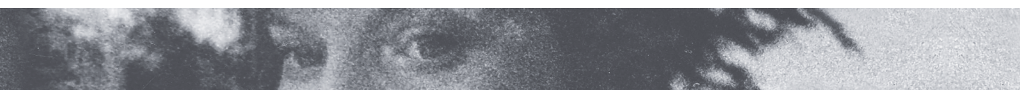
Katja Petrowskaja

The photograph looked back at me



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THE PHOTOGRAPH LOOKED BACK AT ME

With black-and-white and colour images

Sample translation by
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THE PHOTOGRAPH LOOKED BACK AT ME

MAJDAN 1943

We are looking straight at Independence Square in Kyiv, which in the course of ongoing protests became known across the world as Maidan. But the place seen here is hardly recognizable: it's not an empty plaza masses of people could fill. Two gigantic buildings dominated it, in the photo they appear as ruins, even in modern Kyiv no trace or memory of them remains. We are standing on Institutskaya Street, it's the summer of 1943, the Wehrmacht has occupied Kyiv, the author of the photo is surely German. On the right edge, people in scant clothing walk a path through the wreckage, past the millions of shattered bricks from the destroyed the Ginzburg House. The building was the stuff of legend: raised in 1912, it was considered the first skyscraper in the Russian Empire. Just twelve stories, but its spire reached up sixty meters and rivaled the belltower of Saint Sophia Cathedral, which you can see clearly on the other hill along with the cathedral's nave.

The view from the twentieth century ruins to the eleventh-century cathedral encompasses an entire topography with its no longer extant, vanished historical sediments.

In the center of the Maidan stand the ruins of a round building, the parliament, the Duma, in the same place where the Kyiv protests took place not too long ago. These ruins would remain there for years, well after the war had ended and the survivors returned, they were still there at the end of the forties, when, on the Khreshchatyk, a neighboring

street that had been utterly destroyed, giant silver streetlamps were erected amid the rubble, even today, they have an adventitious luxury about them.

There are many similar photos shot in this spot on the same day. In one, people are more clearly visible, in another, the composition is more successful. But this photo I've retrieved from my family archive, over the years it showed up inexplicably in some folder or other, and it provoked certain questions for the members of my family, depending on where the photo popped up.

The more I examined the photo, the more clearly I saw a child step into the foreground, a person only vaguely recognizable and hardly relevant for the events that took place here. The child is walking up a path. Eight years old, maybe, in an occupied city, in 1943. My mother, by then eighteen, came back after the Liberation of Kyiv, in May of 1944, after three and a half years as a refugee with her mother and sister. Had they stayed in Kyiv, they wouldn't have survived the occupation.

They walk from the train station home on foot, along the devastated Khreshchatyk, then, just like the people in the photo, they take the Institutskaya uphill, since they lived only 300 meters from the Ginzburg House. They knew Grandmother and Auntie had been killed, but had no idea whether their house remained standing. Nothing but ruins lines their way. When they arrive, their house stands in its place, unharmed.

Here, against this backdrop, my mother witnessed an execution for the only time in her life. Shortly after the war, when the execution of twelve German war criminals was announced, all the children ran in droves to the Duma

Square, today known as the Maidan, curious and filled with joy. “They were hanged there among those ruins,” my mother says, “and everyone celebrated, especially us kids, and later,” she said, “I’ve often felt ashamed of myself on account of that joy. And then I’ve felt ashamed for feeling ashamed.”

07.26.2015

RENDEZVOUS

The photo demands silence, as if words would expose the frailty of looking. I first saw it on a placard in a foreign city, on one of the last warm days of the year, and for a long time I still remembered the pallor of the woman and the swan in the golden frame of autumn. This photo sank into silence naturally as into its own darkness, but now and then the pallor of the two bodies surfaced in my recollections.

Later I saw it again in an exhibit, like a rendezvous with an acquaintance, it emanated something that one had known but had simply forgotten amid the quotidian: perhaps the force of this recognition had bound me to this image.

