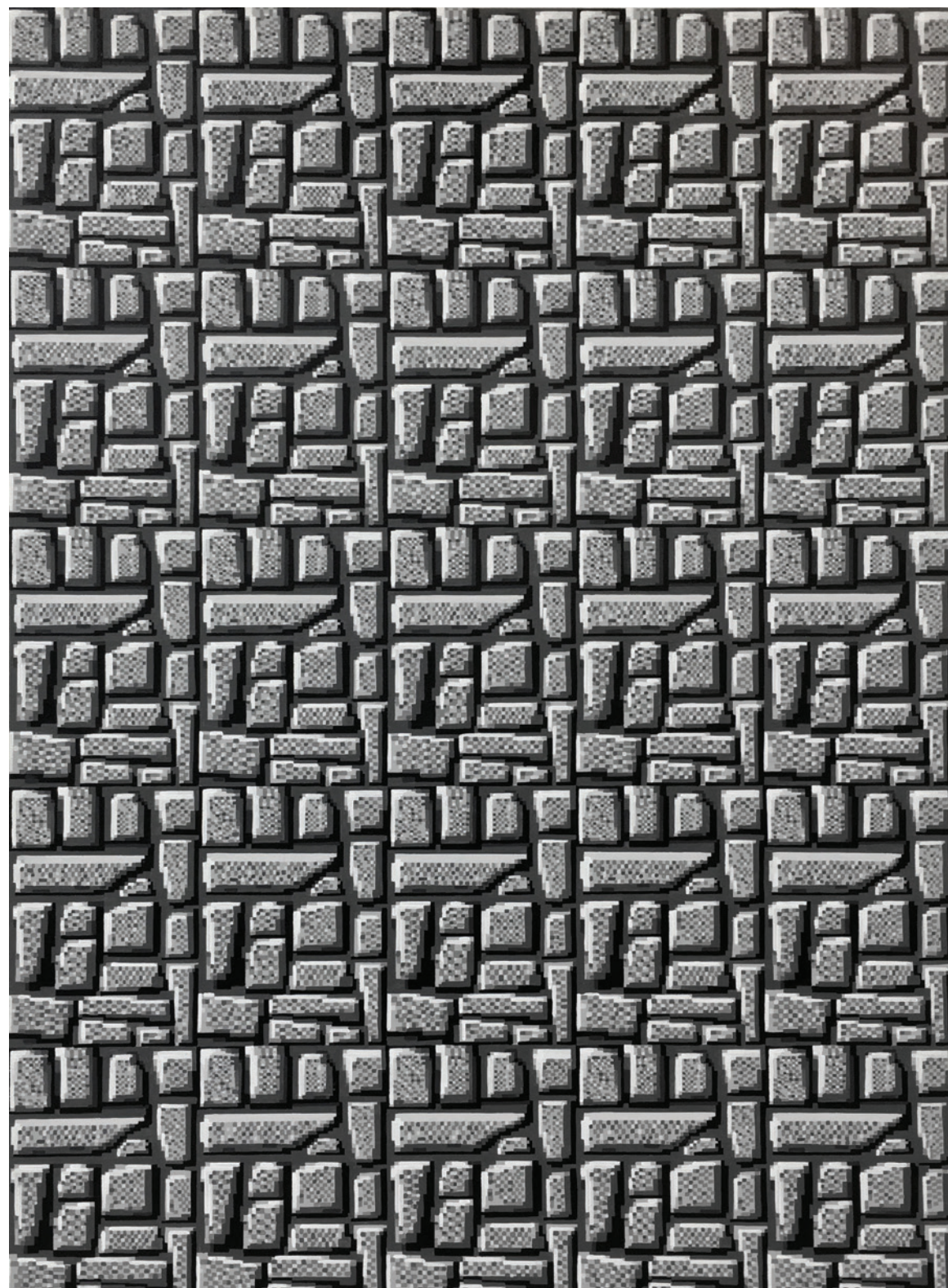


## MATHEW ZEFELDT

*Rocks Tiled, 2016*  
Acrylic on canvas, 55 x 40 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## TYLER STODDARD SMITH

# Smolny Institute for Noble Maidens

Sara makes a fist. She likes how the withered red skin over her knuckles becomes fierce and taut when she clenches the muscles in her hand. The simple act of fist making, the pain, reminds Sara she's done something. Her body is slim, but steady; veins in her arms and legs rise from her pale skin in blue bas-relief. She lets her fist go limp, marveling at her partially adducted thumb and the simian flatness of her callused fingers caused by years in contact with unforgiving rock faces. I've got monkey hands, she thinks—there's no getting around it.

Sara is a climber, an “alpinist,” a weekend mountaineer, really, but right now, the city of Leningrad is short on professionals. The few painters, decorators, designers, and artists left in town produce paints, tarps and netting, stage sets, and other means of camouflage for critical military and cultural targets, the same ones mined in case Germans capture the city. After the Smolny Institute is hit twice with artillery shells, Communist Party Secretary Zhdanov requests that a team of alpiners be assembled to hang the camouflage tarps, conceal military markers, and disguise the enemy's orientation points.

