

## Remains



## SUMMARY

The speaker, along with some other soldiers, has been given an order to go out and investigate a group of thieves stealing from a bank. One of the thieves breaks off from the rest of the group and tries to run away. This person might be carrying a weapon, but also might not be.

The speaker and two other unnamed soldiers make a quick decision, and all three of them begin shooting at the looter. The three of them fire their guns with abandon, and the speaker is convinced that they can see each individual bullet pass through the man's body, that they can see daylight shining through the bullet holes left behind.

After the soldiers have shot the man a dozen times, he's lying on the ground with parts of his internal organs spilling out. He's clearly in extreme pain; in fact, his body is the image of pain. One of the speaker's fellow soldiers walks up to the man, picks up his exposed intestines, and throws them back into the cavity of the man's stomach. The man is then placed into the back of a truck that drives away.

This is where the story ends, but for the speaker the story isn't actually over. The street is stained by the man's blood, as if the man's body were still there and casting a shadow, and when the speaker is walking around the area to carry out military policing duties, the speaker walks right over that stain again and again. The speaker is then relieved of duties and sent home for a rest period.

However, every time the speaker blinks, the speaker sees the dead man once more frantically running out of the bank. While sleeping, the speaker still wonders if the man was carrying a weapon or not. The speaker's dreams are filled with the image of the man's body being ripped apart as it's hit by dozens of rounds of bullets. The speaker has turned to alcohol and narcotics in an attempt to dull the flashbacks, but this isn't working.

The dead man appears to the speaker every time the speaker's eyes are closed. The man is entrenched in the mind of the person who killed him, metaphorically stuck behind enemy lines, rather than lying half-dead in a very hot, sandy country, or buried in a grave in the desert.

Instead, the dead man is right there with the speaker, in the present moment. The speaker was responsible for the man's gruesome death, and the speaker's hands are metaphorically stained with the looter's blood.



## THEMES



## WAR, GUILT, AND TRAUMA

"Remains" describes a soldier's experience of killing a man while stationed in a war zone. The title is a [pun](#) that plays on the idea of both human remains, referencing the body of the dead man, and the horrific memories that remain with the speaker after the fact. The poem examines the effects of guilt and trauma both during and after active duty, and suggests that the effects of wartime violence linger long after soldiers leave the battlefield.

At first the speaker seems distanced from the violence being described, as if it were simply part of being a soldier. To that end, the poem's opening is conversational ("On another occasion ...") and suggests that the speaker is telling the story casually. The first two [stanzas](#) also contain very matter-of-fact statements, presenting the soldiers' task as almost boring. Their violent reaction to the fleeing looter seems nearly automatic—this is simply what they've been trained to do.

Yet the speaker's guilt and trauma become more apparent as the poem progresses and the speaker struggles to accept a role in what happened. The speaker repeatedly says that the looter was "**probably** armed, **possibly** not," suggesting an internal conflict over whether this was justified self-defense in a war zone or the murder of an unarmed man. The deceased man is also only ever characterized as a "looter." To be a "looter," rather than simply a "man" or even a "guy," removes an element of his humanity, which may be another attempt to diminish the guilt the speaker feels over his death. On a similar note, when discussing the actual act of killing, the speaker uses the first-person plural "we." This shares the blame among all three soldiers who opened fire, again suggesting the speaker's need to feel distanced from what happened.

Of course, the traumatic memories described belong *only* to the speaker. And it quickly becomes apparent that the speaker can't stop vividly replaying the man's death. For example, when talking about the gunfire, the speaker says, "I see every round as it rips through his life," suggesting a horrifying dragging out of this violent act. This disturbing [imagery](#)—especially coming on the tail of such nonchalance—suggests that even as war normalizes or numbs people to extreme violence, life will never be the same for the speaker (or, of course, for the dead man). The speaker's earlier use of everyday language, in turn, comes to highlight that this is an ordinary person who has carried out an extreme act of violence and is having difficulty processing it. Later, the repetition of "week after week," referring to the speaker "out on patrol," comes to foreshadow the endless cycle

of traumatic memories that will characterize the speaker's life "on leave." The "blood-shadow" in this stanza also carries a ghostly connotation, suggesting the speaker is haunted by the grisly way the looter died. Finally, the speaker states that the man is "here in my head when I close my eyes," and that the speaker carries "his bloody life in my bloody hands," suggesting an unshakeable sense of guilt about the man's death.

It's worth noting that vivid flashbacks are characteristic of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and the repetition used throughout the poem mimics these symptoms of the illness. The poem never turns to medical diagnoses, of course, but still illustrates the lasting trauma and guilt soldiers face.

#### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-30



## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-4

*On another occasion, ...  
... armed, possibly not.*

The poem's first line reveals that the speaker is beginning in the middle of a conversation—some "occasion" has already been talked about, so now the speaker turns to "another" one. Immediately this makes the poem feel casual and conversational, as if the speaker were simply telling a story to a friend over a drink or meal.

Certain words and phrases throughout this stanza also suggest that it's probably a soldier talking, and that this story is about something that happened while the soldier was on duty. In line 1, for instance, the phrase "we got sent out" indicates the speaker is working as part of a team or unit, and that they are acting under someone else's orders. Line 2, in which these people then "tackle looters raiding a bank," serves to further confirm that this action is taking place in an area of active conflict. In general, "looters" would be the term ascribed to thieves pillaging buildings during war time.

These opening lines also introduce the colloquial tone of voice the speaker will use throughout. This is exemplified in particular here by the speaker's use of the informal "legs it up the road" in line 3, where "legs it" is a British slang term for someone running away quickly. In other words, the speaker is saying that one of the "looters," upon seeing the soldiers arrive, tried to run away.

The fourth line of this stanza sets up an important point of reference that will carry through the rest of the poem. The speaker states that this man was "probably" carrying a weapon, but also that he "possibly" was not. This matters because, as becomes clear later in the poem, the speaker is overwhelmed

by the guilt of potentially killing an unarmed man. On a formal level, the reassuring "probably" is filled with confident, /p/ and /b/ plosives, but this is immediately undermined by the tentative "possibly," where the hissing /s/ sound lingers with doubt.

The phrasing of this stanza is fairly disjointed. Line 1 is [enjambéd](#), its meaning stumbling across the line break ("we got sent out / to tackle"), and both lines 1 and 4 feature [caesuras](#) that force pauses mid-line. ("occasion, we" and "armed, possibly"). These stops and pauses seem to mimic the speech patterns of someone telling a story they are perhaps uncomfortable with, as they try to build up momentum in order to reach the part they dread having to say out loud. Even as the speaker appears to be casual, this halting rhythm already suggests this nonchalance might be an act—that the speaker is actually struggling to reckon with the truth of what happened.

