



2011 Student Work Exhibition

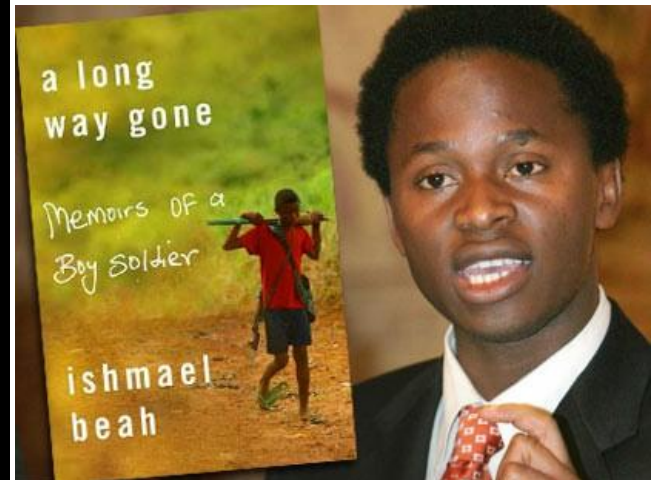
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A Letter to the Young Ishmael Beah

Dear Ishmael,

Perhaps you will not believe or even understand me when I tell you this, but I have read two small parts of your story written by the future you. You will one day escape from this country that has caused you such unimaginable pain.

Perhaps even more so, you will not believe that your story *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* will be published and read worldwide, that a small group of students in the small island of Taiwan will study a chapter of your story as a course reading.



You will, no doubt, not see how this is possible.

I met you on the page when I was very ill. I was physically sick and thus mentally somewhat fragile, and yet I couldn't help but read obsessively once my eyes glazed that first prologue, and then I couldn't keep your story away from my mind. I, who grew up relatively comfortably in a stable society; I, who was not aware of the extent and travesties of child soldiers; I, who was around five years old at the time your story actually took place. We, so close in time, so distant in fates.

Before war raged into your life, war seemed to you foreign and distant, but later it changed your life forever.

I read an excerpt from the first chapter of your story, how your whole world had been shattered when the rebels came. You were only twelve years old, yet your life was suddenly devastated beyond repair. Your descriptions of your family, of your parents, of the severe casualties you saw that day...it pains my heart to think that at an age when you should have spent days learning and growing up under the loving care of parents, you had been paralyzed by the shock of bearing witness to such horrific things.

Your memory of the baby girl, shot dead while her mother was carrying her on



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her back, with an “an interrupted innocent smile on her face” has remained one of the most vivid and most disturbing images that burned into my mind and stuck for days on end.

I read about your recruitment. I cannot imagine the fear and anger you felt when you heard the lieutenant’s words about the rebels. The description of the unspeakable evils that they committed is enough to cause anyone to seek revenge. I cannot begin to imagine how devastating it must be to lose your family so suddenly at such a young age.

I completely understand why you joined the armed forces. I understand your fear: “Leaving the village was as good as being dead.”

I understand the hatred. “Visualize the enemy, the rebels who killed your parents, your family, and those who are responsible for everything that has happened to you.”

I understand how normal it must be to first be shocked, then to be numb, and finally to relish in violence, and take pleasure in revenge.

What happened to you was not your fault. I have so far only read two short excerpts from your story, so that my conceptualization of you is still piecemeal, yet your recollections have evoked such a pull over me that no other story of growth has ever done. I promise to you that I will fill in the gaps of your story as soon as I get the chance. I am well aware that it will probably be just as much (or perhaps much more) painful, but I promise that I will bear through it, and try to share your pain.

It is my understanding that one day soon, your greatest challenge will shift from staying alive to fleeing the war, then finally to rehabilitation and trying to reintegrate with society. This will prove to be very, very difficult. As I am sure you will understand better than I, killing rips the soul apart, and only remorse and finally forgiving yourself can you put yourself back together. I know that perhaps you will not believe me now, but you will one day move above and beyond.

I write this letter close to the closing of 2011, more than a decade since the future you will flee from this world as you know it, yet more than 30,000 children just like you are still used as towards means related to wars.

It was not fair, what has happened to you. No child should have to suffer headaches and flashbacks of horrific scenes, no child should have to cry into the night and wake to the fright of nightmares involving blood and agony. Our world is far from



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perfect, yet it is my wish to thank the future you for sharing your story with me.

Thank you for giving me the slightest insight into what life has done to you. You have helped me become very, very grateful for what I have, and I feel that I have become more compassionate and understanding. I wish you the best, and I promise to meet you on your pages again, and I vow to bear you're an infinitely smaller amount pain along side you, and smile slightly when I know you emerge stronger for it. I am suddenly reminded of the words of English writer G. K. Chesterton:

“Fairy tales do not tell children the dragons exist. Children already know that dragons exist. Fairy tales tell children the dragons can be killed.”

It pains me so much that you have had to face undefeatable dragons so early in life. It has been said that no soldier can walk away from a war unharmed. Thank you for transcending your pain into such a meaningful book. I sign off in the hope that people like me have and will be more aware of these horrors, that they might understand a bit more, and hopefully, that might be a small step toward constituting change. I promise that I will write again soon.

Sincerely yours,

Andrew Wu