

GRANITE

Helena Demczuk

## GRANITE

*Granite is the archetypal rock – the one everybody knows. It has been referred to as: “implacably tough”, “uncompromising”, “the most obdurate of rocks”, “hard and unflinching”, “incorruptible”, “monumental”. Expressions such as “granite-faced”, “granite-jawed” are common. But one aspect of granite is not associated with toughness. Deeply weathered granite can sometimes produce almost perfect pottery clay.*

Keith Corbett

Keith Corbett is a Tasmanian-born geologist who has been lucky to have spent most of his life working in the mountains of Tasmania with a great fondness for Queenstown.

*Great is the benefit of book learning ... for books point out and teach us the way to repentance, since from the words of books we discover wisdom and temperance. This is the stream, water-ing the universe, from which springs wisdom. In books is a boundless depth, by them we are comforted in sorrows, and they are a bridle for moderation. If you enter diligently into the books of wisdom, then you shall discover great benefit for your soul. Therefore, the one who reads books converses with God or the saints.*

Nestor the Scribe, the Chronicler

Nestor the Scribe, the Chronicler (c. 1056 – c. 1114) lived in Kiev, Kievan Rus'. In 1073, Nestor became a monk in the Monastery of the Caves in Kiev.

GRANITE

The Women from Kiev

**Добрий вечер.** Dobryy vecher, Good evening. We all stood around the bench just staring. I was very self conscious about whether I had greeted them correctly. Hearing the sound of my pronunciation also bothered me. My parents had been dead for thirty years now. Since that time there had not been a reason to speak Ukrainian and no one to speak it with. I had considered this as part of me, past but not forgotten. Put on the shelf of history. Elena with her daughter Angelina, standing in front of me, had jolted me back into this time warp.

It was a cold winter's night standing in our home which was also our gallery and studio. The glow of the fire burning from wooden stove, the orange walls in the open plan kitchen, surrounded by more orange. Paintings hanging on the gallery walls. We were embraced by the richness of colour and warmth. I felt happy to be greeting these two women, mother and daughter, newly arrived from Kiev, in this beautiful space we had created.

It felt odd standing there with people who we knew nothing about. Only the familiarity of a language made it easier. It drew me back to another time. We already knew he was nursing at the local hospital. We discovered that he had recently come out of retirement and moved here,

a newcomer to Queenstown. His recent marriage was about to enable a new chapter in his life. He had gotten in touch with Raymond because his wife was an artist and he wanted to bring her to visit our gallery, home, studio. We think his intention was to make her feel more at ease in this old-looking mining town. They did not know I was of Ukraine heritage and we weren't sure then exactly where she had come from.

Introductions followed. He introduced his wife first. Elena was teaching at a secondary school, her teenage daughter, still at high school, was looking to study veterinary science. They lived in Kiev. We had to quickly establish how to communicate. Angelina had a better grasp of English than her mother, but was a shy and inadequate translator. Her mother could speak Ukrainian and Russian and barely a word of English. He had learnt Russian through an online course before heading to Russia in search of a bride. His online Russian was not good. Even I could understand that much.

The mobile phones came out. Google Translate offered a source of communication between husband and wife, with Angela's reluctant translations thrown in. Google was making a mess of the conversations. His Russian was accented strongly with *strine*, an anathema to my

ears and probably theirs. Siri's help muddled the communications even more. The past clicked in a gear and I could soon express with single words and a basic sentence enough to be understood. Somehow we managed to make sense of it all.

I was embarrassed by my inability to speak to Elena fluently in Ukrainian. It had been such a long time since I had heard it spoken. I stood there looking at her, barely able to construct a sentence. Being critical of my grammar. Not wanting to sound silly. The words coming out of me were strange to my ears. I thought about those years I spent at university enrolled in the Slavic department, determined to read the literature of my heritage. Lost. I struggled to find the right words to communicate with her and yet so desperately wanted the conversation.

