

Poppies

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Listen.

Here lies a ground soaked in blood. The clearing is a break in the forest, bordered by walls of trees. Bodies lie strewn about, and all is quiet save for a slight breeze that soars over the dead. Young soldiers lie on their backs, dead eyes gazing towards the heavens. In a trench nearby lie the crumpled remains of two brothers. Other bodies reach for escape, shot mid-retreat.

A moan is carried on the breeze and following it back to its origin leads to a young man, a boy really, slumped over a turret. He has been shot in the spine. He cannot move. He exhales, watching his last few breaths turn to mist in the winter air before rising away from his view. Blood seeps down his back and along his thighs. He wonders if he has wet himself.

The sky above is covered in clouds. Snow begins to fall right as the clouds achieve their final conquest and block out the sun. Snowflakes melt on the boy's face as his moans diminish. By the time he is dead, the clearing is coated with a perfect layer of white. Thousands of miles away, his mother is making his favorite, hominy soup with potatoes.

Listen.

Decades pass. The clearing is a park now. It has expanded, as powers beyond the tree's control have decided that their home was better suited for housing developments. Two mothers watch from a bench as their sons chase each other with make-believe guns. Mikel, a blond boy of four, laughs from thrill as he trips on the jungle gym. His friend catches up to him and points his stick at him, commanding him to put his hands up. Below them, decades ago, a teenager held the hand of his brother as he bled to death.

In a corner of the park, far from the jungle gym, lies a stone with a plaque on it. The plaque reads: "378 men died here on June 9, 1916, after exchanging fire with enemy troops. Deus cum eis."

Thousands of miles away, the leaders of nations sit in a room, bathing in conflict and malice, weaving together reasons for young men to die for their countries.