

Atlas Carried the World

Stanislav's hair is burning, like a holy fool crisping on the pyre of his martyrdom, or berserker, snarling as he dives among the spears, but Stanislav is silent as he works, an automaton busy in its code, repeating the piston hammering of steel. If this were a comedy, Stanislav would not pause after laying down the coughing, smoking children, but would return for greater feats of absurdity, for a chest of drawers, a bookcase, a baby grand, its ivories lively with a tune, to collapse a moment on the ashy grass, until at last he'd go back in and retrieve the fire. If this were a story, Stanislav would be among the ranks of soldiers that the mad king sent into the burning castle, to put out the fire with their bodies and their blood. But this is not a story, and after the two children, Stanislav went back in and did not come out. The fire was too intense, and this was a two miracle deal, two-for-one. If this was a movie, the beams would collapse, the fire would crawl up the walls and the windows blow. The last camera shot as the whole thing soufléd down, would be of Stanislav, backlit by the glow, though all the watchers gave him up for dead and embers mothé his clothes. But he did not come out, nor were there cameras in 18th Century Bialystok, so it did not happen, or at least it happened in the ordinary way these things have always been happening: a passing stranger sees a house on fire and saves two

sleeping children. He is not refined by flames, nor become purified. He does not stride out with T-1000's quicksilver steps, to batter Arnie. He simply bundles out the children and goes back for their mother. But if you look carefully, you can see Stanislav carried hundreds out that day: a doctor, nurses, housewives, even a poet. My mother and grandmother, her father and her uncle, on those broad, gasping shoulders. My cousins and me. Armies of people spreading across the world. How do you thank the men who run into a fire? You write of Stanislav who rescued the future from the burning past.