In the course of Nina Sadur’s career, the place of the writer in Russian culture changed dramatically. The Socialist Realist “engineers of the human soul” reflecting “the consciousness of the people” exchanged their formulaic narratives of a glorious Communist future for more pedestrian offerings. Literature with high artistic ambitions became marginalized by popular fiction, TV serials, and social media.

As a young writer, Sadur struggled to gain recognition from the Soviet literary establishment and was categorically rejected because of the “unseemly” originality and the experimental reach of the work she produced. Except for a brief period during perestroika, when her formerly unpublishable plays attracted large audiences in Moscow theaters, Sadur has remained a writer at the margins in all senses: as a provincial in Moscow, as a woman in a male-dominated cultural environment, as an outsider among literary groupings during the period of “stagnation,” and, most importantly, as a writer whose concerns lie on the periphery of social community and empirical reality. Even her occasional forays into popular culture as a scriptwriter show her predilection for the liminal. In 2004 Sadur appeared
in the credits of *The Female Taxi Driver* (*Taksistka*), a prime-time TV serial in twelve parts, whose heroine roams the Moscow streets after her profession as an organizer of political celebrations at a house of pioneers evaporates.

Due to Sadur’s emphatic incompatibility with the aesthetics of Socialist Realism, the bulk of her work was published only in the 1990s. At that time she was drawn, unwillingly, into the battle between the “realists” and the “postmodernists,” neither of whom impressed her. She belonged to a sizable group of authors uninterested in theoretical and analytical considerations, who avoided labels, theses, and manifestos. Mark Lipovetsky (2000) has proposed the term “neo-sentimentalism” to describe this “manhole” between realism and postmodernism. Its representatives (Lipovetsky mentions Timur Kibirov, Evgenii Kharitonov, Liudmila Ulitskaia, Marina Palei, and Galina Scherbakova) demonstrate the possibility of a literature that questions the capacity of language to capture a fragmented social reality, yet avoids the intertextual playfulness of postmodernism. The “sentimentalism” of this literature is expressed by a heightened attention to corporeality, whereby suspicion towards the world of reason generates a confidence in the body and its sensations as bearers of meaning. Sadur’s use of corporeality is rather distinctive, insofar as the physical atrocities to which she subjects her characters are part of an intertextual play with incantations and spells from Russian folklore. Nevertheless, her professed distrust of rationality and her belief in the spiritual aspect of bodily functions connect her with the neo-sentimentalists as described by Lipovetsky.

Born Nina Nikolaevna Kolesnikova in 1950 in Novosibirsk, and raised by her mother, Sadur never felt socially vulnerable, for the reputation of her father, Nikolai Perevalov—a renowned poet and a hero of World War II—shielded the family. After his separation from her mother, his poet’s salary enabled Perevalov to pay generous alimony to his ex-wife, but his bohemian mode of existence prevented him from participating in family life. Sadur

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1 All biographical information in this article comes from a recorded interview with Nina Sadur on November 24, 2004.
drew closer to him in her teens and adopted the same lifestyle for herself. Instead of going to university after graduating from high school, she spent time with her circle of poet-friends: Ivan Chigov, Aleksander Denisenko, Anatolii Makovskii, and Ivan Zelenin. She subsequently became a member of Il’ia Foniakov’s “lito” (literary association), which facilitated her access to print, since the main editor of the journal *Sibirskie ogni* belonged to the group. Sadur made her literary debut on its pages in 1974 with the unpretentious story “We Go to Work with a Song in our Hearts” (“Na rabotu s pesnei my idem”), and followed up this publication with the novella *This Is My Window* (*Eto moe okno*) in 1977. Both works describe a young girl’s initiation into adult life.

Novosibirsk appears frequently in her oeuvre: as the provincial town to which it is impossible to return (as in “A New Friendship” [“Novoe znakomstvo”] and “Something Will Reveal Itself” [“Chto-to otkroetsia”]) or as the site of a warm, safe childhood in a snowy landscape (as in *The Garden* [Sad] and *Permafrost* [Vechnaia merzlota]). The experience of a fatherless upbringing is also represented, as seen for example in Larisa’s soliloquy in “A New Friendship”:

> It was only the Rogachevs who used to say that our Mom was a useless hussy and we were God only knows what: who were our Dads? Where were they? What would become of us? They were all shook up about that—what would become of us. And the reason they said that was because they themselves did not have anything besides money, but our Mom had her beauty and a dress with a little black bow and lovers and she also had us! (34)

However, there are also darker images to be found in the stories of that period. In *This is My Window*, a passage with striking autobiographical parallels describes the traumatic experience of having a father who, while officially a hero, is in fact an abusive alcoholic:

> A narrow room where they lived, the three of them, a late evening, Father’s drunken laughter, Mom, running around the room with tousled hair and matches…. Father lighted them and threw them at Mom’s hair…. Then Tania had to learn how to lie.
Afterword  Karin Sarsenov

She was ashamed of lying, but she had to, for some reason. She understood that heroes were not like Dad. But Dad was as much a hero as you could be—he had a medal "For Bravery"? (59)

At the age of twenty-one Nina married a fellow writer, Oleg Gareevich Sadur, an ethnic Tatar who, after their divorce, became the model for the demonic Dyrdybai in the novel Sad. Sadur herself claims to be Russian, dismissing suggestions that she is Tatar or Jewish. She traces her genealogy to Tambov on one side and to the Old Believers on the other. Her work teems with colorful pictures of non-Russians, pictures that emphasize their otherness and evoke associations with earlier Orientalist portraits by Russian Romanticists or the philosophical racism expressed by Vladimir Solov’ev and his followers. When asked to comment on this issue in an interview, Sadur made a strong statement of her rights as an artist:

I am an artist, I allow for differences among people. [My protagonist] is totally different, he has different habits, different manners. It’s a whole palette of colors. Of course I make use of it. It’s a whole world, inconceivable…. But I am interested in everything about him, everything about what he’s like. Why do I have to pussyfoot around it if he has some traits I don’t like? Pussyfooting is really the hypocritical side of racism.2

In 1973 Sadur gave birth to a daughter, Ekaterina. The experience of childbirth is a recurring, yet contradictory, motif in Sadur’s work. Traditionally, the bodily processes of conception, pregnancy, and delivery have served as the emblems of womanhood while simultaneously being tabooed and, therefore, narratively underrepresented in Western culture. In Sadur’s work they are revealed in all their complexity, with a sharp focus on their emotional and spiritual aspects.

The contradictory experience of witnessing the miracle of a budding life and of harboring an alien body within one’s own

2 Recorded interview on November 24, 2004.
becomes a matter of escalating intensity in her work. In *This Is My Window*, the latter feeling dominates:

The thing was that she didn’t know whether she wanted a baby. For some reason everybody thought that you had to want one. How could you possibly want somebody unknown? For everybody, even for Lenka, she … ceased to exist as simply Tania; for them she became a vessel, a cover for somebody, whose face nobody yet knew.” (Sadur’s emphasis) (66)

In the novella Tania consistently chooses to associate with strange, randomly chosen people over those who mean the most to her. Consequently, her period of pregnancy is related as a story of friendship with *another child*, with whom she gets acquainted by chance. When the baby appears, it has a “strange, vaguely familiar face” and is immediately abandoned by Tania to be brought up by its grandmother. One discerns the same kind of estrangement in the novel *Sad*, in which the pregnant body, through displacement, becomes an expanding bubble stuck to a radiator.

The conflicting desires spurred by pregnancy—to be loved for one’s own sake and to care for the unborn—structure the plot of the 1987 play *While Still Alive* (*Poka zhivye*). A young couple visits their old relatives in the countryside, inviting them to come to their apartment in the city as volunteer nannies for the expected baby. The young couple’s entrance into the realm of the superstition, poverty, and illiteracy of the village crudely jolts them out of their well-arranged life and modes of thought. The young wife’s confrontation with one of the village women, who is skilled in magic, leads her to acknowledge a strong desire for passionate love and a readiness to sacrifice her child to that end. As in many stories by Sadur, the sorceress proves to be the narrative’s most authoritative protagonist, whose concern is primarily for the unborn child:

You’re carrying him now, you have to walk around quietly. The blood in you is quiet, nourishing, nutritious for your child. But if I stir you all up? Set you on fire? What’ll happen then? (21)

A similar concern is attributed to the half-witted Tikusia in the play *Loving People* (*Liubovnye liudi*, 1979). Tikusia’s mental disorder
is manifested in her nocturnal conversations with a three-year-old child burning in napalm whose image she sees in a magazine. Tikusia carries the illusory child in her arms and imagines a reversed birth:

Cuddle up against me now and don’t breathe, dissolve in me and I’ll never give birth to you, I’ll hide you from everybody and you’ll be safe. (166)

The son of Tikusia’s neighbor serves as yet another surrogate child for the protagonist. Tikusia’s heightened sensitivity gives her intuitive knowledge about the transgression of the boy’s father, who forced his wife to abandon the child at birth. The boy’s dysfunctional upbringing has resulted in a life in and out of prison, and Tikusia’s desire to bring him back to the womb seems suddenly rational. If in While Still Alive the woman’s hesitation about abandoning her body and her life to something unknown presents a challenge to motherhood, in Loving People the ambivalence of fatherhood constitutes the main threat to the child. In both plays, the destructive and procreative forces are monitored by the figure of the madwoman/witch/healer.

