The Yellow Birds

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KEVIN POWERS

Born in Virginia in a family with a long tradition of military service, Kevin Powers joined the U.S. Army at the age of seventeen. In 2004, he was sent to Mosul and Tal Afar, Iraq, to serve for a year as a machine-gunner in the Iraq War. After an honorable discharge from the military in 2005, he dedicated himself to literature, earning a bachelor's degree in English from Virginia Commonwealth University and an MFA in poetry from the University of Texas at Austin. In 2012, inspired by his experience as a soldier in Iraq, he published his first novel, *The Yellow Birds*, which meant to convey a sense of the complex psychological impact of war on an individual soldier. Powers later published a debut collection of poetry, *Letter Composed During a Lull in the Fighting* (2014) and a second novel, *A Shout in the Ruins* (2018), about the violence and repercussions of the American Civil War in Virginia.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

After the terrorist attacks against the United States on September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush declared the "war on terror" to eliminate terrorists and their allies around the world. As part of this strategy, President Bush declared war against Iraq in 2003. He justified the American invasion by explaining that Iraq allegedly had ties to Al-Qaeda, the terrorist organization responsible for the September 11 attacks in New York City, and that there was evidence that Iraq was secretly and illegally developing weapons of mass destruction. Even though intelligence agencies soon proved that these claims were unfounded, the war lasted until 2011. During this period, Iraq, whose entire government was disbanded by the U.S. in the early months of the war, suffered from violent political tensions and sectarian conflict opposing two different groups within Islam, the Sunni and the Shi'a. As the American occupation continued, opposition to the war soon grew in the United States. In 2008, President Bush finally signed an agreement planning for American troops to withdraw from Iraq by the end of 2011, which successfully took place.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

A contemporary war novel centered on the physical and psychological trauma of taking part in war, *The Yellow Birds* has been compared to other classics of the genre, written about twentieth-century wars. Set during World War I, German writer Erich Maria Remarque's novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) describes German soldiers' difficulties to recover from the intense stress and violence of the front and to reintegrate civilian life. In 1940, Ernest Hemingway's novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls* recounts the story of an American soldier who volunteers to fight in the Spanish Civil War. More recently, American novelist Tim O'Brien published *The Things They Carried* in 1990, a short story collection about American soldiers during the Vietnam War—a work which, like *The Yellow Birds*, proposed to fill a gap in public knowledge about soldiers' intimate experiences of war. Similarly, Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* explores the complexity and psychological trauma of the Vietnam War, as well as providing thoughtful political criticism aimed at American political leaders and the American military.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Yellow Birds*
- **When Written:** 2008-2012
- **Where Written:** Austin, Texas
- **When Published:** September 11, 2012
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernism
- **Genre:** Novel
- **Setting:** Iraq, Germany, and the United States
- **Climax:** Murph is tortured and killed after deserting the U.S. Army in Iraq
- **Antagonist:** Although the Iraqi enemy represents the most direct physical threat to Bartle's life in Iraq, the true antagonist in the story proves to be the war itself, as it deeply affects Bartle during and after combat.
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Al Tafar. Kevin Powers share many similar traits with his protagonist, John Bartle. The name Powers chooses for the fictional Iraqi town where John Bartle fights, "Al Tafar," highlights the similarity between Powers and Bartle's experiences, since the author's own experience of combat took place in the real city of Tal Afar, Iraq.

The War in Iraq Today. Although the United States withdrew from Iraq in 2011, after eight years of occupation, the rise of the terrorist organization ISIL (also known as ISIS) has led the U.S. to return to Iraq in 2014—this time working hand-in-hand with the Iraqi army to defeat ISIL.

PLOT SUMMARY

Set in the contemporary, twenty-first-century political world,

Kevin Power's novel *The Yellow Birds* relates a soldier's experience before, during, and after the war in Iraq, revealing the physical and psychological impact of such an intense experience.

In December 2003, at a military base in New Jersey, twenty-one-year-old John Bartle, who has joined the U.S. army three years ago, learns that he is about to be sent to Iraq. Bartle discovers that he will be following the orders of Sergeant Sterling, an officer famous for his bravery and selflessness, and that he will be paired with a young eighteen-year-old recruit, Daniel "Murph" Murphy, who only recently joined the military. Bartle and Murph are both nervous about leaving and try to imagine what Iraq must be like. A few days before leaving the U.S., although Bartle dreads being responsible for Murph, he surprises himself by making Murph's mother a promise that will be impossible to keep: to bring her son back alive.

In Iraq, Bartle and Murph soon find themselves face-to-face with the horrific reality of war. Bartle, who had expected war to bring soldiers together, discovers that it actually has the opposite effect: it forces everyone to focus exclusively on their own survival. Since death is so frequent and unpredictable, Bartle and Murph learn to detach themselves from the deaths around them. Believing that other people's deaths makes their own less likely, they begin a counting game in which they count the number of dead soldiers in the U.S. army. Their goal, which Bartle later calls a futile effort to ward off death, is to keep from becoming the thousandth soldier killed.

Bartle and Murph also learn to commit violent acts without reflecting on the morality of their actions. They grow accustomed to the destruction around them, accepting that part of war involves accidentally killing civilians and watching innocent people die. In battle, Sergeant Sterling proves aggressive, spurring his men to battle by instilling hatred and rage in them—a strategy that Bartle detests but finds necessary.

One evening, when the soldiers receive mail, Murph learns that his girlfriend is breaking up with him. Instead of showing anger, which Sterling wants him to, Murph receives the news with resignation, accepting that he can do nothing about it. Bartle then sees that Murph keeps a **picture** of his girlfriend and him in his helmet, along with his casualty feeder card, meant to allow military staff to identify his body if he is killed.

That same night, a colonel arrives, accompanied by a reporter and a cameraman. Moved by pride and arrogance at being filmed, the colonel announces that the soldiers are about to take part in a very important mission in the nearby orchard. The colonel invokes notions of divine justice, mentioning that this land has biblical roots, but Bartle finds that he seems unconcerned by the soldiers' individual fates, even though he highlights the danger of the upcoming battle and the fact that some soldiers will probably die. After the colonel leaves, Bartle learns that American soldiers have fought over this orchard every year for the past three years—a fact that, for Bartle, makes the war seem absurd and pointless, lacking an overarching goal.

After preparing for battle, the nervous soldiers march toward the orchard at dawn, where they are suddenly attacked. One of the American soldiers, fatally wounded, dies surrounded by his companions. This death deeply affects Bartle and Murph. Bartle, who thought that the soldier might say something before dying, discovers that in these circumstances, death is an inherently solitary and physically revolting process. Murph, on the other hand, is troubled because he felt relief at seeing this soldier die instead of him. Bartle tries to reassure Murph that this is a normal reaction, since it reveals that Murph still wants to protect his own life, but Murph remains disturbed. This episode marks the beginning of Murph's mental suffering, as the young soldier finds himself unable to reconcile soldiers' selfish attitude, based on their own survival, with nobler moral principles, and soon finds himself disillusioned with the cruelty of war.

The next day, the soldiers discover a body bomb on a bridge. This body, an Iraqi man whom the enemy killed and stuffed with explosives, proves to be the first victim in the next attack. During a particularly intense shooting exchange, Bartle feels sick at seeing so much death and violence around him. In this moment, he realizes that he must mentally abandon his memories of home and his previous civilian identity, because he cannot reconcile what he is currently doing with the law-abiding citizen he used to be.

Over the course of the next few weeks, Bartle realizes that Murph is becoming more distant. He does not talk to anyone anymore and often disappears to spend time on his own. Worried about his friend's mental health, Bartle goes to Sterling, who cynically predicts that Murph is going to die because he is thinking too much of home. Becoming distracted in this way, Sterling explains, is the most dangerous thing that could happen to a soldier, because it keeps one from focusing on the daily tasks of fighting and surviving, which require aggressiveness and concentration.

When Bartle finds the abandoned photograph and casualty feeder card that Murph has been keeping safe in his helmet until then, Bartle becomes nervous, convinced that Sterling might be right and that Murph is indeed giving up on his life as a soldier—and, perhaps, on his life as a whole. Bartle goes to look for his friend and finds him by the medics' station, where he learns that Murph frequently goes there to observe a doctor's daily routine. Reflecting on this situation, Bartle concludes that Murph is trying to stay in touch with ideals of kindness and compassion, which this doctor's actions demonstrate. In taking time to observe this medic, Murph is also choosing the memories he wants to form in his mind—a small act of rebellion against the brutal unpredictability of war, which leaves soldiers with very little control over their own lives.

However, when this doctor is suddenly killed in a mortar attack, Murph experiences a complete emotional breakdown, goes insane, and decides to desert the military posting. Taking off all his clothes and escaping through a hole in the wire, he walks toward the city of Al Tafar, where he condemns himself to the near-certain fate of being killed by vengeful locals.

Sterling discovers Murph's absence and the soldiers all go out in search of him. After following the indications of some local inhabitants, Sterling and Bartle discover Murph's lifeless body at the bottom of a minaret. Murph has been tortured to death, and his body is so horribly mutilated that Bartle feels sick. He also feels sorry for Murph's mother, who will have to see her son's body so horrifically destroyed, and concludes that they must keep this from happening. Bartle convinces Sterling to keep quiet and, together, they throw Murph's body in the river, pretending that they never discovered it.

Later, overwhelmed by Murph's death, Bartle remembers his promise to Murph's mother to bring her son back alive and, without truly knowing why, writes her a letter in which he pretends to be her son. Although he knows that it is wrong to lie in this way, he feels that he has taken part in so many immoral deeds that he no longer knows how to evaluate his own actions morally.

When the soldiers finally leave Iraq, after over a year of service, they pass through Germany, where Bartle begins to notice that he feels guilty for Murph's death. Upon returning to the United States, he also realizes that his experience of war as an inherently cruel experience is at odds with most civilians' attitudes, who insult the Iraqi enemy and celebrate Bartle for his participation in a noble cause, using the **yellow ribbon** as a symbol of their support for the war. Bartle, who knows that war leads members of both sides to commit atrocities, finds that he cannot share his emotions of guilt, pain, and grief with anyone, and begins to suffer from social isolation. In addition, he finds himself unable to control his violent memories of battle, which make him feel isolated and displaced in his own home. Over the course of a few weeks, he becomes convinced that he no longer feels at home in Richmond, Virginia, and that his state of mind is so intolerable that he would rather die.

During this period, a captain from the Criminal Investigation Division comes to Bartle's home, and the veteran soldier knows that he is going to be tried for writing Mrs. Murphy a fake letter. When Bartle realizes that the army is in fact accusing him of being responsible for Murph's death, he tries to defend himself by exposing other people's lies, but soon concludes that the army is only interested in using him as a scapegoat, so that Mrs. Murphy might feel as though justice has been done. Bartle also learns that Sterling, so famous for his obedience and self-sacrifice, has committed suicide—an act that Bartle interprets as the only selfish act Sterling ever took part in in his life.

As Bartle anticipated, he is sent to prison for a few years for Murph's death. There, he finds peace in the absence of social interactions, as he is free to explore his mental life at his own pace. As the days pass by, he tries to analyze his memories of the war and to identify the war's overarching significance. Eventually, though, he is forced to admit that he cannot find any grand patterns in his experience of war. On the contrary, he concludes that the events that marked his time in Iraq were defined by chance and unpredictability. Although this conclusion emphasizes the absurdity of war, it allows Bartle to finally let go of the past and stop trying to impose order on a series of events that followed no visible logic. When Mrs. Murphy comes to visit him and they talk for many hours about the events that led to Murph's death, Bartle finally feels that he can resign himself to what has happened, and start moving forward.

After leaving prison, Bartle moves into an isolated cabin by the Blue Ridge Mountains. There, he leads a tranquil life, making sure to remain in an environment over which he has agency and which does not risk bringing him too many painful memories of the war. Over time, he begins to feel more comfortable with himself and his past. In the novel's concluding lines, Bartle finally confronts the fact of Murph's death. As he imagines Murph's body floating down the Tigris river and entering the sea, he lets Murph's body float away from him both physically and mentally, finding peace in the absence of guilt or pain, and the evidence that both Murph and he, in different ways, are finally at rest.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

John Bartle – Protagonist and narrator Private John Bartle is young and innocent when he is sent to fight in Iraq. Although he soon finds war cruel and difficult to endure, he succeeds in protecting himself from excessive psychological trauma by adopting a strategic attitude of indifference to violence. At the same time, despite his self-interested survival techniques, he proves sincerely concerned about his war companion Murph's fate, showing solidarity with the young boy's psychological trauma. Upon his return home, Bartle discovers the depth of his actual emotions. Although he does not believe in spiritual absolution or forgiveness, he remains faithful to the ideal of truth. He demonstrates his honesty and integrity when he engages in introspection, admitting to himself that he has taken part in immoral deeds and is suffering tremendously from the knowledge of his own brutality. He also discovers that his true resilience and strength lie not in his capacity to kill, but in the capacity to let go of the past and rebuild a new life for himself in the United States, despite the trauma he has been through.

Daniel "Murph" Murphy – Although eighteen-year-old Murph initially adopts the same attitude of strategic indifference as his war companion Bartle, he soon shows signs of greater

sensitivity and psychological weakness in the face of violence. Instead of waiting until after the war to analyze the moral validity of his actions, Murph becomes obsessed with the cruelty of war and his own part in it while still in Iraq. Unable to reconcile his moral principles with his current actions, he loses faith in his role as a soldier and longs to return to civilian life—even though he also begins to understand that war will affect him forever. Although Murph's compassion and desire for human kindness makes him a noble, sensitive being, they prove ill adapted to the vicious world of war, and ultimately lead him to insanity and death.

Sergeant Sterling – Two qualities distinguish Sergeant Sterling from other soldiers: his bravery and his selflessness. Characterized by a willingness to sacrifice his entire being to military duty and the necessity of war, Sterling is also deeply devoted to protecting the men under his authority, including Bartle and Murph. Although he occasionally seems cruel or overly aggressive in battle, these are attitudes he consciously adopts to survive and ensure the soldiers' success. At the same time, his brutality does extend beyond the war, as he viciously attacks a vulnerable bartender in Germany, suggesting that violence might be a way for him to cope with the physical and psychological stress of war. Sterling also reveals his sensitive nature through some of his actions, such as his suicide, which suggests that he was perhaps more emotionally vulnerable than he allowed people to witness.

Bartle's Mother – Characterized primarily by the fear and relief she feels in relation to her son's time in Iraq, Bartle's mother proves confused by her son's psychological trauma after the war. Although she does not impose her thoughts on him and tries to be as understanding as possible, her efforts at understanding Bartle are stifled by his own reluctance to express himself. Bartle's mother thus remains a character marked by worry and confusion.

Ladonna Murphy (Murph's Mother) – Although initially reassured to note that Murph and Bartle are becoming friends, Murph's mother also proves deeply worried about her son's fate in Iraq and forces Bartle to promise that he will protect Murph's life. After Murph's death, she proves neither vengeful nor forgiving, still too overcome by grief to accept her son's death in a peaceful way.

The Lieutenant (LT) – Present at all stages of Bartle's time in Iraq, the lieutenant (or LT) gives the soldiers information about upcoming battles. Although he is probably not much older than Bartle himself, he has an air of maturity and detachment that make him seem reserved. He usually speaks to the soldiers in an honest tone, free of aggression and occasionally punctuated by fear.

The German Bartender – The young bartender who works in the brothel that Sterling and Bartle visit shows fear of the Americans, because Sterling has attacked her viciously for no apparent reason, leaving her with a bruised eye. However, she behaves in a dignified way and proves particularly discerning when she realizes that the soldiers' violence and drunkenness are probably signs of sadness more than a desire to harm. She seems genuinely kind, though mistrustful, and feels offended when Bartle appears to want sex after she helps him get over his hangover.

Malik – Bartle's platoon's translator, Malik, is highly skilled in English but demonstrates a lack of knowledge about military safety that ultimately gets him killed. Malik also highlights the emotional and cultural impact of war on local inhabitants' lives, as he recalls with nostalgia the peaceful atmosphere of his neighborhood before the war.

The Doctor – The doctor that Murph observes every day in Iraq is a young woman capable of professional efficacy when tending to wounded soldiers, but also of kindness and compassion. She becomes an example of someone who plays a morally admirable part in the war, devoting her energy to saving lives instead of destroying them.

The American Bartender – At the American airport where Bartle waits for his plane back home to Virginia, a bartender shows admiration for Bartle's participation in the war and utter contempt for the Iraqis. His simplistic vision of the war as a noble fight between good and evil is emblematic of many civilians' attitudes, largely ignorant of soldiers' actual experience.

The Colonel – Characterized by pride and arrogance, the colonel gives the soldiers a speech in which he seems more interested in glorifying the war and showing off for the news people and cameras than in honoring their individual sacrifice. He exemplifies the army's lack of sincere interest in soldiers' well-being and daily lives.

Captain Anderson – The captain from the Criminal Investigation Division proves insensitive to Bartle's current psychological state and condescending of any form of mental or physical weakness. According to Bartle, his cynicism about Bartle's trial, which he knows does not necessarily defend the truth, reflects the army's self-interested attitude, more concerned with protecting its own reputation than tending to individual soldiers' needs.

Luke –In stark contrast to Bartle's depressed mind state, Luke, Bartle' best friend since middle school, shows youthful optimism and energy, organizing expeditions to the river with friends while Bartle feels unable to socialize. Like Bartle's other friends, Luke shows concern for him and tries to encourage him to get out of the house. He saves Bartle's life when he calls 911 after seeing his friend fall asleep in the river.

The Iraqi Man – The local inhabitant of Al Tafar gives the Americans information about Murph's whereabouts and shows sincere surprise at the young man's state, as he proves unable to understand why Murph would choose to walk around naked and alone in such a dangerous area. His honesty about what he

has seen is meant to defend the truth as much as to protect Iraqis from the Americans' aggressive searching techniques.