I stood frozen before the little photo, wishing vaguely to turn to someone, to touch someone, to stretch my arm out toward them — all at once, I felt my arms vividly, right down to the fingertips — just like the woman in the image. I wanted to touch another hand, even if only my own, awed and aghast at the dissolution of matter between the two beings in the image.

The woman is paler than the swam, her body slightly bowed, slender like the stem of a plucked flower. The swan has no feet. She strokes the swan's head shyly, establishes a bond still intimate and obscure. Her hand transmits the swan's curvature into her own body's momentum down to the arm extended leftward, the long and slightly bowing flat of her hand, which mimics the slope of the swan's head, but in reverse. She cedes her weightless fingers to the

darkness. Has she lost her head over the swan? Her body is like the swan's neck, light as a feather, even her calf speaks of a possible transition. Forms, colors, and structures mirror one another. Woman transforms to swan, swan to woman. A tender metamorphosis, private and profound, in the powerful presence of an enduring myth: Leda and the Swan.

Jupiter, in the form of a swan, compels the beautiful princess Leda to fall in love with him, or perhaps he rapes her. This motif has been frequently presented in art as the natural order of things, it's always been a question of perspective who gets to act, who to watch, who to tell. The woman's body was often, at the culmination of male desire, presented as the object of this desire. The woman is condemned to lustful rendition, she is weaker than the swan, her opulence imparts no strength — she is a slave to pleasure. The stronger one holds the power, and power must be yielded to. In my mother language, it is enough to say Leda and Lebed (swan) to evoke the entire longing for parity between two beings mutually present, mutually related: Leda and Lebed.

There is no violence in the photo, not even any desire. No one daunts the other, the white swan floats or swims (in the river of forgetting?) across from the woman's lap, on equal terms, we might say, without a trace of irony. Bereft of erotic luxuriousness there stands a woman, slender, lithe, in white flowing garments, nearly dispossessed of her feminine attributes. These bodies are bodiless, vague evocations of androgyny, maybe, or the striving for reduction until nothing but distilled spirit remains. Love here is curving ornament, free of all need for continuation. At the same time, such sorrow flows from the image, it's as if something

impossible were being portrayed. As if there were still some desire? Is it a valediction?

Francesca Woodman created this image when she was eighteen or nineteen years and was studying, in the small city of Providence, what providence, clairvoyance, meant. The highly gifted daughter of well-known artists, she took her own life at twenty-two years old. Was it the burden of her talent or the compulsion to market herself? When we turn back to this image, our heart shrivels: as if everything that the artist sought in her search for a perspective of her own — her entire hide-and-seek, her being or nothingness — were already present in this image. A transmutation of body and soul, model and photographer. And the way she conceals her body to expose it, to let it speak, the way she exposes it to hide it or even let it vanish.

Swans foresee their own deaths. Even if we seem to find a strange, mythical logic in her plunge, when this young woman jumped out of her window in New York some thirty-five years ago, what remains in the end is this single thing that emerges from time in silent contemplation: a woman caressing a swan.

01.24.2016

No botanist has managed to identify this plant. Its effect on me was like a wizard's wand, I counted the filaments. Ten. What species is it? What genus? One of its fingers glows bright, a few others fade nearly to nothing. What was the fire that raged here?

This book with this glowing plant is easy to find and free to read or examine on the internet — but I discovered it in the motley thicket of New York. I was running across Chinatown trying to find a rare LP. Amid strange fruits and vegetables, child's clothing, underwear, and plastic shoes in all conceivable colors, I found this tiny book, The Chernobyl Herbarium. With its luminescent black-and-white photos, it shone in the shop like a message from unknown eras, an uprooted greeting from home. It was a photographic voyage: even the photos were developed in a foreign setting.

