

THE SEARCH FOR LOVE AND FEMININE IDENTITY IN THE WAR LITERATURE  
OF ERNEST HEMINGWAY AND TIM O'BRIEN

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## **Abstract**

Heather Renee Ross: The Search for Love and Feminine Identity in the War Literature of Ernest Hemingway and Tim O'Brien  
(Under the direction of Joseph M. Flora)

This dissertation examines how Ernest Hemingway and Tim O'Brien challenge the emotionally restrictive nature of our stereotypical expectations of manhood in the context of the war experience. The analysis centers on creating a feminist critical space that affirms the male desire for feminine influence. Though their methods differs, both Hemingway and O'Brien create male characters who seek freedom from the insistence that they perpetually be brave, strong, un-emotive, and otherwise "manly," and freedom from the fear that such a "failure" to perform as expected will not signify that they are less than men. And yet these characters often are at war with themselves, as they struggle with how to endure suffering and loss and still perform as men. Hemingway develops characters who discover that to live and die well, a man must avail himself to the feminine, and be vulnerable to love. O'Brien demonstrates how a failure to listen—both to ourselves and to one another—thwarts love and prevents human closeness. This project uncovers Hemingway and O'Brien's efforts to subvert traditional masculinity by urging the reader to imagine alternative expressions of masculinity and femininity, and to accept male characters whose thoughts and actions defy expectations for masculine performance.

*To Jason, for his love and light, and for knowing I need a room of my own.*

*To Declan and Scout, for hanging the moon each and every night.*

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## Introduction

*Our children's children—what of them? Who of them? New means must be discovered to find room for us under the sun. Shall this be done by war or can it be done by peaceful methods?* -Ernest Hemingway, "Banal Story," *Men Without Women* (126)

I was born in Virginia Beach, Virginia to parents who were so convinced I was going to be a boy, that they had named me John and painted my room blue months before I arrived. From the time my parents shared these early life details with me, at the age of six, I think, the knowledge has colored my perception of self. I am not for a moment suggesting that this prenatal case of mistaken sexual identity had the same trauma-inducing effects that Ernest Hemingway experienced from his mother's cross-dressing experiment with he and his sister, but neither do I really believe that my parents—my father, in particular—were *convinced* I was a boy. It was just they so desperately desired a boy, that in a way they tried to will me into being one. My parents didn't love me any less for being a girl, nor my sister, who arrived two years later, but my father also was sure to instill in me a traditionally masculine perspective on my role in the world. When he pushed me to be strong, tough, independent, unemotional, competitive, and athletic, I embraced it as a way to prove that even though I was a girl, I could still be most, if not all, of the things he wanted his child to be.

The truth is, it all came rather easily for me. I was tough and strong and fiercely competitive. I was a leader—the president of my class more than once and a varsity team captain several times. I was part of the first generation of girls to play co-ed recreational

sports before there were girls-only teams, and I continued to play on teams through college. I was emotional, yet I learned how to submerge my emotions—to keep a stiff upper lip, and I was independent to a fault, and I still am today. What I wasn't, however, was a feminist. In fact, in high school, and even into college, *not* being a feminist was a small source of pride for me. Whether I was sheltered, naïve, or simply in denial, I didn't see anything in my life that I wasn't able to do because I was a woman. From my vantage now, I am certain there were those sorts of things, but I didn't see them then. The other thing I missed back then was the great extent to which the wants and expectations of a man—my father—influenced the choices I made.

My parents were and still are conservative Christians. Growing up, I never had the idea that my mother, as a homemaker, to use the term she prefers, would have rather been doing anything else. There weren't political magazines around our house to inform me of gender-based inequities or the social landscape from a liberal perspective, and certainly I didn't hear it from the pulpit on Sunday mornings. When it came to feminism, it was not that I didn't get what the fuss was all about, but that I didn't even realize there was a fuss. While in high school, I read Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* in the classroom, and then *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and numerous short stories on my own. I admired Hemingway's style, and I identified with his characters' suffering and pain. In retrospect, I think I also liked Hemingway's work in part because it afforded me a space to engage with the masculine ideas that were so familiar and comfortable to me, rather than confront my own difficulty in identifying with the feminine. In this way, Hemingway and I were a bit alike, for he too was employed in the subterfuge of avoiding his own femininity. Then, midway through my sophomore year in college, my entire perspective began to change. I read Charlotte Perkins

Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* in an English Lit course, and almost instantly my old view of literature and the world began to crack and peel. Feminism, I finally understood, was not only considerably more than a "fuss," it was a thing essential to the woman I wanted to be.

