You have stared at the same patch of land for four months.

Sitting between Péronne to the South and Bapaume to the North, this field, for four months, acted as home for 3 million men, 120 times what the population of the area had been only a year ago.

And now, its population has forever grown by hundreds of thousands of men buried beneath the earth who will forever call the Somme their home.

So too are there hundreds of thousands more who had been left mutilated, fractions of the men they once were, most not likely to see home ever again following what they'd gone through.

And you are not one of them.

You, rather, are one of the lucky ones.

You have seen fields of flowers reduced to black marks of scorch whose only chance at life is a distant future's promise of regrowth, fertilized by those lost to the world amidst the fire, heard the crackle that spread for miles like a laughter borne of hell. You have seen the earth crack and splinter beneath the weight of artillery shells that drove your comrades to such a madness that they would beg for the next shell to strike true if only to end the horror sooner, and you heard their screams, lasting even after the last shells had finished dropping hours past.

You have seen the sun's light blotted out by overlapping waves of aircraft overhead like one layer of tarpaulin after another until there was nothing left of the sky above, dropping down death upon you, heard a roar of engines that would tell you with only seconds to spare to throw yourself to the ground with nothing but a prayer. You have seen the glow of tracer bullets light up the night sky like a million fireflies dancing through the air, heard the way they whistled and whined overhead, unflinching even as they claimed the life of your closest friend beside you.

You have seen metal behemoths roll across the Earth and crush the men you'd looked to for safety and guidance as though nothing more than the flesh and water that composed their forms, heard the screams of terror of those with nowhere left to run but into the cold embrace of a heartless steel monstrosity crafted by just as heartless men. You have seen the clouds touch the earth and choke the life out of the men whose only difference from you was that they'd slipped their masks on only a second later than you had, and you heard what came after– silence. Nothing.

And you lived through it all.

It was not something that came by individual merit, because you were somehow superior to those around you, nor because you had the luxury of being placed in the periphery, the most you saw of war that which was plastered on the faces of those who passed through. You lived through it for four months of hell, the legacy you left behind one of the world's bloodiest exchanges of arms with a result deemed after hundreds of thousands of fallen 'inconclusive.'

But you made it out with a ‘million-dollar wound,’ a non-fatal, non-crippling bullet to your right shoulder, through and through in one go, a golden ticket out if ever there was one.

You shared your truck out with the other men of your platoon, only a quarter of which were alive when you first left Grandcourt, and only a fifth of which were alive when you reached the field hospital at Avesnes because all others within fifty miles had been at capacity.

You remember the words that came out of the hospital aide’s mouth as you were offloaded from your truck, smelling no different from those who’d been decaying and rotting away for days.

There were crow’s feet around her eyes, indicative of a smile hidden beneath her mask as she said to you, “You’re one of the lucky ones.”

You didn’t feel like believing her, but at the time, just about the only one of your platoon still able to walk on their own two legs, you weren’t about to argue, nor were you about to claim yourself to be anything else than ‘lucky’ when faced with others beside you who knew wouldn’t live to see their ride home, much less the next morning.

You remember the man in the cot next to you at the field hospital, talking to you with the good half of his face that hadn’t been blown off by artillery, recounting the details of the attack and how the same shell that’s taken half his visage had with it too taken every boy he knew and called friend from his hometown.

You remember the officer who visited you some time later after that same cot next to you had gone through three different visitors, and three subsequent vacancies, none of them discharges. On your chest he pinned a cross of military merit, lauding it vocally “the highest bravery award offered to enlisted soldiers,” telling you more quietly after, a hand on your shoulder, no malice behind his words, only what he believed to be fact just how much luck had played its part.

You believed him, because the alternative made no sense to you. You didn’t feel brave, not when you could hardly stand on your own feet when left standing in the same place for over a minute, not when you had to be coaxed out from beneath the cot you’d been hiding under because you believed the slamming of a door three hallways away the pound of an HE artillery round, and not when you had to be dressed by others in your uniform for discharge because the simple sight of it had sent your body in a shudder so fierce all hope of doing so yourself was lost.

There was an applause for you as you were wheeled out in full-dress to a car that waited for you outside. You didn’t know the model, the make, the driver, only that they were taking you home to Kassel. That wouldn’t stop you from asking instinctively more than once, however, how long until you’d reach the front. Your focus never lasted long enough to get the answer, understanding lapsing in, out, in, and out again until the moment you were home.

