



ANASTASIIA
MARSIZ

THE BIG FELLOW

GLAGOSLAV PUBLICATIONS

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by Anastasiia Marsiz

First published in Russian as *Большой человек* in 2021

Translated from the Russian
by Andrew Sheppard and Michael Pursglove

Proofreading by Richard Coombes

Russian text © Anastasiia Marsiz, 2021

Cover image © Max Mendor, 2023

English translation © Andrew Sheppard and
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Book cover and interior book design by Max Mendor

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www.glagoslav.com

ISBN: 978-1-80484-098-6

ISBN: 978-1-80484-099-3

First published in English by Glagoslav Publications in September 2023

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

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ANASTASIYA MARSIZ

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TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN
BY ANDREW SHEPPARD AND MICHAEL PURSGLOVE

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1. CECILIA'S LAST DAY

"My dear," the owner of the vegetable stall politely addressed the elderly woman standing in front of him, "of course, Ernesto is a good man, a trier, but his hands are an absolute disaster. Today, he managed to drop four boxes of produce. Two of them were cherries, and most of them were ruined."

"Oh, Mario, please forgive me," the woman said, going pale. She blushed and looked darkly at her grandson, who was standing in a corner of the shop, smiling vacantly. "I'm so sorry. What can I do? Perhaps I can pay for them."

"No. There is no need for that," Mario replied hastily, lowering his eyes. He wanted to help this unfortunate woman, but how could he? Her grandson was a prize idiot, and clumsy too.

"Ernesto, let's go," the woman said.

The big dark lad, with his huge long hands, dashed up to his grandmother, seized her, and dragged her to the exit.

"Poor Cecilia," mumbled Mario when the door had slammed behind them.

"And where shall we go now, Ceci?" asked Ernesto, smiling joyfully when they had got round the corner of the building.

"To the sea-front, Ernesto," she replied wearily.

"To the sea!" exclaimed the lad. "Maybe I'll run home and get my swimming trunks."

"No, my dear, we're not going to the sea."

"Why not?"

"You must find work, Ernesto."

“And where will we look for it?”

“In the Chalet Martina. I know the lady who owns it. She’s strict, but it’s worth a try.”

Cecilia paused for some moments and gave a deep sigh. Her head was spinning, her feet hurt and her mouth was dry.

“Let’s sit down,” she said, sinking wearily on to a bench beside a colourful children’s roundabout. Opposite them were several restaurants. One of them, Chalet Martina, was about to host a desperate woman’s last effort to find employment for her feckless grandson – a hapless orphan, half Gambian, half Italian.

“Ernesto, my dear, go and buy me a bottle of water.”

“In a jiffy,” he replied delightedly. He dashed off, and immediately collided with a passer-by who was carrying a glass of coffee. The coffee spilled onto the man’s trousers, and he gave a yell.

“Pardon me. Please! I didn’t see you,” said Ernesto. He leaned towards the man and, in trying to help, struck him a direct blow on the chin with his elbow.

“Leave me alone, idiot!” shouted the man, making haste to get away from the whirlwind that was Ernesto.

“Forgive me,” mumbled Ernesto, smiling awkwardly.

Cecilia heaved a sigh and looked away. Her face was covered with tell-tale red blotches. Over the past eighteen years she had become used to people insulting Ernesto, looking askance at him, laughing. She did not intercede for him, but merely hid her eyes – fearfully and timidly. Ernesto never noticed either her sighs or her ashamed looks.

“Ernesto,” she said quietly.

“Yes, Ceci,” he replied, flying to her.

“You forgot to take any money.”

Ernesto then set off once again to get the water. Cecilia meanwhile plunged into painful thoughts of the past. Lately, she had been troubled by her memories. Her temples throbbed, burning like fire; her throat was constricted.

Spectral images of the past paraded by her, besieging and devastating her soul and bringing her sick heart pangs of pain. She did not trust doctors, did not get a diagnosis, but felt sure that her last days were upon her.

