The soldier sat on a hill and assembled his missile. It was daylight, but he could do it in pure darkness just as easily and just as fast. His crewmate had been complaining about his girlfriend the entire morning, but was now silent as he handed the soldier the pieces he needed, one by one. They had done this many times before; no words were necessary. The soldier’s commander knelt three steps behind them, checking radio communications. The soldier finished setting up the missile, pressed his eye to the viewfinder and quickly oriented himself within the Palestinian city of Nablus in Israel’s West Bank. He found the cafe where the terrorist was scheduled to be, according to intelligence. This would be the most difficult and complicated shot he had ever taken; shooting the missile from 1.5 kilometers through electricity wires and poles, through the window of the cafe, and finally into the deadliest terrorist of Hamas. They all waited. Fifteen minutes later the terrorist entered the coffee shop and sat near the window. The soldier switched the missile’s safety off and waited for the green light from his commander to fire.

Thirty seven years beforehand, another soldier in a different war also killed a man. The soldier was an American named Tim O’Brien, the war Vietnam. In his seemingly autobiographical memoir, *The Things They Carried*, O’Brien describes in detail the Vietnamese man he killed with a grenade during an ambush. After the explosion, the man lay dead on the trail, one eye shut, the other a “star-shaped hole” (172). In a later chapter, O’Brien’s daughter, Kathleen, asks him if he had ever killed anyone. He sits her on his lap and says, “[o]f course not.” Later, O’Brien admits that he didn’t actually kill the man with the “star-shaped hole” for an eye, but rather that he “watched a man die on a trail near the village of My Khe” (171). O’Brien says, “I did not kill him. But I was present, you see, and my presence was guilt enough” (171). In other words, O’Brien lies when he says that he killed the man, but then admits to his lie. He goes on to explain that there are two kinds of truths: “story-truth” and “happening-truth” (171). The “happening-truth”
is the real occurrence: what actually, literally happened. The “story-truth” is the reshaping of “happening-truth” in order for the story to convey the emotional core of the real occurrence. The “story-truth” has more to do with feeling than with facts. The “happening-truth” is that O’Brien was a soldier in Vietnam, afraid to look at all the bodies. The “story-truth” is “a slim, dead, almost dainty young man of about twenty” lying on a trail with a “star-shaped hole” for an eye (172). Because of the authenticity of each of these two truths, O’Brien can switch back and forth between them, seemingly with a clear conscience. When O’Brien’s daughter asks him if he has ever killed anybody, O’Brien concludes that he can honestly say, “of course not”—since he didn’t actually kill anyone—or he can “say honestly, ‘Yes,’” since in his mind, simply being a part of the war made him complicit in the man’s death (172). O’Brien distinguishes between two different kinds of truth in order to better represent the war and his own experiences as a soldier.

Sometimes O’Brien reveals which truth he’s conveying, sometimes he doesn’t. In a chapter called “On the Rainy River,” O’Brien recounts the story of eighty-one-year-old Elroy Berdahl, whom the author describes as “the hero of [his] life” (45). On his way to Canada to dodge the draft, O’Brien spent six days at the Tip-Top lodge with Elroy, and on his last day there, Elroy took him out fishing on the Rainy River. They crossed into Canadian water, and twenty meters from the Canadian shore, Elroy cut the boat engine. O’Brien writes about sitting on that boat, looking at the border in front of him:

I could’ve done it. I could’ve jumped and started swimming for my life.
Inside me, in my chest, I felt a terrible squeezing pressure. Even now, as I write this, I can still feel that tightness. And I want you to feel it. (54)

Crying, O’Brien realized he couldn’t run away to Canada. The next day he left Elroy and the lodge, and departed for Vietnam.

The moral freeze O’Brien experiences on that boat is a feeling familiar to me. I went through two years of training in the Israeli Navy Seals, and I often wrestled with myself over the idea of quitting. Saturday evenings, an hour before our day off was over and my own personal hell resumed, I would lock myself in a bathroom stall and cry. I didn’t want to stay, but I didn’t
know how to quit. I didn’t want people to think badly of me. I knew the tightness O’Brien felt in his chest. I felt it during basic training as my dad drove me like a lamb to the slaughter back to base, neither one of us saying a word.