Today, I am a woman that back then I could only have imagined I would be. I am a feminist, and I also still like Hemingway. I am married to a man I met during that influential sophomore year in college, and it is no small source of pride for him that he introduced me to Sylvia Plath's writing so many years ago. We have two small children, a boy and a girl, and we often find ourselves confronting societal expectations for gender as we contemplate our parenting decisions. Already, I have witnessed from them defiance for any sort of those expectations, and I must admit it leaves me proud. My seven-year-old son, who has near shoulder-length blond hair, was at first nonplussed when strangers mistook him for a girl; now he understands why they make the mistake, but he doesn't care, and is especially against cutting his locks. He talks about someday being an engineer, and he spends countless hours, his hair kept back with a sweatband, filling notebooks with his inventions. My five-year-old daughter recently declared, while sporting a bright orange tutu, that she wants to be a firefighter when she grows up because "there aren't a lot of girl firefighters." When someone informed her that not many girls are mechanics either, she responded that she might have to be one of those, too.

Gender expectations are of course a part of my children's lives, and have found perhaps the most insidious point of entry through the world of toys. For girls, it's kitchen sets, princess dresses, knitting supplies, play make-up kits, and every doll accessory imaginable. For boys, it's battle-based figurines, war-scenario video games, and weapons of all shapes and sizes. For both sexes, children's movies offer loathsome portrayals of gender

stereotypes, with the deceptively benign Disney standing as the most egregious offender. In the course of my study of war and masculinity, I have often found myself thinking of my children, wondering about the world they will inherit, and the personal resources they will possess to make their way in the future. I believe that their ability to defy traditional gender expectations in how they perceive themselves, in how they experience emotion, and in how they interact with others will crucially inform their capacity to navigate pain and suffering in the world. My desire is for both my son and my daughter not to discriminate between the masculine and the feminine aspects that reside within each of them, and to instead be comfortable and confident with the inherent duality of their natures. The male characters in novels by Ernest Hemingway and Tim O'Brien are often aware of the dual nature of their identities, and find themselves wrestling with when and how either to suppress or express either their masculinity or their femininity, while still retaining their status as men.

After years of teaching and reading the writings of Ernest Hemingway, I like to think I am familiar with him in a way that transcends biographical knowledge, and likely this is something I share with numerous others who appreciate his work. From my first experience with *The Sun Also Rises*, Hemingway's words indeed captivated me, and yet what I really wanted to know was everything underneath—all the depth of the iceberg that Hemingway famously referred to in *Death in the Afternoon*. He writes: "If a writer of prose knows enough of what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. A writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes

hollow places in his writing” (154). In the process of learning more about what Hemingway was hiding beneath the waters of his sparse prose, I began to discover what I was hiding from myself in my own life. It seems funny to think of Hemingway giving me therapy, but in a way, that’s precisely what he did. His characters struggle with how to personify both their masculinity and their femininity without risking their authentic selves, and for a period of time in my life, I identified with that experience.

My connection with Tim O’Brien differs from my one with Hemingway. In February of 2007, Tim spent three days as the Morgan Writer in Residence at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, where I was a graduate student. During his first day on campus, I attended his reading for *The Things They Carried*, and afterward, when his ride failed to show, I drove him back his hotel. It was a long walk to my car, and I remember that we talked about Hemingway. Tim was swift to acknowledge the honor in having his writing frequently compared to that of “Papa,” but he was equally quick to distance his work from the association. He was being modest, but also defensive, and while I didn’t understand it then, I think I do now. Certainly no writer wants to exist in the shadow of another, but that only partly explains O’Brien’s reaction. If Hemingway’s writing exemplifies his own iceberg principle, then O’Brien’s writing drains the water from the sea to expose the remaining seven-eighths of the frozen mass. O’Brien has his characters take the emotional risks that Hemingway’s characters only dreamed of taking.

