Redefining the Literal

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“W ell, you’d think, this isn’t so bad. And right then you’d hear gunfire behind you and your nuts would fly up into your throat and you’d be squealing pig squeals” (“Spin” 33). Brimming with humor and bluntness, Tim O’Brien’s style of writing has a humble sense of simplicity to it; he provides us with the truth as it is, unencumbered by additional interpretations or explanations. O’Brien uses the clarity of simplicity to his advantage, intentionally repeating the word “squeal” and jamming phrase after conjunction after phrase together into a sentence shish-kebab: “But the war wasn’t all that way. Like when Ted Lavender went too heavy on the tranquilizers” (31). His words do not feel as if he deliberately chose them after careful consideration and calculation; they give the illusion of improvised storytelling, of the experienced veteran who narrates his stories right on the spot with astounding candor.

Ironically enough, O’Brien explains in an interview that one of the most difficult aspects of writing is grappling with the most basic limits of language: “There are 26 letters in the alphabet and some punctuation marks and that’s all we’ve got. . . . And out of that, characters come and moral quandaries are explored. But in the end, the work of writing unfortunately is really battling with A, B, C, D, and that comma which is so inalcitran” (Allen). This struggle is inevitable for O’Brien, since the most meaningful, thoughtful arrangement of letters could never really convey the inner turmoil of the individual at war. As far as words go, war is “mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love” (“War Story” 76). But when the time comes to describe a truly dramatic scene, one that seems to represent “war” in a nutshell, his chosen sentences are as simple—and therefore as clear—as they can be: “His jaw was in his throat, his upper lip and teeth were gone, his one eye was shut, his other eye was a star-shaped hole” (“The Man I Killed” 118). O’Brien continues to stare at the young man he killed, repeatedly illustrating every nauseating detail of the dead body until the blood clots and the gnats arrive. The raw descriptions
of the man change each time, much like the slides of an old projector, and we are suddenly confronted by a moving picture of Death.

There are plenty of compelling styles in which to write about death, mostly because it is a fascination and a dread that authors and readers share. Natural death often arrives at the end of a short but violent struggle, as the living make one final attempt to hold onto what is, as a character from The Things They Carried describes, “overdue” (“The Ghost Soldiers” 187). Virginia Woolf defines “The Death of the Moth” as a “minute wayside triumph of so great a force over so mean an antagonist.” Death, to Woolf, is “an oncoming doom,” powerful and inevitable (386). Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain), on the other hand, claims “The Death of Jean” (his daughter) to be “the most precious of all gifts—that gift which makes all other gifts mean and poor.” To him, death is a long awaited reward after a lifetime of obligatory pain and torment. As divergent as these two portrayals are, they both give death a name, an identity, and the power of independent existence. But O’Brien describes death in war as “a matter of luck and happenstance” that “transform[s] bodies into piles of waste” (“In the Field” 168, “Lives of the Dead” 226). It becomes a tangible and organic fact of nature, surprisingly real in its meaninglessness and randomness. Curt Lemon dies by stepping on a bomb while playing catch (“True War Story”). Kiowa dies by sinking into a “shit field” in the middle of the night (“In the Field”). Ted Lavender dies because he gets shot in the head while taking a bathroom break (“The Things They Carried”). A young Vietnamese soldier dies because O’Brien throws a bomb (“The Man I Killed”). Norman Bowker dies by hanging himself after surviving the war (“Notes”). A puppy dies because Azar straps it to a Claymore mine and blows it up (“Spin”). In O’Brien’s book, death is caused by guns and bombs and mud and internal torment; the dying are deprived of the right to make that final struggle for life, the right that even a moth possesses. Their deaths are matter-of-factly piled one on top of the other like the bodies in a mass grave. What is complicated and enigmatic in Woolf’s England or Clemens’s America is plain and simple in Vietnam.

But O’Brien does not dismiss the idea of death entirely. Most writers concentrate on the fact that a once-living being is dead by contrasting life and death. The moth in Woolf’s writing is “a tiny bead of pure life,” struggling against an overpowering energy (385). Jean leaves Clemens to join her pre-deceased mother, sister, and dear friend George, and a bereaved father is left alone to lament the fact that he still lives. Death, in short, is the opposite and the end of life. O’Brien seems to keep this traditional opposition in the back
of his mind, but his primary understanding of what we would call death is much more abstract:

Twenty years later, I can still see the sunlight on Lemon’s face. I can see him turning, looking back at Rat Kiley, then he laughed and took that curious half step from shade into sunlight, his face suddenly brown and shining, and when his foot touched down, in that instant, he must’ve thought it was the sunlight that was killing him. It was not the sunlight. It was a rigged 105 round. But if I could ever get the story right, how the sun seemed to gather around him and pick him up and lift him high into a tree, if I could somehow recreate the fatal whiteness of that light, the quick glare, the obvious cause and effect, then you would believe the last thing Curt Lemon believed, which for him must’ve been the final truth. (“War Story” 80)

