

## IDA BÖRJEL

interviewed by David Buuck

**DB:** Tell me about your most recent book, *Call Home (Ringa hem)* and how it came about?

**IB:** *Ringa hem (Call Home)* is a documentary poetry book, made of intercepted phone calls from Russian soldiers in Ukraine to their families: they are calling their mom, their dad, their babushka, their partner. The Ukrainian security services GRU and HUR have been publishing excerpts online since March 2022, and they've continually been translated into English by Dmitri Masinski at [wartranslated.com](http://wartranslated.com). In my book, the last word goes to a Ukrainian soldier lying on his stomach in the Donbas forest, hiding, waiting, recording; whispering his celebration of life.

It is a raw book, violent. A chronicle of Russian fascist and warmongering culture, exposed in its most intimate setting: the private phone call in a time of despair—or delirium. The Russian soldiers speak openly; some boast about war crimes and torture, many are terrified and they are suffering the consequences of bad leadership and corruption, a dysfunctional army where human life—be it Ukrainian or Russian—is rated very low. The snatches of conversations also convey how the fascist warmongering Russian culture runs deep, into the bones of the mothers: one soldier's mom refuses in the name of patriotism to believe that her son is killing anything but satanic fascists, another despises her son for wanting to leave the meat grinder. A wife asks for looted goods, a father and a son discuss the possible earnings from looted car parts. Economy is one main motivation, it seems, next to bloodthirst or obedience out of fear. Corruption is everywhere—there is even trading in dead soldiers—

if it wasn't so horrible it'd be laughably close to Tjittikovs trading in Gogol's *Dead Souls*. The mental stability of the soldiers decreases rapidly over time.

Why me? From the moment of Russia's full scale invasion on Feb 24 I was glued to the news feeds in social media, I had no intent to write about it since who am I—a Swedish, non Russian or Ukrainian speaking poet—to write about a war in a country where I haven't sat foot? Staying silent would've been the easier way out. But I found both an urge and the mandate to act as a fellow human being. And I knew I had the craft to transform the conversations into a literary format. I wrote in solidarity, against Russia's unlawful war. As an act of witnessing, and to expose the intimate war language in my own mother tongue. Also, I live in a democracy free enough to see such a book being published.

Let me add a shout out to my colleagues and friends that took the time to read and discuss the manuscript, especially to Sergey Lebedev, Julia Musakovska and my editor Mikael Nydahl for their fact-checking, consent and corroboration. One aggravating circumstance was not knowing my own blind spots in making this book, how I myself am affected by the glare of Russian imperialism, and where I was faltering, they set me straight.

**DB:** In both your postface and the introduction by Sergey Lebedev there is a focus on the historical conflation in Russian discourse of the “perpetrator-victim,” which has been used to justify all kinds of atrocities. Given that the bulk of your book uses leaked conversations from (mostly) young, conscripted Russian soldiers in Ukraine, how do you think about such material, which of course can render certain perpetrators as worthy of our sympathy? (Not that I'm suggesting an

oversimplified or Manichean representation of “bad/evil” Russians and “innocent, pure” Ukrainians would be better!)

**IB:** Yes, but sympathy is not an end point in the face of war.

Lebedev points at the magic of the phenomenon: when the perpetrator is acknowledged as a victim, impunity is near. *Ringa hem* gives voice to the ones who, from Russia’s point of view, were supposed to be silent. The ones who, also in an Agambian sense, are easily sacrificed by the dictator in Kreml along with the majority of the Russian people. The cannon fodder.

We listen to (read) the words of men in the jaws of death. Surely these presumably last words can awake a whole range of emotions, sympathy being one of them, sympathy for the young, poor or fooled, but that won’t save any Ukrainian lives or stop the war crimes that are being committed as we speak.

What sympathy does to the sympathizer might be another valid question here. In my poetry I insist on the dialogue with the unbearable, in all its complexity and disturbance, as opposed to simplification and semi-digested one liners. As a fellow human being, I say these aggressors need to be stopped and held accountable for their vicious crimes.

