

Sara stands up from their litter of religious paraphernalia and makes a fist, releases it, makes it again. Kat and Serafina paw at her, try to pull her back to their pathetic huddle, but Sara shoos them away with a languid wave of her hand and throws down her belt after removing a screwdriver.

“What are you going to do?” asks Kat.

“You’ll like this, Kat,” says Sara. In front of them, each marble tomb catches beams of brilliant sunlight.

ELIZABETH — ANNA — CATHERINE

Sara limps over to a tomb, rests her head on it. This could be a prayer. Then, Sara rises and stabs her screwdriver into the small fissure separating the plank of capstone from the base of the tomb. She snorts with exhaustion, tubes of slushed snot drip onto the shining crypt. She tires, rests, returns to pounding the butt of her screwdriver with a brass pyx, forcing the point of the tool into the wedge. She can lift it.

“Help me, lazy, freezing citizens,” cries Sara, every muscle quaking with fatigue. Serafina, followed by Kat, gets up and comes to help her. Serafina begins a weak protest, but her sense of piety is freezing and breaking off by the moment. Kat and Serafina help push the capstone, and as the plank budes a little, chutes of tepid, dank air escape from the vault.

The gleaming white marble rests in beautiful, mute deference to any nearby blasphemy.

“Kat, go find something we can use for a lever . . . Serafina—help me try to push this goddamned slab.”

“What are we going to do?” asks Serafina? “Are you doing something angry?”

“No,” says Sara. “I’m doing something reasonable.”

Kat appears with a votive snuffer. It snaps into pieces when she tries to pry open the slab.

“Shit,” says Sara. “Kat, just stand here next to us all on one side—if we all push, all at the same time, we can slide it over.” On Sara’s count of three, the climbers heave and the capstone moves even more.

“Wait, wait,” says Sara. “Just get it open enough.”

“Open enough for what?” asks Serafina.

“Open enough to slip inside.”

“What!” cries Serafina.

“Oh, do you want your own?” asks Sara.

Sara climbs inside, rustles around, grunts. Her head pops up briefly like a mole, and she dusts the edges of the tomb with climbing chalk. “Call me if you need me,” she says, and her wild ice-flecked hair disappears into the grave. “And close this lid a little, huh?”

“Wait,” says Kat, and follows Sara into the tomb. The tomb smells briny and mossy, but warmth soon builds, and for the first time in months, the two women can breathe without seeing the polar exhaust of their breaths. This is nice, they say with the wet flash of their eyes.

“Serafina! Are you going to freeze in protest?” asks Kat in a basso profundo that echoes throughout the cathedral.

“Serafina! Join us as we usher in the warm embrace of dead empire and not freezing to death,” adds Sara.

Ten minutes later, Serafina’s face appears in the aperture in the tomb. She is illuminated by sunlight, an angelic aura, and smiling her ridiculous smile.

“The Smolny Institute for Noble Maidens would have it this way,” says Serafina, and throws into the tomb a pile of dry, warm clothes she’s peeled off the bottom layer of church floor dead. “Rule Number One,” she says: “Do not disparage the dress of your escort, or remark upon it . . . or is ‘no hasty toilettes’ Rule One?”

Kat’s smile cracks and she shushes Serafina with one hand—pointing out the sleeping Sara—and lends her the other, helping her young cohort into the tomb. Both young women help cover Sara in the furs, pull the capstone shut as far as it will go, and drift off into black.

Sara wakes only once, only briefly, when she rolls over and crushes the skull of Catherine the Great.

Stalin: *Andrei Alexandrovich . . . That is a very good question . . . Is the woman fucked?*

Tyler Stoddard Smith’s writing has been featured in *Utne Reader*, *McSweeney’s*, the *Morning News*, *Texas Monthly*, *Electric Literature*, *Tin House*, the *Science Creative Quarterly*, and *Motherboard*, among others. He lives in Austin, Texas, working at the Telling Project, a national performing arts nonprofit that uses theater to deepen civilian understanding of the military experience.

MATHEW ZEFELDT

Skulls Tiled, 2016

Acrylic and Screenprint on canvas, 55 x 40 in



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