

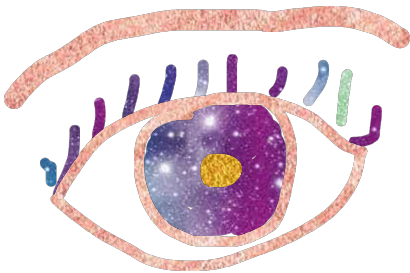
Birth of a War Tank

Text and drawings by Dr. Catalina Florina Florescu

fflorescu@pace.edu

Bio: Dr. Florescu has a Ph.D. in Comp Lit/Medical Humanities, and she is the author of 11 books. She teaches at Pace University in New York. She is a person with a hidden disability.

Synopsis: "Birth of a War Tank" addresses how women's bodies and minds are severely affected by wars, violence, and insecurities that are all agents of constant distress. How could women birth babies that are trauma-free if their first months are spent inside a womb that exists among ruins, sirens, and dead bodies? The woman in the story gives birth to a war tank and yet her maternal instincts stay intact. In a world poisoned by pandemic hatred of the elusive "other," this woman wants to live and love and thus turn her body and mind away from the ongoing destruction. The piece is dedicated to women from Palestine, Sudan, Iran, Ukraine, and other places of conflict and tragedy.



Mantra: Protect women ('s bodies)

Part one:
Raw Cut

Runa yells. She is not running and yelling. Just the latter. It is the most shocking scream that anyone has ever witnessed. It is intentionally loud to make anyone want to leave, or close their windows, or wish they had a magical wand to make the scream disappear. Runa wipes her face with a tissue she took out of her pocket. She looks around and feels comfortable to speak into her phone. On closer look, Runa dictates:

“Ma, I’m sorry I missed your phone yesterday. But listen ... I am not sure how to start. Please be patient.”

Runa sighs.

“It must be Tuesday. It must be 8:56. It must be evening. I am a clock now. I remember... I was in high school, nearing its end, close to graduation. Everybody knew that that was our first, big, collective way to part ways. Graduation caps in our hands. We wanted to try something we saw in American movies. We made our own paper caps. This is what we sent out in the air.”

Runa stops. She wants to find the perfect way to describe that past moment.

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“Ma, we sent our graduation caps in the air... but on their way back, something must have happened because all we could hear was the horrible sound of bombs, and buildings, bodies, life shattered everywhere. It was awful. I was naïve and I was thinking that in the air, these caps did not know where they were ... they felt they did not belong ... they were betrayed ... they wanted to revenge, to teach us a lesson. Our school did not have that American tradition, why did we do it?!

...

I found out it was started by students earning a military degree. My heart sank. It was not the first time when my heart lost its *altitude*.”

Runa stops. She talks to herself in a way in which a parent talks to a child.

I know ... I know, I am so silly sometimes. For months, I imagined that *our* choice was the reason why that war started. Our celebratory, ephemeral choice ... Silly, right?

Runa wants to go back to what she was saying. There is a shadow growing in the back. She watches it with fascination and playfulness. She is not afraid.

“We wanted to try that hat-tossing out. Just once. I had no idea why we wanted that. I had no idea why the graduation caps never returned to us. I come with limitations. I do not know the truth. But I would like to speak ... the truth?!”

Runa takes a deep breath. She presses a button, so we hear this:

“I swear that the evidence that I shall give shall be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God.”

Runa almost laughs. But she is tired of hiding how she feels. She resumes her dictation:

“This was a line I always wanted to say publicly... I saw it in American movies, too. Truth ... whole truth ... funny, right? Truth is not to be known. When I was younger, I used to think peace was a kite. Now my eyes need adjustment. I am ageing. Too much devastation. Is *that* a kernel of whole truth?!

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Listen to this. My last day as a high school student. Finally! I went to school and an *earthquake* almost ate everything that had life. That voracious, greedy earth that cracked open that day just because she was hungry. Earth is a woman.