O’Brien almost romanticizes this moment, imbuing it with a mysteriously holy value. Our first impulse would be to interpret this moment as Curt’s death. But, to O’Brien, this scene is about something else entirely: it is about sunlight, and the way that light seems to inhale and embrace a boy, who also happens to lose his life in the process. The “final truth” in Lemon’s flight is echoed in another scene of death. Alongside the stiff and stark descriptions of the young Vietnamese man he killed, O’Brien contemplates the man’s entire life: how it was and how it might have been. Due to his death, “his life was now a constellation of possibilities” (“Man I Killed” 122). Yes, the man is dead, but that is a separate matter. While we tend to mash the concept of the end of life together with the interpretation of the moment of death, ultimately comprehending the two elements as one circumstance, O’Brien dissociates them.

In “The Man I Killed,” O’Brien cannot take his eyes off the corpse, a behavior that seems to disturb Kiowa more than any other soldier. Kiowa himself turns away from the body and becomes a kind of self-appointed guardian, struggling to wake O’Brien from the trance: “I’m serious. Nothing anybody could do. Come on, stop staring” (120). The rest of O’Brien’s platoon reacts differently to the deceased, in a manner that most civilians would deem shockingly disrespectful; kicking, thumb-severing, high five-ing, and handshaking are just some of their many startling responses (“Things Carried” 13; “Lives of Dead” 214). Kiowa and his platoon members do not turn away from death, but from their own interpretations of it; they associate death with the dangers of sadness, trauma, or rage, so they dissociate death from corpses. But the moment they do so, all other understandings of the dead person cease to exist; their sense of humor produces the same effects that our own interpre-
tations do. We, and they, ignore what the moment of death offers, viewing it solely as the negation of life. O’Brien, unlike us and the soldiers who turn away, stares at the body and imagines its past, reviving the lifeless existence and seeing in death not the antithesis of life but an expansion of our understanding of it. “But he’s dead,” we might say. He would patiently answer, “Once you’re alive, you can’t ever be dead” (“Lives of the Dead” 231).

This response may seem to be a soldier’s defensive attempt to deal with the repetition of so shocking an event, yet O’Brien is showing us more: how our impulse to stop at the simplest interpretation of a concept like death prevents us from seeing its greater significance, even from seeing the thing itself. He tells the story of Curt’s death to a crowd of civilians, and when a kind, elderly woman approaches to tell him to put all the memories of war behind him and “find new stories to tell,” he thinks, “You dumb cooze . . . she wasn’t listening. It wasn’t a war story. It was a love story” (“True War Story” 81). When civilians listen to the story, all they hear is “death” and “war is bad”; they don’t see the elements of truth, flight, and sunlight—the parts that have a right not to be overshadowed by our fear of death, but always are.

O’Brien writes of other abstract concepts—love, loyalty, guilt, fear, superstition—and his stories are packed with the essence of Vietnam. In one story within a story, O’Brien joins the audience in listening to Rat Kiley speak about a strong, young, innocent American girl named Mary Anne, who flies over to Vietnam to be with her sweetheart soldier. To the soldier’s horror, Mary Anne discovers that her basest, most raw identity—her true identity—lies within the deep and animalistic wilderness of Vietnam. This story speaks to both author and reader, presenting the war not as a land of dread where all is lost in confusion, death, and meaninglessness, but as a place of unexpected enlightenment and acceptance. “When I’m out there at night,” says Mary Anne, “I feel close to my own body . . . I know exactly who I am. You can’t feel like that anywhere else” (“Sweetheart” 106). Our shock is slowly replaced by an unexpected envy for this young girl in Vietnam; Mary Anne (whose name seems deliberately appropriate) is the symbol of everything civilians lose in exchange for the numbing comfort of civilization. She represents us before our break from the self, if there ever was such a thing, and our definitions of concepts like enlightenment and love shift and expand.

Through his narrative, O’Brien warps, or perhaps corrects, our pre-existing understanding of such concepts. During an interview he explains, “There’s a wave of anger, or bitterness [in my writing]. It has to do with Vietnam, and it has to do with a kind of mindset of the literal all around me that doesn’t fit my take on the world and my experience in the world where
it’s hard for me to take anything very literally.” According to O’Brien, our “literal take on things is a take without irony and without edge, and . . . there’s a certitude to it” that he despises (qtd. in Allen). After witnessing the loath-somely random quality of war, concepts such as death, truth, love, and salvation are no longer absolute or certain. They can no longer be reduced to their simplest interpretations.

