



speculative fiction **FOR THE REST OF US**

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**The Jellyfish by Pablo Cazares**

It was in September, long after the summer crowds had scattered, flocking back to school and work, that Daniel went down to the beach. The long walk down the sandy hill that led to the water was difficult. The wind whipped up and around him in great gusts and bursts, spitting flecks of sand in his eyes. The ground beneath him was soft, and it gave way with every footstep as he trudged slowly downward.

Daniel knew the lake had long lost all of its warmth, but he hadn't come to swim. He had come to sit down on the sand near the water's edge, to watch the small, gentle waves slide in and out along the shore, to be removed from the city, and other people.

He settled down near a patch of beach grass. The sand molded around him as he relaxed, and he imagined it was securing him to the beach, keeping him safe from the wind and dragging waves. There was a single wisp of cloud hanging in the sky, and he watched as it was torn apart and scattered like dandelion seeds.

The piercing cry of a seagull brought his focus down toward the water's edge. There was the bird,

letting out a squawk of delight and pecking at something on the sand. Daniel couldn't stand seagulls--he grabbed a handful of wet sand and hurled it at the bird. It shrieked angrily and flapped away. And then Daniel saw the jellyfish.

The jellyfish itself was unremarkable. It was dead. Its soft, gelatinous body was like a puddle of melted glass splattered carelessly onto the beach. The extraordinary thing about the jellyfish, Daniel thought, as he got up to examine it more closely, was that it had somehow managed to die so far from the ocean.

"Poor guy," he said, "or poor girl. Poor thing. How did you end up here, hmm?"

If he had his way, Daniel thought, when he died, he would be buried in his backyard, beneath his mother's garden. He would want to be close to home, and, he imagined, so would a jellyfish. He combed the beach, looking for a stick, and when he found one he used it to pick up the jellyfish and toss it back into the lake. He hoped the body would find its way back to the ocean, as mysteriously as it had found its way to him, to sleep beneath saltwater waves in valleys far beyond the sun's reach.

#

In December, Daniel returned to the beach, this time in full winter gear, his face hidden behind a thick, tightly wound wool scarf. He made his way down to deserted shore, and sat down with a muffled thump. The beach was hard, and powdered with snow. The lake was sluggish, the water's surface thick with ice slush. There were no clouds, and the sky was gray and dead.

Daniel felt safe, protected from the elements, bundled up inside sweaters and snow-pants, his green jacket stuffed full of goose-down; safe enough to lie down on the frozen ground, and close his eyes. He had done it many times before. He imagined he was a polar bear, resting after a heavy meal of fish and seal pups, drifting on a slab of ice somewhere along the top of the world.

Daniel felt a shift in the snow next to him. When he opened his eyes, there was an old, ferocious looking man sitting beside him. His hair was long and white, and his face was hard, angled so sharply as to appear to be made of stone. His eyes seemed steady, on the surface, but there was a flicker of madness behind them.

"Sleep well?" he asked, with a voice that felt deeper than oceans. "Strange place to make your bed, young one, but then I've never understood the habits of children -- and I have many children."

"It's relaxing," said Daniel, after he decided it was safe to engage the man in conversation.

"The sound of water always puts me to sleep," he continued. "I have tapes at home, ocean sounds, that do the same thing. Very peaceful, you know?"

"Yes," said the old man, "I do. I also know that the ocean is not always at peace. She can be furious, chaotic -- a murderess when she's at her very worst." He turned to look at Daniel.

"You are very fortunate," he said. "A lake, like this one, is much gentler. You rarely have to be cautious of lakes."

Daniel was quiet for a moment.

"My brother drowned in this lake," he said. The old man appeared unmoved, but Daniel didn't notice. His eyes held the lake, and its still waters, and they seemed to search for something hidden beneath its cold surface.

"They only searched for a few days," he continued. "And they never found his body. I used to wish that he wouldn't have drowned. Now, I just wish he would come back. I know he's dead -- dead bodies don't

scare me. I just want to see him again, and say goodbye."

"Sometimes the waters never give back what they have taken," said the old man. "And sometimes what we think is lost is found by someone else, and whether they return it to us, or not, is up to chance."

"I have not seen your brother," he said. "But if he is found, I will see that he is returned to you."

Daniel studied the old man's face, to see if he was mocking him, but his eyes were sincere. He found it hard to stare at the old man too closely. His presence felt expansive, too much for a single pair of eyes to take in all at once.

"Who are you?" Daniel asked.

The old man laughed, and it was like the crashing of tidal waves, and Daniel trembled.

"I'm just an old man," he replied. "I came to see you, to say thank you, on behalf of a dear, tiny friend. May he rest in peace." He stood, and towered over Daniel.

"Sleep," he commanded.

#

Daniel woke up face down in the snow. His nose and lips were cold and red, and the old man was gone, any trace of him swept away by the wind and drifting snow. Daniel tried to pull the old man's face into his memory, but, like a dream, it slipped further and further away, until he was unable to recall it. The effort made his head feel strange, larger somehow, like it had been stretched wide open by a pair of enormous hands.

He suddenly felt very far from home, and very lonely. He pushed himself up from the snow, shook off the bits of ice and sandy flakes that clung to him, and he began to run towards home. As he ran the wind blew against him, and in its howling he heard the low, rumbling laughter of a voice that was both intimately familiar, and infinitely far from all he knew.

## **Only the Song by Christine Lucas**

At the edge of the galaxy, the Cosmos sings.

The Cosmos sings to her, sometimes with wails, sometimes with whispers. And she, the Oracle, awaits in her tower, on her lonely isle amidst a bitter sea.