The Cartwright – A mysterious man who is surprisingly unperturbed by the presence of twenty armed American soldiers around him, the old cartwright gives Sterling and Bartle accurate information about where Murph's body lies, suggesting that he probably witnessed the violent scene of Murph's death. His indifference to cruelty and to the threat of violence highlights how ordinary brutality has become in this part of the world.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Father Bernard – The priest in the German cathedral Bartle walks in is highly perceptive, as he immediately notices that Bartle looks troubled. Although he appears sincerely worried about Bartle's well-being, Bartle also notices that his offers of help feel obligatory, moved by a sense of duty as much as personal concern.

The Major – Though the major gives a speech in which he congratulates the soldiers for their fighting, proving as uninteresting to the soldiers as the colonel's speech had been, the major shows more concern for the soldiers' individual actions and gives Sergeant Sterling a Bronze Star for valor.

Marie – Murph's girlfriend, Marie, decides to break up with Murph while he is in Iraq, emphasizing the severance between Murph's current life and his previous civilian identity.

The Interpreter – Playing an alternately aggressive or pacifying role, the interpreter helps the American soldiers try to find Murph, although Sterling does not seem to trust him and sends him away.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

WAR, VIOLENCE, AND DETACHMENT

Kevin Power's novel *The Yellow Birds* describes a soldier's experience in the Iraq War—from the moment he learns that he will be sent to battle, to his difficult return to civilian life. Over the course of the conflict, protagonist John Bartle realizes that war is neither glorious nor just, but rather characterized by cruelty and the unpredictability of death. In this context, remaining sane and performing one's job well requires adopting a strategic attitude toward brutality—namely, accepting violence and death as ordinary aspects of life, without reflecting on their moral or emotional significance. Although Bartle mostly succeeds in doing this, his friend Daniel Murphy becomes overwhelmed by the cruelty of war and goes insane, ultimately dying after deserting the camp. Bartle and Murph's conflicting fates suggest that, to remain mentally strong, soldiers must suppress their human sensitivities. The novel argues that survival during war involves a form of dehumanization, as soldiers are forced to sacrifice their capacity for reflection and introspection in order to protect their physical and mental selves.

In war, death can strike at any moment, killing soldiers arbitrarily and unpredictably. Faced with this senselessness, soldiers are forced to accept that they have little control over anything, including their own lives. As such, when Bartle and Murph's translator, Malik, is killed suddenly in front of them, they watch the scene with apparent indifference. Bartle explains his lack of surprise or sadness as a form of self-protection: "I needed to continue. And to continue, I had to see the world with clear eyes, to focus on the essential. We only pay attention to rare things, and death was not rare." To keep fighting, Bartle must learn to focus exclusively on things that affect his own survival—and, in turn, actively shut out those things that don't.

To further distance themselves from the destruction all around them, Bartle and Murph begin to count the number of dead. Their goal of reaching one thousand deaths allows them to turn war into a kind of game—one that affects impersonal numbers rather than real human beings. This capacity to detach themselves from violence allows the men to feel invincible—Bartle says, "We never considered that we could be among the walking dead as well"—but also keeps them from examining the morality of their actions. Bartle notes, "We were unaware of even our own savagery now: the beatings and the kicked dogs, the searches and the sheer brutality of our presence. Each action was a page in an exercise book performed by rote. I didn't care." Like counting deaths, obeying orders takes on a mechanical quality. The repetitive, routine nature of the soldiers' actions further numbs them to the brutality of war, thus allowing them to obey violent orders without a second thought.

Bartle views even Sergeant Sterling's aggressiveness as a necessary strategy to ensure survival, rather than a display of sadism, since staying focused is so crucial to staying alive. In combat, Sterling yells hateful words at the enemy and seems to take pleasure in shooting at them, delivering his shots and insults with a rage-filled energy that he means to communicate to his companions. "I hated the way he was necessary, how I needed him to jar me into action even when they were trying to kill me," Bartle explains, noting that his own survival instinct is not sufficient to make him want to fight.

Regardless of the moral validity of doing so, the novel argues that soldiers are able to insulate themselves from the senseless horrors of war by becoming indifferent to the violence of their

surroundings. In turn, soldiers who fail to cultivate this emotional detachment put themselves in a vulnerable position. When Murph begins to daydream of being back home, for example, Sterling says: "Murph is home, Bartle. And he's gonna be there with a flag shoved up his ass before you know it." Sterling argues that Murph's distraction (the fact that he thinks of home too much) is keeping him from concentrating on the war and protecting his own life, which is likely to lead to his death.

Bartle also realizes that Murph is losing his ability to remain purposefully indifferent toward other people's deaths. When one of their fellow soldiers is killed, Murph feels distraught, instead of simply counting it playfully as he might have done before. "I was really happy it wasn't me. That's crazy, right?" he asks Bartle, who tries to reassure his friend by saying that *not* feeling relieved to be alive would be crazier. However, this episode suggests that Murph is no longer thinking as a typical soldier. Instead of focusing exclusively on fighting and surviving, Murph now interrogates his own emotions as well as the moral validity of his actions.

Through introspection, Murph is desperately trying to regain control over the soldiers' inherently unpredictable lives. In his free time, he goes off on his own to watch a doctor's daily routine, as she tends to wounded soldiers. Murph finds comfort in the fact that he is *choosing* to watch her, when he has so little control over everything else in war. As Bartle explains: "[Murph] wanted to have one memory he'd made of his own volition to balance out the shattered remnants of everything he hadn't asked for." However, Murph's illusion of choice soon shatters when the doctor is suddenly killed, and Murph once again finds himself face-to face with the arbitrary violence of war. Unable to withstand how helpless he feels, he goes insane, deserting the camp completely naked and condemning himself to being brutally tortured and killed by the nearby Iraqi enemy.

Murph's desertion and death confirm Sterling's prediction that Murph's inability to detach himself from the brutality of combat would be his undoing. More generally, the young soldier's story illustrates that, in a context of near-constant violence, soldiers can only survive if they remain emotionally distant from both their own actions and the destruction around them. Paradoxically, then, ignoring one's compassion, fear, or moral instincts—that is, everything that makes a person truly human and complex—proves necessary to become a successful soldier, capable of surviving the horrors of war.

MEMORY AND TRAUMA

After leaving Iraq, John Bartle realizes that war has left indelible wounds on his mind, and that reintegrating into regular society might prove just as difficult as combat itself. Plagued by vivid memories of violent killings, Bartle finds himself unable to focus on the present and start a new life as though nothing happened. The anger and guilt he still feels at having been unable to prevent tragic events such as his companion Murphy's death lead him to try to sort out his memories of the war, in search of a greater significance that would give meaning to his experience. However, Bartle soon realizes that he cannot control his flow of memories and that there is, in fact, no underlying meaning to many of the horrors he witnessed. Although this initially generates feelings of helplessness, as well as the desire to end his life, he eventually realizes that the only way for him to move on is to let go of his guilt. Instead of trying to find peace by ascribing meaning to past events, Bartle gradually finds peace by accepting the past as it is: a disordered, tragic series of events he had no control over—and therefore should not feel guilty about. The only thing he *does* have control over is his present life. By focusing on the little areas of existence over which he does have agency, Bartle is gradually able to feel comfortable again with his own self and build a new life in the United States.

Back at home after the war in Iraq, Bartle finds himself unable to escape his memories of violence. When Bartle's mother drives him home from the airport, Bartle looks out at a field and wonders where he could hide from an enemy's attack, only to realize that he is projecting his memories of Iraq onto the familiar landscape of home. Days later, in his own backyard, he physically braces for the impact of shells when a crow's caw reminds him of mortars. These memories prove so strong that they impact his current life, making him feel a distinct sense of dislocation even in familiar places. Although thinking of home used to comfort him during difficult moments during the war, he no longer feels emotionally attached to the concept of home upon his return. "My muscles flexed into the emptiness I still called home," he says, understanding that although nothing at home has changed, *he* has changed too much to fit back into his old life.

Though Bartle might be physically present in Virginia, it's clear his mind remains elsewhere. When his mom encourages him to at least think about joining his friends on an expedition, Bartle, who feels disconnected from his former acquaintances and his old lifestyle, explodes: "Goddammit, Mama. All I fucking do is think." Bartle feels helpless and trapped specifically because he does not know how to escape his own mind and the oppressive nature of his memories.

To counter this feeling, Bartle tries to organize his memories chronologically. His goal is to establish a relation of cause and effect between different events, so that he might grasp the overarching significance of what he has experienced. However, he soon realizes that war follows no hidden logic. In prison for a crime he did not actually commit, Bartle covers his cell's walls with writing, making a mark for every memory that comes back to him, hoping that he will find order in this process. However, this effort proves futile: "Eventually, I realized that the marks could not be assembled into any kind of pattern. They were

fixed in place. Connecting them would be wrong. They fell where they had fallen. Marks representing the randomness of the war were made at whatever moment I remembered them: disorder predominated."

After realizing that he cannot bring order to an inherently incoherent series of events, Bartle ultimately decides to give up on trying to organize the past. Instead, he looks toward the future and attempts to make his present life as small and manageable as he possibly can. After leaving prison, Bartle moves to a small cabin in the hills, where he tries to live peacefully. "I don't want desert," he says. "I don't want anything unbroken. I'd rather look out at mountains. Or to have my view obstructed by a group of trees. […] Something manageable and finite that could break up and fix the earth into parcels small enough that they could be contended with." Bartle's desire to regain control over his life involves eliminating anything that might remind him of the war, such as the desert, and dividing his experiences into manageable, orderly chunks that stand in stark contrast with the chaotic swarm of wartime memories. His attitude toward trees is symbolic: all he wants is to be given the physical and mental space to live a life in which he has full control.

Rebuilding the present in small steps goes hand in hand with letting go of harmful memories. In the novel's final scene, Bartle imagines Murph's body floating down the Tigris river in Iraq, all the way to the sea. This becomes a symbolic moment in which Bartle reconciles with his own past: Murph's body flows away from him both physically and mentally, suggesting that Bartle can finally let go of his grief and move on. Bartle might not be able to change, reorganize, or forget the past, but he can modify his emotional attitude toward it, thus making his post-war life more bearable.

Therefore, when imposing an artificial order on his memories fails, Bartle realizes that his true power lies not in having control over their *emergence*, but in modifying the *attitude* he might adopt toward them. Feeling guilty or angry about Murph's death will only make the rest of his life painful, whereas accepting it as an unfortunate yet irreparable event ultimately allows him to move on. Bartle, the novel suggests, must accept that he is not responsible for all the tragedies he has witnessed. Instead, he must focus—with the help of a lot of time and patience—on taking small steps toward rebuilding a peaceful life, free from suffering about the past.

COMPANIONSHIP VS. SOLITUDE

Following a traditional conception of the army as a place of camaraderie and solidarity, Bartle initially believes that war will bring his fellow soldiers and him together. However, he soon realizes that true solidarity in war is rare, existing only in extraordinary fighters such as Sergeant Sterling. By contrast, for most soldiers, war generates isolation, as all learn to focus primarily on their own survival. This particular form of solitude becomes both the cause and the consequence of soldiers' unease: during war, it makes them lose trust in the nobility of their fight (since they are primarily concerned with surviving, not defending high-minded ideals), and after war it keeps them from reintegrating civilian life (since, unlike them, many people still see war as an elevated enterprise). The novel thus denounces a central hypocrisy: the way in which a nation celebrates soldiers' achievements without actually understanding how soldiers might feel about their experience. Instead of holding on to the idea that war is always glorious, the novel suggests that recognizing the deep psychological toll that war has on soldiers is necessary to keep them from succumbing to solitude and alienation.

Although Bartle initially believes that war might bring companionship, he soon realizes that the inherent selfishness of war leads to various degrees of solitude and alienation, with potentially fatal consequences. At the beginning of the novel, Bartle reflects on the gap between his expectations and the reality he has come to accept: "I'd been trained to think war was the great unifier, that it brought people closer together than any other activity on earth. Bullshit. War is the great maker of solipsists: how are you going to save my life today?" The self-interested nature of fighting thus keeps soldiers from becoming a unified group and condemns them to fear and isolation.

Back at home, too, Bartle is alone, as the gap between the noble goal civilians ascribe to war and the selfish reality he has witnessed as a soldier keeps him from sharing his experience with others. "I feel like I'm being eaten from the inside out and I can't tell anyone what's going on because everyone is so grateful to me all the time," he says. Bartle does not want his war actions to be celebrated, since he feels that nothing he did was inherently generous or noble. Rather, he would want people to recognize that war is more painful than virtuous, and then to change their attitudes accordingly.

This feeling of being misunderstood and isolated can have fatal consequences. At home, Bartle begins to feel that he would rather die than continue living this way. Although he does not actually commit suicide, two of his war companions do. His fellow soldier Murph finds war so cruel and alienating that he deserts and essentially commits suicide by walking naked into enemy territory, where vengeful Iraqis brutally mutilate and kill him. Even Sergeant Sterling, a fighter whom Bartle admires for his self-sacrifice, commits suicide as soon as he realizes that he can be the master of his own actions, instead of a tool serving the army's interests. Soldiers' suicidal thoughts and/or actions reveal that war leaves soldiers mentally isolated, unable to find comfort in the collective enterprise of the military or society.

Although Bartle does not end up killing himself, his unwillingness to accept help reveals how isolated and misunderstood he feels. Despite feeling lost and confused, Bartle does not want to rely on others for help. For example,

while in Germany, on his way back to the U.S., a perceptive priest notices that he looks distraught and offers to pray for him. However, Bartle feels that the priest is doing this out of obligation and refuses, suggesting that he does not believe in spiritual absolution. Even meeting with Murph's mother in prison does not bring Bartle any sense of peace or reconciliation, although the two of them talk about Murph's death for six hours. "She hadn't offered forgiveness and I hadn't asked for it," Bartle explains. These episodes suggest that Bartle has not been given (and has not accepted) the opportunity to express his thoughts to others in a way that might make him feel relief.

The novel highlights another way in which Bartle might have been able to recover from the stress and pain of war: medical care. Bartle's refusal to seek such care derives in part from his belief that no authority will be able to help him, but also from the lack of subtlety with which the military approaches psychological support. For example, after Iraq, Bartle is given a form in which, when asked how he feels after a "murder-death-kill," he is given only two options: "delighted" or "malaise"—two extremely simplistic conceptions of the psychological life of soldiers. Similarly, when Bartle tells a captain that he has found it hard to readapt to civilian life, the captain calls Bartle's attitude cowardice and asks him if he has seen "the doctors," which Bartle says he has. These episodes suggest that post-combat resources are ill equipped to handle Bartle's complex mental state. Feeling that no one is able to understand his situation, Bartle is forced to rely on no one but himself to heal from the wounds that war has left him with.

Even though isolation might be in part the consequence of inadequate support, it does allow Bartle to process his experience at his own pace. In Germany, for instance, he discovers that he cannot communicate with many locals yet finds "peace in the absence of talk." In prison, too, he does not feel oppressed or lonely but, instead, happy to be "pleasantly forgotten by almost everyone." These episodes reveal the pleasure Bartle takes in not having to explain himself to anyone. By the end of the novel, after leaving prison, Bartle feels comfortable living on his own in the hills, far from family and friends. To cope with his own past, this ending suggests, Bartle needs to be given the time and space to decide how he might want to reintegrate ordinary society, instead of having social interactions forced upon him.

Although Bartle ultimately succeeds in finding peace and comfort after war, the military and civilian support he receives after the war proves inadequate, as it is capable of condemning him to isolation and suicidal thoughts. The novel suggests that truly helping soldiers overcome the psychological effects of war involves understanding the complexity of their experience, far from rigid, idealized visions of war as a glorious enterprise.

JUSTICE, MORALITY, AND GUILT

At odds with many civilians' perception of war as a noble enterprise, Bartle knows from experience that war does not promote fairness and justice but, rather, arbitrary violence and death. Episodes such as Bartle's participation in killings and his companion Murph's cruel death uproot Bartle's principles, as he finds himself conflicted about taking part in potentially immoral acts. At the same time, though, many of the actions he feels guilty about are not the result of individual will but, rather, constitute orders that he was meant to follow—a situation that makes it difficult to identify who is truly responsible for the crimes committed in combat. As Bartle realizes that ordinary conceptions of human justice is unable to account for the horrors that he has witnessed or taken part in, he becomes convinced that such actions are not necessarily *individuals'* fault, but can be seen as the product of war itself. In breeding immoral actions and encouraging soldiers to behave violently, war itself sets the foundation for horror and injustice.

Although many civilians believe that the war in Iraq defends a noble cause, Bartle discovers that the actions he takes part in do not conform to traditional ideals of justice and fairness. This causes him to lose faith in the moral justification of war. In battle, Bartle does not consider the enemy inherently evil. Instead, he realizes that soldiers on both sides are fighting for nothing more than their own survival. As a result, he becomes disillusioned with the moral value of the actions he takes part in. For instance, when he sees an enemy escape fire during a violent battle, his reaction is to feel compassion for the man: "My first instinct was to yell out to him, 'You made it, buddy, keep going,' but I remembered how odd it would be to say a thing like that." The rivalry that Bartle reminds himself of thus proves artificial and arbitrary, since it does not reflect his actual feelings toward the enemy—whom he sees as fellow human beings, even if they are fighting on the opposite side. Wondering about the ethics of shooting a soldier who is, in essence, a person just like himself, Bartle wonders: "What kind of men are we?"

Bartle's experience thus strips the war of moral prestige. By contrast, civilians in the novel often retain an idealized vision of war as a grand fight between good and evil. When an American bartender asks Bartle if Iraq is "full of savages," Bartle replies evasively, "Yeah, man. Something like that." Bartle's unwillingness to agree fully with the bartender reveals his aversion to overly simplistic depictions of the war. Unlike most civilians, Bartle knows that it is not necessarily *the enemy* that is savage, but that both sides can commit atrocious acts. In this way, *war itself* is savage, as it forces people on both sides to commit potentially abhorrent acts.

