What happens?

A veteran’s memory of a shooting continues to intrude after deployment.

The main idea

A shooting that seems finished remains mentally present because responsibility and uncertainty have not ended.

1. “probably armed”

Method: Qualification

The threat was never completely certain.

2. “possibly not”

Method: Counterweight

The alternative possibility keeps moral doubt alive.

3. “blood-shadow”

Method: Compound metaphor

A physical trace becomes an image of persistent memory.

4. “bloody hands”

Method: Guilt imagery

The ending makes the narrator’s own responsibility impossible to wash away.

Form and structure

A dramatic monologue in colloquial free verse; a short final stanza concentrates the personal aftermath.

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Development, voice and tone

Shooting — Conversational, then graphic. An apparently routine account becomes a vivid description of bodily destruction.

Return home — Intrusive and repetitive. The setting changes, but the killing returns through perception, sleep and dreams.

Final admission — Entrapped and guilty. The narrator’s focus narrows from the group to personal responsibility.

Context

Armitage’s The Not Dead project drew on veterans’ accounts. The poem explores trauma without making every veteran’s experience identical.

Comparison links

War Photographer: memory and responsibility. Poppies: conflict beyond the battlefield.

Recall question

How does the meaning of returning home become complicated?