She spends her days perched upon the windowsill, the wind lashing her face, its briny breath carrying the echo of distant worlds. Her nights are rarely dark, her lonely planet swirling in a complex dance amidst three suns. She had a name once, when she walked among her kin, deaf to the strings of the cosmic harp, oblivious of the infinite melodies filling the void among the stars. Now that name is long forgotten, along with all the words she once knew, their meaning humbled in the presence of the Song.

When darkness falls, the waters part. The path to her tower surfaces and the seekers come to hear a portion of the Song, all that her limited voice can relay. Some are bipeds, like herself. Some are not, creatures of strange planets and alien habitats. She welcomes them all the same, children of the Cosmos, different notes of the same Song. She does not judge. She cannot judge. The Song is her only voice. She possesses no words of her own.

The traveler is tall and silent, his face hard as the rocky mountains of his distant world. His gaze is steady, unyielding, like his ancient oaks, rooting deep into the dry land, ever-seeking water. Heavy drums boom around him, spiced with the cymbals of the forests and the flutes of the songbirds.

A war rages across the galaxy. This oak-man speaks of it, but his words fly to the wind, meaningless to her ears. She takes his hand and leads him to the topmost floor, where her bed used to be, when the tempest still scared her and she wore her auburn hair in long braids. Only the remnants of a withered mattress litter the floor, dampened with the timeless brine.

Hesitant, stubborn like the high oaks of his world, he finally follows. His face never softens, not even when she reaches out to him. In him. Through him. Fingers seek, tongues trace the path. Neuron by neuron, she plays on the strings of arousal. He sighs. He grunts. She sings, body and mind, tongue and soul, reaching into the core of existence, in the brilliant moment when finite and infinite merge into one. Synapse by synapse, she sees. She knows.

Among distant stars, a yellow moon ascends over a green planet with seven silver rings. The Armada closes in a remote outpost, guns at the ready. The oak-man yells over the transmitter about an ambush. Fire and death.

She tells him this, but knows not what it means. The oak-man does, for his face hardens even more. Mumbling about warning the Command and Control center, he leaves in a hurry, without one word, without one look back. She thinks his step falters for a split second at the threshold. Or perhaps not.

It is still dark when another seeker crosses the narrow, sandy path to her abode. Not a tree this time, but a flower. Unlike her oak-man before, this girl looks soft and fragile, like the low shrubs of her marshy land. The Oracle takes her hand, studies the lines of her palm. Rarely do women visit her. It changes nothing. The Song cares not for such insignificant details.

This girl smells of grass, sways like a flower to the wind: yielding, only to rise another day. While the storm rages, the Oracle reaches into this girl with the soft fragrant flesh and the steel mind: a tiger-lily, two beings in one, the predator and the flower. She traces the paths of the Song on skin, nerves and veins, all senses blending into one. The harp weaves the tune of arousal through grassy fields, the pipes rejoice the bloom of climax over vast forests and jungles. And the Song bursts inside her mind, the trumpets of the final battle at the End of Days.

Fire and death.

A tiger runs through a field, crushing flowers under mighty paws, and the flowers turn to miniature oaks, tiny and helpless beneath the predator. Stars explode, the skies darken, and the stars go out one by one. Now, over her tower on her lonely moon, there's a hole in the galaxy, a darkness that spreads until it devours everything. Until it ends the Song.

A sudden jolt of pain cuts her breath. She doubles up, unfamiliar with such agony. The tiger-lily mistakes her pain for passion and pulls her closer. The Oracle wants to break the contact and push her away, far away. Like countless others, the tiger-lily has come seeking answers, for her world is at war. Her enemy is the oak-man.

Her answer will end the Song. Somehow, someday, this girl who smells of fresh grass and flowers will end the Song.

She cannot allow this.

A cacophony of voices bursts inside her head, leaving her breathless. The stars speak. You cannot

judge, they cry. You cannot speak, they yell. You have no words. Only the Song, they scream. Obey, or perish!

The tiger-lily holds her tighter, and the Oracle screams. Her tears join the brine of the wind, seeking the words she does not have. Only the Song. Without the Song, she has no life. No soul.

The wind dries her tears, and the Oracle makes her choice. She speaks the Song--not this new heart-wrenching melody, but the Song of the one who came before. She speaks of the Armada sent to destroy the outpost, an Armada led by the tiger-lily herself. Over that green planet with the seven silver rings is where the tide will turn, one way or another. But the Oracle doesn't tell all. She does not speak of the fleet waiting in the shadow of the moon, a fleet alerted by her oak-man.

The tiger-lily breaks off the embrace and leaves to alert her homeworld, certain of their victory. But the Song around her has changed, the melody branching off to a softer key and a different future. The trumpets of the final battle are silent. The tiger licks her wounds, defeated.

All alone again in her lonely isle, the Oracle lies on the damp floor, watching the clouds. There's no void devouring the stars. There will not be one. The voices have stopped screaming. One by one, they retreat, leaving her bereft. The sea stops whispering, the wind ceases the tales of distant lands. The Cosmos denies her the Song, until all she hears is the sound of her own breathing. This too will soon stop.

No regrets. Only the Song. She breathes.

In.

Out.

In.

## **The Running of the Duckies by Joanna Gardner**

It had been three days without soup, and the painted sign on Eydie's front door was still turned to the "Pot's Empty" side. She had never gone this long without brewing up a cauldron. I didn't think she could. I thought she physically needed to chop and saute and simmer and stir, to ladle her concoctions into bowls and hand them, free of charge, to anyone who came by the house.

Earlier I had added another day's letters and magazines to the growing pile in her mailbox in my capacity as postal carrier. Eydie hadn't emerged to get her mail since the soup stopped. It was time to check on her. Not only was she my soup source, we had been best friends since the age of three when our mothers determined we were old enough to babysit each other on the lawn between our two houses, a slope that led down to the creek and then up again into the forest beyond.

