

Daria Serenko

I Wish Ashes for My House

(Original Russian title: желаю пепла своему дому, unpublished manuscript;

Translated German title: Ich wünsche meinem Haus Asche)

approx. 150 pages

Clothbound

Release of the German edition by Suhrkamp: Autumn 2023

© Suhrkamp Verlag Berlin 2023

I WISH ASHES FOR MY HOUSE

*Dedicated to Sasha S., Sonya S., Vlad N.
and all the people who made me survive the year,
as well as every Feminist Anti-War Resistance activist*

The war caught us in the act of all things. We froze, disarmed, pathetic and helpless, watching our bodies merge daily with those of the underage invaders, turning into indecipherable bloody scribbles in the snow-covered fields. In this fusion I periodically experience a feeling of dissociation, as if I were no longer me, as if I were floating above my own empty body, looking blurry like a satellite image. I first experienced this after being raped, and now it comes back again.

I sit down to transcribe an interview with a Ukrainian woman who was raped by Russian soldiers last week. Simultaneously, I listen to the audio recording of the torment of a Russian woman several times, she was tortured by the police, I listen carefully and write it down to give the news a quote from the audio. "Bitch, I'm going to fuck you up... <inaudible>... fucking kill you!" I recognise the Russian woman from her voice, I don't know the Ukrainian woman at all. The voices are similar and I'm afraid of mixing up the two audios. I have no right to mix up the two audios.

Our bodies merge daily with those of underage drunken rapists. I have tried to settle inside every Russian soldier to find out where my guilt lies. The guilt seemed to lie everywhere. It reeked of boozy breath, of wet body, of vomit frozen overnight in the spring frosts. An hour ago, I read a comment from a compatriot, in which she was rejoicing at the abuse of Ukrainian women. Her compatriot wrote that she herself had also been beaten up and that she had been beaten for a reason: people are not animals, they won't just beat and kill for no reason. There is always a reason: she cheated, was having a good time, made threats, lived her life. This is how the bruises, contusions and lacerations migrated from the bodies of Russian women to the bodies of people far removed from them. The bodies of enemies. I am not in pain, Natasha is in pain, should the pain go from Fedot to Yakov ...

If you gaze into the sun for a long time, its outlines will remain in your eyes for some time: no matter where you look, the echo of the sun will appear and obscure everything you see. So it is with violence: if you scrutinize it for long enough, you begin to see only it, you see violence even with your eyes closed, you see it in your dreams, but one day you wake up and you become someone else, someone you can no longer stop seeing. "Where have you been for eight years?" asks an artificially generated voice, trying to shift our gaze from war to the sucking demagogic void. For eight years we have gazed into violence, we have studied the habits of violence, we have become akin to violence, we have the eyes of violence, its features, its breath, its facial expressions. We merged with it to stop it. We have become it by confronting it. We are compatriots of violence in spirit.

We can't look at other people's suffering, we still look at our own. We close Susan Sontag, we close Hannah Arendt, we have already read it all, serving time in our prisons and special detention centres, we open a bottle of wine, it now costs less than pads. To get drunk or not to bleed? "Mummy, your hands are up to your elbows in blood," cries a Russian child cheerfully on the festive street.

It's the eternal 9th of May, so let's drink to the fact that we

can never again

... repeat ...

the already repeated

I write while there is light in the cell. A man in uniform controls my light today, this man is not rude, it feels like he is as surprised by my presence as I am, and the surprise softens his official, toiled intonation.

I am alone in a cell designed for five people, and I will probably be alone for the whole of the fifteen days from 8 to 23 February. Last night I spent on the floor in a dirty, windowless cell at the Tver police station. I was forcibly taken there by two men in plain clothes who introduced themselves as criminal investigators. Ironically, these men burst into the cafe the minute after I had signed a copy of my book *Girls and Institutions* for my friend Peter. The dedication reads:

“Russia will be free – and we will definitely celebrate that.”

I was caught with the book. Apparently, Russia wouldn't be free for the next fifteen days.

At the station I was very worried about my belongings. When they took off my earrings and rings, I felt like a cyborg, continuing in the curves of the metal in contact with my body. Despite the fact that my devices had no additional function other than aesthetic, it felt as if I had been stripped of my strength and capacity.

