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# OF POLITICS AND PANDEMICS

Songs of a Russian Immigrant

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Maxim D. Shrayer



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**M-GRAPHICS PUBLISHING**

BOSTON • 2020

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Of Politics and Pandemics: Songs of Russian Immigrant

ISBN 978-1950319268

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020945063

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Cover Design by Natali Cohen

Cover Photo by Maxim D. Shrayer

PUBLISHED BY M•GRAPHICS | BOSTON, MA

 [mgraphics.books@gmail.com](mailto:mgraphics.books@gmail.com)

 [www.mgraphics-publishing.com](http://www.mgraphics-publishing.com)

Printed in the United States of America

*The author would like to thank Boston College for its support.*

*Anna Brodsky-Krotkina, Stefano Garzonio, Graeme Harper, Karen E. Lasser, Michael Minayev, Maxim Mussel, Vera Polishchuk, Andrew Sofer, David Shroyer-Petrov, Ekaterina Tsarapkina and Igor Vishnevetsky read the manuscript and provided invaluable feedback. Dobrochna Fire copyedited the manuscript with care and patience.*

*The author is most grateful to them.*

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Depuz a mascara, e tornei a pô-la.      I took off the mask and put it back on.  
Assim é melhor.                                      This way is better.  
Assim sou a mascara.                              This way I'm the mask.

**Fernando Pessoa**, from *Poems of Álvaro de Campos*

Лучше недо-, чем пере-.                      Better to under-, then to over-.

**Ilya Selvinsky**, from *Anecdotes about the Karaite  
Philosopher Babakay-Sudduk*

Sing low, sing high, sing wide.  
Make your wit a guard and cover.  
Let your laughter come free  
like a help and a brace of comfort.

**Carl Sandburg**, "The Long Shadow  
of Lincoln: A Litany"



## PROLOGUE: A RUSSIAN IMMIGRANT MEETS HIS DOUBLE

### 1

We used to live on Beacon Street in Brookline,  
the year of the election was under way,  
and all the different contenders looked like

caricatures of virtue and dismay,  
and yet I chose the ones I could contend with  
as long as they succeeded, come what may,

in beating the Trump and rescuing our tender  
democracy from a looming right-wing threat.  
I knew our freedom needed a defender,

I didn't know how this theat-  
rical election could be so dull,  
and when I felt fed up with all the rest

I usually took our silver miniature poodle  
for walks in a secluded old park,  
we'd stroll around the circle and I would doodle—

with words and rhymes, and later I would park  
them on my desktop, as though silly verses  
could offer solace and also hit the mark

of truthfulness and justice universal—  
or simply paint a picture of spring eternal.

The vernal season wasn't far ahead,  
the body shunned the chill and craved the sunny  
languorous days, the honey of New England.

On my long walks I would observe a skinny  
bespectacled fellow with a Newfoundland  
old and piebald. When the weather wasn't rainy

they occupied a bench near the sand-  
box where the children built their castles,  
the owner read, the dog lay on the ground.

For weeks I walked my poodle round the circle  
without ever speaking to the man  
who seemed withdrawn or even antisocial,

who owned a dog too weak to join the clan  
of other dogs careening or escaping  
from their owners who knew not where they ran.

And yet I wondered: What if this is fated?  
What if he's also "A Russian Immigrant,"  
my own double— conjured up, created

to help me shape these lines into a rant  
against tyranny, indifference, injustice,  
against cruelty, contempt, intolerance?

Thus I envisaged: when he came from Russia  
he brought with him a puppy: now fourteen,  
he's outlived his age and broken records,

an immigrant dog the world has never seen.  
I thought: the owner lived in Moscow or Saratov,  
then immigrated at the age of thirty-seven

and settled in one of Boston's near suburbs,  
where streets and parks resound with Russian verbs.

