

Yovshan Annagurban

An unborn rabbit under the ingrown sagebrush

There is no war in my country, but war,
I fled it a long time ago,
forced to heal my wounds, which are still bleeding,
and there is no Covid-19 either, but people do die,
it's pneumonia, says the government,
and of course, the World Health Organization confirms it,
there is no war in my country, but war,
against the people and me,
a banned poet since 1993,
silenced alongside his indifferent nation,
turned out to be a victim of bad education,
so I left my country instead of fighting back with arms,
as I was not that Turkmen on horseback any longer
who died defending his homeland in Gazawat,
who defeated his enemies, being murdered in Gökdepe,
as I was a chickenhearted half soviet young poet.

They tried to convince me, of course,
they tried to persuade me,
saying do not challenge the existing paradigm,
they tried to intimidate me too,
ridiculing and questioning my boyish aim,
there is no war in my country, but war,
since my teenage-hood which I fought back in cotton fields,
after the man made canals were built,

when the land was poisoned and gang-raped,
where people's mindset were regularly reshaped,
there was so-called developed socialism then for decades,
there was the Soviet Union with its Pravda,
which collapsed in front of my eyes,
despite that some generals forced people to say yes,
first of all the first one of them,
then the second one who was not so polite,
they told me you, dear poet,
don't push the edges,
don't pee against the wind,
which is strong enough yet,
and might be strong during our lifetime,
because the people are not ready,
and plus, the elite is so greedy,
they smiled not thinking of the abyss many might end up in,
reminding me of the traps such as free gas and electricity...

And the head of the General Persecutor office,
an iron lady told me to regret, describing me as a backstabber,
then the other one who'd die in prison later,
all of them demanded me to condemn myself,
in front of the people, on my knee,
if I loved my children and wanted them to see.

And I did it.
And I said it.
Of course, I am the one who is worse than the backstabber,
and I am the one who is worse than any traitor in known history,
who was ready to sell his country for nothing,
and the leader of our nation,
who wanted to seem like a savior,
was over the moon,
because it meant that I won't write about his wrongdoings anymore,
there is no war in my country, but war.

And I wanted to tell them that I was not to blame,
the teacher who taught me to read is to blame,
since then I couldn't help it,
I couldn't pretend not to see what I saw,

I couldn't pretend not to hear what I heard,
it was not me the one to blame,
it was my father, and the KGB knew it,
so he finally was kicked out of school,
where he taught for forty six years in a row,
and the bullies said that it was so cool.

When I was born on victory day,
my father, a young teacher wanted to name me Yengish,
which means Victory, but my grandma,
lost her eight children out of ten,
said no way, son,
because she didn't want to seem an arrogant lady,
she didn't want to be at odds with god,
rather intending to ease him saying,
her grandson is not he, he is it – a plant,
a yovshan, sagebrush,
which grows on steppes,
leave it to me almighty,
don't be angry with us!

And the message seems to have been accepted,
at least so far,
since I was twice released from prison,
since I managed to leave the country,
since I managed to smuggle my children,
so it was dangerous for me to stay,
but I wasn't the backstabber of the people,
I wasn't the traitor to them at all,
I might be the one for the for-life President,
I might be the one for his inner circle, I'll bet,
but I wasn't any kind of threat for the people,
and everybody knew it.

Maybe, I wouldn't have condemned myself,
maybe, I wouldn't have done it ever,
where it turned out to be the way of escaping,
as if it helped us so many disappeared in prison,
dying there before and during the pandemic,
even though my case was a bit different,

so I was talking to the walls of the cell,
talking to metal beds and the door,
I was even talking to those pigeons,
who greeted me through the barred window,
who shared my bread without dipping it in tea,
and the walls had been talking to me back,
saying repeatedly do it, Yovshan,
because it was not true and won't be so by repeating,
you're not the traitor, they are,
and my grandma was saying it to me,
and my grandpa was saying it to me,
and an uncle of mine who was killed in Belarus,
who said I should do it for his sake too,
and they had insisted on it.

And there were bullies always,
if there were not present but in my head,
they were insisting too,
saying you're the traitor,
not a poet at all,
you won't be a voice of voiceless, never,
it's just wishful thinking,
the people don't need your voice and won't,
don't bother yourself anymore, don't!

