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Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*: A Historical Novel Hoping to Persuade Readers to Make
Change in the World and Themselves

Historical fiction as a genre inherently contains both truth and falsities. While the falsities are a natural consequence of any piece of fiction, the truth held within a novel can exhibit the values of the writer and the era in which she writes. Historical fiction attempts to comment on the time period of the piece as well as the period in which the author lives through the truths that the author emphasizes. Alice Walker, in her novel *The Color Purple* shows that domestic abuse, feminine identity, and racism and the violence associated with it, are all issues within the novel as well as in her own time. Walker's novel demonstrates how the problems and solutions haven't changed or evolved over time, even though over 50 years have passed from the time of her story to her time, even though in her time, the Civil Rights Act had been signed. Domestic abuse continued to be swept under the rug by the majority of the world, and African American women had lost their definition of what it meant to be a woman and what it meant to be feminine. By writing the historical novel *The Color Purple*, and embedding it with truths about race, sex, gender, and violence, Walker hoped to show how the world had not changed and to change the way that people saw each other and more importantly themselves.

Alice Walker, born in 1944, is known as a prolific writer, not only of fiction for adults, but also of fiction for children and nonfiction. One of her most notable works, and winner of the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award, *The Color Purple* (published in 1982), tells the story of Celie in the 1910s-1930s through letters written by Celie to God, and later to her sister Nettie.

The story details her friendships with women who help her to escape and overcome the abuse that she suffered within her family and relationships.

Historical fiction is difficult both to define as a genre and to produce as an author, simply put, because it is a work of fiction, meaning that by nature it contains elements that are not necessarily true while also relying on events or places that are inherently real. That is not to say that historical fiction as a genre is a waste. Grant Rodwell argues that it is “an error to think that the facts of the nonfiction are any more complete than those contained in historical fiction” (148). Within both nonfiction and historical fiction, there is truth and, in some cases for the historian, speculation involved for the best understanding of what actually occurred. For most history, events cannot be known with complete certainty, even with sources describing the events. Witnesses hold their own perspectives, biases and viewpoints, and as such tell history as they see it; they are in no way all-knowing. While writers can offer narrators that are indeed all-knowing, and writers can act as all-knowing, it is nearly always the case that writers do not know the minute details of their characters lives, and yet there is an element of truth within the story that they are telling. Much like the definition of historical fiction, the definition of truth can be ambiguous. Michael Williams writes that “Truth is not merely a matter of fact. Truth is the spirit which underlies all appearances and materializes in facts and deeds; truth is a hidden and spiritual force and facts are only modes of its operations; the outward signs which express the inward life” (361). While facts are a key component of what makes up the truth, the truth is not totally reliant on facts. In the instance of historical fiction, the facts of history do not always need to be followed if the truth of the matter--the emotions and meaning--are there. However, by completely ignoring the facts of history, the author runs the risk of misinterpreting history and compromising the truth of the event. Facts are simply an indication of the underlying truth, and

are a byproduct of that truth. The truth of historical fiction, in regards to a fictional character, is that while this character by name may not exist within the real world, this character may exist by some other name, the name of a real person who exists and is living in a similar situation. Because historical fiction is, indeed, fiction, it often attempts to make history more approachable and understandable, while trying to hold onto the details or truth of the historical event in which it is set. In this way, a historical novel (if it is well written) does not neglect the complications of history, but rather embraces and challenges the simplifications that the world tries to impose on history and in the minds of people. The well-written historical novel must find the balance between the details of the history and the excitement of the novel. The author must find a way to remain in the truth without focusing solely on facts. To quote Rodwell, “the historical novel brings an element of excitement to history and shows the personal and emotional elements, removing the sterile, academic label history often has” (176). The author of a piece of historical fiction makes the reading and comprehension of history accessible to the general public and enjoyable by using characters and “real” people to help the reader connect to the events, rather than providing a list of dates and places in the details of a historical book. However, authors must be careful not to create generic characters, but rather have characters that were created and formed by their living situations and historical pasts. In high quality historical novels, characters should not be able to be transferred to a different time period or place and still have the same character and storyline (Akman 89). Characters (and their personalities, reactions, biases, prejudices, and thoughts), just like real-life people, are formed by their experiences and knowledge of the time in which they live. Rodwell argues that historical fiction is a way of explaining how people of today view the past, and what events they see as important and unimportant (Rodwell 171). The events that the majority of the world sees as important will most

likely be written about in a historical novel--for example, there are hundreds (if not thousands) of novels detailing events of the World Wars. However, the interpretation of events and people as good or evil can often depend on the author. Within novels about the world wars, Britain is often seen as heroic, while Germany is portrayed as crazed and evil. This perspective is not an accurate representation of history. It completely ignores the humanity of the "enemy" while also ignoring the cruelty and brutality that often comes from both sides during a war. This is not to say that the enemy was mislabeled, but rather that history (or that the world's idea of history) tends to oversimplify things for the sake of ease of understanding and generalizations.

Historical fiction is often both a commentary on the time period in which it is set, as well as commentary about the period in which the author is writing. Charles Dickens, for example, critiqued the political events and corruption of his time period by writing about the struggling lower classes during the Industrial Revolution. Likewise, Victor Hugo analyzed his own political beliefs, as well as the political opinions of the French countrymen in *Les Miserables*, and he also examined the corruption within the Catholic Church as well as the cruelty of individuals in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Authors often attempt to promote on their own agendas and perspectives in light of the political situations of their time period. Authors show this by emphasizing the moments in history that mirror or starkly contrast their current period. It must be noted that in order to be considered an outstanding novel that attempts to tell the truth and make commentary on the world at large, the author must not be attempting to make the novel into its own form of a sermon in which to teach the masses by using the past. The lessons must be focused inward--on the characters within the story and within the world that she has created. Williams writes that if a writer attempts to hide the lesson that they want their readers to learn, rather than simply writing for the sake of the lesson or the characters, the "historical or religious

propaganda, through the form of a novel, is almost certain to be a failure” (369). A reader knows when he is being preached at, especially when the author is attempting to be covert.

Within *The Color Purple*, Walker uses the truths within the novel in order to examine the time period her novel is set in and on the time period in which she is lives. Her themes, or truths, about racism, domestic abuse, and feminism/womanism can be seen woven throughout the novel, and making observations on the characters’ time period as well as her own. Within Walker’s truths about overarching and systematic issues, Walker accurately portrays the facts of the issues--such as the tendency for African American women to seek help in each other rather than seeking help from the police--adding to the truth that she is telling.