I rang the bell and heard thumping, as of someone running down the stairs. The curtain in the window by the door twitched.

"Go away, Joule," she yelled from inside. "I'm busy."

"Open up," I yelled back.

I jiggled the knob, but it was locked. As were, no doubt, the half dozen deadbolts and chains that secured her house in this village where the only crime in the last three years was the theft of apples from the tree in Stick Levy's front yard. Still unsolved, to the chagrin of Sheriff Whisker Fats, although he suspected marauding raccoons figured into the plot.

"You can't stay in there. Tomorrow is the derby."

The annual Rubber Ducky Derby, to be precise. When the summer solstice sunrise hit the base of Rocky Falls, the sheriff would open the gate and release hundreds of toy ducks to race down the creek behind our houses to the finish line at the fairground. The winning duck earned its sponsor the first-place cake in the Ladies' Cake Society's annual bake-off. Eydie wouldn't attend, of course, but she usually made extra soup for the occasion. Me, I had been carrying my five derby tickets around for weeks to give my five duckies a good-luck boost.

"I'm sick. A fever. Hives. And pustules. It's catching."

She was such crap at lying. I raised my voice. "Don't make me call Whisker. He would love to try out his battering ram."

Silence, then the door of Eydie's other neighbor opened.

"Joule Weller?" Miss Toomy's gray head peered around the honeysuckle that screened the side of Eydie's porch, a dapple of green and yellow in the evening sun. "What are you on about?"

"It's Eydie," I called back, more loudly than necessary, watching Eydie's door from the corner of my eye. A series of clanks and scrapes sounded from the other side. "She's..."

The door flew wide. A mittened hand shot out, grabbed a fistful of my shirt and yanked me in.

"...working on a new soup."

Which was usually the case. We soupies argued about whether she had ever repeated the same recipe even as we reminisced over our personal favorites, such as that curried parsnip bisque, or the fresh tomatoes chopped up in their own juice with raw garlic. She had a thousand cookbooks, a collection bequeathed to her by great-aunts and grandmothers along with a small living allowance and the house full of big bay windows. But Eydie never opened a book. She merely paced back and forth in front of the shelves that lined one wall of her kitchen, hands clasped behind her back, waiting for the next soup idea to strike.

She slammed the door behind us. I barely recognized her, bundled up for a blizzard as she was. Snow pants, moon boots, a down coat in electric magenta. A rag-bag of scarves and hats hid her head, and her eyes blinked inside ski goggles.

"Eydie?" I ventured. "Are you all right?"

"Sure. In a nervous-breakdown kind of way."

"Which nerves are breaking?"

"All of them," she said, leaning against the wall of the entryway and letting her back slide down until her pillowed butt hit the floor. "It's the ghosts."

This was new. Her various fears...needles, scissors, snakes, taxes, scabs, foreign invasion...had always stayed within in the realm of the real. Or so I thought.

I spoke carefully. "What ghosts?"

She glanced up at me, her eyes a smear through the goggles. Her spine slumped and the mittens went limp in her lap. "You'll think I'm crazy."

"Too late, sweet thing. But who am I to hold crazy against anyone? Look at my family." We Wellers slept in the yard year round, rain or snow or open sky, in hammocks strung between tree trunks. My sister Opal had believed herself to be a mermaid since the age of thirteen and hopped around town with her ankles strapped together. And I couldn't shake the belief that my daily rounds delivering mail somehow knitted up the ends of the village, from those who favored cake to those leaned toward soup, and somehow enabled us all to cohere into a whole. I had more than a passing acquaintance with crazy.

"It's different. You aren't afraid of anything."

"Irrelevant." I sat down beside her, cross-legged in my shorts, the wall pressing against my back through my sleeveless shirt. Eydie had to be sweltering. "Tell me about these ghosts."

"Well, they're upset for some reason. They're going nuts."

"Where?" I peered around the entry, up the varnished stairs, into the parlor opposite us. "Can you see them?"

"Of course not. What do you think I am, delusional?" I let that one go unanswered, and she filled her lungs. "I can feel them. On my skin. Drops of water, cold and wet, like I'm standing in the rain. But my skin is dry, see?"

She pulled her scarves aside to reveal a neck that seemed dampened by nothing more than real-world sweat.

"What makes you think they're ghosts? Aren't ghosts supposed to drag chains around and moan in the night?"

She shook her head. "They just are. The same way I can tell I'm me, I can tell they're them. Usually there are only a few around, but not for the last three days. First the rain became a downpour, then a hurricane. Hasn't been this bad since I quit going to church."

"What does church have to do with it?"

"They're the reason I stopped going. It drove them loopy every time I set foot inside the chapel, and when they go loopy, I go loopy. But it feels like they're trying to tug me over there right now."

"They can tug?"

"It's not normal tugging. More like an undertow."

"Does the winter get-up help?"

She shook her head. "No. But I was afraid I'd scratch my skin to ribbons. Do you believe me?"

I opened my mouth to lie, but something stopped me. What harm would a little belief do? It was something I could give, free of charge, the way she gave me soup. I decided I would.

"Yes. Let's go to the church and see what they want."

"You mean it? You'll come with me?"

"Absolutely."

She peeled her hats, goggles and scarves off. Sweat slicked her black hair against her face and her cheeks were flushed the color of strawberry jam, but she was still beyond lovely, with her sculpted

eyebrows and cheekbones and her turquoise eyes. It always felt like a gift being in the presence of such beauty.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. You want a shower first? Maybe actual water would distract you from the invisible stuff."

She nodded, but she wasn't looking at me. Wasn't looking at anything, in fact, just gazing into a place outside the space and time I occupied. She squinted, as though wind were blowing.