As I leafed through the book, the mute plants emerged from their darkness, as if part of the long forgotten, long repressed, as if I was running through an enchanted forest; memories briefly imprisoned, soon afterward to escape. A primeval forest? The fact that the subject was plants from Chernobyl made their contemplation still more peculiar, more unsettling, for how can one apprehend Chernobyl? The Exclusion Zone is an experimental field for the return of savage nature.

The book Chernobyl Herbarium: Fragments of an Exploded Consciousness consists of thirty essays by Michael

Marder and thirty-one photographs by Anaïs Tonduer. Together, they bring invisible radiation to light, to consideration, thirty-one years after the catastrophe. The herbarium itself was gathered by a group of Slovakian biogeneticists in order to analyze the effects of radioactivity on the flora in the zone. Plant specimens were placed on photosensitive plates and imaged without the use of cameras. Tonduer refers to them as rayograms, with reference to the method employed by Man Ray. The plants leave behind traces of themselves, glowing where the radioactivity lingers and is preserved.

The great catastrophe unfolds en miniature, the plants are effigies of the event, they embody fragments of a decayed world. From the image of the majestic lira (Linum usitatissimum) to the bouquet of little stars (Linaceae) — the drama unfolds here at a creeping pace, a mystery without end.

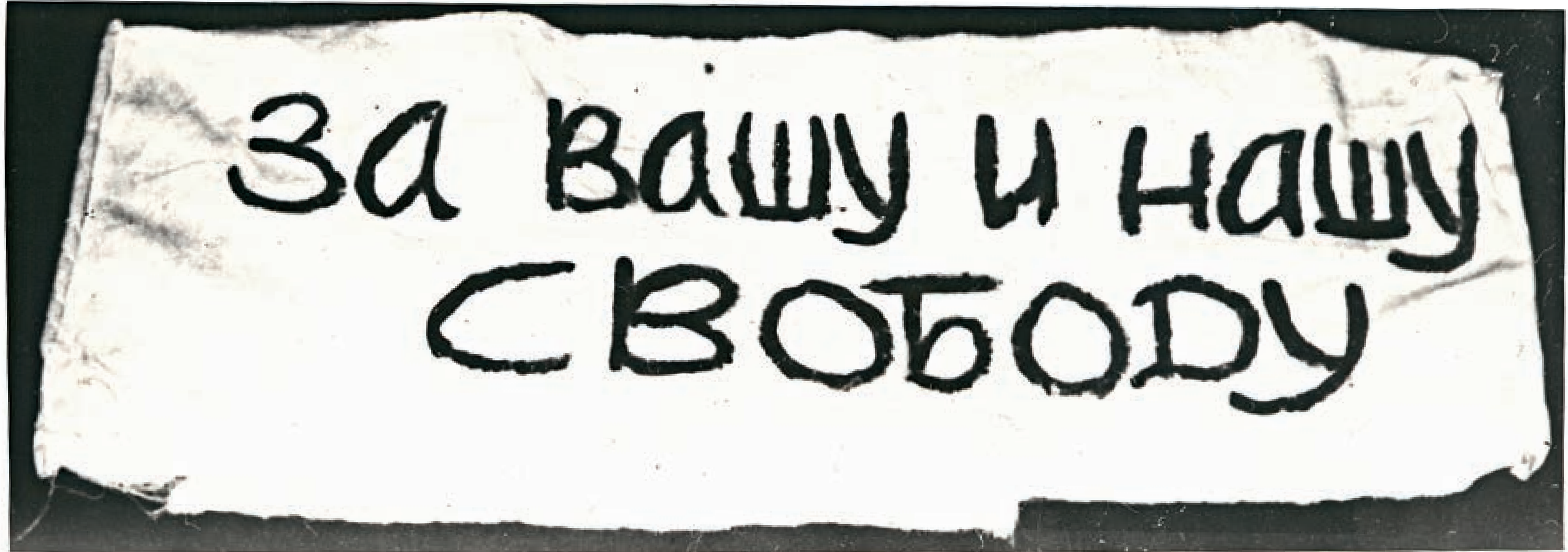
Even the name of the place where the event took place, Chernobyl, has its reign in the plant kingdom, it means bitter grass or wormwood (Genus artemisia), like the star from Revelations that fell upon the earth and poisoned the waters and many people died. But it is not at all clear what parts of the image arise through and what through chemical processes. The photos reflect symbolic radiation, radiation as such, in its glowing and annihilating ambivalence.

