

## Divide Me by Zero

**Lara Vapnyar**

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Katya Geller has been making her living as a writer for the past twelve years, all the more impressive because she's a Russian immigrant writing in English. But making a living as a writer requires you to write, and now she's stalled out. Faced with an impending deadline, she decides to write a comedy dark enough to bring tears—one that mirrors life. Lara Vapnyar's novel *Divide Me by Zero* plunges into dark comedic territory with savage grace, following Katya as she traces her history and discovers her most important functional limit: her relationship with her mother.

In Soviet Russia, Katya's mother wrote mathematics textbooks, and correlating math to the everyday was one of her gifts. From Katya's earliest days, her world was structured by mathematical relationships. Now, faced with her mother's mental and physical decline and the simultaneous dissolution of her various romantic relationships, Katya uses the notes for her mother's final textbook as fodder for her novel.

Over the course of Vapnyar's book, the philosophical mystery and resounding error of division by zero becomes an objective correlative to Katya's life. The return to math's structures provides an elegant framework for Katya to tally the sum of her life and for Vapnyar to embed the haunting, complex geometry of the central mother-daughter relationship.

As Katya's marriage, old flame, and new beau all burn out in sync with her mother's death, she confronts her arrested development, the effects of her compartmentalization, and the ways her mother's bulwark shaped and stalled her. A novel that treats the emotional territory of adulthood with devastating aplomb, *Divide Me by Zero* grasps the event horizon of parent-child relationships and the reckonings that lie in wait when their fundamental structures pass on.

LETITIA MONTGOMERY-RODGERS (September / October 2019)

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