

# Natalia Grechina: The Black Sea Always Turns Red

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RAW  
Streetphoto  
Gallery

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Rotterdam

# Intro

**In, out.  
In again,  
pass through, out.  
In, -take a red bead-,  
pass the needle  
through, and out.  
In on one side,  
out from the other.**

I love the place where I'm sitting.

A comfortable armchair at my sewing desk, surrounded by an abundant amount of crafting supplies and piles and piles of bones and wounds made of string and glass beads. I sew for hours, at night, to keep the memories at bay.

A small light, a glass of wine and the smell of the sea all help me get through the evenings.

The sound of the waves crashing on the rocks crawls inside the room from the open window to my left; a soothing, yet unnerving sound. Its constant motion is a rhythmic companion, but at night -in the silence- it becomes a deafening reminder of its unrelenting existence.

It will never leave me alone.

Although I have always been grateful for its presence throughout my life, lately, it has started to haunt me.

The waves bring back ancient memories with them; things locked away in the back of my brain a long time ago.

My vision is filled with the red hue of the wounds I'm sewing: the glass beads become droplets of blood in the corner of my eye.

I lift my head from my work to look at the Black Sea and there it is: red. No matter how many times I close and open my eyes again, the sea is always red.

I'll go back to my work.

At some point, maybe, the water will be clear again.

# The Burning House

**Red, like the flames rising  
from the roof.  
Black, like the cloud of  
smoke above them.**

They came in the middle of the night.  
Loud bangs on the door, and -waiting behind it- soldiers  
with weapons at the ready that started to search the house  
and kick everybody out.  
They threw my four siblings in the courtyard behind the  
house. They found themselves standing out in the cold  
next to each other, terrified and not completely aware of  
what was going on. The soldiers were shouting at them,  
incomprehensibly, almost like barking. A round of fires

and suddenly the white wall was covered in bullet holes and  
blood.

All dead, no one spared.

And the house, a pile of ash.

I survived because I was sleeping at my aunt's house, on  
the other side of the village.

How is it, then, that I remember everything as if I were  
standing next to them?

Why do I still see those frightened expressions on their  
faces?

Why do I remember the red and the heat from the flames  
that were eating up the house?

Maybe because I was the one to find them, in the  
courtyard, the morning after.

Maybe because I was staring at their bodies, while I was  
digging the graves.

Maybe because, once they were buried, I could not  
distinguish the blood coming from my hands and the one  
coming from them.

Sometimes I feel like I'm there, lying beside them, in the  
cold soil.

# The Double-Sided Gloves

**A dripping sound in the back of my head. I can feel that my hands are wet, but not with water: the floor underneath me is all red.**

I moved to Sevastopol once the war was over.

We came there with so many others to rebuild the city, after the strain it had gone through during the siege.

I remember the first picture you took of me there, while we were walking aimlessly along the rocky shores: it almost looks like I'm on vacation, with me, posing on top of the white stones.

We were there to start a new life, far away from the sorrows of the past.

Instead, it didn't take us long to discover that we had settled in a place with a legacy of conflict: blood, bones, metal, and pain were all elements of its fabric, which manifested itself in every corner.

It was a beaten city but, after all, we were beaten individuals.

Tainted because of what we had witnessed; vexed by what we were forced to do in order to survive.

No other place could have suited us better.

We would put up a proud appearance while in public, but in the privacy of our own minds were still sorting through the pain. A double identity, like the stones in the photograph: they appear white, while only a few months earlier, they had been running red with blood from the soldiers thrown into the sea.

# The Man Without Skin on His Face

The room is covered in white tiles. Even the tiniest whimper I make reverberates a hundred times. I must keep quiet, otherwise, he won't stop looking at me.

Every night, once I've fallen asleep, he comes to visit me. In the nightmare, I always find him in the same place: the corner of the bathroom. He stands there, doing nothing but staring at me.

His skinless face- a mask dripping blood, twisted in a weird manner.

Last night, though, I finally understood -after so many years of visitations- that the meaning of his eerie expression was a smile.

A terrifying smile with bare teeth, like animals do, to scare off a threat.

It reminded me of a postcard that portrayed me during the war, one of the very rare photographs in which I am smiling.

Natalia made me notice this very detail when she saw it for the first time: she was rummaging through old family photos that I kept in the house and asked me why I looked happy in this one, even though it was taken during the war.

At the time, I wasn't able to give her an answer.

I still can't.

It's a camouflage, more than anything: a smile hiding a deep wound in plain sight so that I don't have to pay attention to its constant bleeding.

# The Black Princess

**I made the sword, especially for the princess.  
It's her birthright and legacy.  
She will be able to carry it only when she grows up.**

One day Natalia came home with a photograph in her hand, which she showed me proudly as soon as she came bursting into the room. It was a portrait where she was dressed in a sailor's uniform, that was taken a couple of days earlier at her kindergarten.

"See? Now I look just like you!" she told me with a smile. She felt empowered by the costume that she was wearing,

almost like a promise that she was fulfilling.

I couldn't tell her that seeing her like that was horribly painful for me.

For this little person standing before me, the stories of the war were more like fairy tales than facts; with kings, queens, knights of old, and princesses to save. Good and Bad, clearly defined, fighting against each other.

But all I could see in the photograph was a child dressed as a soldier.

I knew that my inability to tell her about my experiences during the war had led to this: by studying it only on the books, Natalia couldn't absorb all the pain and horror that the war brings to those who witness it.

That should have been my task.

I could never bring myself to about it. The words simply couldn't make their way from my mind to my tongue.

That day, I decided to start sewing objects that would tell all these tales in my stead.

At least, Natalia will still have those after I am gone, amidst all the silence.

# The Forgotten Valor

**Will this metal weigh on my chest, when I'm lying in the casket? Finally, I won't be able to notice.**

All these medals are so heavy.

I never thought that something so small and thin could be so hard to carry.

I look at them; they are also heavy to see.

Some of them I got for valorous acts during the war, some as a commemoration of the battles I took part in, some

of them simply for having survived. Although there was nothing simple in survival: you are pushed to the edge, forced to do things you were not imagining or even thinking of being capable of in order not to fall in the shooting line or to find something to eat that day.

For all these achievements, you get a metal token as a sign of bravery.

Even though, honestly, I would prefer to forget about the circumstances some of them are reminding me.

They form an uncomfortable armour once they stand all together pinned on my jacket.

It's terribly hard to move, even.

I hope I will be the last one to carry this burden; that Natalia won't have to bear it.

Despite my wishes, though, I know that it won't be so: conflict is still all around us and in her future too.

A less resonant battle, perhaps, but a never-ending one.

After all, the Black Sea always turns red.

