THE DAUGHTER OF A PHOTOGRAPHER

FROM *IN MEMORY OF MEMORY (A ROMANCE)*

BY MARIA STEPANOVA

TRANSLATED BY SASHA DUGDALE

Let's suppose for a moment that we are dealing with a love story.

Let's suppose it has a main character.

This character has been thinking of writing a book about her family since the age of ten. And not just about her mother and father, but her grandparents and great-grandparents whom she hardly knew, but knew they existed.

She promises herself she will write this book, but keeps putting it off, because in order to write such a book she needs to grow up, and to know more.

The years pass and she doesn't grow up. She knows hardly anything, and she's even forgotten what she knew to begin with.

Sometimes she even startles herself with her unrelenting desire to say something, anything, about these barely seen people who withdrew to the shadowy side of history and settled there.

She feels as if it is her duty to write about them. But why is it a duty? And to whom does she owe this duty, when those people chose to stay in the shadows?

She thinks of herself as a product of the family, the imperfect output—but actually she is the one in charge. Her family are dependent on her charity as the storyteller. How she tells it is how it will be. They are her hostages.

She feels frightened: she doesn't know what to take from the sack of stories and names, or whether she can trust herself, her desire to reveal some things and hide others.

This family photograph appears at the end of *In Memory of Memory*. Courtesy of Maria Stepanova.

She is deceiving herself, pretending her obsession is a duty to her family, her mother's hopes, her grandmother's letters. This is all about her and not about them.

Others might call this an infatuation, but she can't see herself through other peoples' eyes.

The character does as she wishes, but she comforts herself by thinking that she has no other choice.

If she's asked how she came to the idea of writing a book, she immediately tells one of her family's stories. If she's asked what it's all for, she tells another one.

She can't seem to be able to, or doesn't want to speak in the first person. Although when she refers to herself in the third person it horrifies her.

This character is playing a double role: trying to behave just as her people have always behaved, and disappear into the shadows. But the author can't disappear into the shadows — she can't get away from the fact that this book is about her.

There's an old joke about two Jews. One says to the other, "You say you're going to Kovno, and that means you want me to think you're going to Lemburg. But I happen to know that you really are going to Kovno. So — why are you trying to trick me?"

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In Autumn 1991 my parents suddenly began to think about emigrating. I didn't think they should. They were only just in their fifties, and the Soviet regime had finally fallen — they'd waited so long for this moment. It seemed to me that now was the time to be in Russia. Magazines were openly printing the poems and prose we had known only from typewritten copies passed around. Colorful things were being sold right on the street, nothing like the boring stuff we'd had before. With my first ever wage I bought blue eyeshadow, patterned tights, and lacy knickers as red as the Soviet flag. My parents wanted me to go with them, but I held my peace and hoped they'd change their minds.

This lasted a good while, longer than anyone could have predicted. Permission to move to Germany came only four years later, and even then I couldn't believe our inseparable life together would come to an end. But they were in a rush and wanted me to decide. There was nowhere else I wanted to be. Apart from anything, this new life fascinated me, it stood half-open, constantly inviting me in. I simply couldn't see what was so clear to my parents: they had lived through enough history. They wanted to get out.

A process began, and it was somewhat like a divorce: they left, I stayed, everyone knew what was happening, no one spoke about it. The guts of the apartment had been ripped out, papers and objects were divided up, the Faulkner and Pushkin *Letters* disappeared, the boxes of books stood ready-packed and waiting to be dispatched.

LET'S SUPPOSE FOR A MOMENT THAT WE ARE DEALING WITH A LOVE STORY. LET'S SUPPOSE IT HAS A MAIN CHARACTER.

My mother spent more time thinking about the family archive than anything else. Under the Soviet rules still in place, all old objects, whether they belonged to the family or not, could only be taken out of Russia if you had a certificate stating they had no value. The country had sold priceless paintings from the Hermitage, but it wanted to make sure that other people's property didn't escape its grasp. Grandmother's cups and rings were sent away to be certified, along with the old postcards and the photographs I loved so much. Their old order was disrupted; my mother, not trusting my memory, wrote down names on the backs of photographs and placed them in piles. She stuck the pictures she'd selected into an album with a once-fashionable Japanese patterned cover. On the first page a crooked line of writing read: *For Sarra. To remember me by, Mitya*.