I hustled her upstairs and into the bathroom. While she showered, I rummaged through her closet and found a summer dress, the one in the same green as her spring pea soup had been a few months back. That, some sandals, and some underwear. As I put the clothes in the bathroom, the water turned off and her hand emerged to grab a towel.

"How are they doing?" I asked.

"Bad."

"Hurry up then."

The walk took five minutes. Her hair was still wet and she was rubbing her bare arms when we arrived at the steps of the sandstone church. The sun was about to disappear into the shortest night of the year and Father Minky stood at the door in a shiny blue robe which gleamed in the twilight. He never wore the same vestments two days in a row. Sunny yellow, emerald, tangerine...he was a great believer in using color to keep his flock interested. He slid the building's key into his pocket.

"Hello, Father," I said. "Locking up?"

"What's that?" Father Minky held a hand to his ear with a broad smile on his face. He'd ruptured his eardrums years before while lake diving in the tropics. He always said the accident had been the first rung on his ladder up to God.

"I said," raising my voice, "are you just locking up?"

"Yes, yes." An expression of dazzled pleasure spread over his face. "Eydie? Is that you? Here?"

"Eydie thought she might see what it's like inside after all these years. You know, in case she might want to start showing up on an occasional Sunday."

Eydie stared at me, aghast, but Father Minky spread his arms wide, the shepherd welcoming the lost sheep.

"Splendid, splendid. Here, take my spare key, and lock up when you're finished. I'm off to the tavern. I've just blessed five hundred rubber duckies, and I could use a glass of wine."

"Blessing the duckies?" Eydie said, voice squeaking.

"Yes. Sheriff Fats suggested it. He thought it wouldn't hurt to ask for a kind eye from above on our festivities. I'm sure he's right, but I ought to have just dumped a gallon of consecrated oil over the bunch of them, rather than blessing each duck individually. It took me three days, can you believe?" Minky shook his head, smiling.

"Sounds like you've earned that wine," I said. Eydie was visibly quivering. "See you at the derby tomorrow."

Father Minky waved as he walked away, singing to himself in what I'm sure he thought was an undertone: "Tum, tum, tumty tum, gently down the stream..."

"We've got to get to those duckies," Eydie whispered.

I unlocked the door and opened it.

She stared at the shadowed entrance, her fists punching each other, knuckle to knuckle. "But I'm not sure I can go in."

I had seen her fears often enough to know not to attempt to reason with them, so I just stood there and held the door.

"On the other hand, how can I not?" she went on, her voice low. "What's the worst that could happen? We're struck by lightning? Our skin melts off our bones?"

I focused on the door in my hand, on the dusky blue sky of twilight, on how night seemed to rise from the ground.

"I guess we could risk it," she said at last. "Yeah?"

I shrugged. "Whatever you say."

"Ok. Let's go."

She plunged through the doorway. I followed and closed the door on the waning daylight. The sudden darkness in the unlit church smelled like candlewax, cool stone, carpet cleaner, and the soaring space that reached up to the vaulted ceiling. The last time Eydie had entered this building had been the week before our high school graduation.

"Downstairs," she whispered, breathing fast.

In the basement the scent of pumpkin pie and coffee had steeped into the walls, and sounds pressed in around us instead of taking wing as they did upstairs. We found five cardboard boxes on the worktable in the kitchen, each full of duckies in the colors of a bouquet: daffodil, periwinkle, carnation. The rubber toys had numbers written on their wings to match the derby tickets villagers had bought over the last few weeks. I couldn't help scanning for 123 through 127, the numbers on the tickets in my pocket.

"Ok," I said. "Now what?"

Eydie closed her eyes for the space of a breath. "Can you feel the ghosts? They've never been so upset."

She touched the shiny smear on the head of an avocado-green ducky where Father Minky had applied the oil with his blessing.

"They slide off." She stared at me. "The ghosts want to ride the duckies in the derby, but they slide off on the oil. Come on. It's bathtime." She stopped up both sinks, ran hot water from the faucet and squirted in dish detergent.

I took a deep breath and reminded myself that belief was something I could give. "I guess I'll dry?"

"Shh," Eydie hissed, and slapped the faucet off.

The upstairs door closed and footsteps creaked overhead. She yanked the drains open. Undoing the blessings of the priest wasn't something to be caught at. I had no idea what kind of trouble it might incur, but I didn't want to find out.

"Behind there," I said, pointing to the kitchen's open door. We slithered into the shadow behind it and

pressed up against the wall. The crack between the door and its frame was wide enough to give me a view of the kitchen with one eye. Eydie and I pressed up next to each other, shoulder to hip, as close as two duckies in the bottom of a box.

The steps came down the stairs. I held my breath as a shape passed through the door beside us and moved toward the refrigerator. It was Mrs. Minky, president of the Ladies' Cake Society and wife of the minister, wearing her trademark gray pantsuit and sensible black shoes.

She carried a puffy white cake which she set down on the counter. Concentric circles of raspberries were arranged around the top, ringing a pile of violets in the center. She opened the door of the fridge, and light streamed from inside, revealing another dozen cakes frosted in chocolate, lemon yellow, and pink, and all decorated with elaborations ranging from silver ribbon to chocolate leaves. My mouth watered. I loved the Society's cakes as much as Eydie's soups.

Mrs. Minky sang quietly as she moved cakes around to make room for the new one, "Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily," continuing where her husband had left off, when I nearly squealed. Something was touching me, something cold and wet, all over and through my skin, a subcutaneous ice storm, a sweep of chilled pins rolling over my scalp, my neck, back, and legs. Eydie grabbed my arm. Mrs. Minky stopped singing and lifted her head from the fridge to frown at the room.

