

Weld (St. Petersburg Blues)

by Andrew Trent

I. St. Petersburg Blues

There's one graveyard for the part-timers and another for the full-timers. Ours is a little nicer, but we're still all going to hell. Do you remember St. Petersburg? No, you're memory's not that good. But now that we've got all that behind us, at least we can enjoy the memory. The Russian welcome mat, the crazy hungry cats who would wait for you to come home, to give away your warmth with suffering charity in your eyes. The frozen saints of poverty hanging their heads in shame over our bed, reminding you of Tolstoy in the rain. The smell of stale vodka and dead cigarettes in everything we owned. I can't even drink vodka now. We brought our own pasts to the city that had none — not so different from the places we left behind. The nights after work when we had no rubles — the nights I would spend (much to your chagrin) working on that impossible machine — you know how much it meant to me...

II. The Satire Machine

A collection of gears driving an insane puppet show w/ matching Cossack dance. The music comes from broken brass I brought from France. It's like Punch & Judy, but the satire is aimed at other places. I dreamt up this device in the Bangkok haze I used to know so well. Analog! Analog! We must preserve the analog discontent. It's not as quick or pretty, but it crushes in ways that digital doesn't. The sun curls away leaving only the stiff fingers of cold nights and loneliness to pass their unsoothing paths along your skin. But there's warmth in the work, fire that wells up from somewhere you can't name as your mind fits the pieces together, to build something

from the heart — something from the nothing that was there before. Impassioned, deluded, strung like power lines across your rotting mind. A ghost ridden city that demands you pay attention to her details and dealers and deaths acted out daily. I'm drawn further out to the sea of living for the work. And I want to go. I cut the lines they throw me, I make it impossible for myself to survive — survive the way they tell me I must. The way they think I should.

III. Goddamn Wine

Strings of the violin on the late night classical radio, my mind wanders down the empty alleys in search of the perfect scrap or otherwise useless and discarded metal, shiny and rusted all at once. You used to interrupt my treks with your own rough edges and all that heat that poured out of you on the winter nights in Petersburg. And as I would mark the territory with blood or piss or chalk or breadcrumbs, you would drag me back into the light of the city's center. "Come to the café, Jackson. Come dance with me and see the laughing faces of our drunken friends." Your Russian always sounded so formal. And I followed you to the ends of the night, always I followed. Your heat was also light that made the winter a festival that I could not escape. You never saw the darkness that surrounded us; you had slain your own with only courage at your side. And I would never be that brave... I've lived so long on the strength of fear. Yuri would always bring us the freshest of his homemade portwine, the worst I'd ever drunk and the worst drunk I'd ever had. Paint thinner. Or perhaps that way just from the left over smell from his studio that permeated the grapes as they rotted under his sink in the next room. The lofts of St. Petersburg, Deirdre. They were cold and dark and inhabited by souls who kept their dreams warm but not their heads. And who needs a wool hat when your mind is full of the world the way it should be? That would be miserly at best.

IV. Archaeology

You'd disappear to your aunt's for the weekend, or a trip to Moscova with the other secretaries, for shopping and a different scent in the air. "Come with me, Jackson," you would plead, "Get out of this place for a day. See the world as it really is..." and I would dodge your proposition in any way I could find. I even hit you once, just to make you leave. I never forgave myself, though I know you forgave me before the bruise even began to show. What must your aunt have thought of me then? A brutal insane American with nothing but vodka and cigarettes and a collection of metal scraps to feed her sister's child. You told her I was a genius and that genius must be allowed its moments of great despair. I was never near the man you told them I was, but I tried... at least for a while. And the times you were gone were the best for hunting for the relics I needed. You weren't there to distract me with the promise of heat or the annoyance of not understanding. And I found most of my best pieces then. Chickenwire to serve as marionette strings; hubcaps; driveshafts; shattered mirrors and broken pipes. All of it together enough to make them see. See their error and erroneous judgment of my errant ways. It wasn't simple justification or revenge that drove me, but those were certainly ingredients.