As Bartle loses faith in the moral validity of this war, he struggles to define what actually constitutes right and wrong more broadly. After Murph's death, for instance. he writes

Murph's mother a letter in which he pretends to be her son, thus making her believe that Murph is still alive. Although Bartle knows this is wrong, he is too overwhelmed by sadness and grief to judge his action in ethical terms. "I know it was a terrible thing to write that letter," he confesses. "What I don't know is where it fits in with all of the other terrible things I think about." The cruelty of war makes him lose track of what truly constitutes fairness and justice. Since he is so often forced to take part in actions that he would normally find reprehensible, such as killing other human beings, he no longer knows how to judge his own actions, and consequently remains plagued by a vague, generalized sense of guilt.

Faced with the burden of what he has witnessed and performed during war, Bartle finds that ordinary civilian justice is unable to account for his experience. The incapacity for human institutions to account for what happens in war suggests that it is war itself—rather than the individuals who take part in it—that is responsible for injustice.

Bartle is ultimately tried and sentenced to a few years in prison for Murph's death. Although Bartle is not actually responsible, he accepts punishment because he feels guilty about other things he has done in the war, such as writing a letter to Murph's mother. He concludes, "If writing it was wrong, then I was wrong. If writing it was not wrong, enough of what I'd done had been wrong and I would accept whatever punishment it carried." Bartle's self-critical honesty contrasts with the hypocrisy of the justice system, which only seeks a scapegoat; "Someone has to account for some of it," the captain explains, admitting that Bartle's trial is not actually meant to find out the truth about Murph's death, but to *make someone responsible* for it—in other words, to account for the inherent injustice and unpredictability of war.

Bartle's resignation to being sent to prison highlights his belief that *no one* is truly responsible for what has happened, but that everyone (himself included) is probably guilty of *something*. Guilt, then, can emerge even in the absence of a desire to harm. For example, Bartle's decision to write a letter to Murph's mother was not meant to cause her pain but, rather, to spare her the pain of learning about her son's death—a noble cause, even if the means to achieve it is dishonest. Similarly, although Bartle feels guilty for killing people during the war, he never actively wanted to harm others, since he was merely following orders and protecting his own life. In these circumstances, determining the extent of Bartle's agency and responsibility becomes particularly difficult, since the logic of war itself has led him to commit some of his most violent acts.

Bartle's experience thus highlights the way that war corrupts ordinary human beings, forcefully turning them away from ideals of justice and morality. Although Bartle never directly mentions the government's responsibility in starting the war, it becomes obvious that war itself—more than individual soldiers, who are obligated to follow orders—might be the true culprit, responsible for the injustices that are perpetrated in its name.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE YELLOW RIBBON

In the United States, in times of war, yellow ribbons are used as a symbol of support to U.S. Army troops. However, in *The Yellow Birds*, yellow ribbons come to represent a more uncomfortable fact: most civilians' ignorance of the realities of war. After Private John Bartle returns to the U.S. from the war in Iraq, he grows annoyed by the yellow ribbons around him. When an American bartender points to a yellow ribbon in a bar to explain why he wants to pay for Bartle's beer, Bartle becomes frustrated, because he feels that he has not taken part in the heroic enterprise the bartender assumes war involves. Another time, Bartle angrily wants to burn all the yellow ribbons in the country, as he feels that he is being celebrated for being a murderer.

Bartle's dissatisfaction with this symbol thus proves paradoxical. Although one might expect that he, as a veteran soldier, would feel grateful for the signs of civilian support he sees around him, Bartle's resentment derives from his realization that people's perception of the war (symbolized by the yellow ribbon) is overly simplistic and at odds with how the war truly is—brutal, destructive, and inelegant. Yellow ribbons thus begin to represent the lack of knowledge that people actually have about soldiers' experience, as well as Bartle's inability to reintegrate ordinary civilian life, where he feels like an impostor. The yellow ribbon thus acquires a meaning that clashes with its official definition: instead of highlighting the glory of war, it reveals the gap that exists between public narratives about war (which involve visions of camaraderie and grandeur) and the experience of war itself, which is infinitely more complex and unsettling.

MURPH'S PHOTOGRAPH AND CASUALTY FEEDER CARD

In his helmet, Murph keeps a photograph of his girlfriend and him, as well as a casualty feeder card that contains all the information necessary to identify his body if he dies. Throughout the course of the novel, these two objects represent Murph's gradual detachment from life (culminating in his emotional breakdown and death), as well as Bartle's attempt to come to terms with Murph's death (culminating in the decision to let go of the past). Although Murph initially keeps the picture and the casualty feeder card in a Ziploc bag, revealing how much he cares about his home life and the

protection of his own body, he later discards them, leaving them in a laundry bucket—an act that shows how disillusioned he has become with the war and that highlights his intention to die. When Bartle finds these objects, he decides to save them. However, after trying to keep Murph's memory alive, Bartle ultimately throws the photograph and casualty feeder card in the river, revealing that he wants to feel free from the pain and guilt that Murph's death evokes. Through their alternation of protection and abandonment, these objects thus reveal the evolution of Murph and Bartle's relationship with memory, as each character initially wants to hold onto the past, before deciding—for various reasons—that they need to let it go. In making Murph and Bartle's difficult relationships with the past and the future more visible, these concrete objects reflect the two characters' potentially fatal struggles to remain sane without giving up on their essential identity as human beings.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Little, Brown, and Company edition of *The Yellow Birds* published in 2012.

Chapter 1 Quotes

A yellow bird
With a yellow bill
Was perched upon
My windowsill

I lured him in
With a piece of bread
And then I smashed
His fucking head

Related Characters: Sergeant Sterling, John Bartle, Daniel "Murph" Murphy

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

This military song is included as a quote before *The Yellow Birds* begins. It gives meaning to the novel's title and sets the tone for the work's description of war and violence.

In the song, the surprising shift from the peaceful setting described in the first stanza and the seemingly gratuitous violence in the song's conclusion suggests that, in a context of war, successful soldiers must learn to perform cruel acts automatically, without reflecting on the moral value of their actions. However, if the yellow bird (or enemy) dies, the murderer becomes a yellow bird of his or her own—someone who, at war, is not only constantly exposed to being killed, but who also must give up on their own humanity to become callous killers.

By introducing this quote at the beginning of the novel, Kevin Powers exposes the cruel way in which soldiers are meant to feel no compassion for their victims and to follow their violent instincts blindly. As *The Yellow Birds* shows, becoming so desensitized to violence has severe psychological consequences on soldiers' psyches, as they struggle to figure out how to live with the horrific acts they have witnessed and participated in.

The war tried to kill us in the spring. [...] While we slept, the war rubbed its thousand ribs against the ground in prayer. When we pressed onward through exhaustion, its eyes were white and open in the dark. While we ate, the war fasted, fed by its own deprivation. It made love and gave birth and spread through fire.

Related Characters: John Bartle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

In these opening lines of the novel, protagonist John Bartle describes the war as impersonal, unstoppable force, bent on killing everything around it. Bartle's decision to speak of the war in neutral terms, without mentioning political conflict or hatred between him and the enemy, highlights his vision of the war as a force beyond human control. This description also serves to deprive war of any pretention to nobility or glory. War, Bartle emphasizes, is nothing but an evil force that kills human beings, achieving nothing but pain and destruction.

Bartle's perspective sharply criticizes the cruelty of war. It also presents all soldiers and participants in the conflict as victims, falling prey to the pernicious influence of war, trapped in its toxic environment. This description thus insists that no one is individually responsible for the horrors of war. Even though Bartle might have killed people, he cannot be blamed for his role as a soldier. Rather, the true culprit is the harmful, death-obsessed environment that war

creates.

> Nothing seemed more natural than someone getting killed. […] I needed to continue. And to continue, I had to see the world with clear eyes, to focus on the essential. We only pay attention to rare things, and death was not rare.

Related Characters: John Bartle (speaker), Malik

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

When the platoon's translator, Malik, is suddenly killed, Bartle, who was chatting with him seconds before he died, feels indifferent to the man's death. He explains this lack of emotion in terms of the context of the war. He describes his reaction both as an automatic process and a necessity. Because death has become so common in this war-torn world, Bartle no longer notices it as an extraordinary event, and has thus automatically become used to considering it yet another aspect of life. In addition, Bartle *needs* to prevent himself from becoming affected by people's deaths, because feeling too many emotions would keep him from focusing on fighting and survival—the two most important goals in this war. Therefore, becoming indifferent to death is a survival strategy—the self-protective response of the body and the mind to a lethal environment.

After the war, Bartle will realize that he no longer knows how to live happily in a peaceful environment, and that he will need to confront the emotional trauma of war before he can return to civilian life.

> I'd been trained to think war was the great unifier, that it brought people closer together than any other activity on earth. Bullshit. War is the great maker of solipsists: how are you going to save my life today? Dying would be one way. If you die, it becomes more likely that I will not.

Related Characters: John Bartle (speaker), Malik

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

After the translator Malik's death, Bartle reflects on his attitude toward survival and death. He realizes that war has forced him to focus exclusively on his own survival and to treat other deaths indifferently and instrumentally. Bartle's understanding of other people's deaths as a protection against his own death is fallacious, because nothing actually prevents him from dying as well. Like emotional detachment, this belief is nothing but a survival strategy, aimed at giving Bartle hope that he might survive. It allows him to find some logic in the disordered, selfish world he is immersed in.

Bartle's disillusion with the war has implications beyond his own experience. If the political goal of war is to defend a nation's interests and bring its citizens together behind a common goal—as soldiers do when they decide to defend their country militarily—the fact that the actual experience of war generates the exact opposite (namely, selfishness) suggests that war is a deeply flawed enterprise. This realization anticipates the lack of solidarity that Bartle will be confronted with after the war, when he will conclude that the nation's presentation of war as a glorious activity is unrealistic.

> There were no bullets with my name on them, or with Murph's, for that matter. There were no bombs made just for us. Any of them would have killed us just as they'd killed the owners of those names. We didn't have a time laid out for us, or a place. […] I believe unswervingly that when Murph was killed, the dirty knives that stabbed him were addressed "To whom it may concern." Nothing made us special. Not living. Not dying.

Related Characters: John Bartle (speaker), Daniel "Murph" Murphy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

Reflecting on Murph's death and on the constant threat of death during the war, Bartle concludes that dying in this context is inherently impersonal and unpredictable. Because war is not concerned with individuals' desires, but is fought between two rival groups, attacks are not directed toward individuals but toward the group as a whole. This makes even the death of active soldiers a form of collateral damage: soldiers die not because of who they are on an

individual basis, but because of what they represent—a country, a group, a cause.

In denying that war is personal, Bartle denies that Murph's gruesome death carries any inherent meaning, since it is simply one of the many aspects of conflict. Even though Bartle later desperately tries to assign significance to Murph's death, in an attempt to regain control over his own memories and his past, he is forced to accept that some events are purely casual and unfortunate, and cannot be explained in any deeper way.

> A man ran behind a low wall in a courtyard and looked around, astonished to be alive, his weapon cradled in his arms. My first instinct was to yell out to him, "You made it, buddy, keep going," but I remembered how odd it would be to say a thing like that. It was not long before the others saw him too.

Related Characters: John Bartle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20-21

Explanation and Analysis

During battle, Bartle sees an Iraqi man escape fire unscathed, and wants to share in the man's surprise by encouraging him to keep on fighting. However, Bartle soon reminds himself that this person is a rival, and that encouraging the enemy—the very entity he is supposed to be shooting at and killing—would be seen as treason or a sign of mental disturbance.

This episode highlights the absurdity of war. Although Bartle would rather engage compassionately with this man, he is forced to ignore his own feelings and keep on taking part in an activity of utter destruction. This scene shows that rivalries and conflicts between humans are largely artificial, devised by the people who start and maintain wars, but not necessarily sustained by the fighters on the ground.

Bartle's attitude reveals that, despite the chaos and violence around him, he has retained a crucial sign of humanity: the capacity to empathize with fellow human beings. This attitude, however, proves useful neither at war nor back home, where he is encouraged to show patriotism and contempt for the enemy. However, Bartle's compassionate instincts serve as a refreshing reminder that peace and compassion might in fact be more important and valuable—and, perhaps, more *instinctual*—attitudes than hatred or a desire to harm others.

Chapter 2 Quotes

> We'd had small lives, populated by a longing for something more substantial than dirt roads and small dreams. So we'd come here, where life needed no elaboration and others would tell us who to be. When we finished our work we went to sleep, calm and free of regret.

Related Characters: John Bartle (speaker), Sergeant Sterling, Daniel "Murph" Murphy

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

At the military post of Fort Dix, New Jersey, Bartle reflects on the impulse that led young people like Murph and him to join the military. He concludes that it was more the result of boredom and monotony than of a deep commitment to the ideals of the U.S. military. Paradoxically, part of what Bartle identifies as the attraction of the army is the way it allows soldiers to obey orders blindly, without having to think for themselves and exercise much agency—the very lack of control that, when taken to an extreme, haunts both Murph and Bartle, leading them to despair.

This suggests that, as adolescents, Murph and Bartle looked to the army as an opportunity for them to find a sense of purpose in life, and thus faced great difficulties when they were forced to define themselves as individuals with emotions and desires that do not necessarily align with the army's—for example, when Murph began to feel overwhelmed by the violence of war.

The hierarchical nature of military life can thus be both a source of comfort and distress: some military discipline and structure might be pleasant, but keeping individuals from expressing their full personality and emotions can prove alienating and dangerous. As Bartle's later struggle to reintegrate civilian life indicates, it is only through mental freedom that he can find comfort and peace, and adjust to his new home setting.

Chapter 3 Quotes

I felt an obligation to remember him correctly, because all remembrances are assignations of significance, and no one else would ever know what happened to him, perhaps not even me. I haven't made any progress, really. When I try to get it right, I can't. When I try to put it out of my mind, it only comes faster and with more force. No peace. So what. I've earned it.

Related Characters: John Bartle (speaker), Daniel "Murph" Murphy

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

In Germany, after leaving Iraq, Bartle concludes that he has a duty to remember his fellow soldier Murph with precision. His desire to remember correctly is a way for him to honor Murph's life, but also to try to parse out the meaning of the war—a war that seems senseless in the gratuitously horrific way it killed Murph.

Before Bartle even reaches the U.S., however, he realizes that he has very little control over his own memory. He is able neither to forget the past, nor to grasp the meaning of the memories he has accumulated over the past year. In the end, Bartle concludes that he must be haunted by his past because he is guilty of something and deserves to suffer pain for his participation in the war.

Bartle's conviction that his psychological suffering is a valid form of punishment keeps him from turning to others for help or relief. This explains why he does not want to share his thoughts with family, friends, doctors, or the justice system. Instead, Bartle accepts that he deserves to suffer and that he must learn to handle his problems on his own. To achieve peace, Bartle will need to let go of this attitude and accept that he is not to blame for Murph's death.

But things happened the way they happened without regard to our desire for them to have happened another way. Despite an age-old instinct to provide an explanation more complex than that, something with a level of profundity and depth which would seem commensurate with the confusion I felt, it really was that simple.

Related Characters: John Bartle (speaker), Daniel "Murph" Murphy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

When Bartle reflects on Murph's death and the course of the war, he realizes that the events all the soldiers lived through were not inherently just, fair, or logical. Rather, they were the result of chance—or, at least, of a force beyond human control. This conclusion is frustrating for Bartle, because it forces him to accept that the war he lived through is inherently meaningless, since it does not follow any logic that he might identify. In this way, it condemns him to confusion, without any hope of resolution. On the other hand, it also means that Bartle can be freed from responsibility for most of what happened during the war, including Murph's death, since no single event can be traced back to any particular manmade cause.

In accepting that humans cannot control the course of war, Bartle thus finds frustration and comfort. By the end of the novel, as his confusion and pain lessen, this mindset forces him to reorient his whole life, as he focuses only on the small things over which he *does* have control (his house, his view, his lifestyle), instead of trying to understand the past.

Chapter 5 Quotes

I didn't want to smile and say thanks. Didn't want to pretend I'd done anything except survive.

Related Characters: John Bartle (speaker), The American Bartender

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

After Bartle and his fellow soldiers leave Germany and land in the U.S., Bartle goes to the airport bar to wait for his flight to Virginia. There, the bartender chats with him about the war and insists on paying for Bartle's beer, pointing to a yellow ribbon as justification for treating this young soldier with deference. Instead of feeling proud and grateful, Bartle becomes annoyed because he does not believe that what he did during the war truly served an elevated, collective ideal. Rather, he knows that the only reason he is now being

celebrated—while other soldiers, not as lucky as him, are already dead—is because he was lucky enough to survive. Bartle thus becomes frustrated because he does not want to accept collective gratitude for an act that was inherently selfish, aimed at protecting his own life. This gap between the public conception of war as an act of self-sacrifice in the name of a greater good and the soldier's understanding of war as a selfish struggle for survival remains unresolved in the novel.

However, Bartle's narrative serves to fill some of the public's gaps. It denounces the inadequacy of the glorification of war and suggests that civilians should focus on truly understanding soldiers' experience before emitting an opinion about war's presumed nobility.

I felt as if I'd somehow been returned to the singular safety of the womb, untouched and untouchable to the world outside her arms around my slouching neck. I was aware of all this, though I am not sure how. Yet when she said, "Oh, John, you're home," I did not believe her.

Related Characters: John Bartle (speaker), Bartle's Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

When Bartle lands in Virginia, coming home for the first time since he was sent to Iraq, his mother meets him at the airport and her hug makes him feel protected and safe. This moment proves to be the only moment in which Bartle feels true comfort and is able to immerse himself in the feeling of being home before having to confront the difficult process of readjusting to civilian life.

Bartle contrasts the feeling of love and comfort he receives from his mother's embrace with the actual notion of being "home." Comfort derived from friends or family, he concludes, is not sufficient to make him feel whole, because he knows that part of his identity is now tied to Iraq—a place in the world and a series of circumstances that have been his physical "home" for over a year, during his military service.

Bartle thus realizes that home is not a physical place, but a complex feeling—the capacity for one's entire identity to be tied to a single place—that he now feels detached from. However much Bartle might desire and appreciate the security his mother brings him, he must go through a process of readjustment, in which he will need to redefine himself in relation to his surroundings, before being able to call any place home.