Walker demonstrates the ability of a person to endure a racist environment and become a strong person, despite and because of all the struggles of life. By showing Shug as coming from Memphis, an area that was historically struggling with racism and riots, Walker shows not only that Shug had to endure racism, but that she overcame it and managed to be successful, even in her hometown. Walker wrote Shug as a very strong black woman who does not appear to be affected by the racism occurring around her, particularly because she is a successful performer. Walker makes connections to the racist events that occurred before *The Color Purple* by making reference to Memphis, where in May of 1866, there were riots of African American soldiers and white police fighting over terms of citizenship (Roberts 174). Walker’s reference to Memphis shows how Memphis has changed (or perhaps how Walker wishes it had or will change).

In both the past and the present, African Americans and the problems of racism and abuse have been ignored by the general public as well as government agencies. When one thinks of welfare, one thinks of an African American woman, when the majority of those who seek welfare are predominately white (Higginbotham 254). African Americans are portrayed, and

typically do, live in poorer neighborhoods, and struggle economically as well as socially. This is often because when they are on the verge of success, they are punished. Celie's real father is an excellent example of this, because he was lynched after people realized his business was very successful. African Americans were and are alienated from legal institutions, either because they are ignored or because they are difficult to reach.

One of the most obvious truths that Alice Walker discusses within *The Color Purple* is abuse, and in particular domestic and spousal abuse. Within the story, Celie, and many of the other women protagonists survive some form of domestic abuse, and find a way to overcome it. During Walker's life, domestic abuse was more widely publicized problem, with many people seeking solutions and studying the causes and effects. Her representation of abuse and seeking help within the novel not only portrays an accurate way for the characters, but shows the systematic problems that many African Americans face when suffering from domestic abuse. The problem of domestic abuse and the inability to access institutional support and aid transcends time, and occurs throughout the twentieth century.

Walker attempts to shine a light on how domestic abuse truly works. She does this by focusing some of her efforts on the abuser, and by revealing how domestic violence is a systemic issue. Throughout the entire existence of the media, news outlets and fictional stories regarding abuse "for the most part, [have] focused on battered women and demonized or ignored the abuser" (Kozol 650). Walker defies this by showing the abuser--through Mister, his own personal struggles, and his change into a "good man." Celie is not seen as a battered woman, although she is seen as suffering. She is able to overcome her struggles. Mister, as well, is not seen as completely evil, but rather as someone who reaches a breaking point after being cruel for so long, and seeks help (which is given to him by his son). Mister is seen as human, flawed and

emotional, and he is unable to care for himself until he is willing to change and accept help from his son.

How domestic abuse is viewed in society is also dependant on race and the ideals of the culture to which one is accustomed. For example, those who are white often believe that domestic abuse is something that is private, that is meant to be kept a secret, and that it should be handled by the individual person (Weis 156). Along with this problem is the idea in society that abuse is the victim's fault (for enduring it and for allowing it to happen and continue). African American often believe that domestic abuse is not something to be kept in the dark. Many of the African American women are open to sharing about their struggles, and that abuse is occurring because of other factors not relating to the individual victim (such as poverty, violence in the area, and racism) (Weis 156). The matter is complicated when whites see African Americans suffering from domestic abuse. In this case, many whites would argue that the domestic abuse is occurring because of the systematic social problem of violence within the African American community. In reality, while domestic abuse occurrence has many factors, a crucial piece is the acceptance of violence within the culture at large, and the idea of male dominance. Domestic violence is a systemic issue because of the ideals of the culture in which a person lives. The idea of male dominance did not originate in Africa, so the idea that Africans are more violent, especially towards women, is untrue. Rather, the idea of male dominance entered the African American mindset only after they reached America, and after it had been ingrained in their systems of beliefs through slavery. Traditional African values believe that men and women are "complementary, parallel, asymmetrical, and autonomously linked in the continuity of human life" (Badejo 94). Within African culture, men and women are not the same, but rather they have different jobs so that they work together to achieve their goal. Both are working towards a good

quality of life, as well as the continuation of existence for the people. The roles that each sex takes on almost naturally fits with the gifts that are given to them. Women are seen as crucial for providing of life, while men are meant to protect it. Men are not domineering and holding all of the power. In fact “African feminism embraces femininity, beauty, power, serenity, inner harmony, and a complex matrix of power” (Badejo 94). Women are seen as powerful, beautiful, collected, and to a certain extent leaders in their own right. Without women, the world and the culture would not continue to flourish. Women hold a lot of responsibility. It is not the man’s job to ensure that the woman does not misuse her responsibility and power, but rather to ensure that no one takes the woman’s power from her. Men are not violent to women, because men do not feel challenged because of the power that the women hold, but rather see the power as naturally belonging to women. In America, meanwhile, violence is, to a certain extent, normalized, justified, and accepted, because “violence in the right amounts and in the right context can be defined as either good, acceptable, or to be expected” (Sigler 132). The idea of defending oneself from harm is seen as justified; so if someone is able to justify why they are abusing their spouse, or anyone for that matter, and perhaps claim that it is not abuse, then the violence that is occurring can be seen as good, acceptable, and to be expected. Celie for example thinks that the abuse she endures is acceptable, and that even though she is afraid, it is unacceptable for her to stand up against the abuse. She also encourages Harpo to beat Sophia when she is not being obedient. Harpo learns that he should beat his wife simply because she is his wife from Mister, who believes that he is expected to beat his wife, simply because she is his wife, and because she is not obedient.

African American women, both in the novel and in Walker’s time relied on each other heavily, particularly in times of trouble. Within *The Color Purple*, readers see the reliance of

women on each other for financial, moral, emotional, spiritual, and physical support. In particular Shug, Celie, Squeak (Mary Agnes), Sophia, rely on each other for protection from men and other dangers of society. For example, Shug helps Squeak and Celie to escape domestically problematic situations and helps them to become more financially independent. In another example, the women attempt to help Sophia get out of prison so that she can survive--in particular, Squeak endures sexual assault and police brutality for the sake of Sophia being released to work for a white family. In the "real world" in the 1970s, studies showed that women did not trust the police or the legislative system (because women believe these groups similarly abuse their power and are unjustly cruel to the "criminals"), and rather turn to friends and family (and in particular, other women) for help (Weis 164).

It was only after Celie had been liberated from her maltreatment that she was able to focus on her own joys and talents and embrace her identity. While she was living with Mister, she showed an inclination for sewing, which she enjoyed, even though she was never able to benefit financially from it. It was only done in her free time, as a hobby that emphasized her feminine nature. When she began to make pants, rather than quilts, she no longer saw her sewing as something that was feminine, but as something that was simply a talent. She did not sew to perform her feminine duties, but to benefit both men and women. She also used an object that it was inherently masculine--pants. She originally cringed at the idea of wearing pants. But she began to design pants that compliment each woman--both in style, personality, and fit. In this way, Walker is showing that not all women are the same, but that each woman is unique. Walker shows that her definition of feminism--which does not reject the idea of being feminine--but means accepting the whole person for who she is by revealing Celie, Shug and Squeak use their gifts as women to succeed financially. In fact, Walker's word is not "feminism," but rather is

“womanism” which is comes from the term “womanish, often used to describe a young girl who is bold, precocious, and curious” (Griffin 487). African feminism emphasizes the whole person--the whole woman--and all of her gifts. It is important to note that within African feminism, masculinity is not rejected or seen as a bad thing, but rather it is seen as just as important and as complementary to femininity.

