

*A Short Story*

# DISTANT LAUGHTER

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TINY WINDOWS

Cover: Illustration created by MidJourney software (an AI generator) using the prompt “portrait, POW of Spanish Civil War, 1930's, cloud of starlings in sky, mortar fire in background, dusty, surreal, senselessness of war, despair, distant laughter from an absent god, lost innocence, eyes as gateway to the soul.”

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When I came upon the fascist, he was sitting on a log and seemed at peace. Surprisingly, I didn't hate him for this. In fact, since deciding to go through with it, I'd been buoyed by a euphoria I hoped would remain beyond this day, which I intended to be my last.

The fascist was smoking a cigarette or thumbing some pebbles or reciting poetry to the shrubs—I couldn't tell, as his back was to me, and I had time to decide where to place my crosshairs, choosing to shoot the log directly beneath him. If I missed, the bullet would rip into his ass, but I didn't miss, and he jumped, his arms flailing as he fell forward to run. My thinking had been that after passing on this blissful lightness to him, thereby guaranteeing its preservation, I'd stick my rifle butt on the ground and lean over it, pressing the muzzle to the spot between my throat and bottom of my chin. The headaches had become unbearable, same with the incessant high-pitched frequency in my ears I couldn't escape, and the burden and tension of survival. We are each issued a role in this life, and there was only one relief from mine. But I couldn't do it with that fascist falling every ten meters, making negligible distance between us.

Unfortunately, the others – my brothers in arms – roused by my rifle shot, rushed to me and took aim. Watching the fascist's desperate and frantic efforts, I understood it was not only this euphoria he strove to carry forward, but that I had given him his life back and he was now attempting the same for me. If I get away, his pitiable try at flight told me, you can't put the muzzle

under your chin. “Come on,” I was surprised to hear myself saying. And: “Faster.” Our bullets started for him but, as I said, he couldn’t go a few meters without tripping, which was likely what kept saving him. Several times he’d tumble in tandem with a rifle shot, and I’d think, with neither sadness nor relief, so that’s it, the two of us are done for, at which point he’d crawl forward, each limb out of concert with the other, stumble to get himself upright, and soon skid onto his face once more. Maybe a piece of the log had penetrated his leg. Nothing else explained his difficulty in staying on his feet.

I suppose it would have been easier for one of us to run after him and dig a knife into his back, but who was to guess he’d continue falling as often as he did? I began thinking the others were missing on purpose so as to prolong this comedy, up to the horizon if possible, and if that was the case, he and I had more in common than I could have imagined—somebody, something, found humor in delaying our end.

Robles, another of my fellow soldiers, bumped me as he went to a knee. He pressed the rifle butt snug to his shoulder, and I saw that this one was it, the line was direct, a tight thread knotted straight from his rifle to the fascist. I held my breath. I waited. But Robles paused and cocked his head slightly to study me in his periphery. He was working the whole thing out—that was my life, too, in the round eyesight of his stock’s end.

He still had time to ease his finger against the trigger, nothing had happened to that line, but he lowered his rifle and looked at me directly and nodded, his lips screwing to the left side of his face, an expression that said: vale, let’s see, sure maybe he was a murderer of children, but who knows, he might be the one to save us all, let’s see. I nodded, too, then I laughed, realizing how foolish I’d been, how I’d been looking at the world through a pinhole these past weeks.

The sky was a muddy sort of steel, the color of water off our hands whenever we found the rare fountain. A few more shots went after the fascist, but the bullets wouldn't have been able to do much from that distance. It was like scaring off a coyote. So he got away. And what can I say? I could have drunk the sky. Robles was still nodding, his lips turned down, his thoughts finding my ears: let's see, he kept saying. Let's see.

And I wish it had lasted—this let's see, the not knowing how the war would go, the chance it might – finally! – turn in our favor. Hours later, the fascists surprised us, starting their offensive. They were a black twisting cloud of starlings while they shelled us. The only faces I can recall within that deafening intensity were those the shrapnel tore apart, the resigned look in their eyes the moment before it happened. A look that told me they'd always known this would be their end, that none of this came as a surprise, regardless of how they tensed when shrapnel met flesh.

It explained why I was among the few taken prisoner. A ridiculous confidence possessed me—I was not allowed to die. “Don't worry,” I whispered to my four fellow prisoners, “we won't be executed but instead put to work, chained to each other, toiling on some project meant to bring forward the fascist's still-born vision.”

I was playing my role, and this made the next few days of sleeplessness and starvation a bearable experience. I knew how the rest would go and there was some comfort in that. A diminishing supply, as it so happened.

Soon, the headaches returned, and the world was once more reduced to that ceaseless jaw-clenching high frequency, a ringing that needed the back of my teeth and that refused to take a breath. I wanted out. Thankfully, orders came for our captors to move camp. A two-day journey to Valladolid. We prisoners wouldn't be joining them. Unlike the four others, this came as a relief to me. “I

was wrong,” I told them, perhaps too giddily. “There is no prearranged story. We are in nobody’s hands.”

But then, of course, it all went sideways.

We were chugging down a road to the pit that had been dug for the five of us. We sat in the lorry’s back, encircled by seven Nationalist soldiers who were to serve as the firing squad, along with the one up front in the driver’s seat who was easing off the gas for the sodden bend ahead, when the earth suddenly ripped open in a deafening crack. A golden light flooded the world and flew me away, into a blackness that was upside down, or, at the very least, not right side up.

Slowly, my vision returned, and I groaned as I pushed myself off the ground. I was in a field where a few trees stuck up solemnly like quiet statues in a garden—an attempt at a forest. Maybe somewhere ahead I’d find a grey- and wild-bearded man with pristine wings who’d begin a recitation of my sins. But someone else was next to me, another of the prisoners, Robles. He was on his hands and knees, throwing up, and behind us I saw the lorry on its back feeding a fire, the heat of which I couldn’t feel. I couldn’t feel anything, not even as I stood and searched for the others.

Robles spun me around by the shoulder, and I remembered that we’d been sitting side-by-side in the lorry, catapulted in that moment the others were pulped. I probably looked as scorched and singed as he did. You and I are not allowed to die, I tried to tell him, but some part of my mouth wouldn’t obey. His eyes were covered by a film of blood. They were the size of cannonballs, and they told me: run. Or maybe he was shouting it. I don’t know. A pair of hands had been slapped over my ears ever since awakening. I swatted at them but only came away with blood, then tilted my head and smiled. The high frequency whistle was gone. Robles pulled me forward. We should have been hobbling, but I doubt I’ve

ever run so quickly. There was no reason to. None of those unidentifiable parts back there were chasing us.

We sprinted among the trees, the branches painlessly slapping my face, and gradually I began to hear something, not the ceaseless ringing that had long plagued me but distant laughter, a muffled laughter I couldn't outrun. I understood with terror it was the laughter of a graceless, unpitying god. A laughter letting me know there was no way out.

It was, it turns out, Robles hollering with a crazed smile the remaining branches couldn't tear from him. Ahead I saw the full light of day. Where are we going, I yelled, or tried to. He didn't answer but kept howling at the great clearing that opened before us.



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Julian Zabalbeascoa's stories have appeared in *American Short Fiction*, *Boulevard*, *The Common*, *Copper Nickel*, *Electric Literature*, *The Florida Review*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *Glimmer Train*, *One Story*, *Ploughshares*, *Ploughshares Solos*, and *Shenandoah*. He is a visiting professor in the Honors College at the University of Massachusetts Lowell.

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