My connection as a soldier to O’Brien makes it difficult for me to listen to his 1999 President’s Lecture at Brown University. He retold his story with Elroy and concluded by telling the students that “none of [the story is] true . . . It’s invented. No Elroy, no Tip-Top Lodge . . . I’ve never been to the Rainy River in my life” (“Writing”). Elroy Berdahl does not exist. O’Brien never sat on that boat and cried. The entire chapter was made up. I felt cheated. In *The Things They Carried*, O’Brien lies about killing a man, but admits he has lied. The Berdahl story, since it did not include admittance of its fabrication, though, seemed different to me. While O’Brien’s book has been marketed as fiction, O’Brien seems to use techniques we typically associate with memoirs. He uses his own name, and the story takes place in a war he fought, within Alpha Company, where he really served. It is here where I felt O’Brien broke a sacred contract, both with me as his reader and fellow soldier. If he’s going to use his real name and talk about his *real* experience in Vietnam, I’m going to believe him.

In his essay “Representation,” W.J.T. Mitchell discusses this social contract as part of the inherent problematic nature of representation in literary works. Mitchell states that “representation’ has always played a central role in the understanding of literature” (329). He thinks of representation as a triangular relationship “of something or someone, *by* something or someone, *to* someone” (330). As such, representation, Mitchell feels, can act both as a means of communication, and a “potential obstacle to it” (330). But the triangular relationship may act as a barrier in the communication between the one representing and the reader, leading to the “possibility of misunderstanding, error, or downright falsehood” (330). This miscommunication is apparent in the form O’Brien chooses when he communicates his falsehoods to us. Mitchell makes the point that when “something stands for something to somebody, it does so by virtue of a kind of social agreement — ‘let us agree that this will stand for that’” (331). But O’Brien ignores this agreement. He doesn’t tell us that Elroy stands for anything other than Elroy, who is presented as real, and with whom we, as his attentive readers and listeners, have been invested.
Not only does O’Brien change the stories and fail to tell us what he changed, he also makes up stories about how he came to write the made-up story. Even after learning that the book was fiction and that Elroy did not exist, I still did not question the validity of Norman Bowker. In the following chapter, “Notes,” O’Brien tells of how he came to write a story about Bowker. In 1975, he received a 17-page letter from Bowker, who described how hard it was to find meaning in his life after the war. Bowker told O’Brien he should write a story about a “guy who feels like he got zapped over in that shithole. A guy who can’t get his act together . . . This guy wants to talk about it, but he can’t” (151). Eight months after O’Brien’s tribute was published in 1978, Bowker killed himself. Bowker’s mother sent O’Brien a note explaining how he had used a jump rope to hang himself at the YMCA after a game of basketball. “I don’t think [Bowker] would mind that his real name appears,” O’Brien says at the end of the chapter, indicating that Bowker’s is the only name—along with O’Brien’s—that wasn’t changed for the purpose of the book (154).

In an interview, Daniel Bourne and Debra Shostak ask O’Brien whether or not we can believe “Notes” is nonfiction since O’Brien is “giving us the truth about what went on in the composition of another story” (Smith 77). O’Brien answers, “You ought not to believe it. In fact, it’s utterly and absolutely invented . . . No Norman Bowker, and no mother” (77). For crying out loud, O’Brien “lovingly” dedicates the book to Bowker! I feel I have fallen victim to a practical joke. More than feeling cheated, I feel angry. Here, it seems like O’Brien takes his use of “happening-truth” and “story-truth” beyond the desire to relate a truth, and into some kind of desire to shock. Yet O’Brien claims he doesn’t lie to us to be mean or shocking. Rather, this form of storytelling is the most effective way to show us something about himself and his experience. O’Brien tells Bourne and Shostak,

[i]n fact I do truly love you, I’m not just tricking you, I’m letting you in on my game, letting you in on who I am. . . . All these lies are the surface of something. I have to lie to you and explain why I am lying to you, why I’m making these things up, in order to get you to know me. . . . And it’s going to hurt now and then, and you’re going to get angry now and then, but I want to do it to you anyway—and for you. That’s the point of the book. (Smith 75)

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That’s hard for me to accept in the sense that there should be a way to represent war in a form that doesn’t make readers angry or hurt; it’s hard for me to accept that O’Brien—whom I come to care for through reading his experiences—deliberately hurts and angers me in trying to do what he feels is best for me. He doesn’t know me. He doesn’t know what I went through.

Here’s a story. The soldier at the beginning of the essay is me. On July 17, 2006, I sat on a hill on the outskirts of Nablus and had the number one terrorist of Hamas in my sights. We received confirmation to shoot. Right before I pressed the trigger, a four-year-old boy jumped into the terrorist’s lap. We waited. The boy never left his lap.

“Mission’s scrapped. It’s a no-go,” my commander said. I pretended not to hear. I kept my eye in the missile viewfinder, kept the terrorist within my sights. “Bezalel, did you hear me? There’s no shot. Pack it up.” I couldn’t turn my head away from the missile. I was afraid to let anyone see my face. I was so angry that I was almost crying. I was being denied my opportunity to make a difference, to save lives, to do what I had been trained to do.