However, despite the clearly declared feelings of alienation in connection with childbirth, the mystic power of life-giving motherhood is present to an equal extent in Sadur’s work. In Everything Is Forbidden (Zapreshcheno—vse) the untouchable sacredness of a mother with her newborn baby in a pram is presented against the background of the debauchery taking place in the basement of her house. Here, the voice of the newborn child transforms into a shield, capable of protecting the vulnerable, unmarried mother.

In 1978 Sadur enrolled in Viktor Rozov’s theater seminar at the Gor’kii Literary Institute in Moscow. After a brief period in the Institute’s dormitory, she moved with her family to a dacha in Vostriakovo, within commuting distance of Moscow. This was a productive time in her life: the plays The Witching Hour (Chudnaia baba, 1983), Dawn Will Rise (Zaria vzoidet, 1982), Loving People (Liubovnye liudi, 1979), and The Devil in Love (Vliublennyi d’iavol, 1983) were written here. Vostriakovo, a provincial, isolated site, figures in such novellas as The Girl at Night (Devochka noch’iu, 1981)
and *South* (*Iug*, 1992). None of these plays was published before perestroika, however; editors judged their metaphysical bent and existential despair unsuitable for Soviet readers.

Sadur’s next “home,” a communal apartment close to Patriarch’s Ponds in central Moscow, also spurred her creativity. Her ordinary neighbors across the hall were transformed in Sadur’s prose into grotesque monsters or pitiful victims, such as Mar’ia Ivanovna, the prey of the Blue Hand in the story named for that figure, the promiscuous Farida in *The Diamond Valley* (*Almaznaia dolina*), or the six-fingered Polugarmon’ (Semi-Accordion) in *The Wondrous Signs of Salvation* (*Chudesnye znaki spasen’ia*). Sadur’s work from this period contributed to a large corpus of “communal art” in Soviet/Russian culture—artistic interpretations based on the provisional Soviet housing experiment that became a permanent tool of surveillance by the state. Whereas films such as *The Pokrov Gates* (*Pokrovskie vorota*, 1982), *Everything Will Be Fine* (*Vse budet khorosho*, 1995), and *Life is Full of Fun* (*Zhizn’ zabavami polna*, 2003) emphasize the atmosphere of mutual support and solidarity in these domiciles, and songs such as Bulat Okudzhava’s “The Black Cat” (“Chernyi kot”) and Diuna’s “The Communal Apartment” (“Kommunal’naia kvartira”) center on their political aspects, Sadur’s primary concern is the violation of private space constantly occurring within the permeable walls of the apartment.

Sadur graduated from the Literary Institute in 1983, embarking on the path of self-supporting mother and nonconformist author. Her work as a cleaning lady in the Pushkin Theater is reflected in such stories as “Frozen” (“Zamerzli”) and “The Wormy Son” (Chervivy synok) from the cycle *Discerning* (*Pronikshie*).

Perestroika finally put an end to Sadur’s literary invisibility. In 1987, the student theater at Moscow State University staged *The Witching Hour*, and established theaters soon followed suit, including Lenkom (Lenin’s Komsomol Theater) and the Ermolov Theater. In 1989 she published her first collection of plays, *Chudnaia baba*, which contains the bulk of the texts written during her years in obscurity. Two plays in this volume, *The Witching Hour* (*Chudnaia baba*) and *Move It!* (*Ekhai!*), come from this first collection.
By late perestroika Sadur had managed to exchange her four rooms in the *kommunalka* for an apartment of her own on Nikitskii Boulevard, in the “house of the polar explorers,” close to Nikolai Andreev’s Gogol monument and next to the mansion where Gogol burned the second part of *Dead Souls*. Like the more mundane localities of her earlier years, these historical sites inevitably made their ways into her works. Gogol’s statue figures as a silent witness and interpreter of the lives of the homeless in *The Garden* (*Sad*, 1997) and as an unfortunate object of children’s mockery in *South* (*Ilug*). Gogol is also a cherished source for her dramatic adaptations (Gogol’s story “Vii” translates into Sadur’s play *Pannochka*; *Dead Souls* is staged as *Brat Chichikov* [*Brother Chichikov*]). Built in 1935 to accommodate the heroes of the Soviet polar expeditions, Nikitskii Boulevard no. 9 witnessed the atrocities of Stalinist persecutions, and in *Permafrost* (2002) Sadur vividly transforms it into a basement populated by starving, dislocated elderly people.

