

The Yellow Birds: A Novel Study Guide

The Yellow Birds: A Novel by Kevin Powers

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Plot Summary

The *Yellow Birds* by Kevin Powers is a tale of friendship, loss and redemption. Set against the Iraq War, events beyond their control or understanding forever intertwine three soldiers' lives.

Sergeant Sterling, a veteran of three tours of duty, tasks 21-year-old Private John Bartle with guiding 18-year-old Private Daniel Murphy, also known simply as 'Murph'. Reluctant at first to take responsibility for the younger man, Bartle soon comes to think of Murph as a close friend. Their experiences training for and then fighting in the war bond them in a way that nothing else could, but fate will step in to tear that bond apart.

The novel switches back and forth in time with each chapter, beginning with a battle in Al Tafari, Iraq, then flashing back to a base in New Jersey before settling on a back and forth between events in Iraq and Bartle's post-war life in Virginia and then in Fort Knox, Kentucky. Having promised both Sterling and Murph's mother that he would look out for Murph, Bartle becomes more and more disillusioned as he realizes that he is unable to keep that promise. He watches Murph become distant and Murph finally tells Bartle that he doesn't want anyone to know he was in the war, nor does he want to continue with any relationships connected to it once he's home.

Sterling tells Bartle that Murph's attitude means he's probably not going to make it out alive, but Bartle refuses to believe it, still thinking he can help his friend. In the end, Bartle can't save Murph, who dies horribly after wandering away from the Army outpost where they're stationed.

Bartle carries the guilt of his failure back home after his discharge. Confounding his guilt is the event that occurred after Murph's death, a secret only he and Sterling share. Wishing to spare Murph's mother from seeing Murph's mangled, tortured body and wishing to save Murph from a final humiliation, the two men dump him into the Tigris River and claim they never found him.

Back home, Bartle does the best he can to drown his grief and deal with the memory of his actions by avoiding other people and drinking too much. In the end, he can't keep running or hiding – literally or figuratively. The Army finds, arrests and convicts him to assuage Murph's mother who has been hounding them for the truth about her son.

It's in prison where Bartle finally comes to terms with Murph's death and also his experiences in the war. Through a conversation with Murph's mother shortly before his release, Bartle finds a way to forgive himself, though Murph's mother never tells him that she has forgiven him.

Sterling is unable to cope with the reality or consequences of what they did and as the event begins coming to light, he commits suicide – only after one last attempt to save Bartle by not telling the truth when investigators ask. It is Sterling's one last act of protection for the men he led and cared for.

At the time he's writing the story, Bartle is living in a cabin on a mountain, still solitary but beginning to heal.



Chapter 1

Summary

Outside of Al Tafari, Iraq, Private John Bartle, the book's narrator, and his friend Private Daniel Murphy – or “Murph” – wait with their U.S. Army unit to lay siege to the city. With them are Malik, the unit's Iraqi translator who grew up in Al Tafari; the unit's lieutenant; and Sergeant Sterling, who is directly in charge of Bartle and Murph.

The chapter opens on the unit's fourth day of fighting, during a brief lull that is about to break. Bartle recalls the first day when Malik stood on the roof talking to them about his childhood in the city. As he's talking, Bartle and Murph warn him to get down, knowing that the enemy is about to start shooting. Malik doesn't listen and he dies as he's telling the men about an old woman who grew hyacinth so perfect others accused her of using witchcraft to grow it.

On the battle's fourth day, an armed man is darting in and out from behind buildings, shooting at the soldiers. As he runs, they return fire until they finally kill him. Bartle briefly cheers for the man's survival despite being under fire, but then bullets begin hitting the man and he dies. Bartle is certain it was his own bullet that killed the man.

Next, the men shoot at a car heading toward them. Bartle sees an old man driving and an old woman in the backseat and he thinks he should tell the men not to shoot at them, but he doesn't. He assumes no one else can see who's in the car. When the car stops, they continue shooting. The woman crawls out and dies as the car burns with the man inside. When it's over, a little girl comes out and tries to drag the old woman away, but she can't and begins pacing in circles around the body.

After, the lieutenant walks among the men, trying to calm and reassure them. They wait for new orders.

Analysis

This chapter's main theme is death. Murph and Bartle are obsessed with it, and it sets the book's tone. As the book continues, death becomes literal and figurative and dominates all of the major characters' lives.

The author focuses on hyacinth, a flower – and symbol and metaphor – that appears in the text many times through the text. Legend is that the Greek god Apollo created hyacinth from the blood of a man he loved who died violently. This is a foreshadowing of Murph's impending death, which the author makes certain to tell the reader won't be due to a bullet or bomb but doesn't elaborate on what will actually happen to him.

That Apollo is the god of truth and that Bartle mentions hyacinth often throughout the novel is an example of irony when considered against future events, especially Bartle's



and Sterling's actions. Secrets and lies dominate the book's climax. Bartle is helpless to stop or change events – he can't save the old man and woman, he can't save the armed man and he can't save Murph. The question is, can he save himself?

The soldiers in this book are not heroic and the author doesn't describe the war in any way that one could interpret as noble. Death is pointless. They fight, they die, they kill and in the end it doesn't matter. He avoids judgment of either the American soldiers or the people against whom they are fighting. Most poignant is a lack of reference to any overall objective. They worry only about the moment – surviving it.

Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of being the thousandth soldier death and why don't Bartle and Murphy want to be it?

Discussion Question 2

Bartle and Murph's only reaction to Malik's death is wondering whether it counts toward the thousandth soldier death. Does this sound like a rational reaction? Do you think this is how you would respond in a similar situation?

Discussion Question 3

Do you think Bartle's bullet actually killed the armed man? If not, why do you think Bartle believes it did? Do Bartle's thoughts about the armed man, along with Bartle's actions, make Bartle seem more human or less?

Vocabulary

blanched, preordained, intervals, milestone, promenades, corrugated, catacomb, minarets, citadel, disheveled, daubed, acrid, solipsists, correlation, notional, prostrate, reverberation, platoon



Chapter 2

Summary

Sometime in the future, Bartle has written and sent a letter to Murph's mother pretending to be Murph. The letter includes several tell-tale signs that Murph didn't write it, but Bartle says it brought Mrs. Murphy happiness – for a moment at least.

The chapter flashes back to before the war when Bartle, Murph and Sterling are training at a base in New Jersey. When 21-year-old Bartle and 18-year-old Murph first meet, Sterling tells Bartle that he is responsible for the younger soldier. Bartle privately resents the responsibility, but outwardly accepts it, telling Murph to move his things into Bartle's room in the barracks while the other soldiers are off base on passes.

The men know their date to ship to the war is coming soon, but they don't know when. When they get word that they should invite their families to the base, Sterling goes to Bartle's and Murph's room to talk to them about what's coming and to make sure they know that when they get to Iraq, they need to follow Sterling's orders without question. He tells them that people are going to die there. That night, Murph asks Bartle if they will be OK and Bartle assures them that they will, even though he doesn't believe it himself.

In the rain the next day, they go to the shooting range where they receive their highest ever marksmanship scores. Bartle attributes their success to Sterling's tutelage. After, Bartle and Murph again talk with Sterling about what to expect in Iraq and Sterling has a difficult time answering their specific questions.

Back at the base gymnasium, the soldiers and their families spend time together, eating and talking. Bartle reveals that he joined the Army after leaving his house in anger following a fight with his mother.

After Bartle says goodbye to his mother, Murph introduces Bartle to his, LaDonna Murphy, who begs Bartle to watch out for her son and keep him safe. Though again someone is asking Bartle to take on a responsibility he doesn't want, he doesn't know what else to say so he makes the promise. When Mrs. Murphy leaves and Bartle is alone, Sterling chastises Bartle for making the promise and then beats him up, leaving him bleeding on the ground, staring up at the stars.

After a while, Bartle goes back to his room. Murph is already there. They exchange a few words about the evening and then go to bed.

Analysis

Bartle says that Mrs. Murphy read his letter as snow fell on the mountain on which she lived. He talks a lot about how he used to think snow meant something, but says he no



longer thinks so. There was also snow the day Bartle met Murph. Snow in literature symbolizes death, and so again there is foreshadowing of Murph's future and the book's theme continues in this chapter. There is death everywhere and Bartle doesn't think it's special or that there is any meaning in it.

Bartle explores his role in Murph's fate without revealing exactly what it was. He feels great guilt over something – was he responsible? Was there "friendly fire" involved? Whatever happened, Bartle cannot forget it and it holds him back somehow. He's trapped emotionally in Iraq and tied to this man who was his friend, even if the friendship began with Bartle's reluctance.

Murph's impending death seems untimely for many reasons. His youthful age – 18 – is one reason, but the story also sets up a grandfather/father/son relationship between Sterling, Bartle and Murph, despite all being within only a few years of each other's ages. The grandson is not supposed to die before his father and grandfather. Bartle's and Murph's initial simple meeting belies the importance they will have to each other over the next 10 months, but their love/hate relationship with Sterling continues through the narrative. Both men resent much of Sterling's attitude, but they also long for his approval.

Sterling is a loving father except in the moments when he is emotionally or physically abusive. Bartle accepts this because he needs someone to help him feel safe and give him direction. His experiences have left him cynical and angry in ways he can't express in a healthy manner. Bartle seems to have sensed Sterling's shortcomings and in his own way tries to protect Sterling. He stops Murph from speaking when he senses it's a bad time to push Sterling and he neither fights back nor reports Sterling when Sterling beats him up. It's a classic abusive relationship in which the abused protects the abuser because the abused needs, and possibly loves, the abuser.

