
Physical and Psychological Burdens

Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* is a highly unique work, a compilation of many stories carried home by veterans of the Vietnam War. The length of the stories in the 22 chapters varies dramatically, a technique that "demonstrates well the impossibility of knowing reality of the war in absolute terms" (Calloway 1). The reader - like the soldier - never knows how the day will turn out. O'Brien even adds stories whose veracity is challenged later on, thus allowing the reader to understand that the stories are not the most important thing. Stories are used only to provide insight into the emotions of war; from these stories, O'Brien effectively teases out the psychological burdens carried by Vietnam veterans. Initially the soldiers, new to the field of course, carry personal effects, physical burdens, that serve as a reminder of the friendly reality of home while in a hostile and foreign place; however, as the soldiers stay in "Nam" longer, these physical burdens are replaced by psychological burdens that alter the perspective of reality for returning soldiers. "Home" becomes an alien place, serving as a constant reminder of Vietnam and its horrors.

In Chapter One, O'Brien outlines the items that individual soldiers carry that differentiate each from the other; these items serve as symbols of home. Each item alludes to what soldiers want to remember from their "old life," the comforting and recognizable one. For example, "In his wallet, Lieutenant Cross carried two photographs of Martha" (4). Constantly dwelling on past times spent alone with the girl of his dreams, Jimmy Cross is representative of all the men who are living hundreds of miles away from Vietnam in their mind even while being very much present in the war in body. Still concerned with his life back home, Jimmy Cross would rather reminisce about life at home than accept his role as a leader in the war. "Kiowa, a devout Baptist, carried an illustrated New Testament that had been presented to him by his father, who taught Sunday school in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma" (3). Before the war Kiowa was devoted to religion, so in order to make his new situation more forgiving, he tries to integrate his old ways into Vietnam life. Wanting to continually recall his life symbolizes the fact that he still is attempting to hold onto something he will eventually have to let go of: his reality. "Henry Dobbins carried his girlfriend's pantyhose wrapped around his neck as a comforter," a simple act that epitomizes the feelings of longing for home a soldier experiences (10). A new reality has not yet set in for these men; they feel that their charms from home will both protect them and help them return to normalcy once the war ends. The items and the memories reveal the men's longing for love and familiarity of home. As physical representations of the men's yearning to hold onto the life they are used to, the items symbolize their only lifeline to the United States. The desire to carry something familiar into an unfamiliar land shows that the men still want to live in the innocent world and maintain a hopeful, naive mindset. The physical burdens carried by the men embody the superficiality of war, allowing them the illusion that they can simply return to their prior lives.

The first to encounter a change in mentality is Jimmy Cross, when Ted Lavender was shot. Feeling personally responsible for his death, the Lieutenant becomes "determined to perform his duties firmly and without negligence" (25). Furthermore, "from this point on, he will comport himself as an officer. He would dispose of his good luck pebble...impose strict field discipline...send out flank security...confiscate the remainder of Lavender's dope" (25) This is the point where his character steps into the shoes of Lieutenant Jimmy Cross, and into a much

more complex and mature reality. Cross rids himself of physical burdens as a much more powerful burden of guilt encompasses his conscience and ultimately drives him to shoulder his responsibility as an officer in order to ensure that more tenacious feelings of guilt are not bred. Out of fear for his personal stability - not courage - Cross finds the reality of Vietnam. Giving up his personal items represents his loss of innocence and gaining of maturity, as well as the severing of his ties to the world he used to know. Never again will he be able to live in the world he did when he was a boy. Never again can he think of Martha without images of Ted Lavender's limp body popping into the picture, along with a tidal wave of grief and guilt over Martha and his fellow soldiers.

"The Man I Killed" describes the body of a young Vietnamese soldier that O'Brien has just launched a grenade at, and the incredible feelings of guilt that O'Brien experiences. With images such as "the man he killed was born in 1946 and...his parents were farmers," O'Brien reveals his inability to move on and his obsession with death (125). Kiowa urges him to rationalize the situation: it was either the Vietnamese kid, or O'Brien. Yet this event is imbedded in his conscience forever; the body of the boy continues to haunt his memory for years to come. He will always think "what if?" He will always be forced to confront the realities of war, death, and guilt on a regular basis. He will always wonder whether he was right, and will always be uncertain as to the answer. The only certain thing will be that he will think of the incident day in and day out for the rest of his life.