Now *everything* was in this album: everyone she remembered by name, everyone she felt compelled to take with her on this freshly provisioned ark.

Photo of Maria Stepanova by her father, Mikhail Stepanova.

SHE STUCK THE PICTURES SHE'D SELECTED INTO AN ALBUM WITH A ONCE-FASHIONABLE JAPANESE PATTERNED COVER.

Grandmother's school friends rubbed shoulders with mustachioed men and the pink-cheeked children of the London aunt, who, it's said, became close to the exiled Alexander Kerensky. Lyolya and Betya shared the same page, I was there in my school photographs, and Grandfather Nikolai sat glumly on a hill. Our dogs, Karikha and Lina, and then me again, grown up, aged twenty, stuck on one of the last pages, in grand company, squeezed between two newspaper portraits of the dissident physicist Andrei Sakharov and the priest Alexander Men. We were all listed, even Sakharov, in my father's hand: "Friends, Relatives, Family Members from 1880 to 1991."

They left on the train. It was during the hot month of April in 1995, and the weather was celebratory: the sky above Belorussky Station, formerly Brest Station, in Moscow, was a giddy blue. As the train's tail lamp zigzagged into the distance, we who were left behind turned and wandered back along the platform. It was Sunday, quiet, and I was just considering whether I should be crying when a man holding a can of beer glanced at me from out of a train door and said: "Kill the yids and save Russia." It's all too neat, but that is how it happened.

Later, I went to Germany to visit them and stayed a month, not convinced I could build a new life there or elsewhere. In the huge hostel in Nuremberg where ethnic Germans from Russia occupied ten of the twelve floors, the top two floors had been allocated to Jews, and they were half-empty. I spent two days there, all on my own like a Queen in my enormous empty room with ten bunk beds fixed in two lines like a sleeping car. No one else was put in the room with me. I was given food tokens to buy food with, a little like green postage stamps (Germans were given orange tokens). When I first arrived I made myself a cup of tea and sat down to watch the European night: in the distance, surrounded by black trees, I could see the

twinkling lights of an amusement park and the shape of a stadium. I could hear the sound of someone playing the guitar from the floor beneath.

My parents came back to Moscow once, six months before my mother had her operation. The coronary artery bypass she needed was not an operation undertaken very frequently in the 1990s, but we were sure that they'd be good at that sort of thing in Germany. Anyway there wasn't much choice, the congenital heart defect first diagnosed in wartime Yalutorovsk had deteriorated and now needed urgent treatment. I was twenty-three, and I felt quite grown up. We'd lived with my mother's condition for as long as I could remember. At the age of ten I used to wake up and stand in the hall outside her bedroom to check that she was still breathing. But the sun always rose and the morning came, and all was fine. I slowly got used to it and never asked any questions as if I was afraid of upsetting the already delicate balance. We never properly spoke about the operation itself, perhaps just the insignificant details of her hospital care. So it was not to us, but to her friend that she said wearily: "What's to be done? I don't have any other option."

Although I tried very hard to ignore all the signs that this was her last visit to Moscow, I wondered at her unwillingness to enjoy old memories. It was a carefree summer, and Moscow smelt of dust and dried up ponds. I was sure she would want to visit our old home and sit on a bench outside on the boulevard, or go and have a look at the school where her mother, she and I had studied. I'd also planned a long conversation about "the olden days" just as we'd always had in my childhood, and I was going to make notes this time, so not a drop of precious information would be lost. After all I was going to write this book about our family. But my mother resisted the idea of a nostalgic stroll, at first with her usual gentleness, and then she simply refused point blank: I'm not interested. She started cleaning the apartment instead and immediately threw away some old bowls with chipped edges we'd had since the seventies. I would never have attempted such blasphemy and I looked at her with a mixture of shock and excitement. The apartment was cleaned and polished until it shone. Her school friends and relations visited, but no one spoke the truth aloud: that they were all saying goodbye. And then my parents left.

