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ELENA
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by Elena Dolgopyat

First published in Russian as *Чужая жизнь* in 2019

Translated from the Russian by Richard Coombes

Proofreading by Stephen Dalziel

Book cover and interior book design by Max Mendor

www.glagoslav.com

ISBN: 978-1-80484-018-4
ISBN: 978-1-80484-019-1

First published in English by Glagoslav Publications in May 2023

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

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INTRODUCTION

This is intelligent writing. Its simplicity is deceptive, and its apparent artlessness is the product of experience and skill. The author's restraint resonates in us with an unexpected strength of feeling.

Each of Elena Dolgopyat's stories is unique, and could only have been written by her. Each painfully stirs the soul with a sense of the fragility, the evanescence, even, of human existence, in a world that is far from illusory: it is our world, very real, recognisable. Even those stories which contain an element of phantasmagoria reach us not as fantasy, but are somehow elevated to the level of our everyday lives. I cannot tell you about the techniques by which this effect is achieved; I do not know what they are. I suspect that the mystery of the impact of these texts on the reader is contained in something not taught on any writing course.

As someone with long years of schoolteaching experience, I know that if the children start to make a racket while you are talking in class, it is useless to force your voice. There is one of you and many of them; you will not out-shout them. The best way to make them listen to you is to lower your voice. In my view, something similar is happening today in literature. Desperate to be heard, we try to shout more loudly, to out-shout the noise of the world. For most of us, this simply does not work.

Elena Dolgopyat never tries to raise her voice. Her stories have long been appearing in literary journals, and have come out as books; but only in the last few years, it seems,

have we begun to understand that in her quiet voice, she is telling us of 'the multicoloured underside of life'. She is telling us of things that matter to us all.

Leonid Yuzefovich

SOMEONE ELSE'S LIFE

LYOSHA

It happened involuntarily, without effort.

The queue was not moving. Lyosha's mother was keeping him close to her, holding him by the co˚llar like a tiny tot. People were coming up and asking what was available.

Sausages.

They said not to join the queue.

A kilo, no more.

The shoppers stood patiently, close together. Every so often, someone tried to push in and was met with a hail of foul language.

The queue would stand stock still for a time and then take one small step forward. How many more shuffling steps to the saleswoman in her white bonnet? A thousand? A hundred thousand? Lyosha would have hopped out and measured, but his mother would not let him go; she kept tight hold of him.

'I'm hot,' complained Lyosha.

His mother let go of his collar, and bent down.

In that instant, at the very moment when Lyosha's mother's face came close to his, time stopped. His mother, all the people, all creatures and all objects froze, like in the fairy tale about an enchanted castle that Lyosha had read many times in a slim children's book. The book had a picture of the castle's inhabitants, frozen in a dance. Mind you, any picture shows the world with all its inhabitants frozen.

Lyosha stirred, and realised that for him, time had not stopped. Everyone was in suspension, while Lyosha

remained free. He showed no particular surprise. He took what had happened calmly. He stepped away from the queue. Walked along it. Noted that no sounds were audible; even his own footsteps made no sound. No squelching from the black gunge on the floor. He was walking as if in a void.

Lyosha stepped carefully, frightened of startling slumbering time. Frightened of waking it up. The way it might be best to sneak past a dozing lion.

A shiny new coin hung suspended in the air. A five kopeck piece. Lyosha made out the year: 1972. 1972 had just begun. The shop door was ajar; it had evidently not managed to slam shut behind a chap who had gone purple with cold. The gap was wide enough for Lyosha.

The boy went out into the winter street. Diamond dust glittered in the air. There was a child skating along the icy path, arms flung wide. Lyosha glanced at his face, into his bright, clear eyes, then went on his way. Lyosha knew that the street should lead him to the river. He wanted to have a look at the ice, perhaps even walk across it to the far bank. The other kids said that the wind in the middle of the river was awful, howling, enough to blow you off your feet and drag you all the way to the plywood factory. The factory always smelled of sawn wood–though in this world on pause, Lyosha could not smell anything.