She remembered the day when Ernesto came home from school, pale and excited, with a still-bleeding wound in the back of his head. He was eight years old.

"Ceci, we had a great time playing in the yard with the kids from my class," he had yelled, delightedly. "A game with text books. You had to hit a target. I was the leader. Dino was happy to let me have it, just here," he said, pointing to his injury. "We drew a spot with chalk! Ceci, I was a human target!"

With a muffled groan, she set about bandaging Ernesto's head, thinking of the cruelty that lies in the hearts of children. In this merciless world, life would be hard for her gormless grandson. Would there be so much as one person who would be kind to him and not turn him away?

She herself had once wanted to be rid of Ernesto. When he was just four years old, she had decided to put him in a children's home. As she had got his things together and dressed him, he had watched her with his trusting eyes and a naïve smile so broad and joyful that she shuddered. She had turned away, ashamed of her intended treachery. When all was ready, she had taken him firmly by the hand and led him to the bus stop, trying not to look at him.

They had walked along the sea-front in silence. It was late autumn. A strong wind got up; it howled like a wild animal, rocked the trees, bent branches to the ground. Waves furiously lashed the shore. Ernesto's small hand, strong for a child of his age, gripped hers, which was enfeebled by her own age. "The hand of a traitor," said the waves.

At the bus stop, Cecilia placed Ernesto on a bench. A bright notice caught his attention. "Ceci, what's that?" he asked, looking his grandmother in the eye.

She had gasped, and even staggered backwards a little. With his clear glance, Ernesto had reminded her of Leah, her beloved daughter. His eyes were exactly the same.

Cecilia had sunk to her knees before her grandson, embraced him, and clasped him firmly to her. Warm tears gushed from her eyes, erasing the remains of her powder along with her treacherous intentions.

So they returned home. Cecilia held Ernesto by the hand as the wind swept her grey locks this way and that; tears ran down her cheeks; her lips quivered and she murmured, "Leah, Leah, my little girl."

She would of course never forget how she had lost her only daughter.

The day on which Leah left the family home had been one of the hottest of the year. Exhausted by her work and the heat, Cecilia had been mighty glad to push open the door of her flat. It was quiet inside, as if everyone were asleep. "Leah. Daughter. I'm home," she had called loudly.

No one answered. In the kitchen, her husband, Roberto, was sitting at the table. He was staring at a sheet of paper with a vacant expression such as she had never before seen in the twenty years she had known him. Moving close enough to get a clear view, she read:

My dear Mum and Dad,
I've fallen in love with a good man. He's called Omar. He comes from Gambia. We want to get married. I know you'll be against the marriage, so I've had to go away. But I'll be back. I'll phone you soon.
Forgive me!
Your Leah.

It was eight months before Cecilia saw her daughter again. Leah came home sad, emaciated, and expecting a baby.

Roberto did not ask Leah where she had been, or look at her outsize belly. He just said, dryly: "Don't go into the street. You'll bring shame on us all."

Leah did indeed stay at home for days on end. At night, repressed sobbing could be heard from her room.

She had changed. She was no longer the vivacious Leah who smiled at the morning sun, took delight in the beauty of the sunset, leapt laughing into the sea, lay on the golden sand and looked at the sky. Her love for life had burned out and cooled. Her eyes no longer gleamed and her voice was weak. She would lie in bed and look at the ceiling with unseeing eyes. Cecilia wondered what had happened to her; wondered where she had been all this time; wondered who this Omar was who had left her in this humiliating situation. In response to Cecilia's questions, Leah just smiled warily and her eyes filled with tears.

So, instead of asking questions, Cecilia would stroke Leah's head, comb her hair and say: "It's all right. Everything will sort itself out somehow. The main thing, Leah, is that you are at home."

One night, Leah whispered to Cecilia: "Mama, I feel bad."

