
1 Shared Weight: Tim O'Brien's "The Things They Carried"

Susanne Rubenstein

Wachusett Regional High School, Holden, Massachusetts

Interviewer: If you were to give advice to a young writer, what would you tell him?

Elie Wiesel: First, to read. I never taught creative writing courses. I believe in creative reading. That's what I am trying to teach—creative reading.

1978 interview in *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*

They come into class burdened with books and bags and backpacks. I watch as they deposit all the paraphernalia of adolescence about their desks and feet. Matt sighs hugely.

"My locker's waaaay on the other side of the building," he says, dropping his gym bag in the aisle. "I gotta carry all this stuff till fourth period."

I smile. I couldn't ask for a better opening. "Really?" I say, tapping my fingers on the cover of Tim O'Brien's novel *The Things They Carried*. "So tell me about the things you carry."

It doesn't take us long to amass a list of items that many of my twenty-two New Literature students carry. Chemistry books and calculators, Walkmans and water bottles, baseball caps and computer disks. Today Erin's got her senior pictures, Rosemary her art portfolio, Ken three detention slips. Christina produces a banana gone slightly brown ("I've been carrying it since Tuesday," she says sheepishly), Laurie a field hockey stick, and Pete a *Time* magazine. Their arms are full. When we've filled half of the blackboard with a list of all the stuff that they have spread about them, I stand back and survey the list. "What shall we call it?" I ask.

They barely hesitate.

"Necessities," says Rosemary.

They all nod in agreement, and I print the words *Necessities of High School Life*. Thinking that the game is over, they look at me expectantly, sure that "real" class is now about to begin. I see the look of

surprise in their eyes when I tap the blank side of the board. "So that's it then?" I say. "That's all you're carrying?"

"Nope," calls Andy from the back corner, "but you don't want to know everything I've got!"

"Probably not," I agree, amid the laughter, "but maybe I'd like to know a little more. Who's carrying something that's hidden?"

"I am," says Erin. She rummages in her pocketbook. "These are my worry dolls. I don't go anywhere without them." She opens the little straw box and produces three tiny brightly dressed figures.

"My journal?" offers Cheryl, pulling from her backpack a worn blue book, ticket stubs and photographs jutting from its pages.

"Butts," announces Andy, tossing the pack of Marlboros up in the air and deftly slipping them back in his jacket.

I grab the chalk and we begin another list, this one of the items that line the dark recesses of their pockets and their purses. When the side of the board is full, we study the list. "What shall we call this?" I ask.

"Our secrets," says Matt.

"Our symbols," says Christina.

"Our selves," says Erin.

A few minutes before the bell rings, I hand out copies of Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. The students ruffle through the pages, certain that we have left the lists behind, sure that now we're on to more serious work. I give them a brief introduction, tell them that this semi-autobiographical novel, published in 1990, is a powerful exploration of the experience of war. A veteran of the Vietnam War, O'Brien describes, through a series of interlocking stories, the horror and complexity of war, and he carries his readers to a geographical and emotional territory they will never forget. For tomorrow, I ask the students to read the title story. They leave, bags, backpacks, and books in hand, while I hope that they carry with them the connection I have tried to draw between the baggage of their lives and that of Lieutenant Cross's men.

In "The Things They Carried," O'Brien uses the simple device of the list to organize his story and to make the reader begin to understand the terrible weight young soldiers carried in the jungles of Vietnam. We read of assault rifles and grenade launchers, radios and rations, flak jackets and flares. Dave Jensen "humps" three pairs of socks and foot powder, Kiowa a *New Testament*, Henry Dobbins canned peaches in heavy syrup. Someone carries comic books, another tranquilizers, a third a thumb cut from a VC corpse. The pounds mount up, the load increases, until suddenly we realize that the heaviest burden comes not in boots, binoculars, or bars of chocolate but in the weight of all that

can't be measured: "They carried all the emotional baggage of men who might die. Grief, terror, love, longing—these were intangibles, but the intangibles had their own mass and specific gravity, they had tangible weight" (20).

"Cool story," Andy announces the next morning, tossing his tan backpack on the bookcase. The others are nodding, their words tumbling together.

"But why'd Sanders cut off the thumb?"

"Did guys really die the way Lavender did?"

"Could they really carry all that stuff?"

And a wail from Erin: "But why, oh why, did Jimmy burn those love letters?"

