

Museumification

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It was wrong, what I was seeing on shore—all wrong!

A historical site like the Peter and Paul Fortress should not have a sunbathing beach, let alone an international sand sculpture competition held there each summer. I blinked in disbelief.

The starfish lay next to the octopus, the mermaid beside the anteater. A toucan cozied up to a Baltic seal, all of them rendered in exquisite gravity-defying detail in toasty-colored sand. Tourists milled about, admiring the creations, snapping pix. From my seat in the stern of a tour boat, I felt appalled.

The dungeons of the Peter and Paul Fortress had known torture and executions during the imperial era. The tombs of the tsars were there. This was where Dostoyevsky had been held prisoner in the 19th Century. Built as a bastion to repel invaders, the fortress walls had never faced attack, owing to Russia's dominance over the Neva River delta and the Gulf of Finland into which the Neva flowed. Instead, those stone ramparts had become a lockup for enemies of

the state who sought to bring the empire down from within: anarchists, assassins, terrorists. Lenin's older brother was held there for attempted regicide before being executed.

I studied the toucan, noted the impossible lengths the sculptor must have gone to for the elegant curve of its beak. The Peter and Paul Fortress should never sully the dignity of its solemn past with glib things like sand sculpture competitions.

Situated on the south side of the rugged fortress walls, right across the Neva from the Winter Palace, the beach received sun throughout the long hours of a 60th parallel summer. Kayakers drew close right now, leaning on their paddles to get a better look. A woman on a stand-up windsurfing board sought to glide smoothly onto shore but her ankle, leashed with a neoprene tether to the board, suddenly lurched. She splashed down into the knee-deep water. The sand figures attracted crowds all day and deep into these White Nights of June when an unending twilight bathed everything in a spectral glow.

My tour boat rocked near the beach, and the guide was gesticulating. My eyes were on the wind-surfing woman as she splashed ashore, dragging her board behind her. I felt my jaw set.

A city like Saint Petersburg could certainly have a sand sculpture competition. Any city could. Even those without shorelines, those without bodies of water. I lived in a beach-bereft place, landlocked Iowa. Its capital city Des Moines hosted sand sculpture competitions occasionally during summer festivals—so of course Saint Petersburg could do so, too.

But a neutral stretch of the Neva River would be a better location for it, near a park with trucked in sand if need be, far away from any momentous sites of cultural or military heritage. This wasn't just my quirky oddball personal opinion. History itself should have by now made the Peter and Paul Fortress off limits. History should have protected the place better.

No less a cataclysm than the interrogation of tsarevich Alexei Petrovich took place there. Eldest son of Peter the Great, and the next in line of succession, the tsarevich stood accused of treason in 1718. He received 25 lashes with the knout on June 19th, 15 more on June 24th. The knout not only shredded the skin, but its hooks tore the underlying flesh to ribbons. It is said that his father even

swung the thing against him. The tsarevich died inside the Peter and Paul Fortress seven days after that first lashing. Sand sculpture competitions had no place here.

History should have disallowed it. History should have been a better custodian—and the countervailing weight we assign to grave occurrences, the reverence with which we walk the cobbles where upheavals have happened. The way we resonate with the convulsive geopolitical incidents that shake a place. As if exercising some kind of bizarre eminent domain, history's usual tendency was to snatch up choice real estate, event by event, century by century, making it impossible for that place ever to exist as anything other than a diorama to what had happened there, a replica of bygone occurrences or a staging ground for costumed reenactments, sort of a Living History gulag.

A town like Pompeii came to mind, buried under the volcanic ash of Mt. Vesuvius, smothered in time, unable to move forward, unable to add to its legacy or destiny, unable to be anything other than a lifeless testament to its long dead past, its citizens forever holding the poses they'd been in when the volcanic ash had all at once surprised them, overtaken them. Standing, sitting, crouching, lying down—ash had finished them off dramatically and quickly. And then millennia fossilized them.

As if obeying an odd gravitational pull, history had the clock-stopping force of Pompeii's ash. When a place was 90% its past and nothing else, no longer humanly usable, no longer dynamic, the hands of the clock did not sweep forward anymore. The seconds no longer ticked by. Pompeii was held in silent, hermetic awe, reduced to a caricature of the life that had actually been there, like the Clip-Art version of what its living reality had been. Where there might otherwise be restaurants, grocery stores or housing developments, things that reliably contributed to the tax base of a contemporary municipality, for instance, there instead were Interpretative Centers and Gift Shops, not to mention a fleet of docents in soft-soled shoes patrolling the place.

