# The Things They Carried

## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TIM O'BRIEN

Tim O'Brien moved with his family to Worthington, Minnesota when he was twelve, a place which has served as the setting in many of his stories in *The Things They Carried* as well as his other works. He got his BA from Macalester College in Political Science in 1968. In 1968 he was drafted by the Army and sent to Vietnam, where he served from 1968 to 1970. When he returned from the war, he went to graduate school at Harvard University. In 1973, he published his first book, a memoir entitled: *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*. In 1979, O'Brien won the National Book Award for his novel *Going After Cacciato*, but he is perhaps best known for his collection of semi-autobiographical stories *The Things They Carried*. He has written many additional novels, many focused around the Vietnam war and its aftermath upon those who served in it.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

O'Brien ardently tries to separate his storytelling from political commentary in interviews, but all of his works to date intimately deal with war: experiences of war before, during, and after the actual fighting. The entirety of *The Things They Carried* is a depiction of experiences from the Vietnam War. United States intervention in the regional conflict was an effort to prevent South Vietnam from being overtaken by communist leaders, but objectives were often not entirely clear and were particularly opaque to the soldiers in the middle of the fighting. The war led to intense debates and unrest in the United States, and produced a generation of veterans who were impacted by the war in many different ways, but all of them profoundly.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

As a war novel written by a former soldier, *The Things They Carried* shares a great deal with other war novels of similar authorship. In 1929 the novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* or, *Im Westen nichts Neues*, by Erich Marla Remarque was published in Germany. Remarque was a veteran of World War I, and the book chronicles the extreme anguish, both mentally and physically, most soldiers experienced during the war. It also explored the pervasive sense of alienation that soldiers felt from the society that sent them to war, and their inability to ever really return home. In just its first eighteen months in print, it sold 2.5 million copies in twenty-five different languages. Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* similarly explore chaotic war experiences and the way that war has a lifelong alienating effect on soldiers. Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969) uses a similar disjointed narrative as many of the stories in *The Things They Carried* to capture and portray the chaos of war.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Things They Carried*
- **When Written:** 1980s
- **Where Written:** The United States
- **When Published:** 1990
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** War Novel
- **Setting:** Vietnam; Minnesota; central Iowa

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Film Adaptation.** "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" was made into a movie in 1998. It was titled *A Soldier's Sweetheart* and starred Kiefer Sutherland.

## PLOT SUMMARY

*The Things They Carried* is a collection of twenty-two stories chronicling the author, Tim O'Brien's, recollections of his time as a soldier in the Vietnam War. While O'Brien admits in the book to often blurring the line between fact and fiction, the names of the characters in the book are those of real people. Since it is a collection of stories rather than a novel, there is not a traditional narrative arc with a beginning, middle, and end. Yet, the entire collection functions as a self-contained work because it is so loyal to its themes and characters.

"The Things They Carried:" This story introduces the reader to O'Brien's platoon leader, Lieutenant Jimmy Cross. The story travels between Cross' infatuation with a girl named Martha that he's in love with based on a single date in college, the death of the soldier Ted Lavender, and an itemized chronicle of what the men carried at war, from supplies, to tokens of luck, to emotions.

"Love:" Jimmy Cross visits Tim O'Brien long after the war has ended and they swap war stories over a bottle of gin. The topic of Martha comes up, and Cross confesses that he still loves her. He tells the story of how he saw Martha at a college reunion after the war. She had never married. Cross asks O'Brien to write a story about him that makes him appear to be the best platoon leader ever, hoping Martha would read it and find him.

"Spin:" A story of Tim O'Brien's fragmented memories from the

war. Mitchell Sanders sends his body lice to his hometown draft board. Norman Bowker and Henry Dobbins play checkers every night. O'Brien's daughter, Kathleen, says he should stop writing so many war stories. O'Brien recalls Kiowa teaching Rat Kiley and Dave Jensen a rain dance. Ted Lavender adopted a puppy that Azar blew up. Kiowa told O'Brien he had no choice but to kill the armed man on the path. O'Brien says he must write stories because that's all that's left when memory is gone.

"On the Rainy River:" Before going to Vietnam, Tim O'Brien decides to dodge the draft, and he drives north to Canada but stops near the border at The Tip Top Lodge, owned by an old man named Elroy Berdahl. O'Brien credits Berdahl with being "the hero of his life." O'Brien spends six days at the Lodge, trying to decide whether or not to flee. Berdahl takes him out on a boat so he's only yards away from Canadian soil. O'Brien feels forced to go to war for fear of embarrassing himself and his family, more than he fears death.

"Enemies:" Dave Jensen and Lee Strunk get in a brutal fight over a stolen jackknife where Jensen breaks Strunk's nose. After Strunk returns from a few days in medical care, Jensen becomes paranoid that Strunk will retaliate by killing him. Jensen isolates himself for a week, and eventually loses it and starts shooting his gun in the air until he's out of ammo. Then he breaks his own nose with a pistol and asks Strunk if they're even. Strunk says they are.

"Friends:" Dave Jensen and Lee Strunk become friends after their fight and start doing everything in pairs. They make a pact and sign it that reads one is obligated to kill the other if one is harmed so badly in battle that they would be wheelchair bound. Later that month, Strunk gets most of his right leg blown off in combat. As the soldiers wait for a medic chopper, Strunk comes in and out of consciousness begging for Jensen not to kill him. Jensen promises he won't. Strunk dies in the chopper, and Jensen appears relieved.

"How to Tell a True War Story:" O'Brien writes that war stories have no moral, they are often not true (at least completely), and if a story is true you can tell by the kinds of questions a story gets after it's told. O'Brien tells the story of Rat Kiley's reaction to Curt Lemon's death as an example, as well as Mitchell Sanders' story about a platoon of soldiers that started having auditory hallucinations. When O'Brien tells the story of Lemon's death, usually an older woman will say it's too sad, and O'Brien resolves he has to keep telling the stories and adding to them to make them truer.

"The Dentist:" Curt Lemon, a soldier that Tim O'Brien didn't particularly because of his hyper-macho personae, is eulogized in a quick story. Lemon enjoyed combat and was known for his dangerous antics, but he was terrified of the Army dentist that all of the soldiers had to see. When the dentist touched him, Lemon fainted. When he came to, he spent the rest of the day in a stupor, cursing himself. In the night, Lemon woke the dentist and forced him to pull out a perfectly healthy tooth.

"Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong:" O'Brien tells a story that Rat Kiley told him from when he was stationed in an isolated area. There was so little action there that one soldier, Mark Fossie, snuck his girlfriend Mary Anne Bell in by helicopter. Things don't go as Fossie planned, though, because Bell becomes infatuated with the war, leaves Fossie, and joins the Green Berets in battle.

"Stockings:" Henry Dobbins, a loveable, gentle-giant, had a peculiar ritual of wrapping his girlfriend's stockings around his neck before dangerous missions. At first Dobbins was made fun of, but then the platoon started to believe in the power of the stockings because Dobbins was never hurt in battle, even when he was standing in open fire and stepped on a mine that didn't go off. When Dobbins' girlfriend breaks up with him, he still wears the stockings and says the magic didn't leave.

"Church:" The platoon uses a pagoda where two monks live as an operations base for a week. The two monks like the soldiers, but they particularly love Henry Dobbins. Dobbins tells Kiowa he might become a monk after the war, but confesses he could never be a minister because he can't answer the hard questions about life and death. Kiowa, who always carries the New Testament, doesn't feel that it's right that they're using a church as a base. Dobbins agrees.

"**The Man I Killed**:" The story goes back and forth between O'Brien's memories of the corpse of the **young, armed man** he threw a grenade at on a path outside of My Khe and the invented history O'Brien has created of the dead man as a mathematician, scholar, and terrified soldier. Kiowa keeps insisting that O'Brien quit staring at the body and talk to him.

"Ambush:" O'Brien's daughter, Kathleen, asks him if he's ever killed anyone. He lies and says he hasn't, but then addresses the story to an adult Kathleen and promises to give the truth. He recalls the image of **the young man** outside of My Khe and how the memory haunts him still, but in his memories the young man keeps walking down the path and survives.

"Style:" **A young Vietnamese girl dances** in the charred remains of her village. Azar keeps asking why she is dancing. From where her house was, the soldiers find the corpses of the girl's family. She continues to dance. Later, when the soldiers have left the village, Azar dances like the girl in a mocking way. Henry Dobbins picks up Azar and holds him over a well, threatening to drop him if he won't stop and "dance right."

"Speaking of Courage:" Follows Norman Bowker at home after he returns from the war to the Unites States on the Fourth of July. Bowker drives repeatedly around a lake in his hometown, reminiscing about the night Kiowa died. He remembers seeing Kiowa's boot and trying to pull but Kiowa was too stuck so Bowker fled. Bowker has convinced himself he would have won the Silver Star if he had pulled Kiowa out, and that Kiowa would still be alive. Bowker feels like he has no one to talk to, and imagines telling his father that he was a coward. He imagines

his father consoling him with the many medals he did win. Bowker wades into the lake and watches the fireworks.

"Notes:" A post-script for the story "Speaking of Courage." O'Brien tells the background of how "Speaking of Courage," came to be when Norman Bowker sent him a seventeen page letter, ultimately asking him to write a story about a man like him who feels he died after the war. O'Brien feels guilty and compelled to oblige, and writes a version of "Speaking of Courage" that he publishes, sends to Bowker, but is not truly proud of. Bowker doesn't react well to the story because it was doctored to fit into O'Brien's novel and lacks the truth of what happened to Kiowa in Vietnam. O'Brien hopes the story will speak to his failure to protect Kiowa and to Bowker's courage.

"In the Field:" Chronicles the search to find Kiowa buried under the muck after enemy mortar rounds killed him. The story is split between Lieutenant Jimmy Cross' guilt fueling his conviction to write Kiowa's father a letter, the young soldier (O'Brien) who feels he killed Kiowa by turning on his flashlight in the dark to show him a picture of his girlfriend, and the men of the platoon who eventually pull Kiowa out.

"Good Form:" O'Brien toys with the function of Truth in storytelling, and how there are different kinds of truth in a story, particularly a war story. There is story-truth and happening-truth. He claims he wouldn't be lying if he said he killed **the young man** outside of My Khe but he also wouldn't be lying if he claimed he did not kill him.

"Field Trip:" O'Brien takes his ten-year-old daughter Kathleen with him to Vietnam. With a translator, they visit the field where Kiowa died. The field looks different than O'Brien remembers. He wades out into the water and buries the pair of Kiowa's moccasins where he believes Kiowa's rucksack was found. His daughter Kathleen asks about **the old farmer** staring at O'Brien and thinks he looks angry, but O'Brien says that's all over.

"The Ghost Soldiers:" O'Brien recalls the two bullets he caught in Vietnam. Rat Kiley immediately treated the first bullet, while the second nearly killed him because the new medic, Bobby Jorgenson, was in shock while the platoon was under fire. O'Brien wants revenge on Jorgenson, but only Azar will help him try to scare the medic. They try to terrify Jorgensen one night by pretending to be the enemy, but Jorgenson doesn't scare and O'Brien is forced to let go of his grudge when they agree they're even.

"Night Life:" A second-hand account of how Rat Kiley shot his own foot to get out of the line of duty. The platoon had heard rumors of an imminent enemy attack, and only operated by walking at night. Everyone was affected, but Rat Kiley started to lose it. After he shot his foot, Lieutenant Jimmy Cross told the chopper that carried him away it had been an accident.

"The Lives of the Dead:" O'Brien compares his Vietnam wartime experiences with the death of his childhood sweetheart, Linda, who died of a brain tumor when she was nine. Hers was the first dead body O'Brien ever saw. He says that stories keep their subjects alive, and in this way Linda can live forever.

## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Elroy Berdahl** – The man that Tim O'Brien considers to be his "life hero." Berdahl takes O'Brien in after O'Brien attempts to dodge the draft and head for Canada. O'Brien stays with Berdahl for a week at The Tip Top Lodge, where Berdahl offers him money and the opportunity to flee while they're out on a boat ride.

**Lieutenant Jimmy Cross** – The Lieutenant of the Alpha Company. He never wanted to go to war, nor did he want to have to lead men. Instead he's preoccupied with how much he's in love with a girl named Martha from home. This infatuation lasts long after the war, though they never get together.

**Martha** – The love interest of Lieutenant Jimmy Cross. They went on a single date in college. She sent him letters in the war and a pebble for good luck. After Vietnam, they see each other again at a college reunion. She never marries and spends her time during and after the war abroad, working as a nurse.

**Norman Bowker** – Awarded seven medals in the war. He returns from Vietnam tortured with guilt about the death of Kiowa and feels responsible. He hides this guilt under the regret that he didn't win the Silver Star. He asks O'Brien to write a story about how great of a soldier he was. He hangs himself in his hometown YMCA after the war.

**Dave Jensen** – A soldier who becomes so plagued with guilt and fear of retribution after he breaks Lee Strunk's nose during an argument, that Jensen breaks his own nose. Strunk and Jensen become friends and make a pact to kill off the other if they become wheelchair bound. When Strunk dies after losing a leg, Jensen is relieved to not have to follow through.

**Lee Strunk** – Accuses Dave Jensen of being crazy for breaking his own nose to make them "square" after Jensen shattered Strunk's nose. Becomes close with Jensen soon after and signs a pact that promises one will kill the other if either of them is wounded enough in battle that they are wheelchair bound. Strunk dies in a medic chopper after most of his right leg is blown off. Before leaving, he begs Jensen not to kill him.

### MINOR CHARACTERS

**Tim O'Brien** – The author and frequent protagonist of *The Things They Carried*. The collection serves as an account of his and his squad mates experiences as a soldier before, during, and after the Vietnam War.

**Kiowa** –Tim O'Brien's best friend in the war. Kiowa is Native

American, and known for carrying around a copy of the New Testament with him in his rucksack. He dies under heavy mortar fire and is buried under what the platoon calls a "shit field."

**Mitchell Sanders** – Known for telling stories throughout the war. He believes there's a correct way to tell war stories, but often insists there is no meaning to them whatsoever.

**Bob "Rat" Kiley** – The medic of Alpha Company. He is well respected for his ability to treat wounded men incredibly well under pressure. He eventually loses his composure in the war, and intentionally shoots off his own toe so that he must be forced out of combat.

**Henry Dobbins** – A simple man. He admits to not being that smart, and relies on a pair of stockings that belonged to his girlfriend to keep him safe in combat. He ritualistically wraps them around his neck before dangerous missions, and manages to leave the war without a scratch.

**Ted Lavender** – The first to die in Alpha Company. He took lots of tranquilizers to quell his constant terror over being at war, and carried extra ammunition. He was shot in the head while returning from a pee break.

**Azar** – An often ruthless and unlikeable member of the Alpha Company who enjoys wreaking havoc. He blows up Ted Lavender's puppy. Azar helps pull Kiowa's body out of the muck.

**Kathleen** – Tim O'Brien's daughter. She constantly questions why her father insists on writing so many war stories. She joins him on a trip to Vietnam where they revisit the fields where Kiowa died.

**Curt Lemon** – Known for hyper-masculine behavior and dangerous antics. He enjoys combat but is terrified of dentists. When the Army dentist touches him, he faints. Later he demands the dentist pull out a healthy tooth. Lemon dies after stepping on a rigged mortar round.

**Mark Fossie** – A medic who was once stationed with Rat Kiley. He sneaks his girlfriend, Mary Anne Bell, into his post in Vietnam.

**Mary Anne Bell** – The former girlfriend of Mark Fossie. She arrives in Vietnam wide-eyed and innocent, but transforms from a spectator to a fighter. Fossie is devastated by her abandonment when she chooses the war over him.

**Eddie Diamond** – Fossie's superior at the post. The first to jokingly suggest that the area is so peaceful a girl could be snuck in. Fossie takes the joke seriously and sneaks in his then-girlfriend Mary Anne Bell.

**The Greenies (6 Green Berets)** – The men that Mary Anne Bell disappear with to be a part of the combat.

**Sally Kramer/Gustafson** – Norman Bowker's former girlfriend, who is married when he returns from the war.

**Max Arnold** – Norman Bowker's childhood friend.

**Billie** – O'Brien's girlfriend in the picture that he was showing Kiowa right before Kiowa died.

**Bobby Jorgenson** – The replacement medic for Rat Kiley. He is so scared of combat that he screws up the treatment when O'Brien is shot for the second time, and O'Brien nearly dies for it.

**Morty Phillips** – The one who everyone says used up his luck after he disappeared for a day to go swimming in a river where the territory was hostile. He survives the swim, but because he drank some of the polluted river water he gets incredibly sick and dies.

**Linda** –O'Brien's sweetheart as a child. She dies of a brain tumor when she's nine years old.

**Nick Veenhof** – A boy who mocks Linda's cap in the classroom and rips it off—revealing the stitches in her head. From this, O'Brien learns that Linda has a brain tumor.

**LZ Gator** – An American soldier who got into a fight with two of his comrades, Lee Strunk and Dave Jensen, over a jackknife in the story "Enemies."

## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

### MORTALITY AND DEATH

The threat, even expectation, of death hangs over all of the soldiers in *The Things They Carried*. Even before he reaches Vietnam, Tim O'Brien (both the author of the collection and the frequent first person narrator) meditates on the inevitability of his death after he is drafted in "On The Rainy River," and considers dodging the draft and fleeing to Canada. The collection is haunted by the deaths of O'Brien's comrades—Ted Lavender, Curt Lemon, and Kiowa. The thoughts of the soldiers and the narrative itself circle around and around these soldiers deaths, trying and failing over and over to process and understand what happened, and showing how the deaths impact the thoughts and actions of the soldiers who remain both during and after the war.

*The Things They Carried* depicts death during the Vietnam War as being completely arbitrary, with the difference between those who survive and those who die being nothing more than luck. Death can come at any time, from any direction, and no manner of precaution (in Ted Lavender's case, it was always carrying an extra magazine of ammo on his gun) and no amount of faith (Kiowa carried the New Testament in his backpack)

could keep a man alive. Death came as a random bullet for Lavender, a hidden trap for Lemon, and unexpected mortar fire for Kiowa. The soldiers, unable to either predict when death might come or protect themselves against it, come to anticipate dying at any moment, at every moment, to the point that it drives some of them mad, such as Rat Kiley. From brushes with death (O'Brien being shot twice, nearly dying the second time), the value of life—of still being alive after battle—becomes majestically amplified.

## SOCIAL OBLIGATION

In *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien often focuses on how the men in his stories, even if they volunteered to fight, joined the army because of the unspoken pressure to fulfill their obligations as citizens and soldiers. These social obligations range from that of wider society (government, city/town) and narrows to the nuclear (family, friends, personal reflection). After being drafted in "On the Rainy River," Tim O'Brien runs from his hometown and ends up spending six days with a reticent old stranger, Elroy Berdahl, who takes O'Brien fishing so close to the Canadian border that he could have jumped out of the boat and escaped into Canada.

O'Brien returns home, though, because he cannot bear to think of the town grumbling about his cowardice for not fulfilling his duty, nor can he handle the thought of his family believing him to be a coward. He admits that he goes to the war to avoid the embarrassment that would have resulted from thwarting this legal and social obligation. Similarly, Lieutenant Jimmy Cross in "In The Field" never wanted to be a commander, and only joined the reserves because his friends at college were doing it. Ultimately, O'Brien depicts how his characters did what was expected of them as men and as citizens, but how in reality they are all still so young, are still boys—just kids at war.

Perhaps the most extreme example of this theme of social obligation occurs in "Speaking of Courage," which tells the story of Norman Bowker after the war. Like the other soldiers, Bowker joined the war out of feelings of an obligation to society, and then, once in the war, he felt the pressure from popular culture (such as. the heroism on display in movies and TV) to impress his father and his town with medals and honors. And he succeeded, receiving seven medals, nearly every medal other than the highest, the Silver Star for Valor—though the constant emphasis is that he could easily have been awarded that too. When he returns home, though, there is little fanfare, and Bowker becomes haunted by the one medal (the Silver Star) that he failed to receive. In addition, he finds that in accepting the social obligation to fight in the war he has been so changed that he is incapable of meeting the social obligations of being a citizen: holding down a job, maintaining relationships, etc. The war mandated patriotic obligation, an obligation to make one's family proud, but by the time the soldiers returned home, many discovered they could no longer operate within the norms of the society they had been charged to protect.

## MORALITY

Within the stories in *The Things They Carried* the characters tell many stories to each other, and the question always asked of the storyteller is "What's the moral?" In "How to Tell a True War Story," Mitchell Sanders tells O'Brien about a company who has to lie dormant and watchful in the pitch-blackness over a village. They begin to have auditory hallucinations: champagne glasses clinking, music playing, a full chamber orchestra. They aren't supposed to call in an airstrike unless they are under attack but they can no longer bear the sounds and they call in the attack and watch the city burn. Yet even after there's just scorched earth, they all can still hear the music. Sanders keeps trying to tease out a moral, and O'Brien ultimately points out that the moral never amounts to much more than a perfunctory "Oh."

Ultimately, *The Things They Carried* suggests that, in war, the conventions of good and evil in civilized society fall by the wayside. After Rat Kiley loses his best friend, Curt Lemon, to a booby trap he tortures a baby water buffalo as everyone else looks on. No one tries to stop it. Mitchell Sanders says that in Vietnam there are new sins created that have never existed before. War re-defines morality, it changes the definition. Even the purpose of being there is lost on the soldiers when they are down in their foxholes. When O'Brien eventually returns with his daughter to Vietnam in "Field Trip" and she asks why there was a war, O'Brien says it's because "some people wanted one thing, other people wanted another thing," and all he wanted was to stay alive. *The Things They Carried* challenges the reader to think about whether or not truth exists, whether or not there is such a thing as right v. wrong, and finally whether the idea of morality is flexible based on the context (in this case, in the fields of Vietnam).

## STORYTELLING AND MEMORY

Storytelling in *The Things They Carried* operates on multiple levels: at the level of the book itself, the stories within stories, and the reflections on the value of these stories both in the context of the war and then post-war. "The Lives of the Dead" speaks to O'Brien's belief that stories have the power to give an entire life to those who have passed on. He refers to his childhood love Linda who passed away from a brain tumor when they were nine, and how he spent his nights inventing stories and false futures to ease his grief. O'Brien does the same thing with the man that he killed with a grenade in "The Man I Killed," which is not a story about the act of killing as much as it is inventing a past and future for the unnamed, skinny man who perished at O'Brien's hands.

The collection further explores the very role and purpose of

"war stories," and how they can be told "correctly" and how to tell whether or not one is "true." There is a rhythm to war stories; there is a level of detail to be expected. O'Brien establishes rules for telling war stories, which presents a poignant irony given the fact that war exists in a space that largely lacks rules. The role of these war stories during the war was to keep the soldiers' minds off of their obligations, off of death, and after the war to give words to experiences that are unspeakable—that do not make sense to people that were not there. A war story provides an account that speaks to the bond of the men who fought and died together, while recognizing that the greatest truth of a war story is the visceral feeling it fosters in the listener/reader. O'Brien's collection argues that "stories," due to their complexity, their amorality, and their ability to give a voice to the voiceless, are the most authentic medium to accurately communicate wartime experiences—factual or not.

### SHAME AND GUILT

Shame and guilt are constant and often inextricable themes in *The Things They Carried*. Soldiers felt obligated to go to war for fear of embarrassing themselves, their families, and their towns if they fled. This embarrassment is bolstered by the guilt of not being "masculine" enough—not being brave, heroic, and patriotic enough. O'Brien reflects on how he thought he had a secret reserve of bravery and heroism stored away, waiting for the moment when he would be called to war—if that day ever came—in the story "On The Rainy River," and how in reality no such reserve existed.

The feelings of shame and guilt follow the soldiers into the war as well, and make them do irrational and crazy things. In "The Dentist," Curt Lemon faints when an army dentist treats him, much to his own shame. To prove to the men in his Company, as well as to himself, that he's man enough and brave enough to see the dentist (and, by extension, fight in the war) he goes to the dentist's tent in the middle of the night and demands that he pull out some of Lemon's perfectly healthy teeth. Survivor's guilt haunts many of O'Brien's friends, as well as O'Brien himself. Norman Bowker can't shake the shame of not winning The Silver Star of Valor because he thinks that he would have won it if he had not failed to save Kiowa's in "Speaking of Courage." Shame and guilt follow Bowker with such intensity that he eventually hangs himself.

In "In the Field," it's revealed that O'Brien is shaken by a similar shame and guilt over Kiowa, believing that he's the one that was actually responsible for Kiowa's death. Meanwhile, the other soldiers in the company blame Lieutenant Jimmy Cross in "In the Field" for stationing them in such a vulnerable position. Even Cross wavers between blaming himself (he first wants to write a letter to Kiowa's father commending how great of a soldier his son was) and blaming the cruelty of war (resolving not to write the letter). The war created impossible situations where death was inevitable, but that didn't stop those who survived from blaming themselves for the deaths of their friends—maybe if they'd just been a little braver, a little faster, a little smarter, they could have done something to save their comrade, and so they can't ever escape the guilt.

The solders even feel guilt about the deaths of the enemy. In "The Man I Killed" O'Brien throws a grenade into the path of an anonymous young man, killing him, and then tries to "un-kill" him by creating a history and future for the man—O'Brien, after seeing his own friends die, can't help but understand that the man he killed is just that, a man, just like O'Brien himself. Every story in *The Things They Carried* is riddled with feelings of shame and guilt. It is a feeling that no soldier in the collection, and as O'Brien insinuates, no soldier in Vietnam, was able to escape.

## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

### THE MAN O'BRIEN KILLED

**The young man** that Tim O'Brien killed on a trail outside of My Khe is a recurring symbol throughout *The Things They Carried*, as O'Brien struggles to deal with being responsible for the death of another human being. The young man becomes a symbol of the meaninglessness of the categories of enemy or ally after death has taken you, as well as a symbol of O'Brien as a dead soldier. O'Brien consistently draws parallels between the young, dead man and himself—though the parallels are all conjecture. O'Brien speculates that the man was a scholar who disagreed with the war, but only fought to make his family and town proud—which is a fairly good description of O'Brien.

### THE OLD FARMER

**The old farmer** is featured in the story "Field Trip," and symbolizes the mostly-buried hatchet between the Vietnamese people and the Americans. Tim O'Brien assures his daughter, Kathleen, that the man is not angry at him—that all of "that is finished." But the old farmer and O'Brien share a long stare at one another, where O'Brien half-expects the old farmer will come over and start talking about the war. When he goes back to work, directly trying to improve the land, this symbolizes a desire and a need to move on from the memory of the war and the devastation it had on the old farmer's country.

## THE DANCING GIRL

**The dancing girl** is featured only in the story "Style," but serves as a poignant symbol for the chaos and meaninglessness of war. Azar is put-off by the fact that the girl keeps dancing, even though her family is dead and her village is burned to the ground—he can't find any meaning in it. This closely parallels Tim O'Brien's constant insistence that there is no moral to a war story: no right or wrong, no core point. The dancing girl is symbolic of this amorality and senselessness that pervades the soldier's feelings and actions throughout their time in Vietnam, as well as those who found difficulty finding any purpose in life after the war ended (e.g. Norman Bowker).

## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Houghton Mifflin edition of *The Things They Carried* published in 1990.

### The Things They Carried Quotes

They marched for the sake of the march. They plodded along slowly, dumbly, leaning forward against the heat, unthinking, all blood and bone, simple grunts, soldiering with their legs, toiling up the hills and down into the paddies and across the river and up again and down, just humping, one step and then the next and then another, but no volition, no will, because it was automatic, it was anatomy, and the war was entirely a matter of posture and carriage, the hump was everything, a kind of inertia, a kind of emptiness, a dullness of desire and intellect and conscience and hope and human sensibility. Their principles were in their feet.

**Related Characters:** Tim O'Brien (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 14

**Explanation and Analysis**

O'Brien describes the monotony of war. Though the common thread of the story is Lieutenant Jimmy Cross's picture of Martha, O'Brien also touches on the death of Ted Lavender and weaves it through these bulky descriptions of the men marching, carrying different items. O'Brien uses this language of hard labor and repetition to simulate the boredom of walking, the tediousness of doing the same thing for hours upon hours while miserable and tired. The men did not march out of any force of will: they were not marching out of patriotism or social obligation or fear, they simply marched. Their bodies became thoughtless and mechanic in action. In becoming like machines, the men could divorce themselves from the reality of war. Machines do not have to think or feel guilt or be afraid of the never-ending threat of death. Instead of marching under the weight of all their pain, they simply become one with the action. Morality is defined by the "principles...in their feet." There is no right or wrong in the abstract, just the stop and go of their steps. As they march, the bigger questions of life are of no consequence, and by extension, the crippling answers and their effects aren't a factor either. This way of viewing marching is miserable but also cathartic for O'Brien and the men. It allows them to zone out, to turn their minds off the war entirely.

For the most part they carried themselves with poise, a kind of dignity. Now and then, however, there were times of panic, when they squealed or wanted to squeal but couldn't, when they twitched and made moaning sounds and covered their heads and said Dear Jesus and flopped around on the earth and fired their weapons blindly and cringed and sobbed and begged for the noise to stop and went wild and made stupid promises to themselves and to God and to their mothers and fathers, hoping not to die. In different ways, it happened to all of them.

**Related Characters:** Tim O'Brien (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 18

**Explanation and Analysis**

No one is immune from reacting in wartime, O'Brien suggests here. The men all displayed these exceptional reactions in their behavior. Reduced to a pure survival instinct, they did things they would otherwise be ashamed of: begging for their lives, discharging weapons without cause, making promises to their parents and God. In war, where mortality is always on the line, the senses are constantly heightened and the men are united by their shared fear. They accept that if one becomes hysterical with fear then they all have or will become hysterical too. The shame one would feel in civilized society for acting this way is not felt in the same magnitude in wartime, given their bond and shared experience. The social rules do not apply in war, and particularly in a war like Vietnam (or so O'Brien implies). No one is safe from the fear of dying.

Lavender was dead. You couldn't burn the blame.

**Related Characters:** Tim O'Brien (speaker), Ted Lavender

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 22

**Explanation and Analysis**

Lieutenant Jimmy Cross burns all of his letters from his sweetheart, Martha, back in the United States. He is riddled with guilt over Ted Lavender's death. He believes that had he not been so distracted by constantly thinking about Martha, then he would have been a better leader and been able to prevent Lavender from being shot and killed. He realizes that burning the letters is a sentimental gesture, and will not change the fact that Lavender is gone. The blame he feels is monstrous and enormous, but there is no way to burn it, to make it disappear.

It's suggested that Cross also knows that the life he remembers with Martha is gone. She does not love him anymore - they are in different worlds. He is resolved to become a better Lieutenant, which he believes to mean accepting this new reality where he is alone and his only responsibility is leading his men and keeping them safe. So, for now, he does the only thing he has control over and burns the symbol of Martha, which was keeping him tethered to the old world outside of Vietnam. It will not make his guilt go away, but it's something he can do to fight it.

This was not Mount Sebastian, it was another world, where there were no pretty poems or midterm exams, a place where men died because of carelessness and gross stupidity. Kiowa was right. Boom-down, and you were dead. Never partly dead.

**Related Characters:** Tim O'Brien (speaker), Kiowa, Lieutenant Jimmy Cross

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 22-23

**Explanation and Analysis**

The rules of life have changed for Lieutenant Jimmy Cross. In his life before the war, big events centered around things like pretty poems and midterm exams. His social obligations were tied to school, family, or finding love. In war, however, the big event is life itself and the constant threat of it being taken away in an instant. In war, the smallest action can get you killed. As O'Brien emphasizes several times, this is a total result: no one gets sort of killed, you are either alive or you aren't. These were not the stakes for Cross back in America where, at worst, he ran the risk of being heartbroken by Martha—there a thoughtless movement could not have absolutely final consequences. In Vietnam, though, every little thing he does not only determines whether he stays alive, but whether his men stay alive. This burden dwarfs the memory (and even the morality) of the old world Cross used to inhabit in Mount Sebastian. His reality is different now, and there is no turning back.

## Love Quotes

For a few moments he considered asking her to his room, but instead he laughed and told her how back in college he'd almost done something very brave. It was after seeing Bonnie and Clyde, he said, and on this same spot he'd almost picked her up and carried her to his room and tied her to the bed and put his hand on her knee and just held it there all night long. It came close, he told her—he'd almost done it. Martha shut her eyes. She crossed her arms at her chest, as if suddenly cold, rocking slightly, then after a time she looked at him and said she was glad he hadn't tried it. She didn't understand how men could do those things. What things? he asked, and Martha said, The things men do. Then he nodded. It began to form. Oh, he said, those things.

**Related Characters:** Tim O'Brien (speaker), Lieutenant Jimmy Cross, Martha

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 27

**Explanation and Analysis**

Lieutenant Cross is visiting with Tim O'Brien many years after the war has ended and they have both returned home. He is telling O'Brien about how since he returned from the war, he saw his old flame Martha again at their class reunion. He maintains that he still loves her, and he discloses that when they saw each other again, he confessed to her that the night he walked her to the same place they were standing near her dorm at the reunion he wanted to take her upstairs, tie her to the bed, "and put his hand on her knee and just [hold] it there all night long." This harkens back to the title story in *The Things They Carried* where Lieutenant Cross can't stop thinking about touching Martha's knee while they both watch "Bonnie and Clyde" (page 4).

When Cross tells Martha about wanting to touch her knee all those years ago, she does not react well. She cowers a little, crosses her arms, and appears cold. She tells him that she is glad he did not do that, and can't "understand how men could do those things." She leaves this in the abstract, even when Cross asks her to explain. "The things men do." Yet, he does not push her on the question because the answer makes sense in a way: "[the answer] began to form." Cross learned in the war, as O'Brien did, that the whole truth, the whole answer, is never available. He has come to accept the discomfort of uncertainty for what is true, and on top of that he has witnessed the horrors of war, the horrors of what men to do each other. Martha knows this too after she spent years as a combat nurse on mission trips throughout the world. She is not blind to the world he saw in Vietnam. In their world, men go off to fight one another, men start these wars. What men do, then, is inexplicable to her, and it is inexplicable to Cross as well. They are both caught in this double bind without answers to the big "why" of war and killing and lost love, but she can say she is glad he did not tie her up and touch her knee all night. That is something she can understand and react to, however strange it may be.

## Spin Quotes

The bad stuff never stops happening: it lives in its own dimension, replaying itself over and over.

**Related Characters:** Tim O'Brien (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 31

**Explanation and Analysis**

The memories of the war never stop replaying for O'Brien. It is like a tape on loop. O'Brien cannot look back on death as an event—instead he lives with the constant recall of the moments before his friends' deaths and then the deaths themselves. The feedback loop is endless and exists in a world of its own, a different "dimension." The title, "Spin," encourages this sensation of recurrence in the story. O'Brien is no longer fighting the war in Vietnam, but he can never escape the memories. Insofar as that is the case, he can never really see the end of war, and thus never see the end of guilt and trauma.

But the thing about remembering is that you don't forget. You take your material where you find it, which is in your life, at the intersection of past and present. The memory-traffic feeds into a rotary up on your head, where it goes in circles for a while, then pretty soon imagination flows in and the traffic merges and shoots off down a thousand different streets. As a writer, all you can do is pick a street and go for the ride, putting things down as they come at you. That's the real obsession. All those stories.

**Related Characters:** Tim O'Brien (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 33

**Explanation and Analysis**

O'Brien often feels guilty for still writing war stories. He is forty-three years old and his daughter, Kathleen, asks him why he won't write stories about getting her a pony. At forty-three, O'Brien is years out of fighting the war and he can't stop writing about it. Writing about it means that he must remember Vietnam, and in remembering something you necessarily must not forget it (as he states rather obviously but also ironically here). For O'Brien, writing anything else is impossible, because writing comes from life experience. Even fantasy stories are informed by the things he has done in reality, and the most affecting reality O'Brien experienced is in wartime. He has become obsessed with writing to make sense of these experiences. His fascination is not with the retelling of facts or events—memories cycle in his head over and over anyway—the "magical" part is when imagination enters that cycle and stories spring forth from the endless spin of recollections. In those stories that are born from experience, O'Brien can find meaning in the amorality of war and revisit the friends and innocence he lost.

That's what stories are for. Stories are for joining the past to the future. Stories are for those late hours in the night when you can't remember how you got from where you were to where you are. Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story.

**Related Characters:** Tim O'Brien (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 35-36

**Explanation and Analysis**

Stories defy life and death—something very important to O'Brien, particularly in the face of the deaths he has witnessed in war. As he claims here, stories exist as entities unto themselves that can be passed from person to person. Without a history, without any memories or a past, a story can still make sense. A story can envelop you when you are lost, with no memory of how you arrived at the present.

O'Brien finds solace in the escapism of storytelling. He can define his own rules for morality and life and death. In stories, he can absolve himself of guilt, and can converse with friends who are no longer alive. He can relive the brotherhood he felt while he was fighting in the war. There is a safety in the world of stories that is constant and unchanging. It's the creation of something different and separate, where he can hide from the demons of his past.

## On the Rainy River Quotes

❝ I felt myself blush. I couldn't tolerate it. I couldn't endure the mockery, or the disgrace, or the patriotic ridicule. Even in my imagination, the shore just twenty yards away, I couldn't make myself be brave. It had nothing to do with morality. Embarrassment, that's all it was. And right then I submitted. I would go to the war—I would kill and maybe die—because I was embarrassed not to.

**Related Characters:** Tim O'Brien (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 57

**Explanation and Analysis**

O'Brien is on a boat with Elroy Berdahl, who is housing him near the Canadian border. O'Brien has fled from his town and his job in a panic, to prevent being sent to Vietnam after he's drafted. Elroy seems to know why O'Brien is so afraid, and does not ask him his reasons for being at the empty Tip Top lounge. He takes O'Brien out on his boat, and when they are no more than twenty yards from the Canadian shore, more than close enough to swim across and escape, O'Brien is struck with overwhelming shame. The embarrassment he experiences simply thinking about not going to the war is enough to make him go to Vietnam and potentially die. His reasons for fighting are not to defend America or its ideals, but instead to not be embarrassed. This is an important admission, and emphasizes O'Brien's common claims that war is not only about high ideals or even about constant violence, but just as often it's about petty emotions, drudgery, and shame. It is not very heroic, but it is very human for him to risk his life just to avoid embarrassment.

❝ The day was cloudy. I passed through towns with familiar names, through the pine forests and down to the prairie, and then to Vietnam, where I was a soldier, and then home again. I survived, but it's not a happy ending. I was a coward. I went to the war.

**Related Characters:** Tim O'Brien (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 57

**Explanation and Analysis**

O'Brien here fast-forwards through his drive back home from the Canadian border, through the settings of the war itself, and back to America, where he returned after surviving combat. This is not a happy ending, he insists. He is a soldier who fought and he is also a coward. He cannot give himself credit for being a brave soldier, because his reasons for fighting were not noble. He went to the frontline only because he feared embarrassment more than death. In his mind, he cannot be championed as a hero or a patriot because his intent was self-preservation. Indeed, as O'Brien sees it, there might have been something more "heroic" about just going through with his plan for fleeing America and the war altogether.

## How to Tell a True War Story Quotes

❝ A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. There is no rectitude whatsoever. There is no virtue. As a first rule of thumb, therefore, you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil.

**Related Characters:** Tim O'Brien (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 65

**Explanation and Analysis**

According to O'Brien, war stories do not abide by conventional rules of storytelling, in the sense that the moral and factual truth is not fixed. O'Brien provides a calculus for determining whether a war story is true, and says that if it makes you feel as though there is moral justice, then you have been duped. If it makes you feel like you have learned a lesson about how people should act, you have been duped. True war stories are bound by their absolute "allegiance to obscenity and evil," because they are intended to work out the darkest parts of man's behavior and thinking. War is one of the only occasions where humans are reduced to their basest actions in defense of their lives, which means civilized moral thinking is thrown out the window. Anything to stay alive goes, and that total immorality makes life unlivable and nonsensical to a society that is not at war. The stories about war, then, cannot be in service of proving some fundamental human good or larger lesson about how to live, because this would not be reflective of war itself, where there is no inherent truth or good to be found.

> In a true war story, if there's a moral at all, it's like the threat that makes the cloth. You can't tease it out. You can't extract the meaning without unraveling the deeper meaning. And in the end, really, there's nothing much to say about a true war story, except maybe "Oh."

**Related Characters:** Tim O'Brien (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 74

**Explanation and Analysis**

O'Brien claims that if, for some reason, you take away a moral from a war story, then it becomes impossible to divorce a lesson away from the whole story. He likens this to the impossibility of teasing out a thread once it has become part of the cloth. The cloth doesn't exist without that thread as it did without it: you can have no whole without the sum of its parts, and the whole is the story. While a smaller moral takeaway from a story may make sense to the reader, deeming an action in a war story moral or immoral requires that specific context, that particular story, in order to make sense. The action in and of itself does not make sense as a good, bad, or moral action.

This does diverge from O'Brien's original claim in the story, though, which is that absolutely no moral can be claimed from war stories. In revising that rule within the same story, O'Brien is adhering to the fact that war stories have no rules. It does not matter that he contradicts himself: this is a war story.

> It comes down to gut instinct. A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe.

**Related Characters:** Tim O'Brien (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 73-74

**Explanation and Analysis**

O'Brien presents a claim which seems to be internally inconsistent: war stories do not generalize. That statement is, itself, a generalization, but O'Brien also contends that war stories do not have rules. War is inherently chaotic and its stories reflect that. To say that "war is hell" does not resonate for O'Brien, because it does not speak to something visceral and felt in the body. It is too abstract from the base, ignoring the survival instincts that govern action in war. For a war story to be true, it must pledge allegiance to the grit and physicality of combat, of brotherhood, of death. Abstract language does not punch you in the gut, it does not bring you into the harsh reality of war. It allows readers to remain comfortable and look at war through a lens of morality. O'Brien argues, then, that war stories which fail to elicit a response in the reader at the level of their stomach are not true.

> You're never more alive than when you're almost dead.

**Related Characters:** Tim O'Brien (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 78

**Explanation and Analysis**

O'Brien contends that war is fundamentally contradictory, that things are true and false at the same time. One never feels closer to life and death than when they are at war. Death, though, is ultimately an absolute boundary. No one is partially dead. Death is total. At war, it is as though one's close proximity to the constant threat of death makes one feel closer to life. Life is experienced fully: every sense is felt, recorded, noticed. People commit terrible crimes and

do horrific things, but they still appreciate nature and want goodness in people in a way that is unique to the theater of war. Being in constant fear for one's life ironically makes those at war more appreciative and mindful of living.

## The Man I Killed Quotes

In the presence of his father and uncles, he pretended to look forward to doing his patriotic duty, which was also a privilege, but at night he prayed with his mother that the war might end soon. Beyond anything else, he was afraid of disgracing himself, and therefore his family and village. But all he could do, he thought, was wait and pray and try not to grow up too fast.

**Related Characters:** Tim O'Brien (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 120

### Explanation and Analysis

O'Brien weaves in episodic reflections about the the Vietnamese youth he killed in the war, as Kiowa tries to comfort him in the battlefield. In reflecting on the man, O'Brien finds himself giving the man a story. He imagines the family the man has left behind, and the things that the man used to enjoy as a boy. He imagines the sense of patriotic duty that the man feels socially obligated to fight for even though he is afraid. The man would not want to embarrass himself by failing to meet this obligation, and even if he no longer cared about embarrassing himself then he has to worry about embarrassing his family and his village.

O'Brien projects his own fears and insecurities about fighting in the war onto the dead man through this invented narrative. There is no need for O'Brien to come out and say this fictional story about the man, because of the way these reflections are situated between the telling of Kiowa's attempts to comfort O'Brien. This mirrors how O'Brien could not believe Kiowa in the moment; he could not even hear him or focus on the present. He was overcome by guilt for killing the man, and kept getting lost in inventing a life for the man - a guilt that pulls him deeper and deeper into new, false details about the man's family, the man's village, the man's education.

These reflections echo O'Brien's anxiety throughout the book towards the limits of social obligation and the role of blame in war. O'Brien does not want to fight in this war, but if he flees or refuses, he fears the embarrassment this would bring upon himself, his family, and his town. Similar to the man he killed, whom he says "pretended" to care about his patriotic duty, O'Brien feels throughout the war that he is masquerading as a soldier. He is simply trying to survive, but it is fear of humiliation that brought him to combat, not patriotism. He believes he probably shared this anxiety with the young man he killed.

## Ambush Quotes

I did not hate the young man; I did not see him as the enemy; I did not ponder issues of morality or politics or military duty. I crouched and kept my head low. I tried to swallow whatever was rising from my stomach, which tasted like lemonade, something fruity and sour. I was terrified. There were not thoughts about killing. The grenade was to make him go away—just evaporate—and I leaned back and felt my head go empty and then felt it fill up again. I had already thrown the grenade before telling myself to throw it.

**Related Characters:** Tim O'Brien (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 126

### Explanation and Analysis

O'Brien prefaces the story by saying that he lied to his daughter, Kathleen, about not killing a man in Vietnam. He takes this story as an occasion to tell the "adult" version of what really happened. In describing the act of killing, he insists upon how fast it all happened. There was no sustained calculus of political or social obligation that drove him to throw the grenade, and he felt no ill will towards his target - the response was overwhelmingly automatic. The fact that another man's death is the result of a reaction clearly troubles O'Brien, given how absolutely final death is as a result. While he can offer no moral or even superficial justification for throwing the grenade, besides a need to make the man disappear, he nonetheless goes through the list of all of the things he did not think about the man. Thus we see both how O'Brien could blame himself for not thinking more about the man or the reasons for the war in the moment, as well as empathize with how fast these life and death decisions take place. This passage communicates the fleetingness of mortality - how life can become death in an instant without any time to process or understand. War

is defined by these indigestible instants that defy explanation or justification - which is why O'Brien is so haunted by their memory. He can't help but feel things in the present and map them onto his recollections of the past.

## Speaking of Courage Quotes

❝ Courage was not always a matter of yes or no. Sometimes it came in degrees, like the cold; sometimes you were very brave up to a point and then beyond that point you were not so brave. In certain situations you could do incredible things, you could advance toward enemy fire, but in other situations, which were not nearly so bad, you had trouble keeping your eyes open. Sometimes, like that night in the shit field, the difference between courage and cowardice was something small and stupid.

**Related Characters:** Tim O'Brien (speaker), Norman Bowker

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 141

### Explanation and Analysis

O'Brien tells this story from the perspective of his platoon member Norman Bowker after he has returned to the small town in which he grew up after the war. Norman is still consumed with guilt for not being able to save Kiowa after he was blown up in the "shit fields." In order to not blame himself directly, he keeps the imaginative focus on how he failed to get the Silver Star, but he was close. He imagines riding in the car around town with his father, telling him the story of how close he had been. How even in his imagination his father cannot make him feel guiltless for Kiowa's death.

In describing the shit fields during combat, Norman highlights the fragility of mortality and the unpredictable strength of one's moral compass. The horrors and stresses of war put so much pressure on people that in the moment it's impossible to know how one will react. Courage takes on different forms, then, since no man was one way at all times. There was no guarantee one would be brave in response to danger. On the night Kiowa died, courage and cowardice are measured inminutia—the variables are so small that one's inner turmoil almost seems banal compared to something as final as death. Norman blames his inability to save Kiowa on the fact that the shit fields smelled so terrible that he could not continue to hold onto Kiowa's boot - instead letting him sink below the muck. He insists he could have been able to save him but for the overpowering stench. That small fact, and Norman's reaction to it, plague him at all times. He cannot accept the honors of his other medals or value his survival. Those gestures from the army are meaningless to him because Kiowa is dead. Winning the Silver Star would mean he would have lived, so the medal becomes a symbol of impossible achievement.

## Notes Quotes

❝ By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths. You make up others. You start sometimes with an incident that truly happened, like the night in the shit field, and you carry it forward by inventing incidents that did not in fact occur but that nonetheless help to clarify and explain.

**Related Characters:** Tim O'Brien (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 152

### Explanation and Analysis

After O'Brien receives a letter from Norman Bowker years after the two fought together in Vietnam, he realizes the important role writing has played in his life and development following the war. Bowker is in terrible shape: he sleeps most of the day, plays basketball in the afternoons, and drinks at night as he drives his father's truck around his small town for hours on end. He asks O'Brien to write a story using his story, but changing his name. He says that he wishes he could write it, but he can't go back to that time; he doesn't have the words for it.

O'Brien sees that he's gotten off easily after the war; he even feels a bit of guilt for how quickly he has been able to re-enter society as a functioning individual. Writing has worked as a way to channel all of the memories out of him in a productive way instead of letting the tape loop endlessly in his mind without exit. He has given the stories a world separate from his own lived experience, and this allows him to make sense of those experiences. Whether the stories are entirely true or not is not necessarily of consequence, because their purpose is to search for meaning and reconcile the big questions of life concerning death and morality.

❝ Norman did not experience a failure of nerve that night. He did not freeze up or lose the Silver Star for valor. That part of the story is my own.

**Related Characters:** Tim O'Brien (speaker), Norman Bowker

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 153-154

**Explanation and Analysis**

O'Brien reflects on writing "Speaking of Courage" about Norman Bowker, and he now wants to go beyond that story to actually change it in hindsight. He feels it necessary to insist upon the fact that Norman did not suffer from a lack of bravery or skill when Kiowa died and he missed the opportunity to win the Silver Star. Instead, O'Brien shoulders the blame himself for Kiowa's death (even though in that actual time and place, he had nothing to do with it). In war, blame is an all-consuming feeling that touches everyone. Blame avoids being assigned a clear agent in war as well, meaning that everyone can come to believe that a certain, immaterial event was their fault. Both Norman and O'Brien can rightfully believe Kiowa's death happened because of them, and they could both be right and wrong at the same time. O'Brien wants to emphasize at the story's end that he is solely responsible for Kiowa's passing.

O'Brien even blames himself for Norman's death, now, because in the original iteration of the story he didn't include Kiowa, or the shit fields, or Vietnam. He hopes that this new version of the story lives up to what Norman would want to be told about him to the world, and believes that because he failed to do that the first time around perhaps Norman could not bear to live with the truth of his experiences alone. Stories help make it possible for O'Brien to live, and Norman was never able to properly tell his, which contributed to his suicide.

## Good Form Quotes

❝ "Daddy, tell the truth," Kathleen can say, "did you ever kill anybody?" And I can say honestly, "Of course not." Or I can say, honestly, "Yes."

**Related Characters:** Tim O'Brien, Kathleen (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 171

**Explanation and Analysis**

O'Brien uses this extremely short story as a direct address to the reader. This is one of the most obvious times that O'Brien writes with awareness of an audience in the book. He spends the pages expressing an ambivalence in regards to historical truth. It is true that he has and hasn't killed someone in the historical sense—but to O'Brien, it is story truth that is more important and affecting. In stories, his feelings can be articulated in the present. The guilt he has about feeling responsible for another man's death and his part in the war can change shape, take new forms. Sometimes the story is that no one died—he absolves himself of that historical event, and he allows himself to be guiltless of another young man's killing in the war. Other times he blames himself. The story shifts with the present feeling. The feelings, therefore, give birth to the story—they actualize as the story's truth, tapping into what was authentically true for O'Brien at the moment of their telling. Storytelling functions as an exercise in fantasy fueled by very true emotions. O'Brien doesn't feel wed to telling the whole truth in the empirical sense because, for him, emotional resonance is what keeps him tethered to the present. Without stories that pull him into the now, he could get completely lost in obsessing over the past.

## Night Life Quotes

❝ He said he'd done his best. He'd tried to be a decent medic. Win some and lose some, he said, but he'd tried hard. Briefly then, rambling a little, he talked about a few of the guys who were gone now, Curt Lemon and Kiowa and Ted Lavender, and how crazy it was that people who were so incredibly alive could get so incredibly dead.

**Related Characters:** Tim O'Brien (speaker), Curt Lemon, Kiowa, Ted Lavender, Bob "Rat" Kiley

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 211

**Explanation and Analysis**

The evening before Rat Kiley shoots himself in the foot so that he can be taken in a chopper to Japan, he admits to the platoon in near-tears that he is at the end of his rope. The war has driven him to the point of madness, and all of the other men have noticed his quick deterioration. For weeks the platoon has been forced to spend the days trying to sleep, while at night they walk in a straight line through the pitch blackness. All of the men dealt with the impenetrable dark in different ways, but the darkness made it so Rat couldn't escape his vivid recollections of what he had seen in Vietnam. As medic, there were many men he had treated

that he could not save, others who suffered from gruesome injuries. When he speaks to the platoon they don't know he will shoot himself the next day, but the moment shows Rat on the precipice of breaking. He tries to redeem himself while acknowledging that he has failed to save everyone. His shock regarding how grotesque and traumatizing wartime can be is manifested via the memory of his dead friends. One moment the men could be joking with one another and the next a member of their crew gets blown up, erased from the earth. The fundamental absurdity of this immediate, profound loss pushed Rat to a breaking point that forced him out of the war entirely.

## The Lives of the Dead Quotes

But this is true too: stories can save us. I'm forty-three years old, and a writer now, and even still, right here, I keep dreaming Linda alive. And Ted Lavender, too, and Kiowa, and Curt Lemon, and a slim young man I killed, and an old man sprawled beside a pigpen, and several others whose bodies I once lifted and dumped into a truck. They're all dead. But in a story, which is a kind of dreaming, the dead sometimes smile and sit up and return to the world.

**Related Characters:** Tim O'Brien (speaker), Linda, Kiowa, Curt Lemon, Ted Lavender

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 212

**Explanation and Analysis**

O'Brien opens the story this way following the title "The Lives of the Dead," as a thesis to argue the point of the story itself. The title itself is somewhat ironic, since death is not a lived experience, but O'Brien contends that stories save the dead. As a forty-three-year-old writer, he keeps Linda, Ted Lavender, Kiowa, Curt Lemon, the man he killed, and the scores of anonymous dead he saw in the war alive. He raises them from the dead with words. Stories' imaginative space allows people to come back to life and engage with the still-living. Through writing, O'Brien defies death itself.

The thing about a story is that you dream it as you tell it, hoping that others might then dream along with you, and in this way memory and imagination and language combine to make spirits in the head. There is the illusion of aliveness.

**Related Characters:** Tim O'Brien (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 218

**Explanation and Analysis**

Tim reflects on his memory of attending the movies with his friend Linda when they were children, and his memories of Ted Lavender popping tranquilizer pills every morning in Vietnam. These figures in O'Brien's life have all died, but in telling stories about them he insists that he cheats mortality. By relaying these stories to scores of readers, he builds up a vast audience in whose minds his friends remain alive. Through stories he builds an illusion of immortality that makes coping with their physical absence less painful.

O'Brien needs this "illusion of aliveness" to combat negative feelings he still has about the war, like the shame and guilt of his behavior on the battlefield, his inability to save his friends from death or injury, the survivor's guilt of being alive when he was no better a soldier than friends who died, and the sadness he continues to feel even now many decades later. These negative feelings can isolate O'Brien from others, which is why he wants to tell these stories to other people. In telling the stories, he gets to keep the dream of his dead friends alive in other people, and connects to those still living.

It was a kind of self-hypnosis. Partly willpower, partly faith, which is how stories arrive.

**Related Characters:** Tim O'Brien (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 230

**Explanation and Analysis**

A young Tim O'Brien recalls conversations he dreamed that he had with his deceased friend Linda. Before sleep, Tim would fabricate elaborate schemes in order to conjure Linda in his dreams. As a child, he believed these dreams to be miracles, though in retrospect he sees them as coping mechanisms for how to reconcile with mortality. His need to tell stories in order to remember Linda's life became his way of dealing with her passing. It's a method of self-care through will and make-believe, a way for his friend to live

beyond her physical death.

The young Tim's impulse to keep his friend alive through stories is one that is seen throughout *The Things They Carried* – in every story that O'Brien writes about the friends he made and lost during his deployment in Vietnam. He frequently emphasizes the importance of storytelling as a means of coping with loss and despair, by both acknowledging and partially evading it. For instance, the rich history he invents for the unidentified man he killed in battle serves as a way of both grieving for a life he is responsible for ending and giving that man a life again, at least in story. By giving the man a full life in writing, he can - partially - absolve himself of the man's total death, since he lives on in the book. At the same time, by writing about that man he acknowledges that the man was a human being who was just as complex as he himself, and takes responsibility for having killed him. The same goes for Linda.

❝ Well, right now I'm not dead. But when I am, it's like…I don't know, I guess it's like being inside a book that nobody's reading.
A book?
An old one. It's up on a library shelf, so you're safe and everything, but the book hasn't been checked out for a long, long time. All you can do is wait. Just hope somebody'll pick it up and start reading.

**Related Characters:** Linda, Tim O'Brien (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 231

**Explanation and Analysis**

A young Tim begins going to sleep earlier so that he may see his recently deceased friend Linda in his dreams. In those dreams, she appears as a dead girl, and likens her experience of death to being an old library book on a shelf. She can't leave the shelf. She can't move the book to another place. She cannot add pages to the book. Her life is contained in that dusty book where it remains unchanged. She can only live again when someone comes to pick the book up and read it. Mortality, the quote suggests, is relational - her life continues or ends depending on someone else picking up the metaphorical book of her life and flipping through its pages.Until Linda's memory is conjured, she sits on a proverbial dusty shelf where her memory is safe from destruction, but it remains dormant and stuck in the past.

The metaphor of death as a book on a shelf pertains more broadly to explain the relationship O'Brien sees between storytelling and mortality. Stories keep people alive in the only way O'Brien knows how, which is why he is so adamant about telling as many stories he can on the subject of his time in Vietnam and his friends (or even non-friends) that were killed in action. O'Brien's aim is to keep the dust off of the metaphorical books on the shelf. He refuses to let the memory of the dead become lost within the infinite, ever-expanding library of mortality. He wants as many people to read about his dead friends as possible, so he may better keep them alive in our memories.

## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

### THE THINGS THEY CARRIED

First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross of Alpha Company is carrying letters from a girl named Martha that he loves from back at college, though he doesn't believe she loves him. He reads them carefully, and decides her letters are "chatty." Each night, he checks on his men after reading her letters and then returns to his foxhole and thinks about her.

*The letters establish a link between the war in Vietnam and home. Cross' letters provide a framework for the rest of the story, told largely out of order. Cross can't accept Martha's love as he fears his death in the war, thinking she writes out of pity.*

The things they carry are determined by necessity and what the army mandates, but also by each soldiers' personal quirks. Henry Dobbins carries extra rations. Dave Jensen carries a toothbrush, dental floss, and soap. Ted Lavender ("who was scared") carries tranquilizers. Mitchell Sanders carries condoms. Norman Bowker carries a diary. Rat Kiley carries comic books. Kiowa carries a copy of the New Testament.

*The different items introduce the characters that will fill the entire collection. The items they carry are intended to illustrate aspects of their personality. The emphasis is on Ted Lavender, the scared one, who carried tranquilizers. Even though these men had things they had to carry, they elected to carry more.*

Ted Lavender is always very careful, but he's shot dead in April. He's wrapped in an army issued poncho and carried into a chopper

*Lavender's death is one of the central events of the story. Its blunt introduction shows the arbitrariness and suddenness of death.*

Lieutenant Jimmy Cross walks with pictures of Martha all over Vietnam. He has two pictures of her: one is of her standing against a brick wall, the other is of her playing volleyball in college. He remembers taking Martha on a date to the movies and touching her knee during the final scene until she looked at him and made him move his hand. He remembers kissing her goodnight at her dorm. Now in Vietnam he wishes that he had taken her upstairs and tied her up and touched her knee all night long.

*The mundane normality of the pictures is striking—Cross seems to cling to both Martha and the normality. Cross's fantasies about tying Martha up shows how the violence of war has warped his thinking, but also his essential innocence and inexperience—he just wants to touch her knee. .*

The things they carry depend on their rank and role. Lieutenant Jimmy Cross is a lieutenant and so he carries a different kind of gun and the responsibility to protect his men. Rat Kiley is a medic and carries medical supplies. Henry Dobbins carries extra ammo and an M-60 because he was big. Everyone else carries a standard M-16 with a standard 25 rounds of ammo, but Ted Lavender was carrying 34 rounds (and his fear) when he was shot outside Than Khe.

*The list of characters' ranks and positions adds to the reader's understanding of life as a soldier. Cross has the highest rank, and responsibility is his greatest weight. The soldiers carry not just things but social obligations. Lavender carried extra rounds for protection but still got shot dead, showing death in war does not reward the prepared.*

Kiowa describes seeing Ted Lavender die and says it was like watching a rock drop to the ground. The men carry him to a chopper and then smoke his dope. Lieutenant Jimmy Cross blames himself for Ted Lavender's death because he loves Martha so much that he's been preoccupied. They burn Than Khe. Kiowa keeps describing the way Lavender fell when he died.

*Kiowa's repetitive description of Lavender's death illustrates how death is harsh, swift and meaningless—like a rock falling. Notice also how the narrative circles around Lavender's death just as the soldiers do: the story structure mirrors and portrays the soldiers own thoughts. Cross continues to feel the weight of his responsibility even though he could have done nothing, and the soldiers respond to their trauma with inhumanity of their own: burning Than Khe.*

In the first week of April, just before Ted Lavender died, Lieutenant Jimmy Cross got a pebble as a good luck charm from Martha. She said in her letter that she found it on the Jersey shoreline and it made her feel like they were "separate-but-together." He walks through the war daydreaming of Martha, distracted.

*The shifting of the narrative through time disorients the reader, again mirroring the disorientating state of war. The pebble is Cross' connection to home and Martha. He has been thinking of her long before Lavender died.*

The things they carry vary by mission, depending on whether they're in the mountains, in heavily mined areas, setting ambushes, on night missions, or on special missions. In mid-April they had to search and then destroy the tunnels near Than Khe. They drew numbers to decide who would go below ground to search the tunnels. They imagined being trapped below, being blown up, being bitten by rats.

*Death can come just from drawing the chosen number—it's literally a lottery—there is no way to predict whether or not the tunnels would collapse or explode. Each mission carries the weight and fear of potentially dying in horrifying ways.*

On April 16, Lee Strunk draws the number to go down. The men all feel sympathy for Lee Strunk because it's a dangerous job. Ted Lavender takes a tranquilizer and goes off to pee. Lieutenant Jimmy Cross checks the tunnel when he gets concerned about Lee Strunk, but he can only think of Martha and the tunnel collapsing on the both of them.

*And the lottery is even bigger than the lottery of drawing numbers that the soldiers set up. Anyone can die, at any time, doing anything, no matter how mundane. Strunk is in the more precarious situation, while Lavender is just off peeing.*

Lee Strunk eventually emerges, grinning and filthy, and everyone claps. Lee Strunk makes a ghost sound, trying to spook everyone and make them laugh. Suddenly, Ted Lavender is shot in the head as he returns from peeing. Rat Kiley keeps saying "The guy's dead."

*Lavender's death shows how arbitrary death is in war. Strunk's death makes more sense, but there is no sense in war. Rat Kiley's repetition emphasizes this blunt quality of death, how the only thing death means is death.*

The things they carry are determined by superstition: Lieutenant Jimmy Cross' pebble, Dave Jensen's rabbit foot, Norman Bowker carries a dead man's thumb that was a gift from Mitchell Sanders. Mitchell Sanders said there was a moral to taking the dead teenager's thumb. Henry Dobbins asks what it is and Mitchell Sanders delays answering before finally saying that there is no moral.

*The carried items by superstition further flesh out the characters, but also show that superstition won't protect you. The thumb story and Sanders' claim that there is no moral shows there is no meaning, no obvious right or wrong, in war, nor is there a right or wrong in a war story.*

After Ted Lavender dies and is taken away in the chopper, Lieutenant Jimmy Cross leads his men into Than Khe where they burn everything down and shoot every living thing.

*The soldiers respond to the trauma of death by dealing out terrible, mindless death to others. It's an endless, awful cycle (and the stories repetitive structure might also be described as cyclical)*

That night Kiowa talks about what it was like to see Ted Lavender die. Lieutenant Jimmy Cross walks away and begins digging a foxhole. He sits at the bottom of his foxhole and cries.

*Cross cannot bear to think he's responsible for Lavender's death, and separates himself from the Company to mourn.*

Kiowa and the men are still talking about the abruptness of Ted Lavender's death, the short distance between life and death. Kiowa says Lieutenant Jimmy Cross is commendable for caring so much about Ted Lavender and his men. Kiowa goes to sleep thinking of how good a man Lieutenant Jimmy Cross is for his "capacity for grief," And wonders why all he can do is think of Ted Lavender falling like a rock.

*Kiowa's high esteem for Cross and the reader's view of Cross from Cross' perspective are contrasted to show how differently each soldier perceived the other. They believed they had to uphold a certain kind of behavior. Kiowa can think only of death because when faced with the abruptness of it he must think of his own potential death.*

They carry themselves with poise, while hiding shame, with "wistful resignation," "pride," "stiff soldierly discipline," "good humor," and "macho zeal." They are all afraid to die but try not to show it. They tell jokes. They talk about Ted Lavender's supply of tranquilizers and Mitchell Sanders says there's a moral to the story: don't do drugs.

*Their behaviors and jokes are meant to help them hide from the fear of death. Sander's moral to Lavender's story is ludicrously insufficient—and just further emphasizes that there is no moral. It could have happened to any of them.*

The emotional baggage they carry: they know they might die, they carry their reputations, they fantasize about purposely blowing off their own toe and going home but don't do it. They carry a whole host of complex feelings but they hide them inside. They imagine flying over America, going to McDonald's.

*They all think about ways to leave the war, but don't leave because they would shame themselves and their families. Instead, they comfort themselves with thinking of home, but do their duty, even though they can find no moral in it.*

The morning after Ted Lavender dies, Lieutenant Jimmy Cross burns Martha's letters in his foxhole. Then he burns the two photographs. He decides he hates her. "Love, too, but it was a hard, hating kind of love."

*In burning the letters Cross is destroying his connection to past, giving up on all that distracts from the war, and punishing himself for his failure In war, love and hate become tangled.*

Lieutenant Jimmy Cross feels determined to excel as a Lieutenant now and protect his men. He decides he will get rid of the pebble, get rid of the rest of Ted Lavender's drugs, accept all the blame for Lavender's death. He expects the men won't like his newfound strictness but that they will keep marching.

*Cross's failure leads him to accept the burden of leadership—even if it means losing Martha and the goodwill of some of his men.*

## LOVE

Many years after the end of the war, Jimmy Cross visits Tim O'Brien at O'Brien's house in Massachusetts. They reminisce, drinking coffee and looking at old photographs of their Company. When they see a photo of Ted Lavender, Jimmy mentions that he's never forgiven himself for Lavender's death. O'Brien responds that he feels that way himself about other things. They switch from coffee to gin, and focus on less grim stories.

*Cross and O'Brien's meeting shows how unbreakable the bond is of fighting together. Cross' guilt hasn't dissolved with the years—the self-blame will always haunt him. O'Brien mentions feeling the same way to foreshadow his own story of guilt. They switch to gin is to make the conversation regarding painful memories more bearable.*

Eventually, O'Brien feels like the mood has lightened enough for him to ask about Martha. Cross stands up and returns with a picture of Martha playing volleyball. Cross asks if O'Brien remembers the picture, and O'Brien says he thought Cross had burned it. Cross says that Martha gave him a new one at their college reunion in 1979 after he told her he still loved her.

*O'Brien remembers Martha after all this time to ask after her. Cross' response with a picture alludes to the strength of these memories. The photograph allows Cross to tell the story of seeing Martha again after the war.*

At the reunion, Cross learned that Martha had become a Lutheran missionary and a nurse who had done service in Ethiopia, Guatemala, and Mexico. They took a long walk across campus. She had never been married and didn't think she ever would be.

*The fact that Martha never married opens up the possibility that she did love Cross and he never came for her, or she simply defies conventional norms. Martha also went to foreign lands, but not for war. She went to help others.*

Cross tells Martha that he loves her, but she keeps walking and doesn't answer. He walks her back to her dormitory and recalls how he had taken her back to the same spot after they kissed on their date before the war. He tells her about how, on that night, he wished he had taken her upstairs and tied her up so that he could touch her knee all night long. She closes her eyes and acts cold, and says she doesn't understand how men can do the things they do.

*Their reunion is a close parallel to the date Cross reminisced about throughout the war, but it shows how much the war has changed each of them. His confession doesn't lead to anything between them; it only reveals their distance. Martha blames the atrocities of the world on the actions of men.*

They have breakfast the next morning and she apologizes. She gave him another copy of the volleyball picture and told him not to burn it this time.

*Martha gives him another picture because she still wants to be remembered, and perhaps because she wants to help Cross recapture his former innocence.*

Cross tells Tim O'Brien that he still loves Martha. O'Brien tries to keep the conversation away from Martha for the rest of Cross's stay, but as he's walking Cross to his car O'Brien mentions that he wants to write a story about Cross and Martha.

*The story O'Brien wants to write is "The Things They Carried." He makes it clear that that story is a war story, written by a writer—a war story to capture the war.*

Cross thinks it over for a moment, then agrees to let O'Brien write the story, saying that maybe Martha will read it and come back to him. He makes O'Brien promise to depict him as a "good guy" who is "brave," "handsome," and "the best platoon leader ever."

*Cross' list of things O'Brien must include in the story show how he still feels the weight of obligation. It is still important to him to look like an ideal soldier, to Martha and to the world.*

Cross then makes O'Brien promise not to mention anything about something, but O'Brien cuts him off, promising he won't.

*This could be in reference to any number of things, but so much of war is unspeakable and Martha won't understand.*

## SPIN

O'Brien says sometimes the war wasn't always terrible: it could be "almost" sweet. He recalls how a boy with a plastic leg approached Azar and asked for candy. Azar gives him the candy and says "War's a bitch." O'Brien recalls watching Mitchell Sanders sit under a tree, picking off body lice from his skin. He put the lice in a USO envelope and sent it to his draft board in Ohio. O'Brien recalls Norman Bowker and Henry Dobbins playing checks every evening. Often, the other soldiers would watch.

*Azar says "war's a bitch" because the soldier who blew off the kid's leg would have shot the kid dead if he had more ammo. Sanders can't escape from the war, so his only form of retaliation is to send a letter, filled with his body lice, to the people who sent him there. There's comfort in playing/watching checkers because the rules don't change, unlike in war.*

O'Brien says he is now forty-three years old and he is a writer. The war is long over and a lot of it is difficult to remember. As he sits at his typewriter he remembers Kiowa disappearing under the mud and Curt Lemon blown up in pieces into a tree. O'Brien says the act of remembering becomes a kind of happening, and the characters of his memories do things: Kiowa yells at him, Curt Lemon steps into the sunlight. He says the bad stuff still happens. He says the war wasn't always this way, though.

*O'Brien is bringing the reader to the present—he is introducing himself as a writer who remembers and writes stories. His memories have lives of their own, and the people he fought with who died still exist in their own way through memory and stories. And he emphasizes that it is too simplistic to say that war is just terrible—it's both a kid with a leg blown off and that kid being a kid, wanting and getting candy.*

O'Brien remembers how Ted Lavender acted when he took too many tranquilizers. When asked how the war was going, he would say it was a "nice mellow war today" with a spaced out grin.

*We already know Lavender dies, so there's sadness in this recollection. But O'Brien shows that good memories are still associated with Lavender.*

O'Brien remembers how the Company once had an "old poppa-san" to be their guide through mine fields in the Batangan Peninsula for five days, and he led all of them to safety. Jimmy Cross gave the poppa-san a hug while Mitchell Sanders and Lee Strunk gave him boxes of C rations. The old man had tears in his eyes as they parted ways.

*The old man crying shows the line between enemy and ally is blurred in war: he was a native but he still helped the soldiers survive and felt a bond to them.*

O'Brien recalls how much time they spent waiting around if they weren't "humping," which meant marching. He says the war was boring in a strange way. You'd try to relax, but as soon as you did you'd hear gunfire and be reduced to squeals.

*Even when there was no fighting, the soldiers' minds were always on the war, always focused on the possibility of death*

O'Brien says he still feels guilty. At forty-three he's still writing war stories. O'Brien's daughter, Kathleen, tells him he's obsessed and he should write about happier things. He admits he should forget, but the problem with remembering is you can't forget. As a writer, you take from your own life and memories "at the intersection of past and present." He says the real obsession is writing the stories.

*Part of O'Brien thinks he should quit writing about the war. He looks to his daughter's innocent suggestion as reason to forget his gruesome past and move on. But the nature of writing is the utilization of memory, and using memory means being unable to forget.*

O'Brien says there are happy stories too. He then presents a "peace story." A soldier goes AWOL and lives in Danang with a nurse from the Red Cross. The nurse loves him, and he gets everything he wants. Then one day he returns to his unit in the bush. One of his fellow soldiers asks what happened with the nurse and why he came back. He says the peace "felt so good it hurt. I want to hurt it *back*."

*It's clearly not a story about peace, but rather that when this soldier goes AWOL and basks in freedom for a while from the war, he feels compelled to return to action because the peace isn't enough. After experiencing war, it doesn't feel right to feel at peace. He can't let go of the war—it's adrenaline fueled and terrible excitement.*

O'Brien often only remembers fragments. He recalls Norman Bowker one night lying down, watching the stars, and saying to O'Brien if he could have one wish it would be that his dad would write him a letter that says it's OK if he doesn't win any medals in the war.

*Bowker not only feels the pressures of surviving in the war, but he feels the social obligation to his father and his reputation to come back from the war a hero.*

O'Brien recalls how Ted Lavender adopted a puppy he found. He spoon-fed it and carried it with him until the day Azar killed it. O'Brien says the average age in the platoon was about nineteen or twenty, so the atmosphere was playful in a warped way. He recalls Azar's words after he blew up Ted Lavender's puppy, wondering why everyone was so upset. "I mean, Christ, I'm just a *boy*."

*The nature of "play" in war takes on a sinister shade. O'Brien is showing how war warps "play". Not only are the soldiers too young to always know right from wrong, but they've been put in a war where right and wrong doesn't exist.*

O'Brien knocks off a laundry list of other fragmented memories. The scent of an empty body bag. The moon rising over the paddies. Henry Dobbins sewing on his buck-sergeant stripes. A field swirling under the wind whipped up by a chopper, and then returning to normal when the chopper went away. A trail outside My Khe, a hand grenade, **a dead young man**, Kiowa telling O'Brien he had no choice.

*O'Brien presents such a seemingly mundane list of memories that ends alluding to the man he killed. O'Brien's contrast of "normality" with his killing of another man shows the sudden, awful, and arbitrary intrusion of death and fear in a warzone.*

O'Brien repeats that he's forty-three years old and though the war happened "half a life ago," when he remembers the war it comes back into the present. When he makes the memories a story, it makes them forever. He says stories are for bringing the past into the future, when you can't remember how you got to where you are and memory is erased, all you have are stories.

*The war never leaves O'Brien. He can't stop remembering it, not only because he doesn't want to, but because he feels compelled to write about it. By writing about it he makes these stories eternal.*

## ON THE RAINY RIVER

O'Brien says the story he is about to tell is one he has never told to anyone out of embarrassment for himself and his family. He's lived with the shame for over twenty years. He hopes that by writing it, he'll alleviate some of that shame.

*By this introduction we're led to believe that this is going to be a gruesome, terrible story of actions O'Brien committed in the war.*

O'Brien says that he's sure all of us would like to think that there's a reserve within us ready for "a moral emergency" that will allow us to be heroes. He admits he used to think that was the case in the summer of 1968.

*As O'Brien continues, though, we see that this story might not be about something he's done, but rather something he did not do.*

A month after O'Brien graduated from Macalester College in June of 1968 he was drafted to fight in Vietnam. He says he hated the war, even though he was twenty-one and politically naïve. America was divided on all of the issues, and the only agreement was "moral confusion." It was, and still is, his view that "you don't make war without knowing why." There needs to be a reason when people are going to die.

*The draft is another form of social obligation—it's a legal obligation, it's an obligation with the might of the government behind it, and it meant that O'Brien couldn't just choose whether or not he agreed with the war. He had to just go and fight and face death for reasons he, and the country, couldn't even understand.*

The draft notice came on June 17, 1968. O'Brien read the first few lines of the letter and remembers thinking he was too good, too compassionate, to be drafted. He had a full-ride scholarship to go to Harvard for graduate school. He believed someone had made a mistake. He hated camping, blood made him nauseous, he didn't know anything about guns. He was a liberal, and wondered why they weren't drafting some right-wing country-boy, or LBJ's daughters, or General Westmoreland's family. He thought there should be a law that if you support a war, you have to sacrifice your own blood and you have to bring the whole family.

*No one was "too good" for the draft. O'Brien's belief that there should have been a law forcing the politicians and those who supported the war to put their own families on the front lines indicates his conviction that the war may not have been fought if those supporting it had to actually fight in it, and is also darkly comic as the first three stories of the collection make it clear that war is such a lawless space—no law can save you.*

He worked that summer in a meat packing plant in his hometown of Worthington, Minnesota on an assembly line taking out blood clots from dead pigs' necks. He couldn't get dates that summer. He felt isolated. He kept the draft notice in his wallet.

*With the draft notice looming, O'Brien spends his days surrounded by death, stinking of death. This separated him from the society he was being drafted to protect.*

At night, O'Brien would borrow his father's car and go on drives. He felt like he was paralyzed and he had run out of options. Just disagreeing with the war was not enough to be exempt from the draft. He believed there were times when a nation was justified in going to war, against figures like Hitler, and he would have gone to war willingly.

*O'Brien exhausted every avenue to escape the draft, but he was trapped. The draft took away any agency he had to choose whether or not to put his life on the line for his country.*

In mid-July O'Brien starts to seriously consider fleeing to Canada, only a few hundred miles north. Initially, the idea seemed like a vague prospect, but as his options ran out he could imagine doing it. He was afraid of leaving his entire life, losing his parents' respect. He was afraid of being criminally prosecuted. He was afraid of being ridiculed. His hometown was conservative and he imagined everyone talking about how he had been the one that fled. O'Brien blames his hometown for their ignorant support of the war, which is sending him to Vietnam.

*O'Brien does not want to die in the war he doesn't believe in but has been obligated to join, but he can't reconcile between his mortal fear and the shame and guilt he would feel for fleeing the draft and disgracing his family and his name as well as the fear of exile and prosecution.*

Finally, O'Brien cracks—and this is the part of the story he's never told before. He leaves work one morning, drives home to his parents' empty house, and writes a short note to his parents. He can't remember what he wrote. He drives North towards Canada. He spends the first night in his car behind a closed gas station a half-mile from the border. When he wakes, he goes west along the Rainy River, which separates Canada and Minnesota.

*O'Brien soaks in the last of what he thinks then is his "old life." Note how O'Brien drives right up to the border, but then instead of crossing drives right along it. He can't bring himself to cross-he's paralyzed.*

O'Brien looks for a place to lie low for a couple of days and settles on the Tip Top Lodge. There he meets Elroy Berdahl, the owner, a man O'Brien claims is the "hero of his life." He gave O'Brien what he needed without asking questions and let him stay for six days. O'Brien says he hopes this story is a small way of saying thank you, because he never knew how to say thank you then. O'Brien was certain that Elroy knew why he was there.

*The act of writing this story as a "gesture of gratitude" shows the power of stories for O'Brien—they can offer thanks and redemption, they can say the things that can't be said directly.*

For six days it was just the two of them in the entire Lodge because tourist season was over. They spent all their time together: hiking, working, playing Scrabble. O'Brien remembers Elroy's deliberate silence—he never asked questions about why O'Brien was there even though it was 1968 and young men all over the country were burning draft cards.

*By not asking questions Elroy offered O'Brien a place free of social obligation and judgment.*

O'Brien admits he can't remember most of the six days that he spent at the Tip Top Lodge. He helped Elroy prepare the Lodge for winter. One morning Elroy showed him how to split firewood and they spent hours doing that in silence. During this Elroy looked as though he was close to asking O'Brien a question, but he restrained himself. O'Brien was ashamed to be at the Lodge, ashamed of his conscience, and ashamed "to be doing the right thing."

*O'Brien knows that Elroy has figured out why he's there. Even though O'Brien believes he's doing the "right thing" – which would be fleeing the States and not fighting in a war he despised – he can't shake the shame that he would bring to himself and his family for what they would see as his lack of bravery, patriotism, and courage.*

One night at dinner the subject of payment comes up. Elroy cuts down the price, but then factors in the work O'Brien did around the lodge and concludes that he actually owes O'Brien $115s. Then he tries to give O'Brien $200. O'Brien refuses the money, but in the morning the money is in an envelope tacked to O'Brien's door saying "Emergency Fund."

*Elroy's constant renegotiation of the price illustrates how much he can see O'Brien's desperation. He finds a way to give O'Brien money to help him run to Canada without saying that's what he's doing.*

On O'Brien's last and sixth day with Elroy they go out fishing on the Rainy River. Elroy turns the boat directly north and they cross into Canadian waters. O'Brien felt a tightness in his chest when he could see the shore. Canada had become real. Elroy turned off the engine and didn't say a word and started fishing. O'Brien thought then that Elroy must have planned this, though he can't ever know for sure.

*O'Brien's suspicion that Elroy planned this made O'Brien think that Elroy wanted to give him the opportunity to face head on the choice to flee—whatever his choice was going to be, to finally make it. Elroy forces O'Brien to look that choice in the face, to make it real and inescapable.*

They were floating twenty yards from Canadian land. O'Brien could have jumped and swam for his life. But he felt a "terrible squeezing pressure" in his chest, and he writes that he wants the reader to feel it too, and asks the reader, what would you have done? O'Brien is ashamed of this event in his life because he began to cry, but also because he experienced a "moral freeze."

*O'Brien wants this moral quandary not to exist in the past, but to be a present question, an active engagement with the reader and what they would do. He wants the reader to face it the way Elroy made him face it. The shame doesn't come just from what O'Brien sees a failure of masculinity or bravery, but of moral action.*

O'Brien realizes that Canada has always been a "pitiful fantasy." With the land in sight, he knew that he was going to do what he should. He would not swim to shore. O'Brien sees his life history flash before his eyes and sees, in a kind of hallucination, people he knew and would know in the future, like his family, Linda, Lieutenant Jimmy Cross, his wife, his unborn daughter, his two sons, and **the young man he killed** outside My Khe. O'Brien tries to jump into the water, but can't. In his vision he can hear people calling him a traitor. He says it wasn't morals that kept him in the boat, it was just embarrassment. It was then he knew he was going to war, where he would kill and potentially die, because he was too embarrassed not to. Elroy comments that the fish aren't biting, and turns the boat around.

*O'Brien's moment of realization is not rooted in what he believes is the "right" thing to do, but the thing society wants him to do and his inability to stand up to that expectation. The vision personifies his shame, his inability to withstand what others will think of him, and the responsibility to meet social obligations. The force of his imagination, and the power of the embarrassment this brought upon him, convince him that it's worth risking death and killing others just to avoid shame.*

O'Brien can't recall telling Elroy goodbye. O'Brien told Elroy he would be leaving, and Elroy nodded like he knew. Later in the morning, Elroy disappeared. O'Brien went inside to wait, but he felt certain that Elroy wouldn't come back. O'Brien left the envelope of money on the counter, got in his car, and drove home. O'Brien remembers that the day he drove home it was cloudy. He recognized the names of towns he passed through, then it was forests and prairie and then Vietnam, where he was a soldier. Then he was home. He says though he survived "it's not a happy ending. I was a coward. I went to the war."

*Elroy's absence is fitting, because it's his silence that is so comforting to O'Brien. The ending of the story defies the conventions of a "happy" ending: O'Brien survives—we would expect that to be enough. But because his decision to go to war was motivated by shame, he doesn't see himself as a war hero, just a coward who gave in to social pressures.*

## ENEMIES

On a morning in late July, LZ Gator, Lee Strunk, and Dave Jensen got in a fistfight over a missing jackknife while out on patrol. It was a vicious fight, and Dave Jensen was bigger and stronger than the others. He pinned down Strunk and kept punching him in the nose until it made a snapping sound, but this didn't stop Jensen. It took three people to pull Jensen off. Afterward, Strunk had to be helicoptered to the hospital and rejoined two days later wearing a metal splint on his face.

*O'Brien is recalling this story. The fight breaks out over an innocuous thing, but the tension of war heightens everything and amplifies any animosity between the men that already existed. There is no punishment for Jensen; Strunk arrives two days later with little fanfare.*

O'Brien says that perhaps in any other place it would have ended there, but because this was Vietnam where everyone had a gun, Dave Jensen became paranoid that Strunk would get his revenge. Strunk had made no claims about wanting revenge, but there was a silent animosity. Jensen kept track of Strunk, he dug his foxhole away from the others, kept his back covered, avoided being alone with Strunk.

*The fact that they're at war means that Jensen is conditioned to expect retaliation, and not in a mild sense, but a fatal one. Jensen's suspicions of Strunk overtake him, and he starts changing his behaviors to stay away from him.*

After a week, Jensen "couldn't relax" – he said it was like "fighting two different wars." He could no longer sleep well at night, feeling that he always had to be on watch. The line between good and bad guy blurred. Even when there was nothing going on, Jensen sat stiffly against a wall with his weapon at the ready, watching Strunk.

*Jensen is coming closer and closer to losing it, and he can't tell who is good or bad anymore. He can't feel at peace or relaxed when the "enemy" isn't shooting at them, because now he sees Strunk as an enemy too. Note that Jensen's feelings here are just a heightened sense of what they all feel, all the time. Death in war can always come at any time, from anywhere.*

One afternoon, Jensen finally snapped and started firing his gun into the air while yelling Strunk's name. He didn't stop until he was out of ammunition. Everyone was on the ground, too afraid to go near Jensen. He started to reload, but then sat down suddenly and rested his head on his arms for hours without moving. O'Brien notes that wasn't the bizarre part. Later that night, Jensen borrowed a pistol and smashed it into his own face, breaking his own nose with it.

*When Jensen finally does snap, everyone is terrified. He can't kill Strunk, he has no one to target, so he uses the only weapon he has and shoots into the sky because he can shoot nowhere else. He doesn't want to harm anyone. Later, Jensen breaks his own nose in what he sees as the moral equivalent to what he did to Strunk.*

With a broken nose, Jensen approached Strunk's foxhole and showed him the damage, asking him if they were even. Strunk nodded.

*Out of fear of Strunk's retribution and perhaps some guilt, Jensen gets the OK from Strunk that they're even.*

In the morning, Strunk kept laughing. He said, "The man's crazy…I stole his fucking jackknife."

*Strunk really did steal Jensen's jackknife, meaning Jensen was justified all along, at least in Strunk's mind. But war turns all of that sort of right and wrong inside out. Jensen and Strunk become in this story symbols for the two sides of the war in Vietnam, each of which has done awful things to the other, and which are now circling around each other in a never ending cycle. What Jensen did, and what was not possible in the larger war, was to find a way to end the cycle.*

## FRIENDS

Dave Jensen and Lee Strunk didn't become fast friends but they started to trust each other more over the next month as they teamed up on ambushes, covered each other when patrolling, shared foxholes, and took turns on guard at night.

*Now that they are "square" after the events of enemies, now that they have a firm foundation of knowing they won't try to kill each other, Jensen and Strunk can forge real trust.*

In late August they made a pact that if either were to ever get terribly wounded so as to have to end up in a wheelchair, the other would automatically end the wounded one's life. They wrote it out and signed their names, with others acting as witnesses.

*This pact they made becomes their personal social contract, obligating the other to act in the event of injury. They believe it would be better and fairer to die than live maimed.*

In October, Lee Strunk stepped on a rigged mortar round which blew off his right leg at the knee. At first he seemed to be hopping as though he stubbed a toe, but then he panicked. He tried to run and fell. The stump of his leg twitched, and blood erupted in spurts. He seemed shocked, passed out, and Rat Kiley administered a tourniquet and morphine, then ran plasma into him.

*Death comes suddenly, out of nowhere. Strunk's fear after he loses most of his right leg is perhaps not only from the shock of the event itself, but from the fear of having to die after signing off on the pact he made with Jensen.*

As they waited for a chopper, Dave Jensen went to Strunk's side. The stump wasn't twitching anymore and not everyone was sure if Strunk was still alive. He finally opened his eyes and looked at Jensen. He moaned and tried to get away, begging Jensen not to kill him. Jensen told him to relax, but Strunk was confused. He pointed at his leg and said it wasn't that bad, they could sew it back on. Jensen agreed. Strunk passed out again and when he woke up he said, "Don't kill me." Jensen said he wouldn't, but Strunk made him promise and swear to him. Jensen abided.

*Strunk is terrified to see Jensen because he immediately thinks of their pact, and begs for his life. When he wasn't facing death he couldn't imagine living as a maimed person. Now, facing death, he would rather live maimed—he just wants to live. His will to live overpowers any pact he'd made with Jensen. For his part, Jensen agrees not to abide by the pact.*

Strunk was taken to the chopper when it arrived. Jensen touched Strunk's good leg and told him to "Go on now." Strunk died somewhere over Chu Laid, which O'Brien notes seemed to free Jensen of "an enormous weight."

*Strunk's death is a relief to Jensen because it allows Jensen to remain a man of his word—he no longer has the obligation to kill Strunk (even if he would never have actually done it).*

## HOW TO TELL A TRUE WAR STORY

O'Brien says this is a true story about his buddy Bob "Rat" Kiley in Vietnam. One of Rat's friends got killed and a week after that Rat wrote a long letter to the friend's sister telling her about how great her brother was. Rat mails the letter, waits two months. When he's asked about the letter he says, "the dumb cooze" never wrote back. O'Brien claims "a true war story is never moral" or uplifting. All war stories have a strict allegiance to "obscenity and evil."

*O'Brien starts off with this story about Rat Kiley to show the amorality of a war story. Rat's story doesn't have an uplifting end or a moral to it—it simply exposes what the war was like, and his profound sense of loss over his friend, and his bitter anger about not being heard or responded to.*

O'Brien says you can tell a true war story if it embarrasses you. If you're not one for obscenities, then you can't care about truth—and if that's the case then you should look out for how you vote because it might end up sending boys to war that come back speaking obscenely.

*In war there is only death, and the only way to respond to that reality is with obscenities. Those who send their boys off to war think they are doing so for noble reasons, but war always reduces any noble ideas to obscenity.*

The dead friend's name was Curt Lemon. The third day after crossing a river into the mountains, Lemon and Rat Kiley were fooling around throwing smoke grenades back and forth near a trail leading into the jungle. Mitchell Sanders was playing with his yo-yo, Norman Bowker and Kiowa and Dave Jensen were trying to nap. Except for Rat Kiley and Curt Lemon making noise, things were quiet. O'Brien turned at the sound of a detonator and watched Lemon step from out of the shade into the sunlight and explode. Lemon's death was almost beautiful with the sunlight all around him, and how it looked like it had sucked him up into the tree above.

*Curt Lemon and Rat Kiley were best friends and they were so young they didn't understand how careful they needed to be in the war. Or perhaps they weren't being careful because that was the only way to escape from the constant fear of the war. Or both. O'Brien makes Lemon's death seem almost beautiful, because that was how it seemed to him, that moment seared into his memory, and somehow the beauty makes it more horrible without becoming any less beautiful.*

In a true war story, it's difficult to distinguish between what happened and what seemed to happen. "What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way." Everyone's vision and their angle of it are different. The memories get confused. After, when you try to tell the story, there is always "that surreal seemingness," which makes the story sound like a lie, "but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it *seemed*."

*The idea O'Brien describes here is echoed in "Good Form," with the concepts of story-truth and happening-truth. "Seemingness" is where the truth of the story is, because it communicates the sensory experiences of those who were there—an ineffable quality of how it felt to be at war in Vietnam, which only a story, a true war story, can communicate.*

"In many cases a true war story cannot be believed," and if you find yourself believing a story you should be skeptical. It's often the case that the craziest parts of the story are true and the normal things are made up because they're there to make you believe the crazy things. For some things, there is no way to tell a true war story, "it's just beyond telling."

*That the craziest parts of the story are often true while the benign things aren't shows how devastating and brutal war is and can be, so much so that they surpass a "civilian's" wildest imagination.*

O'Brien recalls a story that Mitchell Sanders told him about a six-man patrol in the mountains. If they heard anything suspicious, they were to call in artillery to take the enemies out. Otherwise, they had to remain completely quiet. After a few days they start to hear music with weird echoes. They tried to ignore it, but soon they start hearing instruments, voices and clinking glasses like they're at a cocktail party. Finally they lose it and call in airstrikes. But the guys still hear the sounds. When they return to base camp the colonel demands to know what they heard, but the guys just look silently at the colonel, "and the whole war is right there in that stare."

*In this story the men are driven so mad by things that they cannot distinguish are real or imagined. When they are asked about what they heard, they* can't *explain it. It was unsayable, unspeakable. Those things that cannot be said or put into language because they're so horrific or strange or unbelievable—that's the war, and those are the things that can only be expressed through stories so that those who weren't there, who didn't experience, can maybe understand.*

O'Brien says you can tell a true war story by how it never ends, or never seems to. He recalls how Mitchell Sanders showed frustration in telling the story of the men at the listening post because he wanted to get all of the details right. The next night at O'Brien's foxhole, Sanders touched O'Brien's shoulder and said the moral was that no one listens: the colonel, the politicians, girlfriends. The following morning, Sanders approached O'Brien and said he had to confess to lying about a few parts of the story, but he insisted that it was still true—those men heard things out there. O'Brien asked what the moral was, and Sanders was quiet for so long it felt embarrassing. Then he told O'Brien that the quiet he was hearing was the moral.

*Sanders keeps coming up with more morals for the story. The first is that no one listens. The second is that there isn't even anything to listen to, that even if there were people listening there isn't something they could hear or understand. Another way of looking at the story is that there are* lots *of morals to it, that there are endless morals in it, that war contains everything and at such intensity it is beyond anyone's ability to directly communicate. But a story doesn't have to communicate directly.*

O'Brien claims in a true war story, if there is a moral, it's impossible to fully tease out. One meaning only leads to a deeper meaning and then in the end there's not much to say about a true war story, "except maybe "Oh." True war stories don't generalize, they aren't abstract, they don't analyze. He says it comes down to whether your stomach believes the story to tell whether it's a true war story.

*In the rare case a war story does have a moral (a revision of his earlier claim that war stories cannot have one—we see that there aren't really rules!) then eventually those meanings unravel to a kind of meaninglessness (signified by the "Oh") or an indescribable feeling.*

On the day Curt Lemon died, the platoon saw a baby water buffalo and captured it. After dinner, Rat Kiley pet it and offered it some of his food, which it refused. Rat shrugged and then shot the animal again and again, careful not to kill it. Everyone was watching but didn't say anything. Rat Kiley was crying, and he walked off holding his rifle. Everyone else stood around without speaking. Then someone kicked the animal. It was barely alive. Dave Jensen said he'd never seen anything like that in his life. Kiowa and Mitchell Sanders carried the baby buffalo and dumped it into the village well. Everyone then sat waiting for Rat to pull himself together. Dave Jensen was still astounded, "A new wrinkle. I never seen it before." Mitchell Sanders played with his yo-yo and said that was Vietnam, the Garden of Evil, where "every sin's real fresh and original."

*Rat Kiley's behavior is, in a way, a gross parallel between how he feels towards Curt Lemon's sister: he tries to write her a letter and when she doesn't respond he reduces her to just a "dumb cooze," except here Rat Kiley is acting out his anger and pain on the baby water buffalo. The war and its lack of moral rules opens up the space for acts that were without name yet—they were unsayable. Kiowa and Mitchell Sanders don't shoot the animal to put it out of its misery, instead they throw it down the village well—which is menacing in its own way because the animal would drown and poison village's water.*

O'Brien asks how do you generalize? It's true that war is hell, but that's not all it is. It can be beautiful, mysterious, and exciting in unexpected ways. To generalize about war is the same as generalizing about peace—almost all of it is true and almost none of it is true. Any soldier will tell you that being close to death just makes you closer to life. After a firefight, there is no greater pleasure than simply being alive and you feel you are your truest self. The old rules don't exist anymore, and neither do the old truths. Right and wrong aren't what they used to be. Order gives way to chaos. The only thing that is certain is ambiguity.

*War is ultimately a contradiction; there is no way to generalize it. Just like there's no way to generalize peace. He suggests maybe war is another name for death, and this expresses this contradiction well because only when you're closest to death do you feel most alive. O'Brien insists that all of the moral binaries—right and wrong; truth and untruth—are broken down in war and in war stories.*

O'Brien claims true war stories often don't have a point. He offers a story that wakes him up. Parts of Curt Lemon were hanging above in a tree after he died so Dave Jensen and O'Brien were ordered to retrieve them. O'Brien remembers pieces of Lemon, but the thing that wakes him up is how Dave Jensen was singing "Lemon Tree" as they threw the parts of Curt Lemon down.

*There's something uncanny, morbid, and almost evil about Jensen's choice of song. It's darkly ironic and obscene in a way that's pointless but also terrifying, and yet it's also kind of funny.*

O'Brien says you can tell a true war story "by the questions you ask." If someone tells a story and afterward you ask whether or not it was true and the answer matters, then it's not a true war story. O'Brien's example: one soldier jumps on a grenade to save his three comrades, the answer of whether or not that happened matters to the listener. A thing can happen and be a lie, and a thing may not have happened and be "truer than the truth." O'Brien's example: one soldier jumps on a grenade to save his three comrades and the grenade kills all of them, but not before one asks the jumper why he did it, and he says, "Story of my life, man."

*O'Brien's example of the four men and the grenade forces the reader to ask themselves if they would feel cheated if the first story weren't true. The story of the four men who die couldn't have happened because no one was there to witness it, but it holds the truth of so much of the war that it feels true to what a true war story is and should be. The first story makes you feel good about heroism. The second story makes you feel the combined insanity, heroism, and pointlessness, and humor of the war.*

Twenty years later, O'Brien can still see how the sunlight was on Lemon's face right before he exploded. In the moment his foot touched down on the ground, he must have thought the sunlight was what killed him.

*O'Brien wants the reader to feel the way he felt when he turned to look at Lemon, to feel how Lemon felt—to understand the surprise and horror and beauty all wrapped together.*

When O'Brien tells the story of Curt Lemon he is often approached after—always by an older woman. The woman will always say O'Brien should put all the war stories behind him and find different kinds of stories to tell. O'Brien will picture Rat Kiley and think, "*You dumb cooze*." For O'Brien, the woman wasn't listening because it wasn't a war story; it was a love story.

*O'Brien believes that he isn't telling a war story, he's telling a love story. Rat Kiley lost his best friend who he loved, and he acted out by killing the animal. O'Brien feels like just calling it a war story is missing the point, and the only way to communicate that is through obscenity.*

But O'Brien can't say what he's thinking to the woman, so all he or you can do is tell the story again, modifying it, making up new things to try to get to the truth. A war story will become true if you keep telling it. Ultimately, though, a true war story isn't about war. It's about sunlight, love, sorrow, and memory. It's about sisters who don't write back and "people who never listen."

*But back from the war, there are social obligations—you can't just use obscenities. So all he can do is keep working on the story, try to find a way to communicate the things he wants to communicate through the story, to communicate not about war as a generality but the specifics of that story, of all the personal and contradictory things within war, and even the ways that people who did not directly experience them fail to understand those things no matter how well you tell the story.*

## THE DENTIST

When Curt Lemon died, O'Brien found it difficult to be sad because he didn't know him well, and what he knew he didn't like all that much. Lemon played the role of the tough soldier, and often took it too far. He would pull off stunts, and once painted his whole body and wore a ghost mask and then went trick-or-treating to villagers on Halloween and wouldn't stop bragging about it after. O'Brien thought Lemon's opinion of himself was too high "for his own good." Or perhaps his opinion was too low, and that's what he was trying to change. O'Brien says it's easy to get sentimental about those who have died, so instead he'll tell a quick story about Lemon.

*O'Brien remarks that it was difficult to mourn Curt Lemon's death because he didn't like him that much and felt like he was overcompensating for either low self esteem or puffing himself up with too big of an ego. But, with this line of thinking, O'Brien says that it would be easy to start waxing poetic about Lemon's good qualities, so instead it's better to tell a fast story that explains the kind of man Curt Lemon was.*

In February, the Company worked in an area called the Rocket Pocket (called this because the enemy used it occasionally to launch rockets to the airfield in Chu Lai). For the Company, though, this stop was a two-week vacation: it was along the sea, felt like a resort outside, and it was quiet. One afternoon an Army dentist was sent in by the higher ups to check out everyone's teeth. He lectured everyone oral hygiene and then set up in a small tent where everyone had to go in for a personal exam. It wasn't a fancy set-up: battery-powered drill, canvas cot, bucket of seawater to rinse, a suitcase filled with different instruments. The dentist seemed only concerned with getting his duties done quickly.

*The contrast between this place that is used by the enemy as a source for rockets to kill Americans versus how the American soldiers see it as a place akin to a resort shows how the landscape of war is so different for all parties involved. One man's area to fear death is another to feel at peace. But this peace has to be interrupted by bureaucracy—even in war it's mandated that the men all be seen by a dentist. It's darkly comic, because healthy teeth won't save you in battle.*

As everyone sat waiting their turn, Curt Lemon began to get tense. Someone asked what was wrong, and he said in high school he'd had some bad experiences with dentists that he equated to torture. He didn't mind the blood and pain of combat, even enjoyed it, but dentists creeped him out. He said he wouldn't let anyone touch his teeth.

*Even though Lemon is completely fine with the gore and death of combat, he can't handle someone else touching his teeth—which is a morbid, bizarre predisposition. He's more comfortable with shooting someone dead than seeing the dentist.*

When Lemon was called in, though, he went. But he fainted before the dentist touched him. Four soldiers, O'Brien included, had to lift him up onto the cot. When he came around he looked shy, like he'd been caught doing something terrible. He refused to say anything to anyone.

*Even though he says he won't let anyone touch his teeth, he follows orders and sees the dentist. When he faints and wakes up, he's immediately embarrassed and ashamed of how this will affect his macho reputation.*

The rest of the day he sat alone beneath a tree, staring at the dentist's tent in a daze. Every once in a while, he could be heard cursing. O'Brien notes that others would have laughed it off, but it was "too much" for Lemon: "The embarrassment must've turned a screw in his head."

*The shame and embarrassment start to drive Lemon up a wall, and he curses himself for his fear. The embarrassment becomes so much that he is compelled to act.*

In the night, Lemon went to the dentist's tent and woke him up. He told him he had a horrible toothache. The dentist couldn't find anything wrong with Lemon, but Lemon insisted. Finally the dentist shot Lemon with Novocain and pulled out a completely healthy tooth. O'Brien says it was surely painful, but the next morning Lemon was "all smiles."

*By getting a perfectly healthy tooth pulled, he feels he keeps his reputation intact and shows that he's brave up against anything. This eliminates his embarrassment, and he sees it as settling the score against himself after he fainted. That it is totally irrational doesn't matter.*

## SWEETHEART OF THE SONG TRA BONG

O'Brien recalls a crazy story that Rat Kiley told him. Rat's reputation for over exaggeration was well known in the platoon. But with this story, Rat always insisted it was true. When Rat Kiley first arrived in Vietnam he was assigned to a small medical detachment with seven other guys. There was almost no supervision, it was an indefensible area, but it was never attacked. The wounded were brought in by helicopter, and then stabilized before being sent to a hospital. The highest-ranking officer, Eddie Diamond, enjoyed smoking dope.

*No one gets upset with Rat for exaggerating stories because they always felt something when he was recounting some memory blown way out of proportion. Rat's stories weren't borne out of fact, but feeling. Rat was first stationed in a pretty peaceful place, where the war seemed like a far off thing. Their lack of supervision gave them a kind of freedom that felt like home.*

A decade earlier the base had been used as an outpost for the Special Forces and when Rat Kiley came there was still a squad of six Green Berets that used the compound. But the Greenies, as they were called, avoided contact with the other men. One night Eddie Diamond joked that they should pool their money and get some village women to come to the compound. The guys talked about it jokingly for a while, but one medic Mark Fossie wouldn't let it go and kept saying it was possible. Six weeks later his girlfriend arrived at the compound.

*The Greenies are mentioned here as a way of foreshadowing their role later on in the story (which Mitchell Sanders points out later, too). Mark Fossie found a way to go around the rules and defy the conventions of war and bring in his girlfriend from Ohio.*

The girl, Mary Anne, was around seventeen, recently graduated from Cleveland Heights Senior High. Mark Fossie and Mary Anne Bell had been together since they were kids, and knew from the sixth grade they'd get married one day and live in a house near Lake Erie with three kids. There was a plan, and they were in love.

*It's clear in the telling of the story—how Fossie and Mary Anne had such plans set in stone—that Rat's foreshadowing the breakdown of those plans. Mary Anne is described as an idealized "American Girl", which makes what happens to her come to symbolize what's happening to all of America in Vietnam, just in a kind of stylized way that makes it less easy to overlook.*

The other medics envied Fossie, because Mary Anne was attractive. She was young, but she was curious, and she went around asking how everything worked on the compound. She spent time on the perimeter and learned Vietnamese phrases. The guys teased her and called her their "little native."

*What's important about Rat's description is following the slow trajectory from innocent to curious. She picks up things quickly. This curiosity foreshadows a change that is imminent in Mary Anne.*

The war and Vietnam fascinated Mary Anne. By the second week she begged Fossie take her down to the village at the bottom of the hill. The next morning Rat Kiley and two other medics went along with them as security. Mary Anne walked through the village like a comfortable tourist. Rat said it was weird to watch, because she couldn't seem to get enough. On their way back, she stripped to her underwear to swim in the Song Tra Bong. Diamond said she had, "D-cup guts, trainer-bra brains." Someone said she would learn, and Diamond responded solemnly, "There's the scary part. I promise you, this girl will most definitely learn."

*Mary Anne's comfort in the village is troubling at first because maybe she's naïve, but it's ultimately foreshadowing how this life she finds so appealing in the village is one she'll take up in her own way. When Diamond says that Mary-Ann will "learn," he means that the war will ruin her innocence, or worse: her unknowing recklessness is going to get her killed. The irony is that she* will *learn, just not in the way he expects.*

At the end of the second week, four wounded soldiers were dropped in, and Mary Anne was quick to help, and learned how to clip an artery, pump a plastic splint, and shoot morphine into a patient. When the action heated up, her face took on a new look: serene, her eyes narrowed into focus. Fossie was proud of her, but also incredulous at how she seemed like a different person. Mary Anne stopped wearing makeup and jewelry; she cut her hair short. Eddie Diamond taught her how to disassemble an M-16 and shoot it. She practiced for hours, shooting at empty ration cans, and she was naturally good. She had a new confidence and authority in her voice. Mark Fossie suggested once or twice that maybe she should start thinking about going back to Ohio. Mary Anne laughed and told him all she wanted was already here.

*Fossie is proud of his girlfriend, but he's beginning to see the change in her behavior and it scares him because this is clearly not a side of her he's ever seen in his entire life. She changes just as all the men in the war change, but somehow, because she's a cute girl, that change is more troubling. Fossie's suggestion that she go back to Ohio is a kind of plea, he knows deep down that he's losing her (just the way so many veterans of the war were lost to their loved ones when they returned changed by their experiences), but she shrugs him off because she's become infatuated with the action of Vietnam.*

Mark Fossie and Mary Anne: still slept together and had their plans for when the war ended, but Mary Anne had changed the details of the plan. Perhaps not three kids, maybe not a house on Lake Erie, but they'd still get married—just not immediately.

*The war changes Mary Anne and what she wants. It gives her a taste for new things in life, removes her innocence, liberates her in certain ways.*

At night when the men played cards she would tap her foot like she was sending a message, and when Fossie asked about it she said it didn't mean anything, she'd never been happier.

*Mary Anne's tapping foot seems like a kind of communion with the land, and also an impatience with inaction. She doesn't want to play cards; she wants to experience Vietnam and all it means.*

Two times she returned really late to the compound, and then one night she didn't come back. Fossie, who thought Mary Anne was sleeping with someone else, shook Rat Kiley awake but they check all the bunks and she's nowhere to be found. She returns the next day and they find out she had been out on ambush with the Greenies.

*And she finds a way to connect to Vietnam intimately—to join the green berets on combat missions, to truly immerse herself in the war with elite soldiers. She has completely transformed, completely immersed herself in the war.*

When the sun rose, Rat said he saw Mary Anne come into the compound tired but happy. She gave Mark Fossie a quick hug after she dropped her gear. The six Greenies didn't say a word. Fossie seemed dazed, but then he yelled at her that they would discuss this now. No one knew for sure what happened between them, but later at dinner she was withdrawn and wouldn't answer questions about being out on ambush. Later Fossie told Rat that there wouldn't be any more ambushes or late nights. They had reached a compromise; they were engaged.

*Fossie seeks to lay down the law, to tie Mary Anne back up in the social obligations such as engagement that bind people to act "morally" and as they should. But it is clear that Mary Anne is restless with these restrictions, even though they work on her for a while. Fossie's victory here is obviously hollow, and his insistence it isn't makes it seem hollower still. Mary Anne has changed. She can't just be changed back by a compromise and some rules.*

Over the next few days the interactions between Fossie and Mary Anne were tense. In front of everyone, they kept up the charade. They talked about their big wedding, but there was an intensity in the way they talked. Close to the end of her third week, Fossie started to make plans to send Mary Anne home. She withdrew even more. The next morning Mary Anne was gone and so were the Greenies. Rat said Fossie had expected it on some level, but he was overtaken with grief. He keeps repeating, "Lost."

*Fossie felt the need to keep Mary Anne on a tight leash, and when he started to make plans to send her home, this tension finally reached a breaking point and Mary Anne disappeared. Fossie was just trying to keep her, to stop her from changing, but she had already changed. She is lost to him because she's left behind the social obligations he wants her to hold dear. She wants the war.*

It was almost three weeks before Mary Anne came back to the compound and Rat saw her go into the Greenies' hut. When Mark Fossie heard Mary Anne was back, he stood outside of the Greenies fenced off area all day. After midnight Rat and Eddie Diamond went out to check on him. There was music playing from somewhere in the dark, and there was a woman's voice but the words weren't English. Fossie pushed the gate open and rushed the door. Rat and Eddie followed behind. There were candles burning, sounds of tribal music, and the smell of incense and something indescribably powerful, like a kill. A decaying black leopard head was on the post at the rear, strips of skin hung from the rafters overhead, there were bones of all kinds everywhere. Rat could make out the figures of the other resting Greenies. Mary Anne emerged, wearing her pink sweater and white blouse with a cotton skirt. But she was also wearing a necklace of human tongues. Mary Anne told Fossie there was no point in talking, he was in a place he didn't belong, and she gestured like it was the whole of Vietnam. She said he hid in this compound and didn't know what was out there. Sometimes she wanted to swallow the whole country to have it in her. But it wasn't bad—when she was out at night she felt closest to her body. She said everything without being melodramatic. Rat helped Fossie up and they went outside and the music and Mary Anne's voice could be heard again. Fossie asked them to do something; he couldn't "let her go like that." Rat listened to the music for a while then said, "Man, you must be deaf. She's already gone."

*Mary Anne is a walking contradiction, much like everything in the war. She is wearing her pink sweater and nice culottes—the things she was wearing when she arrived. But the tongue necklace she's wearing marks a grotesque opposition to the girl Mary Anne used to be. She has transformed, but she is still herself. She keeps insisting it's not bad—but that's because there's no way to tell right or wrong while you're at war. It's not "bad" because there's no such thing as "bad" in war. Her appetite for the war, combat, and the land is almost like that of a junkie looking for a next fix. She can't get enough of Vietnam, of the excitement of war. It makes her feel completely alive and also completely herself, and she believes wholeheartedly this is the only place on earth she can feel that way. Somehow this transformation is horrific in Mary Anne, but it is not so different from the soldier who went AWOL in "How to Tell a True War Story" but then came back because the peace hurt so good he wanted to hurt it back. The soldiers become addicted to the intensity of the war; Mary Anne just embraces this addiction completely.*

Rat Kiley stopped there in the story, which drove Mitchell Sanders, up a wall. He asked what happened to Mary Anne. Rat said he couldn't know for sure, a few days later he got orders to report to Alpha Company, and that's the last he ever saw the compound or Mary Anne. Sanders was furious and said Rat couldn't do that, it was against the rules of storytelling to not have an ending. Rat said everything he's told up until now is what he experienced, but after this point it's things he's heard.

*Rat Kiley stops because that's as far as his first hand account goes. He's trying to prove to everyone that this all happened; he saw it. The next part is what he's heard so you can never know if it's fully true. Sanders claim about the rules of a story complements O'Brien's argument from "How to Tell a True War Story:" you know a war story is true if it has no end.*

A few months later, Rat ran into Eddie Diamond in Bangkok while he was on R&R. Rat suddenly said that he loved Mary Anne, everyone did. She made you think about the girls at home and how innocent they were, how they could never understand the war. Rat promised after the war, it would be impossible to find anyone like her. Eddie told him he heard from a Greenie that Mary Anne had disappeared for good. They didn't find a body or equipment or clothing. There was a weeklong air search, and the compound was overrun with officials. But nothing ever came out of it because the war had to go on. Fossie was sent out on duty but got injured and was given a medical discharge when sent to a hospital back in the States. When the Greenies went out at night they felt like something was staring back at them, the whole rainforest. A few times they nearly saw Mary Anne. "She had crossed to the other side. She was part of the land." She was in the same outfit she had worn in their hut, her pink sweater and culottes, and necklace of tongues and she was dangerous, ready to kill.

*Rat confesses to loving Mary Anne because she's the only woman he knows of who could ever understand what Vietnam does to a soldier because she lived it. But Mary Anne was insatiable about the war and the rush of terror and joy it gave her. She wanted to be a part of the land and be completely lost in it, like she had already become lost in herself. She was calm when under attack, and she was fine with going off alone. The Greenies believed she was still alive, but not in a physical way—there was a spiritual element to it. She had achieved her goal in becoming a part of the land—but it swallowed her whole instead of her swallowing it.*

## STOCKINGS

Henry Dobbins is described as a good man and great soldier—he's like America: big, strong, good intentions. He wasn't fast, had fat jiggling at his belly, and he wasn't that sophisticated, but he was reliable and "drawn to sentimentality." O'Brien remembers how Dobbins used to keep his girlfriend's pantyhose wrapped around his neck before they went out on an ambush. He said they were his good luck charm. He would breathe in her scent, and said he liked the memories they brought back. Sometimes he slept with the stockings against his face. Mostly, though, the stockings were of superstitious value. Dobbins believed they kept him safe from harm. O'Brien said many men in Vietnam felt a superstitious pull, and Dobbins was one of them: he believed the stockings had protective power, like body armor. He was ritualistic about the way he put them on before an ambush.

*Henry Dobbins is not described as the most athletic or smart guy; he's not the one you would expect to come out of war without any injuries. O'Brien spends ample time describing how he remembers Dobbins as a simple, jovial man. The stockings were Dobbins' good luck charm to protect him from harm or death, and he wore them without fail. O'Brien notes that mostly everyone felt mildly superstitious in Vietnam, clinging to arbitrary things to protect them against something as arbitrary as death. For Dobbins, it was his girlfriend's stockings.*

Some people joked about it, but everyone "came to appreciate the mystery of it all." Dobbins never got hurt, not even a scratch. In August, he tripped the wire of a Bouncing Betty, which didn't detonate. A week later he was out in the open of a firefight; he slipped the pantyhose over his nose and came out fine. Everyone in the platoon began to believe in the pantyhose: his survival was a fact, so their power was fact.

*The stockings became a mystery and point of fascination because they did, in fact, seem to be Dobbins' body armor. When the platoon began to believe in the pantyhose it was because fact had become what existed before them: the pantyhose worked. Facts, then, were arbitrary too because they were dependent on chance.*

At the end of October, Dobbins' girlfriend broke up with him. He was quiet for a long time while he stared down at the letter. After a while Dobbins took out the stockings and wrapped them around his neck claiming they would still work: "The magic doesn't go away."

*Even after Dobbins' girlfriend breaks up with him, he doesn't let this take away from the stockings' power. This superstition is what he needs to carry him through and make him feel safe against the constant threat of death.*

## CHURCH

One afternoon the platoon finds a nearly abandoned pagoda west of the Batangan Peninsula. Two monks live inside who hardly speak any English. They don't seem upset when the soldiers dig foxholes close by—though the younger one made a washing motion with his hands that no one could decipher. The older monk led everyone inside, which was in bad shape. Kiowa says you're not supposed to mess with churches, but they stay the night and use the pagoda as an operation base for the next week or so. On the second day the elder monk gave Lieutenant Jimmy Cross a cane chair and put it near the altar area, then bowed and gestured for him to use it. The old monk seemed proud. Another time, the younger monk gave out four ripe watermelons, and watched until the soldiers had completely eaten them. He made the washing motion with his hands again.

*Even though there is a cultural gap, and a war is going on, the respect of a church still remains—particularly for Kiowa who doesn't feel right about using the pagoda as a base because it is a holy place for the monks. Even so, the monks bond with the platoon and show signs of respect in ways they can without language, by recognizing Jimmy Cross as the highest in command and giving him the chair. They feel, in some sense, obligated to show kindness to these soldiers, and the soldiers feel the same way in return.*

The monks were kind to everyone but particularly loved Henry Dobbins. They called him "Soldier Jesus." They helped him clean his gun, and though they never spoke they seemed to share a sense of understanding. Dobbins tells Kiowa that he thinks after the war he'll become a monk. Kiowa remarks he didn't realize Dobbins was a religious man. Dobbins says he isn't; he used to go to church as a kid. But as he got older he saw the material perks in being a minister, how it would be a good life, and though he believed in God what he was more interested in was being nice to people. But Dobbins says he could never be a minister because he's not smart enough for the sermons or answering the hard questions about life, like why God invented illness.

*Dobbins thinks he isn't smart enough to be a priest, to understand all the intricacies and rules of religion and answer the hard questions of life. But the story suggests—through his connection to the monks, their love for him, their naming him "Soldier Jesus"—that maybe Dobbins is wrong. Maybe the answer to the hard questions is to be nice to each other. Maybe the answer is not to try to find a moral in the terrible and hard things, because there is no moral, but to react by being nice to each other.*

Dobbins asks after Kiowa's religious aspirations since Kiowa carries his Bible everywhere. Kiowa says it's because that's how he was raised, and he has never considered being a minister. Dobbins jokes he would love to see an Indian preacher (e.g. Kiowa). Kiowa says he likes churches though: it makes you feel good and peaceful to sit in them. Then he says what the soldiers are doing in the pagoda is wrong, they shouldn't be here because it's a church. Dobbins agrees.

*Kiowa seems religious, but unlike Dobbins who has a religious teaching to impart—be nice to each other—Kiowa's religion is emptier. He carries the Bible because that was how he was raised. Yet religion seems to provide a kind of universal connection, and they both sense that the connection they are forcing between churches and war is wrong. In a church, it is notable, there is right and wrong.*

While this conversation is going on the monks have been cleaning Dobbins' gun. They finish and Dobbins reassembles it. He gives both monks a can of peaches and chocolate. He tells them to go. The monks bow and walk out. Dobbins makes the washing motion. He tells Kiowa that Kiowa is right about the pagoda, and they shouldn't be there. But he says, "All you can do is be nice. Treat them decent, you know?"

*And yet, being nice is a deeper imperative. They shouldn't be in the church, but they have to be there. In the face of those quandaries, those complexities that Dobbins feels no smart enough to answer, being nice and treating people decently does seem like a humble but sufficient answer.*

## THE MAN I KILLED

The story begins with a description of **the dead man**: jaw in his throat, one eye shot the other forming a star-shaped hole, thin womanly eyebrows, undamaged nose, neck open to see his spine--this was the wound that killed him. He lay on his back, dead, in the middle of the trail. He was thin and bony with a sunken chest, not many muscles, "a scholar maybe." He was maybe born in 1946 in My Khe with farmer parents where some of his family and neighbors fought back against the French for independence. He wasn't a Communist, but a soldier and citizen. From youth, "the man I killed" would have listened to stories about heroic fighters for his country and how this was of the highest duty and privilege for a soldier. The man accepted, but he secretly was scared because he wasn't a fighter. He enjoyed books, wanted to teach math. At night he tried to picture himself as a brave soldier, like his father and uncles had been, or the men in the stories. He kept hoping the war would end.

*It becomes clear that this is the description of the man that O'Brien killed—if not already evident from the title. O'Brien, in writing out this history of the man he doesn't even know the name of, gives the man a way to live on eternally in his story. The parallels he draws to the man he killed and himself before the war show the guilt O'Brien feels for this man's death, because he sees himself in the young, dead man. The man was raised to believe he should be courageous and fight, just as O'Brien felt he was obligated to do. O'Brien mirrors himself in the man he killed, how they both felt obligated to fight. But through story O'Brien hopes to absolve some of this guilt, to give the man some kind of life.*

Azar eggs O'Brien on, saying he "trashed that fucker." Kiowa steps in and tells Azar to go away. Kiowa tells O'Brien there's nothing else O'Brien could have done. He keeps repeating this, and urges O'Brien to stop staring at the corpse of the man he killed. Kiowa asks O'Brien if he'd prefer to be in **the dead man**'s shoes. O'Brien keeps staring at the star-shaped hole. Kiowa comes back later tells O'Brien it's a war and he had no choice.

*Kiowa acts as a calming presence for O'Brien. He tries to remind O'Brien that it's not like he killed a man for no reason on the street, war changes the moral definition of murder. The fact that Kiowa keeps returning to O'Brien shows that he's not just trying to help, but he's unsettled by the death as well.*

O'Brien describes **the man**'s face again, repeats the same details: the undamaged nose, the frail figure. He notes the man had feared being a bad soldier—didn't want to be a soldier—he had worried about it even as a boy growing up. He loved math and was teased at school for his feminine eyebrows. The man could never fight his bullies, though he wanted to, and this made him feel ashamed. If he couldn't do this on the playground, how could he fight the Americans? Around his family he pretended to be brave and that he looked forward to fulfilling his patriotic duty, but he prayed with his mother every night that the war would end. Most of all, he was afraid of being a disgrace to himself, his family, and his village.

*O'Brien's inventions of the dead man's history continue to show O'Brien's grief at killing him. The strength of similarities he sees between the dead man and himself are amplified: they both felt obligated to fight in a war they didn't want to fight in, and what they feared most was the shame of letting the people they loved around them down. O'Brien's reiteration of these invented qualities gives the man he killed an eternal space in the world of the story. In this way, he's not completely dead.*

Kiowa tells O'Brien he knows that O'Brien feels awful, and then says maybe he doesn't know. O'Brien keeps staring at the body and describes the wounds on **the dead man**'s corpse, he notes a gold ring on his right hand. Kiowa tells O'Brien again to stop staring. O'Brien notes how clean the dead man's fingernails were, notes again he was maybe a scholar. O'Brien describes how even though the man came from poverty, he would have continued his education as a math scholar attending the University of Saigon in 1964. The man spent all his time working and a lot of time alone. The man knew the war would kill him, but he refused to think about it as he studied. In his last year at university he fell in love with a girl who liked him back. Maybe they exchanged gold rings. But now the man was dead.

*The guilt keeps growing for O'Brien as he continues to stare at the body. Kiowa is unnerved by O'Brien's fixation on the corpse, but O'Brien continues to build a life for this dead man with his imagination to quell his guilt. The man's social obligation to fight matches O'Brien's. In this vignette, though, O'Brien gives the man romantic love, and speculates that the gold ring signified that the young man got to experience it in his life. But ultimately, he can't use the power of his imagination to absolve himself, because the man is dead.*

Kiowa covers the corpse with a poncho. Kiowa tells O'Brien that he seems like he's looking better. He tells O'Brien he just needed "some mental R&R." Then he says he's sorry, then asks O'Brien to talk about it. He keeps asking O'Brien to talk. **The young dead man** was about twenty, and he lay with a leg beneath him, his jaw in his throat, an inexpressive face, and a star-shaped hole in one eye. Kiowa tells O'Brien to "Talk."

*All of O'Brien's efforts to create this new history, by the story's end, arrive at the blunt description of the dead young man. His guilt overpowers the need to write a new history. Kiowa is still unnerved, and thinks the only way to cure this is by talking. The next story, "Ambush", is O'Brien talking.*

## AMBUSH

When O'Brien's daughter, Kathleen, was nine she asked him if he had ever killed anyone. She knew he had been a soldier because he kept writing so many war stories, which she thought proved he had to have killed someone in battle. He says it was a hard moment, but he told her that he hadn't. O'Brien notes that he hopes Kathleen will ask again when she's older, but he's using this story to pretend that she's an adult so he can tell her the truth, or what he remembers. Then he wants to tell her that as a girl she was right, and it's why he's continued to write war stories.

*O'Brien is using this story as a vehicle to assuage his own guilt for not only lying to his daughter, but to try to put words to an event that continues to haunt him into the present. He wants to address this to his daughter as an adult so that she can know she was right in her youth, and even though she pokes fun at him for writing war stories all the time, he hopes this story will explain why it's so necessary for him to do it.*

**The young man** was short, thin, and frail—about twenty years old. O'Brien was afraid of the man, and when the man passed him on the trail O'Brien threw a grenade that, when it exploded at the man's feet, killed him.

*This is the recurring, nearly identical, description of the man who O'Brien killed. Its repetition throughout stories shows the way not just the fear of death but the aftermath of killing someone can haunt you.*

O'Brien insists on going back further. After midnight, before he threw the grenade, the platoon moved to an ambush site outside My Khe. Everyone was there and spread out along the trail, hiding in the brush, taking turns sleeping and keeping watch. Kiowa was O'Brien's partner, and woke O'Brien up while it was still dark for the last watch. O'Brien, groggy and disoriented, lined up three grenades in front of him. The sun began to rise and the trail became more visible. He saw **the young man** emerge out of the morning fog, wearing all black and sandals, and carrying a weapon. O'Brien already pulled the pin on a grenade and was in a crouch. He did it automatically. He didn't hate the man, see him as an enemy, think of morality, politics, or duty. He tried not to throw up. O'Brien was scared. He wasn't thinking about killing; he was using the grenade to make the man leave, "evaporate." He remembers he had thrown the grenade before telling himself to.

*O'Brien wants to set up a backstory, though, to give the reader and his daughter some perspective so they don't think he acted without cause. The way O'Brien describes throwing the grenade, and the decision (or lack thereof) highlights how thoughtless and automatic a decision in war can be—particularly for a terrified young man like O'Brien. O'Brien makes clear that he wasn't acting to kill the man, he just wanted him to disappear. There were no moral questions that made him pause before he threw the grenade, he was in a place of fear. Morality did not come into it. The instinct to survival overshadowed any moral compass.*

O'Brien lobbed the grenade, and it seemed to freeze in mid-air. He ducked down and held his breath. He claims he didn't hear it land, but **the young man** must have because he tried to make a run for it. The sound of the grenade was like a pop, neither soft nor loud. The young man jerked up and then fell to the ground. His sandals were blown off his feet, his right leg was bent beneath his body, one eye was shut, the other was a star shaped hole.

*Again, O'Brien repeats his description of the dead young man that he killed. The star shaped hole is used in multiple stories in the collection. It is these repetitive descriptions that make the man he killed haunt the collection as well as the reader, just as they haunt O'Brien.*

O'Brien notes his life wasn't in immediate danger. It's likely **the young man** would have just kept walking. "And it will always be that way."

*O'Brien acted from fear, and couldn't stop himself. Didn't even realize he was acting. In the aftermath he can understand the morality.*

O'Brien remembers Kiowa trying to console him by saying that **the young man** would have died regardless, told O'Brien it was a "good kill." Kiowa said it was a war, O'Brien was a soldier, and that O'Brien needed to stop staring at the corpse and ask himself whether he would prefer to be the dead young man. Kiowa's words don't get through to O'Brien, though. He can only keep staring at the "fact of" the dead young man's body.

*Kiowa's characterization of the kill as a "good" one shows how destroyed the lines between right and wrong are in war. Not only is killing acceptable, but there are kills that are deemed "good." For O'Brien, his guilt outweighs Kiowa's attempts at consolation. O'Brien is responsible for the fact of another man's death.*

O'Brien says that he still struggles with the event all the time, going back and forth between forgiving himself and felling guilty. When things are ordinary, he tries not to think about it. Occasionally, though, when he's reading a newspaper or sitting alone he will see **the young man** again. He will step out from the fog in the morning and O'Brien will see him walk towards him. The young man will walk close to O'Brien and then smile to himself from a "secret thought." Then he will keep going down the trail and disappear into the fog.

*Just as the war is contradictory, so are O'Brien's haunted feelings about the man he killed—sometimes he can forgive himself because he understands what forced him to act in the way he did, other times he knows that what he did was wrong. In his vision, O'Brien assuages his guilt not by trying to forgive himself but by making the young man live, as only a story can let someone live.*

## STYLE

**A girl danced** with half-closed eyes though there was no music. She stood in the rubble; most of the hamlet had burned down. She was barefoot and around the age of fourteen, with brown skin and black hair. Azar asked why she was dancing as they searched through all of the damage. Rat Kiley caught a chicken to cook for dinner. The girl kept dancing in front of her house. Azar asked again why she was dancing. Henry Dobbins said it didn't matter. As the platoon kept searching, they found her whole family (an elderly woman, a baby, and a woman) dead in the house. The girl kept dancing as the men dragged the bodies out of the house. She covered her ears with her palms, which the men thought meant something. Azar said he didn't understand. The village was mostly burned down; almost everything was dead, even the pigs. As they moved out, and the girl was still dancing, Azar concluded it had to be a "weird ritual." Henry Dobbins disagreed and said she just liked to dance.

*This young girl is dancing after her entire family has been killed. Azar is fixating on the "why" she is dancing and the meaning, while Dobbins points out that there is no meaning, she's just dancing. This parallels the war, and the constant lack of morals to a war story. There is no meaning to the war, there is no definitive answer to why soldiers die, why they are at war, or why certain men die while others live. The dancing girl is symbolic of this meaninglessness. The fact that it appears strange to Azar shows how some men, even those at war and in the midst of a world without rules or meaning, can still question the meaning of something like a girl dancing.*

Later that evening, after they had marched away from the destroyed village, Azar started to move like **the dancing girl** mockingly. Henry Dobbins who was graceful for a big man, went over and picked up Azar and hung him over a well. He asked Azar if he wanted to be dumped in, and Azar said no. Henry Dobbins let him go, but demanded that Azar "dance right."

*Henry Dobbins feels obligated to respect the dance of the young girl, even if it didn't have a meaning. He can still see that there's a right and wrong way to dance—dance the way you feel, not with some lying mockery—and he insists Azar respect that.*

## SPEAKING OF COURAGE

The war has ended and Norman Bowker has returned home. It's the Fourth of July and he's driving his father's Chevy around the lake's seven-mile loop. The town seems the same. In high school at night Bowker had driven around the same lake with his girlfriend Sally Kramer, or he drove with friends and they would spend the ride talking about whether or not God existed. Then the war happened. But the lake had always been there. Bowker got a bad ear infection after high school from the lake water that nearly kept him from going to Vietnam. His friend Max Arnold had drowned in the lake and so he didn't go to the war at all.

*Norman has come back a completely different person, but nothing about where he came from has changed in a way to help him ease back into society. There are some things that are good about consistency though. The lake had always been there, but it was a kind of menacing consistency because it had taken Max Arnold, a friend who would surely listen to Norman after the war when he desperately needs someone to talk to.*

Most of Norman Bowker's friends have moved away. Sally Kramer was now Sally Gustafson. The third day he was home, he saw Sally mowing her lawn. She was still pretty, and he considered pulling over the car to talk to her. Instead, he accelerated. She looked like she was happy with her house and her husband, and there wasn't anything Norman Bowker could really say to her.

*Now that Norman is back from the war he feels aimless and without anyone to talk to. His friends are gone; the girls are all married or gone. His sweetheart Sally is married. Sally wouldn't want to hear about the war and that's all he really knew now.*

Norman Bowker drives past Slater Park and past Sunset Park. If Sally wasn't married and if his father wasn't an ardent baseball fan, it would be a good day to talk. Bowker imagines the conversation with his father, confessing he didn't get the Silver Star for valor, but he almost did. He imagines his father nodding, knowing many brave men don't win medals for what they did while others who did nothing do. Norman then imagines listing the seven medals he won, but telling his father it didn't reward remarkable courage, just routine, common stuff. But wasn't that worth something? The ribbons looked good on his uniform, now stowed away in the closet. Norman imagines telling his father about how he nearly won the Silver Star. He would start by describing the Song Tra Bong river. Bowker would say he wasn't brave enough, but his father would point out he got seven medals; he wasn't a coward.

*Norman keeps driving and he's thinking about all of the people he wishes he could talk to like his father or Sally, but they're caught up in their own lives and Norman doesn't feel like his issues are important enough to intrude, or that they wouldn't understand. He imagines an entire conversation with his father, whose approval he sought out so desperately in the war, and in their conversation his father would celebrate how courageous Norman was, even though Norman feels like a failure for not winning the Silver Star for valor. Bowker has the entire conversation dreamed up because he's thought through so many times what he would say, and what he hopes his father would say.*

Norman Bowker enjoys the feel inside the car, as if it were a tour bus, except he was touring a dead town. When he looks out the window, he thinks it looks like the town had been hit with nerve gas because everything seemed lifeless. "The town could not talk, and would not listen." He might have asked if they would like to hear about Vietnam, but the town wouldn't say anything. "It had no memory, therefore no guilt." Taxes were paid, votes were counted, the government worked on briskly and politely. "It did not know shit about shit, and did not care to know." Bowker fantasizes about serving them shit.

*The town doesn't listen, just like no one else would listen to him, echoing one of the morals from Mitchell Sanders story in "How to Tell A True War Story". The town refuses to hear the horror stories.. It sent Norman to war, its social obligations forced him to go to war, to feel guilty for only winning seven medals, but it doesn't want to know about the war. It fills Bowker, a hero, with fury.*

Bowker spots four workmen setting up the fireworks. Bowker whispers whether they want to hear about the Silver Star he nearly won. If they had listened he would have said it never quit raining and you couldn't escape the muck. He would have told the men about the night in the shit field, where they were warned by village women to stay away. Lieutenant Jimmy Cross had to fire his pistol in the air to make the mama-sans go away. The rain got worse, and the field got worse too. He would have told the workmen that it was like a deep soup, and sleeping was impossible. But he would have said the worst part was the smell from the river and the shit—the village toilet.

*Bowker is so lonely, so isolated, he's whispering to people he sees on the street if they want to hear about the Silver Star he almost won. He imagines what he would tell them. There's something about how he re-iterates the loss of the Silver Star though that alludes to a guilt that Norman is carrying.*

Bowker would have told the story of that night with the "exact truth." They took mortar fire. There was so much rain, and the mortar seemed to be coming out of the clouds. Men began shooting up flares. Rounds hit close by, and Bowker heard screaming and recognized it as Kiowa's voice. Bowker started crawling towards the screaming and in the light of flares he saw Kiowa's eyes wide-open and him sinking into the muck. When Norman reached Kiowa, he was nearly completely under the muck. He tried to pull Kiowa out by his boot, but Kiowa was gone. Bowker felt himself going because the smell of the shit was overpowering and he let go of Kiowa's boot and worked to pull himself out of the muck. He was alone, without a weapon. But it didn't matter because the only thing Bowker wanted was a bath. As he drives around the lake Bowker keeps remembering how Kiowa, his friend, sank under the shit. If it hadn't been for the smell he could have gotten the Silver Star.

*It wasn't a lack of physical strength that made him let go of Kiowa; it was the smell of the shit. Norman Bowker couldn't stand it anymore, and he blames himself for Kiowa's death because he feels like he's a coward for letting go when he just couldn't hold onto the boot for another second. If he had just pushed through that feeling, he could have pulled Kiowa out of the muck, and he's convinced himself that if he had done that then Kiowa would be alive and he would have won the Silver Star for valor—which is more important to Norman because it would mean Kiowa had lived, rather than he had received another medal. For others the medal would be a sign of valor. For him it would be a sign of Kiowa still being alive and him, Norman, not being crushed by guilt.*

Bowker parks his father's Chevy at the A&W. A slim waitress passed by, but she didn't seem to notice when he honked his horn. Bowker felt invisible. He honked his horn again. The waitress turned slowly with confusion, and came to Bowker's car. He ordered a burger and the girl shook her head and pointed to the intercom on the steel post next to his car, and said that's how you place an order—all she did was carry the trays. She looked at him for a second like she had a question, but then she pushed the intercom for him.

*Bowker is out of touch with what's changed since the war. He has to have been to the A&W before, but the intercoms are new. He honks at the waitress to get her attention for an order, but also as another person he could potentially talk to about everything that happened in the war. He remembers so much but no one will listen.*

He ordered a burger with fries over the intercom. The voice responded with "Affirmative, copy clear. No rootie-tootie," which Bowker found out meant root beer and ordered a small one. "Roger-dodger. Mama, one fries, one small beer. Fire for effect. Stand by." The intercom went silent and Bowker said, "Out." The girl brought his tray and Bowker ate fast. He finished his root beer and pushed the intercom. The voice asked him what else he needed. Bowker smiled and said, "How'd you like to hear about—" but he stopped and the voice asked to hear about what, but Bowker was quiet. The voice over the intercom said it wasn't going anywhere; it was stuck listening to this post all night, so Bowker should tell him. When Bowker didn't respond the voice over the intercom sounded slightly disappointed.

*This military language over the intercom is almost comical. A kind of fun-house reflection of the war that has filled Norman with unbearable guilt, now turned into a kind of silly-talk to help sell burgers. But the voice at the other end of the intercom is willing to listen. Someone is finally willing to listen. And Bowker can't say it. He wishes someone would listen, but it's unspeakable.*

On the tenth go around the lake, Bowker thinks, "There was nothing to say. He could not talk about it and never would." If it were possible, though it wasn't, he would have explained how Kiowa slipped under the mud, and became the waste of war. Bowker had pulled on Kiowa's boot but the smell overtook him and because of that he fled and lost the Silver Star. Bowker would tell his father the truth, which was that he let Kiowa go. He imagined his father would say maybe Kiowa was gone already, but Bowker would say he wasn't. His father would say "But maybe." But Bowker would be insistent; he would say he felt it. His father would be in the passenger seat, and he would say that Bowker still won the seven medals.

*Bowker is haunted by the image of Kiowa sinking under and he can't get past how guilty he feels about letting go. He thinks he was brave—he didn't expect to be so brave—but it wasn't enough, and that is the distinction that is driving him mad. His imaginary father, which is also his own rational side, tries to talk him out of this despair. But in the end it can only invoke the medals Bowker won, which Bowker pursued because of the social obligations he felt as a soldier and to make his father proud, but which have left him isolated in the post-war world and did nothing to save Kiowa.*

On Bowker's twelfth circulation, the fireworks start to go off. He parks, gets out of his car, and wades into the lake with his clothes on. The water is warm and he fully immerses himself. He lest his lips open a little to get a taste. He stands up with his arms folded and watches the fireworks. He decides that it's a pretty good show for a small town.

*Bowker's self-immersion in the lake mirrors the night in the shit field and Kiowa's death by sinking, except now Bowker is home and it's water in his mouth. It's Independence Day and there's a huge show celebrating America and its victory in war, shiny lights in the sky like shiny medals on a uniform, but Bowker is still alone, with no one listening to his unspeakable thoughts.*

## NOTES

O'Brien notes that he wrote "Speaking of Courage" in 1975 after Norman Bowker asked him to. Three years after that, Bowker hanged himself in the YMCA locker room in his hometown in Iowa. In the spring of 1975, O'Brien received a long, frazzled letter from Bowker talking about his difficulty finding any "meaningful use for his life after the war." He'd worked odd jobs. He'd enrolled in junior college, but the work didn't seem important compared to what was at stake in war, and he dropped out. He spent mornings in bed and in the afternoons he went to the YMCA to play basketball. At night he drove around in his father's car, sometimes with a six-pack of beer.

*This story serves as a post-script to "Speaking of Courage," and an explanation for how O'Brien wrote that previous story. It serves to show the contrast between the story O'Brien wrote and what he actually received from Bowker. Bowker couldn't handle the social obligations he felt after the war to be a functioning and productive member of society after he had seen the world in all its cruelty while in Vietnam.*

Bowker confides in his letter that there's nowhere for his life to go. He says it's as though he died in Vietnam, and he's still haunted by the night that Kiowa died. He feels like he went down under the shit with Kiowa. Bowker chastises himself for complaining too much because he doesn't hate anything more than a "whiner-vet."

*Bowker's letter is a desperate cry for help. He has no one to talk to. But in keeping with being a strong soldier—in meeting the social obligation of being a strong soldier—he refuses to be a "whiner."*

At the end of the letter Bowker says that he read O'Brien's first book, which he mostly liked except for the politics. He requests that O'Brien write a story about a guy like him, who feels like he's come back dead from the war and spends his days driving around. He even tells O'Brien that things from his letter can be used, but he requests that O'Brien change his name. Bowker says he would write the story, but he can't put into words the things he saw, especially Kiowa sinking dead into the mud.

*Bowker is reaching out to O'Brien because he knows that O'Brien is a writer and he was there the night Kiowa died. Bowker he can't put into words the pain and guilt he still feels over Kiowa's death. He believes that O'Brien—a storyteller—is his only hope for giving a voice to his experiences.*

O'Brien says that Bowker's letter really affected him. He says that he felt "a certain smugness" after the war for how easy it was for him to transition back into normal life. He went from Vietnam to graduate school, and never really talked about his experiences in the war—except for in his writing.

*O'Brien feels guilty for how easy it was for him to return home after the war without being severely traumatized, like Bowker had been.*

O'Brien says he didn't look at his writing explicitly like therapy, and he still doesn't. But after receiving the letter from Bowker he realized that the stories he was writing were important because it prevented them from being forgotten. The story becomes distinct from the writer, and becomes its own object. It can come from a fact, like Kiowa's death, and the story can spur on with details that are fictional to help the reader understand.

*This is O'Brien's view on the importance of storytelling and writing. The story, once written, exists separately from the writer. It takes on a life of its own. Because of this, it defies being forgotten, because it doesn't die in the mind of a living being. Rather, in writing it becomes eternal.*

Bowker's letter haunts O'Brien. A month later O'Brien decided to write Bowker's story. At the time he was writing the novel *Going After Cacciato* and within that he started a chapter titled "Speaking of Courage." He changed Bowker's name to the protagonist of the novel, Paul Berlin. He borrowed imagery from the memory of his own hometown. He wrote it in about two weeks and published it as a story. But O'Brien felt he had failed. In the version within his novel, O'Brien didn't include the "shit field" or Kiowa's death, forced to replace them with events from his book. He pulls the chapter from the novel.

*O'Brien tries his best to incorporate Bowker's story into his novel, but at the expense of losing the core truths of the story that Bowker wrote about in his letter and what happened in Vietnam. O'Brien knows that by sacrificing the truth for trying to wedge the story into his novel, the story is missing an essential element: the truth of what happened in the shit field.*

As the months passed, O'Brien pushed the thoughts of the failed story out of his mind. When the story was published in an anthology, he sent a copy to Bowker. Bowker's reply was short and sour, saying it wasn't "terrible" but he asked where the shit field was, or Vietnam, or Kiowa? Eight months after Bowker sent his reaction to the story to O'Brien, he hanged himself. In August of 1978, O'Brien received a note from Bowker's mother explaining the suicide. Bowker had played a game of basketball at the YMCA. He left the game for some water, and hanged himself with a jump rope from a water pipe. He didn't leave behind a suicide note. Bowker's mother tells O'Brien that her son had always been quiet, and she guesses he didn't want "to bother anybody."

*The proximity of Bowker's death to the publication of the story doesn't mean that they're necessarily correlated. However, there is the insinuation that because Bowker couldn't find words to put to the memories that were driving him mad, and he believed O'Brien to be his last hope, he ultimately gave up on living altogether. Bowker's mother is exemplary of Bowker's reticent character—he died refusing to be the "whining vet."*

O'Brien says that it has been a decade since Bowker's death at the time of re-writing "Speaking of Courage." He hopes that it "makes good on [Bowker's] silence." He says he doesn't think Bowker would mind that his real name is in the story. O'Brien claims it was hard to write because Kiowa had been such a close friend, and O'Brien had spent many years trying to avoid thinking about his death and "[his] own complicity in it." O'Brien says he wants it to be clear that Bowker is in no way responsible for Kiowa's death, he wasn't a failed hero. "That part of the story," O'Brien writes, "is [his] own."

*O'Brien is hoping that "Speaking of Courage" now, after all of its revisions, lives on as the voice that Bowker couldn't express to the world. He doesn't think that Bowker would mind having his real name used because O'Brien has faith in the truth of the story. In a twist, O'Brien implies that it was actually* his *fault that Kiowa died.*

## IN THE FIELD

It's morning and the platoon, consisting of eighteen soldiers, is slowly moving through a deep shit field in the rain trying to find Kiowa.

*Kiowa is dead, but the platoon can't find him because he's been buried under the monsoon rains in the shit field.*

Jimmy Cross yells at a young soldier to close up rank. The young soldier is separated from the group, standing in the center of the field reaching around under the muck. Jimmy Cross can't tell who it is. He thinks how Kiowa had been a great human being—perhaps the best. Kiowa's father taught Sunday school in Oklahoma City in Kiowa's hometown. Jimmy Cross thinks Kiowa's death was a crime.

*The foreshadowing in "Notes," points to the young man's identity as Tim O'Brien. Cross thinks that Kiowa's death is a crime, which is a bold statement in a war where anyone's death is possible. For Cross, Kiowa's death is a crime against anything good left in the world.*

When Jimmy Cross looks at the river he knows he made a mistake setting up his men there. Even though he was following orders, he could have found a way around them. They should have moved to higher ground or sent in false coordinates over the radio. He knew it was pointless to think of what he could have done now that Kiowa was dead, but he felt sick. He started to write a letter in his head to Kiowa's father to tell him what a great soldier his son had been.

*Jimmy Cross did what he should have done, what his obligations were. He followed orders. But in his heart he knew better than those orders, but he didn't have the courage or will to disobey them. Now he blames himself, and as a way to cope with his guilt, he starts to think up a letter to Kiowa's dad as a way to apologize for letting Kiowa die on his watch.*

The search was slow going. Azar, Norman Bowker, and Mitchell Sanders searched along the edge of the field. Azar said Kiowa would find his death ironic, and if he were there he would laugh. "Eating shit—it's your classic irony." Azar keeps talking about Kiowa's death, and how it's ironic and classic that the "redskin" dies in the cowboy movie. Bowker insists that he be quiet. The soldiers knew there was nothing they could do for Kiowa; they just had to find him and get him on a helicopter. When men died, the desire was to get things over with.

*Azar doesn't know any other way to deal with death than to make a joke of it. If Azar compares death to a comic irony or a movie, it doesn't carry the weight of a real death. The men wanted to get things over with when someone died because the best thing to do was to try to forget about what happened for a little while.*

Mitchell Sanders stops in the middle of the field and fishes out a green rucksack. Inside they find a pair of moccasins and a copy of the New Testament. Sanders says Kiowa must be close. Bowker says they should tell Lieutenant Jimmy Cross, but Sanders refuses, claiming it's Cross' fault Kiowa is dead for stationing them there. Bowker says it wasn't Cross' fault. Sanders demands to know whose fault it is, and Bowker's responds that it was no-one's fault.

*Mitchell Sanders is quick to blame Cross because Cross was the leader. Bowker disagrees, but is it because he truly thinks at this time that it's no one's fault? We know from previous stories that Bowker comes to think that Kiowa's death is his own fault because he didn't have the courage to save him.*

Jimmy Cross is fifty meters away from the three men. He's finished composing the letter to Kiowa's father in his mind, and now watches as his platoon searches for Kiowa. It reminds him of a golf course in his hometown in New Jersey when people search for a lost ball, and he wishes he was back there.

*The stakes in the game of golf are different than the stakes of war: a lost ball is different than a lost man. Cross longs for the lack of responsibility.*

Jimmy Cross never wanted to be a leader. He had signed up for the Reserve Officer Training Corps in his sophomore year of college because his friends had signed up and it was worth class credit. After all of those months in Vietnam, he still doesn't know how to "keep his men out of a shit field."

*Cross wants to be a good leader, but only because he's been forced to become one. He feels he's failed his men and it's his fault that Kiowa died because he hasn't learned anything about being a leader.*

Jimmy Cross recalls two old women from the nearby village who had come out to warn him that that this was evil ground, but he was following his orders and told his men to set up there. As the night went Mitchell Sanders crawled over and asked Cross what he was doing stationing them in a shit field. Cross knows he made a mistake, and it had been stupid, but it had cost Kiowa his life. He resolves to apologize to Kiowa's father in the letter.

*Cross can't shake the image of Mitchell Sanders and the two village women telling him that it was an evil field because it serves as confirmation to him that he made a grave error. His guilt and sense of responsibility swell up so much that he decides to change the nature of the letter to Kiowa's father and apologize outright.*

Jimmy Cross again notices the young soldier and approaches him. The young soldier was trying not to cry, because he blamed himself for Kiowa's death. The night before as they had huddled under their ponchos in the rain, Kiowa had laughed off the conditions and said they should talk about good things, so they exchanged stories about home. Then, the young soldier remembered he'd shown Kiowa a picture of his girlfriend and he switched on his flashlight, which was a stupid thing to do. Kiowa had said she was cute. Then the field started to explode around them. The young soldier thought Kiowa's death was like murder, and his flashlight had caused it so he was responsible.

*Cross doesn't get angry at the soldier for not being a part of the search for Kiowa. He attributes the young soldier's state to the chaos of the night, and he blames himself for that chaos. The young soldier is Tim O'Brien. He believes he murdered Kiowa because he turned on his flashlight to show Kiowa a picture of his girlfriend, Billie. He feels like he murdered his best friend in the war, because the flashlight might as well have been a beacon to the enemy.*

The young soldier remembered the screams when the mortar fire hit. One of them was Kiowa's. He tried to crawl towards the screaming, but when he reached Kiowa and tried to grab his boot, it wouldn't budge. He whispered Kiowa's name and let go. "He'd lost everything." Kiowa was dead; his weapon, flashlight, and the picture of his girlfriend were gone. He wondered if he could lose himself too.

*O'Brien's memory is that Kiowa was already dead, suggesting that Bowker's guilt is unnecessary. Bowker blames himself. Cross blames himself. O'Brien blames himself. The truth is unclear. It could have been no one's fault. Three is no moral to this story.*

The young soldier seems panicked and doesn't look up when Jimmy Cross gets to him. The young soldier keeps saying, "Right here...Got to be right here." Cross steps in and says Kiowa could be anywhere in the field. The young soldier says Kiowa is dead, and asks instead about Billie, his girlfriend in the picture. He had lost it, but he kept it wrapped in plastic so it should be OK. Cross insists the young soldier can get another picture from her, but the young soldier says Billie isn't even his girlfriend anymore and he has to find it. He keeps searching through the muck. Cross walks away, thinking about the letter to Kiowa's father.

*O'Brien is frantic to find the picture of Billie because he feels that's all he has left. The picture links him to home and a person he cares about that is still alive. He feels like he can't lose the picture if it's the reason Kiowa died, because then Kiowa would have truly died for naught. Cross feels pity for the young soldier, but he's too preoccupied with his own guilt to help in the soldier's search. He has to keep thinking of the best way to write his letter to Kiowa's father.*

Azar, Norman Bowker, and Mitchell Sanders are across the field still searching. It's almost noon when Bowker finds Kiowa. Bowker looks at Azar after touching the protruding boot and asks where the joke is, but Azar says there isn't one. They find Kiowa's other boot in the muck and start to pull hard, but there's little give. They call over Henry Dobbins and Rat Kiley, but even the five men couldn't pull Kiowa out. Azar moved to the bank with a pale face, gripping his stomach. The rest get out their tools and begin to dig around Kiowa. Everyone else comes over to watch except for Jimmy Cross and the young soldier.

*Even Azar has no jokes left at this unspeakable situation. It makes this boy, who thought nothing of blowing up a puppy, sick. Jimmy Cross and O'Brien are off alone in the field, still reeling from their own guilt.*

They finally pull Kiowa out. Part of his shoulder is gone and his chest, arms, and face were cut from shrapnel. Dobbins said it could be worse. Jensen asks him how, but Dobbins doesn't answer. They all carry the body, trying not to look at it, over to the dike where they used towels to clean off some of the muck. Rat Kiley goes through Kiowa's pockets and puts his things in a plastic bag, then tapes it to Kiowa's wrist. Then he radios the chopper to come.

*Dobbins says it could be worse to mean Kiowa could look a lot worse. Jensen asks how it could possibly be worse because no matter how Kiowa looks, he's still dead. There's no way it could be worse. Rat Kiley moves quickly so that he can get away from the body to try to escape the reality of Kiowa's death.*

The men move away from the body. Some smoke, some open up cans of food, others stand in the rain. They are all relieved to be done with the search, now they can look forward to being somewhere else. They all feel bad for Kiowa, but feel a secret happiness that they were still alive.

*In an earlier story O'Brien commented that coming close to death made you cling to life. But there is a guilt to that clinging when it is another man's death.*

Azar sits next to Bowker and says he doesn't mean anything bad by the jokes he tells. Azar feels like Kiowa was listening to him. He admits to feeling guilty, that if perhaps he hadn't made any jokes then Kiowa wouldn't have died. Azar feels like it's all his fault. Bowker says it was no one person's fault: it was everybody's fault.

*Even Azar feels guilty—because he was telling jokes! Notice how Bowker has moved from "it's no one's fault" to "it's everyone's fault." On one hand he sounds like a voice of reason. On the other hand, we can see his trajectory toward finally thinking it was his own fault.*

Jimmy Cross is near the center of the field almost completely covered in the muck. He keeps thinking about his letter to Kiowa's father, except he's crafted a new impersonal version as an officer sending his condolences. He didn't apologize in the letter because it was a freak accident and it was a war, and there was no point in apologizing when it wouldn't change the fact that Kiowa was dead.

*Cross has revised the letter to something official—he uses the official language to hide, and hide from, his own guilt.*

Jimmy Cross knew that "when a man died, there had to be blame." Blame could be put on the war, the people who started the war, Kiowa for going to the war, the rain, the river, the field, the mud, the climate, the enemy, the mortar rounds, the people who didn't read the newspaper or switched the channel on TV when they heard about politics, the nations involved, God, ammunition manufacturers, Karl Marx, fate, an old man "in Omaha who forgot to vote." But the causes in the field were immediate, and a bad call or stupid mistake had eternal consequences.

*But Cross knows that despite all the things you could blame, ultimately it comes down to the decisions made by the commander in the field. He knows it's his own fault.*

Jimmy Cross keeps floating in the water of the river for a long time. From the east there was a chopper arriving, but he can't hear it. He lets himself slip away, back home to New Jersey where he's on the golf course teeing up at the first hole. He thinks maybe after the war ends he will write to Kiowa's father or maybe he won't. Maybe he will take a few practice swings and then hit the ball and carry his clubs with him to the next hole.

*Cross has to keep ignoring everything around him to try to remain calm because the guilt is overwhelming to him. He thinks back to New Jersey and golf, where the stakes aren't life or death. And he doesn't write the letter at all.*

## GOOD FORM

O'Brien says it's time for him to be blunt. He is forty-three years old and a writer, and in Vietnam he was in the Quang Ngai Province as a soldier. "Almost everything else is invented." It's not a game, though; storytelling is a form. As he writes he invents himself, and he's thinking of all the things he wants to tell the reader about why the book was written. Twenty years ago near My Khe he saw **a young man** die on a trail, but he didn't kill him. His presence was enough to make him guilty. He felt responsible and blamed himself, which was the right thing to do because he was there. But he insists, "even that story is made up." He wants the reader to feel what he felt and know why "story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth."

*O'Brien tries to toy with the reader's understanding of Truth in the collection of stories. For O'Brien there is "story-truth" and "happening truth". Happening-truth is the basic facts that can't be changed. Story-truth lets those facts be modified to suit a better understanding of what happened. By claiming he didn't kill the man outside of My Khe, he was just there, and then saying even that part is made up he is intentionally disorienting the reader's understanding of Truth, and what demarcates fact from fiction.*

The happening-truth: O'Brien was once a soldier and there were many dead people in Vietnam. He was young and afraid to look at the bodies. Now, twenty years after leaving the war he still feels the responsibility and grief for the faceless.

*These are the plain facts that cannot be changed. He feels guilty over what happened in the war and horrified by the death he saw, but he was young and afraid to look at the bodies.*

The story-truth: **the young, dead man** was slim and around the age of twenty. He died in the center of the trail near My Khe. One eye was shut and the other had a star shaped hole. O'Brien killed him.

*In the story version, he looks at the bodies and gives the dead young man a face. He kills him in the story version because in the happening version he can truly convey what it felt like to feel guilty for killing him. Who actually killed him in happening-truth didn't matter. What mattered was how he felt.*

O'Brien says that stories can make things present. It lets him look at things he didn't look at in the war, and he can put a face to the feeling of guilt and blame, even God. He can be brave and make himself feel something.

*Stories allow O'Brien to address memories he has long suppressed, and he can construct an identity for the nameless corpse, like the man he "maybe" killed.*

When O'Brien's daughter Kathleen asks him to tell the truth about whether he killed anyone he can honestly say no and he can honestly say yes.

*War obliterates the line between fact and fiction, as do stories. In war there is no Truth, and in stories O'Brien relies on memory to construct a story that explains what he remembers, how he felt—not necessarily what happened. He felt like he killed that man, whether he did or didn't.*

## FIELD TRIP

A few months after Tim O'Brien finished writing "In the Field" he brings his daughter, Kathleen, with him to Vietnam to visit the field where Kiowa died. He's looking for "forgiveness or personal grace or whatever else the land might offer."

*O'Brien feels obligated to show his daughter his history in addition to feeling an obligation to returning to the place that changed him, hoping it will offer him relief.*

The field is not as O'Brien remembers it: smaller, not as scary, and mostly dry. He thinks the place is peaceful now. He sees two farmers along the river repairing the same dike Kiowa's body had rested on after five men pulled him out of the muck. A farmer looks up at O'Brien, but then goes back to work. O'Brien feels amazed by the fact that twenty years have passed.

*The moment strikes a stark contrast between the vast and hopeless feeling we experience when reading about the night Kiowa died compared to this place where farmers are working in order to cultivate land that, to O'Brien and his platoon, was just a shit field.*

Kathleen is in a jeep with a government interpreter. O'Brien doesn't think either knows why he insisted on making the two-hour journey from Quang Ngai City in the August heat to that particular field. Kathleen gets out of the car and tells O'Brien she thinks the field smells terrible. O'Brien agrees. She asks if they can leave, and he promises they will soon.

*O'Brien keeps secret from his daughter and the interpreter his motives for going to the field because while he feels like it is something he has to do, he thinks that they won't understand.*

O'Brien conceived of the trip as a birthday present for Kathleen, who had just turned ten. He wanted to show her the world and some of his history. One morning Kathleen asked O'Brien what the purpose of the war had been, and why everyone had been so angry. O'Brien says people weren't mad, "some people wanted one thing, other people wanted another thing." Kathleen asks what O'Brien wanted and he says, "To stay alive." She continues by asking why O'Brien was in Vietnam, and he says he didn't have a choice. She still questions why, and he resolved, "it's a mystery." Kathleen was quiet the rest of the day, but that night she approached O'Brien and accused him of being weird—how some "dumb thing happens a long time ago and you can't ever forget it." O'Brien asks if that's a bad thing, and she says it isn't—it's just weird.

*O'Brien's answer to his daughter regarding the purpose of the war shows that after twenty years he still hasn't found a purpose or meaning in why he was sent to Vietnam—it's still a mystery to him too. Kathleen can't qualify her father's inability to move on as bad or good, just weird. It's not a moral question, rather it's a part of O'Brien's personality she doesn't understand.*

O'Brien wonders, as he looks out over the field, whether they made a mistake and went to the wrong place because it seems too calm and quiet. He tries to remember Kiowa's face. He thought of how the field had swallowed Kiowa as well as O'Brien's pride, his ability to believe in himself as a courageous, dignified man. Even though he thought of the field that way, O'Brien couldn't find emotion to accompany it, and blamed his inability to feel on the conditions of the night Kiowa died. O'Brien thinks of how he's struggled to show empathy and passion throughout his life and how he has blamed the field and what happened there for this emotional block.

*There's a cruelty in the peace of the field to O'Brien because he believes it already took so much from him—so for it to be at peace is an affront to what he feels is a lack of personal progress. O'Brien has always blamed the field for his emotional shortcomings, and it exists as a calm and peaceful part of the Vietnamese countryside, with no physical markers of the war while he is still haunted by it every day.*

O'Brien wanders along the river and watches the two farmers' work, takes more photos, and waves. Kathleen asks if they can leave, and he promises they will soon. O'Brien retrieves a bundle from the back of the car that he'd brought from home. Kathleen asks what it is, but he doesn't say—so she follows him out of the jeep while he walks back to the field. O'Brien walks to a point where the field merges into shallow water. O'Brien tells Kathleen he's going for a swim. She watches O'Brien unwrap the bundle, and Kiowa's old moccasins are inside.

*O'Brien is here to bury Kiowa's moccasins into the marsh, a task he'd kept secret from Kathleen during their trip. He brought the moccasins because O'Brien wanted to bury part of Kiowa where he died, and he thinks if he's the one to do it, it will help assuage some of his guilt over his friend's death.*

O'Brien strips down to his underwear and wades in. Kathleen says what O'Brien is doing is stupid. O'Brien got to where the water reached his knees and decided that was where Mitchell Sanders found Kiowa's rucksack. O'Brien sits into the muck and then wedges the moccasins into the bottom of the marsh. He tries to think of something to say, but can't. He eventually says, "Well…There it is." He wanted to confess to Kiowa how great of a friend he'd been.

*O'Brien is at a loss for words because he has twenty years worth of things to say, but they are an unspeakable mixture of love and sadness and guilt. And so he says "There it is." And that does capture his feelings, because in that moment for him this field is all there is, Kiowa's death is all there is—in that moment. And the moccasins are all he has to offer as apology.*

O'Brien thinks that maybe he went under with Kiowa, and after twenty years he's getting closer to emerging. One of **the old farmers** is watching O'Brien, and O'Brien stares back. O'Brien "felt something go shut in [his] heart while something else swung open." He wondered whether **the old farmer** would come over to exchange war stories, but he goes back to work after saying something to the other working farmer. He lifts his shovel up over his head "grimly, like a flag." O'Brien gets out of the water.

*O'Brien thinks that maybe he's close to finally getting out from under the muck, because a part of him died the night Kiowa did. He thinks maybe he's healing The comparison of the old farmer raising his shovel like a flag shows the boundaries between these men still based on nationality, but they're not raising guns, they're raising tools to work on cultivating their land.*

Kathleen says her father looks like a mess, and threatens to tell O'Brien's wife. O'Brien agrees, and says Kathleen shouldn't tell her mother what he did. Kathleen looks back over the field when they get to the car. She asks if the **old farmer** is mad at O'Brien. O'Brien says he hopes not. Kathleen says the old farmer looks mad, but O'Brien assures her he's not. "All that's finished."

*O'Brien's insistence that the old farmer isn't mad is important because it shows that the war is over in the happening-sense. It just exists for O'Brien in the realm of the story. The water that once took Kiowa is now the water that sustains crops; the positive and negative forces have flipped.*

## THE GHOST SOLDIERS

O'Brien was shot twice. The first time was near Tri Binh and he landed on Rat Kiley's lap, which was fortunate because Rat was a medic. Kiley tied a compress onto O'Brien, told him to stay back, and then he ran back into combat. O'Brien praises Rat's bravery and skill.

*Rat Kiley's competence and lack of fear comfort O'Brien when he fears he might be dying.*

When O'Brien returned to Alpha Company in December twenty-six days after he was shot, Rat Kiley had been wounded and taken to Japan. The replacement medic was Bobby Jorgenson. Jorgenson was new, terrified, and "incompetent." When O'Brien was shot the second time in the butt, Jorgenson took ten minutes to get to O'Brien because he had been too afraid to crawl over in the firefight. By the time Jorgenson reached O'Brien he was in severe pain, and it was later found out O'Brien nearly died of shock. Jorgenson didn't do a good job patching O'Brien up, and because of it weeks after that part of O'Brien's flesh started to rot off. O'Brien had to spend a month in the hospital on his stomach. O'Brien started thinking up ways to get back at Jorgenson.

*O'Brien comes back to duty after Rat Kiley has already left (see the story "Night Life). The new medic isn't like Rat Kiley at all; he's new to the war. O'Brien is haunted by the night where he nearly died, and all he wants to do is get back at Jorgenson for his failure in the field in whatever way he can.*

By December's end, O'Brien was transferred to headquarters Company—S-4, "the battalion supply section," because the Army must have decided he'd "been shot enough." In comparison to being a foot soldier, it was a peaceful life, and O'Brien felt sort of safe for the first time in months. There was still a chance of dying, at least once a month they would be hit with mortar fire—but you can also die from a foul ball in a baseball stadium.

*O'Brien feels safer than he ever has in the war after he's been transferred, even though there's the occasional attack. It shows how the war warps perception of safety, because a deadly attack at least once a month, for most people, would not give them any sense of safety and wouldn't be comparable to a foul ball in a stadium.*

Though O'Brien sometimes misses the thrill of combat he knows his war is over. If it weren't for the constant pain in his butt things would have been fine, but the pain wouldn't subside and he had to keep sleeping on his stomach. Unable to sleep, he'd focus on his anger towards Jorgenson. Some nights when he couldn't sleep he'd go on long walks, thinking up ways to hurt Jorgenson and make him feel as O'Brien had when he thought he was dying.

*Perhaps if O'Brien hadn't been in such constant pain he could have let his grudge against Jorgenson go, but the pain wouldn't let up and O'Brien's anger only swelled. Just as all the soldiers tend to focus their emotions on one thing, O'Brien focuses on Jorgensen.*

In March, the Alpha Company came to the HQ. Mitchell Sanders, Azar, Henry Dobbins, Dave Jensen, and Norman Bowker all shook O'Brien's hand and he drove them to their quarters. They partied until it was time to eat, and then kept partying after. It was a ritual. Even if you didn't want to party, you "did it on principle." Once it reached midnight it was time for stories. Bowker tells the story of how Morty Phillips used up his luck. Azar insists that Phillips wasted away all of his luck on "*nothing*." O'Brien envied them in a way, and felt left out. They were all scratched up from the war they were still fighting and his clothes were pressed. They were still his friends, but things had changed. O'Brien felt like a civilian.

*The return of the company to O'Brien's quasi-new life in the war starts to show the gap that has grown between him and the men he sees still as his brothers. They party as they're supposed to—it's a principle, to party because it was a statement that you were still alive. They tell stories to O'Brien to try to communicate how things have been, but O'Brien isn't really part of the war anymore, which cuts him off from the true camaraderie, from truly understanding the adrenaline driven non-morality of war.*

Bowker continues with the story of Morty Phillips. Near My Khe on a scorching day, everyone notices that Morty is missing. Two search patrols went out, but no one could find him. Morty shows up that night and it turns out he had gone swimming alone in a hostile area. A few days after the swim, he started to get really sick and Jorgenson concluded Morty must to have swallowed some water on his swim that gave him a virus. O'Brien asks where Jorgenson is at the sound of his name, but Bowker brushes it off to finish his story. Morty gets so sick that he becomes paralyzed. The men all agree that it shows that you can't go around using up all your luck. Everyone was quiet for a while thinking about the nature of luck. O'Brien asks where Jorgenson is to break the silence.

*The story of Morty Phillips is about the arbitrariness of death in war, which the men choose to call luck because that makes it feel like they have some semblance of control over their fate. They try to quantify luck, even though they all know it's impossible. All O'Brien can think about as the story progresses, though, is Jorgenson. He just wants to find Jorgenson, who he has not yet seen, to get his revenge for getting him booted out of the war.*

In the first day that Alpha Company was there, O'Brien didn't see Bobby Jorgenson. He nearly went searching for him, but Mitchell Sanders encouraged O'Brien to let it go. He said Jorgensen made a mistake, but he was new to the war and he's improved a lot. He kept Morty Phillips alive. Sanders says that things have changed, and Jorgenson is with them now. O'Brien asks if he isn't, and Sanders says "No…I guess you're not." Sanders walks away, and O'Brien felt angry but also grief. Soon they would all leave, and O'Brien would be left there. He felt betrayed.

*O'Brien didn't want to fight in the war. He hated being in the war, the constant fear, the death all around him. And yet when he's knocked out of the war he feels great. There is beauty in war too. Terrible beauty, sure, but the war creates a camaraderie among men, an adrenaline rush, that nothing else can replace. Jorgensen is in now; and O'Brien, even though he knows what war was like isn't in the war now, and so he's out.*

The next morning O'Brien saw Bobby Jorgenson. Jorgenson was waiting at O'Brien's jeep for him. O'Brien was surprised. Jorgenson admits to O'Brien that he made a mistake and he apologizes. He confesses he couldn't move when O'Brien got hit, and asks if O'Brien ever felt that way. O'Brien says he hasn't. Jorgenson tries to ask again but O'Brien accuses him of making excuses. Jorgenson then says he made a mistake, no excuses. He feels terrible about the infections that O'Brien got, and has had nightmares about seeing O'Brien get shot again. Jorgenson made a sound and O'Brien thought he was going to cry, which O'Brien said would have ended it. But Jorgenson smiled forcefully and extended his hand. O'Brien glared at him and said it wasn't this easy to apologize for nearly killing him. Jorgenson kept his hand out, and he looked so genuinely upset that O'Brien felt guilty. But not guilty enough, because he left Jorgenson standing there and drove away. But he hated Jorgenson now for "making [him] stop hating him."

*Jorgenson is suffering the same sort of guilt that all of the other soldiers do, for so many other reasons. But this guilt just further marks Jorgensen as someone who "was with them now," which further drives home how O'Brien isn't. So now O'Brien can't hate Jorgensen—he knows full well what Jorgensen was going through when he failed to help O'Brien, and he knows the guilt Jorgensen is experiencing. But in ceasing to be something that O'Brien can blame, Jorgensen steals something else from O'Brien. So he hates Jorgensen even more.*

O'Brien says something had gone wrong; he didn't used to be a vengeful person. The war had turned him into a mean man, even cruel. In spite of his education and values there was now something dark and cold in him that he felt was capable of doing evil things. He wanted to hurt Jorgenson the way he had been hurt.

*O'Brien, like all the soldiers, like Mary Anne in Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong, is changed by the war in ways he can't escape, understand, or control. The war is inside him.*

That afternoon, O'Brien tried to employ Sanders to help him spook Jorgenson, but Sanders refused. O'Brien resolved to use Azar, who was ready and willing. O'Brien told him to not get too carried away with it. O'Brien says that no one liked Azar that much, including O'Brien. O'Brien asked if Azar understood, and Azar winked and said it was, "Only a game, right?"

*Sanders won't help out O'Brien because Jorgenson is one of them now, but Azar gladly will because he's always up for causing chaos. Azar doesn't take anything seriously; he's emblematic of chaos in the collection—he sees no boundary between right and wrong, everything to him is a game, including the war, but it's a game with no rules.*

In Vietnam, the soldiers called the enemies "ghosts." The countryside of Vietnam was already scary at night, and it seemed like the whole place came alive at night with Charlie Cong as the main ghost. You never saw him, but you almost did, and you were afraid of him. In the daylight, it seemed like a joke. But at night you believed he was out there.

*Charlie Cong is a reference to the Viet Cong, which the soldiers used to call Charlie for short. Death could come from anywhere at any time. It, and the fear of it, were like ghost.*

O'Brien almost calls off the plan a number of times. Sanders' comments made him want to cancel the plan, and if there had been a way out that was dignified he maybe would have taken it. That night at dinner he kept looking across the hall at Jorgenson, and when they made eye contact and Jorgenson kind of nodded at him, But looking at Jorgenson sitting with Dave Jensen and Mitchell Sanders, and fitting in really well, pushed O'Brien over the edge in deciding to go through with it.

*It's not the fact that Jorgensen's failure almost killed him that now spurs on O'Brien. It's that Jorgensen now belongs, now is part of the war, while O'Brien does not. O'Brien finally gets out of the war he never wanted to be a part of, and it drives him nuts. Note also how it's shame that keeps O'Brien from backing out. He can't see how to back out without looking foolish, so he keeps on going.*

That night, O'Brien and Azar follow Jorgenson as he goes out for his post. They watch Jorgenson get ready for the night. Azar compared Jorgenson to a roasted, sizzling pigeon on a spit. O'Brien reminds Azar this isn't "for real." But Azar claps him on the shoulder and asks, "What's real? Eight months in fantasyland, it tends to blur the line. Honest to God, I sometimes can't remember what real *is*."

*O'Brien has already set everything up to scare Jorgenson, now it's a matter of waiting for the right time to strike. Azar's comment emphasizes how the war blurs the lines of what's real, what's right, and what's moral.*

O'Brien says psychology was key, and he knew how it worked. You don't scare people in the daylight, you wait because darkness forces you inside yourself, it cuts you off from the world, and your imagination becomes more powerful than ever.

*O'Brien knew he had to get his revenge at night, because it was the fear, the lack of knowing brought on by night, that let the fear spread.*

Azar and O'Brien pass the time until it's late, then they get their gear from O'Brien's. O'Brien says it felt like he was a soldier again: they stayed quiet, keeping under the cover of darkness. When they reached Bunker Six, where Jorgenson was, Azar started to move away to circle south and O'Brien was reminded of old times.

*O'Brien insists on waiting because he wants that darkness to really settle in for Jorgenson. As they approach Jorgenson, O'Brien feels like he's a soldier again and it's both a good and bad feeling: one he misses and one he hates.*

O'Brien was thirty-two meters behind Jorgenson and even though it was dark he could see his silhouette. O'Brien prepared ten flares and reached for the ropes he'd set up earlier. But he felt the coldness in him; he wasn't himself. O'Brien took the first rope and tugged it, and there was a clatter outside of the wire near Jorgenson. Altogether there were eight ropes: four for O'Brien, four for Azar. Each one was connected to a noisemaker in front of Jorgenson's post. Then O'Brien tugged all four of his ropes, and he knew Jorgenson was listening because it seemed like the silhouette froze. Azar started too tugging too.