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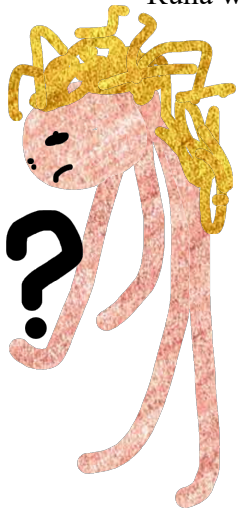
Ma, would you agree with me? Women get famished. More than men. More than we want to admit. That day was the last day of classes. We came to school to exchange hugs

and promises. She came and almost gave me a hug. Everybody knew she hated me just because I was of a different religion, same nationality, though. She repeated: ‘Take this, please,’ and showed me her fist like you know ‘... shhhh... something is here, can you keep a secret kind of situation ... look, I am not opening my palm, you gotta trust me...’ My mind was like, ‘Is this a trap? Why is she suddenly so friendly with me? Why did she wait so long to talk to me politely? ... like I was finally a human to her, too?’ This felt suspicious. I turned my back to her, at first walking very slowly, then running so hard I thought my heart would come out of my chest.”

Runa unwraps a candy. Takes her time.

“As a child, I loved geography, staring at maps, following the soothing course of a river, looking at the world from the peak of a mountain, feeling the grass, field, earth in my palms; maps were real, like me. Once at recess, I found myself getting so close to a map, touching it gently, even kissing *her*. Maps are like women: full of secrets and beauty. Wanting to be seen. Wanting to be acknowledged. I kissed the map and then ... I wanted to run, but I couldn’t. That sound was poisoning my body. I did not feel shame. I kissed a map, so what?! She needed that kiss. I looked at the palm of my hands. That awful laugh stopped. It was the first time when I saw the resemblance. The story that is in our palm, that we keep with us 24/7, the story that has no words, but knows of the best untold stories. It is about us: our existence *typed* right here.”

Runa feels like she needs air to breathe. She signals that she may be collapsing, and she is not yet done with her story. She prays. After some time, she points to her belly. It is flat. She gestures. Runa wants us to imagine she is pregnant. She has something in her hand.



“This is a mistake! Take this away.... Someone else has my child. Where is my child??? None answered. Time passed. Her first day of school. The looks I got... I cannot even tell you. All kids were dressed up nicely, some were smiling, others were shy, still others were holding a toy in their hands, you know, the usual mix of first day jitters. Here I was, with my child on her first day of school. Some were laughing, others were spitting disgustingly to ward off malignant spirits, or ... I, honestly, really do not know the whole truth. I come with limitations. Of not knowing why people act in a certain way. This was my old school. I was in the school yard again and saw where I got my first kiss. Right there!

...

It is kind of funny what we do with our memories. What they do with us. To us, that’s better, right? It was here when we were told ...we had to relocate to places without homes. Just go. Simple instructions. Careless times.

Runa takes a deep breath.

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“I became a mother in a place that was not my own. I became a mother while other people were watching. I had no idea how to love a war tank, *my birthed baby*. But at that time, I had no home of my own either. I was relocated. The hospital was gone. The library was gone. The police station was gone. The marketplace was gone. My home was gone. The school stayed. It was the only structure that resisted. I told my daughter stories. I sang to her. She has days when she is big and full of dreams. She has days when she is small and wants to hide away from the world. Nothing soothes her more than looking at maps, pristine, borderless, full of that promising land where there is love and light. Uninterrupted love and light. No hatred and no darkness. My daughter and I have this bedtime routine where we put our ears close to the floor and start to listen. Everything is connected.”

Runa puts her daughter on the floor, turns her on a side, does the same with her own body; they start to breathe loudly followed by a chant, an incantation that connects us to worlds from the past. Ghosts never ever truly go away. Everything is indeed connected. The chants grow bigger and bigger. War tanks become people. Destroyed places become fields full of sunflowers and poppy flowers. Love refuses to be tainted by hatred.

“Ma, have you ever heard of to be or not to be? Where we come from, it’s to dream to be or not to be.

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Are you still there? I’ll be done shortly. Please, just this one thing:

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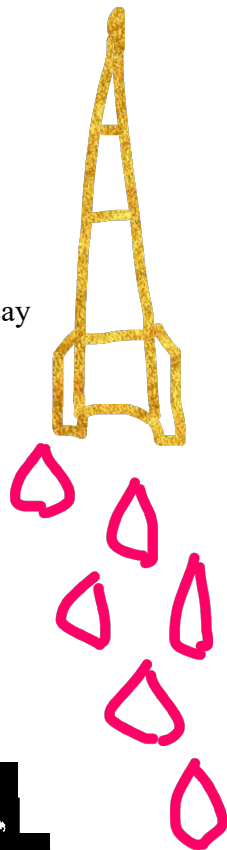
Do you know why the school was the only structure that refused to collapse? People say this is just a new myth in the making, so what? The ancient world thrived on those stories! The school stood up, defiant against war, because the school was a nursing woman, her classes, her belly, her books and school supplies, her kids, the real kids, martyrs. The school cries softly. She still does not know the truth.”