Chapter 6 Quotes

"I was really happy it wasn't me. That's crazy, right?"

"Naw. You know what's crazy? Not thinking that shit."

Related Characters: John Bartle, Daniel "Murph" Murphy (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 121

Explanation and Analysis

After an American soldier dies on the battlefield, surrounded by the rest of the platoon, Murph and Bartle remain affected by this event, which forces them to come to terms with the horror and solitude of death during war. Murph, in particular, cannot stop thinking about this soldier. That night, he confesses to Bartle that he felt relieved when he saw the soldier die, because this man's agony meant that Murph would not have to go through such pain himself. Murph feels troubled by this selfish attitude and wonders if he is going crazy, but Bartle explains to him that this is a normal reaction, healthy in the way it shows that Murph is still attached to his own life.

This dialogue marks the beginning of Murph's suffering and isolation, as he begins to interrogate the moral validity of adopting a purely selfish, detached attitude toward war. Ultimately, Murph becomes so convinced that war is cruel and unjust that he loses the desire to protect his own life, concluding that he has seen too many horrors to remain a sane human being.

Chapter 7 Quotes

What would I say? "Hey, how are you?" they'd say. And I'd answer, "I feel like I'm being eaten from the inside out and I can't tell anyone what's going on because everyone is so grateful to me all the time and I'll feel like I'm ungrateful or something. Or like I'll give away that I don't deserve anyone's gratitude and really they should all hate me for what I've done but everyone loves me for it and it's driving me crazy." Right.

Related Characters: John Bartle (speaker), Luke

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 144

Explanation and Analysis

At home in Virginia, Bartle feels as though he cannot share his feelings with anyone. His inability to communicate derives from his knowledge that he would shock people by revealing how much pain and guilt war has left him with, when everyone keeps on thanking him for what he has done. Bartle does not want to disappoint anyone, nor does he want to burden them with his own suffering.

After being so detached from his emotions during the war, Bartle is now experiencing their full force. Their sheer intensity, he discovers, makes him feel separate from everyone else, since the people around him are simply living their everyday lives without suffering like he does. Bartle's shame thus proves twofold: it is not only related to his actions in the war, but to his inability to share them with anyone, which creates a vicious cycle of guilt.

In this situation, in which Bartle does not feel comfortable confiding in anyone, his only hope is to stop feeling guilty for what he has done—a task that he will slowly come to terms with over the next few years.

❝ […] there isn't any making up for killing women or even watching women get killed, or for that matter killing men and shooting them in the back and shooting them more times than necessary to actually kill them and it was like just trying to kill everything you saw sometimes because it felt like there was acid seeping down into your soul and then your soul is gone and knowing from being taught your whole life that there is no making up for what you are doing, you're taught that your whole life, but then even your mother is so happy and proud […]

Related Characters: John Bartle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 144

Explanation and Analysis

This section of Bartle's long internal monologue, in which he finally confronts all of the emotions that war has left him with, constitutes the most direct denunciation of the horrors of war. Despite defining shooting and killing as actions that he took part in, Bartle also notes that these are actions that the army and the public *condone*. Paradoxically, then, society celebrates the very actions that Bartle feels have destroyed his core as a human being ("acid seeping down into your soul"). In this way, Bartle denounces society's moral hypocrisy. Although everyone knows that killing is wrong, war proves to be the great exception to this rule—one that leads people to *celebrate* killing instead of *condemning* it.

Even though this moral inconsistency deeply troubles Bartle and condemns him to solitude, by the end of the novel he is forced to accept that he can do nothing to change the moral weight of his actions, since these actions have already been committed and belong to the past. All he can do, perhaps, is relate his own experience, so that it might serve as a much-needed moral and emotional evaluation of war.

❝ […] a deeper hole is being dug because everybody is so fucking happy to see you, the murderer, the fucking accomplice, the at-bare-minimum bearer of some fucking responsibility, and everyone wants to slap you on the back and you start to want to burn the whole goddamn country down, you want to burn every goddamn yellow ribbon in sight, and you can't explain it but it's just, like, Fuck you, but then you signed up to go so it's all your fault, really, because you went on purpose […]

Related Characters: John Bartle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 145

Explanation and Analysis

In Bartle's long monologue about the impact of the war on his psyche, he confronts issues of justice and responsibility. On the one hand, Bartle feels that he should be considered responsible for at least part of what happened during the war, since he was the one who held the rifle that killed other people and, more generally, he decided to enlist in the army and obey any orders he might receive. However, he also knows that, in becoming a soldier, he lost much of his agency to the army and cannot be entirely responsible for his actions, since he was only obeying orders.

After the war, Bartle thus feels angry with himself (he put

himself in this situation to begin with), with the army (which made him behave violently), and with the country in general (which glorifies a war that is far from glorious). This anger leads to frustration, shame, and hopelessness, since Bartle does not actually want to engage in any more violent acts, whether directed toward himself or toward the rest of the world.

Without an outlet to express this anger in a healthy, productive way, all Bartle can do is keep his feelings to himself and wait for them to pass—a solution as confused and imperfect as Bartle's emotions themselves.

❝ […] cowardice got you into this mess because you wanted to be a man and people made fun of you and pushed you around in the cafeteria and the hallways in high school because you liked to read books and poems sometimes and they'd call you fag and really deep down you know you went because you wanted to be a man and that's never gonna happen now […]

Related Characters: John Bartle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 145

Explanation and Analysis

During Bartle's long internal monologue about the war, he reflects on the reasons that led him to join the army. He admits that his motives were not related to grand ideals of defending the homeland, but to the desire to be seen as a man. The ideal of masculinity that Bartle describes is extremely narrow; it involves not being intellectually curious about the world (reading books and poems) and not being perceived as gay. As Bartle's conception of what it means to be "a man" was formed within the confines of this homophobic, anti-intellectual culture, his decision to join the army can be seen as an attempt to escape bullying and prove to his bullies that he is capable of displaying traditional male characteristics such as strength and bravery.

The seemingly trivial motives behind Bartle's entry in the military highlight the gap between his expectations of the army and his actual experience of war, which proved to him that even physically strong men can experience psychological stress and suffer from the trauma of violence. Bartle's experience thus reinterprets what it means to be a man and an adult, as it comes to terms with the myriad ways in which the human brain—whether male or female—responds to a harsh external environment such as war.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ It's impossible to identify the cause of anything, and I began to see the war as a big joke, for how cruel it was, for how desperately I wanted to measure the particulars of Murph's new, strange behavior and trace it back to one moment, to one cause, to one thing I would not be guilty of.

Related Characters: John Bartle (speaker), Daniel "Murph" Murphy

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

When Murph begins to adopt a distant attitude toward Bartle and the other soldiers, barely talking to anyone and often disappearing on his own, Bartle tries to understand what is happening to his companion. He wants to keep Bartle from giving in to despair and letting himself die, because he cares about Murph's well-being and feels responsible for him.

Bartle denounces the war as a cruel joke because it is utterly unpredictable, follows no inherent logic, and destroys everything in its wake, killing soldiers physically and/or mentally. Bartle's desperate search for key events in Murph's life as a soldier does not lead him to any clear conclusion. Rather, he is forced to admit that the accumulation of violence that the war brings—the very nature of war itself—is responsible for Murph's current state, more than any particular event. However, it is not only until years later that Bartle will finally let go of the guilt he might feel toward Murph and accept that war is the only culprit responsible for Murph's psychological troubles and death.

❝ We were unaware of even our own savagery now: the beatings and the kicked dogs, the searches and the sheer brutality of our presence. Each action was a page in an exercise book performed by rote. I didn't care.

Related Characters: John Bartle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 159

Explanation and Analysis

As Bartle learns to detach his emotions from the actions he performs, he begins to perform them mechanically, without giving them any thought. Paradoxically, it is this indifference that makes him a good soldier, allowing him to obey orders and to overcome the violence and monotony of daily life in Iraq.

However, after the war, Bartle becomes aware of how brutally he behaved and can no longer sustain the indifference that kept him sane during the war. He assigns brutality not only to the explicitly violent acts the soldiers take part in, but also to a more political and cultural aspect of war: the presence of American soldiers on the Iraqi territory.

In this sense, war brings more than just death and violence—it also forces a local population to be kicked out of their own homes, see their neighborhoods get destroyed, and generally give up on having self-governing rights over their own territory. Although Bartle never discusses the intricacies of international politics, he remains aware of the *human* costs of any political action, and uses his own experience to highlight the way in which military or political decisions affect the lives and minds of ordinary human beings.

❝ He wanted to choose. He wanted to want. He wanted to replace the dullness growing inside him with anything else. He wanted to decide what he would gather around his body, to refuse that which fell toward him by accident or chance and stayed in orbit like an accretion disk. He wanted to have one memory he'd made of his own volition to balance out the shattered remnants of everything he hadn't asked for.

Related Characters: John Bartle (speaker), The Doctor, Daniel "Murph" Murphy

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 159

Explanation and Analysis

After discovering that Murph has abandoned the photograph and casualty feeder card he kept preciously in his helmet, Bartle goes to look for him, worried that these objects might signal that Murph has given up on life entirely. Bartle discovers his companion by the medics' station, watching one of the doctors' daily routine, and realizes that Murph has isolated himself to try to control at least a small part of his time in Iraq: the memories he chooses to make for himself.

Unlike Bartle, who has made a mental shield of indifference, Murph has been consumed by the emotions growing inside of him—pain, moral doubt, and confusion which, in times of war, he finds extremely difficult to express. If external events such as battles and sudden deaths have made him feel that he has no control over his own life, he believes that controlling part of what happens in his mind remains his only chance to stay sane.

This effort, however, soon fails when the doctor Murph is watching dies from an unexpected mortar attack. Murph's subsequent emotional devastation proves that the internal peace or comfort he was so desperately seeking cannot exist in a void. Rather, it must hinge on the acceptance that one can never control the external world.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ It probably wouldn't matter what our level of culpability was. I was guilty of something, that much was certain, that much I could feel on a cellular level.

Related Characters: John Bartle (speaker), Ladonna Murphy (Murph's Mother), Daniel "Murph" Murphy, Captain Anderson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 179

Explanation and Analysis

When the captain from the Criminal Investigation Division (C.I.D.) arrives at Bartle's apartment, Bartle knows that he is going to be prosecuted either for writing a fake letter to Mrs. Murphy or for any of the actions he took part during war, in particular those related to Murph's death.

Although Bartle played no actual part in Murph's death, he accepts punishment because of the overwhelming guilt he feels. Although he cannot necessarily attribute this guilt to any particular event, given the inherently chaotic nature of war, he feels it in his body and mind ("on a cellular level") in an intense way.

This aspect of Bartle's narrative highlights his honest approach to describing his own experience. Instead of trying to glorify his role in the war or justify himself at all costs, he acknowledges his own weakness. He does not gloss over emotions he cannot necessarily explain, such as this generalized feeling of guilt, but instead acknowledges them as something that is happening to him, whether or not it is justifiable in a rational way.

This deeply personal approach to guilt and mental health allows Bartle to make veteran soldiers' experience less taboo, as he acknowledges all aspects of his psychological experience without censuring himself.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ Eventually, I realized that the marks could not be assembled into any kind of pattern. They were fixed in place. Connecting them would be wrong. They fell where they had fallen. Marks representing the randomness of the war were made at whatever moment I remembered them: disorder predominated.

Related Characters: John Bartle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 217

Explanation and Analysis

When Bartle is in prison, he makes marks on his cell's walls for every memory of the war that comes back to him, with the hope that the visual combination of memories might one day reveal the war's underlying logic or pattern. However, although Bartle spends much of his time during and after the war trying to make sense of his experience, his final conclusion is that there is no grand logic to war. Rather, he must accept that his experience was ruled by chance and chaos. This seems a disappointing conclusion, because it reminds Bartle that taking part in war does not necessarily mean behaving gloriously, in support of a noticeably noble project. Rather, war is made up of potentially incoherent bits of soldiers' every day life, as each individual soldier struggles, like Bartle, to fight and survive—participating, through these crude and self-interested acts, in a larger project that they cannot actually perceive.

However, this conclusion also brings Bartle peace, as it finally allows him to stop trying to impose order onto something that never had any. In this way, Bartle can let go of the past and move forward, accepting that life does not necessarily follow a grand, well-prepared scheme.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1: SEPTEMBER 2004 – AL TAFAR, NINEVEH PROVINCE, IRAQ

In an intensely lyrical voice, Private John Bartle recalls his memories of the war in Iraq, recounting his experience of fighting in the city of Al Tafar, Nineveh Province. Bartle describes the war as something that tries to kill everyone indiscriminately, an ever-present force that feeds on destruction and violence. Patient and determined, the war tried to kill everyone in the spring, then in the summer, killing thousands of people by September—soldiers and innocent civilians alike. Bartle and his friend Murph count the number of soldiers who have died, with the goal of avoiding becoming the thousandth soldier killed.

Bartle's description of the war as an impersonal phenomenon bent on killing others incessantly shows that he is not interested in assigning human responsibility to the war (for example accusing the government, the army, or the enemy of evil), but in emphasizing that the war corrupts and destroys everyone, regardless of who is fighting whom. This means that everyone—civilians and soldiers alike—is a potential victim, whether they suffer from violence or commit it themselves.

Although September seems to bring nothing new, Bartle later recounts it as a period that would change his life forever, setting the foundation for everything that would be important in his life. In Al Tafar, after four days of crawling along rooftops, Bartle and Murph are now waiting, hidden, at dawn. Bartle looks down at the space that his fellow soldiers and he are responsible for defending, and notes the dead bodies in the street and the strong smell of burning around him.

Bartle's mention of dead bodies and stench as ordinary features of his life suggests that he has already become used to them. Although he still notices their presence, he does not have a strong emotional reaction anymore. Bartle's realization that this period changed him forever reveals that the psychological impact of war extends well beyond fighting itself, affecting soldiers in their post-combat life.

As Bartle's platoon waits on the roof, Bartle lights a cigarette, watches Sergeant Sterling pour Tabasco on his eyes to stay awake, and feels comforted by his companion Murph's steady breathing, which Bartle is now used to hearing by his side. After Bartle puts out his cigarette, the two of them chew some tobacco. When the lieutenant tells the men to get ready, Bartle and Murph prepare their rifles and get ready to take part in yet another battle.

The fact that Sterling needs to pour hot sauce on his eyes reveals the extreme physical stress that war places on the human body, as the soldiers are forced to behave in unhealthy ways. Bartle's mention of Murph's breathing reveals that the intense months they have shared together have united them in an almost corporeal way, making Murph's breathing almost necessary to Bartle's life.

Bartle describes reaching this building a few days ago and running into the empty house, yelling aggressively when the soldiers perceived shapes they thought might be people. On the first day, the platoon's interpreter, Malik, who studied literature before the war and speaks excellent English, sits next to Bartle. He always wears a hood over his face to keep people from knowing who he is, because he knows that he would be killed for helping the Americans.

The fact that working with the Americans could destroy Malik's life highlights the underlying political nature of this conflict, an aspect that Bartle rarely mentions. War forces people to adopt narrowly nationalistic attitudes, organizing entire societies in terms of two opposites: fidelity or betrayal. This fosters division and hatred instead of cultural understanding and exchange.

Looking around, Malik tells Bartle that this used to be his neighborhood. He stands up and points to a place where an old woman used to plant hyacinths. Despite Bartle and Murph's warnings that Malik should remain seated, Malik keeps on standing and, when shooting suddenly erupts, Malik is killed on the spot. Although Bartle and Murph do not see Malik die, his blood splatters all over their uniforms.

Malik reveals his underlying longing for a time before the war, when he could enjoy ordinary civilian life and simple things such as flowers. Malik's desire to recall his former home serves as a forewarning of Bartle's later difficulties to return to his own home in the U.S.

After Malik's death, Bartle and Murph decide that this death doesn't count, and that they are still at nine hundred sixty-eight or seventy deaths. Reflecting on this episode, Bartle explains that the reason he felt neither surprised nor moved by Malik's death is because death is so common in Iraq. In this context, the only way to remain sane and want to keep on fighting, Bartle argues, is to focus on the actions he needs to perform, not on the deaths around him. Cynically, Bartle concludes that, even though he initially thought that war would bring people together, he soon realized that it only forces everyone to focus on their own survival. This mad Bartle see other people's deaths as reassuring, since they made it less likely for him to die.

Bartle and Murph's counting makes the constant death around them seem less frightening and allows them to see the war as a kind of game, which they can observe from the outside. Taking part in war thus involves ignoring or eliminating one's emotional instincts, according to which witnessing death might be shocking or sad. Bartle's conclusion that war makes people selfish overturns traditional conceptions of war as a noble enterprise. It emphasizes, instead, that a soldier's true role in war is not to defend noble ideals but simply to kill and survive—and that, from a soldier's perspective, war is nothing but a series of meaningless, brutal actions.

Reflecting on this mindset, Bartle concludes that this mode of thinking was an illusion, since war kills people arbitrarily, respecting no particular order or logic. Unlike what they thought, counting up to a thousand deaths does not protect anyone, and Bartle and Murph might be killed at any point. Bartle rejects the idea of destiny, noting that the fact that he ultimately survived while Murph died does not mean that Murph was destined to die. Rather, death struck Murph impersonally, in exactly the same way it could have affected anybody else. Although Bartle was not present at the moment of Murph's death, he knows that the knives that killed his companion could have killed anyone else, and that neither living nor dying makes soldiers special.

Bartle realizes that his counting game with Murph represented a way for them to feel as though they had some control over their lives—an illusion that would soon dissipate for Murph. Bartle's conclusion that anyone could have died in Murph's place suggests that no one is inherently responsible for Murph's death—not even, perhaps, the very people who killed him. Rather, Bartle suggests, it is the context of war that indiscriminately turns everyone into potential murderers and victims.

When Malik dies, therefore, Bartle does not feel anything. He only remembers a woman who his conversation with Malik reminded him of, a woman who served him tea once in delicate cups. The memory feels distant, covered in dust, but he tries to unbury it and remembers the old lady's wrinkled face.