Walking turned out to be easy, weightless. Lyosha observed clouds of steam and cigarette smoke that looked as if they had been captured on photographic plates. The street running down to the river was lined with small one-storey houses. Smoke stood motionless above the chimneys. A stream of ice like sparkling jewels was beating from a standpipe into a bucket. A lady was using a hook to hold the bucket, her feet planted firmly. Felt boots with sleek black galoshes, and a grey woollen jacket from under which a long dark skirt peeped out. Lyosha walked round the lady looking at her from all sides, like a statue in a museum. He

marvelled at her ample rear, at her legs as strong as concrete piles, at the hairy black mole on her upper lip.

She had screwed up her face; it looked as if she had been about to sneeze, but had not had time to do so.

Here I am, thought Lyosha suddenly, *walking around and not the slightest bit cold, and not hungry, either.* Yet in the queue he had felt very hungry, especially as the shop had smelled not only of cold and people; there was also the waft of fresh bread, and of the sausages brought in from Moscow to sell.

Now he did not want to do anything else; just look.

Lyosha left the lady and went on his way, lingering now in front of a fluttering sparrow, now in front of a passer-by. He walked out onto the carriageway, stepping out without fear of cars; their snarling was silent, and gone too was the animal smell of petrol, which Lyosha adored.

At the river, behind the sheds, an alleyway opened up, and in it Lyosha saw a small, crooked figure. It was a boy, lying on the snow, his legs tucked up and his hands covering his head, towards which a foot inside a boot as heavy as a stone was flying. Flying, but not reaching its destination; it had stopped in mid-air. The assailant's face was twisted, and his grey army cap with a dent from a cockade had fallen off and was hovering just above the ground.

Lyosha knew both boys. The one lying down was Valya, a fellow fourth year of Lyosha's. His executioner, nicknamed Bull, was an eighth year. He was not so much studying as serving time, as Lyosha's mother would say. Valya did little to draw attention to himself, except that he had a quiet, clear voice. The teacher always had to go right up to him to make out what he was saying. Frozen nearby in the pose of an observer was another acquaintance and classmate of Lyosha's, Petya. And not just an acquaintance and classmate, but his best friend. He was standing with his hands shoved into the pockets of his short coat, observing the beating with a smile.

Lyosha looked in horror at his friend's face. This was Petya! Cheerful, clever, deft, adored Petya! To whom (and no-one else) Lyosha had told his dream about death. Who had taught him to swim that summer. Petya, who knew how to make a blood pact. The best fellow on earth was watching the beating without turning a hair and with visible pleasure.

Lyosha knelt down and looked into poor Valya's face.

Valya's eyes were squeezed shut, his nose bashed and bleeding.

Lyosha thought, *I'll grab the stone boot and give it a yank. The back of Bull's head'll come smacking down onto the ice, and Valya and I'll take off. To the plywood factory, across the ice.*

Lyosha grabbed hold of the boot, and in that very instant came to in the queue. Sounds clattered around him, deafening him. Voices, footsteps, coughing, the door slamming. His mother said, 'Chin up, son. Nearly there.'

She straightened, something distracted her, and Lyosha made a dash for the door.

The alley behind the sheds was already empty. Lyosha could see drops of blood on the trampled snow. He looked around and hesitated, waiting, though he was not sure what for. Then he trudged back towards the shop. His breathing gradually returned to normal.

Back home, his mother said there were no sausages for him. 'I stood there for as long as it took to get my allowance, but you obviously didn't want yours.'

After that, she didn't say another word to him the whole evening. She didn't even look in his direction, as if Lyosha was just an empty space. She cooked a sausage and ate it. Lyosha chomped his way through potatoes and sauerkraut, and sat down to do his homework. Lyubasha, as they called their class mistress, had promised they would have a test the following day. Lyosha felt old, one of life's veterans.

The next day, Valya did not appear at school. Petya arrived with his eye all puffy and told Lyosha about how he

had been walking along the alley by the river, thinking his own thoughts, and suddenly seen Bull laying into Valya.