Sara reads about the open invitation to try out for the camouflage team on a billboard notice. The climbing “assessments” will be held in the Field of Mars. Sara is tired and hungry, overwhelmed, literally, by gravity. Who can climb when we cannot even stand?

It is early November 1941, and the Wehrmacht's Army Group North is closing in on Leningrad. Food rations are cut again, and temperatures during the month stake mercury at 0°F.

The city's food reserves, much of it held in the Badayev warehouses, are as follows:

Flour: 15 days  
Cereal: 16 days  
Sugar: 13 days  
Fats: 12 days  
Meats: 0 days

*Secretary Zhdanov: . . . Comrade Stalin, General Voroshilov and I wonder if it would be more expedient to reroute the relief convoy to Smolensk. The Leningrad food stores are at full capacity; we are reinforced for the winter months,*



*I assure you. What is more, of course, is that our soldiers are unstoppable, unflappable. I have never been prouder.*

**Stalin:** *You old son of a whore! I was hoping you would say that. Eminently prepared, that is my Zhdanov! What do we do without our capable man in Leningrad, eh? Are you sure about the relief train? If so, I shall tell Zhukov to marshal the relief trains to the cowards in Smolensk.*

Sara is tired of being just hungry. If she is going to starve, she decides, she will do it in the service of something other than anonymous rot, peat for her third-floor flat. The fire brigade is fed well, but full of hideous men—fat, drunk oafs who may come by their oafism honestly, but how they manage the fat and the drunk are not above suspicion; the Radio Orchestra gives extra rations. If Shostakovich plans to rearrange “Three Blind Mice” for harmonica or cornet, she may have an opportunity. Absurd, she smiles. The army and civilian brigades offer extra rations, but they also offer instant, loud death. I will climb.

Lumbering her way toward the Field of Mars, Sara sees two women in the street accuse each other of stealing ration cards. The cold and the raving hunger have whipped deep creases in their sallow cheeks, their gray, sputum-wet chins, and bony foreheads. They are both covered in pustules and icy sores. Sara sees that they are no longer scared. Animals in the wild fear predators; they do not fear hunger. They anger for it.

“To the street, old bitch,” says the chief belligerent.

“I’ll shake you until your tooth rattles,” says the other.

The first woman instinctively brings a finger up to her one yellow tooth, its root held by a sliver of black, dead gingiva. “Empty your pockets!” she says.

Sara wants to do something, or say something, but the action on the street is so dumb and resolutely listless. To interfere is to slow down.

“Don’t scream at me and don’t tell me about pockets!”

Nearby, everyone not gathered by the burst drainpipe to pail fresh water is gathered around the two women. Someone protests, some spectral altruist. The street begins its own dull hum, a fiend orchestra to accompany the metronome played ceaselessly over Leningrad’s 1,500 loudspeakers. What does that relentless ticking *mean*? Keep the pace? Stay alive? Why do they play it? The Germans know

where we are. Why not play music? Shostakovich would be better, thinks Sara. The metronome. The inevitability of sameness. Daily, ruthless sameness.

The two old women approach each other. They meet at an incongruous angle. Both women lower their heads and their patchy skulls collide with a crunch. The bodies stick out, oblique and gnarly, completing an A-frame structure, while their arms flail pathetically at the air between them. Energy saps. Motion ceases. The two women exhaust themselves. The crowd watches. A boy on a sledge delivering his infant brother to be interred carves an elegant path in the icy street, through the frozen human archway. The sledge halts at a curb and slides around in a circle. The boy holds up a finger, imagines he’s won laurels for an empire.

When the women are wrenched off of one another, stone dead, a search of their coats reveals multiple ration cards stuffed in various pockets and sewn-in pouches.

**Zhdanov:** *Hunger, dear Father, is a mental barrier.*

**Stalin:** *This from the fattest man in the Politburo. But it’s dogmatic. I like it. This is your last opportunity for relief. You’re not going to come whining about oats and grains in a week or two, hmm?*

**Zhdanov:** *On my oath, Comrade Stalin, I’m telling you that Leningrad is fortified with food, nourishment. Indeed, our nourishment is the Party, wouldn’t you say? At this stage, a food relief train would be more gilding the lily than anything else.*

Von Leeb’s Army Group North gains ground, pushing back the shock troops, closing the blockade around Leningrad, though the Soviets keep producing soldiers. Men, women, and children—animal scared and animal hungry—pour out of fissures in the earth like fire ants. The soldiers carry no weapons save empty rifles. They carry plaintive war cries—ferocious, sad.

Sara arrives at the sprawling, ice-flecked Field of Mars to an agonizing scene of desperation and hubris. Hundreds of hopeful and hungry applicants—most of them scaffolds of crust and bone—are given a physical evaluation, which demands that he or she perform a pull-up on a crossbar.