### LINES 5-8

*Well myself and ...  
... all letting fly,*

The first three lines of the second [stanza](#) describe the moment that three soldiers, including the speaker, decide they should shoot at the fleeing looter. The repetition of "body" (as in, "somebody") in line 5 signposts the upcoming violence that will turn the looter from an active, living person to a body lying in the road.

Line 5 is also an example of [polysyndeton](#):

*... and somebody else and somebody else*

Here, the repetition of the conjunction "and" presents the three people involved as equals. This reinforces their position as soldiers, operating as part of a unit, while at the same time insisting that they all *share* the responsibility for whatever happens next. In other words, the speaker subtly highlights the fact that the violence to come was no single person's fault (though, as will soon become clear, the speaker is individually traumatized nevertheless). This idea is echoed in line 6 via the word "same" as well as by the repetition (technically, [diacope](#)) of "all" and "three" when the speaker insists they "are **all** of the **same** mind" and that "**all three** of" them "open fire," "**three** of a kind **all** letting fly." The speaker is *insistent* that the reader understand that the speaker didn't act alone.

Their violent reaction to the fleeing looter comes so quickly and casually here as to seem almost-automatic—this is what they have been trained to do. The [colloquial](#) "Three of a kind" and "letting fly" even give the speaker an innocent, almost-childlike viewpoint, making the violence appear momentarily less real, as though the three of them are playing a game. The sound of gunfire is also subtly reflected in the short, staccato sentences used to describe their decision.

## LINES 8-10

*and I swear ...  
... the other side.*

When discussing the actual act of killing the looter, the speaker repeatedly emphasizes the fact that the soldiers all acted together. This feels, at least in part, like a thinly-veiled attempt by the speaker to distribute blame among all the soldiers. However, the speaker's ongoing trauma belongs *only* to the speaker, as indicated through the sudden switch to the first-person singular pronoun "I" that comes right after the [caesura](#) in line 8. The speaker then starts the next two lines with "I," suggesting that, however casual the speaker might be trying to make this incident seem, it has been seared specifically into the speaker's mind:

... and I swear  
I see every round ...  
I see broad daylight ...

These lines become a pivotal moment in the poem since they describe the horrors that continue to haunt the speaker long after leaving active duty. Fittingly, then, the [imagery](#) of the poem takes a sudden, graphic turn here.

The use of [enjambment](#) across these stanzas ("and I swear // I see ...") draws attention to the white space between these two blocks of text. This builds tension, suggesting that the speaker is getting swept away in the retelling of this story. Then, at the start of the third stanza, the [anaphora](#) of "I see," with its long /ee/ sound, slows down the reading of the phrase. When, in line 9, it's paired with the [alliterative](#), guttural /r/ sound in "round as it rips," the speed of reading is slowed again. Like the speaker, the reader is forced to imagine the sight of each individual bullet hitting the looter's body.

The use of the active verb "rips" here is also important because it suggests the fragility of human life, so delicate it can be torn apart in a matter of seconds. When the speaker sees "broad daylight on the other side" of the looter's body, this again suggests how thin and delicate life is; the looter's body becomes see-through, like tissue paper held up to a window. These lines also serve to foreshadow the [metaphorical](#) rips and tears that appear in the speaker's own life and mental health following this incident.

The use of "the other side" may be a [pun](#), playing on the euphemism of death as "passing over to the other side." Here, there is nothing on the other side but daylight, perhaps suggesting something of a wake up call for the speaker as the speaker suddenly understands the consequences of this violence. The fact that it's "broad daylight" adds to the horror of the scene as well: this violence is so casual and common in war zones as to be happening right out in the open, with no one able to stop it.

## LINES 11-13

*So we've hit ...  
... image of agony.*

Following the shooting of the looter, the speaker seems almost frozen in time, able only to observe the man dying on the ground. There is a quick shift back to the plural first person "we" here, again sharing the blame for the violence among all three soldiers who fired their guns. It's also interesting to note that the speaker only ever characterizes the deceased man as a "looter." To be a "looter" equates this man's identity with his crime, removing an element of his humanity. This is likely yet another attempt to diminish the guilt the speaker feels over this man's death.

By stating the number of times they hit the looter ("a dozen"), the speaker also indicates this was probably a case of excessive force. A dozen shots doesn't imply an attempt to *immobilize* the man, but rather an attempt to kill him. In fact, the soldiers have hit the man with such force that he's described as being "sort of inside out," meaning his organs or intestines have spilled out of his body. This is a grotesque image, and it's left to linger across the stanza break. It's then followed by a [metaphor](#) wherein the looter becomes "pain itself"—no longer a human being, but instead "the image of agony." The speaker is basically saying that if you were to look up the image of horrific pain and suffering in the dictionary, you'd see an image of this man.

The tone here is remarkably matter of fact, even flippant. The speaker relays these horrifying details in a detached manner that suggests a need to feel distanced from what happened, to play it off as no big deal, just another day at war. The speaker isn't doing this to be cold or cruel; instead this speaks to the way that ordinary people thrust into extreme violence may try to cope with their experiences. The speaker almost cannot admit to being horrified at this scene, because, the thinking goes, such emotions might interfere with the soldiers' ability to do their job.

## LINES 14-16

*One of my ...  
... of a lorry.*

The speaker's solitary contemplation is broken when another soldier approaches the looter and "tosses his guts back into his body." The casual, careless nature of this action shows little regard for the value of the man's life. This moment also highlights a shift in the speaker's role, from active participant in the violence to a shocked bystander, able now only to watch what happens to the man's body.

Lines 15 and 16 contain some discreet [slant rhymes](#), created through the /aw/ [assonance](#) of "tosses," "body," "off," and "lorry" (a "lorry" is a truck). The man is simply carted away without fanfare, without attempting to figure out who he is or if he was really armed. His life, it seems, doesn't matter all that much to

the soldiers. The word "back" is also repeated, albeit though with different meanings—making this an example of [antanaclasis](#):

and tosses his guts **back** into his body.  
Then he's carted off in the **back** of a lorry.

This may be to emphasize the fact that, although the man is being moved from the street where he was killed, he is unlikely to be treated with any sort of reverence wherever he is going. Similarly, the plosive sounds in line 15 ("tosses his guts **back** into his body") add a harsh, biting quality to the line, intensifying the sense of violent disregard being shown for the man's body. This carries over into line 16, though with slightly less intensity ("he's carted off in the **back** of a lorry"). With the removal of the man's body comes an end to the active violence against him, but it's impossible to know where he will be taken or what will happen to him. The phrasing of "carted off in" also becomes a sort of subtle [pun](#), playing on the sound of the word "coffin"—as though this truck is the vessel that will carry the man's body to its final resting place.

Contrasting with the previous two stanzas, this stanza is very firmly [end-stopped](#)—the full stop after "lorry" suggesting a definitive end to this incident. The dying man is taken away, and the soldiers can return to business as usual, putting this moment behind them. Of course, it'll become clear in the next few lines that this is wishful thinking on the part of the speaker—though the actual *incident* ends here, its *repercussions* reverberate throughout the speaker's life.

