

KATYA LAVINE

Death, They Said

So our story begins with a field, an ordinary field
(Of browned grass and grazing cows).
An ordinary field, a blue sky and a small boy
(A boy aged six or seven).

Madeleine said to me:
“What’s the use of it? What’ll you do if you find her?”

Burning flesh and blackened tar spilling hot into the smoky room.
And I ask myself:
“What’s the use of it? We’ll all just rot anyway.”

In the field we see the boy hovered over
A body—a corpse—and the boy is singing to it.
Pray peace. Fast death.

I think of this corpse and this boy, and the ordinary field
When I pull the lever that stops the tar halfway up the wall.
I see limbs stirred in the mix of drying tar. There are arms and fingers and tailbones
And clumps of hair. There are full skeletons and broken skeletons.
I wonder if there are *minds* but I
Must save my philosophizing for another time.
A time with more time.

“You know what we came here to do. Do it.”

Madeleine grabbed the shovel and put it in my hand.

It was rusted and tarnished and looked like it had been

Buried in the ground for the last century.

My hand was black. I began to dig

As I spit smoke from my mouth. Waist deep in tar

I moved through the room like you’d wade through a thick ocean—one with a current perhaps—
(Oceans are all the same consistency, and none quite like tar).

In the field the boy sang to the corpse

With a blue sky backdrop. The corpse was his mother

And the boy was terribly sad.

The boy sang something like: “you were all I had. You were all I had. You were all I had.”

The singing turned to crying and then back to humming,

Until the boy was silent and suddenly—inexplicably it clicked in my head.

She was all he had.

I used the shovel as a prodding tool to feel for shapes in the tar.

Bones were of no use—I needed skin.

I needed a face that I could identify.

The blasts were a day ago and I knew

The faces would be in tact.

Madeline looked on from the door, waist deep in tar herself—

A hero for it—knowing full well that we were both thinking

Of the same young boy in the same field,

Singing,

You were all I had.

Death was upon us, they said. They were saying this, all the while the newspapers were reading
this. *They are coming.*

The boy knelt down

The way I knelt down when the shovel hit something

Soft. Hard-soft, like a dead face might feel.

I lifted the shovel as I began to feel nauseated and

Black spots filled the spaces in my eyes.

My head lifted from my body as a gust of air ran through one ear
And out the other, and I dropped the shovel and wept.
There was nothing on the shovel.
There was nothing but tar.

Death was upon us, they said.
And the soldiers moved in from every which way with their large bellies and round faces,
And mustaches, and guns.



KATYA LAVINE received a B.A. in English and creative writing from the University of California, Los Angeles. She is interested in narrative medicine and the intersection of writing and illness. She has worked in global public health and is certified in End-of-Life caregiving. She lives in San Francisco.