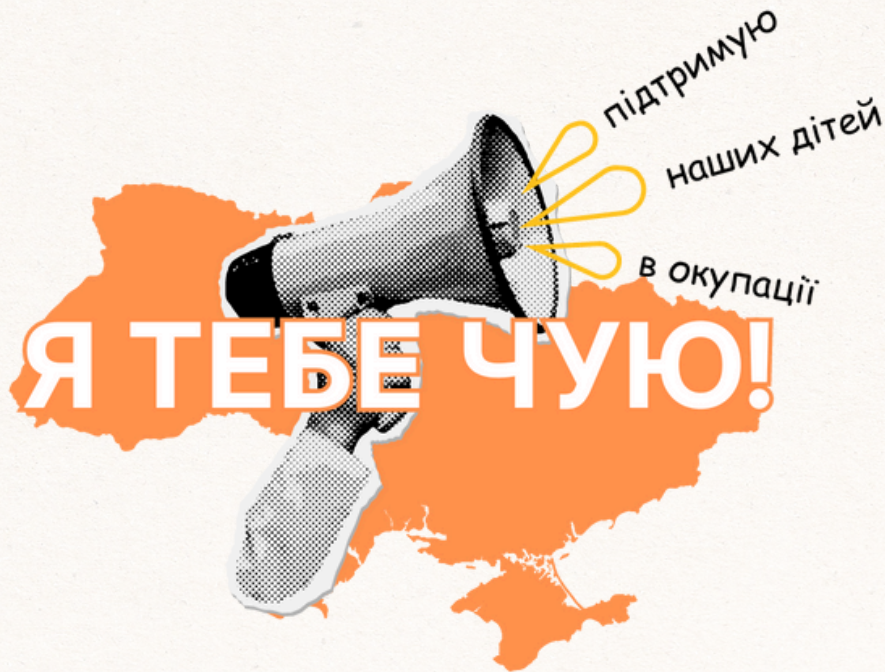




## Letters from the winners of the All-Ukrainian Student Essay Contest

# 'I hear you": a letter to a peer under occupation'



## After the rain always comes the rainbow

Yelyzaveta Brizhak,  
9th grade of the Zolote Lyceum No.5,  
Hirske Urban Hromada, Sievierodonetsk Raion of Luhansk Region.

### Hello, Mykhailo, my old friend!

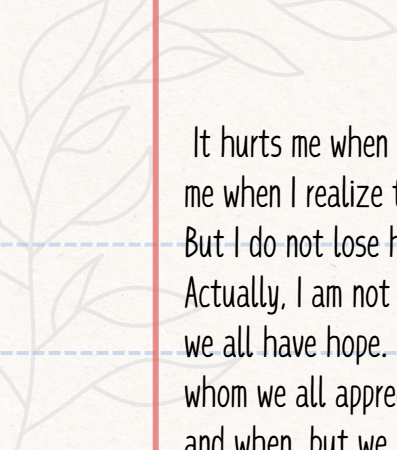
How have you been? Yesterday I learned from my parents, that there was an air strike in the city center. They say that a store and several residential buildings were affected... I sympathize with you. Hope that everyone is safe and sound! I asked my mom if you were all right, but she pretended not to hear anything. I could not sleep... It seemed that my worry would just eat me from the inside, so I decided to finally write to you.

I really miss you and our native city Zolote so much. When all this horror called "war" was just beginning, I had no idea that everything would take this long. The death toll, photos of destroyed cities, the cries of children who were left without parents because of this damn war – I see them in my nightmares. I always feel a kind of emptiness in my chest because I left my hometown, I left you, I left my past. The life goes on, but the real us remained somewhere where the sun shines, shines differently, where people did not wake up because of air raid alerts, where it was always warm at heart. I would like to come back home very much, walk with you in the field as we used to, and share my feelings that have piled up over all these years... But it is impossible, at least now.

I remember all our classmates, compatriots. I wonder how their lives turned out. I am deeply sorry that our city is occupied, or as some residents say – "liberated." If you think about it: liberated from what? From civilized life?! After all, there was everything: water, electricity, gas, the city was becoming better... It is worth mentioning our school – beautiful, renovated, modern. It was equipped with new computers, interactive boards, a 3D printer etc. Not every school of the so-called capital of the LPR – the city of Luhansk had such gadgets... People say that as soon as Zolote was occupied, everything was taken to Luhansk with the words "In such a village – such equipment." And what gym we had: various exercise machines, sports equipment... Unfortunately, all this was destroyed, stolen.