Bartle's desire to hold onto this seemingly insignificant memory serves as an early indication—which becomes an obsession after the war—that he is trying to make sense of the war on a personal and emotional level, trying to understand the role that different characters played in this period of his life.

Four days after Malik's death, when the soldiers prepare for combat, Bartle notes that the place where Malik pointed to the hyacinths is now all burned-up and any trace of ordinary civilian life gone. As the sun begins to rise, the lieutenant, a detached, reserved man, explains that the third platoon will try to lead the enemy to their front. He asks about the fires that he notices in nearby orchards, and tells Bartle and Murph to monitor them. When the lieutenant forgets what he was previously saying, Sterling, a sergeant, intervenes and completes the lieutenant's sentence, adding that their job is to "kill the hajji fucks."

The physical destruction of Malik's neighborhood serves as a symbolic prelude to the destruction that Bartle himself will experience when returning to his home: the collapse of his former life. Sterling's apparent hatred and aggressiveness toward the enemy does not necessarily reflect his desire to harm others, but, rather, his understanding that soldiers need to be aggressive if they want to fight successful battles and put their own lives at risk.

After Bartle realizes that the call to prayer did not sound that morning, a mortar attack suddenly erupts and the men protect themselves, lying on the ground with their hands over their head. When the attack stops, everyone yells that they are fine and gets ready for battle. When Sergeant Sterling tries to motivate the soldiers, Bartle describes his mixed feelings of appreciation and hatred for Sterling. Although Bartle hates how aggressive Sterling becomes in battle, he also knows that he needs Sterling to stimulate him for him to want to fight. Seeing Sterling yell with anger and hatred at the enemy, seemingly taking pleasure in shooting at others, makes Bartle feel grateful.

Bartle's knowledge that Sterling plays an important role in motivating him to fight reveals that the possibility of his death is not sufficient to make him want to kill others. This reluctance to fight suggests that Bartle feels an emotional or moral reluctance to harm others—and that only artificial, external stimulation allows him to forget this instinctive aversion. Under the guise of righteousness and self-protection, war often forces people to act against their principles.

The enemy then appears, hidden in nearby buildings, and Bartle begins to shoot. When he sees a man who shows surprise at still being alive in the middle of this shooting, Bartle wants to congratulate him but realizes that it would be inappropriate to yell words of encouragement to the enemy. Bartle sees his fellow soldiers shoot at this man, and he feels uncomfortable and wonders what kind of men they are. At the same time, he knows that he is terrified and finds that he too is shooting at the man. The knowledge that they are killing him collectively makes Bartle feel relieved, despite his moral interrogations. In the end, though, Bartle knows that he is the one who gave the man a fatal shot.

Bartle's desire to congratulate the enemy on surviving suggests that divisions between nations, which organize people into rival enemy groups, are artificial and arbitrary. Bartle does not believe the war is inherently just. Rather, he always remains aware of the fact that he is committing a crime by killing other human beings just like him, and that his first impulse remains compassion, not the desire to kill. His perception of moral dubiousness will not disappear, but will continue to haunt him long after his participation in the war ends.

Bartle then sees a car drive on the road near the orchard, with white sheets flowing from it, and notices that there is only an elderly couple in the car. He wants to tell his platoon not to shoot, but the shooting has already begun and Bartle watches the scene without saying anything, filled with fear and anticipation. When the old man in the car is killed, the old woman tries to get out of the car and is soon shot dead. Murph makes a surprised yet unemotional comment about this woman's death, and Bartle notes that sleep deprivation makes them feel as if nothing matters.

Scenes such as this one, in which an evidently innocent and harmless couple is killed, reveal that war is unfair and cruel in the way it affects civilians and combatants alike. Instead of teaching soldiers to identify the enemy accurately, war forces people to want to defend their lives in all circumstances, sometimes at the cost of committing mistakes and atrocities. Bartle's inability to do anything and Murph's indifference both suggest that war's power lies beyond individuals' control.

As Bartle watches the old woman bleed to death, Sterling gives Bartle and Murph pieces of dry pound cake. A small girl then moves toward the car and begins to drag the old woman's body away. In the meantime, Bartle watches the leaves of some trees move in the wind. The lieutenant comes by to congratulate the soldiers on their good work and Bartle wonders if they all look so frightened that the lieutenant needs to reassure them that they are going to be okay. Bartle has a hard time believing that they fought well but decides that his disbelief does not mean that what the lieutenant is saying is not the truth.

Despite Bartle's previous comment about how selfish the war makes people become, Sterling's sharing of pound cake reveals that unity and solidarity are also necessary for soldiers to survive, as they need to rely on each other for physical safety and at least minimal emotional comfort. Bartle cannot believe that they fought well because he knows they killed people indiscriminately, but he also accepts that his "truth" might not align with the military's "truth"—its stated goals and objectives.

Bartle knows that they are going to be sent on a new mission soon but feels comfort from knowing that Murph and he have survived this one. He wonders if he could have known at the time that Murph was going to die soon but concludes that he could not. That day, they were simply happy and relieved, and spent the next hours sleeping in the sun.

Bartle's desire to recall Murph precisely reveals his desperation to make sense of Murph's death and identify any pre-emptive signs of Murph's emotional breakdown. However, this scene emphasizes that soldiers' external attitudes, in which they show relief from the physical and emotional stress of battle, might not reflect their underlying psyches and moral considerations.

CHAPTER 2: DECEMBER 2003 – FORT DIX, NEW JERSEY

John Bartle describes writing a letter to Ladonna Murphy, Murph's mother. Murph dies ten months after Bartle meets him for the first time, and Bartle knows that this period of his life will affect him permanently. After Murph's death, overwhelmed by strong emotions, Bartle decides—without truly understanding why—to write a letter to Murph's mother in which he pretends to be Murph. He assumes that Mrs. Murphy will probably believe him since she must not have received many letters from her son. Much later, Bartle learns that Mrs. Murphy read the letter with snow falling around her and wonders if that fact is symbolic, since it was also snowing on the day Bartle met Murph.

Bartle's decision to write a letter to Murph's mother remains unexplained, revealing only how emotionally troubled Bartle must have felt after his friend's death—and how much he wanted for Murph to still be alive. This action shows the first signs of trauma that Murph's death will leave Bartle with. Bartle's temptation to see snow in a symbolic way reveals his desperation to give meaning to Murph's death, and he wonders if even random circumstantial details might hold the key to the grand significance of this event.

Although Bartle knows that it was wrong to write that letter, he feels that he has done so many terrible things in the war that he is no longer able to judge his own actions. Bartle then recalls his first meeting with Murph. Both of them were at Fort Dix, New Jersey, waiting to be sent to Iraq. Sergeant Sterling, whom Bartle describes as a severe but noble, much-admired officer, tells Murph to follow everything Bartle does and stay with him at all times. While Bartle has been in the army for two years, Murph has only joined the army recently. Bartle compares Murph to Sergeant Sterling, since both are blond, but concludes that while Sterling is an exceptional soldier, Murph is simply an ordinary fighter.

Bartle's inability to judge his own actions reflects the moral shift war has provoked in him, as he no longer knows what principles to abide by since he has already given up on basic principles like not killing another human being. Bartle's extolling of Sterling suggests that Sterling's occasionally brutal or reckless actions are at the service of greater goals, such as the protection of his soldiers and success in battle. The opposition between Sterling and Murph also predicts that Sterling will be able to remain strong, whereas Murph will succumb to the emotional difficulty of war.

When Murph moves his belongings next to Bartle's, the two of them chat. They discover that they are both from Virginia, but Bartle feels annoyed, because he does not want to become close to Murph and feel responsible for him. Bartle describes their mutual impulse to join the military as a desire to escape their small-town routines and give a grander meaning to their lives.

Bartle knows that he should focus on his own survival but also knows that he will probably not be able to keep from becoming at least minimally attached to Murph. The boys' seemingly trivial reasons for joining the military highlight how psychologically unprepared they are for the horrors of war.

In the meantime, as the days go by, Bartle and Murph know that their departure date is approaching. When Sterling meets with the two asks them how old they are, Bartle is surprised to learn that Murph is only eighteen, although, when he looks back on this time, he realizes that he, too, at the age of twenty-one, was also extremely young. Sterling, who is shocked at how young they are—although Bartle knows that Sterling himself must not be much older—tells them that they will be with him in Iraq and need to promise to do everything he says, because the situation there is likely to be extremely violent and chaotic.

The main difference between Sterling and the boys is not necessarily their age, but their experience and general attitudes. Unlike Sterling, Bartle and Murph are not necessarily committed to military life and the army's goals. The experience of war has shaped Sterling to appear older and wiser, since he has seen enough horrific events to confront pain and death face-to-face and has also learned to be a role model for scared, insecure young soldiers.

Sterling concludes their meeting by telling them that, from a purely statistical perspective, it is inevitable that people are going to die. That night, when they are in bed, Murph asks Bartle if they are going to be okay. Bartle reassures him that they are, although he does not believe it himself.

Sterling's matter-of-fact attitude toward death shows that he has learned to detach himself from personal relations, even as he remains committed to protecting his men's safety. Bartle's feeling that they are not going to be fine foreshadows both Murph's death and Bartle's later psychological distress.

The next day, the boys attend a safety briefing and practice marksmanship, impressing Sterling with their shooting skills. When Murph asks Sterling what Iraq is like, Sterling gives the two of them practical advice, telling them that they will need to find their most aggressive impulses and make themselves *want* to shoot the enemy, which Sterling says he will help them with. Reflecting on Sterling in retrospect, Bartle concludes that Sterling is very brave, willing to sacrifice himself for someone else's life without a second thought.

Sterling's emphasis that the soldiers need to force themselves *to want to fight shows that, even for him, wanting to fight is not an automatic impulse but something that he must impose on himself. This reveals the extent to which war perverts the human psyche, forcing ordinary people to behave in seemingly hateful and brutal ways, against their own moral and emotional inclinations.*

That day, the soldiers spend the evening with their families for the last time before leaving for Iraq. Bartle's mother comes and feels upset about her son leaving for the war, but tries to accept the situation and have a good time with him. Bartle recalls the day he decided to leave the house at eighteen, and wonders if he might die in Iraq and his mother might have to bury him. As she is leaving, he promises her that he will stop smoking and that he will write to her, although he lights another cigarette after watching her car leave the army base.

Bartle's thoughts about death suggest that there is a great difference between self-sacrifice (to the point of death) and his adolescent decision to join the army, which was moved by other factors such as a desire to get away from home and start a new life. His inability to quit smoking serves as a sign that he is emotionally troubled and afraid, beyond what he might reveal to his mother.

Bartle then meets Murph's mom, who is glad to know that Bartle and Murph are becoming good friends. Although Bartle does not want to be responsible for Murph, he finds himself promising Mrs. Murphy to bring her son back to her. Later, Sterling, who has overheard this conversation, confronts Bartle and tells him that he shouldn't have promised that. When Bartle tries to argue that it doesn't matter, Sterling punches him twice in the face. Bartle stays lying in the snow for a while and then returns to his bunk. Bartle looks out at the stars, knowing that some of the ones he is seeing have already died. He feels like he is looking at a lie, and concludes that the world makes everyone a liar.

Sterling knows that what happens in war is unpredictable and terribly violent—and that one should not blind oneself to that fact by trying to give oneself or others false reassurances. Sterling's brutally honest attitude contrasts with Bartle's confusion—the early sign of a moral insecurity that will affect him for the years to come. Bartle's vague feeling that the world turns everyone into liars suggests that he does not believe that what he is doing is noble. Rather, from the very beginning, his experience of war is marked by moral disappointment.

CHAPTER 3: MARCH 2005 – KAISERSLAUTERN, RHINELAND-PALATINATE, GERMANY

On their way back from Iraq to the U.S., the soldiers stop at the town of Kaiserslautern, in Germany. Bartle feels strange, noticing how different the trees and the temperatures are here. He walks toward the town and finds comfort in the silence between the local inhabitants and him, since he does not speak German, although he feels deeply lonely for another reason.

Bartle's feeling of solitude becomes a defining feature of his life: his desire to be left alone with his thoughts and pain, combined with the loneliness and grief caused by Murph's death. Bartle needs time to reflect on his own, but could also benefit from the presence of a trusted friend.

Bartle takes a taxi toward the center of town and, on the way, notices that his hands close automatically around a rifle that he no longer has. Bartle feels numb and tired. When he reaches town, the thought of running into Sterling and the other soldiers makes him want to vomit, although he notes that it is not only because he has gone AWOL, leaving the military base when he wasn't supposed to.

Bartle's physical instinct to grab his rifle serves as a prelude to the trauma that will affect him for the next months and years, as memories and sensations keep on returning vividly to him over time. Bartle's disgust toward Sterling shows that he associates Sterling with Murph's death.

Bartle walks in front of a cathedral, and he decides to enter. He grabs a descriptive pamphlet, watches the priest prepare incense at the other end of the church, and watches a group of school children. Bartle admires the martyred saints depicted in the cathedral and, after looking back up from his pamphlet, notices that the priest has walked up to him. The priest tells him that he cannot smoke, and Bartle looks down, realizing that he has lit a cigarette without even noticing.

The martyred saints in the church are the victims of violence in a similar way to Bartle, who is celebrated in his own country for the wounds he has suffered at war. The fact that Bartle has begun to smoke without realizing it highlights that he is no longer in full control of his body and his mind, and that he will need to work hard to readapt to civilian life.

The priest tells Bartle that his name is Father Bernard and asks him if he needs help with anything. He discovers that Bartle is a private, and makes a joke about also being a private. Then he tells Bartle that he looks troubled, burdened by something. He asks Bartle if he might want to talk, but Bartle feels uncomfortable and rejects the priest's offer. Bartle says only that he made a mistake.

The priest's perception of Bartle's mental distress and Bartle's subsequent rejection of the priest's offer suggests that Bartle is not yet ready (or does not yet know how) to handle the mental wounds that war has left him with, even though these wounds are visible for people to see.

Looking around at the cathedral, Bartle admires its beauty but finds it sad at the same time. Reflecting on his own life, he finds that he does not feel he has any control over his history. He feels that he has no grasp over the logic of the events he has lived through, and that he does not even know how to mark the difference between words, memory, and the truth.

Bartle's sense that he has no control over his life suggests that war has caused him to relinquish control—and, therefore, that he cannot be considered fully responsible for his actions, since he sometimes cannot even recall or justify them.

When the priest offers to pray for Bartle, Bartle refuses, thinking that the priest's gesture is obligatory and thus meaningless. When the priest insists, though, Bartle says he could pray for a friend, Daniel Murphy, who died in Iraq. Bartle then has a mental image of Murph's body floating down the river and feels that it is his duty to remember him well, because remembrance is a way to give meaning to events, even though Bartle himself admits that he does not understand precisely how or why Murph died.

Bartle feels a sense of duty toward honoring Murph's life, even if this life does not have any grandiose, underlying meaning or impact on the world. The mystery surrounding the circumstances of Murph's death builds suspense, but also reflects Bartle's difficulty to confront it directly, since it is imbued with horror and emotional trauma.

As Bartle walks out the church into the cobblestone streets, he feels completely detached and separate from everyone else. He reaches a building with red curtains, from which women's voices can be heard, and he remembers this address as a brothel, which a fellow soldier had enthusiastically told him about. Bartle considers walking in but has begun to feel uncomfortable in crowds and desperately wishes Murph were here.

The contrast between Bartle's complex emotional mind state and the possibility of easy sexual relief through prostitution reveals just how difficult it will be for Bartle to find an adequate source of comfort for his grief.

Reflecting on what happened in Al Tafar, Bartle concludes that events happen in a certain way even if one does not want them to, and that there is no inherent logic to their occurrence. At the same time, Bartle knows that people have always tried to make sense of life, even if there is no destiny and all people can do is watch life unfold before them.

Bartle concludes that much of human life is passive, as people are forced to suffer events over which they have no control. This attitude shows how helpless war has made him feel, and how difficult it will be for him to trust in his own life and agency again.

When Bartle sees a man walk out the door, he decides to enter the house. A frail-looking bartender with a bruise beneath her eye talks to Bartle in German but he asks for whiskey and begins to drink, watching the men wait for prostitutes. Bartle drinks many glasses of whiskey and, noticing how shy and scared the girl looks, asks her if she is okay, but realizes that his speech is slurred.

Bartle's drinking suggests that he wants to forget about what has happened to him, even if the pleasure or oblivion he achieves is only temporary and dissatisfying. At the same time, Bartle reveals that war has not made him callous, and that he retains his instinct for protecting others.

Bartle then hears a loud noise on the stairs and turns around to see Sergeant Sterling coming down, shirtless and bleeding a little by his mouth. When Sterling sees Bartle, he yells at him excitedly, then he walks toward the bartender and attacks her violently, insulting her and squeezing her face in his hand while she tries to resist and begins to cry. Bartle distracts him by telling him to drink with him. Before joining Bartle, Sterling hits the girl's head against the wall.

Unlike in the war, Sterling's aggressive behavior here remains unjustified, since this gratuitous violence is not an act of self-protection, nor does it obey to higher orders. This scene thus reveals the incompatibility of war with civilian life, where such brutality is not considered acceptable. Sterling seems almost inhuman here in his violence and the fear he inspires in the bartender.

Bartle then notices that it is two in the morning and that all the other men have left, either to spend time with a prostitute or to escape Sterling's drunkenness. Sterling laughs and says that he loves this freedom. Then, Sterling begins to make fun of Murph's face when a female suicide bomber killed herself in front of the men. Sterling adds that nothing bad ever happens when he is in charge, but that trouble begins when people try to convince him of things.

Despite Sterling's apparent joy, his pleasure remains colored by his memories of the war—which he initially recalls in a joking way by making fun of Murph, but then admits that he sees seriously when he comments on his responsibility to his soldiers. His words hint at the problematic circumstances of Murph's death, which still remains unexplained.