One ride back to hotel turned into several rides, and ended up including lunch, a trip to a toy store, and more than one stop for cigarettes along the way. Tim wore the same thing every day I saw him: white lace-up sneakers, a blue v-neck sweater that was heavily pilled from wear, faded blue jeans, and his ubiquitous baseball cap. I had wanted to be original,

thought provoking, and intellectually impressive with the questions I asked him, and while I'm fairly certain I wasn't any of those things, it didn't matter much. To put it simply, we hit it off. He dutifully responded to my queries, and then we moved on to more interesting things. We quickly discovered that we both had spent childhoods obsessed with magic, and now we both had young children who fancied wearing tails.<sup>1</sup> He chained smoked the entire time we were together, except when we ate, and he left a pack of cigarettes in my car. On his last day, I took him to the local mall to buy trains to take home to his sons. The young woman ringing up his purchase was considerably overweight, her hair was limp and greasy, and her complexion was far from clear. Atop her head, she wore a plastic tiara. Tim paused mid-sentence in his conversation with me to say to her, "My, that tiara really makes you shine. You're beautiful." And it was there, in a single moment I won't soon forget, that I glimpsed the heart that he lays bare in his fiction.

The writings I have selected by Hemingway and O'Brien reveal the complexity and contradiction that emerge from man's desire for the freedom to identify with his femininity. Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) and Tim O'Brien (1946- ) not only share the experience of war—Hemingway served in World War I and O'Brien served in Vietnam—but also an undercurrent in their fiction that explores how our social demand for masculine performance complicates a man's self-awareness, and impacts his efforts to love and be loved. These two writers challenge and engage the emotionally restrictive nature of our stereotypical expectations of manhood, yet at the same time labor to keep up their own masculine performances. Though their methods differs, both Hemingway and O'Brien create male

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<sup>1</sup> In the September 14th, 2009 issue, *Atlantic Monthly* published "Telling Tails," the article O'Brien was working on when I interviewed him.

characters who desire freedom from the insistence that they perpetually be brave, strong, unemotive, and otherwise “manly,” and freedom from the fear that such a “failure” to perform as expected will not signify that they are less than men.

In the first chapter, I consider O’Brien’s composite novel *The Things They Carried* (1990). In the interconnected sequence of stories that comprise *The Things They Carried*, O’Brien’s narrator, also named Tim O’Brien, engages the reader with a penetrating, and sometimes haunting, recollection of his experiences at war in Vietnam. Emotion in O’Brien’s work is raw and close to the surface, both in his writing style and in what he chooses to reveal about how men think and feel. Just as O’Brien consciously mingles autobiographical details with his fiction, the narrator is open with the reader about his metafictional manipulation and merging of fact and fiction to deliver what he calls “story-truth,” a thing that “is truer sometimes than happening-truth” (*The Things They Carried*). In one interview, O’Brien elaborates on his view of fiction: “A good piece of fiction...does not offer solutions. Good stories deal with our moral struggles, our uncertainties, our dreams, our blunders, our contradictions, our endless quest for understanding. Good stories do not resolve the mysteries of the human spirit but rather describe and expand upon those mysteries” (Bookreporter). *The Things They Carried* is nothing if not “good.” Faithful to his philosophy, O’Brien leads his reader on a search for understanding not only of truth, but also of love, of the need for human closeness, and of what it means to be brave. He subverts traditional masculinity by urging the reader to imagine alternative expressions of masculinity and femininity, and to accept male characters whose thoughts and actions defy expectations for masculine performance.

Hemingway's *Men Without Women* (1927), also a composite novel, is the focus of the second chapter. My close study of five stories—"Che Ti Dice La Patria?," "In Another Country," "A Canary for One," "An Alpine Idyll," and "Now I Lay Me"—argues that perhaps the last thing Hemingway or most of his characters want to be is without a woman. The effect of the title is similar to telling a person not to think of elephants—immediately, elephants spring to mind. The lack of significant female characters in the stories creates an absent presence, and forces the reader to contemplate how the narrator and the other men in the stories frame their own identities in relation to the role a woman plays or doesn't play in their lives. The numerous and inescapable autobiographical reflections in the stories further drive the reader's awareness of how Hemingway's relationships with the women in his life evoked for him feelings of guilt, betrayal, pain, and self-doubt. The characters often are at war with themselves, and they struggle with how to endure suffering and loss and still perform as men. Their efforts are complicated by their awareness both of their need for feminine influence and of their desire to identify with their own femininity. When the men in these stories are without women, they experience sadness, guilt, regret, emptiness, and an uncertainty about their futures. Nick Adams, a war veteran who also appears in Hemingway's *In Our Time* (1925), is the probable narrator in "An Alpine Idyll," "In Another Country," and "Now I Lay Me," and his presence lends continuity and perspective to the depictions of masculine experience. The men in these stories ignore, mistreat, and betray the women in their lives, but they also mourn, love, and long for them.