The failure is embarrassing for everyone. Most hopefuls are unable even to lift their arms up to grasp the bar, while others simply die waiting for their fiasco in the frigid wind whipping around the tinkling quadrangle. Dead Leningraders no longer litter the streets—they *are* the streets; they have become part of the landscape and pulped into the ground until a thaw.

A team of three is chosen.

**Stalin:** *I love it! Gilding the lily, he says. I also enjoy the English expression “bringing coals to Newcastle.” It’s like “gilding the lily,” but it’s more industrial, more accessible. Comrade Zhdanov, do you know why they say something is like bringing coals to Newcastle?*

**Zhdanov:** *Yes, Comrade Stalin, I believe I do.*

**Stalin:** *It’s because they already have coals in Newcastle.*

**Zhdanov:** *Yes, Comrade Stalin.*

**Stalin:** *More than they could ever want!*

Hear the Germans grind. From on top of a panzer, a turret turns and scans the damp, pocked field before it like a mechanical barn owl. Voroshilov’s shock divisions leak fear, leak self. Entrenched, a sergeant grins idiotically, and evacuates himself like a child. Even his subordinates scold him for behavior harmful to morale. He is scared for his daughter, wants to run home to her. He wants to be brave. Bravery makes a great man. No, bravery makes good fertilizer. He wants to go home.

**Zhdanov:** *Very good, dear Comrade. I’d like to ask now as to the question of ammunition. If I may, our frontline men have been using bayonets against the German big guns, tanks, and artillery. It’s General Voroshilov, Comrade. I am concerned about his lack of preparedness. We’ve brought knives and puppet shows to the front!*

**Stalin:** *Uncle Vanya under fire. It’s a fitting tribute to Chekov.*

**Zhdanov:** *Yes, but when the puppeteers were assassinated*

*by German snipers, the trench soldiers, who were enjoying the performance, became distracted and were killed by a pressure blast. No crater. The soldiers still looked like they were enjoying the show, but they were gray white and bleeding from the ears. The Germans have brought Mephisto’s vigor. With your support, sir, I would like to request a pivot from manufacturing aerial ordnance toward manufacturing bullets for our foot soldiers. We’re seeing cracks in the lines. But like I always say, “Leningrad is not afraid of death. Death is afraid of Leningrad.” Isn’t that good, sir? . . . You know how well a deftly placed aphorism will inspire confidence.*

**Stalin:** *Leningrad is not afraid of death. Death is afraid of Leningrad . . . That’s nice, that’s good. When did I say that?*

**Zhdanov:** *I said it, Comrade Stalin.*

**Stalin:** *Are you sure? It sounds more like me. Leningrad is not afraid of death. Death is afraid of Leningrad . . . Hmm?*

**Zhdanov:** *Of course, Comrade Stalin. When you put it that way, it does sound more appropriate coming from you.*

From behind the soldiers come the sound of Katyusha rockets. They spit out of their racks squealing like devil shoats, then overhead, ripping air, exhaling yellow flames. As the Katyushas cut across the sky, the soiled sergeant gives a signal and the shock troops emerge frantic from the stinking trench. They are already dead. Half of the troops charge toward the Germans without ammunition, and they don’t even know it. There is a shortage of working gas masks; soldiers wear beekeeper masks instead.

Wheezing, ventilated by shrapnel, the sergeant squeezes the trigger of his Mosin-Nagant and sinks down into the moist transition of the trench.

**Stalin:** *And you’re really telling me the puppet show is dead?*

**Zhdanov:** *I’m afraid so, sir. And two shock divisions.*

**Stalin:** *Leningrad is not afraid of death. Death is afraid of Leningrad . . .*

**Zhdanov:** *Yes, sir.*

Sara arrives at Smolny Institute, Communist Party and Staff Headquarters, whose tantalizing yellow façade and military importance have been targeted multiple times by German bombers. The halls of the Smolny are warm. Fluttering apparatchiks carry identical attaché bags and wear identical scents. Military personnel pass by Sara with hard, square faces and wet mustaches. She is led into a briefing room, where two young women—girls, maybe—sit fidgeting in metal folding chairs.

Once venerated as the top breeding ground for royal offspring, the Smolny Institute for Noble Maidens flourished in this very building until 1917, when Lenin assumed power, killed the nobles and their maidens, but kept the building's dainty yellow. Today, the lower level of the building is painted over to resemble a nondescript gray blur, while the upper levels wait for a tarp and netting to be strung up and hung from the neo-Classical façade.