Where Eydie's hand gripped my arm the feeling was stronger, a thousand syringes injecting me with hail. I pressed my lips together to keep quiet and tried to hold my limbs rigid.

Mrs. Minky turned back to the cakes, but she cast nervous glances around the kitchen as she worked. Soon she closed the fridge and hurried out, practically running.

As soon as I heard the upstairs door close, I let my breath out and tumbled away from the wall, from Eydie. ? "What is the matter with you?" she said, hands on her hips. "You nearly gave us away."

I wiped at my head, my stomach, my legs, although the feeling was fading. "The ghosts." I sounded as though I'd been running uphill. "They got me. I felt them."

Eydie gave a half-smile. "Doesn't seem so crazy now, eh?"

"It seems crazier!" I straightened, my skin beginning to relax. I reached out to touch her arm again. There it was, the invisible storm. I jerked my hand back and shuddered.

"Let's wash those duckies and get out of here."

The kitchen's windows were at ground level, so we drew the curtains on the night outside. Eydie stopped the drains and started hot water running again. I dumped a box of duckies in, the cascade of rubber blobs disappearing into the rising suds as into the children's baths they were made for. This close to Eydie, I could feel the ghosts again like a wet wind.

Once the soapy side had filled, she swung the faucet to the empty sink to run a rinse bath. Her hands disappeared beneath the bubbles and brought up a ducky. She rubbed its head with a cloth, dunked it in the filling sink and handed it to me. Baptism in reverse, that's what we were doing.

"Bless you, little ducky," I said as I dried. I meant it as a joke, but it sounded weirdly right, and I sensed a drop of phantom rain land on the ducky's head and stay there.

Eydie picked up another ducky. Into the soapy water, a swipe on the head, into the rinse. Five hundred duckies seemed infinite. We would be washing at midnight, at dawn, next year. But soon the first box was done, then the second, third, fourth and fifth. I moved a hand through the air over the duckies and ghosts and felt a ripple, but when I touched Eydie's arm there was just the warmth of life filling skin.

No ghosts.

"They're gone," she said. "They're all in those boxes. Feels like the sun came out. Let's go. It's time for soup."

We headed up the stairs, but she paused at the front door.

"Hang on. I haven't ever been in the chapel without the ghosts. Mind if I take a minute?"

"By yourself?"

"Yeah."

"Go ahead."

I watched her walk in, her footsteps silent on the worn velvet carpeting, but when she sat down in a pew halfway down the aisle, the bench creaked like an oak struck by lightning. I jumped, certain everyone in the village had heard. She seemed entirely calm, though. Entirely unafraid.

Moonlight purpled the figures in the stained glass windows, and beams of it hung in the vaulted room like blue slabs of the night sky. My pupils had never dilated that wide. They stretched in their attempt to let more light in, and every nerve ending stood on high alert, reporting back on how the air moved and settled around me with my own breath.

And then, after five minutes or maybe fifty, Eydie stood and joined me back in the vestibule.

"I'm ready," she said, peaceful as you please.

"Does this mean you're coming to church on Sunday?"

"Goodness no. Too much soup to make."

We walked back through the cool night. It was very late, and we had the streets to ourselves. Back home, she bustled around her kitchen making a vat of zucchini-cheddar chowder and some kind of herbed dumplings. We ate as the sun rose.

"I'm going to the derby." I rubbed my eyes, which burned from the lack of sleep. "Wanna come?"

"Sure," she said.

She hadn't been to the derby in years, but here she was, flipping the sign on her door to the "Soup's On" side, leaving her locks undone, and strolling to the fairgrounds with me. She took my hand as we walked, like she used to when we rambled through the woods, and a faint sensation of mist rose up my arm from her palm, much like the shreds of fog lifting from the grass in the morning light.

"I thought the ghosts were gone," I said.

She seemed unconcerned. "Picked up a few at home, I guess."

On the far side of the creek a green wall of shrubs and trees rose up, but this side was lined with spectators. Father Minky wore a scarlet robe and sipped steaming coffee from a chipped orange mug. The high school band tuned, trumpets honking and tubas belching their scales. A single-file parade from the Ladies' Cake Society came bearing the cakes I had seen in the church's refrigerator. It would be a good day, with cake for dessert after a breakfast of soup. Wind ruffled the greenery, and the trees swayed to the band's ragged music.

"So the ghosts," I said. "What are they? Murder victims? Suicides? Battered wives and children?"

Eydie frowned at me. "I thought you said you felt them."

"I did. But only for a minute. What are they?"

She shrugged, dropping my hand to pour us coffee from the church's table. "Could be remnants of the dead, I guess. Or something else altogether. Whatever they are, it isn't pain that keeps them around, that much is obvious."

That was as much of an answer as I ever got. The band went silent to let the tuba bleat out a few notes, followed by trombones, trumpets, saxophones, clarinets and flutes, all now miraculously in time. "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" braided over itself again and again as a mass of duckies rounded the bend in the creek in all those Easter egg colors, bobbing, tipping, bouncing and spinning, wild grins on their rubber bills, each suffused with its own glow like a tiny cloud lit from within.

## Prototype by M. H. Gentile

"Prototype" first appeared in [AlienSkin](#), Aug/Sept 2007.

"Ambulance incoming!"

Baker looked up, wiping the blood from his hands onto his already soiled smock. The air soon filled with the agonized groans of the wounded as they were brought in on stretchers. Another shelling, this new batch. Not much he could do for any of them.

Wayman appeared beside Baker, a hand against his unshaven chin. "Most of 'em ain't even good for spare parts."

Baker swallowed hard. He never liked the idea of looking at a human body in terms of "spare parts." "No cutting. Not while they're still alive," he replied quietly.

Wayman shook his head. "Heh. If you call that 'alive.'"