Throughout the chapter, Bartle does things against his instincts and wants in order to please some and spare others' feelings. Yet he doesn't reassure his mother when he says she thinks he's going off to war while still angry with her. He has more compassion for the strangers around him while he remains closed to her. In a way, he's punishing her, showing that he is actually still angry even if he won't admit it to himself.

At the picnic, the soldiers and their families behave as though everything is normal, as though the soldiers aren't about to go to the other side of the world and risk their lives. Hamburgers and French fries symbolize the safe, fun American cookout that people have for holidays like Independence Day and Memorial Day – both holidays that commemorate war. Bartle's mother has worn makeup, something she rarely does, as though putting on a false front or a false face.

The chapter ends with Bartle looking up into the night sky, thinking about the stars and how most of them are probably long dead. He's looking at light from an object that no longer exists as he's on the verge of transitioning to a new self. The chapter also reveals a side of Sterling that Bartle hasn't alluded to previously. Sterling is fallible. He's imperfect. And he isn't afraid to break rules to make a point. He hurts Bartle in order to



teach him a lesson. Sterling isn't afraid to do what it takes in order to protect his soldiers, even if his actions could hurt him in the long run.

And yet Bartle never tells anyone about the beating. He trusts Sterling and feels an obligation to the man. Bartle and Sterling are realists. Murph, on the other hand, is still an innocent about to thrust forward into a manmade hell. Can he remain an innocent, or will the war tear that from him? The author is setting Murph up as a martyr, the symbol of the worst part of war. His sacrifice will affect everything and everyone he has touched in his short life – especially Bartle and Sterling.

Discussion Question 1

Bartle wasn't there when Mrs. Murphy read his letter. Do you think he really knows that it was snowing and that she was happy or do you think he just wants to believe those things? Why?

Discussion Question 2

While talking about the war, Sterling tells Bartle and Murph, "It was their idea. Don't forget that. It's their idea every time. They ought to kill themselves instead of us." Who do you think "they" are?

Discussion Question 3

Sterling describes the waiting soldiers as "grooms before a marriage." How is war like marriage?

Vocabulary

dormant, skepticism, careened, deployment, evolutionary, competence, carriage, battalion, accountability, bristled, sheen, distraught, opacity, cadre, dilapidated, emanating, feigned, latitude, unadulterated



Chapter 3

Summary

Another leap forward in time finds Bartle in Germany on his way home after completing his tour of duty in Iraq. He's left the base without a pass and is wandering around Kaiserslautern, hoping not to run into anyone else from his platoon – especially Sterling.

Instead of going to any of the local bars, Bartle ducks into a cathedral where he watches an after-school tour. The guide is speaking German. Bartle can't understand the words, so he reads a pamphlet that outlines the cathedral's history and discusses the saints featured in the church.

After a while, the priest, Father Bernard, approaches Bartle to tell him not to smoke in the building. The priest thinks Bartle looks troubled and asks if he needs to talk. Bartle declines and leaves and the priest asks if Bartle wants the priest to pray for him. Bartle declines, but asks the priest to pray for Murph instead.

He leaves the cathedral and goes to a brothel that other soldiers had told him about, wishing Murph were with him. He goes to the bar and orders drinks from a girl with a bruise beneath her eye. After Bartle has had a few and is drunk, he hears a crash from the staircase and turns to see Sterling coming down. Sterling joins Bartle at the bar and Bartle notices the bargirl back away from Sterling. Sterling goes behind the bar and grabs the girl's face hard, asking, "Not tonight?" and calling her names.

Bartle, to defuse the situation, invites Sterling to have a drink. Sterling shoves the girl into the wall hard enough to crack the plaster, then grabs her arm as she tries to run away, telling her to get back behind the bar as he turns to join Bartle.

Sterling wants to talk about Murph and then he makes a veiled threat to Bartle about what they know that no one else does. Bartle reminds Sterling that Bartle has information on Sterling, too. Bartle suggests they go ahead and tell the truth, but Sterling laughs him off.

Bartle wakes up in the bargirl's bedroom. He apologizes and says he should have done "something else." She assures him that he tried and that was enough. He's not feeling well and she tries to take care of him. He decides to go back downstairs to sleep. Instead he drinks more as he watches the sun come up.

Bartle wakes up again, this time outside with his hands resting in water inside a canal. He's across the street from the brothel and several of the women who work there are on the porch. He asks them where "the girl" is. They don't answer and go back inside.

Back at the base, Bartle finds the lieutenant angry but he doesn't get in trouble for being AWOL. Sterling tells Bartle that he covered for him, but adds that they aren't finished. Bartle can only think that he is almost home.



Analysis

In his cab ride from the base to town, Bartle notices pine and birch trees. This is the first of what becomes a recurring theme in the book – he often sets the scene by describing what kinds of trees are around. Birch trees specifically signify healing, purification and new beginnings. These are all things Bartle longs for and needs but – at least at this point – they elude him. His journey going forward is to try to achieve them. More than anything, he needs to forgive and accept himself for what he's done and what he's become and he needs to heal from the horrors he's experienced in the war.

At the brothel, he can't bring himself to partake in anything more than a few drinks, having no interest in sex – also symbolic of life and healing. Instead, he tries in the only way he can to save the girl, though he never says from what exactly she needs saving and neither he nor the reader know what happened to her in the end. Like Murph, we get part of the story but none of the details. Bartle has already begun isolating himself. He can't connect to other people or even navigate normal life anymore.

Bartle is trying to find peace, to leave the war not just physically but mentally. He doesn't succeed. His hand wants to grasp a rifle that isn't there and he finds no peace inside the cathedral, a holy, peaceful place – the opposite of the place he'd just left. In a way, he leaves Murph there with the priest, who can care for the martyr but not soothe Bartle's guilt or feelings of having betrayed his friend.

Again, the author uses foreshadowing. He reveals that something bad happened to Murph, that Bartle and Sterling were involved and it was far more than just dying in battle. The two men had something to do with it, but Bartle doesn't reveal what that was, what he has to feel guilty about or what Sterling has over him. Murph is in a river, a symbol of eternity. Specifically, he is in the Tigris River, which represents Eden – paradise and purity. He describes Sterling's eyes at the time he wants to talk about Murph as “the color of dried sprigs of lavender,” another symbol of purity and peace.

Sterling shows his friendship when he doesn't turn Bartle in for going AWOL, but Bartle can't accept it. He can't shake his feelings of hate toward Sterling, who embodies all the things Bartle wants to forget.

Discussion Question 1

What other symbols does the author include in this chapter and what do they mean? How are they relevant to the plot?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Bartle turns down the priest's offer to pray for him?



Discussion Question 3

Bartle spends a lot of time thinking about the saints and about Murph. Does Bartle see Murph as a saint? Does he see Murph as a martyr?

Vocabulary

untethered, unbeknownst, disquiet, buoyant, amplified, explicable, rudimentary, apse, nave, congealed, perpetually, filigree, acutely, obligatory, assignations, profundity, commensurate, futile, astringent, morose, fricative, withers, caryatids, tableau



Chapter 4

Summary

Back in Iraq, the platoon members are taking watch shifts and the fire that had been burning in the orchard is burning out. They're resting from a battle and a runner from headquarters arrives with mail. Murph has received a letter, but there is nothing for Sterling, which upsets him.

The letter is from Murph's girlfriend, telling him that she's breaking up with him. Murph takes the news in stride, though he's sad about it. He and Bartle talk, which makes Bartle think about home and the day after he'd enlisted, when he had to tell his mother.

Sterling overhears the conversation about Murph's girlfriend and interjects that he would "kill a bitch" for breaking up with him. Murph says it isn't his call to make anymore. Bartle reflects on the scene, wishing that Murph has been more resistant and realizing that Murph's acceptance was a sign that he'd given up.

After, Murph removes his casualty feeder card and Bartle notices that Murph has already marked the box for "body recovered." Murph puts the card away along with the photo of him and his girlfriend. Bartle pulls out a bottle of whiskey and they begin drinking and laughing together. They notice fires burning on the hills outside the city and Bartle muses that it's beautiful.

The lieutenant tells the platoon that the colonel is coming. He arrives with an embedded reporter and a man with a video camera. The colonel is cheerful and concerned with making sure the cameraman is getting footage of him greeting the soldiers. He gives them a pep talk about their upcoming mission, saying he wishes he could come with them. The men don't react the way he wants or expected. After the speech, the lieutenant tells the platoon that before sunrise they are going to cross empty space from their position to the city. There are dead bodies in the space and Bartle shudders at the thought of stepping on one of them. They're going to engage the enemy inside the orchard. Just before he leaves, the colonel says the Army will be bombing the enemy's position ahead of the fight.

In response to a private's question, the lieutenant reveals that this is the third time in three years that the Army has fought over Al Tifar. Sterling helps Bartle and Murph put black tape over anything that might glint in a small amount of light and makes sure nothing moves or makes noise on them as they move. It will be Sterling's second time fighting the same battle. He tells them to just follow him and everything will be all right.

As they advance across the field, Sterling sprinkles salt on the ground and the bodies. He says it's because of something from the Bible, from Judges, but doesn't elaborate. At the end of the march, Murph goes to check on Sterling. He comes back and tells Bartle that Sterling has a body and he isn't smiling anymore.