Today is my first day and I'm looking forward to the lights in the cell being turned off. It's only after a couple of days that I realise that I have the right to ask for the lights to be turned off, you just have to start banging on the iron door and the guard on duty will look at you through the door window. It's an inversion to get used to: you don't knock on the door from the outside, you knock on the door from the inside.

The lights in the cell at Tverskoy IAB were never switched off, so I could not sleep and sat on the floor among the smelly mattresses waiting for the trial. There were no windows in that cell, but there were six-metre-high ceilings that echoed powerfully with every murmur. For about three hours I entertained myself by singing every song I knew. The sound of my voice, multiplying against the shabby walls, returned to my body, filling and soothing it. I sang louder and louder every hour, surprised that I wasn't being asked to shut up.

Skipping from Zhanna Aguzarova to Taylor Swift, I spread around me the things I was allowed to keep with me: my book, a knitted blue hat, a black down jacket, a bottle of water. The bands of the missing rings glowed on my fingers like scars; just above, on the insides of both hands, the tattoos were black. I seem to have taken a new look at tattoo culture in prisons: they are not only the language of communication, but also a property of yours that is not easily taken away.

They take away anything you could theoretically kill yourself with: shoelaces, belts, sharp objects. It inadvertently leads you to think of ways to kill yourself, even if you don't want to.

Being stuck with a book I had written myself was symbolic, of course, but incredibly useless from a practical point of view: how bored I was with it. I knew it by heart, so there was no immersion; it was like leafing through blank pages. I wanted the act of reading to grab my full attention and take me away from looking at the dirty ceiling, and the waiting time for the trial to condense and speed up.

The detention centre, where I was taken after twenty-four hours, was much better than at the police station. All in all, being here so far most acutely reminds me of a long journey on a very old train, in which everything around you is unpleasant to touch. Only this train is going nowhere and is stationary in space, the only movement it can make is in time. Other than that, it is very easy to create the image the train: food laid out everywhere, rare opportunities to wash, a difficult relationship with boiling water (it was brought to us only three times a day), almost no service, and it is scary to touch the mattress.

Like a train, the time in the detention centre has stops, though the station is always the same: once a day you are allowed to go for a walk in a small courtyard, which can be measured in forty steps. When I went out, a coarse and very slow snow was falling. The exercise yard had a lattice ceiling (the caged sky), on which huge multi-column icicles, similar to the Soviet chandeliers in the Palaces of Culture, had grown. It looked beautiful and festive.

On my first walk I went to look at the walls of the courtyard. They turned out to be mottled with graffiti:

my Russia sits in prison

Love is stronger than fear

Masha Alyokhina – 15 days + 15 days

Liusya Stein – 15 days in jail

Tim Bescvet – 10 days in jail for carrying pride flags

Putin is a dickhead

Nastya Rezyuk – 10 days in jail for picketing

Alina Ivanova – 5 days in jail for reposting

Rita Flores – 10 days in jail for leaving the house

Sergei Ross – 9 days in jail for posting Instagram stories during an election

As I looked at the scratched inscriptions, I cried tears of relief: I was not alone. Being surrounded by these inscriptions made by people I know, I no longer felt so lost. The inscriptions spoke to me and opened up a possibility of communication, the denial of which is exactly what they were trying to punish me with.

My thoughts were interrupted by a man's voice coming from the second floor. From the barred window a shaved dark head with a hole instead of a front tooth was looking at me cheerfully:

—What's your name? How many years did you get? Ooh, fifteen days, and I got five, drunk driving. Are you alone? And there's, let me count, six of us here. For a picture on the internet? Are you political? For Navalny? Fucking hell ... Ask them to move you to our block, I'm serious, don't laugh, we won't hurt you. What was the picture of? What the fuck did you write? Are you married? You got kids? Don't be offended, I'm just saying. We're in the first shack if you need us.

I promised to send a block of cheese to the shack. When I came back from my walk, I felt cheered up. It's amazing how even a conversation like that can make you feel like you're sane again. So my train began to fill up with fellow passengers.