As Bartle notes how drunk Sterling is, Sterling tells him in a menacing way that only the two of them know what happened to Murph, and that he could destroy Bartle, since in addition he is currently AWOL. Bartle replies that he too could talk about what Sterling did. Sterling then begins to laugh, concluding that no one cares about what happened to Murph anyway, since all that matters is celebrating the boy's death and telling his mother a nice story. Bartle suggests that they could simply tell the truth and put an end to all of this, but Sterling laughs at him.

Sterling's threatening attitude toward Bartle is surprising given his usual protection of his men. Therefore, it is more likely a reflection of his own traumatic memory of what happened to Murph than of a sincere desire to harm Bartle. Sterling's cynical conclusion suggests that he does not believe in justice and accountability. Rather, he knows that war is arbitrarily cruel—and, at the same time, that the army and the nation work hard to conceal that fact, as they use comforting narratives to disguise the horrors of war.

Later, Bartle wakes up upstairs. When he sees the bartender, asks her if Sterling is gone. He is then shocked to realize that the girl speaks English. When Bartle begins to make a request to her, she feels offended and slaps him, although he realizes that he does not actually want to have sex, even if that might give him a feeling of control over something. Bartle throws up in a trashcan and the girl comments that they are all so sad. After walking back down and grabbing the whiskey bottle, Bartle falls asleep outside, by a canal.

The fragmentary nature of these memories, due to Bartle's drunken state, serves as a symbolic representation of the fragmentary nature of Bartle's memories in general, which fail to give him a satisfying sense of meaning and purpose. The girl's capacity to identify the soldiers' attitudes—including Sterling's aggressiveness—as sadness, not cruelty, suggests that violence can disguise underlying pain.

As dawn is approaching, Bartle wakes up and walks back toward the house, where he angrily asks the women sitting on the porch for the bartender. He then realizes it is close to dawn, so he returns to the base, where the lieutenant is angry and tells Bartle to clean up. Later, Sterling tells Bartle that he covered for him, although he adds that they are not finished.

Bartle's decision to look for the girl—in pursuit of sex or not—reveals his desperate need for human comfort. Although Bartle does not receive such comfort from Sterling, he does discover that Sterling remains an honest man, willing to protect his fellow soldiers.

CHAPTER 4: SEPTEMBER 2004 – AL TAFAR, NINEVEH PROVINCE, IRAQ

One evening, during a period in which the soldiers guard their post during their day and fight over a nearby field at night, a runner brings the soldiers their mail. Sterling, who has received none, asks the runner if he has forgotten him, but the man says Sterling must not have received mail this time.

This episode highlights Sterling's solitude—and his desire, like everyone else, to feel loved and remembers. Sterling's devotion to the war has effectively severed his ties from civilian life, and he must learn to be on his own.

In the meantime, Bartle watches as Murph takes off his helmet, retrieves a **photograph** from inside it, and reads his letter carefully. When Bartle asks him if he has received good news, Murph replies that his girlfriend has decided to break up with him. Concerned, Bartle asks if Murph is okay, but his friend seems to accept the news in a resigned way.

Murph's apparent resignation does not mean that he no longer has any feelings for his girlfriend, but that he is beginning to accept that his current life is detached from the ordinary life of civilians, and he must learn to accept this difficult fact.

Noticing how silent their environment is during this conversation, Bartle recalls the sounds of cicadas in Richmond, Virginia, and realizes that it must be morning back home. He remembers the day he told his mother, without forewarning, that he had enlisted into the army. Bartle feels that his life has moved straight from that day to the present moment in Iraq, and that he has not lived in between. Much later, reflecting on Murph's death, Bartle agrees with Murph that his separation from his girlfriend did not matter indeed.

The way Bartle thinks of home while in Iraq foreshadows the way he will think of Iraq while in the U.S.—he cannot feel fully comfortable in either environment. Bartle realizes that the war is becoming a defining feature of his life, and that his recollection of home might be nothing more than nostalgia—a feeling of comfort that might no longer exist in reality.

After Murph compares the sky they are under to the one his girlfriend must see, Bartle and he chat in an innocent, lighthearted way, like children. Bartle treasures this memory of his friend before Murph became too affected by the horrors of the war. During this conversation, Bartle asks to look at Murph's **picture** and see that it shows Murph and his girlfriend in a peaceful setting on a dirt track by a mountain. When Murph says that he does not blame Marie, his girlfriend, for her decision, Sterling intervenes. He says if it were him, he would kill her, and that Murph should not accept this. Murph simply replies that he doesn't feel he can do anything about it.

Through Murph's picture, Bartle gains some insight into Murph's life before the war and becomes better acquainted with Murph as a full person, not only as a soldier. Sterling's tendency to resort to violence as a solution reveals not only that he is dangerously transposing the brutality of war into everyday life, but also that he does not want to give up on civilian life and relationships. It is perhaps Sterling's insistence that civilian life continues to exist in parallel to war that allows him to withstand the difficulties of war—unlike Murph, who ultimately feels so severed from civilian life that he gives in to despair.

Thinking back on this scene, Bartle almost wishes that Murph had resisted more, shown a greater desire to fight for his life. When Murph puts the **picture** back in his helmet, Bartle sees the **card** that all soldiers must fill out and sign in case they are killed. He notices that Murph has checked the box for Body Recovered, and Murph comments that he did this "just in case."

Murph's resignation becomes a sign of his gradual deterioration, as he seems resigned to give up on his identity and the civilian life that used to define him—a process that ultimately leads to his death. At the same time, he seems eager to keep from disappearing entirely, since he hopes to preserve his body.

Bartle then discovers that some friends sent him a bottle of whisky and, laughing, Murph and he share the alcohol. The two of them then admire the stars and the scattered fires in the distance, at the same time as they hear the wailing voices of women in mourning in the distance. Later, back home in the U.S., Bartle can still recall theses impressions when he lights a fire and hears the sounds of the women crying.

Bartle's perception and memory of these wailing women underlines his knowledge that his presence in Iraq, through the U.S. army, is harmful to the local population. Even though Bartle does not openly express guilt, this memory seems linked to his own painful knowledge of being an aggressor.

The lieutenant then walks up to them and announces that the colonel is coming. The soldiers prepare their rifles to protect their building and, when the colonel arrives, they notice that he is accompanied by a reporter and a cameraman. The colonel asks all the soldiers individually how the war is going and then, while the camera is rolling, reads a speech in which he announces that the soldiers will soon have to take part in a violent battle "in the cause of good." He notes that this is the land where the Biblical character Jonah was buried, begging for God's justice, which the soldiers now impersonate.

The colonel's ceremonious appearance contrasts with the soldiers' everyday experiences, in which they take part in inelegant and, often, seemingly gratuitous or meaningless acts of violence. The colonel attempts to couch these actions in terms of justice and fairness. His reference to the Bible eliminate any political connotations this conflict might have, arguing that it is, instead, the result of a long-standing process of justice. This attitude of righteousness, however, remains unsubstantiated by actual facts.

Bartle feels that the colonel is moved by pride and arrogance, as well as a lack of interest in the soldiers' individual lives, when the colonel announces that some of them will die. The colonel then exhorts them to fight aggressively against the enemy, but is disappointed by the lack of enthusiasm he receives at the end of his speech.

The contrast between the colonel's exaltation and the soldiers' response reveals that they do not believe the colonel's words: they know that they are taking part in an inherently brutal, dangerous fight—not a noble, elevating enterprise.

The lieutenant then explains that they will move into the field before dawn and Bartle feels overwhelmed by the smells of dead bodies and trash in Al Tafar, hoping he will not step into one of the bodies. The lieutenant explains that the enemy is in the orchard. As the soldiers all reflect on the long walking they are about to do, the colonel explains that they will drop mortars in the orchard before the soldiers get there, and that this might be the most important action the soldiers take part in in their entire life.

Bartle's thoughts highlight how irrelevant the colonel's words are, since Bartle is exclusively concerned with matters of physical well-being and survival, not with justice or elevated ideals. At the same time, ironically, Bartle knows that, from a purely personal perspective, this moment is indeed potentially momentous, since it could lead to his own death.

As the colonel is leaving, Bartle hears him ask the reporter how the photos look. Murph then asks Bartle if he thinks this is truly the most important thing they will do in their lives, and Bartle replies that he hopes not. The soldiers are nervous and scared, and Bartle learns that this is the third time the U.S. army has passed through this orchard, fighting over this town every year. Bartle feels that this war is purposeless, as they simply engage in the same battles over and over again, without achieving anything substantial.

The colonel's concern with his own image reveals how little true sense of solidarity and companionship exists between the soldiers and him. In addition, the fact that the army has fought over this orchard cyclically suggests that there is no grandiose purpose or significance to the soldiers' actions, since they seem bound to win and lose this piece of territory over and over again, without any true progress.

Sterling then prepares Murph and Bartle for battle, covering their shiny gear with tape that will hide any reflections and trying to reassure them that everything will be fine. After a brief sleep, the soldiers are awakened by the sound of mortars. Bartle feels a deep fear take over him, typical of the feeling he gets before every battle—a sensation that Murph has described as a protracted version of what one might feel in the seconds before a car crash, when one realizes that the crash is going to take place. Bartle finds that he cannot relax his muscles or keep from sweating.

The physical and psychological stress that war places on soldiers reaches its height here, as it becomes apparent that the fear soldiers experience is a kind of torture, placing them in a limbo between life and death. As in other aspects of war, soldiers are forced to accept that they have no control not only over the battle to come, but over their very own bodies. This physical process foreshadows the mental phenomenon Bartle will go through after the war, when he finds that he cannot control his memories.

As the soldiers prepare to go into battle, Murph and Bartle notice Sterling throwing salt over the ground, smiling and muttering. When asked about it, he only says "it's from Judges." Although Sterling explains that this is simply a tradition of his, Murph wonders if Sterling has gone crazy and goes to look at what he is doing. He comes back to Bartle troubled and confused, explaining that Sterling is holding a dead body and is not smiling anymore.

Sterling's invocation of Biblical tradition (Judges is a book from the Old Testament) reveals his own fear and desire for protection. His behavior, informed by faith or superstition, underlines his yearning—like Bartle and Murph—to maintain at least some control over his life and hope that these preparatory actions might somehow protect him in battle.

CHAPTER 5: MARCH 2005 – RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

On the plane on his way home to the U.S., Bartle realizes that he feels like he has left a part of himself in Iraq. To him, home has become an undefined image, shaken by the long months he spent in a foreign land. When he wakes up from a nap, he reaches for his rifle before realizing that it is not there. He then looks around the plane and counts the number of soldiers missing, including Murph, listing their ranks, and concluding that the number might be somewhere between twenty and thirty. As Bartle admires the landscape, he realizes that he has been forming a thought in his mind: he wants to go home.

Bartle's combined realization that his time in Iraq has impacted his very sense of being and *that he wants to go home highlights the tragic irony of his situation, since Iraq has changed him so much that his understanding of home has changed, and his American home will no longer give him the comfort he so desperately seeks. To feel at home again anywhere, Bartle will have to confront the impact of his time in Iraq: his painful memories and grief. Otherwise, he will keep on feeling lost and displaced, yearning for a mental peace he cannot find.*

When the plane lands in the U.S., a sign thanking the soldiers for their service welcomes them and the lieutenant gives them a short speech reminding them not to drink and drive or hit their girlfriends. When the soldiers are dismissed, many look confused and wonder what their lives will be like now. Bartle, who also feels lost and confused, goes to the airport bar. He notices that the bar is extremely clean but wants to clean the dust his boots have left on the floor. When he asks the janitor if he can use the man's mop, however, the man tells him there is nothing on the floor and pats Bartle's shoulder to reassure him.

The lieutenant's speech is laughably simplistic, since it handles potential issues of alcoholism and violence in such a simplistic way, failing to recognize the complex ways in which they might represent the soldiers' trauma. The disintegration of the group of soldiers, as each person heads to the plane that will take them home, anticipates the isolation that Bartle will feel at home, where he is no longer surrounded by people who have lived through the same experiences as he.

Bartle drinks a few beers and has a brief chat with the airport bartender, who tells him that he finds it a shame young people like Bartle have to go fight in Iraq and that they should simply annihilate "those sand niggers." When he asks Bartle if Iraq is filled with "savages," as he has heard, Bartle replies that it is "something like that." When Bartle then hears his flight announced, he wants to pay for the beers but the bartender insists on giving them to him for free, showing a **yellow ribbon** as an explanation. However, Bartle, who is annoyed to be treated with deference for his role in the war, where he feels all he did was survive, insists and gives the bartender his money before he leaves.

The bartender's perspective on the war is hateful and overly simplistic, and his use of a racial slur reflects the racist, violently disrespectful attitude he has toward the Iraqis. Bartle, who has more often felt compassion for the Iraqi enemy than hatred, avoids contradicting the bartender but cannot fully agree with him, as he knows that not all Iraqis are savages in the same way that not all Americans are noble. Bartle's growing anger suggests that this kind of civilian support of the war is misinformed and inadequate, as it does not actually reflect soldiers' experiences.

On the plane to Virginia, the pilot makes an announcement expressing his honor to be taking an American hero home. Bartle feels annoyed and embarrassed but is given a seat with more legroom on the plane and drinks four Jack and Cokes. He imagines what other soldiers in other planes must be feeling, as they return to girlfriends and friends with the impression that the world is slipping away from them, unable to get rid of a loneliness that has become impressed into their very bones.

The fact that civilian celebration of veteran soldiers makes Bartle uncomfortable suggests that, instead of making him feel part of a welcoming group, these expressions of gratitude emphasize his difference from ordinary civilians, as well as his inability to actually communicate to others how harrowing Iraq was, far from the idealized conception of war as a noble enterprise.

Bartle falls asleep and soon finds himself in Virginia. His mom welcomes him at the airport, her hands pressing against his face and uniform, as though she were afraid he could fade away. She begins to cry, repeating his name over and over and slapping him in the face when he tries to keep her hands from pressing against his cheeks. She tells him that he is home and, although he feels protected by her embrace as he lays his head against her chest, he finds that he cannot believe her.

Bartle's inability to feel at home is a sign of the detachment between his mind and his body: although his body is physically in America, his mind is elsewhere, still haunted by Iraq. The striking similarity between this dissociation and what Murph felt in Iraq (where his mind was home but his body was not) presages danger and, as in Murph's case, the threatening possibility of death.

On the drive home, Bartle looks out at the landscape and, when he sees the valley below, imagines himself patrolling and taking cover in the fields, examining which positions would allow him to take cover. His mother asks him if he is okay, startling him, and he says that he is fine. When they arrive home, Bartle says that all he wants to do is shower and sleep. He shuts the blinds in his room and concludes that he has reached emptiness instead of a much-awaited home. When he takes off his clothes, he feels that he is disappearing and might vanish at any moment. Feeling tired, he lies in bed and falls asleep, dreaming of Murph and the war, as he does every night.

The mental invasion of memories in a physically peaceful place will become an ordinary part of Bartle's life after the war, as he struggles to readjust to an entirely new setting: civilian life. Bartle's feeling that he might disappear suggests that death is a possible threat, but also that he has lost a feeling of internal unity. Since he feels so torn between the desire for home and his time of Iraq, which has defined his sense of identity, he no longer knows who he is. In this sense, part of him has already vanished.

CHAPTER 6: SEPTEMBER 2004 – AL TAFAR, NINEVEH PROVINCE, IRAQ

In Al Tafar, while the soldiers walk toward the orchard and wait in a ditch, Bartle feels afraid of dying. In the eerily quiet orchard, the lieutenant signals to move forward and Bartle concludes that he is only following orders because Murph, Sterling, the lieutenant, and all the others are doing the same, and the idea of being the one soldier who does not terrifies him.

Bartle's fear of being the only one not to follow orders suggests that many soldiers are probably in the same situation as him: marching to combat not out of bravery, moral commitment, or the desire to fight, but because of social pressure.

Trying to make as little noise as possible, the soldiers walk carefully through the trees destroyed by the mortars and the battle suddenly begins. Like everyone else, Bartle fires as soon as he can, finding that the excess of noise feels like a particular kind of silence in the ears. Although Bartle is not sure where the shooting is coming from, someone screams "Three o'clock!" and everyone begins to shoot in that direction while lying on the ground.

The confusion that this scene describes highlights the fact that even seemingly well planned military operations are experienced in a disorderly way, as soldiers' fear and desire not to be killed takes over, leading them to shoot at anything and everything. The silence that Bartle experiences underlines the surreal quality of this scene, in which men are fighting for their lives.

Silence returns, and the soldiers begin walking again. They discover the bodies of two adolescent Iraqi boys who have been shot in the face and the chest, as well as an American soldier whimpering, dying from a shot in the stomach while the doctors push his insides back in. When Bartle suddenly realizes that the soldier has died, he says out loud that he had expected him to say something before dying. Other soldiers agree that they, too, had expected him to say something, but Sterling explains that the dying rarely say anything and that he only once heard someone speak before dying.

The fact that the soldiers' enemy was only two adolescent boys highlights the enormous disparity between the local population and the U.S. army's training and resources, suggesting that the local population is trying to fight back in a desperate way, using every means they can. Bartle's expectation that the soldier would say something before dying underlines his desire for finding significance in war, as the soldier's words could perhaps have brought comfort or peace to this tragic situation.

Bartle asks Sterling to know what this dying man had said, but Sterling is reluctant to share that memory because he thinks that Bartle is making a big deal out of all of this. In the meantime, Bartle notices that Murph is kneeling in silence by the dead body. Bartle does not want to feel responsible for his companion's state, since he is already struggling enough to maintain his own sanity. Finally, Sterling agrees to tell Bartle that the dying man had asked Sterling to check if he had defecated in his pants. After hearing this story, Bartle turns around to throw up, noticing that the bile comes out in **yellow ribbons**.

Bartle's annoyance at being responsible for Murph serves as a prelude to Murph's future emotional breakdown, which leaves Bartle feeling helpless and guilty. The episode that Sterling recounts is shocking in its purely physical approach to death, which focuses on the disintegration of the human body in a crude way and suggests that death might not bring spiritual elevation. The description of Bartle's vomit as yellow ribbons signals that traditional images of war and death as noble moments (which the yellow ribbon represents in American society) is at odds with the reality, which is infinitely more disgusting and uncomfortable.