GRANDMOTHER'S SCHOOL FRIENDS RUBBED SHOULDERS WITH MUSTACHIOED MEN AND THE PINK-CHEEKED CHILDREN OF THE LONDON AUNT.

I remembered all of this many years later when I tried to read the old family correspondence to my father. He sat and listened for ten minutes with an increasingly downcast expression, and then he said that was enough, everything he needed to remember was in his head anyway. Now I understand him almost too well: over the last few months my state of mind has likened looking at photos to reading an obituary. All of us, both the living and the dead, seemed equally to belong to the past, and the only possible caption: "This too will pass." My father's old and new photographs in his Würzburg apartment were the only things I could look at without feeling shaken: the empty leaf-scattered riverbank with a black boat, a yellow field without a single human figure, or a meadow of a thousand forget-me-nots, no human touch, no selectiveness, just purity and emptiness. None of this was painful to look at, and for the first time in my life I preferred landscape to portrait photography. The Japanese album with the grandparents lay in a drawer somewhere and neither of us wanted to let it out.

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One spring I had the pleasure of spending a few weeks in Queen's College, Oxford, where my book and I were received with open arms, as if my occupation were reasonable and respectable, rather than some embarrassing obsession, a sticky flypaper spotted with quivering, half-dead associations. My college lodgings had white walls lined with bookshelves, but I had nothing to put on them. In the dining halls and libraries memory had a different meaning, one that had so far been alien to me. It was no longer the endpoint of a wearisome hike, but the natural result of *duration*: life generated memory, secreted it, and it deepened with time, disturbing no one and causing no one anxiety.

I'd come to Oxford to work, but I found it hard to get down to writing because life there was tranquil and it

made me feel stupefied, as if I'd been placed back into a cradle that had never in fact existed. Every morning I touched my bare feet to the old wooden floorboards with the same feeling of gratitude. The gardens were vessels of trembling greenery, and the nightingale rattled its empty tin above them; even the way the delicious rain dispensed itself on the perfect facades and stone follies filled me with tender delight. I sat at my desk every day with my pile of pages and stared straight ahead.

The road outside the college was called the High, and it loomed very large in my life. The right-hand side of the window was turned toward the interior of the college, and its cool shade. The left-hand side faced the High that in sun or rain drew my gaze like a television screen; it stubbornly refused to disappear into the horizon as a road should and instead tilted upward like a ship's deck, higher and higher, so the people and buses seemed to become more visible as they moved away from me and no figure, however tiny, ever quite disappeared. Against all probability they seemed to move closer and become more distinct — even the mosquito cyclist, the slant line of his wheels — and this trick of perspective preoccupied me, halted my already intermittent progress.

The endlessly fascinating life of the street moved in intricate patterns like a puppet theater, to the hourly ringing of bells. The long-distance coaches thundered down the street, eclipsing the light, and at the bus stop the drivers changed places; people appeared from a distance and moved closer, while remaining always in view, and sometimes deliberately standing out, like the long-legged lanky girl who came out into the middle of the road, performing a circus-style leap. In short, my idleness could not be justified, but like a character from a Jane Austen novel I sat for hours at the window watching passersby who did not fade into oblivion, but became larger and more recognizable with every passing day. I was continually amazed that I could look out of the window and count the buses at the top of the street where it twisted away, and I became obsessed by the way people, with their tiny jackets and even tinier sneakers, remained forever in focus. It was like watching the mechanism of a clock that had moving figures to mark the hours. A large and glossy black car turned the corner as if this was the deepest past, when

SQUARES OF GLINTING PHOTOGRAPHIC PAPER FLOATED IN RIBBED TRAYS IN THE RED LIGHT OF THE BATHROOM, WHICH SERVED AS MY FATHER'S DARKROOM.

even the smallest detail gained the aura of a witness. Only there was nothing to witness, it grew warmer and lilac shadows brushed the opposite pavement.