Throughout the novel, Walker uses the traditional African values (both overtly and covertly) to express her own ideas about being a woman. Shug is the most obvious example of someone who embraces African feminism. As mentioned before, “African feminism embraces femininity, beauty, power, serenity, inner harmony, and a complex matrix of power” (Badejo 100). Shug is feminine; she feels comfortable dressing up and wearing makeup as a woman, using her singing voice to make a living, and she embraces her emotions. She has been described by multiple characters, including Celie, as beautiful. She is obviously powerful, not only because she is able to influence other people’s actions, but also because she is successful in her career. Her voice in itself is powerful and strong, and she is able to select for herself who is a member of her band. Shug is often intervening for the good of the group, especially in times of conflict. Shug helps calm Celie so that she will not attack Mister with a razor. Squeak renames herself, and insists that she be called Mary Agnes. Within African culture “Naming ceremonies marked the acceptance of the new member into the human community as well as provided that new member with an anchor, that is, a name, an identity” (Badejo 100). Mary Agnes, after enduring suffering in the prison, officially becomes a part of the women’s support group that began to grow closer and more trusting of each other. Her identity had changed. She was no longer Squeak--where she was ashamed of her singing voice--but she embraced her voice as it was, and

saw it for the beauty it held. Singing and the success that came with it, rather than her inability to sing, became a part of her identity.

Within academia in the 1970s and 1980s, more and more of the lives of ordinary people became important for the study of women, race, and class; in particular, history “investigated the daily lives of African Americans, farm women, criminals, prostitutes, factory workers, and domestics in various Western countries” (Smith 728). Walker’s characters--ordinary women, and in fact some criminals--fit right into this examination. It is almost as if Walker was attempting to create her own source of history that had been ignored or erased. In this way, Walker found a truth, and told it for the world to experience, in a era where the world wanted and needed to hear it.

I would argue that Walker’s goal in writing the book--the truth that she wished to tell, if nothing else, was tied back to the idea of African feminism. She hoped to bring this feminism to light to the people who had lost it along the way, especially those in America. Badejo writes that in order to become more like she was meant to be, an African American woman must be “reclaiming [her] humanity, dignity, spirituality, and strength with an attitude of enthusiasm and conviction” (109). Walker shows how to do this by having Celie reclaim her humanity, dignity, spirituality, and strength. Celie believes that she isn’t simply a thing, but that she is a person. She believes that she is worth something. Through her letters to God and her sister Nettie, she develops her spirituality, and she finds her strength by refusing to be hurt and by finding her own path to success by the use of her gifts. Walker’s ultimate truth is the acceptance of humanity and femininity. I would argue that every author, especially authors writing historical fiction, have their own truths to reveal, and have their own voices to share about the times in which they live that can be found within their writings if one only looks for the connections.

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Peace Is Not Silence

“Peace is not the product of terror or fear. Peace is not the silence of cemeteries. Peace is not the silent result of violent repression. Peace is the generous, tranquil contribution of all to the good of all. Peace is dynamism. Peace is generosity. It is right and it is duty.”

--Archbishop Oscar Romero

He wasn't her husband. The man who laid sprawled on the floor covered in bruises and cuts, bleeding profusely and missing fingernails. Joshua was asleep in his crib, the child who had helped her paint the walls for a mural earlier in the morning; his hands had been covered in blue paint, for the mountain range in the background. He had managed, with the giftedness only a toddler could have, to get the paint behind his ear, in his mouth, and behind his left knee. Another child was growing inside of her, although few could tell.

“Is this your husband?” Three men circled the man. Each was dressed in formal military wear and held a gun across his chest. The man's clothes were torn so that Maria could see the cuts running along his rib cage. The skin looked almost melted. His eyes were closed.

The man in the middle shifted his feet and tapped his fingers on his gun. “Is this your husband?”

The man's eyes were closed. Blood was dripping from his temple and out of his ear.

“Is this your husband?”

The man was breathing, and Maria could hear the air continually catch in his throat as he tried harder to get the oxygen he needed. His hair, or at least what was left of it, was matted with blood and plastered with sweat.

“No,” Maria finally answered. The man’s eyes opened for an instant, but Maria knew not to meet them, and he closed them once more.

Father Damien was particularly fond of hiding inside the church throughout the day. Often, while he was hiding he would find a lone person sneaking in to spend private time with God. These were his favorite moments because, while he may have, to a certain extent, been eavesdropping on a conversation, he knew he was witnessing a growing relationship. He loved to notice the patterns: seeing when people came in, where they sat, how they acted. Some were spontaneous or casual, often forgetting to kneel when entering the pew or take holy water at the door. Others were constant in their attendance, stiff, treating God formally. And still there were others in between. Damien saw all of these relationships as beautiful; there was no one right relationship and every relationship was a work in progress.

One of his favorites, one that perplexed him the most, was a woman in her mid-twenties. She had been coming since she was nineteen, when she would bring her oldest child to Mass with her. Soon the child stopped coming to Mass—she stopped bringing him—and it was her alone, desperately focused on the daily readings and kneeling fervently. Her appearance worsened until she stopped coming to Mass, and she only could be found when no one else was present.

There was one chair that she was fond of, always in the back, almost always unseen by anyone who walked past the chapel. She came daily, hoping that no one would see her as she kneeled and stared at the crucifix at the altar. No one noticed her, save Father Damien, who noticed especially when she was absent.

It started in October after coming day after day, precisely at eleven, while Damien sat in his also unnoticed chair. He waited until 11:15. 11:30 came and went. By 11:45, he knew that he had to prepare himself for Mass and knew that something bad must have happened.

He counted the weeks, which added up to months, and sadly to years. Four and a half years later, on March 24, he found her near her chair, with her coat folded on the floor next to her, snow melting out of her loosely tied hair. She had the look of sheer exhaustion similar to that of the college students who came in during midterms—the one where it felt like the eyes were permanently glued open despite the heavy weight pressed on them. Despite the heaviness on her face, the priest could see the joy she had, even though it was deeply hidden—as if it were a fragile instrument that would be broken if anyone dared to get near it. He could see the tiny fragment of peace she found in kneeling in the chapel.

“It has been seven years since my last confession, Father,”

Damien smiled. Although he wouldn't truly remember what was being said after he walked out of the confessional, he loved to hear them, because he loved to help people get better. “Welcome back,”

“I—I made a list. I figured it would be the best way to remember everything. Although I definitely have forgotten something.”