Analysis

This chapter includes more clues about Murph's fate. He is covered behind sawed-off pear tree trunks when the runner brings his letter. In China, pear trees symbolize immortality and in ancient Greece, pears were sacred to Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Hawthorn trees are everywhere – some of them on fire. As hawthorn trees symbolize death, the fire is a metaphor for upcoming death. In mythology, cutting a hawthorn tree brings misfortune from the elves that lived in it.

The author uses sentimentality to humanize Murph and make the reader sympathize more with him. He's on the other side of the world from home, just trying to survive, and the girl he loved broke up with him in a letter. It aged him and it's when Bartle first notices a change in Murph.

Bartle compares Murph's mannerisms to those of old men, when earlier in the book, Bartle remarked on how young Murph seemed, despite being only three years Bartle's junior. Murph's feeder card shows that he's ready to die, expecting it, just as Christ knew he was going to die before he did. Not only is Murph certain he is going to die, he is also certain the military will recover his body. This foreshadowing is accurate but also ironic, since he's correct someone will recover his body, but his body won't make it home.

Salting the earth is supposed to prevent anyone from rebuilding a city after its destruction. The Army has returned three times to conquer Al Tifar and will probably have to do so again. By spreading salt across the battlefield, Sterling is attempting to make another battle unnecessary, hoping to make this the last battle over that land. The book never says whether his method was effective, but the imagery serves to reinforce the idea that this area is important to the theme of religion - and Christianity in particular - in the book.

Murph and Bartle experience more of Sterling's dark side in this chapter. Sterling seems to harbor a great deal of anger and resentment, yet he remains a protective and caring figure to Bartle and Murph. At one point, there is a lone street lamp still shining and Bartle is standing in its glow while it flickers on and off, just as Sterling does for Murph and Bartle. When the light goes out, Sterling walks away.

Discussion Question 1

What kind of man do you think Sterling is?

Discussion Question 2

Do you think the soldiers trust the lieutenant as a leader? Why or why not? What clues in the narrative lead you to this conclusion?



Discussion Question 3

Why does Sterling spread the salt on the field and bodies? What do you think he was doing with the body at the end of the chapter?

Vocabulary

oriented, naiveté, promontory, pungent, intermittent, predicament, accoutrements, keening, forestocks, caricature, brusquely, festooned, essence, facades



Chapter 5

Summary

On the flight home after Germany, Bartle's hand still instinctively closes around a rifle that isn't there. The men flirt with the flight attendants, who play along by bending over enough to show cleavage. Bartle thinks about the men who didn't make it out, especially Murph.

When they get off the plane, the men receive a debriefing and instructions on dealing with stress. After, Bartle stops in an airport bar while he waits for his flight home to Richmond. Bartle mentions a trail of sand he left as he walked in, but the man mopping the floor says there's nothing there. The bartender sees Bartle's uniform and refuses to take his money for the beer Bartle drinks, but Bartle insists, handing his money to the bartender and leaving before the man can refuse it.

On the plane, the pilot announces that he's honored to be giving a hero a ride home and Bartle drinks four mixed drinks free. His mother meets him at the airport, happy and relieved to see him safe. Though it's daytime, when he gets home, Bartle closes his bedroom curtains, strips down and goes to sleep. He dreams about Murph, but he can't remember what he dreamt.

Analysis

Bartle is having a difficult time adjusting to leaving Iraq and being home. He can't leave the war behind, nor can he accept or understand people's reactions to him in his uniform. He receives special treatment and accolades, but it makes him uncomfortable rather than proud. He seems to want to disappear. He can't even form the thought that he wants to go home, even though he eventually admits to himself that he does want to. He doesn't, however, define what "home" means to him at this point. It could be a place or a state of mind.

Bartle is dragging Iraq with him. He's left it, but it hasn't left him. The imaginary sand on the floor of the airport bar is the war following him home. It's attached itself and isn't letting go and it shows that Bartle's psyche is unstable. It also is a metaphor for Bartle as Judas Escariot, Christ's betrayer. In Richard H. Horne's *Judas Iscariot: A Miracle Play in Two Acts*, Judas asks about God writing on the sand and wonders if God wrote, "Judas Escariot." The fear is a result of Judas' guilt over betraying Christ, just as Bartle feels guilt over failing Murph and feels as though he betrayed his friend by letting him die and then disposing of Murph's body, denying Murph's return home.

On his way home, Bartle mentions seeing walnut trees – a symbol of wisdom; and black alder trees – a symbol of strength and battle. Bartle embodies these things from his experiences in the war, but he probably sees it as ironic, as he doesn't recognize these qualities in himself. He can't accept himself in his new role as no longer a soldier. He



thinks of himself as disappearing when he removes his military dress in his bedroom – there is nothing left of the man he was before Iraq. At the airport, he scoots back from the bar when he catches his own reflection in the mirror, showing that he can't even stand to look at himself. Bartle is no longer the man he was before and he doesn't like the person he's become and is ashamed of things he's done.

Discussion Question 1

The narrator describes the flight attendants as smelling of lilac and vanilla. Why does the author choose these scents?

Discussion Question 2

Bartle thinks to himself that he wants to go home. Do you think he feels like he's home when he does get to his mother's house? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Do you think the sand is actually on the floor or that Bartle imagines it there? Why does the author include this detail?

Vocabulary

erosion, estuary, incessantly, addled, accretion, apparition, transposed, trilled



Chapter 6

Summary

Back in Iraq the platoon begins the battle for the orchard. The lieutenant silently gestures to the men that it's time to start the ambush. Inside they find dead birds and broken trees from the mortar attack that preceded the ground attack.

Suddenly, someone begins shooting at the platoon and the men fire back. Someone pulls Bartle to the ground and he crawls forward on his elbows before the fire fight begins again, broken by moments of silence. They continue advancing through the trees and finally come across the enemy: two teenage boys who are now dead. A private from another platoon is dying on the ground, medics working to try to save him, but they are unsuccessful.

Bartle thinks for a moment that the dying man is going to speak, but he doesn't. Sterling says he has only once witnessed a dying man speak, but is reluctant to tell Bartle what the man said, though Bartle pushes Sterling to tell him. While Bartle pesters Sterling, he sees Murph kneeling next to the dead soldier but doesn't go to his friend. He watches Murph adjust the man's clothes and put the man's head on his lap, then goes back to questioning Sterling. Finally Sterling tells Bartle that the man asked Sterling to check if he'd shat his pants. After, Bartle vomits. When he's done, he hears the click of the embedded reporter's camera.

Later, Murph tells Bartle that in the mess hall he had cut in front of the soldier who died and he now feels terrible about it. Bartle tells Murph that it's OK, but Murph doesn't want to hear it. Then Murph says he feels crazy because he's happy that if someone had to die, he's happy it wasn't him. Bartle tells Murph it's OK to think that and then admits in the narrative, though not to Murph, that he thought the same thing. He tries to cheer Murph up by trying to guess which number death the soldier was.

They move into the city. There are dead bodies everywhere, but the soldiers barely notice. There is only an old woman alive in the streets and Bartle only catches a brief glimpse of her. They come across a "body bomb," a dead body that someone filled with explosives and left for the soldiers to find. The body's head is severed and resting on its chest. Before they can decide what to do, the bomb detonates and then there is another battle. Bartle kills a man. Murph and Sterling come over and the three of them continue shooting the man even after he's dead, to make sure.

The platoon takes no casualties in the battle. Bartle thinks about the man whose body had been a bomb. Bartle, Murph and Sterling receive the task of clearing the body off the bridge, making sure there are no more explosives. The people who live in the city return to bury their dead.



Analysis

This chapter highlights just how mundane death has become for the characters. The only person who seems to take the soldier's death to heart is Murph, and Bartle mentions that he thinks that was the moment Murph snapped, the moment he gave up. Bartle feels as though he's broken his promise to Murph's mother when Bartle doesn't go to Murph in the aftermath. Death and despair are only mundane when they happen to someone they don't care about.

The soldier's death is almost unremarkable, missing the iconic last words that movies, television and books often portray. And when Bartle finally badgers Sterling into revealing the only last words he's ever witnessed, they turn out to be vulgar and shallow rather than deep and profound. Bartle and Murph become more convinced that their own lives are dispensable. The fighting, they realize, is almost pointless. They aren't making an impact on the world, only hoping to avoid being the next casualty.

Sterling again puts on the "tough guy" act, as though nothing that's happened in his tours has affected him. Like Sterling, Bartle has begun folding into himself, falling back onto his training, the only thing he knows as fact, to protect himself from the horror around him. He finds solace in his marching, in planting his feet and holding his rifle "in accordance with my training." This is what allows him to kill a man and decimate his body with barely a second thought. Bartle is becoming a robot.

Discussion Question 1

What clues in the text reveal that Sterling's feelings about the war are deeper than he lets on? Do you think Bartle believes the act?

Discussion Question 2

When Bartle says that this is the moment when Murph broke, is it possible he's actually referring to himself? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think about the embedded reporter?

Vocabulary

ruddy, semaphore, detritus, imperceptible, resonated, lethargy, attenuated, distraught, pestilent, phosphorescence



Chapter 7

Summary

Bartle spends up to entire weeks sleeping after returning home to Richmond, sometimes seeing no other people. When he does leave the house, it's to walk two miles round trip along train tracks to G.W.'s country store to buy beer. If he sees a vehicle outside the store, he waits until the owner leaves to avoid any contact. After, he puts the beer into his closet and walks into the kitchen to gaze out at the pond. He thinks about his childhood when older children teased him. He thinks about his current depression.

