

Course: Transreading Ukrainian poetry: a crimson bush amidst silence  
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### **Vasyl Stus**

Море —  
чорна грудка печалі,  
душа Мефістофеля  
наодинці.  
Терпне рояль  
під пальчиками дівочими,  
і в воду  
падає з кручі земля.  
Шерхлі трави  
вологі пасажі ловлять,  
і стогін стихії  
туманом важким облягло.

\*

Гусне вечір сурою корана,  
і в яру струмка гортанний звук.  
Стільки правди в горлі, стільки мук —  
не переповісти і до рання.

\*

Тоскний тріск у порожнім лісі,  
і пташиний колючий свист.  
Падолист.  
Де ж метелику сісти?

## The Sea

The sea  
A dark fragment of sadness,  
The soul of Mephistopheles  
Solitary.  
The piano endures  
Beneath girlish fingers, falls  
Into the water  
From the rim of the earth.  
The withered grasses  
Capture the damp passages  
The moan of the elements  
Engulfed in fog.

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Evening thickens with a *sura* from the Koran  
A guttural sound streams through the ravine.  
How much truth and anguish lie in the throat?  
Too much to narrate before the morning.

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The morose crackle in the empty forest  
A bird's sharp whistle.  
Leaf fall.  
Where shall the butterfly settle?

## *Вінцасові Кузміцкосу*

Холоднозорий присмерк приуральський  
зростав. Мороз ладнав органні труби,  
і сосни справжніми і знаними здавались,  
як провінційний театральний зал,  
де стільки лживих рухів диригента,  
де стільки нот і профілів фальшивих,  
але ніщо не може заглушити  
холоднозору і сувору вись  
Йогана Себастьяна. Ніч росла,  
і я на ній зростав. Гули вітри,  
тріщав мороз. Гули вітри. Тріщали  
поклоні віти у ялин. Частина  
безсонно кліпала одним червоним оком  
електролампи. Сновигав днювальний,  
ламаючи свій сон під чобітьми.  
Тріщав мороз... Каптьорка. Медсанбат.  
І до убогої аптечки — Вінцас,  
наш батальйонний фельдшер, до реєстру  
дописаний — поміж бинтів і спирту,  
пірамідону, йоду, формідрону,  
мовчазний і врочистий, наче бинт.  
Тріщав мороз. А він, ввімкнувши лампи,  
зшалілий, сновигав між довгих тіней,  
як скалків власної сухої туги,  
й рефлектори на стіну наставляв,  
де оживав на полотні фламандський  
пейзаж.  
Солдатська збіднена палітра  
темнішала в литовській ностальгії,  
і в Вінцаса — освітлену мішень —  
Чурльоніс поціляв голками сосон,  
йдучи гравюрним лісом.  
— Говори,—  
мене просив він,— говори! І мова  
про Вільнюс, про Тараса, про Вільняле  
і Саломею тихо жебоніла,  
струмка тоненько жебоніла шпара,  
похмурий розважаючи пейзаж.  
А він, як бог, затиснений між стін,  
у герметичну схований каптьорку,  
незграбно простягав колючі руки,  
де півметрова Вілія пливла.  
— Розповідай,— просив він,— про Тараса...  
Підводив стелю Гедимінів зойк,  
зростаючи під зорі. Шамотів  
колючий ліс Чурльоніса за вікнами  
та узбережна «Летува» шуміла.  
— Так та не так! — Він кидав свого пензля,  
грів інгалятор, підступав, відходив,

і знову йшов, мовчазний, ув атаку  
на Рюїсдалем зміцнений бар'єр.  
— Тайга уральська — до Литви моєї  
болюче схожа. Оренбург. Шевченко.  
І стільки тут у мене земляків —  
аж до Печори. Справді бо — Вітчизна.  
Заснеш — і волохаті, як клубки,  
намотані віками, глухо бродять  
плоскінні сни. І в горлі волохатіє.  
Розповідай. Розповідай. Кажи ж!

*For Vintsas Kuzmitskas*

The cold stellar glow of the Priuralsky dusk  
Grew. The frost ordered its organ pipes  
And the pines truly and symbolically seemed  
Like a provincial theatre auditorium  
Where, whatever the bogus gestures of the conductor  
However many fake notes and profiles are struck  
Nothing can drown out the cold eyed, severe glow  
Of Johann Sebastian's cosmos. The night grew  
And I grew within it. The winds blew. The frost crackled.  
The winds blew. The knuckled  
Branches of fir trees crackled. One red eye  
Of an electric lamp blinked sleeplessly illuminating the area. The drowsy orderly  
Broke his dream under his boots...  
The frost crackled.

The store. The *Medsanbat*.<sup>1</sup>

And in addition to the poor first kit,  
Vintsas, our battalion paramedic,  
Ascribed to the register between bandages and alcohol  
Pyramidone, iodine, formidron,  
Silent and solemn himself, like a bandage.  
The frost crackled. He turned on the lamps,  
Crazily and dreaming between the long shadows,  
That were like shards of their own arid longing,  
And the spotlights on the wall delineated,  
Where some old Flemish landscape canvas  
Came to life.