A team of soldiers hauling another stretcher entered the tent, stomping across the blood-soaked straw which covered the ground. One of them accidentally made eye contact with Baker, and quickly turned away, like he thought the man's gaze might turn him into stone.

Wayman rubbed his hands together, smiling darkly. "Let's get back to work, shall we? The Somme waits for no one."

Baker sighed. "Yes."

Wayman bent down and picked up a corpse from a row of them laid out by the edge of the tent, and dumped it on the rough metal table. The man had died en route to the field hospital of blood loss from a burst femoral artery, but the rest of him was reasonably intact. He was even still warm.

"Cut him open, start taking him apart," Baker said. "I'll need skin for grafts, so be careful with him. Don't make a mess."

Wayman rolled his eyes, tearing the man's shirt back to expose his chest. He raked his fingernail along the dead man's skin, splitting him open from throat to navel.

Two men picked up a stretcher and brought it over to where Wayman was working. "This one's

beyond," one said. "Fix him." The small man on the stretcher groaned in pain as they set him down, runny blood trickling from his nose and mouth. Baker set to work on the most serious of the man's injuries, digging his hands beneath his skin, trying to push shredded muscle and organs back together. He removed what was beyond saving, patching the man with tissue taken from the body being dissected by Wayman.

Baker sighed, glancing at the patch on the sleeve of Wayman's jacket, thinking of the one he wore as well. It was in the shape of a blood drop with a block letter "N" inside of it. Royal Army Medical Corps, Special Division, the letter code detailing his particular talent.

Necromancer.

#

Wayman grinned as his patient screamed. He wrenched the man's ruined arm back and pushed it in, realigning it with his torso. "Oh, be glad you can scream, you bloody wanker." He looked at Baker. "That's the last one." He took a crumpled pack of cigarettes from his pocket with one bloodied hand. "I'm stepping out to put another nail in the coffin. Wanna join me?"

Baker shook his head. "No."

"Suit yourself," he said with a shrug, and ducked out of the tent.

He sighed to himself, looking around. "Beyond," they called it. Trench slang, like Blighty or Alleyman or daisy cutter. Baker wasn't sure of its origins--it could have referred to the Great Beyond, or been a shortened version of the phrase "beyond help"--though it didn't really matter. So far as Baker was concerned, everything here was "beyond."

He watched a boy in a rumpled uniform pleading with one of the regular doctors. He was shouting about something that didn't make much sense. Broken bodies were something Baker could fix. Broken minds were another story entirely. Another case of shell shock. It wasn't the first he'd seen, and it certainly wouldn't be the last.

He approached the boy, walking slowly, covering the patch on his jacket with his hand. "Is there a problem?" he said quietly, addressing the doctor, but looking at the boy.

The doctor sneered, putting up his hands. "You're all daft. I have work to do," he said, then turned and left.

Baker looked over his shoulder. "What was that all about."

"You have red eyes. Not blue, green, or brown, but red. You take the dead and put them back together."

He turned and stared at the boy, who was staring right back at him, apparently unphased by the fact that he was standing toe to toe with a real, live necromancer. "What? Well, not exactly," he replied. The last known necromancer powerful enough to raise the dead had died two hundred years ago. Baker himself was little more than a glorified surgeon. "Are you okay? Who are you?"

"It's not who I am, it's what I do. The wires are in my brain and I can't pull them out because they hold me together so I can kill. Don't send me back to Ludlowe."

Ludlowe. Baker recognized the name. One of the staff officers for the area, who, in true staff officer fashion, had made it his sworn, sacred duty to make everyone else's life as miserable as his own. Baker realized it probably wasn't the shelling that had driven the boy mad.

"They're all dead and it's all my fault," he continued, a vacant look in his eyes. His face looked like a

doll's, like it had been painted on. "I killed them so I came to see if they were okay but all I see is pieces. I haven't eaten all day and I feel sick."

A tall, knobby man with windburnt skin and a riding crop in his hand appeared in the entrance to the tent. Ludlowe stomped forward and seized the boy by the scruff of his neck. "Thought you could run off, Larkin," he hissed. "Not while I have work for you to do." He glared at Baker. "You got a problem, you bloody damnable freak?"

"No problem," he said, feeling his hand twitch into a fist. He knew he could literally rip the man open if he felt so inclined, and this bit of knowledge had a calming effect on his mind. Unless he was well armed, there was little Ludlowe could do to hurt him.

But there was plenty he could do to hurt Ludlowe.

"That's right," he said. "You best mind your own business, or you'll regret it." With that, he turned on a flourish and stalked out of the tent, dragging Larkin along behind him.

Baker frowned. "I need a cigarette."

#

"Took you long enough," Wayman said. He was leaning against a short telegraph pole posted outside the medical tent. He tossed the pack of cigarettes to Baker, who took one for himself.

"They're getting worse," he said, striking a match against the pole. "I don't know how any of them have survived it for so long."

Wayman grinned. "Plenty of spare parts. Just like servicing a car, only a little more organic."

Baker ignored the comment. "Do you know a boy named Larkin?"

"He got a first name?"

"I'm sure he does, but I don't know it. I just want to know if you've seen him before. He's small, very pale."

The faintest hint of interest crossed Wayman's face, then disappeared just as fast. "Why do you care?"

"He's working for Ludlowe. I think he's lost it. He was just in the tent, ranting about how he'd killed people."

"Good for him. One less Jerry to worry about."

"I don't think he was talking about the Germans, Wayman," he said, then added after some hesitation: "And that's what worries me."

#

Baker saw Larkin again a few days later. The boy was sitting atop a stack of sandbags, swinging his feet back and forth, staring at the ground. Baker approached him slowly. "Your name is Larkin?"