'Obviously I went rushing in to pull him off, and caught a swinging fist. Good thing my uncle had done his army service. One chop on the neck and bam! Bull down. Uncle's promised to teach me some moves. Fighting. You want to join in?'

Realisation dawned on Lyosha, something like: you can't judge an event by an instant, by a thin slice. You can't judge with absolute precision. With certainty. You don't know why someone's face is frozen in a smile. He's looking at you, but maybe not seeing you; he's smiling at a thought of his own, something you know nothing about.

After the fight, Petya had walked Valya home, and Valya had told him that he'd been on his way to get bread, minding his own business, when he'd seen Bull standing by the shed, crying. Valya had quickened his pace but sensed Bull catching up with him. Bull caught up, shoved him in the back, and Valya had fallen.

The bell rang. Lyubasha came in.

The class stood quietly. Lyubasha looked at them with the kind of sadness with which Lyosha's mother sometimes looked at him, as if pitying him in advance for the rest of his life.

Lyubasha lowered herself onto the chair at her teacher's desk, covered her young, round face with her small hands, and sat motionless.

The class, too, stopped. No-one moved a muscle. There was a chalk mark on the sleeve of Lyubasha's cardigan. Lyosha wanted the white streak to disappear; looking at it was uncomfortable. It was all very like the way time had suddenly stopped yesterday. Except that on this occasion Lyosha was frozen in it as well.

No-one could move a muscle; no-one, until Lyubasha took her hands away from her flushed face, and sighed. And then everyone sighed.

The girls clucked, 'Miss, Miss, what's wrong, Miss?'

Lyubasha waved a hand to silence the clucking. She took a delicate white handkerchief from her cardigan pocket and dabbed her eyes and nose.

'You're going to find out anyway. Boris Yevdokimov was found murdered this morning. You can sit down now.'

Boris Yevdokimov was Bull. Was.

The following day, Petya intercepted Lyosha outside school, before lessons started. He said the year eights were going to Bull's funeral. A clapped out old bus was already waiting by the front entrance.

'While they're getting ready, let's walk.'

Lyosha did not ask why. He felt he had to go. Petya likewise, probably. To say farewell, perhaps; or perhaps to clear something up.

Bull lived (once upon a time) on the outskirts, in a village adjoining the town. The boys walked through a neglected park by the Dzerzhinsky factory. They walked along the side of a narrow, ice-covered road, went over, crossed a little frozen stream, and there was the village, already in sight. They walked the whole way in silence.

A white field lay under a violet sky. Lyubasha had brought them here in December. They had cut through the snow with a shovel and looked at the layers. Light, dark, an impregnation of soot and a hard crust of ice meant it had thawed and re-frozen. They'd spotted a yellow trail of urine and giggled. Lyubasha said that by spring this whole snow book that she was teaching them to read would have melted away without a trace.

The clean white field under the dusky sky dazzled their eyes. The boys were approaching the village along a beaten path, and everything seemed age-old: the snow, the path, the wooden houses, the smoke from the stoves, and they themselves, the little people.

'The Krysenkov brothers from Alexandrovka are in our class.'

'Yes, that's right.'

People were loitering outside Bull's house. A red coffin lid leaned against the fence beside a wide-open wicket gate. The boys walked through. The path was broad and swept smooth. The snow glinted. Men were smoking on the steps.

The room was cold, unheated.

Meagre light from a modest window. A mirror hung with a black shawl. On a bare table in the middle of the room, an open coffin, upholstered in red. On a chair beside it, a woman, all in black. Lips pressed together, dry eyes.

The boys timidly approached the coffin from the other side of the table. The body lying in it looked nothing like its old, living self. Bull was dressed in a black ceremonial suit and a white pressed shirt. His heavy black boots gleamed, and smelled of shoe polish. A clock stood on the sideboard. His face was frozen in the cold. Petya touched Lyosha's hand, and the boys quietly backed away from the coffin.

They went outside and stood with the men on the steps, breathing in the bitter smoke.

The old bus pulled up, and its door opened. The year eights got out in silence.

'Let's go home,' Petya decided.

