

Whereas, with words, which story do I tell?

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“It is said there are flowers that bloom only once in a hundred years. Why should there not be some that bloom once in a thousand, in ten thousand years? Perhaps we never know about them simply because this “once in a thousand years” has come today.” (Zamyatin 1921/2009: 126)

As a young man reading Economics at Manchester University I was drawn to studying the Soviet Union. What absorbed me more than the workings of a command economy were my daydreams about the enchantment of snow. My first memory of Russia is sleeping in a compartment on a train slowly moving east from Moscow towards the Urals. I dreamt snow was falling upon me through the darkness. When I awoke it was to an endless white landscape sparkling in the morning sun.

It was 1996 and I was travelling to Perm where I had been invited to exhibit my photographs. The city of Perm is twinned with Oxford and an acquaintance, the artist John Goto who lived and taught in Oxford had already been working in Perm during the early 1990's. My invitation had come through Natasha Dubrovina, a resident of Perm, who had assisted him in his research and had become familiar with my work. Sharing the compartment with me were Natasha and her husband the poet Robert Belov who had come to Moscow to meet me. The train was overflowing with disorderly soldiers returning from the war in Chechnya and Natasha, a cautious person, was wary for my well being. Robert had other plans and on the ruse that he needed to escort me to the toilet we escaped to the restaurant car. Here we were served boiled potatoes and pickled herring washed down with vodka which Robert liberally spiked with pepper to soothe his stomach ulcer. Unscrewing the top from the pepper pot he poured all of its contents into his glass. The snow falling outside the

train window was now real and as magical as any dream. I saw how the snow makes everything anew, uniting disparate things, creating harmony.

A man that I had never met by the name of Giorgi Chulakov, a partner in an electronics repair firm, had sponsored the exhibition. He paid for my train ticket to and from Moscow, printed the advertising posters for the show, and for much of my month in Perm invited me to stay with his family to learn about the city. There wasn't a lot of money around then, as it was only five years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, so I knew this was a significant gesture. It was a gesture of faith – faith in the importance of art and friendship and in what photography can promise.

Thanks to Giorgi's ongoing support and generosity, I could return a year later, to undertake a residency at the Puppet Theatre. This time I stayed throughout with the Chulakov family. I learned about what they did and how they lived. Giorgi's business involved buying up broken electronic telephones, printers and computers in Moscow in order to repair them, and then sell them in Perm. Perm is nearly 1500 kilometres east of Moscow by car. This is almost another country. It is 1500 kilometres from London to, for example, Lisbon, Naples or Warsaw, at the far south-western or southernmost borders of Europe, or deep into Eastern Europe. It's only 2500 kilometres from London to Moscow – then almost the same again to Perm. The sense of scale is different of course, but what is also different is that you get a sense of being on the border of two continents. By the time you reach Perm you are almost in Asia. It's just over the horizon, indeed at the next city. You are at the very edge of Europe and on the cusp of a different world, and one which is almost never reported in the Western news media. It's all but unknown to most of us, even now, when we have a twenty-four hour news media and billions of photographs in the world reaching us from every screen. Not only is Perm part of a world almost unknown, but its people are hardly so different to you and me. Language certainly remains different – even those familiar with several Latinate and Germanic languages aren't able to readily translate without learning the language from scratch. What provided me with the impetus to immerse myself in this place and learn about it, wasn't all the facts

and figures but my burgeoning friendship with Giorgi and the people I met, alongside the affinity I felt with them.

I often know what I feel about the world but not what to think. Looking, for me, is intuitive, grounded in feeling- whereas words, a greater construction, can obscure. I found early on my inability to speak Russian, not having to think about the world in words, opened up a space for me; a freedom which I filled with looking. It allowed me to feast my eyes on the world.

On my second trip in 1997 I was met at Moscow Sheremetyevo Airport by Giorgi with a van overloaded with stuff. It was deep winter. Outside Moscow, under brilliant blue skies, the roads dissolved into frozen streams of snow and ice for the long drive to Perm. It really was a dreamlike journey into the heart of a white continent. Russia makes every other European country feel small by comparison. Even though this was a journey they had undertaken many times in the past we regularly got lost. Sign posts disappeared and the road got narrower and narrower until it petered out altogether at a farmhouse or a wood and we had to retrace our tracks. You get a sense of why the great Russian novels and plays of the past are on the scale that they are, and have the scope that they have, trying to encapsulate all of life even when seen through a microcosm of a domestic drama. Anything less would fail to do justice to the sense of place into which you become immersed. Twice, Igor, the driver lost control of the van at speed on the roads of compacted snow and both times we were saved catastrophe by soft drifts of snow lining the road. Once we were able to dig ourselves out but the second time we had to rely on the help of a farmer to pull us out with his tractor and the services of a local mechanic to repair the damage. What I remember most vividly of that journey is stopping on the outskirts of a village where women had gathered by the main road selling food. Served from gigantic thermos flasks we feasted on hot, home baked, pastry pies filled with mashed potato. I can picture the pies steaming in the cold air, the simple, perfectly seasoned delicacy warming hands before filling our eager mouths.

Giorgi and his eldest daughter Lyuba visited me in England the following summer. We also spent a week together on Colonsay, an enchanted island off the West coast of Scotland. The clear sea to them was an unimagined, magical world, as their winter had been to me. Not long after, Giorgi sadly died of cancer. Over the next subsequent twenty years whilst photographing his family and friends I have tried to infuse my photographs with the clarity of the light and the radiant, jewel-like colours that we witnessed together during that week. No photograph can ever recreate natural light, but a successful one can invite you to imagine and be inside it, as though you were with the sitters. A good photograph offers you an intimacy not only with a particular person, but with the idea of a place, and, of course, the idea of a time. I spent the subsequent New Year's Eve in St Petersburg with Lyuba, who was then studying painting there at Herzen Pedagogical University.

John Berger begins one of his novels by writing, "I remember most of what I hear, and I listen all day but sometimes I do not know how to fit everything together. When this happens I cling to words or phrases that seem to ring true." I have taken this as my touchstone. My visits to Perm continued regularly and for 12 years I gave little attention to the photographs I was making of my friends and their lives, except to compile handmade photo-books and playful collages and post them as mementoes back to the Chulakovs. Perhaps this accounts for the unselfconscious nature of many of the images. It was this aspect that initially drew my attention back to them in 2008 after returning from spending a memorable summer in Russia. That summer I had joined Giorgi's wife Valya, Ann their youngest daughter and their son Deema, for a month long 6,000 kilometre round road trip to Altai in south western Siberia. We were accompanied by two other families, the Ketov's and the Bolshakov's, close friends of the Chulakovs who had over the years also welcomed me into their lives. The trip was an adventure not just for me, it was an exciting and ambitious undertaking for everybody. The purpose of the journey was to watch a solar eclipse and to undertake a week long walking and camping expedition into the base of Mount Belukha, Siberia's highest peak. A snowy pinnacle pointing to the sky which has been for millennium, a focus of Buddhist, Hindu and Shamanist spirituality. In Altai folklore, the mountain is believed to be the gateway to Shambhala (Shangri-la),

a place of peace, tranquility and happiness; a “pure land” where all citizens are enlightened.

On the first day of the trek we encountered torrential rain and my camera became waterlogged after I had walked for hours with it stored neglectfully in an unfastened, external pocket of my waterproof jacket. Alexi Ketov had come equipped with two cameras and he generously lent me one. The next day I lost my footing whilst crossing a deep, fast flowing mountain stream and this camera became waterlogged too. More in desperation than hope I took my camera apart, leaving the components to dry on a flat rock by our camp. In the process I lost the small metal battery compartment cover and became further distraught. Undeterred my friends fashioned another one from the metal of a tin can without any implements other than an axe and a multi-tooled pocket knife. Miraculously once dry and reassembled the camera functioned again.

I was at a loss that I couldn't photograph much of our expedition into one of the most remote, beautiful and unspoilt regions of the world but over time I have come to realize that the photographs that ring true for me are those that elevate the everyday, rather than those describing the dramatic, grandiose or spectacular. Returning that summer to London I realized that I had accumulated an archive of over ten thousand images, and that this was a single body of work that stretched back fourteen years at that point, and now over twenty years and amounting to nearly twenty thousand images. The archive encompasses four generations of the Chulakov family. In this it resembles those nineteenth-century novels that can map time in a way we cannot be aware of outside of art, by showing change and continuity, one generation after another, across relations and friendships.