I also remember how we all decided with our class teacher to plant 25 bushes of roses by the end of the 9th grade (in memory of our friendly class) – exactly as many as there were students in our class. In the fall of 2021, we managed to plant only 8... But I believe that we will come back home and finished what we started!

I understand that many people remained under the occupation for several reasons – some have old and infirm parents, some simply did not have time, and some had no money... And children had no choice at all – they stayed with their parents, and now they study in schools where they are taught to hate everything related to Ukraine. But there are parents and children who believe that Zolote is Ukraine! These words were on the main square of our town on a mural created by a border guard from Vinnytsia, Unfortunately, he died in 2023... We have students from the occupied territory studying in our class. How hard it is for them to be there! Poor connection, lack of opportunity to study together with everyone, and also constant fear: what if someone finds out that you study in your native Ukrainian school, that you learn the poem "Love Ukraine" by V. Sosiura by heart. I really root for them! I root for you, may the God keep your family alive and give faith that "everything will be Ukraine!"




It hurts me when I remember all our plans for the future: small and large, insignificant and important. It annoys me when I realize that there is nothing I can do to help you. It is maddening that I am not where I should be. But I do not lose hope. People say that we choose our own lives. I chose to be happy – to live in Ukraine! Actually, I am not feeling very well right now, but we have a future. Nobody knows what will happen next, but we all have hope. Everyone is trying to help and make it, our future, happy for everyone. Our dear defenders, whom we all appreciate and support, do especially magnificent work. We will win! I believe in it! No matter how and when, but we will defeat the “orcs,” and we will definitely meet again. Of course, we will not be the same children as we used to be, because time goes by, and we grow as it goes. Life gives us challenges, which you and I pass with dignity. I promise that we will meet again and give each other smiles that will signify the end of the horror called the terrible word – “war.” I believe that after that there will be a beginning of the new life. Everything will be Ukraine!

See you, Mykhailo.

With respect and best wishes, your friend Liza.

P. S. And we will still plant those roses, no matter what! After the rain always comes the rainbow ...



# I can hear you: a letter to a peer in the occupation

Grizlyuk Karina  
"Lyceum of Natural Sciences"  
Kropyvnytsk City Council"

## My dear Aryna!

It has been almost two months since I heard from you. I know that it is difficult in Rubizhne, but you promised me... to stay alive. You remember, don't you? You wrote me that you will come, that you will get out of that place, and we will go for a walk in the city. And I will finally see the adorable cat that likes to bite you so much, while you write me letters back... My mother calls you a "crane with broken wings" and always asks how you are and if you managed to leave? How should I explain to her that the missiles fell next to your house, and in the photos in the news I noticed that the windows on your floor are no longer there? I want to believe that you are going to be fine, however with every new post about the new air strikes in Luhansk region, I start to fear more and more. My body fills with excruciating pain, my heart begins to pound wildly in my chest, and my thoughts get overflowed with expectation of the worst.

I watch news and remember how you and I used to laugh two years ago. We were such children! And then I remember that I have not heard your voice for several months, have not seen your messages for several weeks, and it has been few days since I forgot your smile. It is impossible to write you a letter while the tears are flowing from my eyes, and I have to endure and swallow them hoping that you will receive this letter. I see the news, I hear them, but I do not want to accept them – how will I live without my friend?

How did this world allow that 13-year-old children like you tremble under the rubble, count seconds after they hear the sounds of the airplanes and hope that it is not a missile? How can we close our eyes to this chaos, to thousands of dead bodies, to the lack of people's basic freedom?

My dear Aryna, do not forget that despite of hundreds of kilometers, explosions, destroyed houses – I am near. I am next to you in letters, in short messages that you write when you have connection. I will always be your friend, your support, regardless of the distance that separates us. I am waiting for your answer. I am waiting for you alive. I am waiting for victory and liberation of the entire Luhansk region. I pray for you and for Ukraine, my dear!  
With much love – your best friend.

