



IN MEMORY OF MEMORY

*"Luminous,
rigorous, and
mesmerizing."*

—ELIF BATUMAN

MARIA STEPANOVA

TRANSLATED BY SASHA DUGDALE

Maria Stepanova

IN
MEMORY
OF MEMORY

A ROMANCE

Translated by Sasha Dugdale

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2. On Beginnings

I STOPPED WRITING THIS text for the very first time thirty-something years ago, after filling two or three pages of a lined school exercise book. The size and ambition of the task were simply too much for me. I put it aside, left it to grow into. I comforted myself with the thought that I could leave it be for now.

The history of this book consists of a number of such denials: moments when I managed to escape it in various ways: I put it off for my older, better self to complete, or I made tiny, painless, and deliberately inadequate sacrifices: jotting notes on scraps of paper or on my mobile while on the train or on the phone, a little like notching a stick (*to remind me*, so that from these two- and three-word distillations the memory would be able to put together a whole viable and elegant construction, a silken tent for the narrative to reside in). In place of a memory I did not have, of an event I did not witness, my memory worked over someone else's story; it rehydrated the driest little note and made of it a pop-up cherry orchard.

Early twentieth-century Russian memoirs sometimes mention an amusement for children that consisted of placing yellow discs in the bottom of a teacup and then filling the cup with water. Underwater the discs began to glow with the extraordinary, exotic, and otherworldly intensity of Japanese and Chinese paints. I've never

seen these discs—where did all that go? But in the family treasure trove of Christmas decorations handed down from my grandmother, there was a little incense burner, the height of a match, in the shape of a swarthy-faced boy smoking microscopic white cigarettes, and the smoke kept rising and the pinpoint of light endlessly disintegrated to ash, until our tiny cigarette supplies ended for good. Now all I can do is describe its workings, and perhaps this is a happy end of sorts? Paradise for the disappearing objects and everyday diversions of the past might simply exist in being remembered and mentioned.

I began writing this book when I was ten, in the apartment on Banny Pereulok in Moscow, where I am typing the first lines of this chapter now. In the 1980s there was a battered desk by the window with an orange desk lamp, I would stick my favourite transfers to its white plastic base: a plush mama bear, pulling a sleigh with a Christmas tree, a sack of gifts, and her baby bear sitting sideways on it under a snowy sky. On each sheet of transfers there were usually five or six drab pictures, gleaming with a sticky finish. Each one was cut out separately and wetted in a bowl of warm water. Then the transparent coloured image had to be peeled free of the backing with a practised movement, placed on a flat surface, and smoothed out, all the creases removed. I remember the little cat boy wearing a raincoat and a carnival mask on the door of the kitchen cupboard, and the penguin couple on a background of pink-green wheeling northern lights. Still the bears were my very favourite.

It is as if it brings some relief to share all these scraps from the past as I remember them, half-wryly, the transfers dirty and rubbed away a good twenty years even before the kitchen was redecorated, and only now reanimated, illuminated again—fat little boy in a sombrero and yellow-green domino mask but with no face behind the mask, a mass of gold curlicues around his head ... As if, like a vanquished wizard, I could disappear, becoming a thousand ancient, neglected, blackening objects. As if my life's work was to catalogue them all. As if that is what I grew up to do.

The second time I started to write this book without even realizing it, I was sixteen, wild, errant, in the afterglow of a love affair

that felt as if it had defined everything in my life. With the passing of years, this love has dissipated and paled to such an extent that I can no longer conjure up the sensation of “everything beginning” that I felt while I was in its grip. But I remember one thing with absolute clarity—when it became clear that the relationship was over, to all intents and purposes even if not in my head, I decided it was of vital importance to record a sort of “selected impressions”: details, assemblage points, the turns our conversations took, the phrases we used. I wanted to fix them in my mind, to prepare for future writing-up. A linear narrative made no sense for this: the line itself was so shakily drawn. I simply noted down everything that seemed important not to forget; on each square of paper a single word or a few words, which straightaway reconstructed a location and happening in my memory; a conversation, street corner, a joke, or a promise. Every incident struggled desperately against my attempt to contain it, to give it order and sequence—alphabetical or chronological—and so I set on the idea of one day putting all these little twists of paper into a hat (my father’s hat, he had a wonderful grey hat that he never wore) and of pulling them out one by one, and then, one by one, noting them down, point by point, until I was able to leave alone this chartered land of tenderness: a memorial to my own self. After a while these forty or so bits of paper ended up in various drawers of a table we had, and then dissolved somehow, lost in a procession of moves and spring cleanings.

Do I need to mention that I don’t remember a single one of the forty words I was so frightened I would forget all those years ago?