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Meanwhile the Ides of March augured disaster...  
The crown prince of death had crossed the Styx  
and from the underworld returned to spread death faster

than doctors could invent a medical fix.  
The Trump was useless. Congress dragged its feet.  
And I forgot about politics.

The living life retreated. The quarantine  
ruled over Boston. Zoom became our window  
into the world. Imagine my esteem

for frozen spinach and for canned tomato.  
We home-schooled the kids. My wife saved lives,  
I taught remotely. At night I tried to veto

the hours of Netflix. Then I realized  
that in pandemics arguments like mine  
rang hollow, appeared oversized

especially to a keening teenage mind.  
I tinkered with some writing. Nothing lofty:  
I watched old Soviet movies to unwind,

I read my favorite poets: Zabolotsky,  
Akhmatova, Selvinsky, Pasternak...  
I went outside when the New England sky

bled colors of sunset. I headed for the park  
where the dog owners maintained their social distance,  
whereas the dogs refused to stay apart.

My immigrant double kept his old place  
beside the sandbox now cordoned off,  
he sat, a pad in hand, the Newfoundland

was dozing at his feet — sure enough  
his memory was filled with greener pastures.  
The immigrant dog was tired. Tired of life?

I wondered as my restless silver poodle  
was pulling at her leash and urging me  
to make my move, to seek out my double.

A gust of wind went through a willow tree.  
I straightened my mask and slowly approached  
(Please note the haunting symmetry:

Two immigrants, two dogs.) I finally broached  
the subject. Indirectly. With a nod:  
“Excuse me, and I don’t mean to encroach

upon your privacy. Don’t you find it odd  
that we’ve been bumping into one another  
without ever sharing a word

of conversation... I was wondering where in Russia  
you come from?” My good double looked askance  
at me, then turned his gaze in the direction

of sunset and replied, his Slavic accent  
not very strong yet tangible: “My old home  
has been renamed — or un-renamed, to be exact.”

“St. Petersburg,” I guessed. “St. Isaac’s dome?”  
“Yes,” he confirmed. “And countless other beauties.”  
“I love your dog,” I interjected. “He’s so calm.”

“He’s dying,” said my Russian Immigrant double.  
“I’m so sorry.” “No need. Now death’s at everyone’s door.”  
“I guess you’re right.” “I heard you dabble

in poesy.” I chose to ignore  
his tone. I was interested in the substance  
of what he meant. “Yes, more or less. Now more

in English than in Russian.” “Ha! Another instance  
of trying to outdo Nabokov at his game?”  
my double asked. “No, a survival instinct—

my audience is here,” I came back.  
“Your audience?” my double turned my statement  
into a question. I was losing track

of our coded exchange. “A stalemate?”  
I said, preparing to leave the park.  
“Wait, please disregard my sarcasm,”

the Russian Immigrant said. “My mood is dark,  
my mother’s eighty-five, my dog is dying,  
I’m lonely, I sit in this old park

and think about the virus.” “Yes, times are trying,  
we all do what we can,” I said. “No, wait,”  
my double asked, his own voice defying

the rules of distancing. “Can you create  
a living record?” “I’m not sure what you mean.”  
“Can you describe this?” “This? You mean the taste

of spring on our lips? The April wind?”  
“No, the pandemic,” my double spoke with passion.  
“The way we, immigrants, endure every kind

of destiny’s tricks. But this, this is too sudden.”  
He turned his gaze downward, where in the sand  
the local children used to play. “This is too sodden

with death. Forgive the unintended pun.”  
“I think I can. Been writing in a trance.”  
“Don’t stop!” intoned my Russian Immigrant.

A mask slipped down and revealed his countenance:  
a feverish smile dancing on his lips.

## AN ELECTION LAMENT

The ancient senator from Vermont  
is so desperate to win  
he opened a second front  
and joined Hezbollah and its kin.

The senior senator from Mass.  
is also very keen to get  
the nomination, her morass:  
taxing the rich to please the rest.