Standing there I could feel myself being drawn back into the past. That country girl who grew up in a coal mining town. An ethnic minority. My father, who worked at the power station to pay back his and his wife's passage to Australia. My mother, who raised her two boys in the women's camp and later me, in their new home. The newly planted garden, full of flowers and vegetables, all growing under the young fruit trees. These plantings were beautifully orchestrated in the

front garden, replicating their past. The eaves of the house my father built, painted in the blue and yellow that typified a Ukrainian in-residence. As kids we would joke about spotting the Ukrainian house. In this new suburban sprawl I was brought up in two conflicting worlds.

Elena was a Ukrainian bride. She appeared to be in her early forties and was immaculately groomed. Her long nails perfectly manicured and coloured to match her winter outfit. She worked as teacher in a primary school and an artist in her own right. She painted portraits and was very good at it. Tapping away on her phone, she was able to show us her portraits. They were very much in the tradition of east European painting, with a lovely sense of colour. I was excited by these works. It was Raymond who brought to her attention, my own painted portraits. Those of the Indian women.

Although Elena lived in Kiev, she came from a small town to the south west of the capital. There, she said, was little work to be found in the villages. All the opportunities were to be found in the cities. It was tough and life was expensive. She had to make the move but would visit her family as often as was possible and the school breaks allowed for longer visits.

Mother and daughter would be leaving to go back to Ukraine in a few days. Two weeks ago they had arrived in Hobart and met other Ukrainians through the Ukrainian Association. I knew nothing about this organisation. Had never sought them out. Elena seemed surprised I had not tried to connect to the Hobart clan. My Ukrainian roots were left back in the coal valley.

This trip of theirs was a short visit. They were working towards Elena and Angela's return as permanent but there were still obstacles in the way. His return to nursing would secure their future. I could sense that the move to Tasmania would be a better life for both mother and daughter. Angelina would have a better future to look forward to.

By now I could understand much more and was able to respond in very basic sentences. TAK helped a lot. Yes, yes, yes. Elena was more at ease and very chatty. She could see I was curious about her life. She talked about the younger group of Ukrainian women who dressed immaculately. They would never be seen in public without their hair and makeup skilfully attended to. Particular attention was given to the eyes. The coloured, polished nails were a regular pleasure. Angelina happily displayed hers. This new generation were

well dressed, wearing the latest fashions and high heels on any occasion.

They were leaving on Sunday to get back to Hobart. Her husband was working the next day so it was arranged for mother and daughter to come to my studio. We were to meet at the local cafe, Tracks, at three o'clock. I wasn't really that excited about Elena and Angelina coming to my studio. My Ukrainian wasn't that good.

We were concerned about them leaving here under the terrible weather conditions. This was mid-June and we were having a really cold spell. Mt Owen was covered in snow. The roads out of town were closed. Four wheel drive vehicle access only, and even then the warnings were against travelling. Their urgency was necessitated because Elena and Angelina would fly back to Kiev on Monday.

зелений = zelenyy

червоний = chervonyy

синій = syniy

Green

Red

Blue

My studio is my sanctuary. My creative bubble. Here, I am totally surrounded by art-making equipment and objects of inspiration. Brushes; round, flat, thick, thin. Brushes for oils and water-based paints. Tubes of paint; oil, acrylic, gouache, watercolours and sets. Coloured pencils, inks, art books, drawing books, papers, canvases. Paintings commanding me into action. Brushstrokes, vibrant and brisk; gentle and soft. Colour. Spending precious time with one of my favourite artists, this time Peter Doig. Hoping for inspiration. Not often do I extend invitations into this precious space to people I hardly know.

At three o'clock I walked over to the café, choosing the side entrance that leads in from the railway platform. This way I could peer into the cafe without being noticed and locate my visitors. The doors were locked. The sign on the door said closed. The few patrons inside were finishing off their coffees before leaving and they were not among them. I had no way of contacting Elena as we hadn't exchanged phone numbers. Had I messed up?

I went back to my studio a little anxious and feeling somewhat guilty. Another part of me was relieved. Should I have arrived earlier and waited? Churning over the possibilities, I hoped they had