Then one day Sasha took me to the Ashmolean Museum, to see a picture by Piero di Cosimo called "The Forest Fire." The long horizontal picture resembled a multiplex wide screen showing a disaster movie. It occupied a prime position in the museum, but in the shop there wasn't a single postcard or coaster with an image from the painting. Perhaps that's understandable, as the painting is far from any notion of comfort. It was painted in the early sixteenth century and is supposed to make reference to Lucretius's poem *De Rerum Natura* and contemporary controversies over Heraclitus's doctrines. If that is the case, then Piero agreed with Heraclitus, who said fire coming on would "discern and catch up with all things." Something similar is depicted on the wood panels of the painting: Doomsday on the scale of a single island, overgrown with bushes and trees and inhabited by all flesh, both of fowl, and of cattle, and of every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.

The painting resembles a firework going off, as if a carnival were taking place in the forest: flashes of red, yellow, and white streak the panels to an inaudible and deafening crack. The fire is not only the center of the picture, but the *omphalos* of their universe, and from it the dozens of stunned beasts canter, crawl, and fly in dotted lines, not knowing what has happened, or who they are now. My sense of it is that this is an image of the Big Bang, although the painter wasn't yet aware of such a name.

Animals, like the newly created galaxies, scatter from a central point — you can't look away from it, it's like the open door of a stove, or the mouth of a volcano. Like lava they have not yet ceased their flowing, to the extent that some of them have human faces. There were doubtless

also people in this world, at least there were *before* the fire. They have a wooden well on an outcrop. And there are a few people, just sketched lines, like frescoes in Pompeii. They are definitely humanoid, although alongside the beasts with their warm corporeality, they look like shadows, like the outlines of humans on a wall lit by an explosion. There is one survivor, a cowherd, clearly drawn, standing half-turned toward us, as bewildered as his lumbering cattle, ready to lower his head and charge with them. His face is not visible, just the stick, the implement he uses because he knows, like Heraclitus, that "beasts are driven by blows."

The beasts cross the painting in pairs, like the inhabitants of the ark, and the fact that some are partly human causes neither distress nor affront. The human faces grew on the beasts as they ran — on the domestic pig and the deer — and they are notable for their expression of gentle thoughtfulness. It's said that the artist added the faces at a late stage, when the picture was nearly finished: one theory is that they are caricatures done at the patron's request. Yet there is not a shadow of comedy about these wreathed hybrids, they look more like students of philosophy who have gathered to stroll under the oaks. Still, even this I can't quite comprehend — a transformation is taking place, but its logic is hard to grasp: is man becoming animal before our eyes, or is animal becoming man, growing a human face, just as it might grow horns or wings? Did Daphne become a laurel, or did the bear become its human hunter?

It would seem that in a postapocalyptic world the beasts *are* the remaining humans; and all hope resides in these animate creatures. There they are, the family of bears bowing fearfully before the lion's fury; the unbending golden eagle; the melancholic stork — all the carriers of distinct qualities, ready to emerge as egos, as "I"s. In contrast we, the humans, are barely distinct, we

THEN ONE DAY SASHA TOOK ME TO THE ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM, TO SEE A PICTURE BY PIERO DI COSIMO CALLED "THE FOREST FIRE."

seem no more than raw material, or rough drafts for a future that might or might not come to pass. The rest were saved and they inherited the earth, and walked upon it, live and blocklike like the figures in paintings by Pirosmani or Henri Rousseau.

It's surprising that the focus of the picture falls not on the predator, the King of Beasts, but on the harmless ruminant. A bull with the powerful brow of a thinker stands dead center, aligned with the tree of knowledge, which divides the picture into two equal parts, and the furnace mouth of the fire. His expression of tortured reflection makes him look a little like the sinner in Michelangelo's "The Last Judgment," mouth opened in incomprehension, furrowed face. But here the creature is without original sin and it has a choice: the bull is free to decide whether or not it becomes a human.