V. Fifty Shades of Glory

All the days I missed from that stupid job, fighting hangovers and hunger and you. You had vengeance enough with your eyes closed and your back turned. I never heard your hate but I could taste the words on your tongue. I could smell it in your hair as we lay curled together in the night. You carried my insolence like a mother and an invalid child, full of sorrow yet still loving the weight — never allowing yourself to cry, never showing the strain of the burden. But the child reads between the lines and knows all the same. So we were never the match I imagined, and I suppose it was the doom beneath the glory that drew me in in the first place. And, of course you never felt the burn that I did, certainly not about the things I

did; wasn't that the death of us in the long run? You, with your dreams of home and children and me so involved in myself. You knew it too... "Sands," you said to me one night, after another useless tussovka at Yuri's, "you can never have children, because then you would have to admit there was something more important than you." I remember throwing a mug and then the tears as we attempted to patch over the words and the walls, always breaking when we fought.

VI. Amerikan Style Hamburger

Still, we had our good and brief moments. Down on Nevksy Prospekt we drank with the expats and remembered the good old USA with a strange condescension. Foster was there, having followed my lead and working in his own dark room on his cycle of plays. He was desperate to fill the void with the rebirth of tragedy — full of the fury of the Eumenidies and the Blood of Agamemnon. And also Carlos, fresh from Argentina with his seductive couplets and the terror of a bourgeois youth and how it would affect the words he wanted to spill from his hands like the blood of the Marxists had on the very streets we walked, all cold and all lonely and all like ghosts of a time we only imagined existed — picturing New York or Rome or Paris when all they really were was starving metropolises tearing themselves apart under the night and their power to hypnotize the young. And I wonder now if we would have done better with different role—models. If the sun had remained as bright as it was when our own middle—class homes we filled with our childish fears and dreams. We turned our backs on all that, didn't we? And it was all so premeditated that we're all as guilty as that old man in Amerikan Style Hamburger, working hard on unknown mysteries that I imagined to be the deciphering of diaries of dead relatives or saints who never saw the shine of neon on a cold and rain—slick street. We all saw something in his deliberate charting and graphs, or whatever we each felt he was doing. And all the while we saw our own selves failing at our quests, Quixotic

though they may have been. You, more than anyone, had already turned your back a second time; were ready to escape to the suburbs of Dallas or Chicago or Detroit or any other urban American hell, to forget the anger that had made you paint to hide the pain. You never shared those bleak moments until we were both far too drunk to do anything productive about them. And I was left feeling bruised and helpless by your tears. What the hell could I have done even if I had been there? Take the bullet for your sister? Kill your mother before she killed herself? Believe you when no one else would? I know your suffering was beyond salvation, and in that was the wedge; My suffering has always been self—imposed, and therefore I could walk away from it at will. And even when my gravity failed, I still drove on into the next terror, with or without a Sancho to keep me in line when I was at my worst.

VII. The Diminutives of Madness

I remember the year before Petersburg... hitchhiking through the backroads of big America of beat fantasy. Finding that the world they loved was as gone as youth or renaissance or enlightenment. Everything out of place and feeling like I was wasting something that I should have held sacred, kept locked in a dark bank's vault or enshrined in a Greek cathedral with icons and dusty prayers and belief. Outside Cleveland I realized that Europe might be preserved in her cultural winter — too cold to change in the way that burning America does. It changes, everything does, but the speed is the question I answered then. I flew back home to tell them I was shaving my head and moving to Portugal, as a start — and they reacted as always, dumbfounded but too polite to care enough to comment. From Lisbon to London to Rome, where my hand was shattered for raging against the resurrected fascists — they didn't waste any time getting their revenge. Then on to Munich; a trip to Hamsun's Oslo in search of Hunger, then down to Moscova and finally to you, Deirdre. And to St. Petersburg, so like a sandbox city, erected by childish hands to fill space that was better off empty.