The third chapter brings fresh perspective to Hemingway's oft-disparaged novel *Across the River and Into the Trees* (1950). Critics have found fault with what they consider to be a dismal storyline, as well as Hemingway's overtly autobiographical references.

Colonel Richard Cantwell, the protagonist, is a different sort of Hemingway hero. As he nears death, he realizes that “holding tight” will prevent rather than ensure the graceful death he desires. Cantwell, who is intimately acquainted with betrayal, injury, and pain, discovers the redemptive power of a woman’s love. Renata transforms his weakness into strength, and convinces him that his ability to suffer is not what defines him as a man. Cantwell rejects the expectations for traditional masculine performance that have defined him for so many years, and instead embraces love and his own femininity. He acknowledges the transformative and healing power of the woman he loves, and he relies on her strength to redeem him from self-loathing and his fear of death. When Renata listens to his war stories, he is able to exorcise the bitterness and regret that he harbors for the betrayals and failures that so sharply color his memories and perception of self. Just before his death, Cantwell goes on a duck shoot, and the third person narrator informs the reader that “a blind is any artifice you use to hide the shooter from that which he is attempting to shoot” (256). Renata’s feminine influence removes the blind for Cantwell, revealing the artifice of masculine ideals. In the end, he realizes that it was his adherence to those tenets of stoic endurance, and his lack of communion with his own femininity, that heightened his suffering and left him emotionally alone. Through his portrayal of Cantwell, Hemingway suggests that to live and die well, a man must avail himself to the feminine, and to the vulnerable state of being in love.

The fourth and final chapter returns us to O’Brien with an examination of his deceptively comedic novel *Tomcat in Love* (1998). In an interview, O’Brien emphasizes how this book fits in his authorial trajectory: “Though I am known as a ‘Vietnam writer’—whatever that may be—I have always pegged myself more as a ‘love writer,’ and in that regard *Tomcat in Love* is no departure at all. I am still circling, after nearly thirty years, the

same old obsessions” (Rosica 131). The narrator, Thomas Chippering, is a Vietnam war veteran and Professor of Linguistics, and also a pompous, narcissistic misogynist who is desperate for love. A life-long series of betrayals by his father, his comrades, his friends, and his lovers have traumatized Chippering and compromised his grip on reality. O’Brien parodies and ridicules the construct of masculinity, suggesting that Chippering’s absurd words and actions are appropriate in so far as they are in response to an equally absurd sets of standards and expectations that prevent men from actualizing self-love and meaningful human relationships. As he does in each of his novels, O’Brien ascribes specific details from his own life to the fictional life of Chippering. Chippering conceives of his effort to win love as a kind of war, only to find that his battle strategies leave him further alienated and alone. O’Brien demonstrates how a failure to listen—both to ourselves and to one another—thwarts love and prevents human closeness. Distancing himself from his emotional pain becomes a coping mechanism for Chippering, but eventually it threatens to destroy him by preventing him from being vulnerable to love. Ultimately, love is what O’Brien and all of his characters are searching for, and in *Tomcat in Love* O’Brien wonders if we are not our own worst enemies if we adhere to social expectations for gender performance and thereby make war out of the quest for human affection.