In the dark days of 1937 the German-Jewish art historian Erwin Panofsky described Piero di Cosimo's pictures as the "emotional atavisms" of a "primitive who happened to live in a period of sophisticated civilization." Rather than a civilized sense of nostalgia, Piero is in the grip of a desperate longing for the disappeared past. In my view this interpretation stems from the age-old desire to see the artist as "other," as a transported creature, an Indigenous person at the Exposition Universelle in Paris, a Martian on a foreign planet. It might be worth arguing but he is right in one important way: the state of mind he describes is also a sort of metamorphosis, the result of a terrible disaster that has thrown the world out of joint.

In "The Forest Fire" we see the moment of exposure, the flash, when light burns out the image and replaces it with the blinding white of nonexistence. The point at which everything shifts into its final shape is beyond memory and impossible to convey. It's the moment we first open our eyes.

Piero di Cosimo's picture is for me a close equivalent of Courbet's "L'origine du monde" — its exact rhythm, even the way it shocks and spellbinds, is the same. This equivalence is due in part to the directness of the message, the documentary scale of the narrative of the formation of the universe, how it casts off new detail, forcing life to roll ever onward down the eternally angled slope. Is catastrophe then simply the starting point of genesis? The kiln for firing small clay figures? The crucible for transmutation? This is how creation happens in a post-Promethean world, and this is how the fall from heaven

must have looked in an age of aerial warfare and chemical weapons — the flaming sword of the forest fire, and partridges swooping in the skies, triangular as jet fighters.

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In one of the exercise books where my mother wrote down all my childish phrases and conversations, right at the top of a lined page filled with notes about summer and dandelions and cows, she has written: *My mother died today. And we didn't know.*

I remember that day well. I can see in my mind's eye the morning light in an unfamiliar building; a huge dog coming out from under the table, which was too high for me; the strange window frames; and then later that day, a vast stretch of water, as far as the edge of the world, and bobbing and flickering in it, my mother's head, for my mother had decided to swim out into this waste of water, and had near vanished. I was certain she was gone — a new and strange life had just begun and I was completely alone. I didn't even cry, I stood on the bank of the river Oka, where it meets the Volga, and there was no one to hear me. When the adults swam back, laughing, something had changed irrevocably.

I don't really think life can begin with a catastrophe, especially not one that happened a long time before us. *Misfortune*, sweeping low and fierce overhead like an Orthodox banner, crackling with burning twigs and tongues of white flame — maybe it's simply a condition of our existence, the maternal womb from which we emerge screaming with pain. Maybe it isn't even worthy of the name Misfortune. When we got home that August and went out to our dacha, grandmother's bouquets of dried flowers decorated the walls, and her bag still held her purse and season ticket; it smelt of phlox; and our life was already arranged for years to come, like a song with a repeating refrain. Grandmother Lyolya was only fifty-eight, she died of a heart attack before we could come home to her. And now my mother's life had been given its shape, its model for imitation. If up till then she had just been wandering along, following her heart, now she had an impossible standard to meet. She never spoke it aloud, but she seemed to want to become someone different, for herself, for us: she wanted to become Lyolya, with her easy hospitality, her radiating joy, her cakes and hugs. She couldn't do it, no one could.

THIS BOOK IS COMING TO AN END. EVERYTHING I WASN'T ABLE TO SAVE IS SCATTERING IN ALL DIRECTIONS.

The story of our home, as I heard it, began not a hundred years ago, but in August 1974. Grandmother reluctantly let my mother and me go off on holiday, away from summer at the dacha with its curtains, patterned with red and green apples. When we returned it was to an empty house, and we were alone. My mother blamed herself, and I sat by her. I remembered the terrifying story of the little girl who was slow to bring water to her sick mother and by the time she got to her mother, it was too late. Birds flew overhead, and one of them was her mother, and it sang: *too late too late I won't come back*. Somehow this story seemed to be about us, although no one had precisely said this. I just knew it, and I wept over the untouched water like an accomplice.