And they were so persistent,
they said don't deceive yourself anymore,
people won't read your poems, they said,
because they boycott reading,
especially the serious ones,
which might give them a headache,
don't you know your own peers,
brothers or peers of your brothers,
don't you see what their priorities are,
brothers who grow up under one blanket,
fight over their father's tumble-down cottage,
which has not seen any repair for forty years.

There is no war in my country, but war,
because people are dying young and more,

people are struggling for decades,
due to unemployment or forced labor,
where you never make a living,
where you never make ends meet,
and one-quarter of the population went through jails,
one-quarter of them managed to bribe judges just in time,
one-quarter of them escaped being a slave-worker in Turkey,
elders say thank god, there is no war in the country,
there is tea and bread at least, though it's not true anymore,
there is no war in my country, but war.

There is no war in my country, but war,
there is no Covid-19 either, and people do die,
so once upon a time, they were so happy,
because they had free gas and water for a while,
they had almost free gasoline and electricity,
and, if you said let's not be fooled or so,
they wouldn't have listened to you at all,
saying how dare you or just go.

And the KGB was saying there is Afghanistan,
on the other side of the border,
where there is an ongoing war for decades,
and there is China with its walls and loans,
there are Russia and Iran
which managed to silence their people more successfully,
and they do not want us to have our freedom,
or our long-awaited statehood,
they want us to be dependent on them,
so they want us to fight against each other,
they want us to destroy our brothers and sisters,
and there is a great game as always,
and our savior should be flexible,
no one wouldn't want to be in his shoes,
so don't take all of this personally,
don't lose your energy in vain,
we don't want you to die or live in pain.

And there were bullies among our beloved authors too,
who always have been part of the propaganda,

who used to say what they expected to say,
some of them might be named after great khans,
some of them were namesakes of prophets,
or carried one of the 99 beautiful names of god,
and some of them had been calling the authorities,
saying don't let him get away this time,
don't repeat the same mistake twice,
because he is really the yovshan-tovshan,
(yovshan means sagebrush, tovshan means a rabbit),
if you'll let him get away and give this theme,
you won't be able to get him back ever,
some poets had begged them saying that,
even the KGB officers couldn't understand them.

Before I'd been bullied by some of my peers,
who might have been dropped from their cradles,
as our teacher used to describe them
when they didn't do their homework,
so, on my way home, they'd shouted saying,
there is sagebrush not grown up yet,
and we saw under it an unborn rabbit,
which ran away like hell...

Now I know how the authorities do us quell,
do I understand how their madhouses work,
do I see how their trolls have been doing well,
as they've been so good at trolling so far.
As result, the government pretend to pay,
and people pretend to be happy,
though nobody trusts it,
while you're corrupted more or less for making money,
while you must be afraid of your blood relatives too,
not only from the state machine,
which was nicknamed a meat grinder,
or the evil jinn already left the lamp he was locked in.

And the place the jinn lives in is a presidential palace now,
actually, he controls your mindset,
the goal is making you a marionette,
most of the people give in without any battle and say:

don't argue with them while you're part of the East,
there is not a supporter, but a cornered beast,
so we think one thing and say it's opposite,
though it's not only our problem as well,
there are no normal human communities anymore,
but prisoners of greedy corporations,
including so many dignitaries everywhere,
whose only mission is to buy or sell,
you can't stand with your pen in front of their machine guns,
so don't try to buy a jail cell for your family in hell.

That's why I said I am the one who is worse than the backstabber,
and I am the one worse than the traitor to his homeland,
maybe I was blind and couldn't see the greatness,
maybe I was deaf and couldn't hear the great leader's healing speeches,
or, maybe, I was one of the narcissist men,
who shares his assumed happiness on social media,
photographed counting dollars on his old metal bed
inherited from his communist dad,
or, maybe I am one of those populist bloggers,
who seem to be the next problem after two-faced politicians,
maybe I am one of the self-righteous young poets,
who are not so happy for the full moon anymore,
and I was deadly wrong saying that there is a war.

There is no war in this world, but war,
as it seems everybody is wounded to some extent,
and who cares if you don't care yourself,
some of them are so destitute, some others are rich,
some of them are at each other's throats,
while most of them tend to destroy themselves in a meaningless fight,
without knowing who or what are their real enemies,
and there are some indications that,
a pen might still really be mightier sometimes,
or might be more harmless than their armored helicopters,
which would destroy lives in an accidental crash,
so I cannot give up while I breathe,
even though I might be as naive as my underpaid trolls,
both of us need some sort of hope for staying alive,
as if we've been that unborn rabbit under the ingrown sagebrush.