As an outsider in Perm, that is as someone who can't speak Russian sufficiently fluently to participate in every aspect of life, I can only ever create my own story, my own play of the Chulakovs' lives. The Chulakovs are a family of three sisters and a brother, just as in Chekhov's play *Three Sisters*. I discovered too, that Chekhov had written to Maxim Gorky, saying that when he set his play in an imaginary provincial

town, he was thinking of a place exactly like Perm. Lying at the heart of Chekhov's play is arguably the sense of difficulty that human beings have in living in the present. In the play, the three sisters all long to return to Moscow, where they imagine their 'real' lives to be, from the provincial town much like Perm where they are stationed; and yet what I immediately saw in the Chulakov family and their friends was the joy they took in being in the present moment. I understood that my photographs similarly had to speak about what it means to be rather than do, to see people being, and being together rather than 'doing'. So I never photographed the family at work outside the home.

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"We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art, and very often in our art, the art of words"

(Le Guin 2014 n.p)

To change the world we need to change the stories we tell about it. To shape these new stories we need to change the way we look at the world. Throughout society there is a dissonance between presentation and [people] being. I first became aware of this disjunction as a student studying economics, I was struck how economic theory built from modeling, graphs, statistics and numbers is far removed from how lives are lived. Our neglect of the peculiarities of everyday lived experience, and our failure to pay them attention or give them merit is one thing that leads to an immoral society, that neither cares for its fellow man and woman, nor for the wellbeing of the wider world.

So at the centre of my work is the desire to pay respect to the things in the world that I photograph, whether that is a person, an artifact, a plant, or an animal. The photographs should show them in their best light, in every sense: they assert their place in the world and their value to the social circle around them. This action of

paying respect to people and indeed to things gives a reason for and a meaning to living in the present. I see it as a necessary stepping-stone towards lasting political change. Until we can appreciate the materiality of the world as well as the relationships between people, (and between people and things), we cannot hope to question our wastefulness or frivolous attitude to fundamental things like friendship, sharing food, raising families and becoming aware of what lies outside of ourselves.

These are photographs of friends, of shared food, of flowers, pets and smiles. They are tokens: tokens of love. I want them to be seen as family photographs and as reflections on family photographs. I'm quite happy that such a position might be seen as being at odds with my position as an outsider to the family and the city. It echoes what I see as the contradictions that are inherent to photography. Photography is a bizarre mix of reality and fiction: that is what makes its identity elusive and impossible to trap. These mercurial qualities, hidden behind a lucid sheen, reflect the subjectivity of our own perception. This is a world that I cannot properly navigate or know, rather than one I can readily imagine I have mastery over. It enforces a degree of humility, because you are aware that you are reliant on others, and can only make your way through the world by learning from others. In that sense, the photographs might be thought properly child-like: they are the impressions of someone new to a world, but who has the capacity to recognize its specialness and particularity.

I have three sisters, so in some ways my own family mirrors that of the Chulakovs. I was blessed with an idyllic childhood, that cocooned and shielded me from a flawed world, by loving and supportive parents, cousins, aunts, uncles and grandparents. Perhaps my photographs are a quest to recreate this innocence in my depiction of the Chulakov's lives as a way of envisioning the world differently.

One of the photographs depicts Sasha, the middle sister, sitting by the kitchen table with the family cat in a box on her lap. Murik has just fallen six floors from a window ledge onto the ground below in a misguided leap to catch a passing pigeon. Look closely and you can see his nose is bloodied and flecks of blood have spotted the

cardboard. The cat still lives to this day with the aid of a metal pin in its leg. The picture reminds me of another story and one which drew me to the Chulakovs. It is encapsulated in the photograph that shows Giorgi on my first visit to his home, sharing with me a video of an extraordinary family summer holiday a few years before. I recently shared this memory with Lyuba and she remembers my first visit too and recalls that we were eating pine nuts that they had collected the previous summer. The video documents how Giorgi, his wife Valya and their four young children together with two other families had hired a helicopter to take them to a remote and distant region of the northern Urals inaccessible by road.

Deposited at their destination they built rafts and travelled down the River Koiva for two weeks getting the helicopter to pick them up again at a pre-arranged spot. What was most extraordinary to me about this expedition was they took their cat, Murka with them. A dainty, small, white cat. Moreover they lived on the sixth floor of an apartment block and the cat until that trip had never been outside. Not once, it was a house cat. The video shows the cat sitting independently and contentedly on an open raft with the family and their dog drifting down a river in the middle of a vast pristine natural landscape. The cat loved the trip. It loved its taste of adventure so much that upon their return it kept trying to escape from the apartment. On its first successful attempt it was found a few days later by a neighbour half a kilometre away at the local market. Murka escaped a second time and was never seen again.

Every photograph in this book is surrounded by stories but I want them to exist in their own right as a stilled moment of looking. I trust the photographs to tell a truth. Whereas with words, which story do I tell?

References

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