

I've been a journalist for about fifteen years, and I've spent a lot of that time writing and thinking about displacement. I have listened to people describe how they were forced from their homes by war and observed them trying to make new homes. I have reported on communities whose sense of home was being undermined by the ebb and flow of capital. I have written about people who have tried to assert belonging through nationalism, and about people who were the target of nationalist violence. I have also written about the way these sorts of events are remembered – or forgotten – in official memorials and in everyday life.

The longer I've done this work, the more I've felt that there are things I'm failing to capture. Are there ways to express what has been squeezed out of conventional narrative? The pieces below come from notes I've kept while reporting in the UK, Europe and the former Soviet Union. They come from interviews and from journeys, including to places members of my own family were forced to flee. Some notes were taken at the time, while others were written later as memories came back to me. I've deliberately mixed up the elements, so that images and voices from one place blend into others. ■

Sentences like walkways that stop in mid-air.

Gold lettering to thank you for your contribution to the war effort.

A house looks like a home until you see straight through it.

DANIEL TRILLING

We met at the entrance and couldn't decide which way to go, but it didn't matter because the paths formed a triangle and would lead us to the same point. It was easy to find our way through the building, since it was a standard design that existed in many different places. You could have walked it blindfolded if you'd been there – elsewhere – before. We walked on through, passing doors thrown open in invitation, and out the other side. There, we saw plots of rough land guarded by hoarding. Pictures on the hoarding told us that what was being built there would be unique but exactly the same. We walked on, to reach a grassy bank, and suddenly the land felt familiar. Was it the way the breeze came off the river in this spot that reminded us of what was here before? A mountain of century-old dirt, possessions spread out for sale on blankets and sheets on a Saturday afternoon, homes built in the spaces the inhabitants had dug out from the waste. Would you believe there was once a canal here, carpeted in water lilies? I asked you if this was the spot and you said no, they dug it all up and reshaped the soil, it can't be.

She went back and they laughed because she spoke a language out of dusty old books.

She went back and the market was selling fruit and veg and meat, it was an ordinary day, you'd never have known.

She went back and it had moved, there had been a flood and nobody was sure where exactly it was any more.

Anyway, they had bigger things to worry about, the flood had caused a lot of damage.

She went back and they had built over the cemetery, they said they were going to move it somewhere else, were going to.

She went back and said nothing's changed, I thought it would be good to see them again, but nothing's changed, I shouldn't have come.

DANIEL TRILLING

In the museum they told her story, but didn't mention her name. She tried to tell them it was hers and they said, Ours too, this is a concept around which we can unite.

At first, she said, I got caught up in the patriotism of it all. I saw it as a way of making a break with the past.

Our youth came to follow us, he said, and the paths they took told us they had given up on the world we imagined for them. We saw them escaping and to us it was like liquid running from broken skin.

They bring the country to the city, driving their animals with sticks along the lane. They put birds in cages and photos of fields on the wall to remind themselves of what came before. They leave their traces on faded tiling and painted signs that hang from first-floor windows. Others take their place and fill their rooms with light and heat.

The carved figures and the mosaics are still there, they've just been covered over with plaster.

We took jobs as taxi drivers, he said, in factories, as chefs, as teachers, in shops, to tide us over until the time came to go back. We waited to live, and we didn't realise until too late that the waiting itself was the living.

At first, she said, I was into taking selfies with soldiers. But then we started to find out.

You and I sat there and watched the mother and the baby stand in tableau behind the cake and the father hurry around and offer drinks and see if we were enjoying ourselves. The father had waited three years for the mother, the mother had waited three years for the father. They put on music and asked us to dance.

He sent the story to me line by line:

My mother told me I should go.

They took us into the marshes at night.

We stood in swamp water up to our necks.

There was a rope to pull ourselves across.

I got a terrible kidney infection from the water.

It was fifteen years ago.

DANIEL TRILLING

Arrive while it is still dark to get good seats on the train. Bring food for the journey. The fifth paragraph, your nationality. Everyone must have one.

The moving of the earth. In barrows. From one place to another.

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A cushion of cloud presses damply down, to smother the sky, to say we are nowhere and everywhere. She looks out of the misted window of the bus at the half-finished buildings and says, They're making this a desirable place to live.

