

On Earth As It Is

2010

An Open Letter of Prayer to the Country of Russia

Sean Carman

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prayer as story, story as prayer

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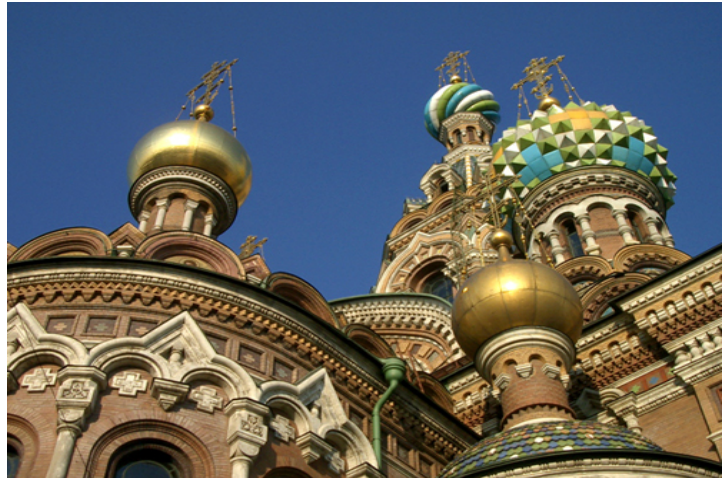


photo by sean carman

An Open Letter of Prayer to the Country of Russia

Sean Carman

Russia!

I know you only through your
quirky and enigmatic literature,
full of ranting underground lunatics,
characters who bustle and fly,
and noses that roam St. Petersburg.

It always seemed that
there was something essential
it was trying to tell me
that I couldn't understand.

Russia, my love!

I've met your women,
in vodka bars and hair salons,

and on the pages of magazines.
At sleek desks in high-rise law firms,
and in executive positions at
major international lending institutions.

They were all beautiful, like movie stars,
smarter than I was, and more determined.
Like they wanted something,
and knew the score.

Russia, I ask: How do you do it?

I've only met two of your men.
One drove a taxi.
The other worked the rental car counter
at a major airport.

It's the women I remember.

Russia!
My once and future love!

When I was younger,
they tried to make me fear you.
We were supposed to be enemies then,
but I never believed it,
even as I matched up all the answers
on those multiple-choice tests.
The possibility of our destruction
was too remote, too horrific to believe.

Sure enough, our enmity
could not be sustained.
A wall came down, exposing
you in rusted tatters,

and Boris Yeltsin stood there,
drunk, on the fender of a tank,

saying he was sorry, and offering a few stray words
about freedom.

Brave Russia!

I only went to you once, to St. Petersburg.
There were little puffs of cotton everywhere.
They filled the air, like snowflakes,

then landed on the sidewalks and
mixed in with the grime.

In the morning I saw half-dressed lovers

on park benches, bandaged drunks,
and toothless men on crutches
begging me for change.

One night, after too much vodka,
on a wooden bridge decorated
to resemble a griffin,
a gang of gypsies stopped me,
lifted me up, and took my wallet.

Oh, earnest and inscrutable Russia!

This is all I know of you,
but hear my prayer.

I'll make it to my country first.
I'll hustle it into a corner and
put my arm around its shoulder.

It might think I'm just a talkative
eccentric but listen, I'll say,
it's not like you think.
The world doesn't really hate us.
Let me tell you how it was.

They told us, every day,
that a nation that stretched from
Kamchatka to Poland,
from the Arctic Circle to the Baltic Sea,
wanted only to destroy us,
but it wasn't true.

In fact, it turned out we both
had bigger problems.

That is what I'll say.

I think, at this point, they'll believe me.

Then you and I, dear Russia,

will go walking.
Me with my good people, and
their myriad catastrophes
and foreign wars,
and you with your hearty souls,
and their ruined economy,
separatist movements, and
gangland presidents.

We'll stop at a small pond,
or a Lenin statue.
I'll read you a Gogol story
and a Pushkin poem,
and you can give a lecture on
de Tocqueville, and read something
by Washington Irving or Edgar Allen Poe.

I'll show you the Jefferson Memorial.
At the Finland Station we can have some tea.

Russia! Vast continent!
Aging industrial empire!
We'll realize we are not

so different, you and I.

And then maybe, when we're done,
we can somehow make amends
for our misunderstandings.

And you, dear Russia—
sweeping empire, enigmatic bastion
of hardship and troubled faith—
can help me get my wallet back.

Sean Carman is an environmental attorney in Washington, D.C. His writing has appeared in three McSweeney's humor anthologies, on the McSweeney's, Comedy Central, and NPR websites, on the Huffington Post, and in a handful of literary journals, including Gargoyle, Bridge, Opium, and Hobart.

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