Another gut-wrenching aspect is the way parents and partners are responding to their loved ones in despair, which gives a hint of not only how Ukrainians and the incitement of the war is being perceived from within Russia, but also of how committing war crimes for a bit of money is being legitimized. It is fascist, hateful and cynical. Fascist also in the sense that it appears to be better to have a dead son than a weak one.

As translating and editing the material was its own kind of struggle, since I felt growing sense of hatred and disgust against a culture that through its actions made me wish death upon young men, I wanted to say my piece in a postface, “Victim Hares in the Hall of Mirrors,” spinning on the common nickname “zajtjonok,” or bunny, echoing through the conversations, “bunny” for a son or boyfriend—the hypocrisy struck me as infantilizing and ridiculous, so I traced the images of the hare in slavic cultural history and into the anti-war poems of Velimir Chlebnikov (there’s a whole book written about his hares and rabbits). The hare as a two-faced trickster rhymes with the core image of victimhood within Russian culture as described by Sergey Lebedev in the preface, or by Oksana Zabuzhko, quoted in the postface: the blame game, all over... This sense of impunity needs to be dealt with at the Hague, for starters.

There’s another aspect here: my responsibility and concerns were directed toward the Ukrainian witnesses, the ones who cannot speak since they have been murdered. Raped, then murdered, murdered by a grenade whilst hiding in a basement with their mom, or slayed with their hands tied to their backs, or crushed together with hundreds of other sheltering women and children at the bombing of the Mariupol Theatre on March 16, 2022. The unjustly attacked Ukrainians are the ones who deserve and need us to act on our sympathy. They above all are the ones I wanted to protect and treat respectfully.

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from *Ringa hem* (*Call Home*)

April 19

*you do not kill civilians*

My son don't lose your fighting spirit  
if you had seen what they are doing there  
know that you are making a noble effort  
remember that and tell everyone

What we do kill civilians children

No you are not killing civilians and children

Believe me

You kill fascists from hell believe me

No

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**DB:** How do you approach the potential challenges of working with appropriated text, whether in this project or other documentary works? What if any ethical questions arise when using appropriated materials within the fields of documentary or conceptual poetics?

**IB:** There are ethical dilemmas around every corner, beneath each and every other word! I try to stay open and to deal with them to the best of my ability and when I get dizzy I ask my first-responder reader to have a look. He can't lie about literature, which is a comfort.

But really, my concerns involve not only representation, for instance; the sincerity of handling others' voices demands my wariness down to the tiniest details of punctuation marks, word nuances, line breaks and book covers.

Comedy is a hazard. That's why I reduced and made a cultural translation of the swear words in *Ringa hem*. If I would have kept them, the result of transferring them into a book of poetry would be the laughter of the reader and not that I'm against having fun, but in this case the reader could easily laugh it off, rejecting the gravity of the matter. Not taking these soldiers seriously would've been yet another violation against the victims.

That being said, may I flip this? It amazes me how in poetry we can embrace and make space for so much paradox, awkwardness, truth and enigma. A way of, to speak with the Swedish author Birgitta Trotzig, trying to convey messages in protest to the automatic readings of

perceptions due to propaganda, exhaustion, ignorance or laziness—the human condition of not giving a damn about others.

**DB:** You have said that your work could be split into two primary kinds of projects: “literary activism” (primarily via documentary poetry) and “independent writing” (however conceptual or experimental). Of course, I assume there’s not a clear separation but perhaps your choice of materials in any given project (appropriated/archival/found text vs, say, more personal or “poetic” content) produces different methods for crafting material into poetic form. Indeed, you’ve worked in a number of different modes (if not “styles”), including appropriated language, research-based projects, performance and video. Do the methods of composition and/or formal considerations “follow” from the specific subject matter or modes of inquiry in each case, or is it more that you’re just inclined to explore different approaches to poetry from book to book?

