



DAMASCUS
ELECTRIC

Nina Murray

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BOOK FESTIVAL READINGS

a man says:

I had an erection

as I watched a *she*-bear

eat apples off my apple tree

her pink tongue

a man says:

mine is a book

about a teen girl

who elopes

with an Iranian post-doc

twice her senior

it's a coming

of age

kind of story

a man says:

she wanted a child

I wanted a dog

our hedgehog has gone

psychotic

I held a knife

all night—

it was a bear I heard

outside

puzzle and snort at trashcans

I couldn't help fearing though

it was a man

twice
or half
my age
and erect

ENDURANCE

A life-size model of a magnolia tree in bloom. The limbs are machined steel and plexiglass welded at the joints and as delicate as fingers holding up each ragged flower. The flowers themselves are made of Kleenexes—used once, irreparably marred but capable as yet of taking in another sob. A sneeze. A snort. The female viewers are invited to reverse the natural order and contribute their own tissues they have used bemoaning a woman's fate, a woman's trouble, or a woman's work and place them artfully — new flowers on this tree.

RESOLUTIONS

itemize kindness — no,
 atomize
let the sound be your guide
play the language make it your drum
 your violin
 a banjo
i grew up with girls
who went to the music *school*—
not *lessons*, mind you—
a disciplined mind was understood to require

commitment
 an occupation
of time
the idleness ROI the X for which we solved
i learned to plot the cosine curves
append anxiety
 perhaps *amend* as well
or better yet: I mend
beside the piano we can find no one to rent

OCTOBER

Rimbaud saw stars melt gently
framed
by lindens
buoyant as swizzle-sticks on bubbles of champagne
he was possessed by effervescent lust
and felt it was as radical a mode of praise
as were St. Benedict's entreaties
to welcome all

instead

we gravitate
toward Sibelius
 stewed beef
 and ale
the temporal geography of days
folds up upon itself

rain totters
acorns wage
a marathon of rectitude
and chance

JANUARY

picture me
a child
in a dark apartment tower
looking down from the top floor
into the hollow column of construction
next door
the nascent winter
waiting for one of the shapes
that thread their paths
over the half-laid sidewalks from the distant bus stop
to be her mother

say the three partitions of Poland
is an odd choice for dinner conversation
but when we moved
next to the crown of brick on a hill
the mortared memory of the Hapsburg empire
we sneaked into abandoned casemates
searched the slivered brickwork
for scratched clues
read of the cannons that fired
at the Bolshevik cavalry on its way to take Warsaw

and found
a draft-horse shoe
a hill always has
a history of possession
into its lineage
I was adopted

COVID-19

i

wild chives on the playground
a single crow rehearses
short laughs

ii

all things small when watched from below
a squirrel who flicks his tail
roofers astride the ridge
nail guns boom

iii

the parking lot full at midday
on a Tuesday
so much for our illusions of progress

v

drivers slow down
children find kinship with weeds

everyone walks at the speed
of a toddler

v

is lamb's cress the right herb
to appease a household spirit
deprived of its privacy? All
such arcana is lost.

A LESSON IN RUSSIAN IDIOMS

words of one morning:

revolution restless
reduction

a fevered dream (in Russian) ferments
foments its subject

the one doing the dreaming — the bait —
is a mare

pale
or gray
or aged

a striker of sparks

a snorter of baskets

she does it (in russian)

on a moonlit night

her coat foams

each hair — a rivulet

a glazed hurricane

the apples above her sway

ANXIETY

A larger-than-life size rag doll apparently stitched together from frayed face masks, ventilator tubes, and deflated vials of hand sanitizer. The doll can be inflated to the size of a small dirigible. In this state, it is placed at suburban intersections where it blocks all traffic as it rotates slowly, trailing streamers of toilet paper.

MY MISERIES

are hard as prayer beads
each perfectly impervious
a sphere
the tooth and claw
just slip
I finger
 finger

the string
has gravity
it flattens as it spins
a ring of Saturn
and I —
a blinkered mule

who trods the icy gas
and turns
the grind-wheel

ARTS OF PEACE (II)

the art of worrying
the way it coats my throat
like sour jelly
so anything swallowed
becomes a firm green grape

the art of memory
its salvage yard
the dress i wore that day
the assessments i made of risks
i didn't take
as real
as rust

the art of always
remaining ready

it insists
i keep the naturalization certificate
in the top drawer
works up alternative origin myths
as fast as rows of knitting



about the author

Nina Murray was born and raised in the western Ukrainian city of Lviv. An American poet and translator, she is the author of the collections *Alcestis in the Underworld* (Circling Rivers) and *Minimize Considered* (Finishing Line), and translator of Oksana Zabuzhko's *Museum of Abandoned Secrets* (Amazon Crossing) and Peter Aleshkovsky's *Fish: A History of One Migration and Stargorod* (both from Russian Life Books). She holds degrees in linguistics and creative writing and regularly publishes original poetry, book reviews, and translations.



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Edited by Cat Dossett for Pen & Anvil; find her on social [@aboutadaughter](https://www.instagram.com/aboutadaughter). The fonts in this layout are Minion, designed by Robert Slimbach at Adobe Fonts; Ostrich Sans by Tyler Finck; and Pacifico Regular by Vernon Adams. On the cover: a cropped version of a 1913 self-portrait by Laura Knight showing the artist at work painting a nude model, her friend Ella Naper. At the time, female art students were discouraged from painting live nudes, and left to work from reproductions. When the painting was exhibited in 1914, reviewer Claude Phillips wrote: "Somehow, women painting women hardly ever infuses into her work the higher charm of the 'eternal feminine'. This painting is obviously but an exercise, and as such it might quite appropriately have stayed in the artist's studio. It repels, not by any special inconvenience . . . but by dullness and something dangerously near to vulgarity" (*The Daily Telegraph*). Herbert Thomas, writing for *The Cornish Telegraph*, condescended to note how the painting seemed to show the painter's "masculine genius and feminine courage." Now in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery, and in the public domain.

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