“That's alright. Do you want to start at the beginning?”

“I think I'll start with the worst sins, actually. You know, get the hard stuff over with first?”

“Of course.”

“You can't tell anyone, right?”

“No, it’s confidential. You could confess to any sort of crime, and I wouldn’t be able to tell anyone.”

Damien could hear the crinkling of paper in the woman’s hands. “Okay,” she whispered. “It’s just really hard,” she sniffed, “Because I didn’t directly do anything, and I still feel guilty for it.”

The priest nodded.

“I lied to the military. And they killed my husband. And I should be dead too.”

“It sounds like the military killed him, not you.”

“Yes, but the reason he’s dead is because he was fighting against the military. He was fighting for the rights that I believe in, that he believed in. He died trying to protect me and my children. And I had to stand there and watch. And I couldn’t stop it. I should have tried to stop it.”

“But then you would be dead. And your children—”

“I know what would have happened to my children. The military would have waited until they were old enough to remember every detail. They would have been tortured. They would have been slowly murdered like my husband. Or worse, they would have watched me be tortured. They would have been forced to watch as the guards cut out my tongue and violated me. And then they would have watched me die. Those images would be forever in their minds, and because of it, they would want to take the gun we hid in the closet for emergencies to their heads. I know what would have happened, and for that reason I don’t regret what I did. I regret what I didn’t do.”

Nine years later

She came sporadically at first, almost as if she was avoiding routine. But her visits became more frequent, and soon they resembled her previous schedule. The weight never really left her shoulders. But it was clear that she had never really had anyone she could have talked to. Her confidant had been taken from her when she was twenty years old. She had been holding in her stories for fifteen years, and even after she started to tell Damien, she never told him everything. She, out of habit, saw corruption in everyone, and assumed that anyone who showed interest in her was using it to get ahead, to hurt her in the long run. It took him years to gain her trust, and it was only after repeatedly showing her that he would never tell.

After dusting the bench for water droplets, Father Damien sat on the familiar stone and closed his eyes, counting with the wooden rosary beads hanging from his waist. He breathed in as he felt the cool spring breeze hit his face and opened his eyes when he heard the flutter of wings in a nearby tree. A bright scarlet cardinal perched in between the white magnolia blooms that were dusted with dew. He smiled and closed his eyes again, opening them occasionally to glance at the cardinal hopping back and forth in the church garden. A branch cracked behind him and there was a flush of wings in the trees. The priest glanced back to see the woman standing, stiff-kneed and grasping her elbows.

“Father? Do you have a minute? Well, actually, it might be more than a minute.”

The priest chuckled. “Of course. How can I help? Do you want to just sit for a minute first?” Damien patted at the stone seat next to him.

Maria’s breath caught in her throat. “S—Sure,” she said, rubbing at her neck as she sat.

“The weather’s beautiful today; a little chilly, but perfect for just before Easter, wouldn’t you say?”

She bit her lip and looked at her feet. “Yeah. I guess it is... It’s my daughter’s birthday today. Her father loved this kind of weather. I’m sure he would have said it fit her personality, seeing as she’s her father’s daughter.”

“How old is she?”

“She would be fourteen today,”

“Oh. I’m sorry for your loss.” Damien placed his hand on her shoulder. “I’m praying for her,”

“Thank you.”

They sat in silence together, watching the birds come back and fly, traveling from branch to tree, almost like neighbors visiting each other. “When she was little, she loved to chase the birds around the backyard. Whenever I think of her I think of her hands, open and grasping for them, hoping to catch one,” her eyes fogged over as she spoke and Damien could hear her sniff as she tried to gather herself. “It’s funny... Well it’s not funny, actually... It’s just that it’s always the kids that get stuck in the middle. Those are the lives that are truly ruined. Because their innocence is taken away from them, or their lives are. And there’s no in between. Everyone becomes a soldier. Everyone has to lie. And those who don’t are stuck in the cross-fire. And that’s what happened.” She wiped at her nose. “Do you remember Joshua?”

“The adorable little munchkin always screaming when I was giving a homily, definitely not,” the priest laughed.

Maria gulped. “He was helping me make breakfast one morning, because he knew that the twins were overwhelming. Men dressed in military wear came in and grabbed him by his neck and pulled him out the door, telling me that they needed him for the front lines. They handed him a knife. I couldn’t do anything. If I did, I knew they would hurt him worse. He was

crying because they wouldn't even let him say goodbye. He was twelve. They didn't think I was looking, but I saw them bump him in the head with the butts of their guns.

“Of course I couldn't tell the twins what had really happened; they were nine. How do you explain to nine year-olds that their brother was taken away by a military that is against everything that their father fought for? I hadn't even mentioned why their father was gone. They didn't even know their father. You don't tell children that their father was brutally tortured for his beliefs. All they knew about him was from pictures that I had hidden in the house. I'm not even allowed to have pictures. Because then the military would find out. That's what we agreed on. We agreed no one would find out.” Maria's words came out faster and faster, and her face had turned red.

“They didn't even bring his body back. I searched for it, because what else could I do? And I found him; he looked just like his father had, with his skin charred and gashes everywhere, and I found him in the same place as his father. They knew who I was, even though they never could confirm it. That's why they took him. To hurt me. And I couldn't take him back. Because then they would know. You can't take bodies from the landfills.

“He had always reminded me of his father, the way he spoke, the way he looked, the way he held himself. I'm sure he had always looked up to him until his dad went missing. That's when he really started acting like him. He wanted to be the 'man of the house,' you know. Make me proud. But it just scared me more. Because he went from playing with paint on the walls to playing with guns. And I was sad, because how quickly they grow up. They lose their childhood all because we want to give them a better one. He, of course, gave a toy gun to his brother. You know Jeremy? They would pretend to be on opposite sides. They would always fight over who got to be the rebel. I never thought that they would ever truly be on opposite sides; that there was

a possibility of them meeting face-to-face with guns in their hands, and one being forced to shoot the other.

“Jeremy had always been more vocal. He didn’t remember what it was like for those who spoke out. He barely remembered his father. He just knew that his father had been brutally murdered by the military and the military had taken away everything good about being a person. He would think, when his stomach was growling when he went to bed, that he wasn’t being provided for. And he never blamed me. He became angry and brash. I would have expected that from Joshua, but I guess he remembered, because I had always told him to be quiet. I had wanted Jeremy and Julianna to be children. So I sheltered them. And I guess I shouldn’t have.

“Jeremy joined the rebellion when he was twelve. And Julianna was caught in the middle of it. There was a fight. They had come to take Jeremy like they took his father. I don’t even know what she was thinking. I don’t know if she was trying to protect him. But they just pulled out their guns and shot her. Jeremy and Joshua. They were supposed to protect her. They knew. They knew she would run out. She always wanted to play with them. She loved to help.”