CHAIN OF SOLIDARITY

masha

katya

kristina

polina

dasha

sonya

oksana

lelya

standing

nastya

standing

anya

standing

yulia

it's cold

yulia

cold

yulia

warm, warmer

standing

like in gym class

standing

first

standing

second

sitting

in jail

not in jail

free

in jail

free

in jail

free in prison

loves me

loves me not

loves

loves not

loves

rose

mimosa

carnation

aster

chamomile

loves me

loves me not

love

lusya

kira

sveta

karina

3 years

20 years

42

54

20.2

on probation

on parole

standing

folding into words

that aren't in the dictionary

of the Russian language

Russian

proceeding

will be held in Russian

you're Russian

speak Russian

you have a Russian name

fatima

leysan

gauhar

liya

lilya

nailya

standing

dasha

sonya

oksana

lelya

olga

standing

tell me

is it a queue or what

tell me

why are you standing?

tell me

what's under your clothes

tell me

whose order this is.

tell me

who's paying you for it

whore

bitch

scum

cunt

turncoat

die

standing

close our eyes

very cold

cold

warm

warm

warmer

wind

warmer wind

warm salty wind

grass

warm grass

warm salty grass

golden suspension

silver cobweb

standing

standing

we are standing

pointing the toes

tummy tucked in

non-girls stand too

hold on

hold

standing

warm salty lips

of the beloved one

white strapless

on the tanned shoulder

flowers passing

from hand to hand

fourth month of pregnancy

drop of sweat

on a flower

dried herbs imprinted on your skin

the first day of your period, a pebble in your belly

insect in an envelope

drop of amber

drop in the sea

letters to political prisoners

constellations

arranged

in a line

dasha

masha

larisa

nastya

irina

standing

over the state borders

standing

without feeling your feet

standing

in jail

standing

in different languages

standing

and when we stand

each man is a step

each of us is a step

wind

grass

first swallow

gold shimmer

silver cobweb

Since I don't have much to do in the detention centre, the gap between reality and writing is minimal: something happens and I immediately try to record it. I don't know whether it's documentary prose, autofiction or reportage.

In the afternoon, three guards on their rounds came into my cell. I have noticed that the female police officers here treat me consistently worse than the men. This was also evident on the rounds: There is a hole in the wall of my cell, I found a nail on the cell floor, and together they allowed me to create a hand-drawn calendar on the wall marking the days of my detention. My watch had been taken away from me, and I really wanted to keep track of my train schedule. Well, it was the woman who said during the rounds that the A5 sheet of paper could not hang on my wall, it was not allowed.

By the way, I have never been a fan of diaries, calendars, to-do lists, journals and other products of the late capitalist economy that manages our time. But here it gives me strength. I have decided that these fifteen days should not be stolen from my life. I need to spend them in a way that makes me feel complete and busy. For each day, I make myself a little list of things I can do. I even manage to work.

Yesterday I received my first handover, I was really looking forward to it. The most expected items: clean pants, shampoo, sleep mask, face cream, books, coffee. They brought me two huge bags; as I unpacked them, I talked to each item out loud: unpacking and sorting them was a pleasure.

On an adjacent empty bunk I laid out the items that were supposed to guard me: a sparkling package of silver glitter, burgundy lipstick that I know how to apply without a mirror, books, and writing paper. I got detained with the “Viva la vulva” tote bag that I went to the seaside with in December, on the bottom of the shopper I found a forgotten pine branch and a few seashells. I placed them next to me too, their real value revealed itself to me just now. In the bare room, where everything was bolted to the floor, painted the same colour and whitewashed with cold lamps, all these little things reminded me of the holiday ahead, if I was not detained again on my release day.

To Galya Rymbu, who is with her husband and son in Lviv

a woman burning her hijab in the square, raising her arms like a flaming bird

a woman who was tortured to death by the military, raped and dismembered, filmed and uploaded to the Internet

a woman hiding her son in a cellar against imminent mobilisation

a woman who has lost her son and considers him a hero because his death made no sense

a woman leading a support group for activists with PTSD

a woman who slit her wrists in pre-trial detention and hasn't seen her children for six months

a woman who left the country because of a criminal case, with a suitcase packed by someone else's hands.

a woman who woke up to cops bursting into her flat

a woman woken up by the sound of an air-raid alarm.