Jumping out of bed, Cecilia saw a huge puddle on the floor. Ten hours later, Ernesto entered the world.

"Signora Bruno, we've done all we can for your daughter, but her body failed...", said a thin young doctor with a thin black moustache. "Your daughter..." The inexperienced doctor crumpled as he tried to speak the words for the first time in his life. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. "My condolences."

A despairing cry tore from Cecilia's chest. Crushed with sorrow, she sank to the floor – life had no meaning for her now. Her pulse struck her head like a hammer; her weak body shivered.

A nurse put something cold on her face; helped her up and settled her on a sofa. She checked her pulse and, leaving briefly, soon returned to give her an injection.

Some time passed. “Signora Bruno, can you hear me?” asked the doctor. “You have a grandson. A healthy, strong infant. Will you take him?”

“What?”

“Your grandson. Will you take him?” the doctor repeated.

“Me?”

“As the closest relatives,” began the doctor, running his finger along his thin moustache, “you and Signor Bruno can take your grandson, or you can give him up.”

Cecilia was not able to give up her grandson. She lived according to rules which had been instilled in her in childhood: to be an obedient daughter, a faithful and caring wife, and a kind and loving mother – a true Catholic woman.

The only right decision was to bring up her orphaned grandson. It was her Christian duty. When she took his small, wrinkled, dark-skinned body in her arms for the first time, she experienced only a feeling of duty, pain and cruel injustice, which she humbly accepted.

She and Roberto lived modestly. She worked as a maid in a hotel: Roberto caught fish and sold them to local restaurants. They had a two-room flat. There was a small living-room/kitchen, and a bedroom which was divided into two parts by a partition. The furniture was inexpensive: a small sofa, upholstered with a grey, cotton fabric, a simple wooden table, four chairs and an old television. The carpet was worn, and the only wall decoration was a picture of Castle Torregalli.¹ Cecilia had often looked at this picture and said dreamily to Roberto: “We’ll save up. I’ll buy a proper silk dress, yellow, with blue flowers and a wide-brimmed straw hat. We’ll go to Castle Torregalli and walk in the gar-

.....
¹ A mediaeval castle (early 14th century), situated not far from Florence, in the foothills between the River Arno and Greve.

den. Leah will run along the avenues catching butterflies. In the evening you and I will drink Pino Grigio and dance.”

Drunk on her dreams, Cecilia spun around the room singing:

It is a simple song for two pennies
That is sung on the streets of the suburbs
For those who wait, for those who love, for those who dream,
It is the eternal sweet tale of love.²

Cecilia and Roberto never did visit Castle Torregalli.

It was a bright sunny day. Cecilia was cooking lunch, while one-year-old Ernesto played on the carpet. There came an insistent ring at the door of the Brunos' flat. Cecilia gave an involuntary shudder, looked around and opened the door. On the threshold stood her neighbour, Toni. He was crumpling his hat in his hands and shifting from foot to foot. He gave a sigh and, without looking her in the eye, said in a quiet voice: “Cecilia, my dear, Robert is there, at the harbour.”

Snatching up little Ernesto, she rushed to the harbour just as she was, wearing her house slippers. There a small knot of fishermen had gathered. The men made a passage for her, shaking their heads. When she got through to the boats, it was to see a pale Roberto with blue lips, lying motionless on a damp board.

He had suffered a heart attack as he came into the harbour.

So Cecilia was left alone with their small grandson.

The years flew by, making of Cecilia the frail, sick old woman who was now sitting on a bench, staring fixedly, sighing, muttering to herself, picking over the threads of bitter memories.

When Ernesto ran up, carrying a bottle of water, she was dozing.

.....
² *Canzone da due soldi.*

"Here you are, Ceci, I've brought it," he said loudly into her ear.

"Ah, Ernesto," she replied hoarsely. "What took you so long?"

"I was looking for your favourite, in the blue bottle."

Cecilia drank the water greedily.

