

# War On No Uncertain Terms

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*There is only a perspective seeing, only a perspective knowing.*  
—Friedrich Nietzsche

**T**he war story, from Hemingway to Heller, is a cherished staple of American literature. Through the words of the war narrative—as often irreverent as bellicose—we engage in vicarious conflict, mounting armchair campaigns and capturing capitals before bedtime. But can the actual *experience* of warfare be adequately transmitted through prose? Beyond descriptions of crackling machine-gun fire and the sibilant shrieks of incoming shells, what is needed to make the reader grasp the realities of the combat zone? What do boundless horror and uncompromising grief look like on the page? Is sorrow ever two-dimensional? Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*, a collection of stories about his service in the Vietnam War, raises exactly such questions, and in remembering, O’Brien endeavors to answer them for himself.

*The Things They Carried* is written in a terse, forceful style that favors a skillful economy of phrase to verbal meanderings. Perhaps the most arresting aspect of Tim O’Brien’s writing in *The Things They Carried* is the way he uses short, staccato, one-line paragraphs to halt the reader in mid-thought. Such sudden breaks in the narrative structure have the effect of yanking us out of the role of observer and into that of participant, drawing us into conversation with O’Brien and his stories. In “How to Tell a True War Story,” O’Brien’s recollection begins placidly, with Rat Kiley and Curt Lemon playing catch with smoke grenades, giggling under a shadowy jungle canopy, while the rest of Alpha Company is “half-dozing” at the mossy trail junction. By indenting the next line, thereby isolating it, O’Brien gives its words an ominous importance, and nudges us out of the tranquil scene: “Except for the laughter things were quiet” (78). A few lines down, he indents again, exponentially increasing the suspense by addressing the reader directly and explaining that “[i]t’s hard to tell you what happened next” (78). The tension is nearly unbearable, and we’re almost relieved when Curt Lemon accidentally trips a landmine and

splatters across the boughs of a tree. Using only two, single-sentence paragraphs, O'Brien has made us understand the nauseating anxiety and unease of Vietnam, and the terrible weight of calm and silence that he expresses in "Spin": "the monotony...was a strange boredom...the kind...that caused stomach disorders...you'd think, this isn't so bad...then you'd hear gunfire...and you'd be squealing pig squeals. That kind of boredom" (37).

As *The Things They Carried* progresses, O'Brien continues with similar, if sometimes repetitive one-line paragraphs: "So what happens?" he asks us; "It's all exactly true," he reminds; "This one wakes me up," he confides ("True" 76, 77, 89). Through their subtle, elegantly conversational tone, these brief asides gently tug us into a dialogue with O'Brien. "Nobody hears nothing," whispers Mitchell Sanders in a shadowy foxhole; O'Brien compels us to *listen* (83). His essays—not just the stories but the language and structure themselves—become O'Brien's "way of grabbing people by the shirt and explaining exactly what had happened" ("Notes" 179).

But exactly what *had* happened to O'Brien? In his essay "Good Form," O'Brien discloses that "a long time ago I walked...as a foot soldier. Almost everything else is invented" (203). He also claims, opaquely, that if his daughter ever asks him if he killed anyone in Vietnam, "[he] can say, honestly, 'Of course not.' Or [he] can say, honestly, 'Yes'" (204). If O'Brien has misled, or even swindled the reader by telling fabricated war stories, what could his motives have been? In one sense such ambiguity is the unavoidable product of engaging with Vietnam, a war characterized by subterfuge, fought in misty mountains and snarled jungles, and fraught at every level with "[l]ies, deception, linguistic obfuscation" (Herzog 911). "In war you lose your sense of the definite," O'Brien writes, and it becomes "difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen" ("True" 88, 78). "You pin down certain truths. You make up others" ("Notes" 179). Telling a story with pristine accuracy would not be possible, or even necessarily desirable. Rat Kiley for example, tells stories pregnant with "exaggeration and overstatement," not to deceive, but "to heat up the truth, to make it burn so hot that you would feel exactly what he felt" ("Sweetheart" 101). "Absolute occurrence is irrelevant" to O'Brien: he wants us "to feel the truth, to believe by the raw force of feeling"; he needs to share with us the swells of bile "like lemonade...fruity and sour," the "spiritual texture—of a great ghostly fog," and the accompanying sense of disorientation ("True" 89, 81; "Ambush" 148). Such is the nature of a "true war story": it "makes the stomach believe" ("True" 88, 84).