P.S. As you have probably understood, reader, this letter is addressed to my friend from the occupied city of Rubizhne, Luhansk region. Since May 12, 2022, the city shared the fate of Mariupol. Rubizhne was completely destroyed, almost no houses survived. Occupation. Such an incomprehensible, strange word for Aryna, who was 13 back then, and for me. I was able to exchange messages with my friend only after they crossed the border of Luhansk region and left the occupied territory in the end of September. Her bravery and unshakeable faith in Ukraine inspired me to write many essays, photos of her destroyed house – to draw pictures, and she herself – awakened by readiness to show all the beauty of this world without war. This little crane with broken wings has overcome hell for her own freedom.

Thank you, Ukraine, for the opportunity to see the smile on my friend's face after all the pain she experienced!  
Thanks to all the defenders who fight for our freedom! Thank you for life!

"The number is not answering," but  
I can hear you!

Sofia Bazai  
Student of the 10th grade of "Lozova Lyceum No.1"  
Of the Lozova City Council of Kharkiv region

We all were children, and we all grew up in an instant. I remember my childhood before the start of the war in Ukraine. It was a time of serenity when I could calmly dream about the future. My family and I gathered together, celebrated holidays and travelled around our native country. I especially remember the vacation of the last peaceful summer...

Mariupol. August 2021.

Our August vacation was coming to an end. It was a bit sad. Tomorrow, we return home and today... Today I asked my parents to go to the sea for the last time. I love the sea. It is endless, just like my dreams. I headed to the pier. There I let the salty wind touch my face, closed my eyes, and felt like a bird!

But today I saw another dreamer in my "favorite" place. Just like me, she was smiling, looking into the distance.

Empathy overcame my shyness, and I walked over and sat next to her. The girl looked at me, smiled, and said as if to an old friend:

- Hi.

- Hi.

She paused, and then added:

- I am Sofia.

- Me too!

We suddenly burst out laughing.

We talked until dusk. What can you talk about with a stranger? About anything! About school, music, plans for the future...

Sofia was local. She saw the sea every day and also could not stop looking at it. She came here every day to dream.

She dreamt of entering our Kharkiv Pedagogical University named after Hryhorii Skovoroda. I have also been dreaming about it ever since... I was not sure before meeting her, but after getting to know her, I realized that it is cool to be a teacher!

Sofia and I exchanged phone numbers, so we do not lose such an unexpected friendship, hugged and... parted ways.

Back then, I could not even imagine that soon our life would drastically change.

Since February 2022, Sofia's number was not answering... I do not know what happened to her, but I want to believe that she is alive. That is why I say a "prayer" every evening and I sincerely believe in its power!

## Lozova. July 2024

My dear Ukrainian friend, I know that you are currently in difficult conditions, and I want to express my support and share my thoughts.

Every day the war makes itself felt, and I think about you and all the children of Ukraine, who found themselves in such a situation. You are children-heroes, children-knights, children-warriors!

I would like to give you something. Or rather, make a spiritual exchange! How?! It is quite simple.

We cannot see each other, but you can feel me with your heart.

We will take a special trip together at the same time.

Look, this is a forest. Many trees used to grow here. And in this meadow children used to play. Let us stop here and make the first exchange.

You will give me FEAR. Your fear for yourself and your loved ones, for your life and health, fear of not being able to learn new things. Fear that nothing will be like before. Fear for the future of our country.

I will give you LIGHT! Hope for the future. Light in the soul to face the enemy, to believe in victory, to drive away the feat step by step!

Let us keep going...

Look, there is a golden steppe spread over there. It bends under the summer breeze and gives shelter to the animals. Nature holds on, just like we do, in tough times. Let us stop here...

Give me your LONELINESS. You are not alone. We will fight for freedom together. Your family and loved ones will be by your side. We will overcome all obstacles on our way to the Victory!

In return, I will give you STRENGTH! The strength to find joy even in the darkest of times. The strength to endure the long fight. The Strength to not forget about your culture, language, and traditions! The strength to dream and to learn! This is what inspires us all.

Let us make the last stop near your native sea. There are almost no people here. There used to be a lot of them. We hear the sea waves, enjoy the sunset...

Give me your DOUBTS. We believe in our people! We know that we are fighting for the independence the past generations fought for and future generations will fight for. Despite all the difficulties, we believe that our country will definitely be rebuilt. We will restore destroyed cities, return to our homes, and build a peaceful life. It will be a long and hard path, but we are ready to it, because we know that the best future awaits us in the end!