Oddly enough, though, O’Brien seems unable to reject entirely this civilian stance, this “literal take on things,” when confronted by the possibility of his own death. In “The Ghost Soldiers,” O’Brien is shot twice, and on both occasions his mind rings constantly with the thought, “I’ve been shot, I’ve been shot” (180). The first time, a competent medic is there to help, but the second time, a new medic, “green and incompetent and scared,” is responsible for the immediate treatment. “It took the son of a bitch almost ten minutes to work up the nerve to crawl over to me. By then I was gone with the pain. Later I found out I’d almost died of shock. . . . To make it worse, he bungled the patch job, and a couple of weeks later my ass started to rot away” (181). For months, O’Brien plots revenge—genuine revenge, fueled by acidic hatred—which he carries out by scaring the medic during the middle of his night guard duty. O’Brien’s own brush with death reads nothing like Curt Lemon’s disappearance into sunlight; “The Ghost Soldiers” focuses on the literal facts—that O’Brien’s life could have ended and that the medic was responsible. And with these facts, O’Brien justifies his revenge.

There is no romanticizing, no love or sunlight, as he describes the feeling of being shot, “the stiff thump of the bullet, like a fist, the way it knocks the air out of you and makes you cough . . . the way your eyes focus on a tiny white pebble or a blade of grass and how you start thinking, Oh man, that’s the last thing I’ll ever see, that pebble, that blade of grass, which makes you want to cry” (182). Death, for that one instant, becomes simply the end of life, and that literal interpretation of it dominates his mind as it does when he receives his draft notice at age twenty-one, another harbinger of impending doom. “I remember a sound in my head. It wasn’t thinking, just a silent howl. A million things at once—I was too good for this war . . . Phi Beta Kappa and summa cum laude and president of the student body and a full-ride scholarship for grad studies at Harvard” (“Rainy River” 39). Discernible in this confession is the voice of a frightened child, torn between the civilian’s literal and reductive interpretation of his duty as a citizen and his own fear of Vietnam. His hatred for the incompetent medic is almost a rebound of the grudge he harbors toward the ignorant members of his hometown who expect him to enter the war with manly pride.
Mary Anne’s rebirth and the deaths of soldiers and civilians in Vietnam are, to some extent, fabricated to convey what O’Brien claims is the genuine significance of those moments; he calls this the “story-truth” and contrasts it with the “happening-truth,” the actual occurrence in its unaltered form (“Good Form” 171). In the same way that a director edits his films to serve the message he strives to deliver, O’Brien crafts his narrative to help us redefine our literal worldviews, to allow concepts like war and love to encompass contradiction, to see death as sunlight and randomness as well as the end of life. But in his own moments of desperation, the matters of the world suddenly become very clear and definite, and civilian literalism dominates.

Through these moments, O’Brien reminds us once again of the utter stupidity of war. What we as civilians—and as people—must never forget is the true and crudest reality—a reality that is often clouded by political, social, and statistical interpretations. A soldier finds the meaning of sunlight and death and Bodhi in Vietnam, either through another’s stories or through his own, and we are easily misled to excuse ourselves and our politicians for sending others to fight problems that aren’t even ours to begin with. When we see ourselves as limited and blind, we tend to view veterans—the enlightened ones—as heroes with both the responsibility to protect us and the privilege of eternal dignity and glory obtained through a single burst of courage: enlisting. We send them off to a foreign country for a few years, and they miraculously return with an abundance of stories and perhaps a scar or two. Subconsciously, we would like to keep it this way, and so we separate war from home and estrange our soldiers.

But when we see O’Brien’s panic and fear in the face of death, every human part of our mind remembers that we are sending an individual, many individuals, to the horrors of war. Beneath both the reductive literalism with which we view war and the moments of transcendence like Curt Lemon’s death, O’Brien reminds us that war forces individuals to endure their most fundamental and overwhelming fears. But he also calls the rest of us to confront war’s bizarre, heartbreaking beauty. Giving us in his stories both O’Brien the wise veteran and Timmy the boy at war, he challenges us to enlarge our sense of war and our relationships with those who serve. In his own casual, storytelling way, O’Brien brings war home to our doorsteps, leaving us to grapple with death, destruction, and the burdens we all bear in the aftermath of armed conflict.


“Field Trip.” 173-79.


“Good Form.” 171-72.

“How to Tell a True War Story.” 64-81.

“In the Field.” 155-70.


“Notes.” 149-54.


“Spin.” 30-36.

“Sweetheart of Song Tra Bong.” 85-110.

“The Things They Carried.” 1-25.