The evocative language and pervasive uncertainty in O'Brien's narratives, then, are used not to conjure the Truth, but to stir gut sensations of belief and

comprehension—to ensure that his stories are “truly told” (84). To this end, O’Brien again uses one-sentence, abrupt paragraph breaks, now to convey the gut-wrenching way in which time itself seemed to stop, start, and skip to soldiers in Vietnam:

His eyes moved from the sky to the dead man’s body to the knuckles of his own hands. “So listen, you best pull your shit together. Can’t just sit here all day.” Later he said, “Understand?” Then he said, “Five minutes, Tim. Five more minutes and we’re moving out.” (“Killed” 144)

O’Brien’s language and structure let us perceive Vietnam as the grunts of Alpha Company saw it, and we begin to grasp that “[w]hat seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way...the hard and exact truth as it *seemed*” (“True” 78). It is out of this obligation that—even though he *knows* that Curt Lemon was lifted skyward by a “rigged 105 round”—O’Brien needs us to “believe the last thing Curt Lemon believed, which for him must’ve been the final truth,” that as he stepped out of the shadows and into the light, “the sun seemed to gather around him and pick him up and lift him high into a tree” (90).

O’Brien finds a similar ambiguity intrinsic in his memories of the war: “the remembering is turned into a kind of rehappening” and becomes a mental recurrence of events that were dubious and difficult to distinguish in the first place (“Spin” 36). As O’Brien makes clear through his dream-like prose, any attempt at a lucid recollection of Vietnam is further hampered by the fact that “[w]hat sticks to memory, often, are those odd little fragments that have no beginning and no end” (39). O’Brien’s style *becomes* his comment on the nebulous nature of perception and memory, which reaches its amorphous peak in the throes of the combat zone.

The use of linguistic and narrative haziness in *The Things They Carried* is also a quiet protest on O’Brien’s part against those who view war in distinct black-and-white terms. “True war stories do not generalize” he admonishes, and while “war is hell...war is also mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love” (“True” 84, 87). “The ironies went beyond” each of the individual soldiers, whose stories O’Brien renders in a cacophony of comradeship and pettiness, fear and delight, superstition and precocious wisdom (“Stockings” 129). “[W]ar is just another name for death, and yet...that proximity to death brings a corresponding proximity to life” (“True” 87). “The truths are contradictory,” O’Brien argues, and his incongruent, sometimes trembling prose is

a reflection and illustration of the inherently paradoxical nature of war itself (87).

Within O'Brien's own manipulation of language and certainty in *The Things They Carried* lies what may have been his deeper linguistic inspiration: the lexicon of the front line. The mouths of the men of Alpha Company brim with a wide array of euphemisms and double-speak designed by the troops, consciously or not, to distance themselves from the trauma of war. The renaming and resignifying of emotional anguish was "a language trick" which "made things seem tolerable" ("Night" 247). For instance, the ceaseless, silent nocturnal patrols that eventually drive Rat Kiley mad enough to shoot off one of his toes are casually transmogrified by the soldiers into "one big party, just living the night life" (247). More starkly, such linguistic denial provided a refuge under which troops could avoid coping with the corpses, both VC and GI, that they encountered. When one of Alpha Company's own had fallen, for example,

They used a hard vocabulary to contain the terrible softness. *Greased* they'd say. *Offed, lit up, zapped while zipping*...When someone died, it wasn't quite dying...because they called it by other names, as if to encyst and destroy the reality of death itself. They kicked corpses...They talked grunt lingo. ("Things" 20)

Such word games were not limited only to American casualties: "A VC nurse, fried by napalm, was a crispy critter. A Vietnamese baby...was a roasted peanut. 'Just a crunchie munchie'" ("Lives" 267). While linguistic self-deception served as one way "of making the dead seem not quite so dead...[by pretending] it was not the terrible thing it was," it was largely as a stop-gap measure, a means of getting through the day (267). Certainly, such denial could do little to allow the soldiers to come to terms with the atrocities, the loss, the misery, and emotional torment of Vietnam.