### LINES 17-20

*End of story, ...  
... home on leave.*

In line 17 the poem contains a turn of sorts. The speaker notes that the actual retelling of the event is over—this is where what happened ends. The rhyme between "story" and "lorry" in the previous line creates an almost sing-song quality, briefly offering a clean, easy ending to this tale.

Except, of course, this isn't the case. The [caesura](#) in the middle of line 17 creates a slight pause, after which the speaker admits that, in reality, this story isn't over at all. The bloody outline of the man's body stains the road on which he died, becoming a sort of [metaphor](#) for the way this incident similarly stains the speaker's conscience. The phrase "blood-shadow" further sets up a connection between life and death, with "blood" indicating the vitality of life and "shadow" suggesting a ghost or spirit, foreshadowing the way that memories of this event will haunt the speaker.

This "blood-shadow" is a vivid reminder of the incident, there whenever the speaker is trying to work "out on patrol." The speaker can't avoid what happened, forced to "walk right over it week after week." The [diacope](#) of "week" here underscores how

inescapable this memory is. This sense of relentlessness is further [assonance](#) of the long /ee/ sound in "really," "street," and "week." The /ee/ sound can also be found in "leave," indicating that these sights and images won't stop when the speaker goes home. The abrupt full-stop caesura in the middle of line 20 ("Then I'm home on leave.") suggests, just for a moment, that this may be it, the end of the speaker's trauma. But it quickly becomes eminently clear that this is not the case—that this horror will follow the speaker even back in civilian life.

### LINES 20-24

*But I blink ...  
... him out -*

There's a moment in line 20 when it seems like the speaker may have escaped the horror of this incident, implied by the period [caesura](#) after "leave." Yet this moment of seeming relief is fleeting, immediately followed by a "But" that reveals that the speaker can find no escape from the images of the looter's horrific final moments even when no longer in a war zone. This stanza again ends with an [enjambment](#) ("But I blink // and he bursts ..."), evoking the way that the image of the dead man "bursts" into the speaker's mind as soon as the speaker "blink[s]." The enjambment here suggests how automatic this remembering is, how the speaker can't control the speed with which this dead man reappears in the speaker's mind.

At this point in the poem, the setting of the action moves from real life into a more abstract place within the speaker's mind. The roles here become flipped, in a way: whereas, while on duty, the speaker was a member of the troops invading a foreign country, now it is the dead looter that has invaded the speaker's mind.

A return to [consonance](#) featuring strong plosive sounds (/b/, /p/, /d/, /t/, /k/, /g/) suggests the barrage of images the speaker is trying to deal with as well as the memory of the gunfire that killed the man:

*... But I blink  
and he bursts again through the doors of the bank.  
Sleep, and he's probably armed, and possibly not.  
Dream, and he's torn apart by a dozen rounds.  
And the drink and the drugs won't flush him out -*

There's a return here to the phrase that first appeared in line 4—"probably armed, possibly not"—indicating that the speaker still grapples with knowing whether what happened was warranted self-defense or senseless murder. The [parallel](#) structure in lines 22 and 23 again emphasize the inescapability of this trauma; the man appears when the speaker *sleeps*, when the speaker *dreams*. [Polysyndeton](#) pops up again as well in line 24 with "**And** the drink **and** the drugs," suggesting how no form of self-medication does any good at stopping these images from appearing before the speaker.

The term "flush him out" plays with the idea of forcing someone out of hiding. It suggests the idea of a military operation to compel someone to leave a place—looters raiding a bank, for example—while at the same time implying the dead man is firmly implanted in the speaker's mind and cannot be extracted.

### LINES 25-30

*he's here in ...  
... my bloody hands.*

The final six lines of the poem reach a dramatic conclusion, and consist of one long, single sentence running from line 24 to 30. This makes it feel as though the speaker is losing control, getting increasingly lost in thought and becoming more and more distressed.

The dead man isn't just there when the speaker sleeps; he's there whenever the speaker's eyes are closed. The [alliterative](#) /h/ sound in "he's here in my head" underscores the insistent presence of the dead man, whom the speaker further describes as being "dug in behind enemy lines." This is a [metaphor](#) tied to warfare, and even though it relates what's going on in the speaker's head, it also grants the looter a point of view for the first time in the poem. To the looter, the speaker and the speaker's fellow soldiers were in fact the enemy. This again suggests the speaker's conflicted feelings about the incident and the speaker's intense guilt. It recognizes, albeit subtly, the humanity of the dead man. The idea of being "dug in" additionally implies that the dead man is firmly entrenched within the speaker's mind. The word "head" also rhymes with "dead" in line 27, emphasizing the speaker's vivid flashbacks and unshakeable connection to the incident.

Lines 27 and 28 are filled with [sibilance](#), as well as [consonance](#) of /n/ and /d/ sounds:

not left for dead in some distant, sun-stunned,  
sand-smothered land  
or six-feet-under in desert sand,

It's as if these lines themselves are "smothered" or "stunned" with sound. The speaker returns to the same sounds again and again, just as earlier the speaker had to walk over the looter's "blood-shadow" "week after week." The consonance here illustrates the speaker's spiraling obsession, the speaker's inability to think of anything other than this trauma. The phrases "sun-stunned" and "sand-smothered" further evoke a harsh, hot, unforgiving landscape, a place not conducive to life. This war zone sounds like a kind of hell on earth.

Then, in the following line, the hyphenated "six-feet-under" recalls the speaker's use of [colloquialisms](#) in the first half of the poem, perhaps as a subconscious attempt to again temper the trauma of this situation. The poem's language never lets readers forget that this is an ordinary human being grappling with extraordinary horror. Instead of being left behind in the

distant desert, the looter is "near to the knuckle, here and now." In other words, the looter is right there with the speaker, even at home as the speaker tries to go about normal life back at home. This speaks to the way that wartime trauma lingers long after soldiers have left the battlefield.

The final line of the poem, then, confirms the immensity of the speaker's guilt. The speaker metaphorically carries the looter's "bloody life in my bloody hands," with the use of "bloody" here recalling the dead man's blood spilled on the street. In this context, the [diacope](#) of "bloody" might also be a [pun](#), using the British slang expletive to heighten the sense of the speaker's frustration. At the same time, it plays on the idiom "blood on your hands," which is used when someone is responsible for another person's death. This final line becomes an acknowledgement on the part of the speaker; the speaker can no longer deny feeling immensely guilty about this event, and can no longer brush what happened off as just "another occasion."



