

“Nothing good, really. I’m more of a ‘who.’ My name is Sara,” she says. Sara turns to kiss Kat on the cheek in greeting, but Kat jabs a translucent hand out.

“I’m Kat.”

“The serious Kat,” says Sara.

“You’re the leader?” asks the younger girl. She is well put together, especially considering there is a famine on. Dressed in a bright blue jumpsuit with red racing stripes down the sides of the pants, and matching red wristbands, the young girl leaks exuberance and optimism.

“Not because I want to be.”

“What kind of experience do you have?” asks the girl, as confident as if she were conducting an interview herself.

“The last time I climbed was during the summer, in Karelia,” says Sara, “I went off course and pancaked my hand in a crevice. I should have taken the bolted route up, but I didn’t. We’re going to need to be more careful. What’s your name, friend?”

The girl flutters her eyelids. “My name is Serafina, I’m fifteen years old and I have a boyfriend in America.” Serafina is curious. Her triceps carve beautiful angles in her skin, shadows play under every muscle of her sleek tensile arms, shoulders, neck. However, her legs are lined with starving gray veins and take on a precarious, al dente aspect. She claims to have no real climbing experience; she has lived in one of Leningrad’s industrial neighborhoods all her life, never venturing past the stop for the train taking her to visit her cousins in Oranienbaum. “Do you want to know my boyfriend’s name? It’s Oliver! Like in Charles Dickens. Isn’t that fabulous?”

Kat mimes the phlegmy cyclone of a death rattle with sad accuracy.

“Don’t be stuck up,” says Serafina.

Kat looks at her in disbelief. Sara appreciates rivalry, but she worries these two will not jibe in the most efficient style. The armored car comes to a stop and the adjutant shows the team into a blasted-out temporary building inside the Peter and Paul Fortress.

Sara first demonstrates how to tie the essential climbing knots, familiarizes the team with the requisite gear, and explains that the most important thing to remember while climbing is not to panic.

“You panic, you get stupid. Fear will turn you into a cowering animal, so stay focused, but stay loose,” she says.

“I don’t spook,” says Kat.

“Lucky for you,” says Sara.

Watching Serafina chin herself up on one of the rafter beams, Kat approaches her in mild astonishment.

“You say you’ve never climbed?” asks Kat, her eyes squinting, crinkling up in defense. “How many chin-ups did you do at the tryout?”

“Twenty-five,” says Serafina.

“Goddamn. If you don’t climb, how do you do twenty-five pull-ups?” asks Kat.

“It’s embarrassing,” says Serafina.

“Nothing is embarrassing,” says Sara.

“I watch my neighbors having sex. They don’t anymore, but they used to.”

“That’s actually quite embarrassing,” says Sara.

“How does that help you with arm strength?” asks Kat.

“I can see their bedroom window if I pull myself up over this fence in our courtyard. I could take you there, but like I said, they don’t do it anymore. They used to a lot.”

“You should start a fitness center in your courtyard once we break the blockade,” prompting a confused laugh from Serafina, and a disbelieving stare from Kat.

“Did you know there is something called a *soixante-neuf*, where two people *bite* on each other’s privates?”

“You are the devil’s own lunatic,” says Kat.

“I don’t think there’s biting happening,” Sara smiles.

“Oh?” asks Serafina. “Have you seen one, too?”