At the outset of "How to Tell a True War Story," we're immediately thrust into the epistolary world of Rat Kiley, told by O'Brien through Rat's coarsely heartfelt words. We hear his voice, taste his tears, feel the breeze when he spits. For a moment we see the world, again paradoxically, through his "gentle killer eyes" (76). "Listen to Rat Kiley," O'Brien tells us, not once, but twice. "Listen to Rat" (76-7). It's as much a demand as it is a prayer, as much exhortation as supplication. In repeating certain phrases—such as "his one eye was shut, his other...a star-shaped hole" and "[h]is chest was sunken...a scholar maybe" from the essay "The Man I Killed"—O'Brien forces us to hear their resonant significance (139).

More important, O'Brien uses repetition to illustrate how "the thing about remembering is that you don't forget...the intersection of past and present...circles for awhile ...and shoots off down a thousand different streets" ("Spin" 38). "I'm forty-three...and a writer now," he chants endlessly, as if trying to convince himself that Vietnam has truly ended, that all that killing and dying and death is behind him now ("Lives" 255). Beyond the incantation of phrases, stories such as Curt Lemon's semi-nude Halloween jaunt through a local village are told and retold throughout *The Things They Carried*, often by different speakers, in different contexts, with different details, and to different ends. O'Brien's stories are moments from his past that he himself cannot escape; or at the very least, they are sensations of guilt and responsibility that he cannot shake, made incarnate in his fictitious narrative. "The bad stuff never stops happening," O'Brien laments in "Spin." "It lives in its own dimension, replaying itself over and over" (36). As he puts it in the titular essay "The Things They Carried," it seems "as if the repetition itself were an act of poise, a balance between crazy and almost crazy" (20).

In "Notes," O'Brien claims that he doesn't "look on [his] work as therapy" (179). He does concede, however, that "[t]elling stories seemed a natural, inevitable process...[p]artly catharsis, partly communication" (179). Indeed, the act of writing and telling stories clearly plays an immense role in O'Brien's life. Whether or not O'Brien is cognizant of the connection, he writes in great part to undo the damage done by the self-deceiving linguistics of Vietnam. O'Brien's language mimics the distorted perspective of combat, recreating and reliving it so that he can finally grapple with the trauma of Vietnam; the euphemisms of Alpha Company, however, deliberately contort reality to circumvent any real recognition of death and pain, keeping the weary warriors composed enough to survive another day. In essence, O'Brien uses *The Things They Carried* to unravel the emotional blocks created, twenty years earlier, by a different, disingenuous set of words.

The stories themselves in *The Things They Carried* also play a dual role, their purpose similarly inverted in the years following the end of the war. In Vietnam, troops "kept the dead alive with stories," denying the concrete substance of death by refusing its finality ("Lives" 267). As long as the stories were told, it seemed that the deceased had never actually died, as if they "were still out there in the dark," just waiting for the right moment to step back into the light (268). The stories "were exaggerated, or blatant lies," but as with *The Things They Carried*, it wasn't their Truth that mattered as much as the emotional force of their words (267). O'Brien too uses stories to keep the dead alive, but unlike those told in Vietnam, his stories don't reject the acrid fact

of death. In a sense, his stories are the very “final confirmation” and acknowledgement of death that the men of Alpha Company sought to escape by hiding behind their facade of anecdotes and lingo (269). Stories “make things present” for O’Brien; they allow him to “look at things [he] never looked at...attach faces to grief and love and pity and God...feel again” (“Form” 204). O’Brien writes and dreams to conjure the dead—whether real or fictitious—to “revive, at least briefly, that which is absolute and unchanging”: his love, his loss, and his sorrow (265).

Throughout *The Things They Carried*, O’Brien stays true to his conviction that “there is no virtue...in a true war story, if there’s a moral at all...you can’t tease it out...often...there is not even a point” (“True” 76, 84, 88). His recollections of bivouacking at a Buddhist pagoda, of Azar mocking a Vietnamese girl’s mournful dance, and of Norman Bowker endlessly circling his hometown lake all have the weight of meditations, like haikus or Zen enigmas. “You can tell a true war story by the questions you ask...you ask, ‘Is it true?’ and if the answer matters, you’ve got your answer” (89). His goal is not to sermonize, and his stories do not “instruct, nor encourage virtue...nor suggest...proper human behavior” (76). He writes to make Vietnam and its ghosts visceral and tactile for his readers—and more important, for himself, so that we might share with him “a clarity beyond language...something huge and permanent” (“Lives” 259). O’Brien needs us to hear his words, for his sanity, for our understanding, and for the memories of those who died.

Even if the truest war story may turn out to be a lie.

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