“I know that this is no consolation,” the priest placed a hand on her shoulder. “And I will never be able to find the right words, but thank you so much for sharing with me. I wish that I could take your pain from you, but I think you’ve already found the place where that can happen. Because you come to church everyday. And that’s why. Because you see the suffering that Christ went through and you draw strength from that.”

Maria stands before the long wall of names, organized by year and then alphabetically. Not even half of the names of those who went missing or were murdered in the civil war are carved into the stone, and thousands of names are still missing, out of fear that the military will

find those who spoke out. She looks to the end of the wall, seeing in the process foam stars that have been glued around a name so that it can be found more easily, and bright blue or red paint covering a name so that it can be spotted from far away. She finds her husband's first, Jonathan. She runs her fingers across the slightly worn letters. This is all she has to remember him by. She remembers the white hand painted on her door one night, signaling that she had two weeks to leave. She remembers grabbing her children, and deciding between one of two photos to take with her, and leaving everything else behind. She wipes the tear from her eye and moves on to find Joshua's, Jeremy's and Julianna's. Each is under a different year. This is all she has, and yet it is everything to her. She can see her family in everything: in the unrecognized carved names, in the wind, the birds, the trees, and even in those who murdered them. She sees that war is out of fear, and she forgives those who were afraid, because she has always been afraid.

A Soldier's World

There had been a silence in between the standing for hours on the deck and the pouring rain. The soldiers were travelling to France, and trying to keep it together, knowing that the rocking of the boat would stop. But that the world shaking wouldn't change. It was dark, and most were asleep, trying to gain the little sleep they could, and perhaps the last sleep of their lives, before the battle. One of the soldiers, James, had the time to gather his thoughts and look at

the stars. He noticed how they were different from home, and how they had been absent from his life for so long.

He was six, barefooted, feeling the grass scratch against his legs as the sky showed its stars and the trees around him became more and more like a blanket enveloping him and surrounding him with a darkness that wasn't as scary as one would think. The air had lost the painful summer heat and he could make out the forms of his parents and his siblings. The fireflies were stars to him back then.

He was sixteen and he felt the wind brush against his skin as he rested his arm on the lip of the window opening of his car. He wanted to stick his head out and stare at the stars; he wanted to watch them rotate. To see the highlights and streaks of the galaxies, the bright orbs of the other planets. When he was driving, he felt free; he felt like he was floating with the stars.

And he wondered how he had failed to notice them. Would he ever see them again? The clouds passed over the stars in the night sky, and he was floating again, but this time it was an empty floating, rather than a floating filled with complete content. The silence was eerie—to be the only one awake. To feel completely alone and yet be surrounded and trapped with no way out. Had he signed up for this? What was he doing? He had so much that he wanted to do. See the USA, in all of its glory, if it had what everyone from the past claimed it had. Learn everything. Know so much that the knowledge exploded out of his ears and his mouth, until he was bursting with enthusiasm with joy, and the only thing he could do to relieve the pressure was share it. And he thought for one second that going to another country to fight was accomplishing that? Did everyone believe that the war would be over as quickly as they said? When he had been given his orders, the commanders put on a brave face, but you could see their skepticism if you looked. They knew that the plan was risky. That many could and would

die. That the other side was ruthless and had been for years. The other side would do anything to win. Because they were desperate. They needed a win. Germany needed a win. Because Russia was overpowering them. And they had made so many mistakes, they couldn't afford another one.

He wondered if the Axis Powers would fade like the darkness of the night faded as the sun rose. So slowly and gradually that one wouldn't realize it until they saw how different everything was. When they saw the sky was burning red with warmth instead of black with the cold chill of the night. Would the war lead in a blazing sunrise or a cloudy morning, where it stayed dark until noon? Would this war drag on, so that everyone, even the Americans, were exhausted and depressed? James hoped not. James yawned. The sky above the sea was cloudy and almost as murky as the water surrounding him. He had to go into that. He hoped that they would get him close to land.

Captain Peterson was fierce in battle. Careful. Calculated. But fierce. James had first met Peterson when the privates were learning of the details of the invasion. The Captain stood in the background, watching all of the privates' reactions to the what would become gory details of the landing. Peterson had noticed the way their faces shifted, into relief and into sadness, after he told them all that the invasion was delayed because of the weather. Because it was too cloudy, and windy. It was just a little too risky. James watched as the brow of the Captain furrowed. As he watched the privates file out, the Captain held a string of beads that were of mixed and matched sizes, shapes, and colors. It looked like it had been made by a five-year-old. The Captain noticed James staring: *My daughter made it for me before I left. It's a rosary.* He fingered the beads and started tapping his foot, and James wondered if the Captain had trouble sitting still. He definitely didn't freeze in battle. His goal, as James saw it, was to get everyone

home—physically, mentally, emotionally. He always said he wanted “whole soldiers.” Broken toy soldiers were useless. War wasn’t a game in either sense of the term. James could almost hear the crackle of his voice. *You must be fearless, but you can’t be careless. Don’t be a dumbass, thinking you’re the hero, the knight with the gun, in it to win it by going all out. You can’t find joy or happiness in the weapon. You find joy in blood, you’re gone.* James didn’t know how he was ever supposed to remain whole. Was it possible? There were rumors of the lucky few who never shot anyone in the Great War. But perhaps they themselves would see themselves as cursed and broken. For not having a number over their head like everyone else. They didn’t have to live with the weight of the war, so they must not have fought in it.

As much as James wanted to write and tell everything to his folks, he couldn't. He knew what it would do to them. How much they would worry if they found out what kind of conditions he was in. Mom would be worried sick. He was eating well, but he was always moving. People were sick often. Because they weren't used to the area and conditions. He had been warned constantly about changing his socks. Dry socks would save your life. That's what all of the older men said to him. Some of them had fought in the Great War.

The rattle of gun fire forced him to focus. He had an enemy to fight. He had to make it to shore. The men in front of him kept falling, their footprints in the sand being the last part of them to change and move. He tried not to step on them. His brothers. He had known them through training and the relentless motion of the plane followed by the rolling of the ship and sea sickness. What had all of the training meant if when they reached the enemy they were simply shot down? Was he on a suicide mission? The sand enveloped his boots, and he had the actually put effort into lifting his feet. He noticed the red that streaked across and clung to the soles of his standard issue combat boots. He just needed to make it to the rocky edges. Get out of the sand.

He could do that. His rifle swayed from side to side with his arms. There were some of the soldiers making it past the sand. He just needed to follow them. That would make sense. What had his commander told him? Where was he actually supposed to go? He couldn't remember that, even though he had rehearsed it in his head all the night before. He was supposed to shoot anyone who fired at him, wasn't he? That's what he had practiced. That's what the months of training and target shooting had been for. And yet they hadn't told him that he would have to kill anyone. Kill people with families, with mothers and fathers, and brothers and sisters, wives and girlfriends. Fiancés.