In the same way, Unknown species, with its ten fingers, flickers between symbol, allegory, and object. The image evokes many associations: a chanukkia with an extra candle? A decalogue? A jewel? Is this glow in the plant's nature, or is it a hint of danger? The longer I look at the image, the more tender and fragile the plant appears to me. Is it a mutant, new and solitary in the world?

"News About Flowers" is the title of Walter Benjamin's review of Karl Blossfeldt's unique photo collections Archetypal Forms of Art and Nature's Garden of Wonders, which show hundreds of plants in the pure architectural sterility of their forms. I looked for our stranger in this plant glossary, too.

But the plants of Chernobyl are from a world no longer intact, where even understanding has a half-life. The forms of nature reveal the porous and fragmentary. For a long time, I wondered what it was this field plant called forth in my memory, but then I recalled a fresco in Padua by Giusto de' Menabuoi. A scene from the apocalypse: a monster rises from the sea, it has seven heads, with ten tiny hats like diadems glowing above them. Beautiful, eerily beautiful. An alarming luminescence that never dims.

06.25.2017



THE PHOTO DOES NOT EXIST

1968 is the year of unforgettable images: protests against the Vietnam War in the USA, the general strike in France, the riots in West Berlin, student demonstrations at the Sorbonne, hippies in every country doing sit-ins. People lived in history, made history — and were photographed in the process. How often has a mild sort of envy gripped us when we've looked on these radiant faces in black-and-white photos? Our nostalgia alone doesn't explain their power of attraction. In the photographs, upheaval, youth, the energy of time are preserved. On August 21, 1968, Warsaw Pact troops, almost a half-million soldiers, marched into Czechoslovakia. Josef Koudelka photographed the suppression of the Prague Spring. The event is unimaginable without his photos. They are integral parts of this year of 1968: young people against panzers, shouting, crying, enraged passersby standing up to heavy artillery. The suppression of the Prague Spring was the end of liberalization in Eastern Europe.

In the immense Soviet empire, eight people march in Red Square to protest half a million invaders. Natalia Gorbanevskaya, dissident, poet, and translator, pushes a stroller with three-week-old Yosif inside. For the eight of them, it is not just a question of solidarity with the Czechs. They experience the occupation as their own personal disgrace. They know their protest is a suicidal act. They quickly unfurl placards with slogans like Hands Off the CSSR, Freedom for Dubček. After a few minutes, they are arrested.

This event has impressed itself upon the consciousness of millions. But there is not a single image of it. There is no image, and so I say their names: along with Natalia Gorbanevskaya, there was the linguist Larissa Bogoraz, the student Taiana Bayeva, the poet and student Vadim Delone, the construction worker Vladimir Dremlyuga, the physicist Pavel Litvinov, the mathematician Konstantin Babitsky, the philologist Victor Fainberg. Their fates could fill novels.

The only visual testimony of this protest is a photo of a placard Gorbanevskaya held up with the legend For Your And Our Freedom. (In 1973, Joan Baez dedicated the song "Natalia" to her.) The placard was photographed during her interrogation; it exists in the trial record that sits in the KGB archive. It looks like a discovery from the Stone Age. The slogan, For Your and Our Freedom, was and is the most important leitmotiv for Soviet dissidents. It stems from a deeply moral consciousness of history. The Soviet panzers in Prague signified a strangling of all freedoms. Afterwards, not many people dared to defend themselves. My mother went to the school principal in Kyiv and said, "I'm no longer teaching contemporary history." My father's book, which went to press in August of 1968, was pulped, he couldn't

publish another until Perestroika.