In August, for the first time, Bartle wakes up wishing he hadn't. He says he doesn't want to kill himself, only fall asleep and never wake up. A high school friend calls to invite Bartle with a group to the river the next day, but Bartle doesn't take the call or call his friend back. His mother tells Bartle he should go and he says he'll think about it.

He gets dressed and walks to the back of the house and keeps going. He follows the railroad tracks toward the city, carrying a duffel bag with a few things in it. As he walks, he thinks about Murph. At sunset, Bartle reaches the river and sits to watch a train go by. He thinks about where it might be coming from and where it might be going and considers jumping onto it, but can't find a good place to do so, especially since it's dark and he can't see the black train very well.

Bartle lights a fire on the riverbank beneath some trees and falls asleep. In the morning, he wakes to see his friends playing in the river nearby, but they don't see him. Bartle walks on, crossing to the opposite bank, and finds a recently-abandoned campsite where he lights another fire, removes his clothes and boots and sits on the riverbank, dangling his feet into the water, and watches his friends. He thinks about joining them, but he doesn't know how to relate to them anymore so he doesn't. He cries.

It's night again and as he watches his friends getting ready to leave, Bartle wades into the river, then leans face-down into it where he dreams about horses in a field of dogwood and willow trees. An old, injured horse joins him in the water and they nuzzle each other.

He wakes up to people yelling to get him out of the water. It's his friends pulling him out of the river and they have called 911. Because he's a soldier, the police don't make him go in for a psychiatric evaluation and instead take him home. The officer who drops him off tells Bartle to "try to keep it together."

Bartle's mother is waiting and relieved to see him, telling him that she was afraid she'd lost him. She says she doesn't understand what's going on and that she's been getting calls from the Army's Criminal Investigation Division asking to speak to Bartle.



Bartle goes into his bedroom and his mother asks him what happened “over there.” She wants to know what Bartle did. He doesn’t answer her.

Analysis

Like many who suffer post-traumatic stress disorder, Bartle slips into a pattern of isolation and addiction. Not only is this a coping mechanism, but it's also a way of punishing himself and somehow trying to assuage his guilt.

His thoughts, though, seem to be specific and focused. Something happened with Murph, more than just a normal war death. Bartle was involved, as this chapter foreshadows several times. Birds appear often in this chapter, metaphors for Bartle’s wish to escape. But the most important bird is the egret at the river. It’s the only one he names and Bartle refers to the bird as “a body.” This is a clue to what occurred in Iraq. Ironically, egrets symbolize long life while the war cut Murph’s life short.

In his horse dream, Bartle is near a field that includes dogwood trees. Legend is that Christ’s cross was made from dogwood and that it is cursed. But there are also willow trees, which are supposed to increase love in one’s life. Horses are the spirit animal of freedom and mean a journey. From this, the reader can surmise that Bartle feels cursed but that things will eventually get better – once he completes his metaphorical journey. He is physically back from Iraq, but not mentally. Despite its wounds, the horse is strong and whole and can stand tall. Bartle hasn’t yet reached that point. To Bartle, the dream is a message from Murph from beyond the grave. As the Christ figure, Murph has come back to forgive Bartle, as Judas. But Bartle is trying to kill himself, as Judas did. This time, though, his friends save him and he’s able to go on, giving him a shot at receiving not only Murph’s forgiveness, but his own. The horse is injured, but it’s strong and alive.

Discussion Question 1

As Bartle thinks about joining his friends, the narrative goes into a long rant, including one long run-on sentence that lasts a paragraph. What is the author trying to accomplish with this passage? How does it make you feel? What does it tell you about Bartle at that moment?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Bartle ended up at the same part of the river where his friends were going?

Discussion Question 3

Egrets symbolize long life. We already know that Murph is dead, so what do you think Bartle seeing the bird means?

Vocabulary

escarpment, archaeology, aggregate, oxidized, disposition, treachery



Chapter 8

Summary

Cooler and rainy in Iraq in the autumn, the platoon is on lighter duty following its victory in the orchard. When a major comes to the camp, the lieutenant is asleep and the rest of the men ignore the calls to attention. The men go about their routine, cleaning weapons, washing themselves and opening packages while the major reads out which soldiers are receiving medals for their part in the battle. Sterling receives a Bronze Star for valor. It's the only medal that inspires a response from the men, who congratulate Sterling.

Bartle notices that Murph isn't there. Bartle muses that he'd been thinking for a few weeks that Murph is avoiding him, but he isn't sure why he thinks that, exactly. He can't remember when the change started. He thinks about the promise he made Murph's mother and it angers him because he realizes he can't keep it. He expresses his concerns to Sterling who tells him that Murph's mind is already home and because of that, he's going to die in the war.

Bartle doesn't want to accept that, but he admits that deep down he knows it's true. He spends days drinking and talking to himself. He imagines being shot in battle and Murph finding his body. He imagines his mother crying over his grave.

Bartle has gone days without talking to Murph. Bartle finds in a laundry bucket Murph's casualty feeder card along with the letter and photograph his girlfriend had sent and he keeps them. He finds where Murph has been drawing on walls and uses the drawings to try to find where Murph is. Finally he asks the other men if they know where Murph is and Sterling tells Bartle that Murph is at the medics' unit. Bartle finds Murph leaning against a tree staring at the medics' station. Bartle joins him.

A helicopter lands and the medics take out an injured man. There's a female medic and Bartle asks Murph if he's looking at her. Murph says that's what he's been doing. The injured man screams as the medics take him into the tent. Murph tells Bartle he wants to go home and Bartle assures him that they will soon. Murph says he isn't ever going to tell anyone he was in Iraq.

The female medic comes out of the tent, sits on the ground, lights a cigarette and begins crying. The injured man is dead. Then she goes into the chapel.

Murph tells Bartle he doesn't want to be friends with anyone from the war, but Bartle says they'd be friends no matter what. Bartle pulls Murph to his feet and they head back to their camp, but mortars begin falling on the area before they get very far. Most of the mortars fall on the market that the local people run. The Americans fire back. Bartle surveys the damage and vomits when he sees a hajji die.



The mortars also destroy the chapel with the female medic inside. She's dead beneath two planks and Bartle finds Murph and a medic kneeling next to her body. The three of them remove the planks. Bartle and the medic carry her back to the medic station as Murph mutters to himself, wondering what happened.

Analysis

Trees continue illustrating the book's most important points. Willow trees appear again as the men carry the dead medic. There is also alder, which symbolizes giving. They are bent from heat as nearby fires burn, yet they remain standing amidst the destruction – bent, but not broken, love and giving. This is a metaphor for the resilience that Bartle must find within himself later in order to survive.

The female medic passes poplar on her way to the chapel. Poplar in Celtic lore means victory, transformation and vision. In addition, Hercules wore a crown of poplar as he led Cerberus out of Hades. This is related to the presence of tamarisk trees, which are symbolic of the Word of God and Jesus Christ, who also ventured into the afterworld and returned. At the end of the chapter, the tamarisk are burning from fire that spread from the chapel. Murph was obsessed with the medic, sitting and watching her for hours at a time. Her death is his undoing, and as so many symbols of Christianity and eternal life surround her, the circumstances foreshadow Murph's future. He will die, but he will continue living in Bartle's mind and as an influence on the rest of Bartle's life. Murph's death is also a rebirth. It will set him free.

Sterling's character is coalescing. He receives a high military honor, but like earlier in the book when he first says he doesn't want to be on posters, he downplays it. He's accepted that he doesn't have control of his life, but he's going to take what comes and do the best he can with it. He's a realist and unwilling to accept less from others. This attitude proves his undoing in the end when he can't face the consequences of his part in the aftermath of Murph's death.

A strong religious overtone suggests martyrdom, though it's unclear who the martyr is or will be. It could be the medic – a healer; Bartle – sworn to protect his friend; Murph – who is going to die; or Sterling – the quiet patriarch. Murph is going through a transformation, readying himself to leave – Iraq or the world? This comes just as summer turns to autumn and prepares itself to die before being reborn in the spring, metaphorical of Murph's future, forever tied to the medic's death.

Discussion Question 1

How does the description of the mall's destruction and the hajjis reacting to the destruction of their livelihood make you feel? Why would they be the main target and not the soldiers?



Discussion Question 2

What does the female medic represent to Murph?

Discussion Question 3

This is a book about war, but it takes place in a part of the world with strong associations for the major Old Testament-based religions (Islam, Christianity and Judaism). How does this affect the story? What does it mean?

Vocabulary

reprieve, sauntered, coalescing, aloof, scree, banality, permutations, aperture, reverberation, haphazardly, pantomime, staccato, accretion, intangible, prostrate, nocturnal, supplicant, reverence, ascended



Chapter 9

Summary

It's autumn again, back in Virginia, and Bartle is living in an apartment in Richmond. His main companion is a stray cat that happens by every once in a while to curl up in a flower box outside his window. He keeps a picture of Murph on his wall. He's still drinking.

Bartle takes a rifle to his building's roof in the mornings and shoots garbage. He aims at birds, but doesn't shoot at them.

In the midst of snow falling, a Criminal Investigations Division officer, Captain Anderson, knocks on Bartle's door. Anderson has the letter Bartle sent Murph's mother in Murph's name and tells Bartle that he knows Bartle wrote the letter. The investigator says it looks as though Bartle has given up and that it isn't different "out there," but that Bartle is different. He asks Bartle if he's seen "the doctors."