A few hours later, when the soldiers are supposed to sleep, Murph and Bartle remain awake and Murph says that he cut the line earlier in front of the soldier who died today. Bartle tries to reassure Murph, who feels that he is going crazy and is ashamed of having felt relieved when he saw that that boy died instead of him. Bartle, who admits that he also felt relieved not to be shot in battle and die in front of everyone, tries to make a joke about the fact that this must be the nine hundred eightieth death, but neither of them succeed in finding this funny.

This episode marks a turning point in Murph's life, as he can no longer see death in an impersonal, detached way but becomes emotionally overwhelmed by the cruelty of war. In addition, Murph begins to evaluate the moral validity of his actions, wondering if caring only about one's survival might be selfish and wrong. These thoughts foreshadow Murph's later emotional breakdown and escape.

Hours later, the soldiers keep on walking and reach the city, which has been destroyed by the U.S. army's modern weapons. In the city filled with dead bodies, Bartle sees no one except an old woman walking away in the distance. When the soldiers reach a bridge, they come across a dead body in the middle whose head has been cut off and placed on his chest. The lieutenant curses and explains that this is a body bomb.

The fact that the lieutenant is not shocked by the horror of the scene but by its practical implications (namely, the danger of this body bomb) shows how emotionally detached he is from the horrors of war—in a similar way that the enemy, who does not hesitate to use a human body as a weapon, has become.

As the soldiers wait in silence, wondering what they should do, there is a sudden explosion and they are fired at. The soldiers fight back immediately. In this battle, in which Bartle shoots at everything that moves, he decides to abandon all of his memories of home because he feels that he is an intruder in the universe. However, when he shoots a man to death, watching his clothes become covered in blood, a memory comes back of him sitting on a dock next to a girl. During the battle, Sterling congratulates the soldiers for their aggressiveness, telling them: "Now you've got it, Privates. Thorough, thorough is the way home" with a serene face. However, Bartle soon finds that he cannot take it anymore and puts his head in his hands.

This combat scene foreshadows Bartle's later difficulty to reintegrate civilian life in the U.S. In the same way that Bartle will not know how to cope with his intrusive memories of Iraq, here Bartle's memories of home come unbidden and prove incompatible with the violent necessity of the present moment. Sterling's association of this extreme violence with home makes this situation all the more ironic. It suggests not only that fighting is the only way for soldiers to survive and thus hope to return home, but that violence has become *the soldiers' home, since it is now a routine part of their life and defines their identity as soldiers.*

When the battle ends, the American soldiers have suffered no casualties. They move forward, noticing how the body on the bridge has been destroyed into bits of flesh and metal. In silence, Bartle reflects about this dead man's last moments, when he must have begged to be saved before having his throat cut out, so that his body, emptied out and filled with explosives, might be used as a weapon. Sterling then calls on Bartle and Murph to make sure that the body no longer holds any explosives, and they tug at the various pieces of the body until they conclude that there is no longer any danger. As the soldiers walk into the city, civilians come out in small groups to bury the dead and, as night falls, the muezzin calls people to prayer.

Bartle's compassion for this dead man, whose body could have killed them, shows that he does not demonize the enemy but understands that it is made up of individuals just as vulnerable and fearful as him. He understands that war turns individuals into tools used for violent purposes, destroying human life in horrific ways. In the same way that Bartle has learned to be violent to keep from being killed, perhaps even the enemy's seemingly inhuman cruelty is a sign of necessity and desperation. Even civilians' movement to bury the dead highlights how ordinary cruelty has become.

CHAPTER 7: AUGUST 2005 – RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

During that entire spring after coming home, Bartle sleeps most of the time, noting the hour of the day by the sounds of children getting on and off the school bus. Bartle's only activity is to go buy a case of beer every afternoon at a local store, making sure that no one sees him. Bartle feels both ashamed and scared of being seen for who he truly is, as he feels degraded. He tries to make himself as discrete as possible in his mother's house, drinking the beer in the kitchen and watching the woods through the window.

Bartle's growing addiction to alcohol reveals his desire to forget everything and escape the oppression of his memories and this current life in which he does not fit in. His fear of being discovered for who he is suggests that he feels like an impostor, incapable of sharing his deepest fears or weaknesses with anyone, as well as his realistic experience of the war.

Bartle finds that everything he does reminds him of Iraq. Once, when his mother asks him to repair the fence, he hears a crow caw and, thinking that the sound signals mortars falling, tries to protect himself. Afterwards, he notices his mother at the window and waves at her. Overall, he feels as though he is at the edge of a cliff and wants to fall, thinking that he cannot bear another day, yet finding that he is breathing and must go on, unable to actually fall.

If Bartle felt that he had no control over his life during the war, he soon discovers that he is in a similar situation back home, where he might have agency over his actions but cannot keep unwanted memories from emerging. His efforts to pretend that all is well only increase his solitude, as he cannot share this burden with anyone.

Bartle sometimes wakes up wishing he did not have to live. Even though he does not actually want to kill himself, he knows that if people were to become aware of his state he would have to answer uncomfortable questions. One morning, his mother comes to him with the phone, telling him that his friend Luke is going to the river the next day with friends. Bartle asks her to tell him he is too tired to talk. His mother agrees to do so but insists that Bartle at least think about going, which causes Bartle to explode, saying that all he does is think.

In the same way that Murph's emotions overwhelmed him in Iraq, leading him to death, Bartle's lack of control over his mental life leads him to desire death. Paradoxically, his regained liberty only turns him into a prisoner, as he cannot escape the workings of his own mind. His solitude both reflects and accentuates this, as he does not allow himself to benefit from at least temporary distractions or comfort.

Bartle gets up from bed, feeling raw pain all over his body, and walks down to a pond by the house, where he finds a place he used to go to as a child. He sees the initials J.B. carved into the barks of many trees and concludes that they must be his, even though he does not remember making them. This makes him smile. He sits down for a while, but when the heat becomes too intense, decides to walk toward the city on the train tracks.

The mental pain Bartle feels becomes physical, emphasizing that he truly is suffering from war-related wounds, even if they might remain invisible. Bartle's detachment from his childhood memories suggests that memories are unreliable indicators of identity, since they are so fleeting and uncontrollable, unable to provide an accurate representation of all moments of life.

Unable to keep thinking about Murph, Bartle walks back to his mother's house, puts some belongings in a duffel bag, and leaves. Although he tries to concentrate on his memories of Murph, he finds that they are unreliable, as he succeeds in recovering some memories while others fade away. He remembers a story Murph told him about a dozen canaries his father bought. When the father opened up the cages, he was surprised to find that, after singing for a little while, the birds decided to return to them instead of flying away. Going through his memories of Murph, Bartle finds that his image of his friend is fading away and turning into a permanent absence which cannot be filled, even as he misses him dearly.

Paradoxically, Bartle is forced to endure the presence of memories he does not want, and incapable of summoning those he actually does want to recall. This suggests that his own life—past and present—is largely out of his control. Murph's story about the canaries recalls this novel's title. The paradox that birds who are given freedom return to their formation suggests that birds, like humans, might not always thrive in free environments. In the same way the birds return to their cage without realizing it, Bartle feels trapped in his mental life as a soldier without knowing how to appreciate his own liberty.

Taking the railway tracks toward the city, Bartle feels that he is walking aimlessly and finds that he has gone far, already reaching the river, and that the sun will soon set. When he feels a train approach, he slips down at watches it pass by, looking for a place to jump on but finding none. Bartle observes the trees and the city in the distance, finally falling asleep next to a fire he makes.

Bartle wants to escape his current circumstances at all costs. However, his belief that he could achieve this through mere physical displacement—by jumping on a train, for example—is largely naïve, since it is unlikely that moving would keep his memories from torturing him. His desire to be on his own, however, reveals his desperation.

Bartle wakes up in late morning. He hears music and noise nearby and sees Luke with a group of friends. Bartle washes off in the river and walks toward the city, then back toward the river, where he finds a recently deserted campsite. He takes off his clothes, starts a fire, and enters the water. When he sees how beautiful Luke and his friends look, he wants to hate them, feeling that he has become a "cripple," unable to express himself.

Bartle's hatred of Luke's physical beauty and his self-comparison to a cripple show that he is transforming his mental difficulties into physical problems, as though his psychological stress affected his body. This serves to make his troubles more tangible, giving them a concrete manifestation instead of confining them to the invisible mental realm.

In an ironic tone, Bartle concludes that it would be impossible for him to tell his friends that he feels destroyed on the inside and that he cannot stand to tell people this because everyone is always congratulating him. He also cannot say that he wants to die because he has killed people, sometimes shooting them more times than necessary, and that these actions—which he knows are wrong and he will never find absolution for—are eating away at him, even though his own mother is proud of him.

This internal monologue finally brings to light all of Bartle's thoughts, allowing the reader to understand what is going on in his mind beyond external expressions of unease. An important reason behind Bartle's alienation is the contrast between morality and social acceptance: although Bartle feels that what he has done is morally wrong, people's dogged belief that war is noble keeps him from confessing his true feelings.

Bartle adds that he failed to protect the one person he had promised to keep safe, and that he saw death so often that he became inured to it, to the point of only feeling sad for dead animals. By contrast, everyone is so happy to celebrate him, even though he is a murderer and should bear some responsibility for the horrors committed in Iraq. He feels that he wants to burn the country down and destroy all the **yellow ribbons**, even though he knows that joining the military was his own decision—one he made simply because he wanted to become a man, which will never happen now, because he has proven that he is a coward who only wants to die.

Bartle's guilt about failing to protect Murph's life shows that he is still trying to feel a sense of control over something that he cannot fully accept as inherently disordered and uncontrollable: war and death. It is the contrast between the elements over which he does *have control (e.g., joining the military, promising to keep Murph safe) and his current state of unhappiness, based on what he* could not *control, that confuses him most. His illusion of control proves harmful and dangerous, because it makes him feel responsible for everything that happened and thus turns his hatred, confusion, and rage toward his own self.*

Night falls. Walking in the river, Bartle starts to cry and lets himself float on the current, as he watches the moon and begins to fall asleep. He wakes up abruptly to the sound of people yelling to get him out and pushing on his chest for him to spit water out. Luke had called 911 when he saw Bartle floating on the river. When the police arrived, they did not make Bartle take a psychological test because of his military background. Instead, they take him home and try to give him encouraging words about getting better soon.

Bartle's drift down the river recalls Murph's dead body's traveling down the Tigris in Iraq, thus associating Bartle's current mind state with Murph's tragic ending and suggesting that Bartle might feel suicidal. Luke's concern for his friend reveals that Bartle is not as alone as he believes to be, and could perhaps rely on his friends more if he wanted to. The police's failure to test Bartle psychologically reveals, once more, the lack of adequate professional care from which Bartle benefits, since his military past keeps him from expressing his mental troubles and receiving help.

When Bartle's mother sees him walk through the door, she grabs his face, saying she thought she had lost him, to which Bartle replies that he is fine. She says she is worried about him and adds that she has been getting calls from a captain from the Criminal Investigation Division (C.I.D.). At these words, Bartle goes to his room and closes the door, hearing his mother ask him repeatedly what happened in Iraq. Bartle feels this is an unanswerable question, because there is no way to give meaning to what happened.

Bartle's mother's concern is both heartwarming and frustrating, since she does not actually understand what her son is going through—and Bartle does not want to explain anything. The C.I.D.'s criminal investigation, evaluating a specific deed, contrasts with Bartle's feeling that the war in general *is criminal, makes little rational sense, and that no one can ever be fully responsible for the horrors that it breeds.*

CHAPTER 8: OCTOBER 2004 – AL TAFAR, NINEVEH PROVINCE, IRAQ

A few days after the fight in the orchard, a major comes to talk to the soldiers at dawn, after a storm. He congratulates Bartle's platoon for fighting well and suffering few casualties, which earns them more relaxed patrolling schedules. The soldiers are so exhausted from fighting and, as Bartle recalls, spending three hours picking pieces of metal from a boy's face, that only Sterling succeeds in staying attentive and upright. The only part of the major's speech where soldiers react is the one in which he announces that Sterling has received a promotion and a Bronze Star for valor, which causes the soldiers to congratulate him.

The contrast between the major's formal speech and the soldier's informal, exhausted attitude reveals the disjunction between official narratives of war (such as the colonel and the civilian public also emphasize) and the inherently messier, more uncomfortable reality. In this context, even the major's congratulation of the soldiers' work and Sterling's bravery seems absurd, since all the soldiers have been doing is kill or wound others—and, in turn, get killed or wounded themselves. The crude reality of war suggests that the soldiers taking part in it are much less likely than external observers to idealize or glorify it.

After the major leaves, Bartle realizes that Murph is nowhere to be seen. In the next few weeks, over the course of patrols that becoming increasingly hot and uncomfortable, Bartle has the impression that his friend is avoiding him. Bartle tries to reflect on the precise moment when Murph started slipping away but finds that he cannot identify the causes of events. Bartle begins to see the war as a cruel joke, as he finds himself unable to understand Murph's strange behavior and feels angry about having promised Mrs. Murphy to bring her son back home.

Despite Bartle's professed lack of desire to be responsible for Murph, he cannot help but feel concerned for his friend—thus showing that, in the end, his selfish instincts are less powerful than empathy and solidarity. Bartle's later desire to understand the exact chronology of Murph's behavior reveals his sense of guilt, but also suggests that there was little he could actually have done to save his friend, since it is impossible to assign Murph's psychological troubles to any particular event.

When Bartle talks to Sterling about his worries, Sterling laughs and tells him that Murph is going to die because he is already "home" mentally, whereas Bartle has succeeded in remaining concentrated and on edge, what Sterling calls "deviant."

Sterling proves detached not only from death, but also from friendships. His belief that Bartle has succeeded in remaining aggressive suggests that soldiers need to adopt a survival strategy at odds with civilians' non-violent morals—the very principles that are troubling Murph.

Bartle soon finds himself forced to admit that Sterling might be right. Bartle, too, finds himself struggling mentally, muttering to himself and imagining his own death. One evening, drunk on cheap whiskey, Bartle wonders about what his dead body would look like and whether Murph would find him. In the meantime, the men patrol. Bartle finds that he does not notice how violent they have become, as they perform brutal actions such as beatings and searches routinely and indifferently.

Bartle' imagining of his dead body still involves an attachment to personal relationships, since he wonders about the consequences of his death on others—which suggests that he does feel connected to a team of fellow companions. Bartle's capacity to combine violence with limited critical observation (namely, noticing the violence without emitting judgment about it) allows him to keep on behaving as a soldier, but also sets the foundation for his later conviction that he has taken part in cruel. immoral deeds.

After finding Murph's casualty **feeder card and the picture** he kept in his helmet, Bartle begins to follow Murph, searching desperately for signs of life in his companion's behavior. He begins to ask people if they have seen Murph, and Sterling tells him that Murph goes to the medics' station to look at a woman there. Bartle decides to climb up the hill to the medics' headquarters and finds Murph there, sitting in the shade.

Murph's abandonment of his picture and feeder card reveals that he is abandoning his former identity, symbolized by his picture of home and his attachment to his own body. Bartle thus begins to understand that Murph is giving up on life as a whole and grows deeply concerned for his friend's fate.

Murph greets him and, when Bartle asks him where he has been, replies that he has been here. When Bartle asks Murph if he is okay, Murph does not reply. Bartle has the impression that he is waiting for a particular event. A helicopter then lands and, when a female doctor comes out, Murph admits that he has been looking at her. The two boys watch what happens next, as the medics put a screaming, wounded soldier whose leg has been crushed on a stretcher, and run toward the tent that serves as a hospital. Everyone around this scene hears as the boy's screams decrease and stop, marking the soldier's death. Murph tells Bartle that he wants to go home, and that says that when he's back he will tell no one that he went to Iraq.

Murph's unwillingness or inability to share the details of his mental state with Bartle anticipates Bartle's later difficulty to share his own thoughts with other people, and thus highlights the feelings of loneliness and alienation that psychological stress can generate. The simultaneous horror and routineness of this scene highlights how common death is in war—and how one's inability to see death in a detached way, which Murph is no longer able to do, would easily prove overwhelming. Murph's desire to go home is impossible—in part because he cannot leave Iraq easily, and in part because home would probably bring him little comfort, since Iraq has affected him so much. This puts Murph in a desperate plight.

While Bartle tries to soothe Murph, the doctor comes out of the tent, washes her hands, lights a cigarette, and begins to cry. Bartle understands that the reason Murph has been coming here is to remain in contact with soft, kind emotions, in contrast with what they experience in combat. Most importantly, though, Bartle concludes that Murph wants to feel as though he has control over at least a minimal aspect of his life, *choosing* to come form a memory of this doctor instead of being forced to accept all the unpredictable, violent events that happen around him.

The doctor's combination of professionalism and emotion suggests that not all war-related tasks have to be callous and indifferent. Perhaps, the woman's attitude suggests, a healthier attitude toward emotions and stress might be possible. In any case, Murph's desire for control reveals that his own emotions and memories are slipping away from him, making him feel as though he doesn't even have any control over his own life—a feeling that Bartle will later experience in civilian life.

As the doctor walks toward the chapel, Bartle tries to reassure Murph that they can count on each other, although he later admits that he does not know if they were truly close, outside of the closeness that the war imposed on them. The two of them begin walking back toward the platoon area when mortars suddenly explode near them, forcing Bartle to throw himself on the ground and make himself as small as possible. When he finally gets up again, terrified and weak, he runs away as fast as he can, into the sewage ditch.

Even though Bartle evidently cares about Murph and wants to make him feel better, his inability to conclude that Murph and he were truly close friends suggests that war-related ties are partially superficial, based on shared circumstances more than deep affinity—and, therefore, that they might not be as comforting as soldiers might hope (or need) them to be.

