It’s a Sunday in early January—just after Orthodox Christmas, just before the Russian New Year—and snow sifts down on Moscow. I wander along Tversky Boulevard, feasting upon its shop windows, all of them decked out for the season: fruits and candies, sleds and snowmen, toys and trains and teddy bears draped in holiday ribbons, everything dusted with iridescent artificial snow. The promenade is brisk, a leisurely scene of folks kicking back. Shoppers duck into tea rooms for a hot beverage or grab a bite to eat from street vendors. Some head to the outdoor ice rink at Red Square to skate. A merchant dressed as Father Frost hands out coupons to people strolling by. Couples, families, clusters of teens gripping their smartphones—everybody gets a coupon.

Without being able to read minds, I can guarantee that I am the only person walking along in the delightful snow thinking about Holodomor, the manmade Terror Famine in Ukraine from 1932-33 that killed 7 million people. Not only am I blowing right through 80 years of Russian history plus a
geopolitical collapse or two, but I’m connecting wintry, seasonal, holiday Moscow, 2015, to the actions of a totalitarian regime that went extinct two generations ago.

The only possible connection between Holodomor and these holiday decorations rests with Pavel Postyshev, one of Stalin’s officials. He helmed the Ministry whose fleet of enforcers swept through farms and homes in Ukraine and confiscated every morsel of grain regardless of the starvation found there. Two years after this atrocity, and completely unrelated to it at all, Pavel Postyshev wrote a Letter to the Editor of Pravda, the state-run newspaper, in which he argued against “the silly misconception that the New Year tree is a bourgeois excess.” He called for the public reinstatement of the banished tree and stressed the need to give proletarian children an object of wondrous enjoyment. Such displays, seen as evidence of “religious prejudice,” had been banned when the Bolsheviks came to power in 1917. Pavel Postyshev is the link between Holodomor and these holiday decorations.

Because ever since his Letter in 1935 all of Russia has indulged in spirited end of year celebrations—the ornaments, the tinsel, the strings of colorful lights. Nowhere is this carried more to a festive extreme than on Tversky right through the heart of Moscow, a boulevard of haute couture shops and high-end eateries that T-bones into Red Square near the glitzy department store GUM.

To window-shop my way along Tversky and focus less on the decorations that adorn its store windows than on Holodomor, however, is to cherry pick the propaganda. It is to view the meltingly endless scene before me through the warping lens of the past.

In propaganda’s Connect the Dots game, gaps exist between the dots. The indoctrination is such that we ignore the gaps and over-focus on the dots. Holodomor for me is a dot. Pavel Postyshev for me is a dot. Gulags, Godlessness, purges, pain—dot, dot, dot.

As an American whose Cold War era intel on Russia and the USSR was carefully controlled and meticulously manipulated, I have a handful of dots, naturally—but I have gaps the size of the Ural Mountains in my actual knowledge of the place, its policies, the people, its cultural shifts. The gaps themselves generate a narrative that serves propaganda’s aim. Its aim is to
foment doubt through a lie. Propaganda, both true and simultaneously not true,conjures a strange dimension, one that obeys a gravitational pull strong enough to stretch facts to false proportions. The word shares a medieval Latin root with “propagate,” which along with “to transplant a seedling” means “to spread ideas and customs from one place to another.” Propaganda cements an Us vs. Them identity. It provides a substrate for nationalism. There’s a significant self-preservation aspect to it, too. It defines and denigrates the Other and assures us of course that we are not that at all—we are not “Other.” On account of propaganda, we know who we are.

Before my first trip to Moscow, three different people on three different occasions told me stories of abduction. “Women disappear in Russia,” they said. Two others told me “to come back in one piece.” The comments occurred within a six-week period right before I left. What did those who warned me of abduction or dismemberment hope to accomplish? To scare me into cancelling? To frighten me into heightened vigilance? To scold me for violating societal mores (Russia!) and subtly make clear that punishment (abduction!) would be on me? When I rode the Moscow Metro, when I walked back from the opera, when I boarded a bus, when I wandered through a public garden, when I enjoyed a vodka picnic in the park, I noticed other women. The non-abducted. Just like me. Did women go missing in statistically notable numbers here—or did people in the U.S. simply believe that because, after all, this was Russia, women of course were going to disappear? Didn’t women get abducted everywhere on earth? Yet each day courageous women dropped the kids off at school or went to work or stopped at the grocery store for a few items—and they did so bravely in the face of all odds.

From Moscow I sent a couple reassuring emails: “Not abducted yet!” Did anyone find this funny? Did I find this funny?

In some ways propaganda occupies its own country, a fear-inducing place whose passport is paranoia and whose visa stamps leave an indelible stain of suspicion.