Part two:
Erasure technique

Runa



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Ma

Ma

I remember...

our hands

Runa

was thinking

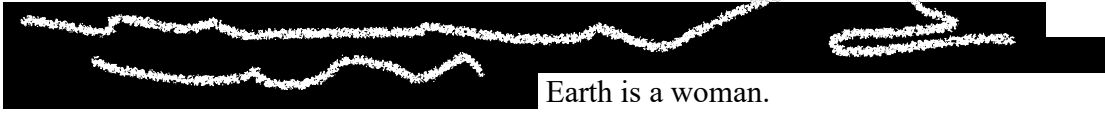
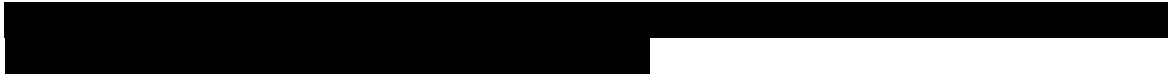
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My heart

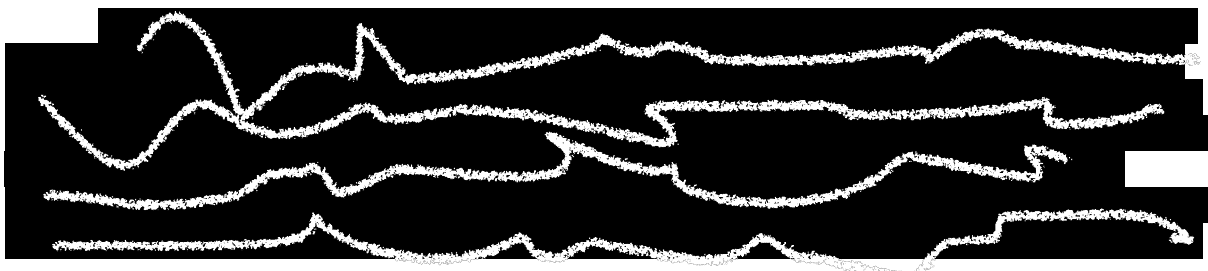
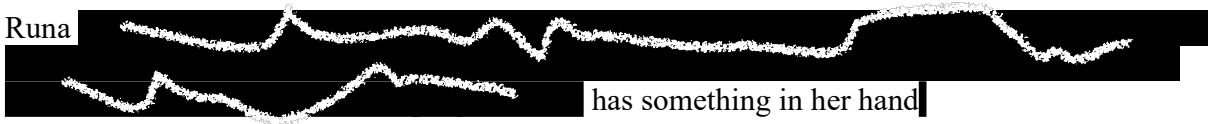
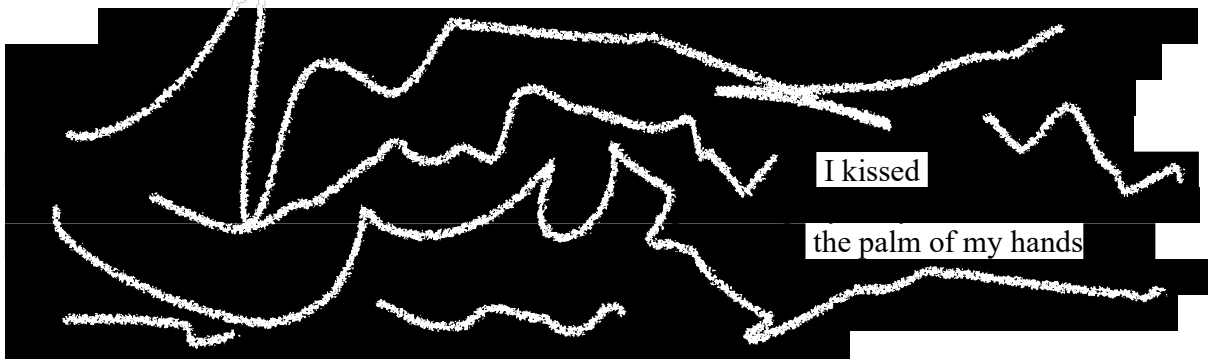
imagined

help me God.