The participants knew they would pay for their minutes-long protest with years in prison. Two of them were sent to psychiatric hospitals, two to internment camps, three were exiled to Siberia, only Tatiana Bayeva was let go. While arresting him, the militia knocked out Fainberg's teeth. He was placed in a psychiatric facility to conceal the state's brutality. He had just finished his studies with a thesis on J.D. Salinger. After three years of compulsory psychiatric treatment, the doctors asked him: "Do you now regret your actions?" He responded that three years had passed since the suppression of the Prague Spring, twelve since the defeat of the Budapest Uprising, and 112 since Nicholas I had conquered Moldavia, but none of this changed a thing about the barbarity of violent conquest.

The slogan in the image stems originally from the time of the 1831 Polish uprising against the Russian Empire. It survived the war and was used by the Polish people's army and even the Warsaw ghetto uprising in the form For Our and Your Freedom. The Soviet dissidents switched the words around: they wanted to advocate for the freedom of others first of all.

The demonstrators stood on Red Square in front of the lobnoye mesto, a monument recollecting the scaffolding where the condemned were decapitated in Tsarist Russia. More than forty years later, Pussy Riot chose this place for their action "Rebellion in Russia: Putin's Pissed Himself." In Russia, there is a tradition of resistors raising questions of honor and conscience without any prospect of victory. This tradition has its roots in the Decembrist Revolt of 1825, when the nobles mobilized their troops against the absolute mon-

archy to protest against despotism and serfdom. The nobles felt unfree and degraded on account of the serfs that they themselves owned, and the Soviet sixty-eighters felt unfree and degraded in a country that oppressed other countries. That is how simple this almost lost logic of conscience is.

02.04.2018

MIRA GOES TO SCHOOL

In the Free City of Danzig, a girl attends her first day of school in 1930. Her bag is full of caramels and pralines for the happy days before her. She is going to a German school. German is her mother language. On the back of the photos, it reads simply: Our dear Mira goes to school. The girl with the bag of candies is my last Polish relative. She is the last of my people from this Polish-Jewish world of the prewar years that could have had an entirely different future. Mira lived ninety-five years and died ten days ago in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, the same week I visited Danzig for the first time. As though she had been waiting for the circle to close.

The girl stands now on the street called Wały Jagiellońskie directly across from Gdańsk Główny, the main train station serving the city. Perhaps Günter Grass went to the same school four years later? Or do I simply wish that, in order to highlight the absurdity of the following events? In 1935, Mira is expelled from her school; henceforward, she is only allowed to attend to the Polish school. When the Second World War breaks out in her city on September 1, 1939, she's fifteen years old and waiting for a visa for Palestine. When I talk to Mira for the first time, she's almost ninety, and she responds in prewar German from a historical beyond. After the war, she stopped speaking German. She could hardly even talk about it for twenty years. With her husband, she spoke

Polish, with her children, English. When I found Mira in 2012, we, she and I, were the only ones in the family who communicated in German. She asked me for German books. When I came to the United States, I brought her The Tin Drum, among others.

We have all seen many such photos, or photos like them, of children who never grew up. Inevitably I think of them, because on the other side of the street where she was photographed now stands a monument dedicated to the Kindertransports. Mira was lucky, though. She had a long, full life. What surprises one most about such lives is how normal they are. Two sons, four grandchildren, loved and admired all around. And beyond that: her attitude toward others was curious and open, and she took them immediately into her heart. Even me.

When we look at this photo, we are looking not only at a girl who survived the Warsaw Ghetto, the Tomaszów Mazowiecki Ghetto, and the concentration camps Bliżyn-Majdanek, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Hindenburg, Gleiwitz, Mittelbau-Dora, and Bergen-Belsen. We are also looking at the photo that accompanied her along this itinerary. In the ghetto, Mira's father,
Moritz Ryczke, placed ninety (!) photos and documents into her hands. And he told her they had to be saved.

