

Andrii Bondarenko

Survivor's Syndrome

Translated from the Ukrainian by John Freedman with Natalia Bratus

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## The End

Every one of us was killed  
already that morning.

We are no longer  
what we were then.

We died.

On February 24  
of the year 2022  
a neighboring country killed  
us all.

The old world went up in  
flames and smoke, splintered  
and disintegrated.

Hundreds, thousands,  
millions of our worlds  
disappeared, destroyed  
forever, irreversibly.

That week I had decided to  
go on a date. Winter was  
coming to an end, but it was  
still gray and cold. I wanted  
finally to change something.

We made the date for the day  
after tomorrow, February 24,  
the year of 2022. We were to  
meet in the center of town, sit  
at a cafe, walk the streets.

That day, the day after  
tomorrow, never came.

Something else entirely  
came about and ruined that  
day. You think you want to go  
for a walk?! There was no  
city in which to meet and  
have a coffee, there were no  
more streets. Something else  
entirely happened. Other  
lives of other people now.

We'll have to become  
acquainted again, set a new  
date, meet at another time.  
Everything will have to be

reassembled, piece by piece.  
And the pieces themselves  
will be completely new. But  
when will that be?

Who will I be?

Who will we be? Where will  
we be? What will our purpose  
be?

The apocalypse has come.  
Everything that was  
is no longer.

What remained were  
vestiges, shadows.

We used to watch TV series,  
drink beer and cognac, we  
stayed out late at coffee  
houses, visited friends,  
bought paperback books,  
hugged, talked about art,  
played cards, laughed,  
danced to music on our  
phones. We went to the  
movies, drinking beer and  
eating nuts.

This all disappeared one gray  
cold morning, swept into the  
dark abyss by the sound of  
an air siren. This is how  
worlds disappear. Like a day  
that ended and never came  
again. Like a flower that  
clamped its petals shut under  
a gust of wind and never  
opened again. Like a laptop  
suddenly disconnected from  
an outlet. Like a sun that set  
in the west but never rose  
again in the east. Like a man  
stabbed in the heart from  
behind. This is how worlds  
disappear - like a light bulb  
going out, like water draining  
from a bath, like eyes being  
shut on a dead man's corpse.  
Our world was no better than  
a light bulb. Just as fragile  
and finite. That's how it  
turned out. Our world was

imperfect. It was alive.  
It was killed.  
The Apocalypse now  
has come.  
There is no fear.  
He whom we feared  
is now long gone.  
Traces, remnants, shadows -  
we have retreated to another  
side, an Atlantis beneath the  
surface of the sea - we still  
see it, but the image grows  
weaker.  
Our life now is a graveyard of  
all the plans, desires and  
aspirations that we had  
before February 24, in the  
year of 2022.  
We now live in a world in  
which our world no longer  
exists. How can that be? It  
just is. That happens too.  
Forests through which we  
used to wander are mined,  
and devastated by tanks.  
Bridges we used to take to  
visit relatives are destroyed,  
our relatives are dead or  
gone crazy. Friends are held  
captive in captured cities, or  
have left for where they never  
had any intention of going.  
Theaters are bombed to dust.  
Theater actors guard  
checkpoints with machine  
guns in hand.  
What kind of world is this?  
This is a world of war. And  
what is war?  
It is something that cannot  
be. Ever. But it is. How can  
that be? It cannot be. We live  
in a world that cannot be.  
What could not happen has  
happened. The unspeakable  
has happened, the unreal  
has happened.

Are we alive at all,  
we who survived?

Who am I now?  
How did I survive those first  
days? I remember little, those  
days are already buried  
under some big,  
impenetrable pillow. All we  
did was wave our arms as if  
they were wings, so as not to  
fall into the abyss that our  
lives had become.  
It turned out we had wings —  
those of us whom we now  
have become.

I still don't understand -  
where are we? We are in  
different places at the same  
time, like ghosts. Like foggy  
clouds, we fly wherever our  
thoughts lead us - to where  
our friends, family and loved  
ones now sit in basements,  
shuddering from rocket  
attacks, or just frozen in fear  
for someone's life.  
We now hover over all of  
Ukraine like ghosts. Our  
bodies obediently remain  
where we left them. We are  
only half of our bodies, or a  
third. We are carried here  
and there by the invisible  
winds of war

Our bodies are like children.  
We command them to be  
polite and obey their elders.  
Sit still, hold this backpack  
with documents, carry us  
onward, until our thoughts  
and souls carry us to those  
who are dying beneath the  
bombs.

Where are we? Our places

and spaces have been  
replaced, spread out,  
confused. Train stations  
function, but they are no  
longer train stations. Cafes  
function, but they're not  
cafes. People sit and drink,  
but that is no longer drinking.  
A drunken friend called me  
recently. He was sitting with  
another friend. His friend had  
a bottle, they both got drunk.  
My friend got very drunk, sat  
there drunk and happy,  
listening to music on his  
phone, remembering funny  
stories, and then he went  
home and suddenly woke up.  
He remembered everything.  
Dark, empty streets  
surrounded him on all sides,  
and his windows were taped  
shut.

A territorial defense patrol  
stood under the bridge. My  
friend called me. What should  
I do, he asked, I was drunk, I  
had fun and suddenly I woke  
up. There's a war going on.  
It's very scary. There is a  
patrol under the bridge. Why  
did I get drunk? What's so  
fun about getting together  
with music and funny stories  
if there's a war going on?  
Don't worry about it, I said.  
Just hang up and go home  
quick. Curfew starts in five  
minutes. You'll be stopped by  
a patrol.

And you're drunk. Damn, he  
said. Curfew! And I was so  
happy half an hour ago when  
I was drunk! Go home quick,  
I said. And don't drink  
anymore. I won't, I won't,  
fuck, I won't, he said and  
hung up.

Those who have no tomorrow should not drink vodka. It's pointless. After all, your hangover will come today, it won't be postponed 'til morning. We have no tomorrow. There is only one, big, swollen today. Heavy, gray, swollen clouds spread over the entire horizon, in all directions, filling all the cracks.

No matter how much you drink, you'll still come back to this today. Nothing lies behind the gray clouds. The road to the future is gone. It must be found again, just as we look for... What? For nothing. Finding your future is finding your future, nothing more.

Who knows how to look for it? We must learn this from zero, from scratch, from the emptiness of the day's eternal gloom.

Just as we learned to fly over the abyss by the power of wings we previously did not have.

Hanging over the abyss bifurcates or even trifurcates you.

I went for a walk. It was around mid-March, a bright, high, dazzling blue sky, the warmth of the sun falling on shrunken faces, caressing them like a mother's hand. A light breeze blows, children's laughter wafts in from somewhere. And your body responds, it responds to this spring around you. Your gait relaxes, a faint smile appears on your lips. But it's just your body, you yourself don't