Case in point: My friend Sergey can sit in a café in Saint Petersburg, a cup of tea on the table before him, and read the Itar-Tass news coverage of riots in Ferguson, Missouri in those August days and weeks after the cop shot Michael
Brown—and Sergey can track the prefab propaganda threads from the Russian side of things: human rights violations in the U.S., a white-on-black hate crime, the brutality of militarized police.

Scanning the articles, each more alarming than the one before, Sergey can link the shooting to a larger narrative in the U.S. of Civil Rights abuses ever since the time of slavery (and before that, with the genocide of Native Americans) and conclude that these abuses have formed the foundation of our country since its genesis.

Sitting in Saint Petersburg, Sergey won’t see the reforms and advances, community efforts, improvements in law enforcement, urban programs, economic gains, attempts at diverse representation in local governments, social movements and inclusion. He won’t see this, because Itar-Tass doesn’t report that degree of fine-grained information about American society.

Itar-Tass sells news, not truth. It’s not that nuanced information about Russia’s Super Power frenemy does not sell. It’s that it doesn’t conform to an overall agenda, one that amps up fears about a hegemonic U.S. The shooting of Michael Brown confirms the worst suspicions about America and reinforces perceptions of injustice. Tass eats it up. These are necessary components in the premade propaganda narrative that Russia’s media favors. If Tass makes of the shooting a metaphor for American society, any Russian—my friend Sergey included—will believe that hate crimes sum up our country completely, as if little has changed since the savage days of slavery.

It is not rational to link American values and the shooting of Michael Brown, of course. Ignoring complexities between the Civil War in the 19th Century and the tragedy in Ferguson, Missouri in the 21st Century oversimplifies facts on the ground and human efforts to mitigate the corrosive effects of racism. This, too, is to cherry pick the propaganda.

My poor friend Sergey in Saint Petersburg--! He folds his newspaper. He finishes his tea.

Dot, dot, dot.

The articles Tass prints reinforce a selective narrative, one he has harbored within him his whole life. It paints America as a demagogue nation, describes a
hapless, hopeless, hypocritical America quick to condemn Russia’s human rights violations while at the same time covering up the way it oppresses a poor ethnic minority.

Highly educated with degrees through the Saint Petersburg Conservatory, Sergey is the 44-year old director of a small *a capella* ensemble, Nevskiy Style. When I needed an English language translator to help me navigate off-the-beaten-path Russia, a mutual friend recommended him.

He and I get together, however—and we are not alone. Propaganda escorts us every step of the way. Last summer we foraged for mushrooms through a dense birch forest northeast of Saint Petersburg. There we were, poking around the ferns and underbrush, unseating dusty old logs—but we both peered at each other from across the heavily fortified ramparts of our propaganda citadel. If I look at Sergey through a propaganda fortress and he looks at me through one, what really do we see? Even when I am in Russia, rambling about the backwoods, breathing in the musky scent of birch, rooting around in the Russian soil, it’s as if I’m not really there, in the country, but in some bizarre transit zone where I must continually pass through the checkpoints of propaganda’s way stations.

*Abduction,* is what people had warned me about, because (they said) *Women disappear*…

I began putting Saint Petersburg to paper in 2012, long before NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden sought and received asylum in Moscow, long before Putin’s annexation of Crimea, long before the mysterious crash of the Malaysian airliner over war torn eastern Ukraine. My focus was on environmental issues primarily—the Neva River basin, hypoxic zones in the Gulf of Finland, the Saint Petersburg Dam. But the first summer I was in Moscow the anti-Putin feminist punk group Pussy Riot had its trial for Hooliganism, and even though I was pretty well blinkered into place-based writing I nonetheless found a way to sneak them into one of my essays.

That’s when I realized it is not possible anywhere on earth to write strictly about the environment without taking in the political, historical, cultural and aesthetic scope.
And in Moscow I discovered I needed to add propaganda to that mix. An American writer focusing on Russia comes to her subject pre-burdened. In order to address the political, the historical, the cultural and the aesthetic, an American must first grapple with propaganda immense enough to span 11 time zones.

Never was this more strongly obvious to me than when my wife and I drove through neighborhoods on the outskirts of Moscow, checking out how people lived. Towering over the streets were so many formidable hi-rise housing units, hulking cement structures numerous enough to create a cityscape of the Featureless, the Blank, the Impersonal. Window after rectangular window peered out at the concrete colored sky, no single window any different from the one above it, below it, beside it. My wife and I were both Russia first-timers; this was July, 2012. We drove along and discussed the way the unimaginative bland architecture imposed upon its inhabitants a sterile uniformity. There was a self-congratulatory air to these “insights.” My snap associations fit right into the premade narrative that I carried with me everywhere I went, a passport narrative that I believed—not because it had been proven true to me with empirical evidence but because I had unquestioningly accepted and embraced it as true. But even as I heard myself making smug and presumptuous comments that day, a part of me was gazing upon those neighborhoods with a calm curiosity and suspending any judgment at all.