**Stalin:** *Have you camouflaged the Institute for Noble Maidens? How are all my noble maidens?*

**Zhdanov:** *The Smolny, sir, will soon be rendered inconspicuous. We have chosen a team of capable young women to complete the task.*

**Stalin:** *Noble maidens! Ha ha! Do you get it, Andrei Alexandrovich?*

**Zhdanov:** *They are capable young women, Comrade.*

**Stalin:** *But would you . . . ?*

This is the first and only time Sara or her team will see the Communist Party leader in person. And despite all preconceptions, the man exceeds Sara's, and everybody's, expectation of what gluttony can really be. Andrei Alexandrovich Zhdanov weighs 270 pounds and commands a room by virtue of his mass. He is boisterous, sweaty, scarlet faced, and sublimely drunk. When he is not eating, he is drinking. In the small pockets of time between these two actions, Zhdanov smokes. He is a man powered by his own vices. If he were to stop moving, stop ingesting,

he could destroy a world. But instead, he is an insatiable hunger unto himself. His thinning hair is plastered to his orbital head with a liturgical unction of oil and creams.

"Good morning, Comrade citizens women," mumbles Zhdanov, bracing himself on a desk that isn't there.

"Good morning, Comrade Party Chairman," the three say in unison. Zhdanov lurches forward and steps in a trash bin, but he extracts himself with the aplomb of an experienced sot. A raw oyster, or some kind of hoary gray globule, has attached itself to Zhdanov's tunic, and his mustache is streaked with mustard. When Zhdanov locates a desk that is there, he braces himself, and with imperial enthusiasm, cries, "A flaming Bolshevik greeting from myself and dear Father Stalin!" The climbers, Sara and the two other young women whom she vaguely recognizes from the tryouts at the Field of Mars, do not dare make eye contact with one another. If life were funny, this could be a joke.

Zhdanov picks a small notebook off of a long, wide desk and begins to read:

"Rule Number One: Do not disparage the dress of your escort, or indeed make any remark whatever upon it. If, however, any misfortune has befallen the costume of your associate, and of which she is ignorant, do speak to her of this mischief, and facilitate her in mending the sartorial casualty."

Zhdanov looks to his audience. They seem pleased, or at least attentive. And who wrote this—my adjutant?

Sara and the two other women stare straight ahead. Sara nods, she doesn't know why. It's not the worst advice, but doesn't seem to pertain to any critical war work. Maybe it's team building. Out of the corner of her eye, Sara perceives a look of perplexity of Zhdanov's adjutant, a young lizard of a boy, who shuffles over to his superior, and tugs lamely at his waistcoat.

"Rule Number Two," booms Zhdanov: "Do not greet callers after making a hasty toilette. Meeting company in a savage state of damp coiffure or disorderliness is unsettling and gauche."

Again, Zhdanov leers up at the women out of fat eyelids like an old, clumsy wolf. The adjutant now whispers something into Zhdanov's ear. The Secretary turns the notebook over and reads its cover.

"Indeed, yes. Of course," says Zhdanov, swiping at the adjutant like a wasp. "A memento from the Smolny

Institute of Noble Maidens. Not mission critical, but important nonetheless. War, like a masked ball, is obsolete without etiquette."

"And so we're going to hang the camouflage stuff on top of this building?" asks the youngest of the team, who, Sara notices, is exceptionally clean and well fed. Lucky girl.

Zhdanov burps a bubbly chortle. "No, my dear. We have soldiers doing that right now. Climbing Smolny? No, no. That is not a challenge. I would do it if I had time. I have no time. You see, I am only one man and I can only be in one place at one time. Thus, I must soon take my leave and occupy another space with my time."

"So what are we climbing?" asks the young woman.

Zhdanov is sweating and irritated. He is not used to questions, but civilians are not used to military formality. The Secretary must endure it. He sighs. "The Germans are using the spire of the Cathedral of Peter and Paul to obtain orientation and azimuth in locating our Party administrative offices, weapons stores, and factories. Sometimes I think it would be better to just raze the churches, but even the sun shines on the Ministry of Culture every once in a while. Thus, our priceless holy places are to be veiled immediately. You will be supplied with an extra food ration, and my most sincere regards . . ."

"Comrade Party Secretary, sir, is our order to climb the spire of Saints Peter and Paul Cathedral?" interrupts Sara, certain he can't mean this.

"Indeed."

"I apologize for any misunderstanding, but you refer, sir, to the spire rising over one hundred feet above the cathedral, up with the angel?"

"Up with the angel, down with fascism, that's right. Our golden guardian angel—if you care to believe—may she protect you from all ordnance and inclement weather. Adieu, my noble maidens," says Zhdanov, clicks his heels together, and salutes the three climbers. Why is he saluting these three women? He doesn't know. He barely knows where he is, and he would like to vomit. The solicitous adjutant takes Zhdanov by the elbow and, gingerly, escorts him out of the briefing room, whisks him out the exit and into a waiting Rolls-Royce. The glass windows in the briefing room groan under hardening mists rising off the Neva.

Before the adjutant returns, Sara looks at the two other women and raises her eyebrows, hoping for some

conformation of disbelief in what they've just been asked to do. Their faces sag, indecipherable. These two are just girls, thinks Sara. This is no place for children. They are here; then, they are women.