I asked my commander to let me take the shot. He reminded me that there was a four-year-old boy down there. I didn’t care. Only a year before, a Palestinian sniper had shot a six-month-old baby in the head. Right or wrong, in my mind at that moment, the life of a Palestinian boy did not balance out against the lives of my friends and families. I couldn’t just pack up my missile and go home! The answer was still no. Packs on our backs, we walked down the hill. We never got the terrorist.

I’ve never written this story down in words but I’ve told it many times to several people. It’s a true story. And it never happened.

Elements of it are real. The “happening-truth” is that I was a Navy Seal and a missile specialist. The number one terrorist of Hamas had come to that coffee shop every day and we were planning on assassinating him with a missile I was supposed to shoot. We trained three full days for this mission in simulators, but intelligence came through that the terrorist kept a four-year-old boy with him at all times and we wouldn’t have the shot. The mission was scrapped; we never left the base. So many of the facts aren’t true in my “story-truth” version above, but the sentiment is still there. The feeling is true. All I said about war is true.
I always thought I told the story that way because I was a writer and I felt the need to dramatize it. But when I think about O’Brien wanting us “to feel it too,” I realize that perhaps I embellished the story because I sought to put my listener in my place, to make him feel what I felt. I’m guilty of doing the same thing I’m angry at O’Brien for doing.

To me, it doesn’t matter whether I was in the simulator or on the hill, whether I killed a child or not. Just thinking about it, knowing I was capable, is guilt enough. I think I feel so guilty about even thinking of killing a child that perhaps I tell people the made-up version of the story in order to receive validation from them, a sort of forgiveness. But telling them the story as it happened—preparing to shoot in a simulator, the mission ultimately scratched—doesn’t implicate me as much as I feel it should. Killing that child was a thought. I am guilty through thought, if not through action, and that is enough. Maybe O’Brien went through the same thing: perhaps he thought he would kill, and from then on, in a sense, it didn’t matter whether he took the fatal shot or not. By making up or changing facts to render his stories emotionally true, I would argue that O’Brien moves his experience of war from the hypothetical to the actual. When it comes to trauma, feelings may even be easier to recall—feel truer—than the events themselves. I never felt uncomfortable about my own “story-truth” until I was subject to O’Brien’s.

In my total of five years in the Navy Seals, I did many things, yet I focus on this one story that isn’t true. I don’t like the fact that I lied, but I realize that the version of the story I made up permitted me to represent my internal experience of war more effectively than if I were to have recounted facts. And I’m uncomfortable because I’m a good person and I care about people and I care about things and I try to do the right thing and I would have killed that child. That last thought doesn’t go away. O’Brien reminds me of it. So maybe it’s not O’Brien I’m angry with, but myself and the reality I lived in and experienced. I want you to tell me it’s okay, and that you understand, and that I’m still a good person, and to say to me, “Of course, Omri, that’s what war does. It wasn’t you, it was the situation. That isn’t who you are. And I understand that now. You made me understand. You’re okay. Everything’s okay.”

As Mitchell says, representation is inherently problematic in that it is only a copy of the original (337). I can never give you the original experience of what I went through in war because that experience was gone the minute
it was over. All O’Brien and I can do is try and represent it through stories. But because it’s not the “original” experience, in every representation there will be some kind of “lost immediacy, presence, or truth, in the form of a gap between intention and realization, original and copy” (Mitchell 337). Both O’Brien and I lost an aspect of truth once we changed our stories and moved away from “happening-truth.” But perhaps we gained an aspect of truth, too, in our ability to represent war and our experiences as soldiers in our stories. Even if we tried to relate something exactly as it happened, something would still be lost; we would automatically lose a part of the “happening-truth” just by virtue of our attempt at representation.

People think that service begins the day you enlist and ends the day you are discharged. But that’s not true. Service begins the moment you decide to enlist, and it never ends. This is service, here. The Things They Carried is still part of O’Brien’s service, left over from Vietnam. The trauma and the subsequent attempt to represent war and what it does to its soldiers is part of serving your country. As long as war exists, so too will there be soldiers who come out of war, longing to hear “I understand now” and “you’re okay.” Each soldier will attempt to represent that traumatic experience not only to those who are fortunate enough to have others pay the price of their freedom, but also to themselves. Their representation will never be their actual experience, but it will probably be what they need it to be in order to process that experience, and, hopefully, to heal. This is what war does.

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