Bartle flashes back to Kuwait where the Army evaluated returning soldiers to determine if they were ready to live in a world away from war. There is a questionnaire for the soldiers to self-evaluate their mental states. He checks the box for "delighted" to answer a question about his emotional state after a "murder-death-kill." The Army sends him home.

Back in his apartment, Bartle admits to writing the letter and the investigator begins reading it, but Bartle asks him not to. He asks Bartle to say that he knows writing the letter was wrong, then tells him that they know what he did. Bartle says he didn't do anything, but declines giving his side.

The investigator says there was an incident involving civilian deaths, that Sterling was involved and had gone on leave before higher-ups took notice and that Sterling didn't make it home to be accountable. He says that the Army wants to make an example of someone for public relations. Sterling committed suicide after discussing "the events" with investigators. The investigator calls it an accident.

The investigator tells Bartle he's going to be OK and Bartle says there are lies in the story, but the investigator says someone has to answer for it. Before leaving with the investigator, Bartle takes his and Murph's feeder cards and on the way out, he throws them into the river.

Analysis

Birds play heavy in Bartle's life just before his arrest, which is ironic because he's about to go to jail and possibly prison. Birds symbolize freedom. But in a way, they are a metaphor for Bartle's state of mind. Memories of whatever happened to Murph in Iraq



and Bartle's role in it haunt him and keep him trapped inside his own head. He's depressed and ashamed, drowning his sorrow in alcohol every night. The truth coming out will set Bartle free from an emotional prison, even if it results in him being sent to actual prison. Specifically, Bartle mentions a whip-poor-will, which means imminent danger as well as "aching solitude." Throwing the feeder cards into the river is Bartle's way of letting go of Murph and forgiving himself. He's leaving his pain in the past rather than taking it with him to the next chapter of his life.

As always seems to be the case when something significant connected to Murph happens, it's snowing. Death has become an obsession for Bartle, both Murph's and his own. He describes Sterling's suicide as the only thing Sterling had ever done for himself, as though it's a gift. And to Sterling it is. Though he put on a good front in the war, deep inside Sterling was frightened and fragile. His only way out was death, and that was the path he chose. But it was also a last act of bravery and protection, trying to save Bartle from arrest and imprisonment.

For the first time, Bartle thinks of Sterling with compassion and understanding, accepting his "father" for a flawed but loving man. This is also a sign that Bartle is letting go of the things that have weighed him down. He's ready to move on, to leave Iraq for good – not just physically.

Discussion Question 1

Why is Bartle's solitude "aching"? What text clues illustrate this?

Discussion Question 2

The two options for answering the murder-death-kill question are "delighted" or "malaise." Why would answering "delighted" be a sign that a soldier is in a good state-of-mind for reentering society? Do you agree with this? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Are there clues in previous chapters that Sterling is selfless? Do you agree with Bartle's assessment?

Vocabulary

Curator, culpability, descended, equestrian, ramifications, haughty, requisite, contingent, imperceptible.



Chapter 10

Summary

Murph has disappeared. It takes time for anyone to notice as they rest after the mortar attack. Sterling is the first to let them know of Murph's absence and the men go out into the city to look for him.

Shortly, they come across a man who is out after curfew, though near his own house. The men tie him up and he says he's seen "the boy." The man, through the translator, tells them that he was at the market on his way home. While there, he saw Murph come from the train tracks, walking "as a ghost." Then he asks why Murph was naked. He says Murph's footprints were bloody and he was sweating. Murph crossed the street to the market and the man says Murph didn't seem to notice the other people.

Sterling asks the man where Murph is and the man says he doesn't know. He says he and others at the market tried to get Murph's attention, yelled at him and told him to return to the outpost with the rest of the soldiers, but instead Murph walked toward an old beggar he'd spotted raiding the trash for food. They watched Murph walk through a traffic circle full of cars without pausing and the cars all had to stop to avoid hitting him. The beggar took Murph's hand and led him down an alley.

The platoon unties the man and turns toward the place where the man had seen Murph. There are several people standing around the traffic circle, but they flee as the soldiers approach. They search around the circle and a private finds the beggar in the alley, dead in a pool of blood, beaten to death. The men look to Sterling for direction, but he doesn't know what to do next. They begin to fear that Murph is too weak to fight off potential attackers and that he's fallen into enemy hands. They imagine the worst.

One soldier heads toward the river as the sun begins rising. Outside the city, they find a man hitching a three-legged mule to a cart. The translator questions the man, who says he saw several men the night before go into the minaret. Sterling instructs the men to guard the perimeter while he, Bartle and the interpreter search the area with the cartwright as a guide. When they reach a specific area, the cartwright refuses to go on. He points them toward the minaret's base and tells them to look there. Sterling sends the interpreter back and he and Bartle go on. Bartle says it feels like a setup, but Sterling insists on continuing.

Beneath the tower, they find Murph's dead body. Bartle surmises that Murph was probably dead before he went out of the window because it isn't high enough for the fall to have killed him. His captors had gouged out his eyes and nearly cut his head off. His nose and ears are gone and they had castrated him.

Bartle covers Murph and asks Sterling what they should do with him. Sterling tells Murph's body that he "didn't have to go out like this," then sits down and takes off his



helmet. Bartle doesn't want Murph's mother to see the body. He thinks it will be the end of her.

After thinking a bit, Sterling instructs Bartle to have the interpreter send the cartwright to their location and to tell the interpreter they haven't found Murph. Sterling says they'll have to make it look like "it" never happened and asks Bartle if he knows what that means. Bartle says he does. The cartwright arrives and asks Bartle for a cigarette, which Bartle gives him. They put Murph onto the cart and Sterling lights the brush beneath the tower on fire.

They take Murph to the river. Bartle looks back and sees the tower in flames, briefly regretting that the fire might spread throughout the entire city. The three men toss Murph's body into the river and then Sterling shoots the cartwright in the face.

Analysis

Murph has become the sacrificial lamb, an innocent lost to the horrors of a war he doesn't want to be part of and maybe doesn't understand. Like Christ, at the end he embraces someone society has abandoned – the beggar – and the beggar embraces him back.

A swallow's song guides the platoon to the beggar's body. In Christianity, swallows represent Christ's incarnation and resurrection. The beggar was scavenging rotted melon and bread crusts when Murph found him. Melon purports good health and sweetness. The rotted state of the melon foreshadows Murph's torture, death and mutilation. Bread in the Bible and Christian rites is the body of Christ. In this case it is the stale, discarded crusts he's after, a metaphor for a bitter, tragic and senseless death.

The cartwright taps his mule with a stick of charred cedar. Cedar is another symbol of healing and protection, so that it's charred foreshadows that the cartwright's fate isn't a happy one.

Finally, they send Murph floating down the Tigris River, back to Eden, back to paradise – the beginning. Christ is going home and at the hands of Judas. Murph has come full-circle. They pass poplars on the way, the "tree that transcends fear."

These are the moments that set the course for the rest of Sterling's life and Bartle's life for many years after.

Discussion Question 1

What significance is there to Murph's nudity and that his captors blinded him?



Discussion Question 2

What other choice did Sterling and Bartle have when they found Murph's body? Do you think they did the right thing? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think Bartle and Sterling each thought and felt about Sterling shooting the cartwright?

Vocabulary

pastiche, permeated, stagnated, scavenged, precariously, protuberance, mottled, tripartite



Chapter 11

Summary

Bartle has been in prison for three years and is due for release. It's spring. He describes his imprisonment as relatively easy. He's been checking books out of the prison library and stacks them like a stool so he can see out of the window in his cell, which is high above his head. He makes marks on his cell walls every time he recalls a particular event from the war, but the staff think he's counting down his days to release. They describe him as a model prisoner and tell him he's a "shoe-in" for early release.

Murph's mother comes to visit. She tells Bartle she "just needed to see." She tells Bartle about the December night she and her husband received the news of Murph's death. Bartle imagines that snow fell that night. The couple was looking out the front window and didn't answer the door when the men came to give them the news. The men let themselves in and Mr. Murphy kissed Mrs. Murphy, put on his hat and coat and went out the back door. When the men left, Mrs. Murphy again stood by the window before finally going outside to join her husband sitting in the snow.

Bartle tells her he didn't mean for things to happen that way and Mrs. Murphy says there's nothing to be done about it now. She'd been trying to get answers, knowing that she didn't have the entire story. Once the Army stopped investigating, she'd continued talking to the press, including the tabloids. She received money and Bartle's imprisonment as compensation.

She asks Bartle about his plans when he gets out and he says he doesn't know. They talk for six hours and he tells her the story of what happened to Murph.

Now Bartle is out of prison, living in a cabin, still thinking about the war, Sterling and Murph. Murph's mother had given Bartle a map of Iraq with Al Tafari magnified. He hangs it on his cabin wall and sticks one of his medals into it in the spot where he thinks Murph's body went into the Tigris.

On his first day in the cabin, Bartle falls asleep outside and dreams about a monument and other people talking. Then he thinks about Murph, still with his injuries, but "beautiful." He imagines Murph's body floating down the Tigris.

Analysis

Though Mrs. Murphy doesn't tell Bartle she forgives him, he feels some relief from her visit. She represents to him all that is wrong with the war, maybe the world at large. He has no connection to people anymore, he doesn't relate to them after what he's been through. But Mrs. Murphy symbolizes the things he still holds onto and what is now most familiar. America has forgotten her just as much as it's forgotten Bartle. She's also



a stand-in for her son. She can offer Bartle the absolution he can never really receive from Murph.

