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No Man’s Land

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No Man’s Land

Abstract
This poem is inspired by a set of letters between Jes Jerry Jessen and his sister Helen during his time as a soldier during World War I.

Keywords
World War I, Letters, Poetry

Disciplines
Creative Writing | Poetry

Comments
In the Fall of 2012, Nadine Meyer brought her students from ENG 302 The Writing of Poetry: New Poems, New Poets to Special Collections, Musselman Library, to view some primary source collections and exhibits.

Kelsey Boyce, Class of 2013, was inspired by the World War I Letters of Jes Jerry Jessen. This collection contains 109 letters addressed to his family in Spokane, Washington. This letters follow him through his training in Vancouver, WA, and Charlotte, NC, as well as his time in France and Germany.

The poem "No Man's Land" draws from the set of letters between Jes Jerry Jessen and his sister Helen (La La).
No Man’s Land

“You love us when we’re heroes, home on leave,
Or wounded in a mentionable place.
You worship decorations; you believe
That chivalry redeems the war’s disgrace”
- Siegfried Sassoon “Glory of Women” 1918

You would like it here.
Blood red tulips reach to the sky
Like hands out of a grave.
Plows cut through the living earth
Leaving trenches like knife wounds in soft flesh.
The people laugh with the power of
A shell bursting open,
Their eyes sparkling like a sky
Lit up by flames.

We fly across somewhere in France on train cars
Made for the commodities we have become:
Tools of violence for our country.
Our feet dangle out, swaying
In the wind like the pendulum in our father’s clock
Counting away minute by minute.

A cottage stands in the distance,
Its cracked stone exterior
Standing as a testament to what has been left behind,
What will be lost and
What can be won.
We have the Germans where we want them.

Wish you were here.

Usually, the thin filmy paper
Flutters in my hand, but
Today it feels crisp as if
Covered in a layer of frost
Able to crack under the
Slightest pressure. Today it tells of
Bullets and bombs not
Barnum and Bailey and
The cold black ink
Pressed into the paper,
Leaves canyons like graves
Under the letters: injured.
*Oh, Jerry boy, I fell into the canyons
And that word screamed and
Echoed as I fell.*

The nights freeze the bone and the days
Fail to thaw them.
My lullaby is a symphony of
Artillery as it whistles through the silence,
Bombs keeping the rhythm.
Shrapnel
Twinkles like chimes, lulling me to
Sleep.

*Oh yes, we have a phonograph in our tent and we have music when we go to bed at night and music when we get up in the morn.*

We are lying in our trenches like coffins,
Bombs screaming through the air
Leaving holes like craters
Where once poppies bloomed,
Red like blood.
Jagged pieces of metal
Fly like butterflies
While their victim stands below
Captivated by their delicate wings.
Men stand frozen in their once lively shells,
Wide eyes reflecting the glittering shards as they fall.

*After I was hit on the field, I walked to the first aid station by my lonesome.*
We went to the old Pantages Theatre
And sat in the front row on seats that
Scratched the backs of our legs raw.
The clock ticked away the minutes as
Black and white figures hurried across
The screen, trapped within the four
Corners of the screen unable to break
Into the world of color and reality.

I sit at our scratched wooden kitchen
Table as it wobbles on the edges of its
Crudely formed legs. The white of the
Paper glares up at me, begging for words
That bleed. Instead, I scratch in pen
Letters that will fit within the square
Corners of my paper and tell you
My life in black and white, a
Story to drown out the
Gunshots.

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1 All italicized lines are direct quotes from a set of letters written by Jes Jerry Jessen and his sister Helen between 1919 and 1920.
Dear Sis, Sa:-

Since you last heard from me, I have changed my mode of living completely. I now sleep in a real four poster bed, with springs, a mattress, white sheets, and plenty of blankets for covering. My attire is also changed. Instead of seeing me coming down the line in regular army uniform, you would see plenty of bath robe and lot of slippers with a cane in one hand. On other words, I am now located in Base Hospital. Of me of old days, handouts & myself could not agree, so I naturally had to take the worst myself in one of Uncle Sam's Hopsital.