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Impromptu Memorials

Six busy street lanes separate the embassy from a local *Starbucks*. The old four-story red brick building stands in contrast to the multitude of modern shops on M Street, in the historical yet rejuvenated neighborhood of Georgetown. The windows of the building, all closed with gray shades, offer no invite inside. But the heavy black bars in front of the street-level windows do offer insight into the significance of the edifice.

What used to be another consular building in a city flooded with physical symbols of diplomacy now stands out in a sea of yellow and blue. The steps of the Ukrainian embassy are covered in fresh sunflowers, roses, tulips, daisies, daffodils and other supermarket flowers ranging in white, yellow, purple and blue hues. Signs asking for peace and the end of the war are interposed with the flowers, along with candles, pictures of loved ones, letters and Ukrainian flags. The sidewalk is still as busy as everyday, and while people stop along their way to look at the tribute, they promptly go on with their lives. No one stays more than two minutes, a silent prayer, and a picture.

The thing about impromptu memorials is that the city does not rearrange itself to create a buffer zone between urban life and the emotional depth and solemnity memorials summon. The trail of flowers and candles and prayers and fragmented hope have to share the pavement with BoConcept and its "NEW DESIGNS, COLORS, FABRICS & TRENDS"! But perhaps the force that makes your stomach turn and cramp is only present in the face of natural humanity. In a city of planned memorials, they mostly inspire awe and grandiosity. You cannot impose emotions, especially when the architecture of a place does not encompass the reality or tragedy of the time period they represent. The memorial in front of the Ukrainian embassy was not planned, does not

have a fancy foreign architect to take claim of its project, nor will it last forever. But the fresh flowers mean that each day it is being built and rebuilt by people who actively carry the lives of the Ukrainian people in their heart. The memorial thus, while small, is alive.

Ukrainian embassies all over the world are seeing these live tributes on their doorsteps. There are no rules or guidelines, but everyone has seemed to resort to flowers, candles and protest posters. In a way, the memorial in DC is only one exhibit, part of a much larger display. What has stood out in these manifestations of collective grief are sunflowers, which in not too long have become a symbol of Ukrainian resistance to the Russian invasion of its national territory. Not only are they Ukrainian-yellow and the national flower, but they will soon germinate all over Ukraine amidst the rubbles of war. In a historical moment caught on camera and reverberating around the world, a senior Ukrainian woman confronted a Russian soldier in her homeland: "You're occupants, you're fascists! What the f*ck are you doing on our land with all these guns? Take these seeds and put them in your pockets, so at least sunflowers will grow when you all lie down here," she said. Before they bloom in Ukraine, the embassies get the sunflowers.

It is said that the practice of leaving flowers at graves began with the ancient Greeks, thousands of years ago, to honor fallen warriors. In memorial sites today they stand as an homage to the ones gone and those yet to go. In the Ukrainian embassy in Washington DC, I believe they stand as the physical embodiment of impotence. What are DC residents to do 4,864 miles away from Kiev? Sending and placing flowers in an embassy seems like a miniscule yet accessible form of support.

Being physically distant from the war is strange. We cannot hear the shelling, the bombs, the cries of small children terrified under subway grounds. We can read it on the news, we see

live videos and personal testimonies on social media — but thousands of miles away in the comfort of our own sovereignty, be that either our homes or our country. For those with no personal connections to Ukraine, it feels even more bizarre to be wounded by the conflict. How can you grieve for a stranger? *Can* you grieve for a stranger? What is the line between human empathy and superficial appropriated mourning? I ask myself these questions as I stand in front of a sunflower bouquet. I feel the urge to cry but who would I shed tears for?

The juxtaposition of the American neighborhood life and the Ukrainian embassy create an even more complex and eerie atmosphere of sentiment. While pedestrians stop to reflect the enormity of what this memorial means, car horns blast beside them, and stationed police officers carry on conversations as if randomly assigned that building for no particular reason. As a couple speaking a Slavic language brought a small bunch of yellow tulips to place atop the mounting flowers, six police officers talked about women, tax forms, and a bet they had made amongst friends. Unfortunately, standing upon the memorial that day taught me more about Miguel's lucky wins than the advancement of Russian troops in the south, or the growing Ukrainian resistance, or the current number of casualties in the conflict. These are the consequences of an impromptu memorial, arranged at the same time as the war goes on.

But the symbolic power of memorials like this should not be overlooked. Nor should the freedom that allows them to be held and protected by officers of the law. In Russia, five kids and their mothers were reported to have been detained by the police for hours after placing "NO TO WAR" signs outside the Ukrainian embassy in Moscow. The ability to display sympathy for Ukraine in open air should not be taken for granted, even if 4,864 miles away from the corresponding capital. Even if not changing the course of the war in any way.

At the gates of the embassy building, stands a white poster written in markers: "WE STAND WITH UKRAINE". Do we really? Do we stand with Ukraine like we have with Afghanistan? With Iran? With Syria? With Yemen? With Myanmar? With...

While the memorial is noble in its cause, we have proven to be terrible at standing with others. Perhaps it's time we try something else.