Mira Ryczke-Kimmelman writes in her book Echoes From the Holocaust about how she hid the bundle in the bottom of a canteen that she never let leave her sight. The canteen became a talisman, a totem, a treasure, a magic vessel. You might say Mira didn't rescue the canteen, instead the canteen rescued her. Never, in all the ghettoes and camps, not even during the death march, did she

allow this vessel to be taken from her, no one ever even looked inside it

When we read the words Auschwitz and shower, we can't go on. And yet we try. Just imagine: a young woman enters the showers in Auschwitz. She's naked, and she holds a canteen in her hand. Her head has been brutally shorn, as she will tell later, and the word brutal has an almost dainty effect against the backdrop of the death that holds sway here. All clothing is set aside. And the canteen? An SS woman asks Mira slightly bemused: "What are you carrying?" And Mira replies: "My soup."

And she lets her go in. And here, it really is a shower. Her entire lineage is in that canteen. The scene is so ungraspable, almost allegorical, that it makes me think of barely decipherable medieval paintings: a young woman with a slightly bowed belly holds something to cover her virginity. She stands before the devil, the others are cooking already in a huge cauldron, punished for the things they did in life. The devil asks what she is carrying, and she responds, it is my memory, and he tells her, then you may stay among the living. But only you.

Mira loses everyone except her father, who will put to paper many years later twenty death records for his sons, his wife, his parents, all his brothers and sisters and their children, in the resolute handwriting of a successful Danzig merchant. Nothing is left of them apart from the ninety photos of Mira and her family and their friends and relatives. They are the lone testimony to some of these people's existence. Apart from the photos are her father's important papers: a membership card to the Danzig Grain and Wholesalers' Association, a driver's

license, a tax assessment from 1938. Moritz Ryczke paid his bill.

It's time for us to say goodbye to Mira, now she has to go to school.

28.04.2019

LAND TRAMPLED, EARTH TROD

The house is burning, the tree grows, wood succumbs and wood becomes. The cloud of smoke binds earth and heaven. Dry grass on the earth, hay on the roof. The burnt matter is dissevered, turns to ash, falls to earth as dust, or flies off, mingles with the air, dissolves into the sky. The natural cycle of war?

When we hold Dieter Keller's photo book The Eye of War: Ukraine 1941/42, published by Buchkunst, a new press based in Berlin, what we are leafing through is the bloodlands. Villages burn, man and beast perish, houses look back at us with empty eye sockets in these hauntingly beautiful images. The villages burn beautifully, their beauty like that of certain sunsets, the sun itself burns through darkened skies. Perhaps these images are haunting to all, but they are more so to me, because this is my homeland, made strange to itself through this trail of destruction.

A German soldier, Dieter Keller (1909-1985), marched across the Ukraine with the Wehrmacht in the Blitzkrieg of 1941. What exactly he did, what he did or did not go along with, is unclear. Presumably he was in administration and did not himself see combat. Before the war, Keller moved in artistic circles, among the Bauhaus milieu, he knew Oskar Schlemmer. After the war, he made his name as an art dealer. He never published these photos.

A horse dying on its feet, horseheads lying on the ground as though attesting to some unknown rite, endless was-

telands, homes without dwellers, the vault of a destroyed church. Smiling children, one stands on a grave with Hebrew letters (the Holocaust left no gaps in this area), farmers, Soviet prisoners photographed against the light like living shadows, corpses, a flower, a frog. The transit from life to death seems a natural occurrence, and over and over, the photographer lingers on the texture of the soil, investigates the dust with his camera, for everything here becomes dust, as in accordance with God's commandment. Dieter Keller photographs tracks: of birds in the snow, of people in the soil. But wait, those aren't footprints, they're feet, body parts. These are the tracks people leave behind: their dead bodies, engraved in the earth. The land is trampled, the earth trod down, but the consequences of war are presented to us as a natural state of affairs. Keller's gaze is archeological, as if he were unearthing a newly discovered civilization, even as his comrades were the ones who buried it.