The first seeds of inspiration for this book grew in response to my reading of Annette Kolodny’s view that men can be inadequate readers of female-authored texts. I immediately contemplated the truth of that statement with regard to female readers of male-authored texts. What I hope to suggest is that neither condition of inadequacy, the latter being my particular focus, need be permanent or all together inappropriate. In both instances, the charge of

inadequacy must necessarily become a challenge that the reader embraces, and then labors to overcome. Feminist literary critics endeavor to "re-vision" literary works in the manner suggested by poet and critic Adrienne Rich: "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (18). Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick urges "that we strongly resist...the presupposition that what women have to do with masculinity is mainly to be treated less or more oppressively by the men to whom masculinity more directly pertains" (13). Twenty years after the publication of O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, and nearly fifty years after Hemingway's death, I am listening to Kosofsky-Sedgwick and attempting a similar re-visioning along Rich's prescribed lines. I am not male, nor am I a veteran, but my challenge is to imagine the male experience, and to thereby model what critics have long called for from male writers in terms of imagining the female experience.

## Chapter I

### A Soldier's Search for Truth, Love, and Identity in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*

*A woman simply is, but a man must become. Masculinity is risky and elusive. It is achieved by a revolt from woman, and it is confirmed only by other men. Manhood coerced into sensitivity is no manhood at all.* -Camille Paglia

In the United States, the spring of 2010 marked the twenty-year anniversary and reissue of *The Things They Carried*; in Vietnam, a translated edition of Tim O'Brien's collection of stories portraying American soldiers found its way on to shelves for the very first time. Tran Ngoc Hieu, a lecturer at Hanoi's Pedagogical University, declared that Vietnamese audiences will appreciate the book for its surrealistic exploration of the horrors of war, despite their general disinclination for any war story. "Vietnamese authors should learn to tell their war stories the way O'Brien does," Hieu said. "With parody, nonlinear plot exposition. The fusion of reality and dreams" (Steinglass 27). O'Brien's storytelling has certainly found favor with American critics and readers, who have honored *The Things They Carried* as a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award. Part of the enduring appeal of this composite novel might be the way in which the characters' search for truth and love transcends war and history, and rather effortlessly presents itself as a viable thread in the fabric of present-day consciousness. For as the narrator of *The Things They Carried* reveals, "You can tell a true war story by the way it never seems to end. Not then, not ever" (76). O'Brien's success at creating a continuity of human experience across

time and place, as well as this aspect of “unending-ness,” are also evidenced by the fact that *The Things They Carried* is one of the things that soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan carry today.

The collection of stories seems consciously un-bildungsroman, exploring episodes of spiritual and emotional crisis that force the narrator to reconsider not only the man he thought he was, but the paradigm of the man that he thought he was striving to be. O’Brien idealizes a dis-identification with conventional registers of manhood, an act complicated in the war arena where dis-identification with such markers of manhood also risks a loss of identity as an American. José Esteban Muñoz, who studies performance within queer and racial minority communities, explains dis-identification as an effort by those outside the racial and sexual mainstream to cultivate a survival strategy that aims from within to negotiate and ultimately transform the cultural logic. What O’Brien points to, however, is how heterosexual white males fail in to co-opt, subvert, and otherwise rupture conventional perceptions of masculinity, as Muñoz’s marginalized communities might attempt with their efforts at dis-identification, because they fear such disruption risks their image as masculine and their identity as men. And yet O’Brien takes such risk upon himself by his very effort to underscore these realities.

*The Things They Carried* demonstrates O’Brien’s recognition of how expectations of masculine performance impinge on how men respond to fear, death, love, and war. O’Brien conveys this understanding by creating characters and stories that subtly controvert stereotypical masculine expectations by unapologetically revealing the soft underbelly of men. Rather than rejecting softness as a chink in the armor of manhood, O’Brien owns and embraces it, using it to underscore the humanity in his characters, revealing their deep desire

and need to be loved by women. O'Brien subverts the traditional expectations of masculinity and urges the reader to imagine alternative masculinities. O'Brien asks his readers—particularly his female readers—to conceive of male identities that challenge stereotypes by including the feminine, and he creates male characters who work to renegotiate with themselves what it means to be a man.