It wasn’t your house anymore, but now an apartment in a building you didn’t recognize on the side of the city you were once told not to cross to, but was now home apparently. They’d

been ready for your arrival–your mother and younger sister who, in your absence, had traded places with one another. Where one, once a caretaker and stone wall amidst fear and doubt, was only some shriveled thing whose only reminder of your mother was her smile, while the other, once a brat and wretch, was a woman grown, no doubt the only thing that kept a roof above their heads. The only commonality between them was the luck they considered themselves to have by merit of your return home.

You wondered if the luck they spoke of themselves possessing had been imposed upon them by another as it had been for you through constant reminder, or if that conclusion was one they had arrived at on their own.

You would not question it. Not for long at least. No doubt there were dozens others in the same building with sons, brothers, husbands, fathers who would not be so lucky as you were to return home.

But still you question such luck, question if you had actually returned, and each time you do, wonder if the ghosts of the dead are damning you for such beliefs and questions you dare to ask yourself as you have the nerve to walk the streets where their orphaned children beg for scraps from passersby to make ends meet.

'You are one of the lucky ones,' you are reminded by the butcher, the carpenter, the officer who watches the street, and by the mother of the friend whose last letters home you've come to deliver.

She invites you inside after those words and asks as she pours you tea if his death had been quick.

You lie and say that it was.

She remarks that he was lucky in his own way then. It does not take long for you to agree.

You sit with his mother and father as they read his last words. It has been months since he wrote them, months since he died, and still you remember how his helmet had done nothing to protect him in those last moments.

His mother begins to cry, and she asks nobody in particular why her son couldn't have had the same luck as you. As your friend's mother sobs, his father invites you to stand so that he can see you out.

At the door, he stops you, closing it behind him.

He is an old man whose stories had cemented themselves in your childhood as the thing of legends, in part the very thing that saw you first don your uniform those years ago, but in his eyes, you don't see the same invulnerability you saw as a child, but past it you see memories of forty years past. You see something you recognize all too well because for an instant you forget you are looking at one who is not yourself.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

He raises a hand to shake yours, but you don’t.

You sit on the front step of his home and you cry. He doesn’t stop you, and he lets you stay because he knows.

You look ahead in front of you and even through the tears in your eyes and the ringing in your ears, it is all just as clear to you as it was then.

You see prairies of white roses reddened by the blood of those who would die in the thousands to claim a kilometer of barren sail, hear the rustle of grass as another body hits the ground. You see the earth open up in front of you as bomb after bomb rips it further open one payload at a time, hear the distancing screams of men swallowed whole by the gaps left behind.

You see a shadow spread across the world as the sun disappears behind a veil of indiscriminate destruction, hear the sirens that herald the coming of a new terror. You see the muzzle flash of machine guns, the only light that reminds you of your place in an otherwise pitch black night, hear the song they sing to you every time one comes close enough, the faint whisper of an approaching lullaby, each closer than the last, just waiting to be the note that sends you to sleep.

You see the monsters of the sea crawl their way onto land as your ancestors once did hundreds of millions of years ago in search of new good, new prey, whose animalistic cries of pain you hear when found. You see a storm of gas gather and collect on the surface of the earth, and spread without limit or mercy, all those caught within lost, and you hear that which is left when those clouds dissipate and rise back up to the skies.

You hear nothing.

In 1922, over three years after the end of the First World War, as we lay the foundation for the second, Spanish-American philosopher George Santayana will write, “Only the dead have seen the end of war.”

He will be right.

Your war did not end in the Somme, in the Avesnes field hospital, or in Kassel. It is not a war that ended as it did for over three-hundred thousand soldiers over the course of four months in a single battle. Your survival is not luck. It is a curse cast upon you that will not leave until your dying day.

Many will not be able to live with this curse, will not live to hear the words of Santayana, to know they are not alone in the world. They are not weak or any less for it; they are tired.

Others will live with this curse, and for it, for their ‘luck,’ will never look upon the world with the same eyes again. This is a war you will continue to fight, and your luck will not have been in having survived once, but in continuing to survive every day that follows.