He looked at Baker, and nodded. His face was milk white beneath the grime.

"How old are you?"

"I'm not old. You're old."

"I'm thirty-seven. I guess out here that does make me an old man." He forced himself to smile.

"The Huns got some powerful ones. Scary people, like you. They call them Blutdämonen."

"Listen," he said, putting up his hands. "I want to talk to you. When I saw you before, in the medical tent, you were saying that you killed all those men."

"I did. It's my fault they're dead. The Huns wanted to shell me and they hit everyone else. Daisy cutters snip you off at the knees." He made a motion with his hand like he was holding a pair of scissors. "They found me in my foxhole, and I still had all my pieces."

Not guilty of murder, just survivor guilt, Baker thought, feeling relieved, but not too relieved. He pressed the boy again. "Why did they want to kill you?"

He leaned in very close. "Because I know things they don't. I know that the end is coming."

"Why is it coming?"

Larkin put a finger to his lips. "Ssh. I can't tell you. We have to wait," he whispered.

He climbed down off the sandbags and walked away.

#

Baker had some time, and Ludlowe was nowhere to be seen. He decided not to let Larkin go again. It wasn't the boy that interested him so much; it had more to do with Ludlowe than anything else. He'd seen that man personally destroy dozens of soldiers, boys as young as Larkin. He'd just keep after them until they cracked, then move on to the next victim. Something was going on with Larkin beyond a simple case of trench madness, and Baker wanted to know just what it was.

He followed Larkin, keeping a safe distance. The boy seemed harmless enough, but Baker really didn't know him, or know what he was capable of.

He followed Larkin for over a mile, into a part of the encampment where he'd never been before. They were approaching the end of the British main lines, the safest part of the front, the place where the officers congregated. Baker saw him duck into a nearby tent. He walked around the back and peered through a hole in the oiled canvas to see what was going on.

He could see Ludlowe in there, with about a half dozen other soldiers.

"There you are!" Ludlowe barked, staring at Larkin. "Where the bloody hell have you been?"

"I'm hungry," Larkin said.

He rolled his eyes. "Nevermind." He handed a battered coffee tin to Larkin, who eagerly accepted it and trotted out of the tent. "Bloody troublemaker..."

Baker edged away from the tent, resuming his chase, but he had lost Larkin's trail. The boy was nowhere to be found. He started his walk back to the medical tent, staring at the ground.

He walked into something soft, and stumbled back, landing square on his behind. He looked up to see a young man similarly seated a couple feet in front of him.

"Oh, sorry," he said.

The young man looked him right in the eye, unnerving him. "You've got red eyes," he said, pushing himself to his feet.

Baker frowned. Something about the young man's face was unnervingly familiar. "Do I know you?"

"I don't think so. I don't know anyone with red eyes."

"Are you sure?"

"I'd know it if I knew it," he replied, looking slightly irritated. "Now I've got work to do or Ludlowe will be angry." He turned and left, leaving Baker alone.

#

Baker returned to his tent, sitting down on the edge of his cot. He cupped his hands over his face, exhaling slowly.

"Where were you all this time?"

He looked up. Wayman was stretched out in his own cot nearby, a burning cigarette clamped between his teeth. "I said where were you?"

"I followed Larkin today."

Wayman propped himself up on one elbow. "What? Why?"

Baker slowly shook his head. "I don't know why." He reached beneath his cot, pulling out a stained wooden ammunition box. He lifted the lid and removed a bundle of photographs tied with string. "If I ever go mad, I want you to kill me, Wayman. I couldn't live like that." He untied the bundle and started leafing through them.

Wayman laughed. "Will do."

"Something is wrong here. Something is going on and I don't like it at all. I ran into a young man while I was following Larkin. He looked familiar. I know I've seen him somewhere before." He found what he was looking for in the stack, and felt the color drain from his face. "There's something we need to do."

Wayman twisted around, sitting up. "What do you mean 'we'?"

"This is a lot worse than a case of shell shock."

"Do you want me to put you out of your misery now, or wait until after you've finished your rant." He smiled.

Baker said nothing. He just handed a photograph to Wayman. "I saw him today, walking around in the officers' area. The middle one."

The smile slipped off of Wayman's face. "Alright, you've got yourself a partner. Wouldn't mind causing a little trouble around here, anyway."

Baker cracked a tired grin. "I was afraid you would say that. No cutting."

Wayman flopped back onto his cot with a grunt. "I knew you'd say that..."

#

Baker and Wayman waited until the early hours of the morning to begin their hike towards where Baker had last seen Larkin. If Baker was correct, then a new enemy had come to the Somme Valley.

They walked slowly, sticking to the shadows, avoiding the guards walking on night patrol. They approached Ludlowe's tent, sneaking in around the back. Baker crawled inside beneath an unsecured flap and hid himself behind a desk. Wayman followed. Ludlowe was there, his sleeves rolled up, looking over a table with something on it Baker couldn't see. Larkin was sitting on the floor. There was blood at the corner of his mouth, like someone had punched him. A few other soldiers, including the one Baker had run into earlier, were milling about.

"I'm hungry!" Larkin whined.

"Shut up," Ludlowe growled. He turned to the boy. "I gave you this life and I can take it away just as fast. Go back and lie in the ditch I found you in for all I care."

Larkin stood up and leaned over the table. He touched something on it before Ludlowe swatted him away. "Don't touch him, I'm working." There was blood on Larkin's palm. Baker watched in horror as he proceeded to calmly lick his hand clean.

Wayman turned to him and mouthed the words "You were right."

