I thought till the last moment that I would stay in my house till the end of the war. A week before its onset, when embassies were evacuating their staff from Kyiv; and on the morning when I woke up because of a distant explosion, went to the kitchen and started making coffee; and on the second day of the war, when my wife and I were driving through the empty city to buy food discussing whether we should receive from the military registration and enlistment office an AK 47, which were distributed to everyone wishing in the first days of the war.

But my resolve changed after a few nights spent in a bomb shelter. Russia bombed cities all over Ukraine, the air raid alert siren howled in Kyiv from morning till night, street fighting that started in suburbs was approaching our house ever closer. Already on the second day, I started noticing that I was rapidly losing my freedom: all of my plans fell apart the moment I read about that the war had started, after the first explosions I started reacting sensitively to loud sounds, and the siren pulling me into the basement made me angry. I was my own master ever less, and my house was ever less mine, I was driven out of it by the threat of missiles. Probably everything I had then was my choice not to leave, to continue living in my own house.

By the third day, I lost that too. I hadn't slept throughout the previous night. Together with other men, I was standing at the entrance to the bomb shelter listening to sounds of the battle that was going on in the center of the city, 7 kilometres away from us. I remember thinking that I didn't want us to be locked in the stone trap of the bomb shelter. I imagined with anxiety and fear that the only narrow way out of it would be occupied by a russian soldier. “He will stand at the door and let us out one at a time,” I thought. We'd have to do what he said. Before dawn, I woke up my wife and daughter and took them home. I wanted to be at home if russians reach our street. We drifted into a short nap, and upon waking up we saw in the news that a russian missile had hit a residential building not far from us. “What else needs to happen for us to make the decision to leave home and move away?” we asked each other.

It took us two hours to pack our stuff. Our whole life fit in three suitcases and a small car. We slipped through the terribly empty city, raised hands up approaching machine gunners at a checkpoint, and found ourselves left to our own will. Then there was a long journey. The further we drove away, the more distinctly I felt that I was losing my home. We looked for home at every stop: we wanted to stay in a Moldovan apartment, a Romanian hotel, a room in Budapest. Every day we wanted to stop and return home. Every morning we opened the news feed with anxiety and hope, and closed it with even more sadness. By the time we got to our friends' rural apartment in northern Italy, I increasingly felt like a dog that had lost its owner in a crowd. Something vital inside of me was lost, I felt that I had lost my freedom that attachment to home gives us. I could hardly choose and prioritize, everything seemed to me equally significant and equally meaningless, all my energy was spent opposing the intensifying chaos. There was nothing behind or ahead, and all I had to do was narrowing my life down to the day today. I remember how, on the second day after our arrival, we washed the pillowcase from a pillow that my daughter had taken from her bed. When the pillowcase dried, it lost the smell of home.

There will be no better time to start helping people like me than right now. In our hearts, we bring here not only explosions, destruction and death, but also a human who has lost home, a homeless person. A homeless person is harder to recognize, especially if he/she hides behind bleeding wounds resulting from more acute, visible losses. PTSD and similar acute symptoms are much more noticeable than the silent pain of someone who has lost home and is unable to rebuild it. This is an enchanted internal event, a swamp, the boundaries of which expand every day, an endless groundhog day, from which it is impossible to find a way out without support from other people. What happens inside a refugee can be compared to a disease that limits his/her freedom to make decisions, to live his/her life. People like me suffer homelessness. Such a disease can and should be treated at the earliest stages. And I'm afraid that if help for people like me is postponed, then streets of European cities will be filled with millions of empty eyes that have lost hope and meaning of what is happening - these are eyes of people who are unable to grieve the loss and move on.

A century ago, Edna St. Vincent Millay described people like me with incredible accuracy in her poem about loss. With this, I will end my speech:

Lament

BY EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY

Listen, children:
Your father is dead.
From his old coats
I'll make you little jackets;
I'll make you little trousers
From his old pants.
There'll be in his pockets
Things he used to put there,
Keys and pennies
Covered with tobacco;
Dan shall have the pennies
To save in his bank;
Anne shall have the keys
To make a pretty noise with.
Life must go on,
And the dead be forgotten;
Life must go on,
Though good men die;
Anne, eat your breakfast;
Dan, take your medicine;
Life must go on;
I forget just why.