The smell of her perfume filled his nose for an instant and he could almost smell her hair again. He remembered her saying that it was the gel that kept her curls in place. The curl that he tucked behind her ear curled towards her lips, and all he could think about was the one time she wore red lipstick: she said it had been her little luxury when she noticed him staring at her smirk; the way she bit her lip and the imprint of her lips on the letter she had given him, which she had doused in her perfume and covered in her calligraphic handwriting. She prided herself on the way she wrote her letters, and he had run his fingers over the script, feeling the intentions. He could almost hear the scratching of the pen against her secretary. The scratching turned into the rattles of machine guns. He was supposed to kill people. Were they people if they were German? If their eyes were blue and their hair was blond? He had brown eyes, but he remembered having his shaggy blond hair shaved off on the first day of his time with the military. He had always worn a cap over it, and it had grown long throughout the summer when he was working on the farm. He could almost feel her fingers running through the strand behind his ear. She had always thought it was unkempt and shaggy. He had always said it was part of his devilish good looks, and that it made him charming. She had wanted a prince, and he was a prince with flowing

golden locks. Despite the way his locks looked in the wind, they didn't reach his chin and she couldn't tie them up or braid the strands no matter how hard she tried, so they weren't long yet. He hadn't realized he had been smirking until he heard the soldier next to him yell at him for smiling. His lips dropped into a frown. Wasn't Grandfather James from Germany? He needed to focus. They had told him that thinking of the enemy as people wouldn't do any good. It would only mean that he would be dead, because they wouldn't see him as a person. He needed to stop getting distracted. He wanted to get back to her. But he wouldn't if his mind was foggy with her memory. She would have slapped him for being so stupid. She had that fire in her eyes. That's what he had noticed on the first date. The night at the carnival. With hot dogs and cotton candy. The stuffed bear that he had won for her. She had rolled her eyes, but she kept it. *Don't turn into a stuffed bear.* Don't be the prize that someone aims for when their shooting their guns at you. He had to make it to the grassy area. Where all the other soldiers were. The run was terrifying. Counting the number of men missing, dead, or dying was terrifying. And seeing what he would live in was even more terrifying. He had been warned that conditions would be rough. That they would be living in conditions that could be like the Great War. He was warned about the dirt and mud. He wasn't warned about the fear and the brokenness that came with living in a warzone.

The Captain seemed whole. Or maybe he was just really good at hiding his brokenness, or at least to most people. Those who weren't looking. But he cracked when he talked to James, and when he held the chipped pink and purple beads of the rosary. There was a heaviness, that look of someone who felt like crying, but was so used to it that tears only came when they chose to let them out. After making it through Omaha Beach, it was so odd to come into small towns where the streets were empty, and the German soldiers were gone. Perhaps they were hiding.

Others had wondered why the French had let this happen? Why they had been so stupid, so naïve, so cowardly? How had they failed to notice a tyrant taking over? James was surprised by the Captain's calm response, and he would continue to be surprised by how the Captain responded in every situation he faced. James felt enraged. Who were they to judge how someone felt, how something happened, when they didn't understand the culture or the past? The Captain's superior insight had shown through—*Sometimes there were stronger forces, and sometimes you were afraid. Sometimes you knew something was wrong, but fighting was more dangerous. Sometimes it was smarter to live with the guilt—and living with the pain was the harder thing to do. Perhaps when the Germans came, they felt liberated, or perhaps they didn't realize it was the Germans. The Germans had been struggling economically when Hitler rose to power. They saw the change as good. Sometimes change is so subtle that the evil can't be noticed. Because evil hides itself among good things. Evil isn't black and white.*

The Captain had smiled at the few children he saw when they would peek out of the doorframes of their houses when the soldiers walked by. The other leaders would glare at him for not being more cautious. Captain Bitters, a newer captain in training, would get on to the Captain for his happiness. The Captain looked at him and raised an eyebrow: *what's the hurt in smiling—in trying to bring joy—especially to those who probably hadn't smiled in a while.*

Sometimes, when James was walking through Bayeux, the wind would blow just right, flying between his arms and behind his ears in such a way that it reminded him of home—the warmth and the weight of it. But it was only on rare occasions that the breeze felt like home. He saw home in the way that the light shined through the leaves when he looked up to the undersides of the branches, and the shades of yellow green and the overlap. But it was still so different. The closeness to the sea, and the breeze that it brought. To see the stripped bark, from

the bullet marks. And the holes, scratches and dents in the church doors, even though the stained-glass windows were preserved. But the church was beautiful. Seeing the bell, James almost expected it to ring on the hour, but the town was silent, missing the almost natural music that should be present. Even the birds sang more quietly. The churches felt different—like their previous automatic welcomes and signs of love were toned down. Because expression of emotion of happiness was looked down upon. But there was forced content. You couldn't be dissatisfied or upset. The face could only show neutrality, even if the mind was anything but.

Sitting in a side chapel, James wondered if God was really present. If the weight he felt was God or the pressure to save everyone. Maybe it was both. Because God was love. God was the desire and need to love everyone around him. To save them. He wondered if the French had felt the warmth and safety that he had felt in his church at home. His church had been small, modest. The stained glass windows were minimal back home. And there wasn't room for a side chapel. He listened to the wood pews creek behind him; and he saw the Captain kneeling, his forearms resting on the pew in front of him. He held the set of beads in his hand and his eyes were fixed on the crucifix above the main altar. His lips moved silently. James watched as the Captain's brow creased more and more as he prayed. He wondered what mysteries he was praying. James didn't even remember what day it was. Was it Tuesday? The Captain finished his rosary, and made the sign of the cross with the crucifix in his hand. He held the crucifix to his lips for ages. Bowing his head, and genuflecting at the end of the pew, he left the Church after dipping his fingers in the holy water and blessing himself.

Sleeping was hard. The constant fear of having to move. Of being shot while he was sitting trying to find rest by laying his head on his pack. He didn't dare unpack his stuff for fear of having to fight again and move. He didn't want to tell everyone about the mud; how

eventually it felt like a part of him. Like he would never be clean and that the ground had taken a part of him and left him a little less human. He lost his humanity a little bit when he shot anyone. He didn't feel like a person. And he didn't deserve to be one. The only time he felt any way like himself was when the letters came, which wasn't often. He wanted to write to his parents, to her, to his best friend, to his sister every day. But he couldn't find the time. He couldn't find the right words. He could barely find the time to write down all of things that happened in the battles in the war; it passed so fast. He lost track of who he fought and where he ran, how many troops they had lost. The food came in metal containers and every meal was the same, with a stick of gum, they said to prevent cavities, to relieve stress. Some of the men smoked, and he wanted to take up the habit; it looked like they were breathing out all their anxiety and fear with the wisps of smoke. But sometimes he wondered if the smoke was simply taking the edge off, distracting them from it, rather than erasing it. He had tried smoking once, but couldn't get over the aftertaste. There was a sophistication in smoking, at least that's what people thought about it in America, all of the black and white photographs. But it wasn't for sophistication in the war. Some guys acted like the only thing to do was smoke. And that was true to an extent. Smoking passed the time, and apparently it distracted the soldiers from their thoughts. He didn't want to be alone with his thoughts more than he had to be, but he didn't want to risk making a target of himself to light the cigarette. He didn't want the stains on his fingers when he came back to her. His hands were already stained red in his mind; they couldn't be yellow too.

