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On the Death of Isaac Babel

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••ON THE DEATH OF ISAAC BABEL

PETER ORNER

Lubyanka Prison, Moscow

Jan 26, 1940

Nothing was especially comic about it. He thought he of all people should be able to find something. Of the two guards escorting him to his place against the wall he noticed only the smaller one to his right, his waggy beard, his breath like rotten pears. Of the guard on his left, he noted only that he was more ape than man. His own feet though, he did notice them. How one was very cold and one seemed to be on fire. Must have something to do with the shackles. None of this approached what he might have noticed if this was happening to someone else and not him. Is this comic?

All I am is a noticer. I dream the smallest of dreams.

The guard on his left's wife. Her small dry hands. He'll rub them tonight, the crannies of a small dry hand. This ape. She'll ask: And today? And he'll say, Nothing much. A little Jew in glasses, some others.