a woman sitting in the basement listening to soldiers walking around in her house

a woman raped in front of her child

a woman abducted by the security forces and taken to a place from which one never returns

a woman who has suffered a miscarriage because of stress

a woman who found out that she has cervical cancer twenty-four hours after she became a refugee

a woman whose home burned down in front of her eyes

a woman fighting for her right to wear a hijab to university classes

a woman forced to deny her own god

a woman forced to acknowledge other people's gods

a woman forced to recognise herself as a citizen of an aggressor state

a woman treated as if she was an occupied territory

a woman who has been examined for inappropriate tattoos

a woman whose only belongings are her toothbrush and none of her family members

a woman whose home is in the crawlspace

a woman whose destiny to be beaten is ensured by the state

a woman who no longer has money for pads and tampons

a woman whose private parts have been damaged first by childbirth and then by violence

a woman dying on a stretcher outside a bombed-out maternity hospital

a woman nursing an infant in a cellar

a woman who changed her passport from Russian to Ukrainian and was blown up by a landmine

a woman who wrote about dictatorship and war, pierced by shrapnel during a reportage

a woman sewing up men's military uniforms to fit her

a woman who stitches up other people's wounds and removes splinters

a woman putting up anti-war notes and serving time for it

a woman who sleeps with the stranger who determines whether she will have a home

a woman staring at a fixed point with a motionless gaze

a woman who closes her eyes and imagines herself chest-deep in golden water

a woman who notices a slight tingling sensation all over her body

a woman remembering her maidenhood and smiling to herself

a woman who feels at home everywhere

a woman who sees other women and waves to them across national borders

a woman who remembers which foods she really likes

a woman surrounded by three generations of other women

women who have not been beaten

not raped

not tortured

women

whose bodies are not worn out by politics and war

whose voices sing in all languages

as if they were native speakers

I like the fact that this text does not pretend to represent some unique experience, is not some kind of first testimony, but just the opposite, it gets lost among other similar texts, it is just another text in the line of women's camp and prison prose.

I'm due a call today, I'm going to ask my husband to bring me Ginzburg's *Journey into the Whilwind* or Yarmysh's book *The Incredible Events in Women's Cell Number 3*. I want to surround myself with other people's experiences, so that I know that I've gotten off easy so far, and not to catastrophise. But at the same time not deprive myself of the right to describe this myself, even though it is not yet prison (and many people are in prison now).

I understand very well now what political prisoner Alla Gutnikova writes, telling us that her house arrest is not so bad compared to prison time. Us poor girls, even in such situations we

feel like impostors, taking someone else's place. Or rather the opposite, not occupying some "real" place. A really hard one, unlike ours. A woman's place in the kitchen, a woman's place in the resistance, a woman's place in prison.

Before dinner the doctor came to see me because I had been admitted to the detention centre with otitis and a fever. I was taken to the medical room on the floor above. I was given a thermometer and sat on a chair. Our silence was interrupted by the doctor asking if I liked the curtains in his office. To be honest, I didn't like the beige sequined curtains at all, but I was so happy to see something other than the dirty blue walls that I nodded in response to the question. The doctor, I don't know whether out of boredom or compassion, was in no rush to get me out.

He told me that he had brought curtains from home to make the room cosier, then showed me a green sofa and a picture of a landscape to confirm his words. While the temperature was being measured, he questioned me about how I got here. He told me about his education and how he was living in retirement and how he liked his job. I was grateful even for this conversation and actively supported him, finally clarifying whether Alyokhina was in Ward 7. Masha and I were put in different cells on purpose, to prevent us from brightening up our sentence with interesting conversation.

—Oh, we often have Alyokhina here, well, my job is to treat people, not to judge whether they are good or bad, we had Leonid Navalny here three times, yes, I remember him, he was polite. Honestly, this is the first time I've heard of anyone being here for what you're serving for.

I was still running a fever. I felt strange, it was as if reality and I could never coincide in the same place and time. I was given Analgin and glycine and headed back to my cell.