Keller's images are aesthetically striking, their publication is significant, but at the same time somehow scandalous: even the title The Eye of War assumes the invader's perspective. The two accompanying texts romanticize the photographer's gaze, weave fancies about his thoughts. Is doing so permissible in an art book without thematizing the victims and their country? Without asking about the settings, about the people's fate? About the military provenance of the photos? The remark that they were taken in secret suggests resistance. But thousands and thousands took photos during the war and weren't punished, as we know from the Wehrmacht Exhibition and numerous publications from archives and private collections.

The volume places Dieter Keller in a line that includes Otto Dix, Hieronymus Bosch, and Francisco de Goya, but in their pictures, these artists were concerned with the suffering of the victims, their work rouses us. In Goya's famous Disasters of War, it is clear who is exercising violence against whom. Keller's photographs, by contrast, show the gaze of the conqueror, the open stretches of land. He sees war as if the campaign were a season, a part of nature's progress. Many things seem to hint that Keller was drawn into the war against his will and sought to redeem himself through his camera. But the question is whether we ought to incorporate his gaze and with it an aesthetics that suggest there is nothing macabre in allowing one's own crimes to appear as occurrences of nature

06.28.2020

My generation's favorite children's book told the story of Buratino, a boy made of wood who runs away from home. First, he winds up in a puppet theater, where he finds two more of his kind, Pierrot and Malvia, forced to act under the despotic rule of the puppetmaster Karabas Barabas. Together, they manage to get away, and Buratino finds a golden key that is supposed to bring good luck. But he doesn't know what door it opens. At last, he finds the secret door at his own home, behind a painting in Papa Carlo's little room. He turns the key, the door opens, and there it is — a free stage for free people.

My home is visible in the photo. Everything here is bright and colorful: a flowery curtain, flowery shirts — flower power in the Soviet Union in 1977. How could that be? My family, hippies? There's an indisputable something in common, but how different their fates! When I hear of the iron curtain, I always think of our flowery one, which conceals the entirety of the social hell my parents were forced into. Standing before it, everyone is beaming. There I sit dressed in black, in my white leggings — my dance costume, tailored by my mother. My cheerful brother — at that time, he was studying for school like mad to avoid military service later on. And me? All I know is that I must have thought I was Alice in Wonderland, because my cat is smiling, and the world outside posed the absurdest rules for us, ones no child could understand.

Our family world was created not through heritage or consumption, but through the comings and goings of our friends. In the world of deficits, every object had human traits, was crowned with a story, there was no routine in the acquisition and possession of things. Beautiful things arose through loss: my mother's Iranian blouse, which I still wore twenty years later, as well as the bookshelves and the pipe, came from friends who had gone to live forever to the United States.

This is my home. I know everything here down to the last detail, even the little 8 on the wall of the wardrobe, which was built for Mama on March 8th. I have now transformed it into an 88 in memory of Papa, who turned eighty-eight years old. A small, secret eternity in plasticine. Looking at this photo trains my sensibility for happiness, and even my mother says, This is the best thing we have. Here, we possess ourselves, as if this moment of togetherness, of intimacy and joy, belonged not only to the past, but stretched out into an always, disputing the dynamic of later losses.

My mother, who looks like a queen here, worked six hours a week back then, twelve hours a day, and only got home late in the evening. She was our sole breadwinner. My father was refused all opportunities for work, and the born scholar and professor spent his whole life in a study in that apartment, where he wrote his books. The search for truth dwelt in private spaces, in those legendary Soviet kitchens, and for him, freedom lay in the creation of a genre all his own. He wrote a book entitled Books of Our Childhood, about the common readings of an entire generation, the fairytales impressed on our souls in big letters: about the Russian variants of Doctor Doolittle, the Wizard of Oz,

and yes, the Russian Pinocchio — Buratino. It was my father who figured out how the golden key made it from Alice in Wonderland into the hands of Buratino and which door to inner freedom it opened up for us. If my father were a saint, the pipe he held in his hand would be his attribute. Were he a knight, it would have his place in his coat of arms. The entire poetry of our home reeked of pipe tobacco, first of Bulgarian Neptune, then of Amphora. All over the world, whenever I smell pipe tobacco, I sense his presence. When I look at this photo, I think of freedom and wait, of a never-ending series of doorways leading backward, of a secret door to childhood. The strange premonition grips me of a discovery lying before me, a riddle I don't understand, in spite of the key in my hand.

