrowing beetle with a metallic forehead. The main thing is to yank your hand away in time.

What is war?

War will continue another five years.

Death, someone else's death, becomes habitual.

Dima and Zhenya are officially listed as missing, although everyone knows that the building where they were located was hit by a rocket that broke through the wall and exploded. No bodies were found. There simply are no bodies. Dima and Zhenya are considered missing.

One person leaves, another moves. One remains, still another can't write. Someone forgot, another disappeared. These are the living and those are the dead.

What is war? It is where people go, cars are driven, thermal imagers are sent, money is wasted. It's something people go to. Many things, they disappear, they vanish. It's like slaughtering a piglet, draining the blood into a sacrificial vessel, and throwing the carcass into a sacrificial pit. You see, it's necessary. It connects us to the gods. It makes us alive. But someone will die.

Every night I slaughter a pig of my memory. Still warm, small, squeaky, shivering, it is alive. I carve it with the knife of my vulnerability, which grows sharper every day. The main thing is to sacrifice the victims in proper time. Still warm, squeaky, already dead, already a victim, no longer here, but already there, no longer existing, already eternal. Like a shadow. Like smoke.

In the morning I see a column of smoke rising outside the city. The Telegram channels are silent about the smoke. It doesn't exist.

Creeping curfew, curfew creeping. I go nowhere anymore in the evenings, or at night on those short, brilliant nights in June.

The war will continue for another five years.

My city is alive and crowded. Everyone drains June to the dregs, they devour life, they stay home

at night. The main thing is to abandon the victims in proper time.

This city is empty at night. Dark magic, light sacrifice. Strange life, common death. A hand stretches out into nothing.

What is nothing?

It is a victim.

What is war? It is when you grow accustomed to death. The death of strangers.

Everyone will grow used to it sooner or later. War will continue until it ends, sooner or later. Later or earlier. For some it will be later, for someone else – earlier. For someone it will end in wounds, for someone late in the evening of the 5th, at 10:46 p.m., it will end with the smell of dry grass. Their last thought will be: "How dry it is, this grass."

Carve the piglet of memory with a knife of well-stropped vulnerability.

This spring was so fragrant, so bright, through clouds of smoke. Then came summer, so fragrant, a summer so green. It was a spring we had never caught hold of before, it is a summer we had never felt before. Through sheaths of smoke, through feverish, painful words wedged between teeth, words-wedged, feverish words, the shadows of smoke-sheathed words.

What is nothing?

This war will continue long enough for us to get used to everything. To the deaths of others.

This war, this we, this summer, these deaths, these they, this nothing.

This war will continue. People must die. I don't want to get used to it. War doesn't ask.

What is war? What is nothing? It will last another five years.

The more Russians we kill now, the fewer Russians our children will have to kill.