As the only member of the camouflage team who, during the tryout, demonstrated any real knowledge of climbing and its attendant equipment, Sara is selected as the de facto leader. When the adjutant returns, the three women are driven to an unknown location, where Sara will acquaint the team with basic climbing guidelines and safety instruction. Sara sits between her two new partners in the steel bladder of the monstrous T-60 Soviet reconnaissance tank.

Kat is sixteen, a self-assured Georgian, poised with the kind of self-assurance that betrays grand insecurities. Tall and wiry, Kat's features are all right angles. She is ashen, wan, as if this famine might swallow her up at any moment, but her eyes are wild and alive with animal anger.

Kat wears a pair of large men's athletic shoes, and instantly Sara feels a pang of sadness. Russians and their feet. If she grows into those feet, she'll be taunted as a giant freak, and if she doesn't, she'll be taunted as a freak with giant feet. As if reading her thoughts, Kat turns to Sara, says, "I am wearing men's shoes."

"I'm sorry, it's cramped in here," says Sara. What a preposterous thing to say. Just address it. "There is nothing the matter with big feet, in my opinion." Sara is mortified with herself. Think three times, then speak. That's what her papa used to say.

"It's because Pushkin only wrote about little girls with little feet," says Kat.

"I like Pushkin!" exclaims the other girl, the youngest. "And you can't have big feet if you want to dance, just saying."

Kat looks at the young girl with practiced scorn. "I am not a dancer."

"Mad, big footed, and dangerous to know," says the girl.

"I think it's nice to meet someone who knows what they aren't," says Sara, trying to keep positive. She smiles at Kat as the three bounce wildly down side roads, the searing clang of metal on metal echoing in the bulky transport vehicle. It is clear to Sara that Kat is not a person who finds humor in her own misfortune, only coarse contempt and bitterness.

"What are you?" asks Kat.



“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?”

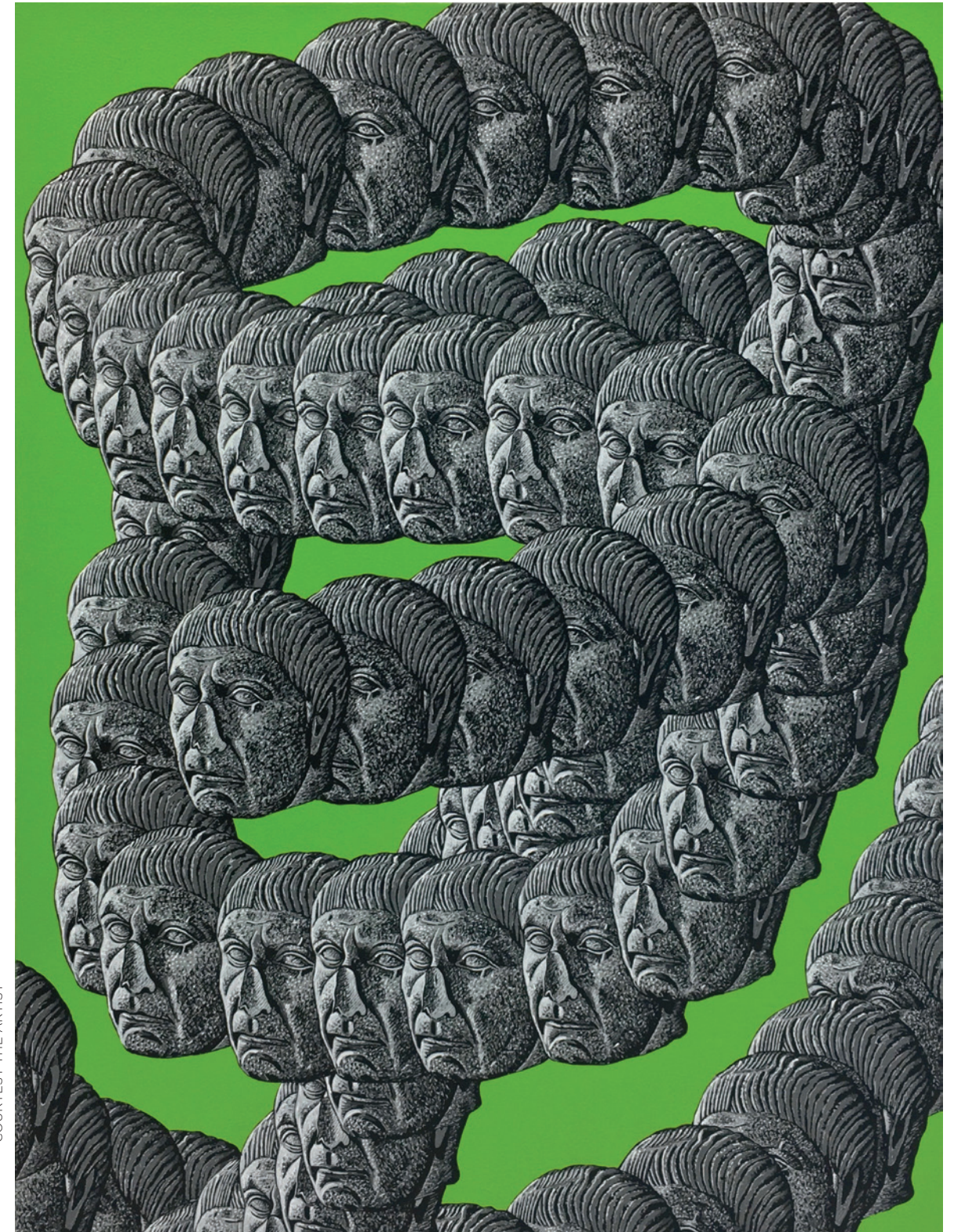
The lessons in this sulfur-stained, windowless structure—windows blown out, roof full of holes, and the smell of fuel flinging around the four corners of the classroom—wrap up with all three women staring at a complicated instruction manual about affixing the camouflaged tarps and netting to the church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