'I'll stay a bit longer,' said Lyosha.

Petya looked at him in surprise, but did not ask why. He shook Lyosha's hand goodbye.

Lyosha stepped down from the porch and loitered nearby. God only knew what he was staying for, what else he wanted to see. Or understand, maybe.

Lyosha waited for the coffin to be carried out of the house, and followed the black, silent crowd.

In the graveyard, men were digging the earth and singing verses Lyosha had never heard before.

'Holy God, Holy and Mighty, Holy and Immortal, have mercy on us.'

There were no priests in the graveyard. A few old women were crossing themselves and crying (Bull's mother was neither crying nor crossing herself), and the men were digging the earth and singing, singing, *'Holy God, Holy and Mighty, Holy and Immortal, have mercy on us.'*

It struck Lyosha as both scary and necessary.

He stayed on for the wake in the now-heated house, listened to the conversations, ate, and even took a sip of vodka.

Bull had been stabbed in the chest on the railway tracks, behind the depot. Snow had covered him during the night.

Bull's mother sat in silence, then suddenly, in a voice low but audible to all, said, 'He departed at the right time, without sin. He was killed. He didn't kill anyone. It is God's mercy.'

'How do you know?' asked one of the women, her voice young. 'How do you know whether he has that sin on his soul or not?'

Bull's mother was silent, thinking.

'I don't know. But I don't know the opposite either.'

She filled a shot to the brim, and drank it down.

Lyosha arrived back home at nightfall. His mother did not reproach him. She offered him something to eat, but he said he was full. He brushed his teeth, had a wash, looked at his wet face in the mirror, and thought that he did not want to die, ever.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elena Dolgopyat is from Murom, in the Vladimir region of Russia. She graduated from the Moscow Institute of Railway Engineering (now the Moscow State University of Railway Engineering) in 1986, and worked until 1989 as a programmer at a military facility in the Moscow region. In 1993 she graduated from the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography, and has worked at the State Central Museum of Cinema in Moscow since 1995.

She was first published in 1993, and has published short stories, novella-length works, and several television serial and film screenplays. Her three short story collections are: 'Rodina' ('Homeland', 2016), which was shortlisted for the 2017 Russian National Bestseller prize; 'Russkoye' ('Russianness', 2018); and 'Chuzhaya Zhizn' (*Someone Else's Life*, 2019), longlisted for the 2020 Yasnaya Polyana prize. The story 'The Facility' from *Someone Else's Life* was runner-up for the 2020 Babel Prize. Her story 'Soobshcheniya s planety' ('Messages from the Planet'), published in the literary journal *Novyy Mir* in 2021, was longlisted for the fifth annual Babel award.

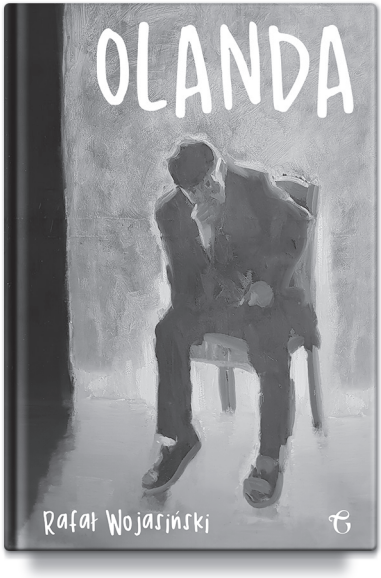
ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Richard Coombes has written music, songs and stories of his own, and translates Russian literature (verse, prose, and song lyrics) into English.

Richard's recently published translations include short stories by Elena Dolgopyat and poetry by Lyudmila Knyazeva, Dmitry Vodennikov and Tatiana Voltskaya in a variety of literary journals; poetry for the Second World War in a poetry collection 'Frontovaya Lira' (*Poems from the Front*), nominated for 'Book of the Year 2021' in a category specifically relating to the Second World War; and a variety of poems for the bilingual anthology *Disbelief*, published by Smokestack Books in January 2023. Richard and his colleagues are already working on a follow-up to *Disbelief*. Richard's translations of Pavel Basinsky's documentary-thriller-biography 'Posmotrite na menya' (English title *Liza's Waterfall*) is scheduled to be published in 2023. Richard is currently preparing a translation of Alexey Ivanov's novel 'Pishcheblok' (*The Food Block*).