Endowments became necessary in order to underwrite major installations, also capital campaigns now and then to fund new exhibits and public programs—plus the constant schmoozing of prospective donors. This was the baggage history brought with it. Once time had curated a site like Pompeii, it

morphed into an organized catalogue of important personages and noteworthy occurrences, all of it tagged and labeled, indexed and cited, like a document ready to fold up and lie flat in the seldom-opened pages of a dusty old tome. And visitors could walk away with a pocket souvenir or a keepsake, a trinket of the past—the glass paperweight, the key chain, the coffee mug.

Pompeii was finished. The ash that had extinguished it had been absolute. If Mt. Vesuvius had not made that abundantly clear, the luxury tour buses that now colonized the site each day certainly did. They followed history like an occupying force follows a conquering army, and they were in fact history's enforcers. They made a place like Pompeii keep predictable hours, for example—open by 9 a.m. until 6 p.m., closed on Mondays. A team of workers performed after hours maintenance on the site and also engaged in routine cleaning. Once the work shift ended and the employees turned off the lights, the calm, empty darkness of night reigned supreme. Like something that had been waiting through the crowded daylight hours for a solitude such as this, Pompeii could reckon with the destiny that had befallen it.

This was the business of Being History. The business of Being History entailed conquest by something one could not defend against. Conquest mandated a new post-apocalyptic reality. It brought rules, brought regulations—along with tickets for timed entry, website purchase only.

The business of Being History necessitated security screening—bags, purses, briefcases, coats. The metal detector was the first hurdle, in effect, to history. An overlapping grid of closed circuit video cameras recorded every move visitors made as they walked through the exhibits carrying their security-screened bags and purses. Wall-to-wall surveillance made it seem like something important might still happen in Pompeii again, though the unblinking alertness of all the well-calibrated lenses was only there to capture footage of history-related criminality: vandalism, theft of objects, etc. Meanwhile, visitors stood in line wearing sensible shoes. They gawped at the volcanic devastation before returning later that day to their cruise ships in Naples' harbor, stopping in picturesque towns all up and down the Amalfi coast for bruschetta and prosecco.

History had the power to anchor Saint Petersburg similarly in place, but as I stared at the beach before the stone walls of the Peter and Paul Fortress, I realized that somehow Saint Petersburg had not gotten that memo.

A small armada of aquabuses zipped along the Neva River past me, boom boxes blaring hip hop. The frothy wake they left etched a trail on the water's surface that led my gaze back to the whimsical sand sculptures.

Saint Petersburg seemed to be rejecting history or repelling it somehow.

The presence of a mermaid or an anteater or a Baltic seal before these solemn walls seemed to signal some sort of resistance move, something gutsy, even rebellious. Saint Petersburg had no doubt produced more history than any city ever could rightfully consume on its own, outside of Rome. Instead of embracing history and all of its trappings—the key chains, the signage, the virtual exhibits—it was refusing it. Instead of carrying the heavy bags of history, Saint Petersburg was fending history off.

Which struck me as rogue. There was more here than merely what had come before. Saint Petersburg acted like a place that knew its destiny was not done. The city had history on the run.

Back home, I lived in one of those uniquely history-starved places on earth. Not only was Iowa beach-bereft, it was also anemic in the category of world-changing events. In the time since fate had collided so spectacularly here in Saint Petersburg, 300 years more or less, Iowa had recorded very mild, very modest milestones: geographic mapping, early agriculture, fur trapping, trade.

Iowa was vacant of history.

Little of human note had happened there, pre-Settlement. Various native groups had pulsed through, nomadically, often following the hunt. Iowa was not itself a destination but a place to traverse, to get through quickly while heading somewhere else. Even the waterfowl drawn to its vast network of wetlands were migrating in a flight path so predictable it was like a Rand McNally bird highway in the sky. Long before humans had flight, the land we call Iowa was a natural born flyover zone. Nothing had happened there with the power to defy gravity. Nothing had happened with the power to fossilize history or hold it down, as if pinned under glass. Nothing would museumify it.

