

JULIAN ZABALBEASCOA

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## Catalunya

They were waiting in a forest, the old man tells me, the first ones. Over the ridge there. He points at the sloping mountain line to our right that tapers into the sea.

They were still in Spain? I ask, and he nods.

I was, and he trails off. Twelve? Every paper showed a parade. Tanks in the street. Women sitting on soldiers' laps, their right arms outstretched in a salute. Finally, my father kept saying, finally that mess is over. What had been the trouble, I wondered. It looked like more fun than we were having but then you saw the buildings, those that still stood.

He stops and drinks his whiskey. Together we look past the scattered pines before us onto the beach, a wide belt of sand, wider than any I've seen. From the patio, the water is a small stripe along the horizon. The rest is beach.

It makes sense, no, why they brought them here? he asks. When he learned of it, my father cursed to whoever would listen as though it mattered. He made every threat he could. But those in Paris didn't care. The *gendarmes* hammered in posts to keep us from our beach and stretched a mesh of hooks across it. Then the people emerged. You see those trees over there? I follow his finger to a thick, zigzagging line of dark green that follows a fold in the mountains. That was nothing compared to the column of people spilling out of their side of Catalunya. It didn't seem a country could have held them all, let alone a forest. It was impossible this beach would. Yet here they came, and for weeks they didn't stop.

The *gendarmes* enthusiastically tapped those first ones with batons but they were defeated creatures. I stood on the sidewalk with my dad and some of his friends.

Women held children's hands while balancing suitcases bound with twine on their heads. A woman with a crutch, one pant leg knotted at the knee, even managed it. The men were loaded down like mares. They walked bow-headed toward the beach. Then I saw something of a curious sight approach. A boy my age pulled along an emaciated sheep. You'd have thought the war had burnt every last herb in Spain. The boy and his sheep were the only two that met our eyes. I wondered about the journey they'd made together when a man near us on the sidewalk stepped into the street and grabbed the rope from the boy. The boy resisted, there was a brief struggle, but then he received a hard knock from a *gendarme* and the sheep went with the man. I expected my dad to say something. He squinted at the smoke he exhaled.

How long will they be here? I asked, but nobody answered.

The boy lunged for his sheep. This time the *gendarme* lifted the baton over his head. I flinched for the sound it made. *Allez!* he yelled and kicked at the boy. Onward! The boy was holding a side of his face. An older man – I don't know how many tattered blankets were tied around him – helped the boy off the ground, with the *gendarme* behind them continuing to yell – *Allez! Allez!* – and wave his baton.

Early on, one of those first evenings, some friends and I couldn't resist this great curiosity. Gran Hotel du Catalunya, we were calling it. The wind came off the water at a cruel angle, as sharp as the barbed wire perimeter. *Gendarmes* patrolled with little interest. Mostly they huddled together, their collars up, passing a bottle between them under hastily constructed sentry boxes whose roofs and floors were little more than sieves. Lorries were scattered at the edge of the coastline. Those *gendarmes* pulling higher rank sat in them, occasionally wiping the condensation from the windows to glance at the beach. The wind rattled the chains in the truck beds. The rain blurred our vision as we crawled closer to the fence.

He stops. This place has changed, he says. Back then there wasn't any of this. He waves at the apartment buildings down the street, the shops and restaurants, even, it seems, the asphalt. I can't position myself in it as easily. Who knows, he says, it may have been this very spot where my friends and I approached the fence. Look at those *sauvages*, my friend laughed. We got the language from our fathers, of course. But watching them on the beach, it made sense. Their desperation was vulgar. It disgusted us, and we pointed and giggled while we watched them dig at the sand like a bitch about to give birth. In the days to come they'd collect enough driftwood to construct tents but that night our giggles turned to uncontrollable laughter for their frantic burrowing.

I was up early the next morning with my father. He cursed at those inside when he saw the grey bodies tumbling in the surf. They ultimately pulled their own from the water and buried them in the least desired spot on the beach, but the tide would uproot them like Lazarus and at dawn, once more, they'd roll loose-limbed in the waves.

He scratches at the side of his face. That was the world once, he says as though drawing a curtain on his story.

Once?

Who knows. He signals for the server and points at his empty glass. You, too? he asks. I finish mine and nod. *Hé*, he calls at the server. She's my age, a year or two out of college. The old man points at both our glasses, and she nods then goes inside.

So what is it exactly you're trying to find? the old man asks after she brings our drinks.

A story.

Whose story?

I shrug.

You say your grandfather was here? He lifts his chin at the beach.

Yes, but not till later.

How much later?

Toward the end. He was probably one of the last few to cross.

Describe him for me.

The swell rises, distinct from the others, as it builds toward the shore. We watch it spread, overtake another, then tilt and curl until it breaks. The old man is nodding. White floaters cordon off an area for swimming though the red triangle flag cautions anyone from entering the water. A few banners for French companies catch the wind and tug on the poles they're tied to.

We had befriended a few *gendarmes*, he says, my friends and I. They'd take us in their lorries, and we'd drive along the border with them. On my own, at that age, I wouldn't have dared it. He points to the mountain range. I had nightmares about what was on the Spanish side of Catalunya. Over there was so bad that people wouldn't trade all of the hunger and sorrow of the beach for it. I feared getting too close lest it somehow pull me in. But with the sun above me and at the *gendarmes'* side, I felt invincible.

One of my friends spotted them—a handful of Spanish soldiers. We were in the lorry's bed, and he shouted and banged on the truck's roof, pointing. The truck bounced over the road to them. I'd never seen a sadder lot. Our *gendarmes* were

clean-shaven, wore crisp uniforms, at the right angle their buttons caught the light. But these soldiers were hollow-cheeked, sooty, each a collection of bones dragging itself forward. Exhausted, they didn't acknowledge us as we approached. The lorry pulled alongside them, and one of the *gendarmes* muttered a few words of what probably passed for Spanish. He yanked his thumb in the direction of our town and the beach. The soldiers' lips were thin, that's what I noticed. They were cracked, split wide at every crease, burned of any moisture. Their eyes were set deep into their skulls. They had paused for a moment as the *gendarme* spoke to them but then resumed their pace as though we weren't there.

A *gendarme* swore at them. Another yelled, We don't have all day. He called our names and we jumped from the bed and they drove around the soldiers to come behind them. The *gendarme* on the passenger side slapped the outside of the door and hollered. The truck's grill nearly clipped their backsides. We were alongside them shouting – *Allez! Allez!* – like colliers pushing a flock of sheep. They started jogging and soon we were on the road. *Allez!* Onward! He shakes his head. I remember that, all the way to town, to the beach and its human smell and everything else that awaited them there, the gravel under my feet – *Allez! Allez!* – smiling as I ran.

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**JULIAN ZABALBEASCOA** lives in Boston and is a visiting professor in the Honors College at University of Massachusetts of Lowell. "Catalunya" is the eighth in a collection of linked stories. The first seven have appeared in *American Short Fiction*, *Gettysburg Review*, *Glimmer Train*, *Ploughshares*, *Post Road*, *Shenandoah*, and *Southern Indiana Review*.