

Forests where past and present meet

Maria Jastrzębska

I'm back again in Warsaw. Lime trees (*lipy*) are blossoming everywhere. The scent of their fuzzy, star-shaped yellow and white flowers hangs in the warm air. For this visit, my partner and I have decided to take a trip east into the countryside to see the primeval forest. The forest we want to visit is a UNESCO World Heritage Site at Białowieża renowned for its biodiversity, including the famous wild European bison, and it is close to the border between Poland and Belarus. Tragically, this borderland has become the site of brutal pushbacks against refugees trying to enter Poland via Belarus from Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, Iraqi Kurdistan and Cameroon. Some people have lost their lives trapped in this no-man's-land, where volunteers, journalists and NGOs are prevented from helping them by the border guards and, more recently, the military.

Over lunch, our friend Jola explains that the Polish authorities have erected a steel fence inside the Polish border. There have been countless injuries as people try to scale it. Now, the Polish government is extending the no-go buffer zone, aiming to strengthen the border. Since the Russian army invaded Ukraine in 2022, Russia is using the refugees and migrants, weaponising them to destabilise European Union states by pushing large numbers of them illegally across EU borders. Increasing numbers of them have Russian visas. The Belarussian government supports the Russian government so is widely seen as complicit in this tactic and as taking revenge for previous EU sanctions.

Ever since the invasion of Ukraine, there is a fear that Poland could be next. There is talk of a 'pre-war situation'. Missiles and fragments of drones have landed in neighbouring countries, including Poland and Moldova. There's also talk of a 'hybrid war' with borders threatened, unexplained arson attacks within Poland and cyber attacks.

'Is this paranoia?' I ask Jola.

'Well, just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get you,' she replies.

We laugh at that old joke from Joseph Heller's book *Catch-22* and it lightens the atmosphere. But it's a grim subject. Compared to other families, my parents spoke little about their experiences of the war but I remember they were always fearful there might be another one. Whenever there were international crises on the news (the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Vietnam War), my mother would look at my father and ask him if there was going to be another war in Europe. Having been caught off guard once by the devastation of a world war, she could never trust that peace would last. Growing up, I thought they were both being over-dramatic. The Balkan Wars of the 1990s and the continuing invasion of Ukraine have proved them right.

I get all the cutlery out of the metal bucket on the table and arrange the knives and forks into borders, the fence and the proposed buffer zone extension. It's the only way I can visualise it. Between the rows of cutlery is the no-man's-land of dense forest that refugees get trapped in, without food or water or shelter, often already brutally injured by the guards. Not only are people losing their lives, says Jola, but the animal population is suffering too with the increased militarisation of the area, army trucks hurtling along roads unsuited to that speed, razor wire endangering humans and animals alike. At least two bison have been killed. One was with a mate. After the dead one was put on a truck for its body to be driven away, the partner kept it company by running alongside.

Once we arrive in the east of Poland, we find that the locals are worried about visitors cancelling their trips. People come from all over the world to experience the immense biodiversity of these lands, they tell us. They come to see bison, elk, white-winged black terns in the marshlands, egrets, cranes and many, many storks and to discover plants such as the insect-eating sundew in the peat bog forests further west near Biebrza. It is a breathtaking part of Poland, teeming with birdsong and wildlife at this time of year, utterly enchanting. We're up at three in the morning to search for bison grazing at the trees' edge, since with more traffic on the roads later in the day they shy away, hiding in dense forestland. 'I have seen four species of woodpecker in one tree alone,' our forest guide tells us proudly.

This is not the first time that blood has been spilled in these beautiful forests. Local people here were murdered by the Nazis and Red Army alike during the Second World War. Countless people were deported to the labour camps in Siberia by Soviet soldiers. Jews, communists and resistance fighters were publicly executed; hanged outside a local Orthodox Church by the Nazis. When some of them hid in the woods and could not be found, random locals were rounded up and shot instead, here among the very trees we are walking through.

When we visit the wetlands area, further from the border, another guide tells us about the elk, lynxes and wolves and directs our attention to animals and birds in the distance. To us, they are blurred dots. It is thanks to her and her long-range fieldscopes that we see elks playing together and grazing in the long grass, as well as countless birds, cuckoos, egrets and cranes. She also shows us tracks in the earth and different kinds of spoor including, to much excitement, the scat of a wolf. 'We used to have a bear coming to these marshlands, but it wandered over into Belarus,' she says. 'It can't come back anymore because of the steel fence.' We visit a stork sanctuary full of stork nests, which we can see into from tall viewing platforms. The storks are feeding their young. It is completely magical.

We also visit the synagogue in Tykocin, a town which had invited Jewish families to live in it during the sixteenth century in order to enhance its prosperity. Almost the entire Jewish population was taken in trucks by the Nazis to nearby forests and shot. The homes of any remaining Jews were raided and the residents also murdered. Local Christians were then forced to dig graves and bury them. We visit the local synagogue, a museum now, not a working temple, and take a few moments to sit on the old wooden benches in it.

We skinny dip in a quiet oxbow of the Narew. We take walks in the lovely countryside.

We eat local potato cakes. Then it's time to drive back to Warsaw.

I can't stop thinking about the refugees caught in the forest land between the border of Poland and Belarus. I keep thinking how every single Polish person I know has parents, grandparents or other family members who were once displaced, not knowing if their loved ones were still alive or not, wandering hungry, thirsty, trying to escape capture or death.

Maria Jastrzębska

Polish-born poet Maria Jastrzębska has published several pamphlets and five full-length collections, recently *Small Odysseys* (Waterloo Press) and *The True Story of Cowboy Hat* and *Ingénue* (Cinnamon Press). She has co-edited anthologies such as *Forum Polek* (Polish Women's Forum) and *Queer in Brighton* (New Writing South). Her poetry features in the British Library archive *Poetry Between Two Worlds* and is widely anthologised, including *Wretched Strangers* (Boiler House Press), *You're Never Too Much* (First Ink/Macmillan) and recently *Up/Roar Queer Poems of Resistance* (Arachne Press)

and *Woman, Mapped* (Rebecca Swift Foundation/Fly on the Wall Press). She translated Justyna Bargielska's *The Great Plan B* (Smokestack Press) and co-translated Iztok Osojnik's poems. Her selected poems have been translated into Polish and Romanian. She has been the writer on various projects including *Dementia Diaries*, a literary drama (Lewes Live Lit), *Snow Q*, a collaborative cross-arts project and *Speaking Solidarity*, an anti-bullying of LGBTQ+ students project.

Currently she is completing a prose memoir.

A recording of this piece can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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