11.29.2020

ILLUMINATED TREE

For Anastasia G.

Is this tree something that will remain in memory when the trees blossom? When the people go? This radiant tree was photographed in 1945, and it is hard to know precisely what in this image has been photographed and what has been experimented with and manipulated. Even the date is vague, it is often said to come from 1939, both of these years mark a black hole in history against which this tree beams in our direction. This photo might be called "The Little Tree After the Rain," in 1956 the MOMA printed a postcard with this legend, but it also roams the internet under the title "Illuminated Tree." It stands there, numinous, nubile, perhaps, we are drawn to it, it nearly hypnotizes us, we believe and yet do not quite believe in its tenderness or what we see, as if we'd encountered a miracle and yet doubted its existence. At the same time, there's something deceptive, beguiling about it. The tree is an apparition from beyond. Its shimmering beauty is unsettling, ambivalent, as if it weren't a tree, but a soul. Like stars in the sky, like bombs in the dark — everything is glowing. It seduces us, like the sweet songs of Undine, which call us to love and lead us to death, because — and the Romantics knew this — beauty conceals danger. Is this tree a tree of life or a tree of death?

In the Bible, we read that man is like a tree of the field. Actually, the photo looks to me like a person in a primordial form, with the trunk as a soul, bright points as existence. This tree resembles an homage. To what? Perhaps to a world-

view which, according to the words of the photographer Josef Breitenbach, "grants validity not only to the fantastic and the mythical, but above all to the ambiguous with respect to the real."

Breitenbach (1896-1984), the tree's creator, born in Munich; wine dealer, politician in the Bavarian Soviet republic, photographer, exile twice over. In 1933, he fled to Paris, where he was known especially for his portrait photography (James Joyce, Aristide Maillol, Max Ernst, Bertolt Brecht). He taught, took part in important exhibits of French surrealists, experimented so much that a biographer refers to him as a "latent alchemist." He even photographed fragrances to render them graspable. His obsession shimmers through his entire destiny, the longing to render the true but invisible and fleeting manifest. Also politically: Breitenbach photographed Brecht's stagings in Paris, documented many attempts by German exiles to turn attention to the other Germany and literally to make it visible. 30 plates for the exhibition "Germany of Yesterday, Germany of Today," which was planned as a protest against the propaganda of the Reich, still exist among Breitenbach's photographs. This other history of Germany is a real one, a real option his photos make clear, but it was never realized. Was there ever an attempt to reconstitute these plates in a textbook? Or is that, too, a surrealistic question?

In his montage "Omen" (1942), which Breitenbach created in the USA, there is a monster made of blood vessels like a tree of branching veins, a medical pendant to our tree. Over it fly military aircraft. A metaphor for the bloodbath? A vision of human insecurity? His V.E.-day photo, shot on May 8, 1945 from a high-rise in New York, shows a view of

the graveyard of Trinity Church: between the graves, white strips of confetti glow and shimmer like flower petals. What is living and what is dead here at the end of this parade?

Disappearance manifests itself in light. And this light transforms, gives joy, as if the tree itself were visualizing sensations in the moment of matter's dissolution, an image that transforms indefinable loss into metaphysical gain. And then, a poem by Yehuda Amichai rises up inside me:

But when the body dies, love is set free
in wild abundance,
like a slot machine that breaks down
and with a furious ringing pours out all at once
all the coins of
all the generations of luck.

05.30.2021

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