I know then the class discussion will take care of itself. O'Brien, with his brutal and beautiful honesty, has carried my students to a place they have never been, a place where, if they are a lucky generation, they will never have to go—to the heart of war where young soldiers

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 rivers 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. (15)

Just for today, though, I want my students to go to Vietnam, to a war that they need to understand, to feel, if they are to grow into young men and women who will make decisions about peace on our planet. O'Brien's writing takes them there, to "Vietnam, the place, the soil—a powdery orange-red dust that covered their boots and fatigues and faces . . . the humidity, the monsoons, the stink of fungus and decay . . ." (15). O'Brien makes them witness the death of Ted Lavender "zapped while zipping" (17) and feel the horrible guilt that Lieutenant Cross bears, "something he would have to carry like a stone in his stomach for the rest of the war" (16). And, as my students march with Lieutenant Cross's men, they too shoulder the weight of canteens and code books, moccasins and M&M's, ghosts and the ultimate loss of love. It is a lot for them to carry, but, I tell them quietly, they have surely all had training; one does not have to be in war to carry heavy burdens. Then, I want them to go one step further. I want them to go inside themselves to discover all the baggage that they carry.

I hand them each a piece of paper, announcing, "Yesterday we made lists of all the tangible items you were carrying. Today let's deal with the intangibles."

"Like Lt. Cross's love for Martha?" Laurie asks.

"Like his love for Martha," I say.

"Like the guys' memories?" asks Pete.

"Like their memories," I say.

There is silence for a moment. Then Andy speaks.

"Like the soldiers' fear of blushing?"

I nod.

They begin to write. I listen to their pens scratch across the pages, but I am watching their faces, and, in the movement of their eyes and the twisting of their mouths, I see that they are maneuvering weight. When I ask them to stop writing, they do not. It is only when I ask for responses to fill the board that they look up. Their faces tell me that they are reluctant to speak. It is one thing to share the things that fill your arms; another those that fill your heart. I wait, allowing them to decide if these are burdens they can bare.

Erin breaks the silence. "Divorce," she says. "I'm carrying my parents' divorce."

In the murmur of "Me too"s, their silence ends. Suddenly their words come fast and furious; my fingers fly across the board, struggling to keep up.

"College applications," someone shouts out.

"College rejections"—a quieter voice.

"Not being who my father thinks I should be."

"Not being who I want to be."

"Being shy."

"Being alone."

"Being afraid."

"Fear of AIDS."

"Fear of death."

"Fear of life."

Making the basketball team, making the honor roll, making the grade. Getting a diploma, getting a job, getting a life. Their words reveal all that lies under the buoyancy and brashness of their adolescent demeanor, and I am reminded that they are brave soldiers.

When the last words are spoken, there is an almost palpable sense of relief in the room. The students seem to breathe easier. They have placed their burdens on the board and now feel almost weightless. But of course the things they carry can't be left behind that easily; perhaps

they cannot be left at all. Like the guilt Lieutenant Cross carries, many of their burdens are simply a part of who they are, and the only way to make the load lighter is to find someone to share its weight.

They leave class that day, each planning a paper. The paper will take the form of a letter to someone "back home"—that is, someone in their lives with whom they can share the weight of something that they carry. Pete has already decided. He will write to his father to explain why his parents' expectations seem an overwhelming load. Cheryl is considering writing to her boyfriend to tell him that his possessiveness is too much for her to handle. Erin of the worry dolls wants to know if she can write more than one letter. And Andy, all cocksure and confident on the outside, pauses by my desk to say, "I got a lot to write on this one, but I don't want anyone but you to read it."

A terrible war was fought in the jungles of Vietnam. The losses and the lessons of that war are part of my own adolescent experience, but, for my students, the war seems a piece of ancient history. Reading Tim O'Brien brings them to the edge of the jungle and makes them care about the lives of those who fought there. O'Brien's soldiers are not military models; they are boys like Andy, Pete, or Ken—boys who, though they must carry all the necessities of war, also carry the pieces of their selves, all the things that make them human. It is there that the soldiers' lives intersect with those of my students; it is there that empathy begins. The reading, writing, and discussion we do around "The Things They Carried" is intended to help my students see that all of life demands courage and that none of us marches without a burden. We are all like O'Brien's men who "carried all they could bear, and then some, including a silent awe for the terrible power of the things they carried" (9).

Work Cited

O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried*. New York: Penguin, 1991.
