

The Mother meets the Son on the Road



“Where are you going, Oleksiy, my own son, my darling,
where are you going so early?”

“Out to the orchard, my mother, my dear thing,
To bring you a sprig of wild cherry.
And the pig needs his dinner, sweet mother, my dearest,
And you need some herbs for the stock pot.
Well, don’t you?”

“Oh, where is your rifle, Oleksiy, my own son,
Why are you just in your t-shirt?”
“So I’m harmless to soldiers, dear mother, my heartling,
Empty handed, I’m innocent as sunlight.
Not even my i-Phone – now that takes some doing!”
“Oh, put on your new boots, my dearest Oleksiy,
There’s glass in the orchard, sharp rubble and pig-shit.”
“Old shoes are poor shoes, new boots are warlike.
Let’s keep them for special, for weddings and triumphs.”

The silence that follows.

First a great rumble of an armoured car.

Shouting, then shots.

The cry. The squealing of the pig.

The silence.

I crawl on my hands and knees,

Oleksiy, Oleksiy.

No sound but the threnody of bees.

Oleksiy, Oleksiy.

How can I bury you,

Hand broken, heart broken

Oleksiy, Oleksiy

Who is this walking, alone and weary?
Out of the sunset, head bowed, defenceless.
Blood on his jacket, smears on his cheek line.
His shoes are broken, his clothes torn to pieces.
“Who has done this to you, sweet-spoken stranger?
The devils who gunned down my own son, my darling Oleksiy?”
“Devils? No, mother, they too are children,
Their mothers kneel daily weeping by icons.
Mother, forgive them, they know not what they do.
Come, Mother, we have work to finish before sundown,
Give me that shovel, go, find his best shirt, bring that fine linen
Treasured ‘gainst his wedding, yes -
The crucifix his father left, oil for anointing.
Go, mother, bustle, there will be time for weeping.”

The day fades, the work done, the burial is over.
Leaving a neat grave, shaped like a young man.
Ready for tending.
“Sit down, sweet stranger, here’s tea, and vodka,
Soup, bread, some bacon, a bed made for Oleksiy,
Clean sheets this morning. You are so weary.”



“No, mother, sweet heart. My people are waiting.
The moment is coming,
a cupload of suffering held for my taking,
not to be evaded. if I am to save them.”

“Take something for comfort
A hip-flask, a sandwich, his jacket, his rifle.
Let me give you his iPhone-
His most treasured possession.”

“No, mother, no creature assuages this agony.
I face it alone, but one gift you can give me.”

She fetches a basin, a towel, some sweet ointment.
Kneels down, and washes, dries and anoints
The feet of the stranger. Then Oleksiy’s good socks, his *hiking* socks,
And the boots, newly broken, which conform wholly
To the feet of the atoner, going on to Golgotha.