After dinner I thought that there should always be as many testimonies as possible, because only a few texts would reach the future. The point here is not even recognition, but that every text about terror is an arrow that is fired, thin and fragile, and most often it misses or is intercepted in flight. Few texts hit the target, few reach the other's hands, it's always about luck and a succession of circumstances. You have to use your attempts to increase your overall chances.

as stipulated
the length of the mass grave
should be 20 m
width 3 m
height 2.3 m

the creation of this document
was of a planned nature

irregular units
of the civil defence
will be carrying out the following works:

preparation of a pit for the construction of a mass grave
preparation of a pit for burying corpses (remains)
preparation of bodies (remains) of the deceased for burial
laying of the first row of bodies (remains) of the deceased in mass graves
filling the first row of bodies (remains) of the deceased
laying the second row of bodies (remains) of the deceased in mass graves to be buried
filling the second row of bodies (remains) of the deceased
filling of mass graves

preparation of the document
was of a planned nature

the burial of 1,000 people
would require the involvement of
two pieces of engineering equipment
and 16 personnel from the teams tasked with
the emergency burial of corpses

work on the development of
this document

was of a planned nature
in the light of the new requirements of
development of the state

said the spokesman

everything goes according to plan
we do not abandon our own

said the representative

work brothers
so that there is no country no pogost
so that the bodies
spell out the letter Z
according to the GOST plan

said the representative

Tonight, as usual, I spoke Russian.

We sat in a small room and drank vodka. A friend said: "It's time for us to leave the country."
My husband said: "We've got to make the most of our medical insurance and make sure we're
in good health before we leave."

I have a toothache and I don't feel like going to the dentist.

My left ovary hurts and I don't want to go to the gynaecologist.

I'm scared.

I've put off going to the doctor for so long that now it's not just a trip, but a body-oriented farewell to a motherland, a fucking motherland whose boundless body terrifies me when I'm left alone with it.

It's time for us to leave the country.

I never took that phrase seriously, but I've been hearing it every day for ten years from different people and I always smile – 'it's not about me'. I am from Omsk, I grew up with the phrase "don't try to leave Omsk", but I did.

If you don't treat a tooth in time, its root will start to die. What if the same thing happens to me? One day I might wake up and not remember how to say this in Russian. I could stay in Russia, wake up and still forget what it's called in Russian, like that feeling when you enter the lift at your house and it says "1488", or that feeling when a friend writes to you that she is being followed, how do you call that in Russian, in the language of your homeland?

You have to make it in time to cure everything. Go to bed with a mouthful of earth. Put a warm steppe fox on my belly. I've always felt homeless and family-less, but when you said "it's time for us to leave the country", my heart started racing at several points at once, they could be connected by an invisible line and form a path, but I won't connect them.

I am afraid of becoming a migrant. I can see what it means to become a migrant. I will lose everything, even though I have nothing. No one will understand how I really talk, what complicated beautiful thoughts are in my head. In a foreign language, I will never be able to express that. I will become invisible with my cured tooth, healthy ovary and inflated ego. Seriously, that's what scares you?

Sometimes I feel so spacious, so timeless. I'm not intimidated by jail or by being frisked or by violence. And then I shrink sharply into one aching heavy point, the same point I feel somewhere deep beneath my teeth and somewhere deep in my stomach. I turn into a throbbing wormhole – and I am not outside my homeland. That's how I feel.

I have recently learned a few names of repressed and political prisoners in case all the lists are removed. If everyone learns a little bit, they won't be able to eliminate our memory. Too bad it doesn't work that way.

They write speeches to the President about Polovtsians and Pechenegs. Speechwriters and referents don't go out on Saturdays for the weekend, Saturday is the busiest day of work. Their texts are just work.

"It's a good thing we didn't have time to take out a mortgage," I say.

"We'll live together, the three of us, at first, it's cheaper and easier," I say.

"You're an idiot," I say.

"It's time for us to leave the country," I say.

"I'm not leaving," I say.

"I'll write this text forever so I won't leave, I won't go to the doctor, I'll rot myself alive in my native land," I say.

"What the fuck for," I say.

"I've caused a tragedy here," I say.

"Home is where you are alive," I say.

"I'm a patriot," I say.

"I'm scared," I say.

Why are politicians afraid to say that they are scared?

Why are texts like this one considered shameful and defeatist?

Why is the sense of loss not considered emancipatory?

One day I will wake up and not remember how to say this in Russian. And there will be nothing scary about it.

[...]