

The Motherland

is not the Rodina Mat,
that slab of soviet concrete that throws its shadow large and looming over Kyiv.

That is not a mother.

I mean the other Motherland,
a ravaged woman that will tuck my mother's mother into the breast of her soil
so that when she dies, it's not alone.

So that she can remember a dacha heaving
with black currants, strawberries, sour cherries, tomatoes,
a blue door, a bucket of cold well water to shock me alive, shiver in the bucket,
throw handfuls of fruit in my mouth,
pull up weeds in the sandy earth,
pucker my body in the cold and the sour fruit.

Tend and tend and tend and tend the *mother* for birthing bounty
and the *mother* holds us close and says
here, eat and love instead.

As she is shredded, she cradles her daughters birthing babies,
soft and milky in the pulsing orange atmosphere.
Born to shrieking, born to sparks of red debris,
born as boys taught to violate lay dead in her street,
born as blackout, freeze, and starve,
as born again sing hymns underground,
as train stations tremble wrapped in tired earth.

My mother keeps saying it: *they are wiping cities off the face of the Earth.*
Specks of bothersome dust mingled with saline tears float off the *mother*'s face and bloom
into the air, blooms the village, the stories, the rust belt,
falling through empty space the unnamed bodies, the children, the strays.
A dust cloud expanding, descending to Finland, to Poland, to Latvia, to America,
yet to return to itself.

I want to honor so I don't forget land that is absent from me.

Perhaps I'll never see my *mother* again
or smell her pines or eat her mushrooms or meet God in the arms of her rivers,
because she cups spilling blood in the open palms of her earth.

She is flecked with loam and pink salt flats
and narcotic poppies and sunflowers that always tilt their faces to the sun.
Though she is pain and violated by tanks belching soot and smoke,
Mother still adorns herself with scarves of fogs in the clavicle of her mountains,
still rouges her cheeks with bushels of red currants
and dresses herself with silks of flowers and life bright fields of grasses.

I want to go back to the Motherland,
not for those hydrocarbons in her black sea,
or the blackening coal basin,
or that golden amber under the flaking birches,
but to step into those boundaries and be held
by invisible lines and visible life.

Oxygen ignites in the place where cold was tracing its morning fingers up my spine,

and lastachki hum their songs,
do acrobatics over the freshly fallen fog
until cheeks burn under sun sharp sky over fields of dream wheat.

Mother is a flag of blue and gold, sky and wheat,
leaning against heaven, gusting in the blasts of wind
and other things,

drooping heavily when she can to rest a rest she cannot have.

Now she is barren and her womb is empty
and the only fruits are those in cans
I grab to drip on myself pink sugar syrup from pale pink plums
to be sticky so grandma can scold me

five floors off the earth,
my hand in the raw black sunflower seeds in clear crinkly bags,
while steam from a pot steams hair to steam-red face,
These five floors fall asleep and wake up to air raid sirens these days.

These days,
there is new grief every morning because they have razed fields and farms and flowers
to the earth that I pack into my fingernails.

Scoop up beets, smear fuschia on my six year old lips, tell my mother *look, I'm wearing lipstick!*

This was before February 24th, 2022, when I forgot it was my father's birthday
because I saw it on the news.

I will return to watch grandma trace a dusty brown dirt potato with the edge of a knife,
see ribbons of potato skin fall so smoothly

while skirts brush heavy and modest against her ankles
while I, sticky and full of fruit,
toss motherland sunflower seeds in my mouth,
practice shucking them in one cheek,
storing used shells in the other, how all the grandparents do.
This was before last summer when I had to work a fluorescent lit job
and my sisters called me on static Skype telling me
Stephanie, we're petting goats and holding hedgehogs by their soft wrinkly bellies.
You see, you have to slide your hand under them slow so they don't ball up into spikes,
and there you'll find newborn kitten skin,
like the ones that roam around my grandmother's courtyard that get picked up by grubby hands
and rejected by furious adults,
that live off the unfortunate pigeons housed in the exact same courtyard that is a short taxi ride
(if the taxi man is the one who used to love my mother)
from the train station that was on the news.
My little sister let out an eight year old gasp, said *that's where we came to meet grandma!*
Except in recent days it's been a departure point.
Mothers, children, and elderly
leaving home and leaving life,
when the missile landed on 4,000 fleeing civilians not too far from Lyman,
the greenest place on Earth,
with green blanket ground, green water, green canopies if you lay down and look up.

It's where the *Mother* wraps her green and blooming arms around too many of my family graves,
holds them steady and safe
next to the little church with the white walls and the well
with its roof shaded and dressed with tender mosses,
where on Sundays I had to scrub off my nail polish, find my longest dress, learn to *sit still*,
listen to my Grandpa give a three hour sermon,
wish I was anywhere else,
and now wish that I paid attention so that I could perhaps have known him better.
Grandma says he *loved* Ukraine, which I didn't know, but it makes sense
because she loves her children,
her bellowing cows birthing gangly calves,
birthing my mother who will eat any animal except those that were raised to feed her.
Her mother, stern and overwhelmed, commands obedience, is rarely soft, says
I have worked so hard so you can eat
while the *mother* feeds us freely from the dust of her earth
where we are born and where we shall return.
Give her back her womb
so I can come back, crawl inside, curl up, rest in throbbing maternal warmth,
and be held by my
Inheritance.