## SYMBOLS



### BLOOD

Blood in "Remains" symbolizes the speaker's guilt. The poem is quite graphic in its description of the looter's death, and first mentions the word "blood" in line 18. Here the speaker notes that the looter's "blood-shadow stays on the street, and out on patrol / I walk right over it week after week." Though the event is over—the story of this man's death has ended—the man's blood serves as a constant reminder of what happened. The speaker is forced to confront the memory of this incident over and over again.

Blood is connected even more explicitly with the speaker's guilt in the poem's final line, where the speaker says of the looter: "his bloody life in my bloody hands." To have "blood on your hands" is a common idiom that means to be responsible for something. Here, the poem is finally acknowledging that the speaker did indeed play a role in the looter's death, even if the speaker was part of a larger group of soldiers at the time. The speaker's [metaphorically](#) blood-stained hands reflect the intensity of the speaker's guilt.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 18-19:** "His blood-shadow stays on the street, and out on patrol / I walk right over it week after week."
- **Line 30:** "his bloody life in my bloody hands."



## POETIC DEVICES

## ENJAMBMENT

The [enjambment](#) in "Remains" suggests a somewhat halting, disjointed, and even nervous retelling of the story. It also heightens the conversational nature of the poem; the sentences aren't forced into aligning perfectly with the poem's line or even stanza breaks. This mimics natural speech patterns, while, in certain moments, also indicating that the speaker isn't as comfortable talking about this as it might seem.

Line 1 breaks just before the speaker says why these soldiers were "sent out." The enjambment subtly echoes the content here: it's as if the soldiers are "sent out" across the line break, the blank space representing their lack of agency. They are just following orders; if they're sent out, they must go, even if they're not sure *why* yet.

An even more evocative moment of enjambment comes in the break between stanzas 2 and 3:

... and I swear  
I see every round ...

On the one hand, this enjambment creates a sense of building of tension and anticipation: what, the reader wonders, does the speaker "swear"? The white space between the stanzas might also represent the speaker's apprehension about saying the next line—because this is the line that describes, in graphic detail, how the looter died.

There's then another enjambment between stanzas 5 and 6:

But I blink  
and he bursts again through the doors of the bank.

The white space here evokes that blink, while the enjambment again makes one stanza spill over into the next; the next line bursts onto the page just as the looter bursts into the speaker's mind.

## Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "out / to"
- **Lines 5-6:** "else / are"
- **Lines 8-9:** "swear / I"
- **Lines 11-12:** "times / and"
- **Lines 14-15:** "by / and"
- **Lines 18-19:** "patrol / I"
- **Lines 20-21:** "blink / and"
- **Lines 27-28:** "land / or"

## COLLOQUIALISM

The poem relies heavily on [colloquialism](#). The *entire poem* feels

colloquial, really, which is deliberate: this casual language suggests that this is an ordinary person telling a story, and that the story *itself* is nothing out of the ordinary. Of course, the story is in fact horrific and traumatic for the speaker, and there's a major tension between the conversational tone of voice and the shocking nature of the story itself. This suggests the way that war may numb soldiers to violence, and also how the speaker struggles to fully accept what happened.

The colloquialisms used in the first two stanzas, particularly the way the looter "legs it up the road" and the way the three soldiers are "all letting fly," speak to a certain childishness on the part of the speaker, as though the act of firing a gun is all part of a game. But the looter isn't just "legging it up the road"—he's running for his life. And the soldiers aren't just letting bullets fly off into the air—they're firing at another human being.

The speaker's description of the man's injured body is also remarkably casual (the man is "sort of inside out"). The speaker then says: "One of my mates goes by / and tosses his guts back into his body." The word "mates" is British slang for friend or buddy, and is a word more at home in a bar than in a war zone, next to a dying man. "Guts," meanwhile, is a rather childish word for organs or intestines. The act of stuffing a person's insides back into their body, something that must be excruciatingly painful, becomes all the more horrific when described in such callous, offhand language. This is then followed by the statement that the man was "carted off in the back of a lorry," which suggests a distinct lack of respect for this man; in other words, he's unceremoniously tossed into the back of a truck.

Note that the speaker isn't *trying* to be cold or disrespectful here; rather, the poem's language reveals how much the speaker struggles to make sense of, or to fully grasp the reality of, such a horrific, inhumane scene. It also points to the way that soldiers may need to dehumanize their enemies in order to do what they're told needs to be done. To treat the looter with more respect—to really consider him as a fellow human being—might make the soldiers' guilt insurmountable. This dehumanization, the poem suggests, is yet another horrible side effect of war.

Finally, in the last line of the poem the word "bloody" is used to describe both the looter's life and the speaker's hands. While "bloody" can be used to describe something physically covered in blood, in Britain "bloody" can also be a mild slang expletive to intensify an expression, usually one of anger, shock, or annoyance. It may be that the speaker is playing on this double meaning to amplify the pain the speaker feels over what has happened and the speaker's role in it.

## Where Colloquialism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "we got sent out / to tackle looters"
- **Line 3:** "legs it," "up the road"

- **Line 6:** “are all of the same mind”
- **Line 8:** “letting fly”
- **Line 10:** “broad daylight”
- **Line 12:** “sort of inside out”
- **Line 14:** “One of my mates”
- **Line 15:** “tosses his guts”
- **Line 16:** “carted off,” “in the back of a lorry”
- **Line 28:** “six-feet-under”
- **Line 30:** “his bloody life in my bloody hands”

## REPETITION

[Repetition](#) is an important feature of "Remains." For example, lines and images from the first half of the poem (“probably armed, possibly not”; the image of the man “torn apart by a dozen rounds”) return in later stanzas to indicate the clarity with which the speaker remembers the incident, and to reiterate the guilt the speaker feels about what happened.

The repetition of “somebody” in line 5 (“**somebody** else and **somebody** else”), specifically an example of [diacope](#), emphasizes the fact that that the speaker didn't act alone; instead, the speaker was part of a group of soldiers, *all* of whom must share the blame for the looter's death. The diacope of “all” and “three” in this stanza serves a similar function, never letting the reader/listener forget that the speaker is just one of many and can't be held individually responsible for what happened (though, of course, the speaker nevertheless struggles with immense personal guilt):

are all of the same mind,  
so all three of us open fire.  
Three of a kind all letting fly,

Later, the diacope of “**week** after **week**” in line 19, referring to how the speaker must repeatedly walk over the looter's “blood shadow” while out on patrol, comes to foreshadow the endless cycle of traumatic memories that will characterize the speaker's life “on leave.” The final evocative moment of diacope comes in the last line of the poem, with the repetition of “bloody.” While the speaker has spent much of the poem trying to feel distanced from the violence being described, here it's inescapable. The blood of the looter is on the speaker's hands, [metaphorically](#), indicating the speaker's unshakeable guilt.

Lines 9 and 10 employ a different kind of repetition: [anaphora](#). Both lines begin with “I see,” which transforms the speaker into a kind of passive observer of this tremendous violence. The speaker is no longer “letting [bullets] fly,” but watching each “round as it rips through [the looter's] life,” until the speaker can “see broad daylight on the other side.” The speaker “sees” instead of “shoots,” a shift that indicates the speaker's desire to feel less culpable, less actively connected to this violence.

## Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** “probably armed, possibly not.”
- **Line 5:** “and somebody else and somebody else”
- **Line 6:** “all”
- **Line 7:** “all,” “three”
- **Line 8:** “Three,” “all”
- **Line 9:** “I see ”
- **Line 10:** “I see ”
- **Line 15:** “back”
- **Line 16:** “back”
- **Line 19:** “week after week”
- **Line 22:** “and he's ,” “probably armed, and possibly not”
- **Line 23:** “and he's ,” “torn apart by a dozen rounds”
- **Line 30:** “bloody life in my bloody hands”

## ALLITERATION

“Remains” is filled with [alliteration](#), which gets slightly more intense as the poem moves on and, in doing so, suggests a heightening of emotion. This makes sense, given that, as the poem progresses, the speaker shifts from treating this incident with detachment to admitting its inescapable hold on the speaker's memory.

In many moments, the alliteration specifically draws a connection between the alliterative words. The first important example of this comes in line 4, when the looter is described as “probably armed, possibly not.” The repeated /p/ sound here (as well as the [consonance](#) of the /b/ sound) suggest the fine line between these two realities. The words are really, really similar: in addition to this assonance and consonance, both have three syllables with the first one stressed (**prob** | ab | bly, **pos** | sib | ly), and both have assonant /aw/ and /ee/ sounds.

In effect, these similarities suggest how, in the stressful environment of a war zone, there isn't a meaningful difference between these two states. That is, a person “possibly” not being armed is considered just as much a cause for action as a person “probably” being armed. It suggests a sort of arbitrariness to the soldiers' decision that continues to haunt the speaker, who can never be sure as to whether they acted in self-defense or if they killed an unarmed man without cause.

Line 9 describes the moment the speaker witnesses the death of the man, as dozens of bullets hit him at once. The guttural, alliterative /r/ sounds in “round as it rips” slow down the line and focus the reader's attention on this moment of horror. Later, the alliterative /b/ in line 15 (“back into his body”) accentuates the rather shocking carelessness with which the deceased man is treated.

This /b/ alliteration appears again in lines 20 and 21, but to a different effect. The speaker states: “But I blink // and he bursts again through the doors of the bank.” Here the plosive /b/ gives the impression of surprise, as though the speaker wasn't expecting to relive this moment so suddenly.

A similar effect is created by the alliterative /d/ sounds in lines 23 and 24, in "dream," "dozen," "drink," and "drugs." This is a strong, voiced consonant that rings out clearly through these lines, almost like a drum beat. The insistence of this strong /d/ sound suggests the insistence of these flashbacks, the way they keep bursting into the speaker's mind. The same could be said for the alliterative /h/ sound in "he's here in my head" in line 25. The /h/ sound also requires an exhalation of breath, and its repetition here again suggests not only the speaker's inability to escape these horrific flashbacks, but how draining, how exhausting, such trauma can be.

#### Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "t," "t"
- **Line 4:** "p," "p"
- **Line 5:** "s," "s"
- **Line 6:** "s"
- **Line 7:** "s"
- **Line 9:** "r," "r"
- **Line 10:** "s"
- **Line 11:** "S"
- **Line 12:** "i"
- **Line 13:** "i," "i"
- **Line 14:** "m," "m"
- **Line 15:** "b," "b"
- **Line 16:** "b"
- **Line 17:** "E," "e"
- **Line 18:** "st," "st"
- **Line 19:** "w," "w," "w"
- **Line 20:** "B," "b"
- **Line 21:** "b," "b"
- **Line 22:** "p," "p"
- **Line 23:** "D," "d"
- **Line 24:** "dr," "dr"
- **Line 25:** "h," "h," "h"
- **Line 26:** "d"
- **Line 27:** "d," "s," "d," "s," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 28:** "s," "d," "s"
- **Line 29:** "n," "kn"
- **Line 30:** "bl," "bl"

## SIBILANCE

While [sibilance](#) can sometimes be used to suggest softness or to offer a calming effect in a poem, it does no such thing in "Remains." The strongest moment of sibilance comes in lines 27 and 28, which are bursting with /s/, /sh/, and /z/ sounds:

not left for dead in some distant, sun-stunned,  
sand-smothered land  
or six-feet-under in desert sand,

The sibilance here is inescapable. It slows down these lines, and

adds a hissing, sinister quality to what the speaker is saying. These sounds steal the air and volume from the line, almost as if the sibilance is "stunning" or "smothering" the speaker's words themselves. The sibilance here also simulates the sound of sand being poured—perhaps over a grave in the desert. The actual *sound* of the poem in these lines, then, contributes to the vivid [imagery](#) at hand. Finally, this sibilance evokes the sense of white noise filling the speaker's thoughts. Clearly, the speaker is unable to concentrate on anything beyond what happened back in the desert.

#### Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "s," "s," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 18:** "sh," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 27:** "s," "s," "s," "s," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 28:** "s," "x," "s," "s"

## IMAGERY

Despite its casual tone, "Remains" is a very graphic poem. It utilizes intense [imagery](#) to conjure the horrors of war and the lasting effects that these horrors can have on soldiers. While the poem opens with some fairly matter-of-fact statements that serve to set the scene, by the third stanza the language becomes disturbingly vivid as the speaker focuses on the horrific violence of this event. In line 9, the speaker describes the bullets hitting the looter in intense detail:

I see every round as it rips through his life –  
I see broad daylight on the other side.

These lines help the reader, too, "see" what's happening to the looter. Rather than just say that the soldiers shot the man, the speaker focuses on the way each bullet slams into and rips through the looter's flesh. The looter is then described as lying "on the ground, sort of inside out," another shocking, unnatural description of a human being that reveals the sheer force of all this gunfire. The soldiers have shot the looter so many times that his body has been literally torn apart; *this* is the graphic result of those "dozen" rounds of gunfire that the speaker so casually lists off. The imagery of the poem thus undermines the speaker's (likely feigned) nonchalance; however much the speaker may try to downplay this violence in conversation, it has clearly been seared into the speaker's mind.

Next the looter is described as "pain itself, the image of agony," another evocative phrase that helps the reader envision the incredible suffering of this man. Following this, the image of the speaker's friend who "goes by / and tosses his guts back into his body"—a disgusting and obscene rendering of how the dead looter is treated. The casual violence of the image is quite shocking and indicates how little regard the dead man is shown.

In the stanzas that follow, the speaker is haunted by what

happened to the looter. This is pinpointed by the image of the "blood-shadow," which shows the reduction of the looter's life to nothing more than an outline. The image of the speaker "walk[ing] right over it week after week" again diminishes the looter's humanity, while at the same time suggesting the speaker's need to disassociate from what happened.