Bartle's cabin view is pine trees, evergreens, which mean eternal life. In the end, he sees Murph's body float out to sea, in pieces, on waves that "break forever as he enters them." His body has become beautiful, despite its mutilation. Murph has entered heaven and Bartle can finally rest. Bartle has transitioned from a boy to a tortured soul and finally into a strong and capable man who can see truth in the world and accept it. He can live with himself now and even look forward to the future.

Discussion Question 1

Bartle describes American cities as "spoiled." What do you think he means?

Discussion Question 2

Bartle seeks signs everywhere throughout the novel, right up until the end. Why do you think he does this? Do you think he receives any kind of comfort from his perceptions and if so, what?

Discussion Question 3

Early in the novel, Bartle mentions scars on his face from an injury he received during the war. He ends his story without ever giving details about it. Why do you think he does this?

Vocabulary

entropy, patina, deference, condescension, sentimental, parcels, arbitrary, livid



Characters

Private John Bartle

Private John Bartle is the novel's main character and narrator. Nine years after serving in the Iraq War, he's writing from a cabin on a mountain where he lives, reflecting back on events just before, during and after his time in Iraq. He's 30 years old as he writes, but was 21 during most of the book's main events. He'd been in the United States Army for three years and left the Army upon returning from the war.

Bartle is dealing with guilt after his friend and fellow soldier, Daniel Murphy – or Murph – dies in the war and Bartle and another soldier dispose of the body in the Tigris River to protect Murph's mother from having to see her son's mutilated and tortured body. He also has post-traumatic stress disorder from his time in Iraq.

Events in Iraq that affect Bartle include a battle in which his platoon shoots and kills an insurgent, as well as an elderly couple fleeing Al Tafari. In both cases, Bartle wants to call out to the other men and tell them to stop and he wants to congratulate the insurgent for managing to survive for a time, against the odds. He stays quiet in both cases.

When Bartle returns home after the war, he can't connect with his mother and isolates himself from his old friends, eventually ending up living in an old factory and drinking every day. This ends when an investigator from the Army's Criminal Investigations Division shows up to arrest him for disposing of Murph's body. Bartle goes to prison for three years. After, he moves to the cabin on the mountain because he can't stand the idea of looking at the desert or plains ever again.

Private Daniel Murphy

Private Daniel Murphy is an 18-year-old soldier who grew up in the southwest Virginia mountains where he worked in a mine before joining the Army. When we first meet him, he's fresh-faced and innocent. Bartle says it appears that Murph has never even had to shave and, despite their only three-year age difference, Bartle thinks of Murph as a child.

Murph expresses fear of going to war early in his interactions with Bartle, but he manages to adapt early on. This doesn't last long. Murph slowly turns inward, becoming more and more melancholy and solitary as the war progresses. At first, he and Bartle are close friends, but Murph decides later that he doesn't want to bring home any reminders of being in the war, including his friendship with Bartle.

His devolvement continues down a dark path when he begins leaving graffiti with his name all around the platoon's outpost near Al Tafari and he starts spending long periods



of time alone sitting under a tree watching a female medic. He rarely communicates with his parents, sending only short, clipped notes home every once in a while.

After the female medic dies in a mortar attack, Murph has a complete breakdown. Nude, he wanders away from the outpost where insurgents capture, torture and kill him, tossing his dead body out of the window of a tower. We last see his body floating down the Tigris River.

Sergeant Sterling

Bartle never gives Sergeant Sterling's first name. In his early twenties, Sterling has already served three tours in Iraq and he acts as a kind of mentor and guide for the younger men who are deploying to the war for the first time.

After counseling Murph and Sterling on what to expect in Iraq and training them in marksmanship, one of Sterling's early acts is to beat up Bartle as punishment for Bartle promising Murph's mother that Bartle will keep Murph safe through the war. Sterling's anger seems to come from his knowledge that this is not a promise Bartle can keep if circumstances don't cooperate. He's already seen many men die.

Though he's outwardly hard and pretends to not take anything seriously, Sterling has a strong protective nature. He looks out for the lieutenant who is in charge of the platoon, but who seems to not be very sure of himself. He constantly reminds Murph and Bartle that as long as they do what Sterling tells them to do, they'll be all right. This contrasts with his earlier anger at Bartle, but Sterling is sure of himself.

It is Sterling's idea in the end to drop Murph into the river and it's Sterling who kills the cartwright who helps them transport the body so that the man can't tell anyone what they did. He's trying to protect both himself and Bartle, prioritizing their lives over that of the Iraqi. When the truth begins coming out, Sterling one last time tries to protect Bartle by lying to the investigators about what happened in Iraq and then killing himself.

LaDonna Murphy

LaDonna Murphy, Murph's mother, is a rural mail carrier. She's not highly educated, but she's persistent when it comes to her son. On first meeting, she pulls Bartle aside and makes him promise to watch out for her son. She's smiling and upbeat, but is afraid for Murph's life.

When she learns of her son's death, she's suspicious about why the Army doesn't have his body. She pushes the government but never really gets answers, settling for a payout and Bartle's imprisonment. At the end of his term, she goes to see Bartle in prison where he tells her everything she's wanted to know, and while she never tells him she forgives him, she is polite and understanding.



The Lieutenant

The lieutenant – LT – in charge of the platoon is young. Bartle isn't sure his exact age, but guesses around 23 or 24. He's a minor character. When he's nervous, which is most of the time, he plays with a mark on his face.

The men respect the LT, but he isn't a forceful leader. He gives orders and the men obey or not, but regardless he doesn't ever take action. He attempts to act as a calming and comforting force before and after battles, but he's withdrawn and keeps to himself most of the time.

Mrs. Bartle

Bartle never tells his own mother's first name. He left to join the Army after a terrible fight and his mother isn't happy about his choice, but she must accept it. She loves her son and tries hard to be supportive when he comes back from Iraq, despite his resistance.

Mrs. Bartle rarely wears makeup, but she wears it to the family event on the base in New Jersey prior to the men's deployment. This shows a brave face even though she's frightened.

Captain Anderson

Captain Anderson is the Criminal Investigation Division officer who arrives at Bartle's apartment to arrest him for disposing of Murph's body. He at least pretends to be sympathetic to Bartle, assuring him that he'll be all right. He asks Bartle about the letter Bartle sent to Mrs. Murphy and then tells Bartle that the world isn't different, Bartle is different. He allows Bartle to take Murph's casualty feeder with him as they leave the apartment.

Malik

Malik is the platoon's translator when they are first in Al Tafari. He helps Bartle learn Arabic. While they're in Al Tafari waiting to begin the battle, Malik is telling Murph and Bartle about what life was like there before the war when he gets shot and killed. Malik was a student before the war and, in order to protect himself and his family, he always keeps his face covered so he's not identified as working with the United States Army.



Father Bernard

Father Bernard is the parish priest for the church where Bartle goes while on layover in Germany. He offers to listen to Bartle if he needs to talk and then offers to pray for him. Bartle instead asks the priest to pray for Murph and Father Bernard agrees.

Bar girl/Prostitute

Bartle wanders into a brothel in Germany and there is a woman behind the bar serving drinks. She has a bruise on her face and is terrified when Sterling comes downstairs while Bartle is talking to the girl. Sterling beats her up and somehow she and Bartle – who apparently helped her – end up in her room. She slaps Bartle when she thinks he's asking her to have sex with him. After, she's kind to him and tells him, "You are all so sad." The she agrees that he should sleep downstairs. Bartle never learns what happens to her after that.



Symbols and Symbolism

Hyacinth

Hyacinth appears early in the novel. In mythology, Apollo created the flower from the blood of a man he loved who died violently and so it serves to foreshadow Murph's death. Ironically, Apollo is the god of truth in Greek mythology, yet lies surround Murph's last moments – how he died, his body's condition and his body's final fate.

Snow

A portent of death, snow appears often in the novel, usually in reference to Murph. His mother reads the letter Bartle wrote in Murph's name while it's snowing. There is snow the day Bartle and Murph first meet. It's snowing the night Murph's parents receive news of his death and it's snowing the day Captain Anderson comes to arrest Bartle and tells Bartle about Sterling's suicide.

Stars

In times of distress, Bartle stares into the night sky, contemplating the stars. Infinite and incomprehensible, they represent how lost and helpless he feels. He wants to have control, but he doesn't and he doesn't know how to deal with that so he allows others to lead him.

Rivers

Rivers flow notably both in Al Tafari and in Bartle's home town in Virginia. In both cases, the river serves a double purpose. On one hand, it means eternity and peace. The Tigris River in particular, which flows through Al Tafari, has biblical significance, as though it is carrying Murph to heaven and God, to peace. Drowning in the river in Virginia, Bartle has a vision of an injured horse that is nonetheless strong and able. Rivers also signify loss.

Birch trees

In Germany, Bartle notes the birch trees he sees on his journey into town. Birch means healing, purification and new beginnings. Bartle is heading home from war and these are all things he should feel and expect, yet he can't because he still carries Murph's fate in his heart. He's seeking them, but can't quite grasp them.



Pear trees

Just before a runner brings Murph a letter from home, he is sheltering behind sawed-off pear trees, a foreshadowing symbol. Pear trees mean immortality, but these trees are not whole. They've been cut down, the thread of their lives broken. Sacred to the Greek goddess of love, Aphrodite, it is also ironic that it's near such trees where Murph receives a letter from his girlfriend telling him that their relationship is over.