Saint Petersburg had laid claim to heavy events over some notably heavy centuries—the assassination of Tsar Alexander II, the birthplace of the Bolshevik Revolution, the Siege of Leningrad. It had known it all, everything befitting a resplendent empire—the wars, the uprisings, the heroics, the consequences. It might seem hard for Saint Petersburg ever really to be in the 21st Century on account of the weight of its past. The heavy centuries were very obligating, very definitive.

Built improbably atop granite piers driven down into a marsh by Swedish prisoners of war, this city was like a marble and stone creation some god had raised from the sea. That it still stood solidly there, whole and complete, not sinking into a swamp, was even more improbable. The Gulf of Finland's moody waters had flooded through every year for 300 years as if to drown it, drag it down into the cold murky depths where its mansions and palaces, still intact, would become a habitat for filter feeders and bottom-dwellers. Down there in the oxygen-starved darkness, fetid currents of water would seep into the sunken parlors and great halls of the stone city, as if to examine and puzzle over these treasures while oysters attached their shells to the very floors where those who had decided Russia's fate once walked.

What had happened to Pompeii would not happen to Saint Petersburg, its forward-flowing life stopped dead by ash. Nature would never score a takedown here as it had there, regardless of the Gulf of Finland's continual flooding. When Saint Petersburg played Rock, Paper, Scissors against nature, it was Rock, it was Paper and it was Scissors.

It was as if nature was nothing.

No seismic features underlay this place. There were no active tectonics or restless fault lines. Saint Petersburg had known volcanoes—but they were of the human variety, the ones we call Great—Peter, Catherine. They strode the land like mortals but were really titans. *He* waved his hand, and granite cleaved itself. *She* blinked an eye, and 14 different colors of marble stacked itself up into the shape of a palace. The baroque architecture we associate with European Russia's iconic look rose to its full height atop a swampy river delta. It rose up, and it stood dripping in the unending light, something kinetic, luminous and unfathomable, as if coaxed into being from the eutrophic depths.

From my seat in the tour boat on the Neva, I gazed upon the sand sculpture competition before the Peter and Paul Fortress and watched a man and woman walk the narrow path between the beachy toucan and the mermaid. The man sipped from a bottle of Baltika beer, the woman wielded a selfie stick. She stopped every now and then to snap some pictures. He pointed at something, maybe at the uncanny realism of the mermaid's fishy scales, and she focused her lens on them. Then he drew near and looked through the gallery on her screen as she swiped left to right.

Saint Petersburg refused to be archived. Refused to be solemn. Refused to be a placeholder only of what had come before. It would not be held hostage to the past. The bottle of Baltika beer and the selfie stick made that clear. The detritus of ordinary 21st Century frivolity now surrounded the Peter and Paul Fortress as no foreign invader ever had, and the intention was not to attack but to protect. The detritus of 21st Century banality was neutralizing the threat that an overly ambitious force like history posed. Like gargoyles standing sentry on the roof of a building, sand creatures were guarding Saint Petersburg. They were warding history off.

My tour boat drifted back out into the river, away from the beach, and the guide began pointing out architectural features on shore—bastions, gates, towers. I swiveled in my seat for one last glimpse. Those sculpted treasures might last a couple weeks before storms from the Gulf of Finland swept them out into the river or melted them down into the miasma of sand. Through July and August people would spread their beach towels and sunbathe right on the spot where the octopus had rested its tentacles or the Baltic seal had tilted its snout up to a bluebird sky.

By then, I would be back in Iowa. I would be back in a place that seemed relieved of history, unburdened, a place that had never been distinctive enough to draw UNESCO's attention. No god had ever raised from its slumbering depths there a colossus built profoundly of granite and marble.

Come autumn, when the days at the 60th parallel began a steep plummet toward claustrophobically long nights, I would be back in Iowa, standing in the bright open space of a harvested cornfield while ragged 'V's of geese migrated overhead. Early snows in Saint Petersburg would blanket this beach, creating

softly sculpted freeform shapes of their own atop the sand and then drifting in mounds against the rugged walls of Peter and Paul. With that blank white austerity as a sedate backdrop, the Fortress would look taller and more severe, the stone from which it was constructed heavier somehow than on the day it was quarried. The geological density would speak to the human agony that had played out behind those walls, the drama they once contained somehow closer, too, very near and insistent. In the brutal cold of deep winter when the Neva was walkable, a glittering frozen expanse, the walls would tower above the ice with a revolting magnificence.

No amount of sand could ever change that, sculpted or not.