"All right. Let's go, Ernesto. Let's go." She stood up from the bench and, leaning on Ernesto's arm, headed for the entrance to the Chalet Martina.

Looking around timidly from the threshold of the restaurant, she saw the owner, Signora Marino. She was bending over a young lad who was reluctantly sweeping up the remnants of a broken glass. She stood with hands on hips and was frowning.

"Antonio, how many times do I have to tell you? And how can you make pasta if you can't keep hold of a glass. I give up."

"What sort of a day do you call this?" she further exclaimed, seemingly to the wider world, waving her arms. Then she noticed Cecilia and Ernesto.

"Hello, Cecilia," she said affably.

"Good day to you, my dear Martina. Look, I've brought my grandson. You remember Ernesto, don't you?" She pushed the lad forward.

"Of course I remember Ernesto," exclaimed Martina kindly, surveying him with interest. He was looking her straight in the eye. "Will you come to dinner? Please do. Today, Adriano is cooking his trademark pasta."

"Thank you for the invitation," Cecilia replied, "But we can't do dinner. I'm looking for work for Ernesto. He's a big lad now." She broke off, lowering her eyes. Then, collecting herself, she went on: "Maybe you've got some work for him, Martina?"

"What can he do?" Signora Marino asked, casting an involuntary look at the lad's long, strong hands.

"Since he was a child, he's helped me in the hotel. He's strong and tolerant." Cecilia switched her gaze to her grandson. "He's a quiet boy, kind and honest."

"Antonio! Son!" Martina yelled suddenly. "How long are you going to be clearing up that wretched glass?"

Antonio shot an enquiring look at his mother, shrugged his shoulders and reluctantly continued gathering the fragments on to a tray. Ernesto stooped and began helping Antonio.

"Martina, please give my grandson a job in your restaurant." Cecilia went on, looking beseechingly at Martina. "I can't work in the hotel any more. I'm old already. I can't cope on my own."

"Of course, Ernesto is a fine lad...," drawled Martina.

"I understand," interrupted Cecilia. "You can't take him. I'm sorry," she snapped and, taking Ernesto's hand, made for the exit.

"Why can't I take him?" Martina retorted with a smile.

Cecilia turned and looked unbelievably at Martina. Her determination to leave the restaurant gave way to perplexity.

"Did I hear you right?" she asked. "You'll find a job for my Ernesto?" The poor woman looked hopefully at Martina.

"Yes, I most certainly will take on the boy in our restaurant," replied Martina, firmly. "Ernesto, my dear, you come along with me."

Smiling broadly, Ernesto followed her.

"Antonio, are you still here?" said Martina, raising her voice again.

Antonio ran to the kitchen. Martina guided Ernesto towards the beach recliners lying folded by the entrance to the Chalet Martina. Cecilia followed them, saying nothing.

"Just here, on this spot," Martina began solemnly, "every evening, at about nine, fold up the recliners. In the morning, at seven, put them out on the beach in even rows. When customers arrive, show them to the places whose numbers I will give you."

The bespectacled Martina fixed a look on Ernesto. "As this is just the second week of the season, I haven't got a security man, so you will also keep an eye on the restaurant at night. Will you cope?"

"Yes, of course, Signora Marino," Ernesto replied, delighted.

Cecilia, her eyes downcast, said nothing.

Martina pointed to the first door of an annex in a narrow passageway between the restaurant's inner courtyard and the beach, where there were chalets for visitors. "You will sleep here," she said. "I will pay you thirty euros a day. Food is on the house."

"Thank you, Signora Marino. I'm very pleased," said Ernesto, smiling broadly.

"Excellent," she replied. "Cecilia, what do you think?"

"I'm very grateful to you, my dear Martina." Cecilia seized Martina firmly by the hand. "What a kind heart you have. May God preserve you."

"Ernesto can start today," said Martina, withdrawing her hand.