James remembered cleaning out his gun one night, before the sun set. The battle had been less difficult than the day before, so his exhaustion had finally sunk in—sitting down, leaning up against one of the dusty outer walls of one of the houses. His knees hurt, and his lower back—and he desperately wanted to pull off his boots, to soak them in water, to clean them properly and

then massage his ankles and the soles of his feet. Would he ever not be sore? *You'll get used to the pain.* That's what the Captain said. It felt like war was a constant. James knew that the war was coming to an end, because that's what they had intended to bring. But war felt like something that would never end. He couldn't imagine what it was like to actually live in the war zone. To be there in it, and to have everything you've ever had surrounded and tainted by it. The Captain cleaned his gun with an experienced hand, and James wondered if he could clean it with his eyes closed. Cleaning it felt almost therapeutic; it was the one thing he could control. Because he could spend thirty minutes making sure that it was in working order, making sure that it wouldn't be the reason he died the next day. James almost felt like he was remembering the people he had hurt that day. He wouldn't be able to clean their wounds, to stop the bleeding, but he could think about them, and try not to become someone who would hurt more people with the weapon in his hands. He wondered if the Captain was doing the same.

All James wanted to do was sit and listen to Captain Peterson tell stories of his life, of fighting in the Great War, and how he changed. He was so full of wisdom. *Coming into war was so different than coming out of it. Or at least it seemed like that. Because for a soldier, war starts and ends so fast. In the War, it started when the whistle shrieked; and in that instant, you had to find every ounce of courage, because the odds of getting shot were high. But it was so crucial to get over the wall. In both cases, the beginnings and ends of war, it takes so long to adjust. But a man's body gets used to fear far faster than not being afraid. War instincts take a while to fade. That's the hard part. Waking up in the middle of the night. Jumping at sounds. Feeling the sudden pounding heart rate when you hear a bell or whistle. People expect soldiers to be the same when they come back. And the soldiers desperately want to be the same person. It was funny, because when the soldiers came home, all they wanted was to go back to work, go back to*

school and read. But they couldn't. They wanted the things they had had before, and they hadn't wanted them then. Because they had them. But now they couldn't have them. They couldn't read because they couldn't focus. They couldn't go to school because they were adults. They wanted to be kids again. What they all wanted from childhood was the innocence, the joy that comes so naturally.

Looking at Captain Peterson, James realized that he tried so hard to protect joy and happiness because he couldn't have it anymore. He smiled because that's all he wanted—to smile naturally. He had to fight for happiness, and that, in James's opinion, was the more honorable thing.

As much as James loved seeing the world, he just wanted to go home. France was beautiful, but it was so broken. He wanted to be whole again. And he didn't know how he ever would be. Peterson was contradictory; *no one went home. But he knew both sides of the story. He knew what it was like to find the nicest paper the army could muster in the war, and painstakingly write a note to a mother, trying to remember everything good thing about her son in a note, and trying to avoid all the negatives. He had seen the reactions of friends, fiancés, wives, and mothers grieving. But he knew, even the families of the soldiers who did come home lost a child. Peterson had watched his wife's face fall when he acted differently, when his gaze would fix on a place on the wall and stay there for a few minutes, and it took a carefully laid hand on the forearm to bring him back. A part of the soldier died with the man he killed. What was important was filling up that empty space, and remembering that it was necessary, but the life lost was still tragic.*

James found it hard to believe that Peterson was able to raise his voice during battle, but he knew that it was necessary. So it was even more shocking to hear the Captain yelling at a

fellow private after a gruesome battle. Everyone had circled around them, running because of the yelling. He could feel the anger coming off Peterson, so he couldn't imagine what it was like to be on the receiving end. He couldn't believe that Peterson was like this, and he wondered if something had happened to upset him. It was several days before James could talk to him again, and he had spent his nights cleaning his gun alone. He had watched the private fight that day, and he saw the carelessness that the Captain despised. How the other private laughed, when it wasn't appropriate to laugh, how he was never listening, and how he had the desire to fight in his own way, completely disregarding orders and rules.

His heart stopped when Peterson fell. Because it was so quick and unexpected. The red splotches down his shoulder and across his chest. The soldiers around him scattered, running in ten different directions. They shouted, trying to spot the sniper, trying to take him out. James froze, gaping at the Captain's slowly stilling body. He watched as his leader's chest rose and fell with labor and his shirt turned a dark wet brown. They had to move, but he had to help the Captain. He had to stop the bleeding, and stop the light from fading from his eyes. But he didn't know how. He didn't have anything to pack it with. Did he leave the bullet in? Who was supposed to be the person fixing the unbreakable person? The one you knew would never break because of his battle hard experience. The medics had run to get supplies. Or maybe they hadn't been there, and someone had run to get them. Shouldn't they be able to call. There should be a faster way to save a life. But James supposed that a valuable life was worth all the more effort. All he knew was that he was surrounded by so many soldiers who were all trying to move Peterson together.

It took six to move him. And just like the mud in the battle had taken a part of James, the Captain had left so much of himself, if not the most important parts of himself on that field. He didn't leave that field the same; and neither would James.

Who would write the letter? The Captain, the writer of letters, the caretaker, wasn't there. He couldn't write it. Who would they tell? James couldn't even remember if the Captain had a wife. Was the wife alive? Where did he live? No. Used to live. Did they have children? Maybe they had trouble bringing children into the world. James's mind had frozen, so that he couldn't remember any of the details that he had painstakingly stored inside of his mind about the Captain for future use. He had wanted to tell his children of his fearless Captain, who was so loving, so fatherly, to someone who desperately needed a father. Someone who had felt so lost. Someone who had saved him. But how could James tell the story of a hero if the hero was dead? If it was James who was the coward, for not dying, for not saving the Captain. For not being smarter. It was his fault. He had been careless. He had jokingly taken up a cigarette. He knew the phrase, the fear of lighting matches. The Captain couldn't leave now, not when he hadn't saved James. James wasn't home yet. The story wasn't over yet. It couldn't be. The hero never died in the middle of the book. The narrator didn't die. And the Captain had to be the narrator, constantly instilling wisdom on the audience. He couldn't be dead.