The soldier's impoverished palette  
Darkened with Lithuanian nostalgia,  
While Vintsas made an illuminated target  
Where Čiurlionis<sup>2</sup> aimed pine needles,  
Walking through a forest engraved in darkness.

“Speak”

He asked me, “speak!” And some words  
About Vilnius, about Taras<sup>3</sup>, about the Vilnia<sup>4</sup>

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1

2 [Medical section of the Soviet Armed Forces](#)

2

3 [Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis \(1875-1911\) Lithuanian painter](#)

3

4 [Taras Hryhorovych Shevchenko \(1814-1861\) is Ukraine's national poet.](#)

4

[A river that runs through Belarus and Lithuania](#)

And Salomeja<sup>5</sup> sighed softly,  
A stream slenderly piercing the aperture,  
Of this sombre, enthralling landscape.  
He was like a god sandwiched between walls,  
Hidden in the hermetic store cupboard,  
And awkwardly held out his prickly hands,  
Where the half-meter Vilnia flowed.  
"Tell me," he requested, "about Taras ..."  
Gediminas's<sup>6</sup> scream lifted the ceiling,  
Grew under the stars. The prickly forest  
of Čiurlionis rustled outside the windows  
And the coastal "Letuva" murmured  
"Like that and not like that" - He cast aside his brush,  
Warmed his inhaler, approached, turned back,  
And went again, silent, in his assault  
on the dyke strengthened by Ruisdael.<sup>7</sup>  
"The Ural taiga is painfully similar  
To my Lithuania. Orenburg. Shevchenko.  
And I have so many compatriots here,  
Going all the way to Pechora.  
Indeed, because it is the Fatherland.  
You all asleep – and, hairy as coils of fibre,  
Wound over, over centuries, your dreams  
Roam insensate flattened. And your throat too grows hairy.  
Tell me. Tell me. Speak!"

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5

Salomėja Bainskaitė-Bu  
ienė, ( 1904 – 1945) was a [Lithuanian](#) poet.

6

[Gediminas \(1275-1341\) Grand Duke of Lithuania](#)

7

[Jacob Isaackszoon van Ruisdael \(1629-1682\) was a Dutch artist.](#)



## ЗИМОВІ ДЕРЕВА

Згорнули руки — не викричатись  
(як викричатись — без рук?).  
Засніженим віттям витишитись  
тополі і не беруться.  
Спочили ясні, мов свічі,  
холодом, як вогнем,  
применшені і порідшталі  
з грудневим недобрим днем.  
Спочили до дна у роздумах,  
наповнені, наче амфори,  
піщаним повітрям морозним  
української Африки.  
З них кожна за розпач вища,  
як герметична ніч,  
цурупалком нервів свище  
крізь праліси протиріч.  
І лячно, немов антена  
ловить радарною кроною  
візерунчастий день,  
гаптований криком вороновим,  
гаптований дзвоном трамваїв,  
гострим сміхом дітей  
і круглим міліцейським бісером  
на розі Хрещатика.

## Winter Trees

They folded their arms and didn't scream  
(How could they without moving their limbs?)  
But settled within their snowy twigs:  
The poplars were unmoved,  
Resting, radiant as candles  
Whose cold flame  
Was thinned and weakened  
By the harsh December day  
And immersed utterly in their reflections:  
Amphorae brimming with the frosted sandy air  
Of this Ukrainian Africa.  
Each of them was beyond desperation  
A hermetically sealed night  
Where the branched nerve flails  
Against some primal forest  
An antenna that frighteningly catches  
The repeated patterns of day,  
With its radar corona:  
The embroidery of a crow's cry,  
The clarity of children's laughter  
And the round warble of a police whistle  
On the corner of Kreshchatyk Street

**Sylvia Plath**

**Winter Trees**

The wet dawn inks are doing their blue dissolve.  
On their blotter of fog the trees  
Seem a botanical drawing --  
Memories growing, ring on ring,  
A series of weddings.

Knowing neither abortions nor bitchery,  
Truer than women,  
They seed so effortlessly!  
Tasting the winds, that are footless,  
Waist-deep in history --

Full of wings, otherworldliness.  
In this, they are Leda.  
O mother of leaves and sweetness  
Who are these pietàs?  
The shadows of ringdoves chanting, but chasing nothing.

## Daddy

You do not do, you do not do  
Any more, black shoe  
In which I have lived like a foot  
For thirty years, poor and white,  
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

Daddy, I have had to kill you.  
You died before I had time——  
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,  
Ghastly statue with one gray toe  
Big as a Frisco seal

And a head in the freakish Atlantic  
Where it pours bean green over blue  
In the waters off beautiful Nauset.  
I used to pray to recover you.  
Ach, du.

In the German tongue, in the Polish town  
Scraped flat by the roller  
Of wars, wars, wars.  
But the name of the town is common.  
My Polack friend

Says there are a dozen or two.  
So I never could tell where you  
Put your foot, your root,  
I never could talk to you.  
The tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.  
Ich, ich, ich, ich,  
I could hardly speak.  
I thought every German was you.  
And the language obscene

An engine, an engine  
Chuffing me off like a Jew.  
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.  
I began to talk like a Jew.  
I think I may well be a Jew.