"Yes, of course," said Cecilia. "Ernesto will be back here by seven." She took her smiling grandson by the arm and quickly left the restaurant before Martina could change her mind.

Martina followed Cecilia and Ernesto with her eyes and did not notice that her irate husband had arrived at her side.

"What have you taken it into your head to do? That's all we need, that what's-his-name," exclaimed Adriano. Antonio watched from the kitchen, expecting a scene.

"He's called Ernesto," Martina replied calmly. "I've taken him on. He'll be the night watchman, and by day he'll help me on the beach."

"And you're not interested in my opinion?"

"I'm always interested in your opinion, my dear," said Martina, with a smile. She gently patted her flushed hus-

band on the cheek. "Ernesto will work for us, and that has been settled," she said, kissing him. "Come on, let's try the best pasta in the world."

Martina led the smiling Adriano back to the kitchen, of which he was the undisputed master.

Cecilia returned Ernesto to the Chalet Martina at exactly seven o'clock. She once again warmly thanked Martina. Then she embraced her grandson, kissed him tenderly, and set off home with tears in her eyes.

She paused on the promenade and for a long time gazed at the sea. For a moment she thought she saw Roberto in the distance in his boat. He was waving and pointing to a net with a rich catch. Cecilia waved back, but he had already disappeared from view.

She felt a powerful, pulsating pain in her head. A noise in her ears drowned out all else. The muscles in her limbs obeyed her half-heartedly, and only after seeming to delay for as long as possible. She felt tired as never before.

The road home seemed endless. Breathing heavily, she finally reached the staircase to her second-floor flat. Opening the door when she reached it was itself an effort. She stepped into the dark, empty living room. Cruel silence. Solitude.

When the time for sleep came, she found she could not. She stood by the window in her nightdress and for a long time stared into the darkness. An apple tree grew beside her house. Suddenly, it seemed to her that young Leah was standing under the tree. She was wearing a linen dress, white, with red spots; her wavy hair was gathered up in a long pony tail. Looking up at Cecilia, she smiled. With a trembling hand, Cecilia grasped the old window latch and tried to open the window. How many times had she asked Roberto to mend that latch? Finally, she managed to open the window.

"Leah," she cried.

But Leah had vanished.

Tears rolled down Cecilia's cheeks. For a long time, she stood in front of the open window, hoping Leah would re-appear.

When she finally slept, she dreamed that she and Roberto were strolling over the lawn beside Castle Torregalli. Roberto was wearing a light linen suit and a white shirt. Cecilia had on a yellow silk dress with a pattern of blue flowers, and a wide-brimmed straw hat. A little girl – Leah – was running along the path towards them. She was wearing the same dress as in Cecilia's waking vision, with her hair in the same pony tail.

"Mummy, look what a nice butterfly It's got yellow wings with blue spots, just like you have on your dress."

The butterfly continued on its haphazard way. Cecilia and Roberto joined Leah in running after it across the green meadow in front of Castle Torregalli. They were all hand in hand, and they laughed.

The breeze carried the strains of a tune being played somewhere far off:

It is a simple song for two pennies
That is sung on the streets of the suburbs
For those who wait, for those who love, for those who dream,
It is the eternal sweet tale of love.³

The sun rises every morning, illuminating all the inhabitants of earth, with their pain and their joy, their grief and their happiness, with snatches of phrases left unfinished at night. People find each other and lose each other; people are born and people die, and the sun rises again.

.....
³ *Canzone da due soldi.*

That morning Cecilia did not see the rays of the new sun. Neighbours found her lying in bed, a smile frozen on her lips. In her cold and lifeless hands was a photograph in which Cecilia, Roberto and Leah were together, smiling happily.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anastasiia Marsiz, a native of Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine, is a writer, journalist, and translator. Resident in Kyiv since 2006, she moved to Italy, with her school-age daughter, in March 2022, displaced by war. Fortunately, and as is magnificently attested to by her novel, *The Big Fellow*, she was already very familiar with people and places in certain parts of Italy.