Dogwood trees

During his drowning vision, Bartle sees dogwood trees. Legend is that Christ's cross was dogwood. This is significant given the strong Christian symbols in the book, especially surrounding Murph. It again drives home the idea of Murph as a Messiah and martyr.

Birds

Bartle often remarks about the birds he sees around him at various points. Their ability to fly makes birds a symbol of carefree freedom, something that Bartle can't grasp for himself. He only specifies one bird's species – the egret. The egret, a symbol of long life, is dipping and looping over the river in Virginia and Bartle refers to it as "a body." The war cut Murph's life short and his body went into a river. Bartle comparing Murph to an egret portends that Murph has become something more than he was. There are many overtones of Murph as a Christ figure and the egret shows that Bartle thinks of Murph as having gone to be with God.

Poplar trees

Bartle notes that the medic passes poplar trees as she leaves the site of the soldier's death and heads to the chapel where she is about to die. In Greek mythology, Hercules wore a crown of poplar when he led Cerberus out of Hades. Very few people were ever able to return from Hades, the Greeks' underworld, and all who did were great mythological heroes. This is more Christ-figure symbolism, as Christ also rose from the dead. The scene occurs shortly before Murph's death.

The beggar

After Murph leaves the base, he comes across a beggar and the two run off together. This scene solidifies Murph's role as the Christ figure. Christ considered all men, no matter their place in society, as worthy and great and he had a special place in his heart for the lowest among us, which includes beggars.



Settings

Al Tafari, Iraq

Most of the important action takes place in Al Tafari, Iraq. It's a desert, hot and dusty, surrounded by an apple orchard and other trees. The Tigris River flows through it.

Private John Bartle, the book's narrator, is in the United States Army fighting in the Iraq War and he's stationed in Al Tafari with his platoon, which includes his friend Daniel Murphy; their sergeant, Sterling; and their lieutenant. They call the Iraqis who live there hajji. Throughout the chapters set in Al Tafari, the soldiers move around the city and its outskirts. Besides the permanent structures in which the hajjis live and work, there are the platoon's outpost and a medical station.

Fort Dix, New Jersey

Fort Dix is an Army training base. It's winter and there's snow and rain and mud all around.

Kaiserlautern, Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany

On their way back home after the war, Bartle and Sterling have a stopover in Kaiserlautern, Rhineland-Palatinate. The German town is at the end of winter. Trees also surround this place and there's a canal there. Bartle walks down the cobblestone streets while absent without leave from the Army base, trying to avoid meeting anyone he knows. He stops over in an old cathedral and talks to a priest, then ends up in a brothel other soldiers had told him about.

Bartle starts out drinking at the bar, then wakes up in a prostitute's bedroom before ending up outside across the street near the canal. He doesn't remember how he got there.

Outside of Richmond, Virginia

Between chapters set in Iraq and Germany, the book flashes forward to Bartle in his hometown near Richmond, Virginia, where he's trying to deal with his guilt over Murph's fate, as well as his feelings about being a returning soldier. He spends most of his time in his mother's house, but he also goes to a nearby store to buy beer. He spends some time at the nearby river and railroad tracks.



Bartle's apartment

When Bartle leaves his mother's house, he ends up in an apartment in Richmond in "the old gasworks building." The apartment is sparse and Bartle spends a lot of time on the roof.



Themes and Motifs

Christianity

While the novel never mentions God or spirituality directly, it is a running theme throughout the story. The author has set up the Murph character as a kind of martyr or Christ figure, while Bartle is the Judas figure, the betrayer.

Murph starts out as an innocent, fresh-faced boy looking to Bartle and Sterling for guidance. Slowly through the novel, he becomes more and more isolated and brooding. Sterling sets himself up as a father figure, but as he sees Murph slipping, he pulls away and allows Murph to fall, just as God left Christ to his fate. Mrs. Murphy passes her protective role in Murph's life on to Bartle, as Mary did for the disciples. When the time comes, Murph goes alone into the desert and meditates in his way by watching the female medic.

Bartle's betrayal is subtle in that he ceases watching out for Murph. Bartle didn't want that responsibility, but he took it on, anyway. In the end, he's unable to keep his promise as Murph continues isolating himself, and Bartle doesn't know what to do to bring him back. Knowing how upset Murph is after the medic's death, Bartle loses sight of his friend and that's the moment there is no turning back. Murph's fate as a martyr to the war and greater society is sealed.

Murph doesn't want to be in Iraq or even remember he was there once he returns home. He doesn't want to accept that this is his life and he plans to pretend it never happened once it's over. In the end, there isn't anything he can do to stop his own death. The events surrounding it ensure that the thing he wanted most – for no one to know he was there – will not happen, as his mother makes such a fuss that the press reports on it for years.

Friendship

Friendship is one of the strongest themes in *The Yellow Birds*, though it's somewhat unconventional. On a small scale, there is the friendship between Sterling and the lieutenant, which Bartle mentions briefly in the beginning. On a larger scale are Bartle's and Murph's relationship, and the peripheral bond between Bartle, Murph and Sterling.

Bartle mentions only briefly that Sterling is especially protective of the lieutenant. They are of a similar age, but Sterling is hardened where the lieutenant is softer and less confident. Sterling tries to cover his protective nature with a tough exterior, but it slips through when needed.

Bartle is the reluctant friend. He takes Murph on because he's following an order, but being thrown together – especially in such a stressful circumstance – turns his reluctance to genuine affection. He sees Murph as almost a little brother at first, but the



more time they spend together, the more Bartle accepts Murph as an equal and confidante.

As Murph devolves into his depression, Sterling doubles down on his tough, “I don’t care” exterior while Bartle tries to find a way to reach Murph, to pull him back into the present and give him a reason to survive, despite Sterling’s warnings that Murph has already given up and won’t make it home. When Murph disappears, though, both men show their true natures. Though a great risk to their own freedom, Sterling and Bartle commit one last act of friendship in order to save what they see as Murph’s honor and his to spare his mother unnecessary pain.

Forgiveness and Redemption

The novel opens with Bartle looking back. He’s out of the war, out of prison – it’s all behind him and he’s now reflecting on everything that happened and how he feels about it.

Though Bartle didn’t want it, he took on responsibility for Murph at both Sterling’s and Mrs. Murphy’s requests. Once he’d reluctantly agreed, Bartle took his position seriously, which made his perceived failure much worse in his own mind, regardless of what anyone else thought.

Bartle’s guilt leads him to write the letter to Mrs. Murphy and to punish himself with isolation and too much alcohol. Murph is gone and he can’t tell anyone what he’s done. When Bartle’s arrested, he’s a model prisoner because he believes he deserves punishment and he needs it in order to finally forgive himself. It’s Mrs. Murphy’s visit and gift of the map that finally break him from his self-imposed punishment. Mrs. Murphy never tells Bartle that she forgives him, but she allows him to let go and move on. His vision at the river is a sign that Murph is OK despite everything, that he’s free and strong.

Bartle also finds it within himself to forgive Sterling and to understand the man’s motives that he’d hidden so well. While Sterling can only find solace in death at the end, Bartle manages to give Sterling what he really needed so that he can also find peace.

Death

Death – actual and metaphorical – dominates the novel. From the beginning, it looms over the characters, starting with Bartle’s mother’s fear when he first joins the army.

The characters at first accept impending death as inevitable, wanting only to avoid being the thousandth soldier death. But as the war goes on, they begin taking it more seriously and find that they actually fear it, for themselves and each other. While Bartle and Murph dismiss and almost joke about Malik’s death, they later feel horrified when they witness the death of their platoon member in the orchard. This turning point is the



moment when the war becomes reality to them and they begin fighting against death, which continues hanging in the air around them.

Bartle attempts stoicism about it, but he fears for Murph, especially after Sterling tells Bartle that Murph isn't going to make it simply because he's given up. When Sterling's prediction comes true, Murph's death dominates both Sterling's and Bartle's lives afterward. Neither can move past it, and in the end it kills Sterling, too.

Bartle deals with Murph's death by passively trying to kill himself until his arrest forces him to face Murph's death and the war head-on, which finally heals him. It's this acceptance, finally, that gives Bartle the push he needs to live again after everything he's experienced.

Transition

When Murph and Bartle first meet, the author focuses on how young they both are, especially Murph. Even at only 21 years old, Bartle sees Murph – 18 – as a child in comparison.

As the story progresses, though, both characters mature in different ways, forced to do so by circumstances that few people have to face. But more than maturation, the characters change in themselves as well as their relationships and outlooks on life. At first, they try to downplay their fear, only speaking of it while alone at night, about to fall asleep. Bartle is less willing to think about what they're facing on the brink of shipping off to war. Murph seems to take a cue from Bartle's stoic nature and by the time they are in Iraq, Murph has relaxed in his fear – at first.

As time goes on, however, both Bartle and Murph begin to get bogged down in the death and mayhem around them, reacting in their own ways to what seems like anarchy and their mission's pointlessness. This leads Murph to the revelation that he wants to go home and forget he was ever there, including dropping any ties to those he knew there. Bartle, who at first didn't want to accept responsibility for Murph or get close to him, fights back against this, telling Murph that their friendship transcends the war, that they would be friends regardless.

In the end, the stress is too much for both men and they handle it in different ways. Murph breaks emotionally and passively commits suicide, while Bartle tries to keep the promises he didn't want to make and protect Murph in the only way he can. Because of the war, neither man can be who he was before – Murph because he's dead and Bartle because he can't forget everything he's witnessed.



