

Steel and Sunflowers

The soil is damp with the breath of remembered rain. Settled in a terracotta pot, a russet womb, it waits for the life inside it to grow. A new day is beginning, heralded by the caress of sunbeams that shrug off the cold restraints of a waning winter. Through the clinging dirt, a tiny miracle emerges, raising its quivering head to the first soft rays of spring. A shoot.

The marvel is observed, as marvels often are. Watching with patient green eyes, the boy puts out a chubby hand to tentatively stroke the emerging bud. His small fingers bear the smooth, sparse lines of one who has spent only three years on this earth, but under his fingernails are the muddy tokens of a life not wanting of adventure. He remembers planting the seed, placing the little striped teardrop in the soft dirt. The boy wonders how so much life could be encased in such ordinary, zebra-patterned beans. He knows very little of worldly affairs. Warfare, nuclear weapons, and the breakdown of democracy are phrases that define his existence, but are simply unfathomable terms to a young, naïve mind. It is, however, a fact of the world that plants need sunlight to survive and grow. The boy knows this, and so his chubby hands fasten on the lip of the heavy terracotta pot, and with shuffling, focused steps, he pulls it into a brighter spot on the verandah.

The little shoot grows, as little shoots do. It opens up, greeting the daylight with two leaves spread, like it could welcome all the sunbeams in the world with its wide embrace. New leaves sprout and grow outwards, leaving the old leaves to darken in its inexorable upward journey. The boy watches as a green bud emerges, imperceptibly slow, from the leaves, and unfolds into a brilliant display of yellow petals. He watches as the head droops and drops its seeds on the hard clay. He cries when he wakes to find it withered, shriveled, dead.

Summers pass, as summers do. The boy grows older. He no longer spares the time to watch the first soft rays of a new season. Sunflowers begin to grow in the hard soil of his front garden, but the boy knows the rain will provide for them. Besides, the war is approaching his city, and there is no time for such trivial things as flowers.

Conflict comes, as conflicts do. In a blast of fanfare, newspapers with exalting headlines: "War Finally Declared." "Arms production increases tenfold." The boy is too old to wonder at the sunflowers in his garden. The enemy is approaching, green-coated, serpentine, but the boy is clad with the knowledge that righteousness prevails. He never stops to wonder that maybe he and his enemy have a common enemy. War.

The boy signs up, as boys do. He is only seventeen, but he is allowed to fight anyway. Mud paints his combat boots a somber brown; dirt mixed with the rusty copper of innocent blood. He is running. The wind bites his nose and claws chillingly at his cheeks, freezing the train tracks that unexpected tears have carved there. Winter ended weeks ago, but the boy thinks that maybe this war is an endless winter. The fighting continues only blocks away, but the boy needs to find the part of his city that still looks like a city. He does not stop until he feels hard cobblestones under his feet. The boy wonders what he is fighting for; wonders how so much death could be encased in such an ordinary, cold bullet. The street is deserted. A lone clocktower mournfully chimes a time long gone, and the sun peeks pitifully behind a cloud. Dusted with the ashes of a life departed, a lone sunflower feebly raises its head to the first soft rays of spring. The boy sees, and as he observes, something pushes its way through the recesses of his mind. A thought.

Tired of the weight, the boy unstraps his gun from his back. The idea matures and flowers. He looks at his hands, lined and soiled with the murky truth of the world.

He does not want to fight this war.

The boy kneels at the foot of the unmoving flower. As he lays his weapons down, he imagines that the sunflower inclines its regal head, just slightly. It takes more strength to grow, in this place, than is given by the tough grip of steel. The boy learnt this lesson a long time ago; but conflict seems to stunt, rather than nurture growth. The soil is damp with the breath of remembered rain as the boy, uniform torn and clinging to soiled skin, stands, and raises his green eyes to face a new day.