The valiant mayor of South Bend, In-  
diana's north, where hunters roam,  
is living like a Bedouin,  
campaigning all the way to Rome.

That old Pennsylvania horse,  
Ukraine's friend, Ukraine's foe,  
his fist is strong, his voice is hoarse,  
he flies a secret UFO.

And only Amy Klobuchar  
is ready to Balkanize the world,  
her bluntness and Midwestern charm  
are paid for with the farmers' woes.

So how do we defeat the Trump?  
How we his machinations stop?  
O Michael Bloomberg, lift your rump  
and drink democracy's last drop.

## THE DEPARTING YEAR

During the Trump impeachment  
it's been difficult to smile...  
This year laughing as free speech meant  
more than a political style.  
So we resort to Jewish jesting  
bittersweet: across the sea  
news of cholera in Odessa  
spreads to Washington, DC.

But we don't forget the jokes  
of our Soviet childhood:  
When political climate chokes  
it is better not to brood.  
When we listen to the comments  
of the clown with yellow hair  
we remember happy moments,  
we don't wallow in despair.

As we chime in the year  
of the clever Metal Rat  
we refuse to live in fear,  
doctor's order: laughter, stat!



## LEV AND IGOR

Lev and Igor, princely lions  
gave some money to the Trump,  
“I love Jews,” he told them (lying),  
they teared up and joined his camp.

Then they turned to dashing Rudy  
who dispatched them to Ukraine,  
where a scandal was gently brooding  
over the end of the gravy train.

Then the Trump pressured Zelensky  
and Congress said: “Investigate!”  
Lev and Igor were quickly linked to  
the emerging Ukrainegate.

Poor pigeons, Lev and Igor...  
You’ve been thrown under the bus!  
You’re in jail now, both eager  
to impeach your former boss.

Lev and Igor, cruel fortune,  
A Russian Immigrant mourns your fate.  
Politics is not your forte—  
better stick to real estate.

## WARDING OFF DESPAIR

*for mama and papa*

I can't convince my parents to stay  
indoors and follow the quarantine.  
They say: "Don't isolate us." "Ah, touché!"

I can't convince my daughter who's fourteen  
that patience is a virtue, and the world  
will soon recover and become pristine.

I can't convince my daughter who is twelve  
that Levin's love for Kitty is not a lie,  
and Vronsky's love for Anna is not a poisoned well.

I can't convince myself the plague is nigh,  
and we should hastily evacuate  
to the deep country where we could survive.

I can't convince my wife it's not too late  
to load our things into a makeshift ark  
and sail off toward an unknown fate.

And so what's left? The pharmacy, the bank,  
the Russian store, take out: Japanese,  
the park, the soccer field, the riverbank,

the puffy clouds, the sun, the ocean breeze...  
I'm still alive. Not down on my knees.

## BOSTON BLUES

*Do people really need all their poets,  
No more than they need their cripples...*

David Shrayner-Petrov

Some fucking nut  
stands outside the local CVS  
and tells each customer: "Now the middle class  
has tasted what it's like."

Another fucking nut  
stands in the briefing room  
and tells each citizen: "You must  
take hydroxychloroquine."

A senator from Vermont  
stands somewhere on Lake Champlain  
and tells his fellow nuts:  
"I won't quit the campaign."

An old chestnut tree  
stands at my street corner,  
its crown is barely green,  
it's dying of corona.

