EVENT TITLE: Writing and Translating the War in Ukraine

Event Description: Five Eastern European/Balkan Poets discuss how the war in Ukraine has transformed purpose in our work. Each participant will read 1-3 poems and then offer a brief discussion about poetry and/or translation of poetry as it pertains to the war in Ukraine. Panelists offer perspectives from each of their unique home countries/cultures with Croatia, Poland, Ukraine, and Belarus represented.

EVENT CATEGORY: Poetry Craft & Criticism

Event Organizer & Moderator
Peter Burzyński: Peter Burzyński, PhD is currently a post-doctoral Fulbright Scholar in Košice, Slovakia. He is the author of the chapbook A Year Alone inside of Woodland Pattern (2022). He is the son of Polish immigrants who call him on the phone every day.

Event Participants
Ana Božičević: Ana Božičević is a poet, translator, teacher, and occasional singer. She is the author of New Life; Povratak lišća / Return of the Leaves, Selected Poems in Croatian; Joy of Missing Out; the Lambda Award-winning Rise in the Fall, and Stars of the Night Commute.

Olena Jennings: Olena Jennings is author of the poetry collection the Age of Secrets and the novel Temporary Shelter. Her translation with Oksana Lutsyshyna of Kateryna Kalytko's poetry from Ukrainian and her translation of Vasyl Makhno's poetry were recently published. She is founder and curator of Poets of Queens.

Oksana Lutsyshyna: Oksana Lutsyshyna is a Ukrainian writer and poet. She is the author of four books of fiction and four books of poetry, all published in Ukraine. She is currently working as Lecturer in Ukrainian Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, where she teaches Ukrainian language and literature, as well as other Eastern European literatures. She holds a PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of Georgia.
She also translates Ukrainian poetry into English in collaboration with the New York-based poet and writer Olena Jennings.

**Valzhyna Mort:** Valzhyna Mort is the author of Factory of Tears and Collected Body. A recipient of several American and European awards and fellowships, including the Lannan Literary Fellowship, she teaches at Cornell University and writes in English and Belarusian. Her new book is forthcoming.

**Opening Remarks and Housekeeping Announcements**

Good afternoon, and welcome to “Writing and Translating the War in Ukraine.”

Before we get started, a brief administrative note: Matvei Yankelevich will not be joining us as originally planned. We welcome Oksana Lutsyshyna to our panel.

Thank you all for joining us. We find ourselves at a moment when endless wars rage in Gaza and Ukraine. We are here because we have not chosen silence, because war not only informs our inherited histories, but because it also pervades our present and looms heavily over our futures.

The idea for this panel came to me while I was asking much of poetry. As we all watched events in Ukraine unfold horrifically, I found it necessary to write poems about the war. Some on this panel have also made it their mission to promote poems from the frontlines by translating them. The panel came together while searching for representative poets from different Slavonic heritages, who also happened to be friends and poets I knew.

As individuals and as a group, we will discuss how we have approached the topic of the war in Ukraine and war in general as poets and translators.

Our esteemed panel includes: Ana Božičević, Olena Jennings, Oksana Lutsyshyna, and Valzhyna Mort. We have approached the war as outsiders and insiders, translators and observers, but most importantly as poets who personal histories are inextricably linked to the histories of Central and
Eastern Europe, where such tragic histories of war with our closest neighbors continue to occur.

I ask each of my fellow panelists to read one-three poems pertaining to the war and offer a brief explanation of their own poetry and/or their translation of poetry as it pertains to the war in Ukraine.

Participant Initial Remarks:

Olena Jennings:

I’ll start by reading three poems “The Violence of Language,” “Opening a JPG,” and “Not for Entertainment.” They were all written for a project called “Writing Through Violence.”

After the full-scale invasion, I wrote an essay called “Distant Loss,” (Birch Bark) about the sense of helplessness I had been feeling since the war started in 2014. Then I translated poems by Vasyl Makhno, one called “War,” which was published in LA Review of Books just days after the full-scale war started. Since then, I have remained engaged through translation. One translation was done with fellow-panelist Oksana Lutsyshyna. We translated the poetry of Kateryna Kalytko, who has been active in volunteering for war efforts and includes war imagery in her powerful poetry.

Valzhyna Mort:

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Oksana Lutsyshyna:

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Ana Božiĉević:

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Peter Burzyński:
I would like to begin by reading these three poems, “Fields of Flame,” “war/fault,” and “An Eye for an Eye for an I for an I.”

I’ll add to this by saying that I have not translated any poetry from Ukrainian into English or Polish, but the war never leaves my mind. It is a ubiquitous sadness not only because I read about it here and there and see its tragedies every time I turn on Polish TV, but moreover, because I work with many Ukrainian students. Many of them are refugees, others have studied in Slovakia before this war, and a few have lived there since the last war in 2014. All of them are impacted by loss, loneliness, and fear; many of them also hope. They find joy in their studies and everyday lives. I want their voices, their sorrows and struggles to be heard.

**Moderator Questions**

1) In what ways has writing and/or translating the war affected your everyday practice as a poet? Your poetry outside of war poetry, that is. Can you go back to your writing style before the war? Before the war in 2014? Are the changes evident?

2) This is perhaps too difficult a question to ask in public, but I will ask in case someone would like to answer—have the impacts of the war on your friends and family made their way into your work about this subject or do you keep those personal narratives to yourself or at a distance? Do you need some objective distance or do you bring those people with you into those poems?

3) All of us on this panel are multi-lingual language speakers. How do other languages inform your work in English? Your work in your heritage languages?

4) Traditionally, poets have often been involved in the tumultuous and war-torn histories of Eastern Europe and the Balkans. Do you see writing these types of poems as a duty of poetry of witness/reportage poetry or do you have other reasons for creating it? If so, could we talk about those reasons and why they matter to you and your poetry? Do you want to talk
briefly about the history of poetry in Ukraine and why it matters so much now?

**Brief Audience Q&A**