

[*Rock, Paper, Scissors and Other Stories*](#) by Maxim Osipov, translated by Boris Drayluck, Alex Fleming, and Anne Marie Jackson, edited by Boris Drayluck, preface by Svetlana Alexievich (Published by New York Review Books, April 9)

Some background: Quite a few people were involved in bringing this book into English, and I am grateful to all of them. This is Maxim Osipov's English-language book debut but these translated stories have appeared in *The White Review*, *Granta*, and elsewhere. Osipov is, according to information from NYRB, a practicing doctor who lives ninety miles outside of Moscow and his work focuses on provincial life (sorry, Dr. Shimamura!).

Some thoughts: Alexievich's preface is a little bizarre. Here's a nugget:

"These stories tell of people who have haven't come to understand the meaning of their existence—what is it all for? Very few of us have, it must be said. But who has the strength? The author relates to his characters as to patients; he asks them where it hurts and whether...in general, does it hurt in the soul? The Russian soul—yet another myth. In reality, there is but soul; the real question is: Is there a person?"

I'm not sure, to be honest, what this is supposed to be mean. It sounds evocative, but I'm not sure that it actually evokes anything. Alexievich, it should be said, has a Nobel Prize in Literature. I, it should be said, do not. But I feel that this makes something of a categorical error that misrepresents what Osipov work is. He's not asking or answering these questions, which is good, because fiction that would attempt either would probably be very boring. (If you're interested in *those* question, Alexievich's work is a great place to start).

Instead, Osipov's stories are energetic and funny and clear and violent. One standout is "Moscow-Petrozavodsk", the first story in the book (or second, depending on how one chooses to read Osipov's "The Cry of the Domestic Fowl: In Lieu of a Forward," which is a Calvino-esque address on what the reader's experience will be). The story takes place primarily on a train ride from (yes) Moscow to Petrozavodsk. Even before the train is in motion, Osipov drops a wry, scathing few sentences:

"After the lecture, you're still answering questions, but behind your back, brawny little red-faced men are pointing at their watches—time's up. These little men are the local professors—in the provinces these days any fool can be a professor, the same way that in the American South any fool, if he's white, can be judge or an army officer."

This comment, which has an air of deflection to it, deftly precedes a story that is actually about the violence that surrounds our narrator. After, in a conversation with a police officer, he learns that he spent the night on the train nearby murderers, the officer replies: "Don't think about them...Killers—they're your average people." For the narrator, and readers, not such a comforting thought. But for Osipov, it's an effective and wonderful planting of a flag.