My inner fucking nut  
stands at his mental podium  
composing with his gut  
what sounds like a poem.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

He did it all just to impress her:  
translator, author, and professor  
at Boston College, where he studies  
a number of areas while he saddles  
three horses: Russian, English, and Jewish,  
he teaches everything you wish  
to know about exile and love  
(read *Yom Kippur in Amsterdam*),  
about immigrants in transit  
(his *Waiting for America* is it),  
about Jewish-Russian writers  
(whose voices he has long curated).  
His work has generated some hype  
and gained a hefty Guggenheim.  
(Please see more info on his site  
or follow his tweets, however trite.)  
A former Muscovite and refusenik  
he's lived in Boston for twenty-five years  
and in America for almost  
3.5 decades, not a minor feat.  
His hero, *A Russian Immigrant*,  
has lately moved to the forefront  
of Maxim D. Shrayer's creative tide,  
like his creator, he resides  
in Brookline, Mass. with wife and kids  
and has a house on Cape Cod;  
unlike his master, he does not  
aspire to offer profound thought.  
A Russian Immigrant entertains  
with Jewish humor in his veins,  
Russian soul-searching in his rimes,  
American optimism in bad times.



Photo: Lee Pellegrini

## Praise for Maxim D. Shrayer's *Of Politics and Pandemics*

“The author, or rather his Russian immigrant lyrical hero, regards poetry as a fainting mirror of doubles, in which boundaries of time and space are erased. Reality and memory, everyday life and the absolute of destiny, feelings, fears and hopes, the pandemic present and the historical past are all split apart and reconnected in the course of Shrayer’s poetical dialogue with himself and others. Both apocalyptic banality and existential suspense need a special poetic perspective: ‘..Can you create/ a living record? I’m not sure what you mean./ Can you describe this? This? You mean the taste/ of spring on our lips? The April wind?/ No, the pandemic, my double spoke with passion.’ This dialogue recalls Anna Akhmatova’s tragic words in *Requiem*: ‘Can you describe this? And I said: I can.’”

— **Stefano Garzonio**, Professor of Slavic Studies, Pisa University,  
editor of *Poesia Russa* (2004) and *Lirici Russi dell’Ottocento* (2011)

“Whether lobbing satiric barbs at presidential hopefuls or pondering the bonds of marriage and family in a time of pandemic, Maxim D. Shrayer’s collection, at once lyrical and playful, captures the predicament of a Russian immigrant in Trump-era America with delicious wit and timely acuity.”

— **Andrew Sofer**, poet and Professor of English, of Boston College,  
author of *Wave* and *Dark Matter*

“Maxim D. Shrayer’s new collection of poems is a splendid achievement, and just what the doctor ordered for readers reeling from the double assault of political upheavals and raging pandemic. Shrayer’s poems are not only personal, but also culturally rich and politically astute—a rare combination in lyric poetry. The poet-narrator, a melancholy, sometimes self-ironizing sophisticate, is a Russian émigré steeped in the tradition of European literature, and profoundly familiar, from first-hand experience, with what an autocratic regime looks like. His otherness is the source of funny, sane, penetrating observations about events in America in 2020. Maxim D. Shrayer’s *Of Politics and Pandemics* is a tonic for our times.”

—**Anna Brodsky-Krotkina**, Professor of Russian Studies,  
Washington & Lee University  
and columnist, *Nezavisimaya gazeta*

“I like humor. As the philosopher once said, ‘I find it funny.’ And there is plenty to turn a smile in this collection. At points I even found myself laughing out loud. Only soon after to be confronted with moments of deep despair. You can’t live in America at the moment and not find yourself taken aback by the laughable craziness of some things and the incredible desperation of others. Maxim D. Shrayer captures that feeling so well. Without much fanfare, he also makes an urgent case for the thinking person and for a return to decency and civility in our leaders—to which I say: here’s to that!”

—**Graeme Harper**, Editor, *New Writing: the International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*  
and author of *Discovering Creative Writing*

Writing in the vibrant voice of “A Russian Immigrant” and employing a rich variety of poetic forms, award-winning author and Boston College professor Maxim D. Shrayer offers thirty-six interconnected poems about the impact of election-year politics and COVID-19 on American society. Through a combination of biting satire and piercing lyricism, *Of Politics and Pandemics* delivers a translingual poetic manifesto of despair, hope, love, and loss.

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ISBN 978-1-950319-26-8



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