In *The Big Fellow*, Anastasiia Marsiz raises the issues that concern her most: hypocrisy in society, betrayal, domestic violence, and racial and social inequality. In doing so, she demonstrates that faith, love, friendship and family are the values that truly matter, enabling resistance to evil and injustice. The book won the 2021 “Literary Ukraine” prize.

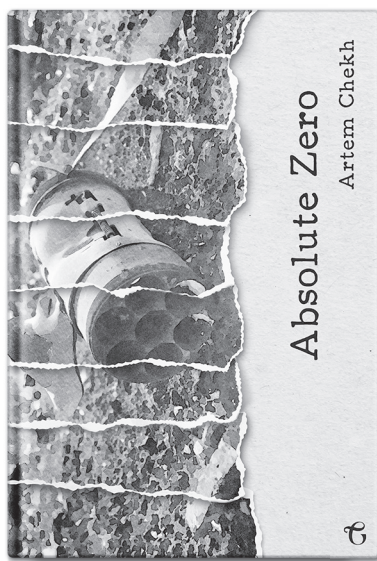
ABOUT THE TRANSLATORS

Andrew Sheppard is the editor of *East–West Review*. He provided the English translation of *War Poems* by Alexander Korotko (Glagoslav, 2022).

Michael Pursglove is a former Senior Lecturer in Modern Languages and is now a freelance translator. He has published translations of *Moon Boy* by Alexander Korotko and *Children of Grad* by Maria Miniailo. His latest translation of *Bera and Cucumber* by Alexander Korotko was published by Glagoslav in 2023.

ABSOLUTE ZERO

by Artem Chekh



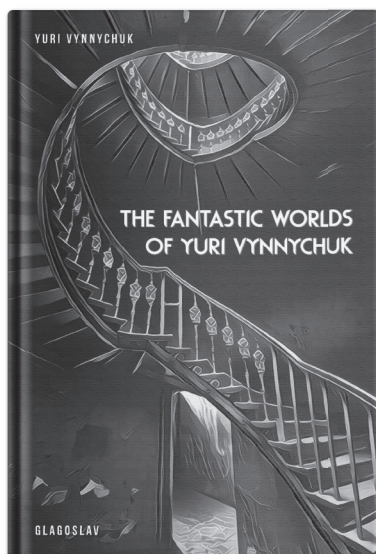
The book is a first person account of a soldier's journey, and is based on Artem Chekh's diary that he wrote while and after his service in the war in Donbas. One of the most important messages the book conveys is that war means pain. Chekh is not showing the reader any heroic combat, focusing instead on the quiet, mundane, and harsh soldier's life. Chekh masterfully selects the most poignant details of this kind of life.

Artem Chekh (1985) is a contemporary Ukrainian writer, author of more than ten books of fiction and essays. *Absolute Zero* (2017), an account of Chekh's service in the army in the war in Donbas, is one of his latest books, for which he became a recipient of several prestigious awards in Ukraine, such as the Joseph Conrad Prize (2019), the Gogol Prize (2018), the Voyin Svitla (2018), and the Litaktsent Prize (2017). This is his first book-length translation into English.

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THE FANTASTIC WORLDS OF YURI VYNNYCHUK