Towards the end of the poem, the images become more abstract as the speaker replays and reimagines what happened. The final [metaphorical](#) image of the looter's "bloody life" in the speaker's "bloody hands" brings back the graphic imagery from earlier in the poem, reminding the reader of the looter lying on the ground "sort of inside out." Like the image of the "blood-shadow," the speaker's "bloody hands" act as a constant reminder of the horror of the looter's death, and of the role the speaker played in it.

#### Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "I see every round as it rips through his life – / I see broad daylight on the other side."
- **Line 12:** "on the ground, sort of inside out"
- **Line 13:** "pain itself, the image of agony."
- **Lines 14-15:** "One of my mates goes by / and tosses his guts back into his body."
- **Line 18:** "His blood-shadow stays on the street"
- **Line 19:** "I walk right over it week after week."
- **Line 23:** "he's torn apart by a dozen rounds."
- **Line 30:** "his bloody life in my bloody hands."

## CONSONANCE

"Remains" uses [consonance](#) often. As noted in our discussions of [alliteration](#) and [assonance](#), the poem's shared sounds get a bit more intense as the poem moves forward, which reflects the poem's increasing emotional intensity.

There are moments in the poem when shared consonant sounds draw the reader's attention to specific words, and also suggest an important relationship between these words. For example, take "probably" and "possibly"—words that appear in reference to the looter being armed in lines 4 and 22. These words are very similar; both have three syllables, and both have a string of /p/, /b/, /l/, and /ee/ sounds. Altogether, this *similarity* suggests how little the *difference* between these words actually matters. When in a war zone, "probably" having a gun is just as much a cause for concern as "possibly" not being armed. The soldiers need to make split-second decisions in situations like that presented in the poem, and don't have the luxury of more thoughtfully considering the subtle distinction between "probably" and "possibly" when it comes to defending themselves.

The most intensely consonant moment of the poem comes in lines 27-28. The combination here of consonance, alliteration, assonance, and sibilance creates a remarkably repetitive two

lines, sound-wise:

not left for dead in some distant, sun-stunned,  
sand-smothered land  
or six-feet-under in desert sand,

These lines themselves feel almost "smothered," the speaker returning again and again to the same /s/, /d/, /t/, /f/, and /n/ sounds (as well as /uh/ and /a/ vowel sounds). This suggests the speaker getting lost in thought, completely absorbed by these traumatic memories. The seeming insistence of these sounds also suggests how insistent the looter's presence remains in the speaker's mind, even though the speaker has left the "sand-smothered land" behind.

#### Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "cc," "t," "t," "t"
- **Line 2:** "t," "t," "ck," "l," "l," "t," "k"
- **Line 4:** "p," "b," "bl," "p," "bl"
- **Line 5:** "ll," "m," "s," "l," "s," "m," "l," "s," "s," "m," "l," "s"
- **Line 6:** "ll," "s," "m," "m"
- **Line 7:** "ll"
- **Line 8:** "ll," "l," "s"
- **Line 9:** "s," "r," "r," "r," "r"
- **Line 10:** "s," "r," "d," "d," "th," "th," "s," "d"
- **Line 11:** "s," "t," "s," "t," "d," "t"
- **Line 12:** "d," "s," "s," "d"
- **Line 13:** "g"
- **Line 14:** "m," "m," "g," "b"
- **Line 15:** "t," "ss," "g," "ts," "b," "ck," "b"
- **Line 16:** "c," "b," "ck," "rr"
- **Line 17:** "st," "r," "c," "t," "t," "r"
- **Line 18:** "d," "d," "st," "st," "t," "t," "t"
- **Line 19:** "w," "k," "t," "t," "w," "k," "w," "k"
- **Line 20:** "B," "b," "k"
- **Line 21:** "b," "b," "k"
- **Line 22:** "p," "p," "b," "bl," "p," "bl"
- **Line 23:** "Dr," "r," "r," "d," "r," "d"
- **Line 24:** "dr," "dr"
- **Line 25:** "h," "h," "h," "d"
- **Line 26:** "d," "h," "n," "d," "n," "n"
- **Line 27:** "n," "f," "t," "f," "d," "d," "n," "s," "d," "st," "nt," "s," "n," "st," "nn," "d," "s," "n," "d," "s," "d," "n," "d"
- **Line 28:** "s," "x," "f," "t," "n," "d," "n," "d," "s," "n," "d"
- **Line 29:** "n," "kn," "nd," "n"
- **Line 30:** "bl," "d," "l," "n," "bl," "d," "n," "d"

## CAESURA

[Caesura](#) is used throughout "Remains." These pauses imitate the rhythms of natural speech patterns, helping to maintain the idea that the speaker is an ordinary person. Overall, the poem's many caesuras give the impression that the speaker is just

trying to remember and relay the exact details of what happened as these details pop into the speaker's mind. The speaker is decidedly not a practiced, polished storyteller.

There are some particularly evocative moments of caesura, though. Take the comma that appears in line 4:

probably armed, possibly not

This repeats almost exactly in line 22:

probably armed, and possibly not

In both instances, this comma evokes the brief hesitation the speaker feels before firing at the looter. There is only the slightest of pauses, just a meager comma, in which the speaker and the other soldiers must decide whether or not this looter is a threat to their own safety. The caesura here indicates how much pressure the soldiers are under, how little time they have to decide what to do in situations like this.

The caesura in line 17 is also striking, coming as it does after the phrase "End of story." The speaker notably *doesn't* end this phrase with a full stop—which might be expected, given that this is, apparently, where the story *ends*. Instead there's only the softer pause of a comma, indicating that even if the actual event being described is over, the trauma the speaker is dealing with is not:

End of story, except not really.

Note how this comma then contrasts with the full stop that then *does* appear in the middle of line 20, at the end of this same stanza:

Then I'm home on leave. But I blink

Here, the period suggests that, finally, things *are* over; the speaker has left the war zone, and as such is free from constant reminders of the looter's agonizing death. Except, this pause is again short-lived; it doesn't fall at the end of a line, but rather right smack in the *middle* of one. There is no meaningful space for a breath or recovery, not even the space of a line break; instead, the speaker "blinks" and is right back in the middle of this horrible scene.

#### Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "occasion, we"
- **Line 4:** "armed, possibly"
- **Line 8:** "fly, and"
- **Line 12:** "ground, sort"
- **Line 13:** "itself, the"
- **Line 17:** "story, except"

- **Line 18:** "street, and"
- **Line 20:** "leave. But"
- **Line 22:** "Sleep, and," "armed, and"
- **Line 23:** "Dream, and"
- **Line 27:** "distant, sun-stunned, sand-smothered"
- **Line 29:** "knuckle, here"

## POLYSYNDETON

[Polysyndeton](#) appears three times in "Remains." In line 5, the speaker describes how "myself **and** somebody else **and** somebody else" all make a split-second decision to open fire on the looter who is running away. The use of polysyndeton here emphasizes the fact that the speaker was part of a group of soldiers and didn't act alone. All the elements of this list are presented equally, suggesting how all three of the soldiers are equally responsible for these violent actions.