Serafina explains that her father is at the front, fighting. He is a sergeant in one of the shock armies, and he is “very brave, and he will be home soon because Stalin will make it so, and so will God.”

Sara and Kat look at one another.

Maybe there is a God that gets you through this, wonders Sara. Or maybe God is anger. He is not love. What shit, she thinks. Luck gets you through it. Deaf, dumb, blind bastard luck.

As she trains them, Sara tries to keep an emotional distance. She is reticent with details about her own life, but takes a keen interest in learning about these two oddities. Serafina, despite her preternatural simplicity and romantic delusions, is decidedly resourceful. Her father, the sergeant, is a chemist, and, she explains, has taught her about inks, dyes, reactions, and pH levels, so that while he is gone to the front, she will be able to make perfectly forged ration cards.

“That’s not something you want to go around advertising.”

“I didn’t. You asked what I did for food.”

“You’re supposed to lie and say something like, ‘By the grace and goodwill and Communist spirit of our citizens, I have managed to persevere.’”

“That’s not bad,” says Kat.

“You like that?” asks Sara. “What about you, Kat? Are you an outlaw like our little counterfeiter over here.”

“No,” says Kat.

“Do you persevere through the grace and goodwill and Communist spirit of our citizens?” asks Sara.

“Kind of. I sleep with people,” says Kat.

“Like a prostitute?” Serafina’s eyes swell and her face flushes.

“Men, women, children,” adds Kat.

“Dear God—children?”

“I’ll sleep with everyone. Anyone. We need food and we need heat. Sometimes I trade food for heat, and sometimes I trade heat for food. I have one ration card. I weigh one hundred pounds and run a temperature of ninety-nine degrees. These two things are currency.”

“Do you know the *soixante-neuf*?” asks Serafina.

“No, you squealing pervert. I don’t know the *swoksant-noof*. And I’m not a prostitute. When was the last time anyone got naked in this town? Can you tell me? When

was the last time anyone even thought about fucking anything?”

It is true. Sara, and all of Leningrad, is overcome by animal necessity, but sex does not factor in any hierarchy of needs.

“When people die, they don’t want to be alone. I wake up with dead people half the time,” says Kat. “People are scared of death, but I’m not.”

“So you’re like a hooker who doesn’t have sex with dead people,” says Serafina, counting something, for some reason, on her fingers.

Sara smiles at Kat, who still refuses to smile, but whose eyes leak something impish, something other than sadness.

“Why did you leave your home?” asks Serafina.

“My family did something,” says Kat.

“What did they do?”

“They were hungry, like everybody. I had three brothers and now I have two,” says Kat, as a mien of ambivalence descends over her face.

**Stalin:** *May I ask you something in confidence, Secretary?*

**Zhdanov:** *Naturally, sir.*

**Stalin:** *I have heard rumors.*

**Zhdanov:** *About me? Nonsense! I assure you that all they are is rumors, dear Father!*

**Stalin:** *No, my friend. About the situation in Leningrad. You tell me that the food reserves are full, and yet, I hear from Voroshilov that there has been an escalation in reports of cannibalism. True or false? And are you still hoarding sweets?*

**Zhdanov:** *Me?*

**Stalin:** *Who else?*

**Zhdanov:** *Absolutely not.*

**Stalin:** *So if Voroshilov says that somebody who may or may not be Party Secretary Zhdanov has a personal cache*

*of chocolates and candies that he has not reported nor registered, he is a what . . . ?*

**Zhdanov:** *He is a Judas! That is his warehouse! His idea!*

**Stalin:** *Warehouse?*

**Zhdanov:** *No, it’s more of a closet. I misspoke. I can’t believe Kliment Yefremovich would try to sell me out like this! No, wait. I can!*

**Stalin:** *You two are like bickering children! Just make sure that you have enough to keep your two fat asses in sweets, then let the citizens have the rest. We are not an eating-people People!*

**Zhdanov:** *That is exactly right, sir. I will speak with General Voroshilov this evening. The candy will be distributed as you instructed. He is a glutton, you understand.*

**Stalin:** *I understand everything.*

**Zhdanov:** *Of course, sir.*

The team stands on top of the walls of the Peter and Paul Fortress. Sara squints out over the frosted beach and recalls the scene in summer—a wide, yawning strip covered with sand and crowded and humming with diversion. Now, a foggy hiss scrambles off the beachhead, and the tide moves like a leaching, frozen sludge. Whitecaps appear like burst pimples out of the black ooze. Diesel heaves in the air.