Captain Bitters was different to say the least. He was cold and battle focused. He didn't talk to the privates expect to motivate them by logic and reason. Watching him in battle was terrifying. Peterson had been frantic, but frantic to save. Bitters was frantic to win. He saw the person in front of him not as a person but as a target, and James was worried for the day that Bitters set his sights on him.

In the middle of a battle, Bitters would not stop screaming at the private next to James, who according to Bitters, was too shy to shoot a gun. He was a coward, for not having the guts; and he was an idiot for not having a brain to shoot the enemy, for not doing the job that he signed up for. He was a failure. Despite this, the screaming made the private tremble even more. His gun shook in his hands. This was no way to motivate a soldier. There was no encouragement, only berating. The Captain knew who to berate and who to praise. He knew his soldiers and what they needed to survive. Bitters only knew himself, and his experiences. James remembered the Captain sitting and listening as all of the soldiers got excited about the first letter that they received from home, and the first letter that they wrote home. He asked the soldiers about each other, trying to learn their histories and life stories, in case he would ever need to tell their families in the notes that he added to the typewriter written letters.

He didn't understand how someone could be like this. How someone could yell at soldiers for not shooting fast enough, for not being enough. How was that supposed to motivate? James felt like he was always on the receiving end of criticism, because he smiled, because he didn't want to smoke, because he wanted books to read, because he ran his fingers over the script of his fiancé's letters. James was weak. But he didn't want to be strong if it meant he lost his humanity. He would rather be broken and suffering.

Bitters cleaned his gun differently than the Captain. James could see it in his eyes—the way he looked at it, checking every piece three times. And yet he cleaned it quickly, scrubbing it without any gentleness. But despite the brisk pace, he looked at his gun lovingly, in a way that James didn't think a person could look at a gun. He looked at it like it was his only lifeline, his only constant. He looked at it like it was his best friend and one confidant. What James wouldn't give to get inside of Bitters' head to understand him better. To see how he got to be the way that

he was. Because then maybe James would be able to halt the process in himself. He could already feel the monster piece of him creeping in.

After being on one of the brunt ends of Bitter's screaming matches, James had had enough, and he couldn't control his temper any longer or his language. *What the fuck is your problem? Why are you like this? Why are you so cruel?* James instantly regretted every word that had come out of his mouth, but he didn't have time to apologize. He felt his own eyes widen and he really wanted to cover his mouth. To shove the words back down his throat like the vomit they were. He couldn't read Bitters' face; he couldn't tell if there was sadness or anger in his voice. All he could make out were the reactions of the soldiers around him—he could feel it, the tension. Bitters had raised his eyebrow, almost in contemplation of what to say to James, and then he rolled his eyes. James read his lips because he swore that he had lost his hearing for an instant: *I don't just want to be a target they shoot at. They're the targets now.* Her words echoed in his head before Bitters even finished speaking: *Don't be a stuffed bear.*

James kept trying to understand Bitters. To get inside of his head. Because both Bitters and the Captain were different than who they had been at the beginning of the war. That much was clear. He could almost see the letters forming in his head. The sound of the Captain's voice as he pronounced every syllable. It felt like the Captain was back, when it was only James's mind, putting words in a dead man's mouth. *The war changes all of us. I chose to live with the pain of killing others; because it was better to be broken in my heart, constantly hating a tiny part of myself, rather than broken in the head. I would rather hate myself than lose myself. I'd rather hate the tiny piece of monster than forget my monster.* It still didn't make sense to James, watching Bitters, watching him fight. Bitters saw them as targets, and claimed that the enemy only saw him as a target anyway. Why should Bitters act any differently. Because Bitters thought

that he needed to come back whole, too. It just so happened that he knew his breaking point, and he wanted to avoid it. Because if Bitters saw the other side as people, he would see the crying mothers, and then he'd see the end of the gun. Bitters had mourned during the killing, and learned that he couldn't, and the Captain had always mourned after. Because in battle, you forget yourself, with the adrenaline, and the stress, and the noise.

Condolences weren't enough. The rest of the squad was sad, but it felt like James was the only one reacting to the degree that the Captain deserved. He could see the way that the other soldiers looked at him, knowing the special relationship that he and the Captain had shared. After his outburst, they didn't look him in the eye anymore. None of the Americans, at least. Maybe because the Americans hadn't been fighting long enough to lose a leader; someone who they looked up to; who had challenged them, and pushed them to be better. They hadn't really lost a father yet. They had lost brothers and friends. But it was different to lose a leader. To permanently lose the source of guidance and comfort; to lose the rock, the constant. He hated the pity looks. As if the other soldiers hadn't lost a leader too. They looked at him like he was a child throwing a tantrum—for mourning the loss of a friend, for being overdramatic. He didn't need their sympathy, the pats on the back. He could feel their eyes on him when he wasn't looking. The French and the English looked at him more sympathetically, rather than pity.

In his free time, he tried to talk to the soldiers from other countries. It was easy to talk to the British, and he really wanted to know what the French had experienced; having their country being taken from them. France had always seemed so far away and magical, like a fairy tale in his mind. And he was there, surrounded by the people, who reminded him of his neighbors. The soldiers spoke of how they used to play in the streets, visiting their neighbors, and spending the summer nights together. Going to church on Sunday. They were human just like him. But

now they hid in their houses. They feared the people who had forced their rule on them. The Germans who wanted to control everything. Back home among his friends, he had been short. But now he was tall. She had always been short, even when she wore her heels, and he had towered over her. That's what her friends went on about. The height difference and how it made them look even more swell together. She had wanted to watch the parade, she couldn't see the show at the carnival; she wanted to touch the sky. And she could reach it if he helped. He lifted her onto his shoulders. She didn't weigh anything. And he had had the romantic thought that she was his entire world. He had said that when he held the box in his hand and asked her to marry him. The ring was on her finger when he left, but he didn't have one on his. He had left too early. He had wanted to give her the proper wedding, with all the family, and cake. She was his entire world, and he had left it to see and fight for another one; one that was so big and so different from what he had expected and read; one that needed to fix its own problems. He just wanted to go back to his little world, where the only thing he had to shoot was a bottle for a stuffed animal at the carnival.

Authors Note: Inspired by the letters of Bruce Adams to his parents back home, I thought of the invasion of Normandy in 1944 as well as the foreign reaction to American soldiers. I also thought of a small-town boy experiencing the world for the first time, in an era when everyone had little. Ultimately, what everyone had were relationships and forms of love. Soldiers were forced to think about these situations, and find a purpose for fighting. Often the purpose was their family. In a time where technology was evolving, but communication was slow comparatively (excluding the telegram), every piece of information was crucial. I hope we can learn to appreciate every piece that we give out to our friends and strangers.

Adams, Bruce L. *Service Men's Book of Letters*. 1944. The State Historical Society of Missouri.