My last gift would have to be special. I will not give you COMPASSION because it will not help in the fight. I will not give you SERENITY, because it is not eternal. I will give you JUSTICE! I know that the day will come when everything will be real, honest, and sincere! The enemy will be punished for the stolen childhood, terrible losses, and memories. I believe that our children will grow up in the free Ukraine, which will prosper every day! They will be able to calmly go to school, seek their purpose and fulfill their dreams. This is what inspires us to fight for a better "tomorrow" and gives us faith that our efforts are not in vain.

My invincible sunshine, our encounter is coming to an end. I am grateful to you for our special trip and the most precious exchange of gifts. I hope you will save my gifts. But I will say goodbye to yours... I will throw it over my shoulder as people say.

Sofia, I know that it is difficult for you right now. The war has changed our lives forever, but we cannot let the enemy break us! Now more than ever it is important to stick together. The joint fight for the freedom and independence of Ukraine unites us! By supporting each other we can overcome any obstacles and restore the peaceful life in our country!

P.S. Our life paths have parted, but I believe that they will cross in the future peaceful land ...

Your Sofia.

## Hello my friend!

You know, I cannot help the feeling that I am listening for something. As if I was trying to hear you through distance and time. And it seems that sometimes I really hear you.

I hear you sigh when you wake up in the morning and forget for a moment where you are and what is happening around you. And then reality hits you, and you take a deep breath getting ready for a new day.

I hear your footsteps – careful and balanced. I imagine how you walk down the streets of our city, so familiar and at the same time so foreign now. Maybe you walk past our old school or our favorite coffee shop. I wonder if they are still standing.

Sometimes I think that I hear your laugh. Remember how we used to laugh to tears at stupid jokes? That infectious laugh of yours that was irresistible. I cherish these memories as my greatest treasure.

I hear your silence. That tense silence when you hold back words and swallow your emotions. I know how hard it is to remain silent when you want to scream. But I hear even the things that you do not say.

Sometimes it seems that I hear your voice in the crowd. I turn around, but of course that is not you. However, for a moment my heart freezes with hope.

I hear how you are trying to stay strong. How you force yourself to wake up every morning, to go forward, not to give up. Your fortitude is something incredible.

Sometimes I hear your anger – hollow, suppressed, but so righteous. This anger is like a bridge between us, it unites us despite everything.

I also hear your dreams. The ones we talked about at nights sitting on the roof and looking at the stars. They did not disappear anywhere, my friend. They are waiting for their time to come.

I hear your questions – the ones to which there are no answers. Why did this happen to us? When will it all end? What will happen next? I also ask myself these questions every day.

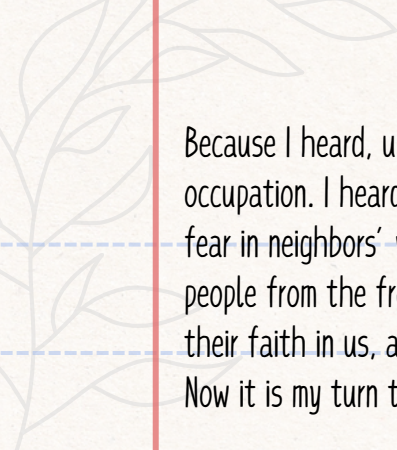
Sometimes I hear your sadness. It comes in waves, I know. And I want you to know – I am sad together with you. Sad about our past, about the lost time, about everything that could happen.

I hear your hope. Quiet, careful, but alive. It is like a delicate flower that breaks through the asphalt. Cherish it, my friend.

You know, sometimes I even hear your night dreams. I imagine how you dream of the sea, or the forest, or just the free sky above your head. I hope these dreams give you strength.

I hear how your heart beats – strongly, confidently, against all odds. It reminds me that you are alive, that you are fighting, that you have not given up.

And I want you to hear me too. Hear how much I believe in you. How proud I am of your courage. How I look forward to meeting you.



Because I heard, unwittingly. I heard you during warm June evenings, when I was in Kherson under the occupation. I heard the footsteps of patrols on the streets, I heard the rumble of machinery at night, I heard fear in neighbors' voices. But you know what was the loudest thing I heard? I heard support. I heard how people from the free Ukraine send hope to us through radio waves, through messages, through songs. I heard their faith in us, and that gave me strength to hold on. I am free now, but a part of me is still there, with you. Now it is my turn to become the voice of hope that once supported me.

One day we will hear each other again in reality. But meanwhile I hear you with my heart. And I know that you can hear me too.

Hang in there my friend. I always hear you.