Styles

Point of View

This novel is in the first person point of view. This means that the reader only experiences what the narrator experiences. The narrator may speculate about others' motives, thoughts and feelings, but he only knows for sure the things he directly hears, sees and feels. This is not always a reliable point of view, as the narrator's personal biases can influence the way the narrator recalls events. The narrator also can leave out important events or add things that didn't happen in order to influence the reader's understanding of the story.

This novel mimics a memoir, a soldier's remembrances of his time at war and the effects it had on his life after. In order to thoroughly convey how deeply he felt the things he did, first person was the best choice for the narrative. While the other characters are necessary to the story, their experiences aren't as important as Bartle's. He's examining his personal experiences and thoughts about them.

Telling this story from this point of view helps immerse the reader into the narrator's mind and helps the reader experience the book's events on an intense level. Bartle is honest as a narrator. He recounts events that don't always paint him in the best light. At the same time, he's immersed in grief and sometimes substance abuse, both of which can affect his memory when it comes to specific details.

Language and Meaning

This book's language is poetic and sentimental. As a war veteran himself, the author is able to give a raw account of the experience he's writing about while injecting a significant amount of emotion. The book is heavy in symbolism. Passages that seem to be no more than a description of the characters' surroundings are full of hidden clues about the book's meaning, as well as foreshadowing events to come. They also serve to tell the reader how the narrator is feeling at the moment, or what he thinks other characters might be thinking or feeling.

Every event in the book leads the narrator down a new road, either to a different but related past event or into exposition about the deeper meanings of life and death. The author uses simple words and short sentences that make the book easy to read. It flows easily, but it's about deep subjects full of deep emotions. He tells the story in memoir form – it's fiction, but it could easily be the true reminiscence of a returning soldier.

There is a limited amount of dialogue, as most of the story takes place in Bartle's mind. He mostly discusses his reactions to events rather than the events' details. This prevents the reader from becoming too invested in any of Bartle's relationships – from his friendship with Murph to how he feels about his mother. This forces the reader to bond closely with the narrator.



Structure

The novel is eleven chapters long. Every new chapter takes place in a different setting. Every other chapter, beginning with chapter one and ending with chapter ten, occurs in Al Tafari, Iraq. Most of the other chapters occur in and around Richmond, Virginia. However, a few chapters happen elsewhere – Fort Dix, New Jersey; Kaiserlautern, Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany; an airplane and airport; and Fort Knox, Kentucky. The chapters flash backwards and forwards in time, though all of it occurred years before the time in which Bartle is telling the story.

The main plot is about a soldier with post-traumatic stress disorder dealing with his time at war and how it has affected his life. However, there is a subplot about his friend's death in the war and what Bartle and Sterling did after, with Bartle trying to avoid dealing with the aftermath of his actions. Bartle, the narrator, is searching for redemption both for his role in the aftermath of Murph's death and the person he became – by necessity – in the war itself. He had a difficult time with having to kill people, but eventually came to think of it as just something he had to do.

The novel moves at a moderate pace. There isn't a lot of action as it's mostly contemplative, yet every passage moves the story forward in a way that makes it easy to read and follow.



Quotes

He looked left, then right, and the dust popped around him, and I wanted to tell everyone to stop shooting at him, to ask, 'What kind of men are we?'

-- Bartle (Chapter 1 paragraph 65)

Importance: This quote sets up the underlying feeling of the entire novel -- "What kind of men are we?" Bartle, the narrator, has stepped outside of himself here and is surveying the scene as though he isn't a part of it while recognizing his role in it. Shortly after this quote, the man dies and Bartle is certain his bullet is responsible. Throughout the book, Bartle takes responsibility for the tragedies around him, even though he's only one man just trying to get through a difficult situation. When he returns home, Bartle can't let go of this feeling. He's trapped in his own head. He thinks the world has changed and he can't find a way to live in it anymore.

I'd had this idea once that you had to grow old before you died.

-- Bartle (Chapter 2 paragraph 2)

Importance: This illustrates Bartle's disillusionment and how profoundly the war and his experiences in it have affected him. He's recognized that his narrow world-view was inaccurate, that there is much more to life and death than he ever imagined. It also serves to foreshadow Murph's death.

But things happened the way they happened without regard to our desire for them to have happened another way.

-- Bartle (Chapter 3 paragraph 62)

Importance: This quote illustrates Bartle's acceptance that he has no control over his own fate or that of the people he cares about. He's looking back at events from years in the future and realizing that what happened was going to have happened no matter how much he wished for it not to. He had done his best to be a friend to Murph, but the war was bigger than both of them and he couldn't stop Murph's breakdown and subsequent death. This line shows that Bartle is beginning to forgive himself and move on. He's considering his role in Murph's fate, as well as the war in general -- all the death he witnessed or even caused. These things would have occurred regardless of Bartle's presence and he was nothing more than an instrument.

While we patrolled the streets, we'd throw candy to their children with whom we'd fight in the fall a few more years from now.

-- Bartle (Chapter 4 paragraph 67)

Importance: This is in reference to how many times the Army has battled over the same city. Every autumn for three years, men marched through the orchard and fought to control Al Tafari and every autumn, they succeeded, only to have to do it again the next autumn. Bartle, Murph, Sterling and the rest of their platoon were only following in the footsteps of those who fought the same battle before, many of whom died for it. And



though they rejoiced after, and celebrated even with those who lived in the city, they merely managed to create future enemies. All the kindness exhibited after couldn't erase the destruction and loss of lives. Bartle recognizes the futility. It's causing him to question his own life choices. He's been in a hurry to join the Army, but hadn't truly thought about what that meant.

I accept now, though in truth it took some time, that must must be its own permission.
-- Bartle (Chapter 5 paragraph 2)

Importance: Bartle and Murph thought at one time that everything had a reason and that fate determined the future. They thought whatever was going to happen was going to no matter what choices they made or what actions they took. There was a bullet somewhere with your name on it or there wasn't. He realizes later that choices matter and we have a say in our fate, but that sometimes there isn't much of a choice in choice. He and Sterling dropped Murph's body into the river because they had to. They could have turned him over to the Army and let things happen, washed their hands of it. Yet they couldn't do that. They couldn't allow the pain seeing Murph's body would have caused Mrs. Murphy. Bartle is giving himself permission and absolution for his choices and actions and realizes he doesn't need any other reason for them than that he had to do it.

Grief is a practical mechanism, and we only grieved those we knew.
-- Bartle (Chapter 6 paragraph 51)

Importance: One of the consequences of the war is that Bartle began to accept death as nothing more than part of the job. It was mundane -- except when it was someone he knew. It was easy to step over bodies and ignore that they were once people who had lives and loved ones. He had no connection to them. They were no longer human, but the Enemy. It didn't serve him to grieve strangers, no matter the tragedy their deaths might be. This is a survival mechanism for him.

They were beautiful. I had to resist the urge to hate them.
-- Bartle (Chapter 7 paragraph 35)

Importance: Bartle can't return to who he was before and he can't understand how there are people still living their lives as though the world is a safe, happy place. He's become hyper aware of how unfair the world is and he's aware of the ugliness that exists. His friends remain innocent and it makes him angry. Bartle's hatred, though, is about his wish that he didn't know these things. He wants to frolic in the river with his friends, carefree, and he knows he will never have that again, that he will always carry memories from the war and the burden of Murph's death.

The curves of all our bells are cracked.
-- Bartle (Chapter 8 paragraph 14)

Importance: Everyone is damaged and there's no way to identify it. Bartle didn't notice Murph's impending breakdown, his change in character and habits, because Bartle



didn't have anything to compare them to. He didn't know what normal was -- not for Murph, not for himself and not for anyone else. People, he realizes, are fragile -- not only physically, but mentally.

You can't run from us, John.

-- Captain Anderson (Chapter 9 paragraph 17)

Importance: Captain Anderson, the criminal investigations division officer who arrests Bartle for disposing of Murph's body, says this when he first walks into Bartle's apartment. He's of course referring to Bartle's attempt to avoid arrest by moving out of his mother's house. In a bigger context, it refers to Bartle's attempt to avoid his conscience and to pretend he was never in Iraq or even the Army at all. Bartle has been trying to bury his feelings in alcohol, but no matter what he does, he can't avoid his feelings and he has to face the past and look to his future.

We had looked for him hard, this one boy, this one name and number on a list.

-- Bartle (Chapter 46 paragraph 10)

Importance: Bartle and Murph knew they might die in the war. The only thing they wanted was to not be the thousandth soldier dead because that would give them notoriety. Everyone would know who they were. The death would be a symbol of something neither wanted to be a symbol of. They wanted to be obscure, just another name on a list. Yet here were perhaps hundreds of men risking their lives to find Murph, this one man. His life, it seems, mattered. They all mattered.

The details of the world in which we live are always secondary to the fact we must live in them.

-- Bartle (Chapter 11 paragraph 36)

Importance: This realization from Bartle shows he's beginning to heal. He's been to prison and he's spoken with Mrs. Murphy. Now he's found the place where he's comfortable and at peace. He's putting the war behind him and realizing that Murph's death was not his fault. For the first time, Bartle can visualize a future where he won't suffer. That comes with acceptance that he doesn't control anything but himself. The details don't matter, only how he responds to them.

No peace. So what. I've earned it.

-- Bartle (Chapter 3 paragraph 56)

Importance: Bartle is on his way home from the war, the incident with Murph fresh on his mind. He's deep into his guilt and depression and looking for a way to make the pain stop. In a way, though, he doesn't want it to. He thinks he deserves it, that it's necessary.