In “An Old Man and a Hat” ("*Starik i shapka*") written in 1993, the history of the house generates a meditation on Russia’s contemporary history:

> Time was, they demanded cheerful, faithful energy from all of our people to last for a thousand years with nothing in return. And the people happily gave what was required, and the polar explorer departed dressed in boots, and his fragile feet were squeezed by the tender cold of the polar region, and the Kremlin stars roiled in steamy ruby-colored blood, and arrogant fireworks thundered in the green sky, and the dead man roared with laughter in the Mausoleum, and the happiness of the downtrodden sparkled.

(381)

The attempt to capture the Soviet experience continues in *The Garden*, in which the Kremlin appears in images associated with the Snow Queen’s enchanted kingdom in Hans Christian Andersen’s tale of that figure.

During the nineties, Sadur turned from drama to fiction: her first prose collection, *Witch’s Tears* (*Ved’miny slezki*) was published by Glagol in 1994, and in 1997 the volume *The Garden* (*Sad*) appeared in Vologda, sponsored by the businessman German Titov. The limited circulation and admittedly poor typography of the latter...
collection presumably explain why most novels and stories from the collection have been republished in *Wondrous Signs* (*Chudeznye znaki*, 2000) or *Angry Girls* (*Zlye devushki*, 2003). Sadur’s prose of the nineties is distinguished by an increasing interest in linguistic experimentation amidst her continued engagement with the folkloric and supernatural. If the stories in *Discerning* (published in 1990) were enigmatic due to their hints at an unknown reality (though they were narrated in a simple, straightforward manner), the novels *The Garden* and *The German* (*Nemets*) and the collection *The Immortals* (*Bessmertniki*) approach this reality by means of deliberately obscure narrative strategies, bringing Sadur’s work of the period closer to the aesthetics of early modernism.

Sadur’s most recent original book-length publication, *Permafrost* (*Vechnaia merzlota*, 2004) contains, in addition to several plays and stories, the novella that lends its title to the volume. According to Sadur, this novella is the book’s sole *raison d’être*: the other texts—including three stories previously published in erotic magazines—were added to make for a book-length manuscript. Two plays appearing in this volume, *Red Paradise* and *Pechorin: In Memoriam* (*Zovite Pechorinym*), are translations of texts from *Permafrost*.

In 1999 Sadur published a new collection of plays, *The Fainting Spell* (*Obmorok*), also sponsored by Titov, and in 2001 one of them, *Brother Chichikov* (*Brat Chichikov*, an adaptation of Gogol’s *Dead Souls*) had great success in a staging by Mark Zakharov at Lenkom. That year the Pushkin Theater, where Sadur had formerly worked as a cleaning lady, performed *Pechorin: In Memoriam*, based on Lermontov’s novel *A Hero of Our Time*.

For many women authors, writing scripts for light Russian TV entertainment has been a welcome source of income, and Sadur has benefited from this boom. During the 2000s, she regularly authored scripts for high-profile TV serials such as *Rostov-papa*, *Taksistka*, and *Ligovka*. In 2010, after a break in her literary pursuits, she published several stories and plays in Siberian thick journals and online. Here, she returns to her investigation of the minds of urban outcasts in a post-Soviet society. Sadur’s new plays, *The Doctor of the Garden* (*Doktor Sada*, 2011) and *The Pilot* (*Liotchik*, 2009), feature characters and situations found in the novella *Permafrost* and in her story “The
Dead Hour” (both from the collection Permafrost). In January of 2013 Sadur finished a new play, Falalei, loosely based on Antonii Pogorel’skii’s novella Lafertovskiaia Makovnitsa (The Lafertovo Poppy-Seed Cake Seller). In the play, Sadur returns to “hovering” between straightforward realistic representation of events and the folklore-based fantasy characteristic of her work of the 1980s.

Sadur’s work is situated in the twilight zone between a readily recognizable empirical reality and “the other side”—an indefinable reality that Sadur conjures up with her densely metaphorical and often poetic language. Her literary space is overtly gynocentric: the fictional world construes women’s traditionally downplayed concerns as narratively and existentially central and crucial. Exploration of the metaphysical periphery—okraina—has become the hallmark of Sadur’s writing. Although critics sometimes situate her among the postmodernists, Sadur herself characterizes her prose as “realism of the illusory,” linking her role as a writer to that of a shaman whose sensibility enables him to approach other worlds that are enriching yet dangerous.

With the exception of Liudmila Petrushevskiaia’s dramatic output, Soviet/Russian drama of the 1980s and 1990s has been generally ignored by the Western literary establishment. Nina Sadur, as a playwright, has earned one of the most prominent places in the Russian literary pantheon of the period. The plays included in this volume offer some of Sadur’s most influential works for the theater to an English-speaking audience for the first time.