In line 22, polysyndeton is used to alter a key line that repeats from the beginning of the poem. In line 4 the speaker says that the looter was "probably armed, possibly not." This suggests that the soldiers were *probably* justified in their attack on the looter because it was *likely* he was carrying a weapon and the soldiers had to make a quick decision. In line 22, though, these clauses are broken apart with two "ands" to read "**and** he's probably armed, **and** possibly not." The latter phrase—that the looter might not have been armed—literally takes longer to say this time, suggesting the speaker is giving more weight to the *possibility* that the looter *didn't* actually pose a threat. If this is the case, then the soldiers had no reason to fire at the man; the polysyndeton here, then, underscores the speaker's lingering guilt over the incident.

Finally, polysyndeton is used in line 24 in the phrase "**And** the drink **and** the drugs won't flush him out." Here, the repeated conjunctions create a piling up effect, underscoring that no matter what the speaker does to self-medicate, the trauma of this incident won't go away.

#### Where Polysyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Well myself and somebody else and somebody else"
- **Line 22:** "and he's probably armed, and possibly not."
- **Line 24:** "And the drink and the drugs"

## ASSONANCE

"Remains" is filled with [assonance](#)—which on one level might feel surprising, given that, for the most part, this is a very conversational, decidedly *unliterary* poem. This assonance adds a sense of melody to the speaker's language even as it remains very casual and colloquial. At times, the shared vowel sounds also suggest a connection between various words and concepts in the poem. For example, take the assonance of the /eh/ sound

in line 5:

Well myself and somebody else and somebody else

Here, the repetition of the /eh/ sound connects the speaker ("myself") to those "somebody else's," insisting that the speaker didn't act alone in this violence. The insistence on the /eh/ sound creates a sense of abundance, reminding the reader that the speaker was part of a *group* and cannot be held solely responsible for what happened to the looter.

Assonance creates some subtle [internal rhyme](#) as well. Note the repeated long /i/ sounds in this same stanza:

... same mind,  
so all three of us open fire.  
Three of a kind all letting fly, and I ...

This sound also is, of course, the sound of the singular first-person pronoun "I." Its repetition very subtly suggests the speaker's *individual* presence in this group and the speaker's *personal* guilt; even as *all* the soldiers are firing at the looter, this doesn't negate the fact that the speaker was there and was a part of this.

The assonance gets stronger as the poem goes on, reflecting the poem's increasing emotional intensity. Note the many /aw/ and /ee/ sounds throughout stanzas 4 and 5: "agony," "tosses his guts back into his body," "carted off in the back of a lorry," "End of story, except not really," etc. There is clear [consonance](#) of the /r/ sound here as well, further amping up the intensity of these lines. The fact that these sounds repeat throughout the stanza evokes the pain and guilt that the speaker still feels even though the story is supposedly over; its *sounds* linger on:

on the street, and out on patrol  
I walk right over it week after week.  
Then I'm home on leave. ...

Something similar can be said for the poem's final two stanzas, which are thick with /uh/ and /a/ sounds:

... some distant, sun-stunned, sand-smothered land  
or six-feet-under in desert sand,  
but near to the knuckle, here and now,  
his bloody life in my bloody hands.

These sounds create the poem's truest moments of rhyme, ending the poem on a rhetorical high that echoes the intensity of the speaker's emotions in this moment—the moment, not coincidentally, when the speaker finally acknowledges some guilt over what happened.

### Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "a"
- **Line 2:** "ai," "a"
- **Line 3:** "e," "e"
- **Line 4:** "o," "o," "o"
- **Line 5:** "e," "e," "e," "e"
- **Line 6:** "i"
- **Line 7:** "i"
- **Line 8:** "i," "y," "i"
- **Line 9:** "i," "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 10:** "i," "i"
- **Line 11:** "i"
- **Line 12:** "ou," "i," "ou"
- **Line 13:** "y"
- **Line 15:** "o," "o," "y"
- **Line 16:** "o," "o," "y"
- **Line 17:** "E," "y," "e," "e," "y"
- **Line 18:** "ee," "o"
- **Line 19:** "o," "ee," "ee"
- **Line 20:** "o," "eav"
- **Line 22:** "ee," "o," "y," "o," "y," "o"
- **Line 23:** "ea"
- **Line 24:** "u," "u"
- **Line 25:** "y," "i," "eye"
- **Line 26:** "i," "i"
- **Line 27:** "e," "ea," "u," "u," "a," "o," "a"
- **Line 28:** "u," "a"
- **Line 29:** "ea," "u," "e"
- **Line 30:** "oo," "i," "y," "oo," "a"



## VOCABULARY

**Looter** (Line 2, Line 11) - Thieves, particularly those who steal from businesses or homes during a war, riot, or other social disturbance.

**Legs it** (Line 3) - Runs away.

**Armed** (Line 4, Line 22) - Carrying a weapon.

**Letting fly** (Line 8) - The way the soldiers shoot at the looter with abandon, firing off many bullets into the air.

**Round** (Line 9, Line 23) - A cartridge containing a bullet, casing, and propellant (e.g., gun powder). Basically, the speaker sees every bullet or shot as it hits the looter.

**Agony** (Line 13) - Extreme physical or mental suffering.

**Lorry** (Line 16) - A British term for a truck.

**Blood-shadow** (Line 18) - The stain left behind by the looter's body after he was gunned down. This implies that there was so much blood that it left behind an imprint in the shape of the man.

**Out on patrol** (Line 18) - Moving around a specified area to

make observations and inspections and to protect that area if necessary. Within the poem, "out on patrol" refers to a sort of military policing to ensure there are no impending threats of violence or unrest.

**Home on leave** (Line 20) - A soldier's time away from active duty.

**Sun-stunned** (Line 27) - The desert environment (implied to be the Middle East) in which this shooting happened—a place where the sun is so bright and hot it seems to send the land (and perhaps the soldiers) into a daze.

**Sand-smothered** (Line 27) - A reference to the desert land where this event took place, implied to be in the Middle East. There is so much sand that it seems to smother, or choke, the ground. This idea of being "sand-smothered" also works as a metaphor for the way the trauma of this event smothers the speaker's mind.