Runa laughs



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my first kiss.

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my birthed baby
was the only structure that resisted

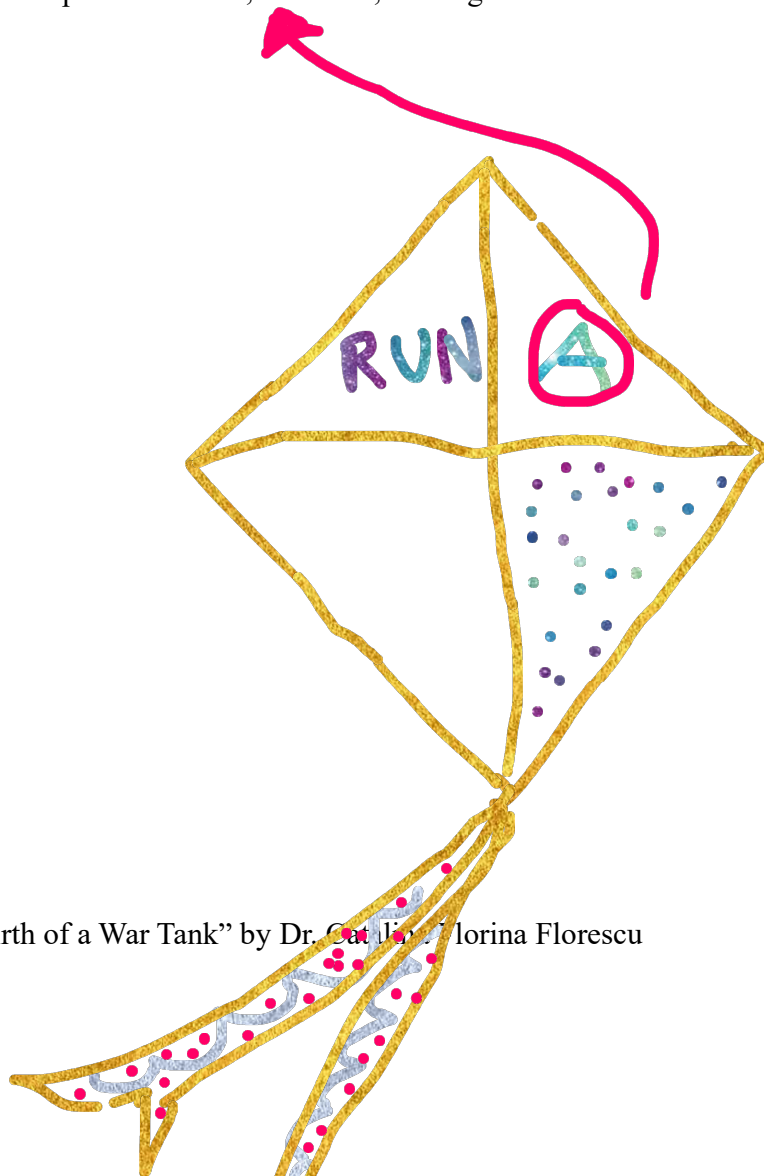
Runa
is connected
full of sunflowers and
poppy flowers

new myth in the making
the truth

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Part three:
Statement

In the first version, Runa is thinking about her life as a young woman in a war zone whose mom is someplace else, or worse, dead. We meet Runa at a time in her life when she is narrating about a milestone that should have been entirely celebratory. Having been exposed to so much trauma and destruction, later, Runa gives birth to a war tank. In such a surreal moment, I was envisioning a scenario in which women's bodies cannot stay unaffected by the massive, ongoing devastation. Hence, my own first statement/unfinished manifesto: Protect women ('s bodies). Continuing, women think they are pregnant with a child. It is a child, *alright*, but one of war. Runa wants to learn how to love her offspring. Maybe in loving this child, she will hint at how giving birth in a world of violence and/or raising children in poverty, famine, insecurity are burdens we leave women in charge while men are still not held accountable for their destruction. Therefore, *her* war tank child is an imaginative way of showing that men's cruel, violent actions have various ways to leave traumatic marks. On the other hand, in the second version, I wanted Runa to be free: of pain, longing, and a reality she did not deserve. Using the erasure technique that may empower the writing to move in completely new directions, not all remaining/selected words cohere into sentences/clear ideas, as words here function more like proof of an existence Runa hopes to reinvent, therefore, making her own stories and truths resplendent of her beauty.



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