All my later knowledge was in light of this story: my mother spoke, and I fearfully tried to remember everything although I still forgot. I ran away, like the child in the story, to play, to grow up and live a little. I think that must be how she felt too, a young woman, younger than I am now, with her exercise book of recipes written out in pencil, and her dependents: a two-year-old daughter and two old people who no longer recognized themselves or each other. Later she began wearing Sarra's wedding ring; on the inside it had the name Misha, which was my father's name as well. Nothing ever comes to an end.

Squares of glinting photographic paper floated in ribbed trays in the red light of the bathroom, which served as my father's darkroom. I was allowed to watch as shapes appeared: the complete blankness was suddenly roiled with lines and angles and they slowly became a coherent whole. I loved the contact sheets best of all, covered in miniature images that could potentially be enlarged to any size, just like me at that age. The tiny portraits of my parents fitted in my pocket and made the evenings spent at nursery school more bearable. I remember my parents realizing I'd torn the picture of my father out of his passport so I could keep it with me.

My own first camera was a little plastic Soviet 35mm, a Smena-8, with dials to change the aperture and shutter speed. I was given it as a present when I was ten, and I immediately set about saving and preserving: the graying pines, the sleepers at the railway halt, someone my parents knew, water running over the stones — all industriously rescued from oblivion. The images, lifted from the fixing tray with tongs, dried on a line, but didn't regain their former vitality. I soon gave it up, but I didn't learn my lesson.

This book is coming to an end. Everything I wasn't able to save is scattering in all directions, like the dumpy birds in "The Forest Fire." I have no one to tell that Abram Ginzburg's wife was called Rosa, I'll never write about Sarra's joke, in the middle of the war, that mold was good because it produced penicillin. Or how grandfather Lyonya demanded that Solzhenitsyn's dissident masterpiece *The Gulag Archipelago* (despite strenuous efforts to get hold of it) be removed from the apartment after only one night as it would "kill us all." Not even how all the women in the Moscow communal apartment would gather in the kitchen with tubs and towels to chatter through the weekly ritual of a pedicure. Or even that a squirrel lived on the balcony of a Moscow apartment seventy years ago. The squirrel had a wheel and it would run round and round, watched by a little girl.

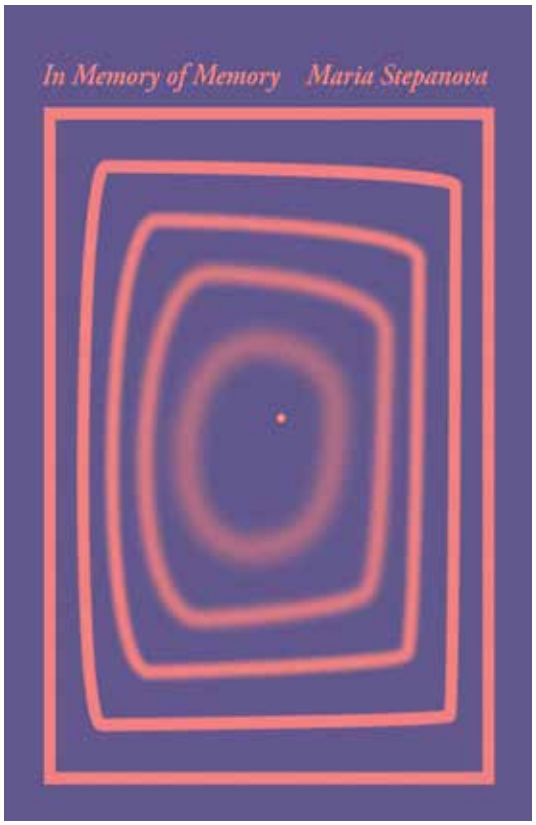
In the 1890s the family in Pochinky sat down at the table for dinner every evening and waited silently for their meal. The soup was brought in. Amid the silence Father took the lid off the tureen and a cloud of fragrant steam rose. He would sniff the soup and then make a pronouncement: "I doubt it's any good" — only after this the soup could be served. The terrifying *paterfamilias* always drank down all of his soup and asked for more.