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"Remains" is made up of seven unrhymed quatrains (four-line stanzas) and one final, unrhymed couplet (a two-line stanza). At first glance, the poem seems relatively organized; the stanzas are, for the most part, regular. But when actually reading through the poem, it becomes clear that there's chaos under the surface. Though the first seven stanzas all have four lines, the speaker's phrases *themselves* often don't line up with the form at hand. That is, the speaker frequently [enjambes](#) lines or inserts jerky pauses in the middle of lines. The speaker even uses enjambment across stanza breaks, suggesting that the form here isn't actually as steady as it looks. The speaker is *trying* to keep things orderly, to tell this story in a logical way, but ultimately fails to do so. The final two lines, then, feel almost anticlimactic; the poem ends abruptly, sooner than the reader has come to expect. It feels as if the speaker suddenly has nothing left to say—or, perhaps, the speaker is so overwhelmed by guilt and trauma that continuing is impossible.

### METER

The poem has no regular [meter](#), and instead is written in [free verse](#). This makes sense, given that it's meant to feel very casual and conversational; the speaker seems to be telling this tale off the cuff, and hasn't rehearsed any of these lines beforehand. As such, the poem is made up of lines that vary greatly in length and rhythm.

One line does stand out from the rest, however: line 27, the longest line of the poem, which has 14 syllables:

not left for dead in some distant, sun-stunned, sand-smothered land

By this point in the poem, the speaker has transitioned from telling this story in a detached manner to seeming entirely consumed and overwhelmed by trauma and guilt. This run-on line might suggest the way that speaker's thoughts are running out of control; the sheer length of this line suggests that the speaker is becoming increasingly frantic and distraught.

### RHYME SCHEME

"Remains" has no set [rhyme scheme](#). Instead it's written in [free verse](#), and for the most part mimics the patterns of everyday speech. The poem doesn't feel overly literary or poetic, but rather like an ordinary person telling a story. This is deliberate on the part of the poet: this is a poem about the horrific, everyday realities of war—and the language takes care not to glorify what's happening.

That said, rhyme does appear occasionally throughout the poem. The clearest example comes in the seventh stanza, where "land" in line 27 rhymes fully with "sand" in line 28; the final line of the poem, "hands," rhymes as well. There's also a great deal of [consonance](#) in this stanza, as well as [assonance](#) of the long /i/ sound that feels a bit like rhyme in lines 25 and 26:

he's here in my head when I close my eyes,  
dug in behind enemy lines,

Altogether, this creates a heightening of the poem's *language* that appropriately appears at a moment of heightened *emotion*. The speaker has begun the poem with a remarkably casual tone, but here gets lost in and overwhelmed by the traumatic memories being described. The entrance of rhyme reflects that shift in tone.



## SPEAKER

The speaker in "Remains" is a soldier who has returned from active duty and "remains" haunted by the horrors of war. Simon Armitage spoke with soldiers when writing this poem, which is based specifically on the stories of a young man who fought in Basra, Iraq. However, the speaker is never specifically named or gendered, which helps the speaker feel like an everyman (or everywoman), just a regular person thrust into horrifying circumstances. This sense of the speaker being a regular person is further supported by the colloquial language and slang used throughout the poem.



## SETTING

"Remains" is initially set in an unknown war zone. Armitage specifically based "Remains" on the stories of a soldier in Iraq, though no country is named in the poem itself. That said, this place is described as very hot and sandy, suggesting that it is

indeed located somewhere in the Middle East. The references to machine guns and trucks further reveal that this is a tale about *modern* warfare.

The initial part of the speaker's story is set in the (probably) near-past, while the latter half of the poem takes place in the speaker's present. This latter part of the poem moves to the speaker's homeland, but this place is also left unnamed. Based on the British vocabulary throughout, though—words like "bloody" and "lorry"—it's likely that the speaker's home is somewhere in Britain.

In a more abstract sense, the poem is also set within the speaker's mind. This is particularly true in the second half of the poem, when the speaker describes having vivid flashbacks and being unable to sleep or dream without replaying this moment of violence.

George W. Bush in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Thousands of civilians were killed and millions more displaced from their homes throughout these conflicts. Soldiers involved were also subject to heavy casualties, and many have suffered from severe mental health issues following their return home.

While "Remains" never attempts to diagnose the speaker, it relates symptoms typical of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), such as disturbed sleep and vivid flashbacks. One survey found that one in five returning soldiers have suffered from major depression and/or PTSD. "Remains" and the other poems within *The Not Dead* speak to the modern interest in better understanding and treating veterans with these lasting mental health issues.



## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- ["The Not Dead" Review](#) — A short review of the collection in which "Remains" is published. (<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-not-dead-by-simon-armitage-1027690.html>)
- ["The Remains" Read Aloud by a Soldier](#) — A British soldier who served in Iraq reads Armitage's poem in a Channel 4 documentary. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2DHWqppktFo>)
- [Simon Armitage on Poetry](#) — An interview in which Armitage discusses the importance of poetry and why he writes. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TvFcbodyQ0A>)
- [PTSD and Shell Shock](#) — A breakdown of the history of post-war trauma. (<https://www.history.com/topics/inventions/history-of-ptsd-and-shell-shock>)
- [Armitage's Biography](#) — An overview of all of Simon Armitage's life and work from the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/simon-armitage>)

### LITCHARTS ON OTHER SIMON ARMITAGE POEMS

- [Mother, any distance](#)
- [The Manhunt](#)



## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

"Remains" was written by Simon Armitage and published in 2008 as part of his collection *The Not Dead*. The poems were also part of a documentary (also titled *The Not Dead*) that was shown on British television in 2007. The film and the collection both explore the stories of veterans who have returned from war zones and still struggle with the horrors they witnessed during active duty.

In its focus on the visceral horror and moral ambiguity of warfare, "Remains" owes a debt to the poetry of Wilfred Owen, a British soldier in World War I who explored the gruesome drudgery and waste of war in poems like "[Exposure](#)," "[Dulce et Decorum Est](#)," "[Anthem for Doomed Youth](#)," and "[Futility](#)." Also of interest is Welsh poet Owen Sheers's 2005 poem "[Mametz Wood](#)," which similarly uses graphic imagery to describe the lingering trauma of warfare. Carol Ann Duffy's "[War Photographer](#)" and Jane Weir's "[Poppies](#)" are other poems that explore themes related to the effects of modern warfare on the British psyche.

There may be also some influence from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* towards the end of "Remains." The image of the bloodstained hands could be a reference to Act 2, Scene 2 of *Macbeth*, in which Macbeth suggests his hands are so stained with blood after murdering Duncan, he will never get them clean. In both *Macbeth* and "Remains," the blood becomes a symbol of the guilt the characters feel.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Remains" never mentions a specific war, though the references to the desert suggest that the speaker served as a soldier somewhere in the Middle East. The poem likely refers to the conflicts begun in Iraq or Afghanistan in the early 2000s, part of the global "War on Terror" launched by U.S. President



## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

MacRae, Marianne. "Remains." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 1 Aug 2019. Web. 22 Apr 2020.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

MacRae, Marianne. "Remains." LitCharts LLC, August 1, 2019. Retrieved April 22, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/simon-armitage/remains>.