What Isn't Remembered: Stories by Kristina Gorcheva-Newberry (review)

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WHAT ISN'T REMEMBERED: STORIES

Kristina Gorcheva-Newberry
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The Russian worldview is built on theories, the American on slogans. Which is the better way to go—the cold, dour approach of Russian theorists or the optimistic "Western cheer," as one character puts it in Kristina Gorcheva-Newberry's new short story collection—is something not even the Cold War could settle. Yet throughout *What Isn't Remembered*, Gorcheva-Newberry, her characters, and likely her readers will remain engaged in this debate, as if it ever could be settled.

The theory that perhaps best applies to the painstakingly crafted chronicles of Russians, liberated Soviet émigrés, and the American generations that encounter them is Kurt Gödel's incompleteness axioms. They are voiced by a chorus of Russian, Ukrainian, Belorussian, Moldovan, Armenian, Georgian, Uzbek, Kazakh, Tajik, and Turkmen orphans halfway through the collection in "Beloveds." As they understand it, after having discovered Gödel in their orphanage library, "Anything you can draw a circle around cannot explain itself without referring to something outside the circle—something you have to assume but cannot prove." How can they talk about themselves, their torturous dreams of familial love and escape, when they don't know the origins of such dreams—the parents who either lost or abandoned them? Still, they construct fantasies of running away, of finding a woman who will take them in, though they are fated to wind up where they started—in the orphanage.

Another way of putting it might be to remember how Gödel has been interpreted: there is neither a consistent nor complete set of axioms that explains mathematics. The pattern is that there is no pattern for those living in a corrupt and crumbling Soviet Union or in the promised land of America. Nor is there anything to justify the betrayals, disappearances, and deaths that seem to follow people across continents. But the search for a governing principle to all this misery endures through the trail of details and metaphors that

Gorcheva-Newberry has planted. What may seem random, even purposeless, in one story will explicate, if not amplify, the horrors of the next.

In "Second Person," for instance, a woman having one last meal with her ex-lover tells herself: "Pray to disappear. Disintegrate." This admonition may be familiar, particularly as it's voiced by the American in the relationship. Disappearing for purposes of reinvention is what Americans do. But by the time the narrator urging herself through this harrowing goodbye utters this advice, it's clear through two previous stories, "All of Me" and "Boys of the Moskva River," that the word has a much more perilous meaning. The narrator of "All of Me," a blocked writer with a stalled marriage, tries to explain her lack of libido and creative animus by remarking, "Growing up in Soviet Russia . . . things continuously disappeared." She should be accustomed to loss, even when what can be lost evaporates with such nonchalance, as it does in "Boys of the Moskva River." In that story, the narrator advises his mother how to survive the loss of her grandson: "the trick is not to love someone so much that he doesn't disappear or run away." The blocked writer has to relearn this lesson in the suburbs of Roanoke, Virginia, when she sees, by chance, in the supermarket the friend who betrayed her. Her friend is dressed in "black yoga pants and a down coat, tennis shoes. Her hair swept up in a choppy bun." Not only has the twenty-year relationship between these two women dissolved, but the admiring picture of the woman who likely guided the writer as she assimilated into Western life, including a realm of frank sexual talk, has also dissipated. "She was so ordinary, so familiar," the writer remarks, as if shocked by this revelation; "so far away."

Such haunting particulars are not the exclusive burden of Gorcheva-Newberry's Russian characters; the Americans navigating their interactions with Russians also see their experiences transformed in light of other realities they cannot know. A recipe for spoon bread, for instance, appears in "No Other Love," where the disappointment and deception among mothers and daughters practically shape-shifts over two generations. Spoon bread is "your father's favorite," the narrator's mother, Bonnie, tells her. Despite leaving the narrator and her father for one fifteen-year stretch—and then disappearing again—Bonnie easily recalls how to make the bread, suggesting that she hadn't truly forsaken her family. Indeed, she has an excuse for why she deserted the narrator and her father. Spoon bread emerges again in the fol-

lowing story, "Pictures of Snow," as an American journalist, searching for his missing ex-wife, remembers his childhood. "Smells haunt him too . . . his mother's meatloaf and spoon corn bread," the man recalls with a requisite whiff of nostalgia. But that memory likely comes from an overly rosy mind and is therefore as fraught as it could be false. In the following moment, the man's car hits a bump, he bites his lip, and the next taste in his mouth is one of blood.

While Gödel's influence is unmistakable, Gorcheva-Newberry finds other postulates, from the natural and literary worlds, to ground her stories. "Nepenthe," a story named after the fictional drug for sorrow in Homer's *Odyssey*, delves into the practice of grafting a fruit-bearing branch onto a young tree so it too will bear fruit. It's an apt analogy for the story of another Russian orphan who overtakes the life of a family she's assigned to as an exchange student. James Joyce's oft-quoted description of history, as stated through his creation, Stephen Dedalus, as a nightmare from which we try to awake, is not directly referred to in Gorcheva-Newberry's portraits of survivors of the 1915 Armenian massacre, in "A Lullaby for My Father" and "Heroes of Our Time," but surely Joyce's sentiment is at work across the generations attempting to make their lives—or the massacre—matter one last time.

The collection's most absorbing and affecting story, "Champions of the World," also recalls Joyce's words as one Russian girl is made to painfully reflect on the meaning of "choice," harking back to the story that proceeds it, "Pictures of Snow." Ann, who will later become the missing woman of "Pictures of Snow," tells her daughter that Norway's law allowing assisted suicide boils down to "the person's choice, her privilege" and that it should be adopted by other countries. Ann also seems to apply the same meaning to the word and to her parents' decision to live in Canada rather than the US, which they found lacking in character and culture. "It has been their choice," Ann thinks, as though exercising her own prerogative to disappear is just as simple.

But what is the meaning of choice for those living in a totalitarian state? This is the quandary of the narrator and her best friend in "Champions of the World," which hews to the book's pattern of expanding the dimensions of literary language while employing other rules of narrative. The narrator and her best friend daydream about a post-glasnost country: "us having all those

choices, all that freedom." All those options, however, are not to be found once the narrator's friend—coincidentally assigned to play Hamlet in their school's production of the story of the Danish prince—finds herself pregnant. This agonizing episode will follow the narrator to her new life in America, where she is childless but still feels the pangs of maternal instinct. How she manages to live with those feelings, and in her case, the trauma that accompanies them, is proof that not all of Gorcheva-Newberry's characters are doomed. It's also a sound measure of the depth and generosity of the author's imagination that she is able to carve out peaceful endings from what Gödel would say are intractable dilemmas that a fellow Russian, and the godfather of dysfunctional family literature, Leo Tolstoy, illustrated for the world more than a century ago.

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CEIVE
B. K. Fischer
BOA Editions Ltd.
https://www.boaeditions.org/products/ceive
120 pages; Print, $17.00

Kathryn Weld

"Gather your wits, girlie. You sit up on a pile of towels by the defunct sump pump—dead quiet, no hum." Thus begins B. K. Fischer's *Ceive*, a verse novella. Who is speaking? To whom? The omniscient narrator is witness to her own story, and the perspective is disorienting. The ground shifts—and would it not shift, continually, if the world were to flood for days, weeks, months, and all solid ground were to disappear? Would one not talk to oneself? We discov-