OLANDA

by Rafał Wojasiński



I've been happy since the morning. Delighted, even. Everything seems so splendidly transient to me. That dust, from which thou art and unto which thou shalt return — it tempts me. And that's why I wander about these roads, these woods, among the nearby houses, from which waft the aromas of fried pork chops, chicken soup, fish, diapers, steamed potatoes for the pigs; I lose my eye-sight, and regain it again. I don't know what life is, Ola, but I'm holding on to it. Thus speaks the narrator of Rafał Wojasiński's novel *Olanda*. Awarded the prestigious Marek Nowakowski Prize for 2019, *Olanda* introduces us to a world we glimpse only through the window of our train, as we hurry from one important city to another: a provincial world of dilapidated farmhouses and sagging apartment blocks, overgrown cemeteries and village drunks; a world seemingly abandoned by God — and yet full of the basic human joy of life itself.

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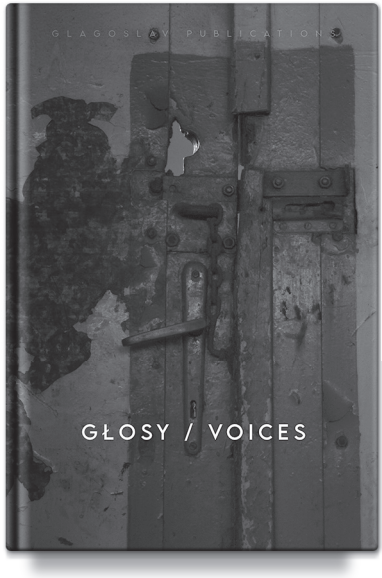
GŁOSY / VOICES

by Jan Polkowski



In December 1970, amid a harsh winter and an even harsher economic situation, the ruling communist regime in Poland chose to drastically raise prices on basic foodstuffs. Just before the Christmas holidays, for example, the price of fish, a staple of the traditional Christmas Eve meal, rose nearly 20%. Frustrated citizens took to the streets to protest, demanding the repeal of the price-hikes. Things took an especially dramatic turn in the northern regions near the Baltic shore — later, the cradle of the Solidarity movement, which would eventually spark the fall of communism in Poland and throughout Central and Eastern Europe — where the government moved against their citizens with the Militia and the Army. Forty-one Poles were murdered by their own government when militiamen and soldiers opened fire with live rounds on the crowds in Gdańsk, Gdynia, Szczecin and Elbląg.

Jan Polkowski's moving poetic cycle *Głosy* [Voices], presented here in its entirety in the English translation of C.S. Kraszewski, is a poetic monument to the dead, their families, and all who were affected by the 'December Events,' as they are sometimes euphemistically referred to.

A BILINGUAL EDITION

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Elena Dolgopyat was born and raised in the USSR, trained as a computer programmer in a Soviet military facility, and retrained as a cinematographer post-perestroika. Fusing her diverse experiences with her own sensitivities and preoccupations, and weaving throughout a colourful thread of magic realism, she has produced an unsettling group of fifteen stories all concerned in some way with the theme of estrangement.

Elena herself, in an interview given at the time of the book's launch, said, 'Into each of these stories is woven the motif that one's life is "alien". It is as if you are separate from your own life and someone else is living it. You feel either that your own life is "other", or you experience a yearning for a life you have not led, an envy for some other life.'

In his introduction to the collection, Leonid Yuzefovich writes, 'Each of Elena Dolgopyat's stories ... painfully stirs the soul with a sense of the fragility, the evanescence, even, of human existence ... in her quiet voice, she is telling us of "the multicoloured underside of life". She is telling us of things that matter to us all.'

Translated by Richard Coombes.

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ISBN 978-1-80484-008-5

LONDON, UK

ISBN 978-1-80484-018-4
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