by Yuri Vynnychuk

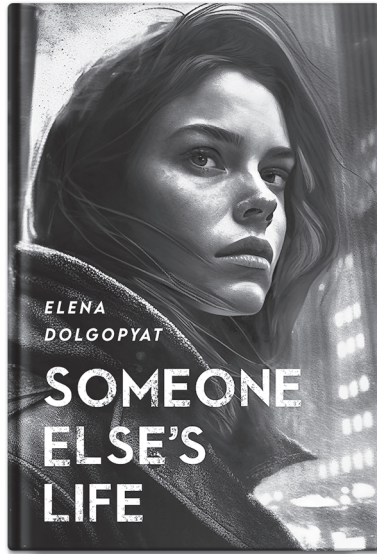


Yuri Vynnychuk is a master storyteller and satirist, who emerged from the Western Ukrainian underground in Soviet times to become one of Ukraine's most prolific and most prominent writers of today. He is a chameleon who can adapt his narrative voice in a variety of ways and whose style at times is reminiscent of Borges. A master of the short story, he exhibits a great range from exquisite lyrical-philosophical works such as his masterpiece "An Embroidered World," written in the mode of magical realism; to intense psychological studies; to contemplative science fiction and horror tales; and to wicked black humor and satire such as his "Max and Me." Excerpts are also presented in this volume of his longer prose works, including his highly acclaimed novel of wartime Lviv *Tango of Death*, which received the 2012 BBC Ukrainian Book of the Year Award. The translations offered here allow the English-language reader to become acquainted with the many fantastic worlds and lyrical imagination of an extraordinarily versatile writer.

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Someone Else's Life

by Elena Dolgopyat

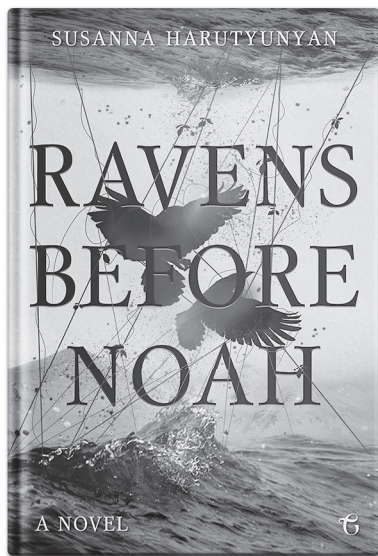


Elena Dolgopyat was born and raised in the USSR, trained as a computer programmer in a Soviet military facility, and retrained as a cinematographer post-perestroika. Fusing her diverse experiences with her own sensitivities and preoccupations, and weaving throughout a colourful thread of magic realism, 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."

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Ravens before Noah

by Susanna Harutyunyan



This novel is set in the Armenian mountains sometime in 1915-1960. An old man and a new born baby boy escape from the Hamidian massacres in Turkey in 1894 and hide themselves in the ruins of a demolished and abandoned village. The village soon becomes a shelter for many others, who flee from problems with the law, their families, or their past lives. The villagers survive in this secret shelter, cut off from the rest of the world, by selling or bartering their agricultural products in the villages beneath the mountain.

Years pass by, and the child saved by the old man grows into a young man, Harout. He falls for a beautiful girl who arrived in the village after being tortured by Turkish soldiers. She is pregnant and the old women of the village want to kill the twin baby girls as soon as they are born, to wash away the shame...

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More to come . . .



This powerfully-written first novel from Ukrainian author Anastasiia Marsiz is set in and around Cupra Marittima, a small seaside town on Italy's Adriatic coast. So closely is the area described, the reader could find their way around without difficulty. They might easily go there expecting to find the Chalet Martina, a seafront restaurant opening onto the beach. To enter the restaurant is to step into the territory of fiction, but in Marsiz's expert hands the boundary is crossed unconsciously. At the Chalet, we meet Martina Marino, her husband Adriano, their two sons and two daughters – about each of whom there is a story to be lovingly told.

Even before our first encounter with Martina, we have met Ernesto Bruno and his grandmother, Cecilia. Ernesto, Italian but with a Gambian father, was orphaned at birth. A naïve eighteen-year-old when we first meet him, he is to become the Big Fellow of the book's title as he simultaneously becomes a champion boxer and seeks to uncover the truth of how both his parents died within a short time of each other. He is big in spirit too, providing aid and support for several of those around him when they run into difficulties of their own – and for the unforgettable "Dog," an abandoned stray when she first wanders into his life.

The novel also has its villains ... and a surprising – even shocking – denouement.