At dusk, Sara and the team enter the cathedral. Serafina takes a match and lights a votive candle, something both Kat and Sara find affected, uncomfortable.

“Look at the floor,” says Serafina, pointing the lit candle out in front of them.

Broken, misshaped bodies litter the floor of the church, the aisles, and the pews. The cemeteries are full, and this is how people give their loved ones back to God. Nearer, our God, to Thee—iconography is proximity. It is too cold to smell the body rot, so the team is unprepared for the sight. They walk over bodies, silently, toward the altar. Before the gold and gaudy iconostasis lie the tombs of the tsars. The bone-white sarcophagi are shaped from Carrara marble,

on top of which are fixed gilded bronze crosses. Kat thinks the crucifix is a sword, Sara says it is, more or less. Serafina crosses herself.

“There’s the stairwell up to the bell tower,” says Sara. “We won’t need to climb until we reach the spire.”

**Stalin:** *I am thinking, Secretary. Who would even gild a lily? Can we even do that? Now there’s an ambitious project. Which reminds me, Secretary Zhdanov, do you know, or can you, or can anyone communicate how or if Operation #4101 is developing? You know people who know Dr. Ivanoff. I can’t reach Guyana. I can’t find anyone who doesn’t have their head up their own ass! I imagine Hitler can get Guyana. Dead air and helpless imbecils too incompetent to patch in on my end. Are you going to answer me, Secretary Zhdanov?*

The birds and bats in the bell tower have fled for calmer climes, but as Sara and her team ascend the guano-slick staircase leading up to the cathedral spire, she can lean out over the bannister and see the bodies littering the church floor over a hundred feet below. Every day now, it seems that the dead of Leningrad have congregated the night before in some sinister necrophiliac spawning. Russians are dying like multiplying salmon. Corpses fill the frosted Field of Mars, and ad hoc mortuaries appear in every church. The generals are delighted the churches have come to use.

Looking down below her, Sara shudders with morbid awe. At ground level, the bodies all look black, or dark blue, like trench boils. But, from her view above, the crosshatch of male and female, young and old, reveals a prism of wild color. Sara stops her march up the stairs.

A glossy red purse

Yellow and green socks, argyle

A white tunic there

Orange hair on canvas

Eager blue underwear on that one

Blacks and purples trickle

“Sara,” says Kat, “is everything good?”

Sara looks up above her at the trompe l’oeil images of peculiar religious scenes on the ceiling. Three-hundred-and-sixty degrees of madness made beautiful.

“Okay,” says Sara.

**Zhdanov:** *Yes, sir. Action #4101 . . .*

**Stalin:** *. . . is the Simian Soldier experiment. Imagine it, Andrei Alexandrovich . . . the brain of a man, the brawn of an ape!*

Sara leads the team through the narrow passage up into the metal bowels of the bell tower. Through counterweights, wire cables, and the bulky grinding barrel of the spire's enormous clock, the three continue up to an opening in the tower that leads out onto the ledge.

**Zhdanov:** *But is it, forgive me, I don't know . . . is it right? I feel the project could blur ethical lines.*

**Stalin:** *Who are you . . . Trotsky? What are you, drunk? If you are not, you should be. Get some backbone, Andrei Alexandrovich! This is war.*

Cold penetrates to the core of their hearts. Sara takes a deep breath and curses as the frigid night air hardens her breath to ice daggers. Snow covers most of the city. Black craters from mortar and artillery dot the streets, and from their vista, it seems to Sara that the city grid is laid out with domino tiles. She takes up a long rope attached to the tarp, slackens it out with a whip.

The black Baltic lights up with antiaircraft fire from gunships. Boys run up and down every dominoed street turning crank-wheel sirens. An alarm is broadcast over the loudspeakers, but the German bombers are too close—an alarm just makes it louder.

They work quickly, efficiently. Kat unclamps a coil of rope and binding rings from her belt, while Serafina assembles the pulley system. Sara ties on to the base of the spire, just above them, chalking her hands from the pouch behind her back. Kat and Serafina work in tandem to unfold and untangle the camouflaged tarp. From her vantage point, the bronzed guardian angel above sees below her a choreographed cluster of spiders spinning a protective web around their home.

The bombers come in low—Sara sees the features of the pilots. They are all extraordinarily white, comely, and clean, which is, beyond anything else—frustrating. Killing is ugly; killers should be ugly, too. The bombs begin to fall.

*Thup-thup-thup.* The time signature of life is ripped from its scale. What comes first? The blast? The cacophony? The gut-wrenching suck of physics trying to fill a void? What's strange is how little it matters. But here I am, thinking, thinks Sara. During times like these, it makes no sense to try and order the world.

Sara begins climbing the needle spire, apelike, her legs and arms working in energy-efficient unison. She has climbed over fifty feet when she finally reaches the gilded copper angel who holds the crucifix. The angel is smaller, more fragile, and dingier than she looks from the ground. Sara's muscle sinews are shredded, her hands numb; they no longer communicate with her mind. I trust in my hands as I trust in . . . what is left to trust? She hoists herself up in one agonizing effort, swinging her leg over the soldered junction where the winged angel's shoulder meets the cross, then pulling herself up by the crossbar. She stands on the shoulder of the angel, secures a rope knot to the cross, and whispers in the angel's ear, "I'm sure you have your reasons, but you are the worst guardian angel I have ever dealt with." Then, with one awkward vault, Sara wraps her arm around the crucifix and pulls up with her left hand, while her right arm latches the trestle in place.

The city is hot and dense and murky, roiling with bomb froth. Angry gases, negative compression—the widow-maker suck of blowback, the insurance payout of material collapse. Another deep wave from another anonymous blast knocks Sara off the cross, but her ropes suspend her. She spills over herself, inverted, and is sent whirling around the base of the spire; she is a rattling tetherball of fear, ice breath. The noise around her is shrieking yellow.

**Zhdanov:** *Out of clinical curiosity, Comrade Stalin, does Dr. Ivanoff plan to inseminate a woman, or an ape?*

**Stalin:**

After several quick, finishing circuits, Sara is finally slammed into the spire with a cold, white crack. Starburst images assail her from every point in space and the smell of . . . chocolate wafts across the icy Neva. To Sara, the sweet odor gives her vertigo an even weirder aspect. Her

team calls out to her, or she thinks they do. The shelling has abated, the sky is almost bare aside from the emptied-out German bombers making their way back to their bases. When Sara negotiates to an upright position, she clings to the spire with all her strength.

**Zhdanov:** *May we move on, Comrade?*

**Stalin:**

**Zhdanov:** *Sir? Are you giving me the silent treatment because you're thinking? Or maybe because of the thing with the chocolate? I implore you—that is all Voroshilov. You have my word it will be distributed with fantastic haste.*

**Stalin:**

**Zhdanov:** *Sir?*

Down a slope leading from an anonymous warehouse to a little side street off of Lermontovsky Prospekt flows a stygian river of melted chocolate. Small schooners of lollipops sail chaotically down the stream, while sinews from swirling blobs of chewing gum flap and gyrate in the current. Starving citizens looking out their window are convinced they're dead. This is not what they thought heaven would be like—it's juvenile. The few citizens able to make it out in the street are instantly drowned in the chocolate's course.

"A chocolate river?" asks a weeping woman to the picked carcass of her infant son. She runs delirious into the street, followed by her two older sons. The boys restrain their mother, both of them finding unanticipated strength, sated as they are for the first time in a month.

**Zhdanov:** *May we move on, Comrade?*

**Stalin:**

The chaos of the approaching fire brigade sirens, alerts, and general cacophony make hearing and being heard impossible. Kat shouts something, then Serafina. Sara can hear only murmurs, not words. Even the screaming buzz of Serafina's voice is muted and unintelligible. Holding

on to the base of the spire with one hand, Sara cuts her safety rope, drops her knife, then hugs the needle and slides down all the way to the bell tower, where she slams down on the ledge, eliciting a pleasant wintery tinkle from the dormant bells.

The crew hauls up the camouflaged tarp. By dawn, the Peter and Paul Cathedral is sufficiently cloaked. The last of the Stukas and Messerschmitts arrive safely back at their air bases and their crews are slugging schnapps, telling a story about a night wraith flying wild circles around a church needle.

After slowly descending the staircase leading down from the clock and bell tower, the team tries to exit the cathedral, but the exits are blocked by debris. Exhausted, the three women drop under the apse and huddle like puppies, covering themselves in red, gold, and purple shrouds and strips of ceremonial cloths. Even bunched together and squirming, the climbers feel their blood freeze and another swell of ravenous hunger sets in. For the team, for all of Leningrad, torture is a feast, hunger a wild animal.

"Pig knuckle aspic . . . herring fillet with pickled onions," says Serafina

"Shut up, Serafina."

"Baikal omul smoked over aspen." Serafina is laughing. "Cut it out!"

"Lamb cutlets with potatoes à la Pushkin . . . apple tartare and cowberries!"

"Sara, what happens if I kill her?" asks Kat.

"If you have the energy, be my guest."

An hour, two, three hours later, they can still hear the sirens of the fire brigade and the bustle of rescue, but nobody comes to clear egress for the women.

"They're not going to get to us," says Serafina, her voice now trembling. The temperature drops, drops, but the sun is getting brighter, projecting great sacerdotal shafts down into the mass of bodies surrounding them.

**Zhdanov:** *Sir?*

**Stalin:**

**Zhdanov:** *Sir?*



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



COURTESY THE ARTIST