The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna  
Are not very pure or true.  
With my gipsy ancestress and my weird luck  
And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack  
I may be a bit of a Jew.

I have always been scared of you,  
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.  
And your neat mustache  
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.  
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You——

Not God but a swastika  
So black no sky could squeak through.  
Every woman adores a Fascist,  
The boot in the face, the brute  
Brute heart of a brute like you.

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,  
In the picture I have of you,  
A cleft in your chin instead of your foot  
But no less a devil for that, no not  
Any less the black man who

Bit my pretty red heart in two.  
I was ten when they buried you.  
At twenty I tried to die  
And get back, back, back to you.  
I thought even the bones would do.

But they pulled me out of the sack,  
And they stuck me together with glue.  
And then I knew what to do.  
I made a model of you,  
A man in black with a Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.  
And I said I do, I do.  
So daddy, I'm finally through.  
The black telephone's off at the root,  
The voices just can't worm through.

If I've killed one man, I've killed two——  
The vampire who said he was you  
And drank my blood for a year,  
Seven years, if you want to know.  
Daddy, you can lie back now.

There's a stake in your fat black heart  
And the villagers never liked you.  
They are dancing and stamping on you.  
They always knew it was you.  
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.

## Winter Trees

Vasyl Stus was only 47 when he died in a Soviet Labour camp in the Urals. He had spent much of his life inside the wire compounds of the GULAG, hewing rocks in Magadan and faced weekly interrogations from the KGB while incarcerated. He spent almost two decades in camps, including a ten year sentence for membership of the Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union, and his death occurred when he was on hunger strike. Stus's poetry is that of a man isolated from the society in which he lives because it does not share his values. He knew that the majority of his fellow soviet Ukrainian citizens were acting out a charade, either out of fear or simply because they were only interested in *kovbasy*, sausages. Ukraine in particular had experienced enormous demographic losses due to deaths from famines, particularly that of 1932-33 which is known as the Holodomor, and mass executions during the soviet era; almost every family had a relative who had died at the hands of a forced famine, in a labour camp, or from a secret police bullet. The public loyalty the regime demanded was, for some people, stifling; it meant that they could not grieve openly for those they had lost or talk about how they had died. Equally, it had an affect on the arts, which had to comply with the aesthetic standards required by the government and, of course, the persecution of people for their beliefs continued until the regime fell.

Stus's early poetry was attacked as decadent by a literary critic working with the KGB because it avoided crass sloganeering and, of course, the Soviets were particularly afraid of Ukrainian poetry which threatened the myth of a more advanced Russian culture. *The Sea*, a delicately observed landscape sketch hovering on the edge of meaning, was the kind of work that stirred the antenna of the KGB. *For Vintsas Kuzmitskas*, a poem set within his military service in the Urals, shows how even within the confines of the Soviet army a medic with artistic ambitions could find a measure of freedom and explore a national identity that was not soviet.

Stus's response to the pressure to adopt a false persona was to affirm his identity in opposition to the society in which he dwelled. Ultimately, he renounced his citizenship saying, "To be a Soviet citizen is to be a slave. I am not suited to such a role. The more tortures and cruelty I experience, the greater my resistance to a system that makes a mockery of people and their basic rights." He and his fellow dissidents were as isolated as Sylvia Plath within the bell jar of her own heightened agonised imagination.

Plath may not strike you as an apt comparison to Stus. Yet both poets wrote collections, and poems, called *Winter Trees* and both were isolated in different ways from the society in which they dwelled and identified with an oppressed group. The poplar in Stus's poem functions as a symbol of Ukraine immobile and frozen but aware. The trees in Plath's poem are of course feminine but "Truer than women". Plath created her own personal cosmos in which images of resurrection by suicide exist alongside nightmarish metaphors of male oppression and vengeance. *Daddy*, one of her most disturbing poems, compares her suffering with the Holocaust and *Winter Trees* creates a feminine collective with a natural continuity that contrasts with her own plight.

Both poets found a measure of liberty within their own different forms of confinement via their ability to reimagine their world poetically. Their poetry speaks to us now at this time when many of us have had to find, and are still finding, ways to cope with our voluntarily self isolation due to covid.

## Your Exercise

This assignment takes us back to where we began, our voluntary imprisonment due to 'lockdowns'. We have all, since the beginning of the pandemic, experienced self isolation. It may not of course be as horrific as the "black shoe" of Plath's *Daddy* or the GULAG and KGB cells inflicted on Stus. Yet these poetries show us how we can all "be bounded in a nutshell" yet have an infinite space. Your task is to use your experience of isolation to create a poem which celebrates liberty. You could:

- play with narratives from classical or other poetries - "Covid's Metamorphoses" is one idea I am toying with
- write the opening poem of a modern day Decameron with ten friends writing ten poems and sharing them over the web
- Focus on the views from your house or apartment and remake what you see or simply narrate it

Alternatively, you could write a poem which places some aspect of your own identity within a wider, shared narrative. It is up to you.