Moscow was unguarded. It was at home. No one had erected a Potemkin Village to coerce someone like me into believing anything other. No one was trying to make Moscow be something other than what it was. Here, it could exhale and be itself. Moscow was being Moscow. And the abductions people had warned me about had as little to do with my experience there as they did anywhere I found myself, whether I was dashing into the corner bodega to buy a bottle of wine or standing in line at the post office for stamps or sipping a Dr. Pepper while watching the world pass by.

But when I got back to my quaint Midwestern college town, I found to my surprise that something had indeed happened. The people who had warned me were right: A part of me had gone missing. I had been atomized, smashed up, reduced to scintilla. It was the propaganda piece, the prefab narrative piece, the dot, dot, dot. All of that had disappeared. In the gaps and empty spaces, Russia
had rushed in. There in my quaint Midwestern town I stared at the five boxy, brutalistic 14-storey dorms on the edge of campus, the ones everybody had always dubbed “The Suitcases.” Stalinistic, no doubt about it. I could photograph those Suitcases against our November grim sky, and they would look like they were standing on the outskirts of Moscow. No Photoshop necessary.

And if I could draw grand sociological conclusions about housing hi-rises in Moscow, couldn’t I do that with these dorms and the people who lived in them too?

No. Because these hi-rises, Stalinistic though they might be, stood in the U.S. They had no connection to Socialism or the Soviet.

When it comes to Russia, the propaganda practically cherry picks itself.

All of which makes me think about Sergey in Saint Petersburg. I imagine him sitting in that café. Cup of tea before him. Folded newspaper. Mainly he is there—and most the year I am not. He has Itar-Tass, I The New York Times. Ever since the annexation of Crimea The Times has kept up a weekly drumbeat of bellicose rhetoric about Russia. Ever since the “Black Lives Matter” protests, Tass has skewered the U.S. There’s a basis for which they distrust us, a basis for which we distrust them. One news agency is state-sanctioned, the other a free press in a free society. Both use the same playbook, however, when it comes to fear.

Poor Sergey--!

Poor me--!

We are pummeled with facts we can’t check, spirited away by a truth we can’t verify, seized by plot developments that jump the shark. Who knows what to believe?

It’s only when I return, when I’m here, that I can be sure...

Sometimes when he and I are together, we go up to Lake Ladoga for the day and walk along the shore of Russia’s largest freshwater body, the equivalent of Lake Superior, a glacier-gouged inland sea full of clear blue water… And the propaganda falls away.
There’s an intimacy the lake creates—or maybe it’s impossible to be wary and circumspect when you’ve kicked off your shoes, rolled up your pants and you’re splashing barefoot in sun-warmed surf.

We talk to each other differently. Something dissolves between us. The sheer liquidity of a summer day augurs against suspicions. We take the moment at face value. Wading and talking, we pick our way through the shallows where granite cobbles the size of grapefruit pock the shore, remnants of the last Ice Age so many millennia ago, evidence of earth’s processes. In the midst of this, and in fact knee-deep in a lake which slow, steady geo-time has created, we gain perspective.

I can see him here—and he can see me. However fleeting it might be, this glimpse, Sergey and I authentically have it, that glimmer, that particle, that speck. Communing in Ladoga’s sapphire waters, we can be real.

Slender framed Sergey whose slate gray eyes have gazed upon musical scores for decades, chords and notes, treble clef, bass clef, musical staffs. Sergey who is practiced at teasing out the soprano voice, the tenor voice, who has decoded the notation for reams of music: \textit{con abbandono}, free and relaxed; \textit{fieramente}, proudly.

He is an unabashed Putin enthusiast who scoffs at the view of Russia’s president that Western media hammers home. He mentions to me all the infrastructure projects that have come about as a direct result of Putin’s presidency—the new roads, new bridges, the Saint Petersburg Dam—and he sounds satisfied and pleased, as if he has had a hand in those improvements. Sergey is informative and descriptive, not defensive at all. A knotted St. George’s ribbon dangles from the rearview mirror in his car, proof that he supports Crimea’s accession to Russia. The story behind its black and orange stripes is one of fierce Russian nationalism. The ribbon is a symbol of victory from the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945), and it possesses a passionate slogan to boot: “We remember, we are proud!” Citizens of Baltic states, on the other hand, associate it with anti-Maidan terrorism in Ukraine.

Sergey, Sergey, Sergey! A kid from Murmansk whose grandmother survived the Siege of Leningrad and lived to fill his childhood with stories about it. He shares those stories with me. These are fear narratives, too—because
there’s no other way to talk about the Nazi blockade—but without the warping pull of propaganda they reveal a truth not a lie. Sergey makes the horror so immediate and vivid I shudder even on a warm July day. That’s when I find myself disappearing, that’s when a part of me goes away.

I have never really returned from Russia.

Even at home, standing right there in the kitchen, one moment leaning against the dishwasher examining a hangnail, I’m there, I’m there—and then all at once gone.