O'Brien's motivation for going to Vietnam is probably not what most of us might expect to hear from a United States military veteran. And it is certainly not the stuff of your typical war novel or action film: no desire for battlefield glory, no militaristic *pro patria* urgency. In his memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Send Me Home*, O'Brien refers to Horace's old do-or-die aphorism—"Dulce est *pro patria* mori"—saying, "it was just an epitaph for the insane" (171). In that same memoir, he also writes that he felt in part as if he *owed* it to the Minnesota town where he grew up to go to war: "For twenty-one years I'd lived under its laws, accepted its education, eaten its food, wasted and guzzled its water, slept well at night, driven across its highways, dirtied and breathed its air, wallowed in its luxuries" (18). In his composite novel *The Things They Carried*, the main character, also named Tim O'Brien, finds himself in a "little aluminum boat," contemplating the Canadian shoreline and the draft card folded in his wallet. Tim O'Brien the character (hereafter referred to as *the narrator*) *tries* to jump overboard and swim away from the draft, but he cannot do it:

I did try. It just wasn't possible. All those eyes on me—the town, the whole universe—and I couldn't risk the embarrassment. It was as if there were an audience to my life, that swirl of faces along the river, and in my head I could hear people screaming at me. Traitor! They yelled. Turncoat! Pussy! 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. (59)

Both O'Brien and the narrator went to the war because they were afraid of failing to live up to the expectations of others, and of themselves. Expectations are often complex and contradictory, and for men, especially men considered in the context of war, there exists an acute awareness of how both the largest and most minute of decisions affects how they might be perceived as men. The narrator and the reader both realize it is more than embarrassment that forces his choice. Tangled with the embarrassment is another sort of fear:

Beyond all this, or at the very center, was the raw fact of terror. I did not want to die. Not ever. But certainly not then, not there, not in a wrong war. Driving up Main Street, past the courthouse and the Ben Franklin store, I sometimes felt the fear spreading inside me like weeds. I imagined myself dead. I imagined myself doing things I could not do—charging an enemy position, taking aim at another human being. (44)

At the end of "On the Rainy River," the chapter quoted above and the one in which the narrator almost runs from the war, he states, "I was a coward. I went to the war" (61). He lays bare his fear, and it is his authentic avowal and exploration of that fear and "cowardice" that renders O'Brien and his work so compelling and provocative. O'Brien has equated courage with "having the moral integrity and strength to take control of one's life and do what one knows is ethically right" (Kaplan 8). In his stories, he struggles with how the social expectations for masculine performance, and the fear of not fulfilling those expectations, challenge him to make choices that defy what he knows to be ethically right. "It was a kind of schizophrenia," the narrator reveals, "A moral split. I couldn't make up my mind. I feared the war, yes, but I also feared exile. I was afraid of walking away from my own life...I feared losing the respect of my parents. I feared the law. I feared ridicule and

censure” (44-5). Of course these fears in general are not exclusive to the male experience, but in the context of receiving a draft card in 1968, they were.

Even decades after his return from Vietnam, O’Brien still lives with the sense of having compromised himself to meet what he perceived to be others’ expectations for his performance. He reveals, “There are certain events I’ve never talked about or written about. Things I saw or did in Vietnam that I’ve only told to a couple of people...I don’t avoid these events because people would condemn me—they would say these are things he had to do and he did them—but because people would look at me differently and I would feel differently around people, not because of who I am but because of the person I was” (Kaplan 4).

O’Brien has called the story “On the Rainy River” a dramatization of the "moral schizophrenia" he felt during the summer of 1968, but notes that its plot and setting are entirely invented. He saw the river as a concrete means of putting his character "on the edge" (*Missouri Review* 95-6). It is difficult to read the story, set in the woods of the northern Midwest and climaxing in a fateful fishing trip, without thinking of "Big Two-Hearted River." The loquacity of O’Brien’s narrator persona here, however, could not be further removed from the reticence of Nick Adams and his creator; and his open-hearted, anguished concern about the war is emotionally at opposite poles from Hemingway’s ideal of "grace under pressure."

O’Brien’s treatment of truth, his penchant for eliding fiction and fact to produce “truth,” overwhelms the critical discussion of his work, and while it is keenly relevant to his artistic purposes, a focus on what is true risks overlooking more significant threads in his narratives. The concept of “truth” in fiction being “truer” than fact-based truth seems easily acceptable, and in essence, the aim of perhaps all literature. O’Brien does draw attention to

his truth play, making the reader hyper-aware of how he or she might desire confirmation of truth, and his own efforts to blur the line. Throughout the novel, O'Brien alerts the reader with phrases such as, "This is true," or "It's all exactly true" (67, 70). Then, only a few paragraphs after the avowals of truth:

In any war story, but especially a true one, it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seemed to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed. When a booby trap explodes, you close your eyes and duck and float outside yourself. When a guy dies, like Curt Lemon, you look away and then look back for a moment and then look away again. The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then, afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it *seemed*.  
(*Things* 71)

Harold Bloom considers O'Brien's work to convey an understanding of how a "typical, linear plot would not approximate the discursive and recurring nature of the war," and how "multiple perspectives and narrators help to atomize truth into something with pieces in everything, no single piece of which is then the whole truth" (Bloom 15). In "How to Tell a True War Story," the narrator, Tim, reminds the reader that a true war story does not depend upon its having actually happened: "Absolute occurrence is irrelevant. A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth" (83). Science fiction writer Samuel Delaney makes a similar point in the introduction to his autobiography *The Motion of Light in Water*:

'My father died of lung cancer in 1958 when I was seventeen.'  
'My father died of lung cancer in 1960 when I was eighteen.'  
The first is incorrect, the second correct.  
So I am as concerned with truth as anyone—otherwise I would not be going to far as to split such hairs. In no way do I feel the incorrect sentence is privileged over the correct one. Yet, even with what I know now...the wrong sentence still feels righter to me than the right one.  
Now a biography or a memoir that contained only the first sentence would be incorrect. But one that omitted it, or did not at least suggest its

relation to the second on several informal levels, would be incomplete. (xviii)

When the narrator in *The Things They Carried* relates a story told by Rat Kiley, a medic and one of the soldiers in Alpha Company, he also speaks to this relative sense of “rightness” with regard to truth, acknowledging from the outset that for Rat, “facts were formed by sensation,” and that while he “had a reputation for exaggeration and overstatement...it wasn’t a question of deceit. Just the opposite: he wanted to heat up the truth, to make it burn so hot that you would feel exactly what he felt” (89).

This is valuable to our understanding of O’Brien’s perception of both truth and masculinity. Without excusing the shades of sexism or misogyny that might occur when these “true” stories are told, knowledge of precisely what these soldiers say they “felt” offers the opportunity for understanding the causes and the possibility for initiating reform. How might we consider these same standards of “truth-telling” with regard to the expectations of masculine performance? If the impossible, unrealistic ideals of manliness and masculinity are masquerading as the “facts” of what it means to be a man, then might we similarly defy those “facts” by imagining new masculinities, predicated in part on how men say they *feel*?

Imagine for a moment a story titled “The Camouflage Wallpaper” in the spirit of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper.” Imagine the distorted bodies of men, almost indiscernible in a jungle of colors designed specifically to obscure their presence, whose every movement depends upon the apparition of the ghost-like enemy rising from the dead:

Ghosts behind you and in front of you and inside you. After a while, as the night deepens, you feel a funny buzzing in your ears. Tiny sounds get heightened and distorted. The crickets talk in code; the night takes on a weird electric tingle. You hold your breath. You coil up and tighten your muscles and listen, knuckles hard, the pulse ticking in your head. You hear the spooks laughing. No shit, *laughing*. You jerk up, you freeze, you squint at the dark.

Nothing, though. You put your weapon on full automatic. You crouch lower and count your grenades and make sure the pins are bent for quick throwing and take a deep breath and listen and try not to freak. And then later, after enough time passes, things start to get bad. (*Things* 205)

While the experiences of the men in O'Brien's work do not equate with the import or historical significance of Gilman's depiction, the analogy does have merit. O'Brien is engaging beyond the scope of Vietnam to contemplate the battle that he suggests is inherent in daily living:

The environment of war is the environment of life, magnified. [...] We are all living in the war. It's just that the wolf isn't quite at the door. The wolf is sort of baying in the woods, in the lives we live in the ordinary world. [...] I hope that my work will ultimately have its effect in understanding the war of living. The stakes are always high. We are always almost dead in our lives—we just don't know it. The problems and dilemmas presented in a war setting are essentially the same problems and dilemmas of living life itself. (McNerney 23-24)

If the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper" seeks liberation from patriarchal oppression and feels trapped to the point of going mad in a prison of domesticity, then O'Brien and his characters seek liberation from what they perceive to be the stifling expectations of masculinity, and feel that gaining the love and understanding of women offers the potential for escape from those nerve-racking demands. This is not to say that women are the oppressors of masculinity, nor to suggest that they benefit from sustained masculinity in the way that men do from patriarchy. The analogy is meant to demonstrate the sometimes silent and unnoticed suffering of men in this vein, and how O'Brien prods us in that direction.