Before Mikhailovna became Lyolya's nanny, she was married to a soldier. In the drawers of the archive where everything has settled like sediment, there are three photographs and an icon. The icon shows the Virgin Mary appearing to Russian troops somewhere in the Galician marshes. The three photographs told the story of Mikhailovna's life: here she is as a young woman standing head-to-head with a dour and innately weary man in a worker's smock. And here she is holding a pitifully skinny little baby. The last picture shows the man in the cap and thick greatcoat of a soldier. Her husband was killed, the baby died; her entire earthly estate consisted of the paper icon, depicting a Pre-Raphaelitish Madonna, and once framed by a heavy silver surround that my great-grandfather gave her. When life got hard again after the revolution, she secretly took the silver surround off the icon, sold it, and brought the money back to the household she stayed with for the rest of her life. In all later photographs Mikhailovna is in her own icon-surround of pale gray, her cone-shaped black headscarf covering everything except her face. All that is left of her are a few cheap religious images and a Psalter that she read every evening.

Aunt Galya made me a present of a colorful Indian dress not long before her death, saying that she'd only worn it once, "for half an hour, when I had a dog come in here." I knew of her secret and unrequited love for her neighbor who walked his dog in the yard and who died without ever guessing why she used to come out every evening to see him.

Sometimes it seems like it is only possible to love the past if you know it is definitely never going to return. If I had expected a small box of secrets to be hidden at my journey's end, something like one of Joseph Cornell's boxes, then I would have been disappointed. Those places where the people of my family walked, sat, kissed, went down to the river's edge, or jumped onto streetcars, the towns where they were known by face and name — none of them revealed themselves to me. The green and indifferent battlefield was overgrown with grass. Like a computer game I hadn't mastered, all the prompts lead to the wrong gates, the secret doors were just blank walls, and nobody remembered anything. And this is for the best: the poet Alexander Blok tells us that no one comes back. The poet Mikhail Gronas replies that "living comes of oblivion."

The parcel had been packed with all possible care, the box was lined with cigarette paper and each of the items was wrapped in the same thin, opaque stuff. I freed each one from its swaddling, and they lay on the dining table in a line so you could see all their dents, all their cracks, the earth ingrained in the china, the absences where feet, legs, hands should have been. Most of them still had heads, and some even had their little socks, the only item of toilet they were permitted. But on the whole they were naked and white, as if they had just been born, with all their dents and flaws. Frozen Charlottes, representatives of the population of survivors; they seem like family to me — and the less I can say about them, the closer they come. ■



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About the Author

While readying for publication Maria Stepanova's "The Daughter of a Photographer," the final chapter of her *In Memory of Memory (A Romance)*, it was announced that the English translation by poet Sasha Dugdale had been shortlisted for the 2021 International Booker Prize. Stepanova is only the third Russian writer to be so honored.

Maria Stepanova (b. 1972, Moscow) has long played a central role in post-Soviet culture as leading poet of her generation, essayist, and editor-in-chief of Colta.ru, the enormously influential online publication. The prestigious Andrei Belyi Prize and Joseph Brodsky Fellowship are among her many awards. *In Memory of Memory* solidified her reputation with the Bolshaya Kniga Award and the NOS Literary Prize, not to mention the dozens of translations and reviews that have appeared in the international press.

Stepanova's documentary novel opens with the death of her aunt and the task of sifting through what has been left behind—photographs, postcards, diaries, letters—as she attempts to reconstruct the story of how an ordinary Jewish family survived the events of the last century. As the narrator writes in this chapter, she has been "thinking of writing a book about her family since the age of ten." In the process she takes part in a dialogue with such writers as Roland Barthes, W. G. Sebald, Susan Sontag, and Osip Mandelstam.

Twenty twenty-one is the Year of Stepanova with the publication of two other translations: *War of the Beasts and the Animals* (Bloodaxe Books), her first book of poetry in English translation, also translated by the superb Dugdale; and *The Voice Over: Poems and Essays*, edited by Irina Shevelenko (Columbia University Press).

Stepanova will be in residence this fall in Columbia's Department of Slavic Languages, where she will teach the course Between History and Story: (Post) Memory.