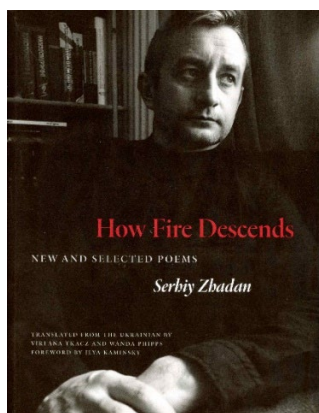




How Fire Descends: New and Selected Poems

by Serhiy Zhadan

**translated by Viriana Tkacz
and Wanda Phipps**

foreword by Ilya Kaminsky

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“The start of a book is like the beginning of a rainstorm,” says the celebrated Ukrainian poet and activist in this momentous collection spanning seven years of resistance, witness and unending hope. Zhadan’s poems are pithy and prophetic, elegant and radically accessible: “No one will remember you for your silence. / No one but you can name the rivers nearby.” I say radical because Zhadan yokes the pedestrian everyday life of eastern Ukraine with the invisible orders of existence and is spiritually attuned to a deep understanding of the forced transience and fragility of buildings and social orders in the post-Soviet east. So the “frightened soul” is “like a dog locked in the kitchen”, “carefree folks” are “like / fish [driven] by the rhythms of ground water”, trees recognize each other “like two people who once shared the same hospital room”. If Zhadan’s poems are universal, they echo the horrors of the contemporary warmongering in the Middle East as well as in eastern Europe: “They didn’t explain that death is local, / it doesn’t run out of the hospital yard, / it is of little interest to anyone, / not part of the funeral procession.” *The Guardian*, “*The best recent poetry – review roundup*” by Oluwaseun Olayiwola, January 5, 2024.

In these poems, compiled from 2016 to 2022, the Ukrainian poet commemorates the plight of his compatriots in the face of Russian imperialism and mourns their deaths, “limited / by the silence that comes with it.” *The New York Times*, “*Newly Published Poetry*, October 25, 2023.”

Among Ukraine’s most distinguished writers, in prose as well as verse, Zhadan has borne expert witness to Russia’s fire-blasted impingement on his country since the 2014 invasion of Crimea. This volume collects poems dating from 2016 onward, with the most recent reflecting the 2022 invasion (“mutilated landscape... slashed by moonlight”) while proclaiming that “pain and hope unite us.” *Library Journal*, “*Best Poetry of 2023*” by Barbara Hoffert, December 4, 2023.

“Reading these words now is enough to make one’s breath catch. [Ukraine’s western partners] do not see themselves as members of its funeral processions; they do not routinely line the streets and kneel before passing coffins.”—Linda Kinster, *Times Literary Supplement*

“[Zhadan] focuses on gaps: in language, between people, between the living and the dead. This void, this ‘silence,’ is returned to so many times that it becomes a character in itself.”—Ella Creamer, *The Guardian*, “*Five of the Best Recent Books from Ukraine*”

“*How Fire Descends* allows English-speaking readers to access a new Ukraine, one fortified in resistance and defiance. . . . Its poems explore pain and bravery, national identity, and daily life in a way only Zhadan has mastered. . . . Each poem is a reckoning with Ukraine’s violent past and present.”—Nicole Yurcaba, *Tupelo Quarterly*

Finalist for the PEN America Literary Award for Poetry in Translation

Serhiy Zhadan's "Of all literature," from **How Fire Descends** on Poetry Society of America website: <https://poetrysociety.org/poems-essays/visiting-poet/visiting-poet-ilya-kaminsky-on-serhiy-zhadan>

"These words blaze across the page like missiles aiming at the fourth dimension: *What if someone spoke a sentence / That could stir the sonic field of death?* In the eternal battle between Orpheus and Morpheus, a great poet's verbal imagination is always his sharpest weapon, his impenetrable shield. In his face-off with memory and time, Zhadan is certain to prevail."—**Askold Melnyczuk**

"A classic of modern Ukrainian poetry."—**Gary Shteyngart**

"When Zhadan says 'speak now,' he is getting at all the ways that speaking matters: from the trenches in Ukraine that he's known to the memories of Ukrainians that he carries. The urging to speak vibrates through these pages, as if the saying it is always an homage to those who have tasked the poet to sing, while alongside him they go about the business of loving or working or cajoling light out of suffering so that we all might 'have enough stories to brave through winter.'"—**Reginald Dwayne Betts**

"Serhiy Zhadan's poetry allows the pain and bravery of those who can only speak through his poems to be heard. Today, in the context of war, his words resonate deeply, offering a powerful and moving journey through the human experience."—**Yevgenia Belorusets**

"Zhadan is a poet, rock star, and activist whose verse is rooted in his native Eastern Ukraine. He draws metaphors from daily life that in turn become the subjects of his poems, and Tkacz and Phipps have brought these images to life in an English that does justice to Zhadan's urgent messages about life, war, and love."—**Amelia Glaser**

"This is the sound of War. Zhadan, reporting from the frontlines in Kharkiv, where words are bullets and voices are heard from the dead. From Ilya Kaminsky's brilliant foreword to the last drops of blood on the book's final pages, *How Fire Descends* is a book on fire. Poetry from bunkers, bomb shelters and graves—poetry from the depths."—**Bob Holman**

About the Author

Serhiy Zhadan (b. 1974) is one of Ukraine's most celebrated writers. He has received the Hannah Arendt Prize for Political Thought, the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, and several international literature prizes. His books include *Sky Above Kharkiv*; *Mesopotamia*; *The Orphanage*; and *What We Live For, What We Die For: Selected Poems*. He lives in Kharkiv, Ukraine. **Virlana Tkacz** and **Wanda Phipps** have been translating Zhadan's poetry since 2002. **Ilya Kaminsky** is an award-winning poet from Odesa, Ukraine, and the author of *Deaf Republic*.