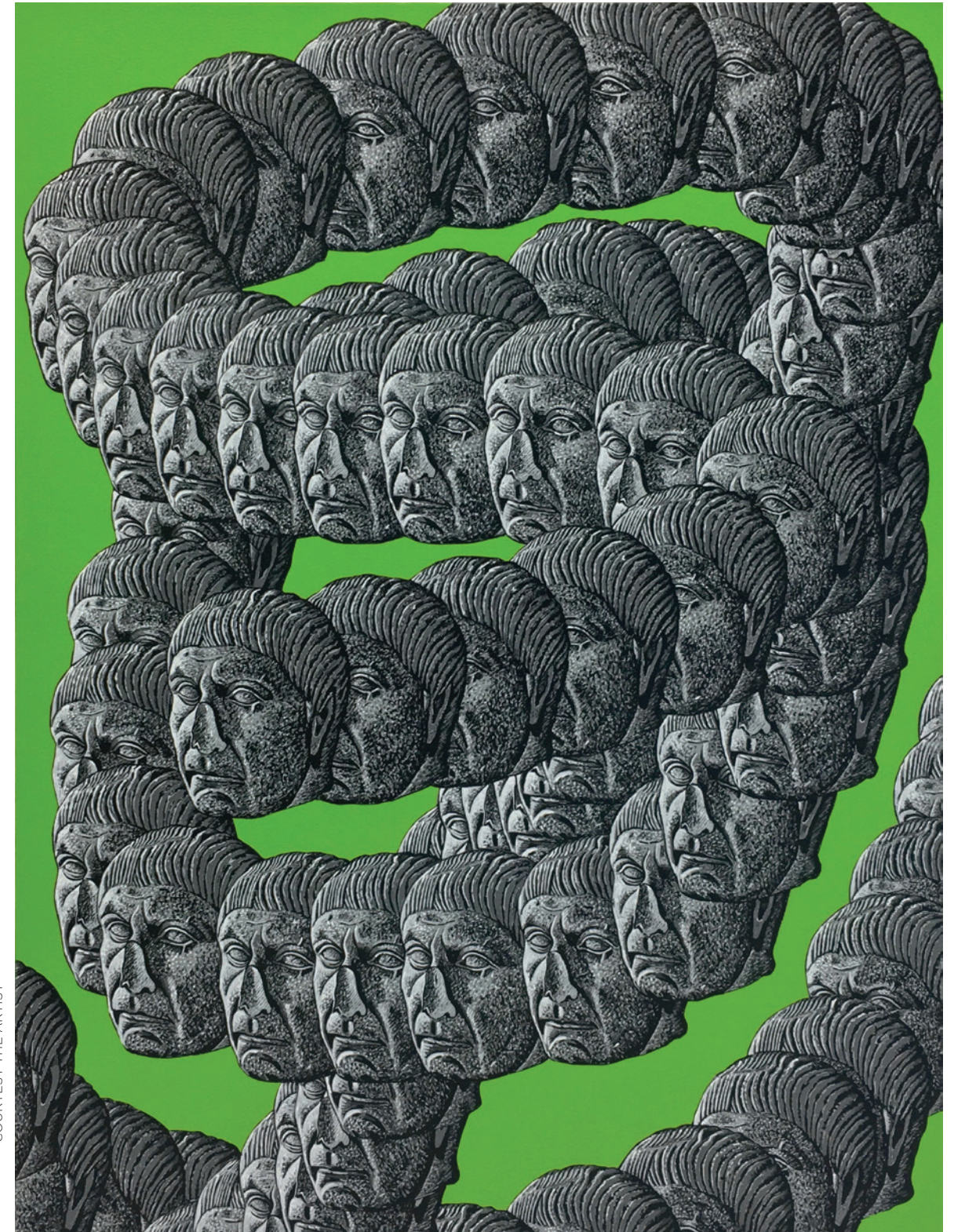
The lessons in this sulfur-stained, windowless structure—windows blown out, roof full of holes, and the smell of fuel flinging around the four corners of the classroom—wrap up with all three women staring at a complicated instruction manual about affixing the camouflaged tarps and netting to the church needle. The instructions are just as convoluted and confused as the task. The cold tightens.

Barely fifteen, Serafina has all the sophistication of a toad. But she is earnestly enthusiastic in her naïveté, and seems to let her experience, her life, wash over her. She watches her neighbors fuck and quotes pastoral doggerel and idylls by Anton Delvig.

*In the name of burning love,
Winged warbler, I give you
Freedom—fly away!*

MATHEW ZEFELDT

Trajan Cursor, 2016
Acrylic on canvas, 40 x 30 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST