

RUSSELL SCOTT VALENTINO

EDITOR'S NOTE

When you look at St. Basil's Cathedral from Red Square, you see the familiar cacophony of domes and colors, the apparent chaos of shapes rising up that makes it immediately recognizable, distinctive. It's hard to confuse that messy splendor with any other. But try squeezing up to the Kremlin wall to see it from the seat of power, and the building appears perfectly symmetrical, a central dome, then pairs of smaller domes descending, then a paired staircase, one vaulting left, the other vaulting right. The tsar, it would appear, wanted to see his realm as ordered, like just about any old administrator. The order came first, of course, the beautiful chaos as seen from the square either a carefully constructed after-effect for the people, or a happy accident.

It occurs to me that this is an apt analogy for what we try for in every issue—yes, editors as tsars, please picture us in two dimensions with a background of gold, *sans lunettes, merci*—pulling disparate pieces together from the familiar cacophony known in the trade as the slush pile in an attempt to shape, order, direct, suggest at least mood, if not meaning. The shaping, we think, is best kept in the background—editors, like conference interpreters, are generally only noticed when something has gone terribly wrong—but if you shift to one side, squeeze up next to the Kremlin wall, as it were, a structure may come into view, which sets off the visible shapes and colors and makes them that much sharper. As I say, it's what we try for. And not just us, of course.

You have a canon, a curriculum, a grammar, a court, and also an English, and in the right mood you might find yourself reaching across the neighbor's fence to cut down those pesky saplings, like reaching back into someone's memories, even your own, to—what verb shall I use here: select? construct? create? discover?—a sense that may or may not have been known at the time, by you or anyone. You try to trim the edges, Zen-like; shape a place for home out of the scrub; order self by age and alphabet, at thirty-seven, say; give the landscape known contours, the Venice of the north, the other Venice, the one you saw, the one you may never see, or never see again. But then the wildness, the words for things forgotten, the wondrous centrifugality there, just outside the code, the chord, making a sign out of old cans, playing rough. In skin tone that isn't "flesh," in nature's violence, in visible and invisible breath.

We held a contest (read: attempt at order), as we do every year, received wondrous centrifugality in response, and here publish (order) the best from this year, chosen by our judges (not the courtroom kind; thank you, judges!), Allan Gurganus, Patricia Hampl, and Claudia Rankine. Congratulations to winners and runners-up alike.

Supposedly the tsar blinded the legendary architects who made St. Basil's so that they would never surpass their work. I like to tell this story to our interns every fall just to get them thinking. Here we merely say: poem, story, essay, and marvel at the messy splendor.