Grabbing Kiowa by the boot, Norman Bowker attempts to pull his friend from the clutches of the enclosing mud, but he "felt himself going too." When faced with a choice between his life and Kiowa's, he allowed his friend to sink to his death (149). He cannot help but think that it was his lack of courage that resulted in Kiowa's death; however, although he watched his friend sink beneath the "shit field", he did attempt to save him - the end was simply inevitable. War, it seems, forces men to assume the blame and guilt for the deaths of friends and enemies alike. This guilt is taken home with the soldiers, and makes them feel like outsiders in their old lives. Isolated from the rest of humanity, Bowker "followed the tar road on its seven-mile loop around the lake, then he started over again, driving slowly" (137). This circular drive is like his life nowadays; the same thoughts of Vietnam just repeat themselves over and over inside his head. His obsession with Kiowa is revealed when Bowker wades into the lake, which is a physical manifestation of Bowker's wish to return to past and alter it. He is confused about why he has become a bystander in a life he once actively participated in. Once again, it boils down to the war and the characters' inability to escape the effects of Vietnam, much like the images of the sewage field and the lake in "Speaking of Courage." Soldiers have seen so much that the general public is not privy to, and these experiences set them on a level of maturity high above everyone else. Their outlook on life becomes a complex web of intricate emotions and images, deadly events, distrust, silence, fear, and animalistic tendencies. No one but they can say they subscribe to such a dark and striking way of thinking.

When, in "Ghost Stories", Tim O'Brien plans revenge on the medic, Bobby Jorgenson, for his incompetent treatment of O'Brien's gunshot wound, he knows that he is acting irrationally in accordance with the values endorsed back at home; in Vietnam, however, this type of comportment just seems right. Before the war, he was a "quiet, thoughtful sort of person, a college grad, a Phi Beta Kappa, summa cum laude - all of the necessary credentials - "however, after participating in war for seven months, he knows he changed...the high, civilized trappings had somehow been crushed under the weight of the simple daily realities" (200). For better or worse, he turns mean inside. The war has taken its toll on him: he now holds grudges

towards those who hurt him, and the only way for him to deal with his pain is to hurt in return. All of his qualifications, memories, education, and civility mean nothing at this point. In his new reality, he is reborn a savage in a place where diplomas and accolades mean very little. Vietnam is a whole new world, a reality where survival is everything and anything else is luxury. O'Brien's character knows he is capable of evil, which unfortunately stems from war's ability to inspire irrational behavior. Not only do soldiers have to worry about the enemy, they must deal with peer cruelty and violence as well. This evokes distrust towards each other that is carried back home and, for some, becomes the deciding factor in whom they confide in.

Norman Bowker sums it up when he says, "It's almost like I got killed over in Nam" (156). Although he is physically okay, psychologically he is ripped apart, like every other soldier returning from war. The weight of the intangible items overcomes the weight of tangible items, and unlike the physical burdens that can be discarded, the psychological wounds are encased in a soldier's mind for all eternity, circulating through their every thought. It is thus practically impossible to function in society without some form of release, for the psychological burdens cripple the men as they attempt to rejoin a world that cannot identify with what they have been through. Just like the silence in Vietnam that will make a man go crazy, the silence and isolation at home will reap the same outcome. Those in war succumb to a complete mental makeover, concealing beneath the skin of everyday life hideous images of war, guilt, confusion, and fear. All these typical consequences of battle elevate a man's maturity level, causing him to view life with a rejuvenated respect, for he has seen death and he has seen how death treats its onlookers. A man who has looked death in the eye becomes a robot that either overheats when thrown back into the regular proceedings of life, like Norman Bowker, or who becomes "fully functional" through the exhausting of its toxic fumes, like Tim O'Brien, who wrote his way out of the hole.