**IB:** You know, being an involuntary entrepreneur, trying to make ends meet through having a sole proprietorship, I don’t have a HR department, a marketing strategy department or a financial department to speak of. I also don’t make plans for books to happen, or pick subjects from a jar. We are reasoning here, but when I write poetry it doesn’t start with reason but rather deeply felt reactions to events in their linguistic predicaments. By now, after twenty years of writing, I might recognize the cognitive landscape, but there’s no map. Each encounter, be it a stiff juridical issue, world crumbling finance bullshit, the jargon of a talk show on the radio in the Swedish periphery or a war language, puts its own demands on the poetic work. Sometimes I picture myself being a Houdini, suffocating inside someone else’s offensive language, trying to find a way out. The struggle and the exit being the poetry book.

Cut back to reality: when I apply the label literary activism, I do so in relation to work with an acute and clearly stated political aim. As with translations of Belarusian and Ukrainian poets, as well as editorial work with the literary anthologies *Ett år i Belarus* (“One Year in Belarus”) and *Under Ukrainas öppna himmel* (“Under the Open Sky in Ukraine”), a literary activism made possible by informal networks of trust and solidarity where people help each other out in handling the lack of knowledge or infrastructure for work coming from silenced places and people. Less obvious, but related are my poetry books such as *Ringa hem*, or my just about finished documentary poetry book about Palestine—*Röd anemon* (“Red anemone”) life and language under occupation.

The bulk of literary activism work I have done is my way of answering the question What do I do with my privileges and my freedom? The egoistic bonus of that being a tiny space kept intact for my uncompromising creativity in a cloud of unknowing, as in *MA*, or my ongoing mole pile scribbling.

**DB:** Although *MA* is not a new book for you, it is new to English-language readers. Can you talk about the project and its method of composition?

**IB:** The avalanche of work with *MA* began after a yearlong silence. I was in a dark place, mourning. A dark place or rather a mud gray discontinuum, with a lost faith in language. I had experienced something unspeakable, the loss of a child, and I couldn't find an answer to the question If language cannot hold back death from our loved ones, then what is there to say? For a while, almost about to give up writing, I played piano on my keyboard, frantically trying to follow along with the key strokes by Martha Argerich playing Ravel, or Sorrel Doris Hays



playing Henry Cowell in my headphones. It might seem ridiculous now, but back then my thought was—while typing so hard it sounded like rain to someone passing by—that maybe my hands, maybe my fingers have a muscular memory of how to write, just maybe there will be poems to pan in the nonsense noise of refusal?

Then I came across Inger Christensen's fibonacci genesis *Alphabet* (translated into English by Susanna Nied). It gave me back my faith in reading and so I started to copy it word by word. Her perception of language and art as a natural phenomenon, and a human being as a coincidental location of production spoke to me. Maybe there can still be poetry, I thought.

“Apricot trees exist, apricot trees exist”... that didn't ring quite true to my depressive state of mind though, where I was questioning the present and I saw no future horizon. So I started to write back into the cracks, agreeing on the foundation stones of letters, but speaking in the past tense. A temporal mark of mourning, of depression. I allowed myself, through my loss, to write about the realm of the dead, of the traumas I had experienced, or learned about, seen in documentary films, heard on the news: the maelstrom of images of the surrounding world and human nature that had left its traces inside me. As I wrote, I was turned towards the dead, thinking that if I'm not prepared to read it to them, then I shouldn't write at all.

*MA* is an abecedarian and a requiem, voiced by a mother differing from the stereotypical mourning mother—Jaqueline Rose pinpoints this—who cries in despair, and who might offer solace in the end. In *MA* the mother is raging, without the intellect being shut down: stitching one-page-headstones.

from *MA*, translated by Jennifer Hayashida

Japanese feverflower  
bubble gum, cigarettes, chocolate  
and the war pigeon Winkie's medal  
for WWII efforts  
the bargaining, story of the  
sun-rinsed waterbone boulders  
remember that green does not follow red  
and the insight *the answer*  
*will exile me from the question*  
the snuffed-out  
water and the sickly burning  
water *Maria*  
*Spiridonova*, dumped  
in the Medvedev Forest

war zone; death zone; the junta's list  
there were search parties  
groundwork, hour by hour  
at the horizon of comprehension  
gold reserves, helicopters  
air force, butterfly  
dove *fly home*  
*to your warm nest* soft  
soft in the white fire could be heard  
the voice from the speakers on the C47  
cleave the night sky in Viet Nam  
where doves were; time, hours  
in what language it continues to be  
in what continues *Scheherazade*

**DB:** Some of your more recent work (mostly not yet translated into English) includes explorations not just of finance capital but the actual workings and lives of those working in the finance industry or its managerial sectors. How have those projects evolved and what have you learned from your “research?”