He knew that there was something wrong with Larkin. He knew he had seen that other young man around before. He pulled the photograph from his jacket. It was of a row of bodies laid out on the floor of the medical tent, a reference picture taken to aide identification once physical remains had been removed for burial--or, as Wayman liked to describe it, used for "spare parts." The young man was dead. Larkin was dead. All of the men in the tent except for Ludlowe were reanimated corpses. And with the exception of Larkin, so it seemed, were all under Ludlowe's complete control.

"This is bad," Baker whispered. He quietly slid out of the tent.

Wayman ducked out and looked him in the eye. "Damned bloody zombies," he said. "Where the hell did they all come from?"

"I don't know. What do you want to do?"

"What can we do?"

"If we don't do something, then how long do you think it will be before one of those men gets loose and decides to take a bite out of somebody."

"Oh, they won't. At least, not until I tell them to."

Baker looked around. He was surrounded by all the men who had been inside the tent. Ludlowe took a step forward, his arms crossed smugly across his chest.

"What the hell are you?" Wayman spat.

"I think that's obvious. I'm just like you, except I'm better at it." He laughed. "And I don't wear that damned patch. Oh, they tried to find me, tried to hunt me down and toss me into the medical corps, but I was too smart for that. See my eyes? They came from a man passed out drunk on the streets of London. I took what I needed and threw him in the Thames. Not the prettiest things, but I never much cared about looks."

Baker looked him in the eye. "What's the point of all this?"

"You must be tired of being a bloody slave, used and abused in the name of King and Country, patching together the Devil's own rejects with bits of their fallen comrades. Call me a hopeless romantic, but I miss the old days. I miss the days when we were respected, when we were feared. I want a piece of that life, and here I can get it. I'll win this war for them, but I'll do it on my own terms, with my own army."

The other men laughed. All except for Larkin, who just stood there with a blank look on his face.

"You've already met Larkin. He was the first, my prototype. Out of a hundred tries I finally got it right." He frowned petulantly. "Well, sort of, but since then it's been easy. I can turn whomever I want. I've got over a hundred beyond what you see here. Loyal exclusively to Phillip Ludlowe."

Wayman smiled. "Bloody idiot. Don't know your history, do you? The second the brass hats find out

about you, they'll burn you at the stake."

"To the contrary," Ludlowe replied. "I am a student of history, and I'm not going to make the same mistakes my ancestors did. After every battle, I make a few more. Not just Britons. Frenchmen and Huns, too. They wait for my command. By the time anyone notices, there will be too many of us to stop."

"I'm hungry," Larkin said.

Ludlowe rolled his eyes. "Oh, shut it," he said, then suddenly smiled. He shrugged out of his jacket and tossed it aside. "I know, you can have what's left when I finish with these two." The other men started to close in.

Shit, Baker thought. The first one lunged. He ducked away, his arm exposed. The man went for the outstretched limb and was surprised when Wayman caught him in the throat, tearing through it with his hand.

"Get him!" Wayman shouted, flinging another from his back, sending him crashing into a tent pole. Baker flew towards Ludlowe, tackling him, pushing his hand through Ludlowe's chest and grabbing him by the heart.

"I squeeze, you die," he heaved. "Call them off."

Ludlowe smiled, his teeth stained with blood. "I die, you die."

Baker felt pressure in his own chest and tasted blood at the back of his throat. He looked down. Ludlowe's outstretched hand vanished beneath his ribcage.

"Not a thing you can do. Now be a dear and let go."

Wayman screamed as one of the men sunk his teeth into his throat. He went down hard and they piled on top of him.

Ludlowe suddenly let out a shriek, retracting his arm in reflex. Baker saw his chance and clenched his fist. Blood spurted from Ludlowe's nose and mouth. He went limp, his head falling to one side.

The dead men froze, their faces blank like Larkin's. They were waiting for orders that would never come. Baker slowly rose to his feet, dusting himself off.

Wayman staggered forward, running his hands over his face and neck, sealing the bite marks one by one. "Next time I agree to one of your little adventures, I want you to punch me."

Baker sighed, smiling tiredly. "Will do." He looked around. Larkin was sitting on the ground beside Ludlowe's bloodied leg. The boy had literally taken a bite out of him. He wiped his mouth on his dirty sleeve.

"What? I told him I was hungry."

## Contributor Biographies

### Pablo Cazares

Pablo Cazares lives in North Carolina, with his brother, his partner, and whoever decides to sleep on his couch for the weekend. He loves to cook, and usually gets his best story ideas while slaving over a hot stove. This is his first published work.

### Christine Lucas

Christine Lucas likes to explore overlooked parts of fantasy worlds, especially the lives of the animals that dwell in them. Rumor has it that she's in fact ghost-writing for her kitty Spitha. Her work has appeared in Ballista, [Renard's Menagerie](#), [Afterburn SF](#), and [Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine](#), while other short stories will appear in future issues of [All Hallows](#), [Arkham Tales](#), [Aoife's Kiss](#) and [Murky Depths](#). She is currently working on her first novel.

### Joanna Gardner

Joanna Gardner's fiction has appeared in [Fickle Muses](#), [Serendipity](#), [Reflection's Edge](#), [The Rose and Thorn](#), and [Rosebud](#), where her story "Tia Trementina" was a finalist in the Mary Shelley contest for imaginative fiction. She is an assistant fiction editor for the literary journal [Many Mountains Moving](#), and she goofs around online at [joannagardner.com](#) and [punkinsneezer.blogspot.com](#). She is attempting to grow a forest garden even though she lives in New Mexico because it's easy to feel more closely related to trees than to people, especially in the hours before noon.

### M.H. Gentile

M.H. Gentile is a student who likes writing, drawing, and making jewelery that she never wears. She believes art and science are not mutually exclusive of one another, and always keeps a notepad around for when the neurons decide to fire. (Which is never as frequent as she'd like.) She is currently attempting to find a publisher for her first novel.