Bartle hears the last mortars explode, and concludes that they were probably meant to target local shops. He walks toward the destroyed shops, watching as the medics try to heal the local bg merchants. Making his way to the chapel, he sees that the doctor is now dead and that Murph is next to her, silent. While Bartle and another soldier cover the girl with a shirt and take her up the hill using wooden planks as a stretcher, Murph stays in a corner, muttering to himself, repeating his incredulity at what has just happened. The doctor's medic friends come and cry by her, as Bartle walks away, watching the small fire spread from the chapel to the nearby trees.

The doctor's death puts an end not only to the only realm of emotion and compassion that Murph could find during the war, but also to any sense of control he might have retained over his own life. If Bartle's reaction is to handle the situation in a practical way, taking the woman's body away, Murph's only option is to abandon all hope of control once and for all. This is what leads him to escape and thus deliver himself to the enemy, putting himself in a position where he is almost certain to be killed and, thus, to escape his current suffering.

CHAPTER 9: NOVEMBER 2005 – RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

In Virginia, Bartle now lives in an apartment he is renting and usually goes out only to buy beer or frozen potpies. In the evenings, he reheats potpies and drinks enough beers to fall asleep. During the day, he shoots at trash with a cheap rifle he bought. He knows that the C.I.D. will probably find him and punish him for what happened to Murph. Even though Bartle is not actually guilty of Murph's death, he feels a generalized sense of guilt and accepts the idea of punishment, anticipating that he will probably be sent to prison for five years for sending a fake letter to Mrs. Murphy.

Bartle's lifestyle shows that he is unable to take part in productive activities of any kind, and that he is using alcohol to try to numb himself, keep away from other people, and keep from thinking about harmful memories. Shooting trash with a rifle allows him to maintain a connection with his dual identity as a soldier and a civilian. It also allows him to use violence to canalize his anger and guilt without harming anyone—suggesting that he has not found a better way to express his emotions.

One snowy day, a captain arrives at Bartle's apartment and Bartle feels ashamed to be seen in this unkempt, alcoholic state. The man presents himself as Captain Anderson. He warns Bartle that he cannot run from them, which leads Bartle to understand that this man represents the entire army's perspective. When the captain pulls out the letter that Bartle wrote Mrs. Murphy, Bartle concludes that he will accept whatever punishment he is given—for writing this letter, as well as for everything else he has done in the war. He feels that nothing in the war made sense, and that he cannot account for his own actions.

Despite being part of the army in such an intense way, through the war in Iraq, Bartle does not feel that the army is on his side—but, rather, that it is hostile to him and wants to use him for its own purposes. Bartle's generalized guilt is, paradoxically, an admission of innocence: he knows that has never actually meant to cause anybody harm, but that the circumstances he has found himself in have led him to behave in potentially cruel, insensitive, and irrational ways.

The captain then contemptuously calls Bartle cowardly for not knowing how to live in ordinary society anymore. He asks Bartle if he has seen the doctors, to which Bartle replies that he has. Bartle then recalls being given a form in Kuwait, right after leaving Iraq, which was meant to measure soldiers' mental health. Bartle recalls feeling contempt for the army's approach to the soldiers' stress, and checks a box indicating that he felt "delighted" after a "murder-death-kill" in order to avoid being seen by doctors and being delayed in going home.

The captain's dismissive attitude toward Bartle's mental health, as well as the ridiculously simplistic questions on the form that Bartle had to fill out, highlights the army's incapacity to deal with issues beyond the practicality of war and violence, and to accept that soldiers might be deeply affected by their experience of combat. This attitude also impacts civilians' perspectives, who fail to understand that war takes a heavy toll on soldiers, however seemingly tough they might appear.

In his apartment, Bartle admits that he wrote this letter, although he does not fully agree that it was terribly wrong to write it. The captain then implies that they know Bartle is responsible for Murph's death. Bartle says this isn't true, but does not want to reveal his own version of the story, saying it does not matter. Bartle realizes that the captain's version of the story is based only on other soldiers' faulty memories, and that Sterling probably gave a deliberately vague answer to protect both Bartle and himself.

Although Bartle does *feel guilty for some of what he did during the war, this trial does not actually address the root of the problem, but merely seeks a scapegoat for some of the war's horrors. Bartle's unwillingness to defend his own perspective suggests that he does not trust the justice system, and that he prefers to keep the truth to himself.*

Bartle then reflects on Sterling's attitude. He concludes that Sterling was more self-sacrificing and devoted to others than Bartle ever realized. When the captain announces that Sterling suffered an "accident," Bartle understands that Sterling committed suicide. He concludes that Sterling spent his whole life obeying the army's orders until his very last moments, in which he decided to kill himself, realizing that he had a will of his own. After being overwhelmed by a mental image of Sterling shooting himself, Bartle simply says that the captain's version of the story is full of lies, but the captain replies that "Someone has to answer for some of it."

Sterling's suicide highlights the difficulty of belonging to the army while retaining a degree of personal agency, as it suggests that Sterling ultimately felt tired of obeying other people's orders and wanted to escape his oppressive environment—a decision that paradoxically recalls Murph's own reasoning. The captain's cynicism suggests that the army is less interested in protecting truth than in defending its own interests—an attitude at odds with true nobility, exemplified by Sterling's capacity for self-sacrifice.

After the captain handcuffs Bartle, Bartle asks if he can take something with him, and he grabs **the picture and casualty feeder card** that were in Murph's helmet. As the captain's car drives Bartle away, they stop on a bridge, from which Bartle throws the cards in the river. When they drive away, Bartle feels as though he is in a movie that he never knew he played a part in.

Although it seems as though Bartle is taking Murph's belongings with him to stay connected *with Murph, his final action reveals the opposite: he is trying to* let go *of the harmful memories that Murph's death has created. Even though Bartle might lack control over his legal fate, he thus tries to retain control over his emotional life.*

CHAPTER 10: OCTOBER 2004 – AL TAFAR, NINEVEH PROVINCE, IRAQ

Bartle recalls the moment Murph disappeared, crying because of the doctor's death. Although Murph did not attend the ceremony in the woman's honor, it was not until hours later that Sterling announced they had to go searching for Murph—who, in the meantime, had escaped naked through a hole in the wire.

The only way Murph tries to escape his pain is by escaping his whole environment, which also leads him to give up on his own life. The need for the entire group to go search for Murph suggests that the army is based on the need for solidarity, but also highlights its limits, since the army did not actually help Murph when he needed it the most.

The men gather quickly and walk toward Al Tafar, which is eerily empty because of the curfew. The uncertainty of the situation makes Bartle wonder about potential dangers, such as being attacked or having to search for Murph for days. Suddenly, an Iraqi man emerges from a house, his arms raised, begging not to be shot and explaining that he saw Murph. A translator then comes, properly hooded, and interrogates the man in a brutal manner, which leads the man to explain that he saw a naked American boy, with legs and feet bloody from the wire and the trash, walk past him in the afternoon, when he was at a local shop.

The man's willingness to come forth suggests that he is trying to protect himself and the fellow inhabitants from the U.S. army's violence by being as honest as possible and showing that he is willing to collaborate. However, Bartle's fear and the translator's aggressive methods reveal the lack of trust that exists between the two groups, as they are used to interacting in brutal ways. The image of Murph's naked, bloody body is Christ-like and presents him as a martyr, a victim of these cruel circumstances.

The Iraqi man pauses, confusedly asking the soldiers why Murph was naked, as though they knew the answer. He then pursues his story, explaining that Murph passed next to him without being aware of any other human presence, looking at the sky and swaying back and forth. The man and his friend at the shop tried to convince Murph to go back to the military outpost, but Murph remained in a trance and followed a beggar, who took Murph's hand and led him down a dark alley.

The Iraqi man's confusion at Murph's appearance mirrors everyone else's confusion and suggests that Murph must have gone insane, giving up on any pretension to being a soldier or a member of ordinary human civilization. The Iraqi men's efforts to send Murph back are not a sign of compassion, but an understanding that Murph is going to bring trouble on himself, which might then bring trouble on the local population.

The soldiers follow the direction the Iraqi man indicated, seeing local inhabitants run away with fear at their approach. The soldiers look for signs of Murph and find a puddle of blood down an alley. Following the bloody footprints, the men check their weapons and follow the alley, reaching a dead old beggar at an intersection. Unsure which direction to take, the soldiers worry that Murph has been captured and tortured to death.

The eerie elements of this search—the darkness, Murph's blood, and the dead old man—create an overwhelming atmosphere of death, anticipating the horrific discovery of Murph's dead body. The soldiers' assumption that Murph has been captured suggests that this war follows simple rules of retaliation, as one enemy is blindly bent on killing the other, even if he is naked and seemingly harmless, as Murph is.

As the sun begins to rise, the soldiers reach the outskirts of the city, where a man with a mule-drawn cart, seemingly undisturbed by the presence of twenty armed soldiers, explains—through the interpreter—that he saw five or six men go into the minaret the previous night. Sterling decides that Bartle and he will go explore the minaret, and the cartwright offers to guide them there. The cartwright then placidly stops and feeds his mule, explaining to the interpreter that he has already been to the minaret and does not want to go there again.

The cartwright's mysteriously indifferent attitude makes him suspicious. It suggests that he is both detached from the threat of violence (since he does not fear the soldiers) and also that he might be involved in Murph's death, since he seems to know exactly where Murph's body is. Overall, the man's attitude suggests that death and violence are so predominant that they no longer affect him.

The interpreter tells Sterling and Bartle to go look by the minaret, and Sterling tells the interpreter to leave. Bartle is scared, feeling that this whole bizarre situation must be a trap, but Sterling pushes him on. In a tense, eerie atmosphere, Bartle and Sterling walk up to the minaret, where they find Murph's dead body. Sterling comments that Murph must have been dead before falling, because of the minaret's small height.

Sterling's decision to send the interpreter away suggests that Sterling anticipates that what is about to happen needs to remain secret. Sterling's comment about Murph's death suggests that he was probably tortured to death and shows Sterling's detachment from the horrors of war, since his first reaction is not the expression of shock but practical considerations.

Pulling out Murph's body from the vegetation, Bartle and Sterling see that Murph's eyes have been gouged out, his throat slit, almost detaching his head from his neck, and that his ears, nose, and genitals have been cut off. Bartle realizes that neither Sterling nor he will ever again be able to see Murph the way they knew him, as an innocent eighteen-year-old boy. Bartle covers the body with a blanket from his pack and finds himself unable to look, finding the sight of Murph more horrific than the results of suicide attacks or cut-off heads.

Although Bartle is used to witnessing death and destruction on a daily basis, the horror of this tortured body and the fact that he knew the victim in an intimate way makes this particular death intolerable. Murph's death shows that human cruelty has no limit, as the aggressors mutilated Murph's body with no greater goal in sight, but simply to wreak vengeance.

Bartle asks what they should do, and Sterling swears, speaking to Murph directly, telling him he shouldn't have died in this way. Sterling argues that they need to bring the body back, because that is regular procedure and that they do not have the authority to decide. Bartle does not want to send such a destroyed body back home, where Murph's mother would probably open the casket and see what happened to her son. Influenced by Bartle's adamant attitude, Sterling takes a moment to think while Bartle shakes uncontrollably. Finally, Sterling decides that they will pretend that they never found Murph's body.

Sterling now expresses his emotions and his sense of compassion, as he genuinely feels terrible for what has happened to Murph—even though he had long predicted this boy's death. Bartle's desire to ignore conventional procedure is meant to protect Murph's mother. Therefore, even though he might be considered guilty of disobeying orders, his ultimate goal is noble, showing a moral concern for other people's feelings.

Sterling and Bartle call the old cartwright, who asks for a cigarette, and they lift Murph's body into the cart. Sterling burns the grass by the minaret, cursing "them" and "everyone on earth." Then they take Murph's body by the river, walking past burning objects thrown in the streets from the soldiers' search. When Sterling and Bartle reach the river, they throw Murph's body in. It soon begins to drift away. Sterling reminds Bartle that they have to act as though none of this ever happened, and he shoots the cartwright in the face. The mule walks away and, when Bartle looks back at the river, he sees that Murph is gone.

The cartwright's indifference to everything that is happening highlights, once again, the routineness of such horrific violence around him. Sterling's anger is not necessarily directed toward the enemy itself, but toward human cruelty in general, which is capable of such horrific deeds. The physical disappearance of Murph's body proves illusory, since the memory of Murph keeps on haunting both Sterling and Bartle well after they leave Iraq.

CHAPTER 11: APRIL 2005 – FORT KNOX, KENTUCKY

Now in a prison for convicts serving terms under five years, Bartle feels that his life is pleasantly ordinary. He is glad to notice that most people have forgotten him and that he can read library books. During his first few months in prison, he desperately tries to find a pattern to the war. He makes marks on his cell every time he recalls a memory from the war, hoping that they might coalesce into a logical string of events, but soon realizes that events cannot be connected to each other. Instead, they occurred randomly, following no apparent pattern.

Bartle's satisfaction does not derive from the success of justice—since, in fact, Bartle played no part in Murph's death, for which he was tried—but from his social isolation. Since Bartle's solitude derived from his inability to show his true self to others, when he is left on his own he is able to confront his own memories without the added stress of social pressure. This gives him the time and space he needs to confront his own wounds.

When members of the prison staff see these signs, they are impressed by the number of marks, which soon cover Bartle's cell, making Bartle feel as though the memories themselves are turning into prison walls. The guards assume that Bartle is counting the amount of time he has spent in prison, asking him if it has been about nine hundred eighty-three or ninety days—a series of numbers that remind Bartle that Murph was not counted among the dead for a time.

The guards' belief that Bartle's marks are related to his imprisonment is highly ironic, since the guards are wrong on a literal level but correctly highlight that Bartle is mentally *imprisoned by his own memories. Their mention of the number of days recalls Murph and Bartle's game in which they counted soldiers' deaths. This analogy suggests that one is never able to put an artificial end to suffering (through counting, for example), but that people like Bartle must learn to deal with the consequences of pain and death in the long run, well beyond one thousand days or deaths.*

One day, Murph's mother comes to visit Bartle in prison. Although the two of them are initially uncomfortable, and Mrs. Murphy is visibly grieving, she describes the moment when officers came to tell her husband and her that their son was dead—a piece of news that neither of them was able to process for a long time. Bartle says that he never meant for it to happen this way, and Mrs. Murphy replies that that does not change anything. Bartle agrees.

The fact that the meeting between Bartle and Mrs. Murphy does not bring reconciliation highlights, once again, that war does not necessarily bring solidarity, since individuals are so busy trying to protect themselves and heal their mental wounds. Mrs. Murphy's attitude is not outwardly accusatory, but she does seem unwilling to free Bartle of all responsibility.

Mrs. Murphy explains that people soon tired of her desire to know why her son switched so quickly from MIA to dead, and that friends told her that she simply needed to find her own truth in this entire story—a comment that frustrates her, since she believes there should be only one truth. She then asks Bartle if he has plans for the period after his release, but he admits that he simply wants to return to ordinary life and be forgotten by everyone, even if he cannot himself forget what he lived through.

Mrs. Murphy's search for truth mirrors Bartle's search for the underlying meaning of his experience in Iraq. These two enterprises are bound to fail, since a single truth does not exist—only the myriad perspectives of each person who experiences an event. Bartle and Mrs. Murphy are thus both condemned to particular kinds of solitude, as they are bound to handle their memories on their own, without hoping for external relief.

Although Bartle does not feel any sense of reconciliation from his meeting with Mrs. Murphy, he appreciates that she sincerely wants to understand what happened to Murph and why Bartle wrote her a fake letter. For six hours, Bartle tries to explain everything, although he finds himself unable to connect events to each other, in the same way that he cannot connect the marks on his cell. In the end, he does not feel relieved, but justified in his resignation—an outcome he is satisfied with.

Bartle does not necessarily seek absolution, but only the freedom to live life as he has decided to: resigning himself to the lack of logic or war, and to his desire to be left alone. Neither Bartle nor Mrs. Murphy seems concerned with questions of ethics or morality. Instead, both seem intent on understanding the past in order to redefine their attitude toward it, and decide how to live their life from then on.

Much later, Bartle reflects on this period and feels that his loss is abating, as he gets older and feels Murph fading away. After leaving prison, he now lives in a small cabin by the Blue Ridge mountains. He has begun to feel normal, and has organized his life to keep war memories as distant as possible, preferring, for example, to look at trees rather than at open spaces such as the desert. He appreciates having a small space that he can manage.

Although Bartle feels increasingly normal, this sense of normality hinges on his complete isolation, as he still seems unable to integrate civilian society. It also requires maintaining control over every aspect of life—an artificial attitude that Bartle is able to create for himself precisely by keeping form subjecting himself to the unpredictability of external events and other people's behavior.

In prison, Mrs. Murphy gave Bartle a map of Iraq, but after looking at it for a long time Bartle concludes that it is impersonal, alienating, and unable to reflect his own experience. However, on the first day in his cabin, he hangs the map up, sticking a medal in the place where he found Murph's body. He sees the map as an imperfect depiction of memory, unable to convey what he truly lived through.

Bartle's lack of connection to this map suggests that his memories only make sense in his own mind and cannot be expressed externally with the precision and complexity they would require. At the same time, though, Bartle does find some comfort from the map's capacity to externalize and validate his experience externally.

That first day in the cabin, Bartle walks outside. He imagines hearing the sound of a cloth being taken off of a monument somewhere in the country. Then, he imagines Murph's body, no longer disfigured. In his mind's eye, he sees the body drifting down the Tigris river, where it turns into a skeleton, free of injuries, and passes by a pair of soldiers who wish him peace. The body then reaches the junction between the Tigris and the Euphrates, and finally flows into the sea, where waves break endlessly, taking him in.

Bartle contrasts his own pain with national celebrations of war (taking a cloth off a monument) to suggest that public narratives do not necessarily reflect a soldier's personal experience. His final imagining of Murph's body reveals that he has come to terms with Murph's death and is able to let go of it physically and mentally—allowing Murph's body to flow away from him without feeling any guilt, but, rather, allowing the past to be just as it is: imperfect, yet distant and peaceful.

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