Since the incident, she has:

asked for clothes 23 times

reported 7 deaths

expressed her disapproval of the police 13 times

posted 3 photographs of mothers and babies

invited 1,748 people to distribute food 49 times

accepted 237 friend requests

been tagged 57 times in order to draw her attention to something and
44 times in gratitude

posted 5 photographs of a short holiday by the sea

counted down the time to demonstrations, court hearings and funerals:
in two weeks' time, in one week's time, tomorrow, today, here is what
happened yesterday

DANIEL TRILLING

He wanted to tell me faster than the words would allow. He was rescued but he left his phone behind, in a plastic bag full of his belongings. It floated on the water for days, his parents were ringing him to find out where he was, the phone rang until the air ran out and the bag sank.

We sat in the cafe and he waved his hands and stubbed his cigarettes out in the ashtray one after another. The translator tried to help but she couldn't keep up.

We stopped walking, just as he was telling me that he thought the media gave to war a logic and coherence that didn't really exist.

Oh, he said, I didn't know we would turn the corner and we would find ourselves here. It looks the same. But in my mind I can see the old woman with the megaphone – and the masked men.

After they'd sold off the furniture and rolled up the carpets and stripped the metal and the wood from the walls, rose bushes grew all over the abandoned homes. For a while, nobody came. Then the petals were taken from the roses and packed tightly into lorries; they were driven away to make perfume.

DANIEL TRILLING

The notes belong to you, said the guards, but the paper you wrote them on is ours.

I took the motorway that ran along the ridge overlooking the bay. Pink and white oleander had burst from the verges and hung over the crash barriers at the side of the road. Tourist signs pointed the way to the ancient city, leading through a maze of empty industrial lots, then down a mud track. I got out of the car and checked the map on my phone, which told me I was in the right place, but all I could see was a field with a ticket office in one corner. Two elderly men were sitting in the shade of the ticket office doorway; they were surprised to have a visitor.

You can't see the ruins, one told me, the grass is too high. Someone was supposed to come and cut it but he didn't know when.

The map on my phone said: *place is possibly closed or doesn't exist.*

DANIEL TRILLING

The screens in the metro carriage are playing looped footage of a territory they say belongs to you. The camera swoops over a wooded hillside and towards the shore. This place, the screens say, it is inside us. They mean to say that the place is within our territory, but everyone on the metro carriage knows that not to be the case. If it was, they would not need to play looped footage of it on the screens, swooping over the wooded hillside and towards the shore.

Above ground, on the concourse of the station, another screen is playing looped footage. It is playing looped footage of tank wheels running their tracks over rough ground, of a woman opening a door in civilian dress and the same woman walking into a room in nurse's uniform. She reaches out and touches a soldier lying in a hospital bed. The screen is shaped like a cylinder: four times around its circumference the woman smiles, opens the door and brings new life to the injured man.

Out in the city, it is the first truly warm day of the year and we walk through a long, narrow park filled with blossoming trees. Large, egg-shaped sculptures are placed in rows along the park, creating an avenue. The eggs are painted with designs that are copied from folklore collections, from wedding dresses, from infant smocks in old family portraits. In the park, parents take photos of their own children, beside the sculptures and beneath the blossoming trees.

We leave the park and walk along grand boulevards that have recently been renamed. The names have been chosen in such a way that they are at once new and very old. These names have not yet settled: a stranger stops us to ask for directions and you become confused, using names for the streets that no longer exist and, moreover, are never supposed to have existed.

At the end of one boulevard we see a slope that rises above the city. You remember a story someone told you, about a terrible thing that once happened high up there, right in front of the city but out of its sight.

When people heard about what happened their first instinct was to bury the evidence. Now, they build a bigger monument each year and repeat the story they have always told themselves: nothing like that could happen in a place that belongs to us.

As the sun starts to go down, people line up on street corners. They are waiting quietly for small vehicles that will take them to tall buildings on the edges of the city. The older people are holding saplings, some of which will eventually bear fruit but whose thin branches do not yet even hold leaves. The roots of the saplings are covered in plastic bags. The bags are wrapped around and around the roots, keeping the soil that clings to them from view. ■