**IB:** As part of an interdisciplinary research project at Malmö University, The City Fables Group—Follow The Money, I probed late capitalism through the local stories of success, meaning we read annual reports and analyzed tax figures, corporate aesthetics and lingo. We made a series of short animated films starring cute animals, following Sianne Ngai on cuteness, a personal test app, The Animal Spirit Quiz “Which economical beastie are you?” and short ventriloquist drama pieces with animal hand puppets.

We had some fun, but mostly it felt strangely draining—the colorful outcomes are a counter-reaction to the stiffening gray media (as studied by Matthew Fuller & Goffey) and detached Economish language.

Later, in my radio plays *Arvodet—Marginalintäkten* (*The Fee –The Marginal Revenue*), I exposed the Economish, the Transparensish, the Derivatish and Corporate bling bling lingo in a mesh of economy journalist metaphors, voiced by three middle aged—and aging—temp job Pythias, oracles hired to spread the economy news reports of the lofty threats and promises that are conditioning our lives.

What did I learn? That we can't afford the rich. That the financial ruling system governing our future is short sighted, toxic, fraudulent and that it serves a chosen few within a small circle of greedy people disconnected from and feeding off the rest. That 95% of the world economy consists

of trading. That the Big Four accounting firms work for nine out of ten of the companies in the European finance market. That the juridical and financial scaffolding is undermining democracy. The little flower shop at the corner in Malmö pays more taxes than the giant corporation next door. That economy doesn't earn up to the status of a science. And I also learned about the nature of bullshit, reading Harry G Frankfurt:

“Someone who lies and someone who tells the truth are playing on opposite sides, so to speak, in the same game. The bullshitter ignores these demands altogether. He does not reject the authority of the truth, as the liar does, and oppose himself to it. He pays no attention to it at all. By virtue of this, bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are.”

One of the Pythias in my radio play dies at the end, locked inside the vacuum of economic language. The two other colleagues reconnect as bystanders to her suffering, perked up somewhat by the drama.

What else? My first feel-good book was published last year *Omsorgslabyrinten* (tricky title to translate, you get the labyrinth part, but “omsorg” translates to care—attention—concern—maintenance the concordance of form and meaning) is a guided tour in the underworld of an art museum's storage house, concerned with cultural identity and heritage, future generations, work ethics and passion. There is a connection to Olga Shparaga, the Belarusian philosopher's train of thought about the infrastructure of care. The portrayed conservator, working against the strong and fluctuating winds of contemporary value currencies, shrugs: “For me as a conservator each and every object has the same value.” There is also a lion in there, which cannot seem to be found.

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from *The Mole Pile Archive*

The Fruits of Enlightenment,  
a comedy, or rather, a farce.

The theme was the love of a demon,  
active force in the play, and the plot  
was mutual misunderstandings  
and nationhoods. The story  
marks the end of the rule of the  
The Belle of Battles,  
of social injustice with a lack of  
fair play.

Powers. We may date the meaning  
to a period when the speech  
was against the grain of their problems  
while criticism was contained in  
weird, uncanny laugh –  
alien to the spirit  
of the exiled rebels,  
the dogmatic followers of an  
old huntsman  
and miserable brutes  
driving in the night down a dark  
rock of orthodoxy

– flatness, freshly cut, sprinkled  
with a tedious lullaby  
from the treachery of translators.

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Meanwhile,  
a family of children discuss  
the point of view  
in conversations  
at a puppet theater  
: of Dead Fish Robbers  
lead away by  
White Lily Wood.

Actors, trained to the style  
acted it well.

*—interview conducted over email, Aug-Sep 2024*