



Post-Soviet Yearning

In the Russia of this novel, hardship and magic coexist.

BY KEN KALFUS

DRIVING by a certain decrepit five-story apartment building in the Russian city of Perm in the late 1990s, you would never have imagined you were passing a locus of magic and transcendence. There had been no heat or working toilets in the building for

THE RUSSIAN DREAMBOOK OF COLOR AND FLIGHT

By Gina Ochsner.

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months, and no running water; most of the tenants had stopped receiving their salaries and pensions. Feral, abandoned children hovered in packs around uncollected refuse heaped outside the building. But Gina Ochsner, traveling there at least imaginatively, has paused at the address, peered into the courtyard and come away from it with a novel of startling, redemptive beauty.

The author of two collections of short stories, Ochsner is an American who has spent limited time in Russia, none of it in Perm. Yet her first novel, "The Russian Dreambook of Color and Flight," is (despite the kitschy title) soaked in baleful authenticity, with laundry boiling on the stove and perfume doubling as an intoxicant. As she links the grim anomic of post-Soviet Russia to the delirium of magic realism, Ochsner elevates the tenants' struggles and makes sense of their confounding times.

Azade, a Muslim woman whose family was deported from North Ossetia, maintains the courtyard latrines, read-

ing in their emerging odors the unfulfilled dreams and about-to-be-realized anxieties of her patrons while she rations out the toilet paper. Her Jewish neighbor Olga works for the Perm edition of the military newspaper Red Star, translating into reassuring euphemism the horrific news from Chechnya. Olga's son, Yuri, a shell-shocked army vet who dreams of being a fish, leads desultory interpretive tours at the All-Russia All-Cosmopolitan Museum of Art, Geology and Anthropology, where the exhibits are entirely fake.

In one way or another, these Russians engage in heroic acts of translation — not from one language to another but from the absurd gibber of everyday life to the salvation of meaning. Another neighbor, an even greater manipulator of the prosaic, is a woman named Tanya, who also works at the museum. In addition to checking coats, she manufactures crude icons out of popsicle sticks and cheap fabric, using the gold foil from candy wrappers for the saints' halos. She concedes that the icons are also made from cardboard, but points out that it's "cardboard of the highest quality." And sometimes, when "the long lines of her serene sorrow guide her hand," she's touched by a true religious and artistic spirit noticed by no one. "Outwardly stout, inwardly anorexic," Tanya carries a battered blue notebook in which she records bittersweet memories, the details of her crush on Yuri and her observations of cloud formations and the colors of the sky. "Always the girl dreamt a translation of her days into the language of clouds, believing that by describing every skyscape she would make her life a beautiful knowable thing."

These four souls stuck in Perm, a city whose name all but promises immobility, are stirred into motion by two events. In the first, which conclusively shelves the novel as Magic Realism, Russian Division, Azade's husband, Mircha, throws himself

off the tenement's roof — only to reappear, weeks later, in the courtyard to taunt his neighbors, who take his resurrection in stride, along with everything else that has befallen them. The second catalyst is mostly comic, as Tanya's boss assigns her to complete the museum's application for an American arts grant. The loopy questionnaire captures the imagination of the museum's indigent staffers, who have visions of using the money to buy toaster ovens and other personal items. But the application's questions thwart their best efforts at translation: "Describe what 'positive work ethic' means to you." Looking over Tanya's shoulder, Yuri asks: "What is 'positive work ethic'? Do such words even belong together?"

It's typical of Ochsner's characters to step back from language like this, in the postmodern fashion, and consider words and language as physical things, with their individual textures and secret affinities. Azade can "curse in Ossetian and bless in Kumyk, those fibrous languages of mud and straw." As a girl, Olga "collected languages the same way people collected keys or buttons. At night she dreamt in other languages and she woke in the morning with spoonfuls of those foreign sounds still on her tongue." When Yuri receives a beating, it's as if by typography: "A pounding punctuated with sharp interjections. A dash, dash. Boxer's blows to the face. Oh Mother. A comma, a semicolon, a reprieve and then ellipses. All the

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pieces of punctuation brilliantly effected by the closed fist, the knee to the groin. Yes, he was getting the message."

Yet the message isn't all bad, since it soon translates into an act of tenderness. Olga notes that a secondary "definition of the word 'translate' was to convey to heaven without death." And when the building's tenants are granted a vision of a muddy apocalypse, they can still manage to see what comes next.

For writers of the present moment, Russian and non-Russian, the Yeltsin years have become a caldron for a wildly imaginative, surreal literature grounded in post-Soviet exigency, a chilly Macondo stretching over 11 time zones. Viktor Pelevin, Vladimir Sorokin, Tatyana Tolstaya and Olga Slavnikova have emerged with distinctive, revelatory fantasies. Ludmilla Petrushevskaya's fine new collection of terrifying stories, "There Once Lived a Woman Who Tried to Kill Her Neighbor's Baby," employs gothic sorcery to populate these years with zombies and demons and ghosts. Gina Ochsner, an Oregon native, sticks her ladle into the same overheated pot and, with luminous writing, affection for her characters and, especially, faith in language's humanizing power, manages to find a portion of hopefulness. □