*O'Brien is aware he's not acting like himself as he does this, he has difficult recognizing who he is and how the war has changed him into a person that would do this to Jorgenson. But that coldness in him, that amorality that is so pervasive in the war, takes precedence and demands revenge.*

After taking a break to let Jorgensen's fear grow, O'Brien and Azar start with the ropes again, even louder than before. "There was nothing moral in the world. The night was absolute." They tugged the ropes to bring the noisemakers closer to Jorgenson's bunker. At 3 a.m. Azar set off the first flare. O'Brien fired off three more and "it was instant daylight." Jorgensen moved, and it sounded like he made a kind of cry, almost like a bark. He moved sideways and crouched near a pile of sandbags clutching his rifle. O'Brien whispered to himself that now Jorgensen knew what it felt like. O'Brien could read Jorgenson's mind, and together they understood terror. It strips your humanity, all you can do is wait, and now they shared that feeling. O'Brien felt close to Jorgenson but not in an empathetic way.

*O'Brien re-emphasizes the amorality of the situation, the only thing that was absolute was the darkness, and in that darkness was the ability to terrify Jorgenson and get the revenge he had been plotting for so long. When they finally scare Jorgenson, O'Brien confirms to himself and in a pseudo-telepathic way to Jorgenson that now he knows how O'Brien felt that night he was shot. How death reduces you to a non-human, waiting thing. Notice how O'Brien has essentially become the enemy, and the closeness he feels is a closeness between enemies.*

O'Brien bent towards Azar, and they're so close he can see the whites of Azar's eyes. O'Brien says they've done enough, but Azar won't have it. O'Brien says it's over, he and Jorgenson are even, and they're just rubbing it in if they keep going. But Azar just said "Poor, poor boy."

*When Azar says poor boy, he's talking about both Jorgenson and O'Brien, because now he—Azar—is in control.*

An hour before sunrise, O'Brien and Azar went into the last phase, but Azar was in control. As they approach the boulder pile, Azar checks the ropes and flares. He looks over to where Jorgenson is. He tells O'Brien he sort of feels like a kid again; that he loves Vietnam. O'Brien tells him to be quiet, but Azar continues, smiling. He asks O'Brien isn't this what he wanted, to play war games like you're in your backyard? Azar said it probably brought back memories for O'Brien for when he was a real soldier, except now he's a "has-been" who just plays soldier. He calls O'Brien "pitiful," and says he would rather die in battle than be him. O'Brien asks him to stop, but Azar keeps repeating that he's pitiful.

*O'Brien feels guilty now about what they are doing, but he doesn't leave Azar alone with it. Just like Azar feels like he has to finish things, O'Brien feels like he can't just walk away from Azar finishing what O'Brien started. Azar teases O'Brien for being a kid trying to play war games and calls him pitiful, because he's not a part of the guys that are fighting anymore, and to Azar this looks like him trying to fit in, in a "pitiful" way.*

Azar returns to work on the ropes. O'Brien watched Azar and fire off another flare. O'Brien tried to say please but it wouldn't come out. There was a whimper, which O'Brien thought was Jorgenson's at first. Azar fired two more flares and threw a tear-gas grenade. O'Brien was begging Azar to stop, but he threw another. Then Azar went over to the rope they hadn't used yet: O'Brien's idea, a sandbag painted white on a pulley. Azar tugged the rope and the white sandbag hovered in the gas over bunker six. Jorgensen started to fire at the sandbag. Azar was excited by this and threw the last gas grenade, shot another flare, and then grabbed the rope to make the white sandbag dance. Jorgenson didn't lose it; he stood up quietly and aimed at the sandbag. His face seemed calm. He looked out into the dark, and then walked towards the sandbag. He put his rifle up to the sandbag. Jorgenson yelled O'Brien's name and fired. Azar said the show was over. O'Brien was still trembling. Azar looked at Jorgenson and then at O'Brien. He moved like he was going to help O'Brien up, then stopped, and as a kind of "afterthought," kicked O'Brien in the head. He walked off to go to sleep.

*O'Brien pleads with Azar to stop, and the whimper he hears is actually his own not Jorgenson's. He's powerless against Azar, he feels like he can barely move. Jorgenson's relatively calm reaction when he stands has a redemptive quality to it; it shows how much Jorgenson has changed in the war from when he botched O'Brien's injury treatment to now. His calmness marks the change that the war has on everyone once they're faced with death. It's not clear if Jorgenson knew who was responsible for all of this when he called out O'Brien's name, or if he's shooting at the ghost's that haunt him—his failure to get to O'Brien in time. Before leaving Azar kicks O'Brien in the head to show how pitiful he thinks O'Brien is.*

O'Brien insists to Jorgenson that the cut on his head isn't a big deal, but Jorgenson takes him to his bunker and uses a towel to wipe at the wound. They didn't talk for a long time. "So," Jorgenson said. "Right," O'Brien said. They shook hands and didn't make eye contact. Jorgenson pointed at the sandbag and said it was a nice touch. Jorgenson steadied O'Brien when he tried to stand and asked if they were even. O'Brien said they were, and he felt the same closeness he had before when he'd been shaking the ropes.

*Jorgenson has found O'Brien and insists on treating the wound that Azar inflicted. They keep their words to a minimum because there's little to say. Jorgensen asks if they're even (which is very reminiscent of "Enemies") and O'Brien finally agrees that they are. He feels close to Jorgenson again, but not in a friendly way. Just a closeness of understanding, the closeness of enemies.*

In the medic's hut, Jorgenson cleans and bandages O'Brien's gash to the forehead and then they both went to breakfast. O'Brien apologized and Jorgenson did too. Awkwardly, O'Brien suggested they should kill Azar. Jorgensen gave a half-grin, "Scare him to death, right?" O'Brien agreed. "What a movie!" Jorgenson said. O'Brien shrugged and then said, "Sure. Or just kill him."

*Jorgenson treats O'Brien even further to prove he isn't going to retaliate. At breakfast O'Brien finds himself seriously suggesting they kill Azar. The coldness in him from the war is still there; it has changed him. He would have never thought to murder someone before the war for retaliation.*

## NIGHT LIFE

O'Brien notes that he wasn't there when Rat Kiley was wounded, but he got the story later from Mitchell Sanders. The platoon had been west of Quang Ngai City and had received intelligence about a likely enemy attack, which fueled a number of more outrageous rumors involving the Russians. The soldiers didn't take the rumors seriously, but they still only walked at night and stayed off of the main trails for two weeks. The troops began to call it "the night life." It made the task seem more bearable to them to play this linguistic trick when they would ask the other how the night life was going.

*This deliberate play on words makes the task of walking through the nights more bearable. They used "night life," a term with a fun and rambunctious connotation, to describe a miserable task. O'Brien notes that this story was told to him secondhand by Mitchell Sanders, again re-iterating the importance of storytelling and how it is inevitable that stories are passed on, and important to say who passed them on to you.*

Sanders told O'Brien everyone was tense, but Rat Kiley took it the worst and it ended up with him in Japan. During the two weeks the routine was the same: sleep during the day (or try to) and then start marching single file at night. Sanders claimed it was the darkest dark he'd ever experienced. It was so dark it made you jittery and nervous, and you'd worry about being separated from the group. Different soldiers coped in different ways: Dave Jensen took vitamins high in carotene, Lt. Jimmy Cross took NoDoz, Henry Dobbins and Norman Bowker attached a safety wire between their two belts.

*Everyone had difficulty coping with the darkness. The laundry list of coping mechanisms is reminiscent of the first story of the collection "The Things They Carried" with itemized lists of how different soldiers acted to deal with the risk of their own death.*

Rat Kiley, though, was different than all the rest. Perhaps it had been that he had seen too many dead bodies put into bags, and too much gore. Initially, Kiley was completely quiet and didn't talk for five or six days. Then he was incapable of not talking, but on odd subjects like how the worst thing in the war were the bugs—that they were mutant bugs who were out to get him. He believed they were whispering his name. Kiley started to scratch himself constantly on his bug bites, and he developed giant scabs, which he ripped off where he'd then scratch the open wounds. "It was a sad thing to watch," because it wasn't the old Rat Kiley.

*Rat Kiley has finally had too much—he's seen so much death in the war and now, in the darkness, he can't escape it. Everyone knew that Rat Kiley was going off the rails, and it was sad to see because they knew it was the war that was doing it to him, and they were just as susceptible to falling prey to madness as Rat Kiley. It was sad because there was nothing they could do, and because they all knew it could happen to them, too.*

To a degree, everyone was feeling off, though. Moving only at night was disorienting and often felt like they were chasing ghosts. Around midnight things always seemed to become "wild," and you could hear "a strange hum in your ears" that you couldn't identify. It was like you were walking through Vietnam's body, "some kind of protoplasm…the blood and the flesh."

*The aimlessness that the soldiers feels parallels the meaninglessness that many feel about the war itself, and the purpose of life after the war. Notice the similarity between the description of walking at night and the description of Mary Anne's transformation in Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong.*

Rat Kiley finally lost it. He no longer slept, and the nights were too much for him. One afternoon, before the platoon started to march again, he cracked in front of Mitchell Sanders. He wasn't crying, but he was close. Maybe he'd been in Vietnam too long, or maybe he wasn't fit to be a medic. He stared at the ones who would survive and picture them dead or without limbs. He couldn't make the images stop. Kiley said the days weren't terrible but the nights were, because that's when he started to see images of himself: "chunks," his own organs. The darkness was a kind of crystal ball. He couldn't take it anymore.

*Rat Kiley has seen so much death that he can only see the living in terms of death. He can no longer see the life in anything. The darkness has driven him to the point of madness because he is only left with his thoughts, and when he can't see another soldier he can only picture* himself *dead.*

Sanders didn't know how to react and they sat for a while in silence. Rat Kiley shook Sanders' hand and said he'd done the best he could. He rambled for a while about some of the guys they'd lost: Curt Lemon, Kiowa, and Ted Lavender. Kiley said he couldn't wrap his head around how people who "were so incredibly alive could get so incredibly dead." Kiley nearly laughed, and then said the war was a giant banquet for the bugs.

*Rat Kiley essentially admits that he's bowing out of the war here. Even after all the death he has seen, he still can't understand the nature and immediacy of death—how it happens so instantaneously and with such permanence. He compares the war to a banquet for bugs—the bugs are the only ones that actually benefit from the war.*

The next morning Rat Kiley shot himself through the foot. He'd doped himself up with items from his medical kit first. Sanders said that no one blamed him for what he did. When the chopper came to take Kiley away, there was some time to say goodbye. Lt. Jimmy Cross vouched that the shooting had been an accident. Henry Dobbins and Azar gave Kiley comic books to read in the hospital. Everyone stood in a circle around him, and tried to cheer him up "with bullshit about the great night life in Japan."

*No-one tries to claim that Rat Kiley purposefully shot himself because everyone in the platoon understood what he was experiencing. They all know he's been pushed over the edge, so the "bullshit" about Japan and the night life is sad because it recognizes the effect the war has had on Kiley but also on the remaining men who can hardly see the joy in "night life" in the conventional sense of the word.*

## THE LIVES OF THE DEAD

O'Brien says stories can save us. As a forty-three year old writer, he continues to dream about people who have died as still being alive, like: Linda, Ted Lavender, Kiowa, Curt Lemon, the young man he killed, an old man beside a pigpen, and other bodies he lifted into a truck. While they're dead in reality, in a story the dead can return to the world for a while.

*Stories give the power to resurrect the dead in a way, not through their bodies but through their souls.*

O'Brien starts with a nameless body. In 1969 the platoon came under fire and Lieutenant Jimmy Cross radioed in an air strike, and the platoon watched the village burn to the ground. The village was deserted except for one dead, old man lying near a pigpen. Dave Jensen shook the dead man's hand. The other soldiers followed suit. It was O'Brien's fourth day in the war. He felt sick. Jensen urged O'Brien to go shake the dead man's hand, but O'Brien kept refusing. He felt sick for the rest of the day, not so much from seeing the body but the "act of greeting the dead." He recalls how the men propped the man up against a fence, crossed his legs, and talked to him. In the afternoon, Kiowa approached O'Brien and told O'Brien he did a good thing by not shaking the dead man's hand: "it took guts." O'Brien said it had nothing to do with courage he was just scared, but Kiowa says they're the same thing. Kiowa says that was probably O'Brien's first time seeing a dead body. O'Brien shakes his head, because he'd spent the day thinking of Linda.

*The soldiers feel the need to shake the dead man's hand to make death not seem quite as "real." By turning death into something darkly comic, they don't have to face their own mortality. They propose toasts, and O'Brien compares it to a kind of funeral without the sadness because even though there is a kind of mockery in the soldiers' behavior, it's not entirely disrespectful. Kiowa collapses the distinction between being afraid and "having guts" because he knows after being in Vietnam for longer than O'Brien they come down to being the same thing: it's the actions that come out of fear that result in heroism. For O'Brien though, he can only think of Linda when he sees the dead body, because hers was the first dead body he ever saw.*

O'Brien and Linda were both nine and they loved each other. As O'Brien looks back it can be tempting to try to dismiss it as childish, but he thinks it was true, mature love. In the spring of 1956, O'Brien took her out on the first date of his life. O'Brien's father drove them. She was wearing a new red cap, a stocking cap, which seemed stylish and sophisticated to O'Brien. It had a white tassel at the too-long tip. O'Brien wanted to compliment her and said something nice about her cap. Linda smiled, but O'Brien's mother turned to him from the front passenger seat and gave him a troubling look. They got to the movie theater and started looking at the concessions. They avoided eye contact, which O'Brien says is how they knew they were in love—"it was pure knowing," though neither would have thought to use the word love.

*The look O'Brien's mother gives him makes it clear that O'Brien's mother knew about Linda's condition before he did. O'Brien claims that the love between him and Linda was as real as a mature, adult love because he wants the reader to know that this wasn't just a childhood crush, but a permanent bond, founded on love, that made O'Brien so devoted to Linda—and what commits him to writing about her into the present.*

Ted Lavender took around five tranquilizers every morning, and it made his eyes peaceful. Even when they were in stressful situations, the drugs would give Lavender a dreamy expression. Someone would ask him how the war was going that day, and Lavender would smile and say it was, "Mellow—a nice smooth war today." In April, he died after being shot in the head. O'Brien, Kiowa, and others were responsible for preparing Lavender's body for the chopper. After collecting his personal effects and attaching them to him in a bag, Mitchell Sanders asked Lavender how the war was today. Someone said, "Mellow." Sanders kept egging the conversation on, and O'Brien said they could almost hear Lavender talking back. He says that's the function of a story: the bodies are alive and the dead speak again.

*This story about Ted Lavender is an example of how the dead return and live on in story form. The soldiers used Lavender's "mellowed" out attitude after he was shot to bring him into the present again. Lavender was still very much alive to them as they stood there talking to his corpse, and answering, as he would have. All of the soldiers find solace in this conversation they have with Lavender after he's died—in a way that parallels the old man that was dead by the pigpen by pretending it's not entirely real.*

O'Brien can still see Linda's silhouette in the theater. They saw *The Man Who Never Was*, whose protagonist was a corpse. It was a WWII film where the Allies dress up a body as an officer to fool the Nazis and it works. O'Brien remembers looking at Linda and thinking it was too grotesque for her, but she seemed to be smiling and O'Brien couldn't understand why. O'Brien had to cover his eyes a few times, and he hated to think of the heavy thump of the body hitting the water. He was relieved when the film was over.

*The movie choice and its thematic closeness to 'The Things They Carried' is ironic for a young O'Brien. O'Brien as a boy cannot stand the sound of the heavy thump of the body hitting the water, and that's the same shock he and the other soldiers experience in Vietnam when someone dies. Linda smiling is an acceptance of her own imminent death.*

In the next few weeks, Linda wore her new cap to school every day, never taking it off. She started to get teased by a boy named Nick Veenhof. He kept trying to sneak up to her and yank off her cap on the playground. O'Brien wanted to do something but it wasn't possible: "I had my reputation to think about. I had my pride." And Nick Veenhof was a problem. So O'Brien watched Linda deal with Veenhof and hold her cap close to her head. She smiled in Veenhof's direction "as if none of it really mattered."

*As a boy O'Brien can't bring himself to stand up for Linda because he's afraid of what people will say about him if he stands up for Linda—among nine-year olds, boys don't usually defend the girls. Linda's smile that signals none of it really mattered shows she knows her death is coming, and the jokes and bullying can't hurt her.*

It mattered to O'Brien then and it still does, though. He regrets not intervening, and doesn't think he had any excuse not to. These decisions don't get easier as you age, and he reckons it would have been helpful to have displayed some bravery as a kid when he was faced with even harder choices in Vietnam.

*O'Brien's regret isn't just to Linda, but to his growth as a man who wished he had acted with more courage while he was younger to prepare himself for his experiences as a soldier in Vietnam.*

One afternoon in the spring the class was taking a spelling test and halfway through Veenhof raised his hand to use the pencil sharpener. The teacher allowed him to get up, but told him to be quick. As he returned to his seat, he didn't go the straightforward way, but headed for Linda's desk. When he was passing her desk, he grabbed the tassel and took off her cap. Linda didn't move and O'Brien thinks someone must have laughed. He remembers how she wasn't completely bald, there was a big bandage at the back of her head covering stitches, and then gauze taped to her left ear. Veenhof stepped back, still smiling, but "the smile was doing strange things." Linda kept staring ahead wordlessly, until she turned and looked at O'Brien for a moment. He felt that they had an entire conversation in the moment: "Well? she was saying, and I was saying, "Sure, okay." Later, Linda cried and the teacher helped her put her cap on again. After school, O'Brien and Veenhof walked Linda home.

*Veenhof clearly feels guilty for what he's done to Linda after he sees that the cap has been covering up the fact that she has a brain tumor, which is shown in his reaction (the smile "doing strange things") and how he walked her home later that day with O'Brien. When Linda looks at O'Brien after the cap has been pulled of he feels they had an entire conversation that questioned whether he still loved her, in spite of her illness. She's asking, well what do you think of me now? His "Sure, okay." is an acceptance of the baldness on the back of Linda's head, and how his feelings for her haven't changed. But he hasn't yet come to terms with the fact that she will die.*

O'Brien says it's 1990 as he writes this and he's forty-three. Looking at photographs of himself in 1956 he sees the ways he hasn't changed: then Timmy, now Tim. He doesn't let his clothes fool him, he knows the eyes are the same and behind them is something unchanging about himself because "the human life is all one thing:" a kid, a soldier, a writer. As a writer, now, O'Brien wants to save Linda's life, not her body.

*O'Brien believes that in all of us there is a kernel of the self that never changes, and one that he can detect when looking at old photographs of himself. All of life is, and always has been, bundled up into one thing. As a writer, his goal is to save Linda's life through stories.*

Linda died when she was nine years old from a brain tumor. In a story, though, O'Brien can have her soul and bring the parts of her back that are permanent. O'Brien notes that he knew she was ill and perhaps even dying, but because he loved her so much he couldn't believe it. On a September afternoon on the playground Nick Veenhof approached O'Brien and told him he just learned that Linda had died. O'Brien walked home from school without telling anyone.

*O'Brien initially denies to himself the fact that Linda is dying, up until the point that she does die. But with stories, O'Brien discovers that he can keep Linda alive and bring back that kernel of her life that is permanent. He can talk to her and she can talk back in this invented world between the two of them.*

He lay down on the sofa and tried to imagine what it was like to be dead. He whispered her name over and over, and eventually he "willed her alive." He could see her walking down Main Street wearing a pink dress and she had grown back all of her hair. Then O'Brien started to cry and Linda approached him, sitting on the curb on Main Street, and asked why he was upset. He told her she was dead. Linda nodded and smiled in a secretive way, like she knew things no one else could, and she touched O'Brien's wrist and said, "Timmy, stop crying. It doesn't *matter*."

*O'Brien's dream/hallucination/story expresses the power that stories have in resurrecting the dead. By the force of will, O'Brien could bring Linda back via his imagination. When she consoles him by saying it doesn't matter that she's dead, she (and O'Brien) are saying that physical death doesn't mean true death. She still lives in his memory, and now in his stories.*

In Vietnam there were ways the soldiers had of making the dead not seem so dead, like shaking their hands. By acting and joking they could pretend that it wasn't as grave and final as it was. Linguistically, the dead were transformed into waste. When someone was killed, it wasn't a body but waste. The words make a big difference in coping with death. If you take away the human element, it doesn't matter as much. VC nurse fried by napalm: crispy critter. Vietnamese baby: roasted peanut.

*O'Brien's need to tell stories is but one of the ways that people cope with death. The language games between soldiers changed the register of death from one that was human (and threatened their mortality, morality, and guilt) to one that lacked humanity—which made death abstract and easier to face. O'Brien's stories do the opposite. They bring what was gone back.*

The day after Linda died in September, O'Brien asked his father to take him to the funeral home so he could see her. Once they parked, his father told him if O'Brien was upset at all they could leave as fast as he wanted. When O'Brien saw her he thought there had been a mistake because the girl in the casket wasn't Linda. She resembled Linda in a way, but the body was bloated while Linda had always been thin. O'Brien wondered if someone had made a mistake in preparing her body. He looked at his father, hoping Linda would jump out from behind a curtain and say it was all a big joke. He pretended she was sleeping, though she didn't look like she was—"She looked dead."

*Death is different. Something is gone. This is both obvious and yet it's hard to understand until you see someone who is dead. O'Brien really doesn't recognize Linda at first because of the way death changes her, and then, even as young as he is, his mind starts working to try to deny death—it isn't her; she's sleeping. But death can't be denied. "She looked dead." Except by stories.*

After Ted Lavender died there were more bodies. When Curt Lemon died O'Brien climbed a tree and retrieved the parts of him that were left. O'Brien saw Kiowa sink into the shit-field. In July O'Brien was assigned to a policing detail where he dealt with twenty-seven bodies altogether in one day. For three hours he and five other men carried the bodies down a mountain to a clearing next to a dirt road. A truck came and they loaded it up with bodies in two man teams. Mitchell Sanders took feet and O'Brien took arms. All of the dead had expired for more than a day, they were bloated, smelly, and made burping sounds when they hit the truck bed. Mitchell Sanders said he just realized that "death sucks."

*Death never stops being terrible, especially in war. There are always new ways to die, new horrors, new things to learn about being dead. When Mitchell Sanders says that "death sucks," he is both stating the obvious and stating something profound. He is distancing himself from the death by saying something stupid, and he is also right.*

While O'Brien lay in bed at night as a kid, he would make up stories to bring Linda back while he was sleeping. He would picture a birthday party and cake, and then he would be asleep and Linda would show up and they wouldn't talk much in the dream because they were shy. Then O'Brien would walk her home and they would sit on the front steps. She said things like: "Once you're alive...you can't ever be dead." "Do I look dead?" O'Brien thinks it was a product of willpower and faith, which is how stories are created.

*O'Brien's powers of imagination really started to take off after Linda's death. The dream at the birthday party where she says once you're alive you can never be dead, is essentially the core faith, the core purpose, of O'Brien's storytelling.*

As a kid, though, O'Brien thought it was a miracle to be able to see Linda whenever he willed it, and he thought they had a way to secretly meet up. He started going to sleep really early, to the point that it concerned his mother. He didn't tell her what he was doing, because he was embarrassed but also because he thought it would make Linda go away. He knew she was dead, but he was using the magic of stories to keep her alive. In one dream they went ice-skating and he asked her what it was like being dead, and she said, "Do I *look* dead?" O'Brien said she didn't. She was quiet, but then said at that moment she wasn't dead, but when she was it was like being in a book no one was reading. She said it wasn't that bad: "when you're dead, you just have to be yourself."

*When O'Brien was young he didn't realize he was writing stories in his head, he thought he was communicating with Linda—which in a way, he still believes. Storytelling is a kind of miracle. Linda compares death to being like a book, which befits O'Brien's storytelling philosophy. When she's in his mind and being read about in a story she's alive. The rest of the time she's shut away. But even then, it's not so bad, because being dead just means being yourself, which references that kernel of the self that never changes.*

It's 1990 and O'Brien is forty-three and he still dreams of Linda the same way he did when he was nine. She has a new identity now. He feels as though he can still see her as if through an opaque ice, like glancing into another world where there aren't brain tumors, funeral homes, or bodies. He can see Kiowa, Ted Lavender, and Curt Lemon. Every once in a while he can see himself ice skating with Linda. He's Timmy, and he's happy, young, and immortal. He slides over the surface of his history. When he leaps, he lands thirty years later "as Tim trying to save Timmy's life with a story."

*O'Brien's invented a whole life for Linda. Names don't matter, because the core of Linda—that unchanging part of her self—is still there. When he writes stories about the dead, he feels like he can see into their world. Sometimes he can see himself, and he knows that as he's writing stories these stories he's also trying to save himself: nine year old Timmy, Tim the soldier, Tim now. Storytelling will keep them all alive.*

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