With the hope of finding that there was still something worth fighting for, that life could be more than they said, more than all the friends and lovers and parents and professors had finally offered to my questions and quests. Continuity, camaraderie... comrade. You didn't even see me the first time we met, your eyes darkened with rapture for that bastard Lucien. And it took two weeks for you to learn my name and two more to agree to dinner... and 2 months to speak to me again after that. I'll never mix vodka and champagne again, I swear. And I'll never tell the "necrophiliac's wet dream" story to someone who doesn't know when I'm kidding. Slowly, though, you broke down — who could stand such infernally consistent persistence? Charming, graceful, and sober then, I told you the secrets of my Texas youth, and you laughed the full and disarming laugh that almost made me cry, and still brings sadness to remember. And so we lived, dancing softly around one another's neuroses for nearly two years. Each afraid to leave, but in the end tired of staying. So when your father died, and you felt you owed it to your family (god how you hated them until then, except of course, your aunt) to return to mind the store. We only had a day to argue and cry and finally accept. I walked you through those frozen streets, watching the flurries like ghosts of the unborn & unrealized children you dreamt of. The train station, bleak in the streetlights, rose above our two lonely figures, separate though together, and threatened to devour us. We sat for two more hours on the platform, waiting for the bullet of train that would shoot you into dark night travel to reunion with the awful West. When the train arrived, all our tears were gone, left with only the knowledge that somehow we'd forget these days as we forgot all the ones that came before. Squeezing my good hand, I saw you smile for the last time. "Sands," you said, "try to make it back from yourself. Try to find the sun." And then you were gone. Disappeared from view like a stacked magician's deck...I turned and left before the train began to pull away. I knew I'd run alongside if I didn't. That night I found the final scraps for the machine: a Mercedes hood ornament, a crushed Pepsi can, and someone's lost St. Christopher...

VIII. The concerned cognac reminded

acetylene torch burned blue in the damp room... fingers raw with the polishing of metal and the pounding of hammers. parched skin around taut eyes. a figurine of fatigue. shame around my throat like an anchor. grasped the fire and made real the word... sanitized in the bleak light of neon and white-hot steel then the final realization working for, working towards death and dying on the vine. And then the moment of all my anger:

shh shhs hhshhshhs shhhs hs ssssh ssh shhhhhssss clak clak ssss
tang ting
ping clank drak fang death
ssss bang tok tok

gears grind / lose mind / fall behind / empty rind
calliope nightmare sounds to the sky and the wicked black metal groans into life like the end of the world on speed... alone in that dark room I thought saw you dead on the tracks, twisted black metal hissing steam and blood... the world gave way to terror, the little puppets danced and mocked... I woke up screaming.

IX. Mourning

A trisket a tasket a black and silver casket, like a spent bullet, a murderous casing. So, no, I'm all right... the disease. fall behind. Another chunk of slag to feed the gears of the beast. And what? when the archaeologists unearth this toy? this humorous relic? this monument of folly? A museum display, but the creator unknown. In the basement with all the other torture devices. Cobwebs in the corners, an Iron Maiden, a rack and gilded cage. And a strange machine that makes noise and jerky motions. It won't even work, I'm sure of it now. Not built to last, not like a good old American waste of time. Cheap expatriate goods from heavily tariffed trade

partners. Dime a dozen if dime at best. I was always a gnarled bitter dwarf. An Angry baby. Impotent rage at the world that doesn't do what it is supposed to. but supposed by an idiot or a madman. or a genius you would say. the ridiculous man strikes again and has burned the candle down for no reason other than burning. I miss you, beloved...

X. Coda

April in Paris again. The city shows all its lights. And in Clichy all the clichés remain the same. My arm gets worse every day, but I survive. The machine was sold for a million worthless rubles to an entomologist in Chiba City. He thinks it will show him the face of God. I hope it does — but I'll look for the answers here, in this wine and the warmth of your eyes. The afternoon's showers cause me to pause, seeking shelter in a corner café. Music from the cabarets makes me tap my feet. An organ—grinder's monkey stole the last of my francs this morning. Yet somehow I'll get by. And I see lovers along the Seine, glowing. Europe still soothes me, after all.