In many ways, O'Brien trades one failed idealistic paradigm of masculinity for another, with the love of a woman as the ultimate redemption. The unavoidable implication, then, is that woman's *denial* of love and understanding *causes* men, including the men in

O'Brien's fiction, to behave with violence, cruelty, misogyny, or other forms of depravity.

Lorrie M. Smith asserts:

[*The Things They Carried*] probes the vulnerability of soldiers betrayed by cultural myths and registers how deeply war in our culture is a gendered activity. But O'Brien inscribes no critique of his characters' misogyny or the artificial binary opposition of masculinity and femininity, no redefinition of power, no fissure in the patriarchal discourse of war. However ambiguous and horrible Vietnam may be, and however many new combinations of memory, fact, and imagination O'Brien composes, war is still presented as an inevitable, natural phenomenon deeply meaningful to the male psyche and hostile to femininity. More pernicious, these stories seem to warn women readers away from any empathetic grasp of 'the things men do.' (23)

Yet it is not femininity that O'Brien (and Hemingway) is hostile toward, but "the artificial binary opposition of masculinity and femininity." If by "pernicious" Smith intends to suggest that O'Brien hopes to prevent women from understanding "the things men do," so that he can then blame them for not understanding, and for then causing them to continue to do those things, then I disagree. While O'Brien does not offer overt claims of acceptance of responsibility on the part of men for devising the cultural myths that attempt to sustain patriarchal power, neither does he blame women for not understanding. Conceptualizing men as separate from masculinity and women as separate from femininity challenges O'Brien. He manages both in various places, the former with greater clarity, and yet his commitment to such a theoretical ideal is at times unreliable. The narrator is not, for instance, angry with the woman who does not understand, but with how his obvious *need* for her sympathy, love, and understanding renders him vulnerable and feminized—whereas in other places he cries out for the freedom to be feminine.

An "empathetic grasp" is precisely what O'Brien is seeking, and he attempts it in a way that also tries to preserve an image of manliness—in part because he is unwilling to relinquish the patriarchal power that comes with a less-than-manly image, even as he is

desperately aware of his own femininity. In a 1991 interview with Ronald Baughman, O'Brien revealed:

The way one handles the enemy is a big question for people who write about Vietnam in particular and about war in general. People often ask why not treat the enemy with the same detail and richness as you treat your protagonists, the American soldiers. And the answer is, of course, that you often simply *cannot*. You don't *know* the enemy. You are pretty much stuck with your own point of view. Beyond that, of course, you'd end up doing stereotyped sorts of things. (Heberle xxiv)

In the interview, O'Brien does not make the analogy of woman as a similar "enemy," although some critics have charged that he does so in his fiction. Regardless, the writerly concern for how to treat that which you "don't know," enemy or not, is analogous. Clearly the young men in Alpha Company do not feel as if they *know* women, even as they desperately hope to, leading us to suspect that the men are confused and inexperienced rather than, as Smith advocates, hostile. Still, youth and inexperience—and the narrator frequently reminds us that he and his fellow platoon-mates suffer from both—are not tenable excuses for sexism or misogyny. O'Brien is critical of "the things men do," as well as frustrated and constrained by that fact that he himself "does them" too. Pamela Smiley views the "central project" of O'Brien's work as the following: "to make the Marthas who stayed home during the sixties and seventies playing volleyball, going to college, reading Virginia Woolf, to make such women understand their brothers, friends and lovers who went to Vietnam" (Smiley 602). If Smiley's assessment is accurate, then the trouble for O'Brien would arise from his assumption or insinuation that he can "make" women understand, that they do not already understand, or that they are unable to understand. He does err in this regard in *The Things They Carried*.

The first chapter of *The Things They Carried* introduces us to Jimmy Cross—the young, inexperienced, and likeable first lieutenant of the book’s fictional platoon. He carries with him letters from a girl named Martha, who is an English major at Mount Sebastian College in New Jersey, has gray eyes, and quotes poetry. When the other men turn, in moments of repose, to their diaries, or Bibles, or tranquilizers, Cross turns to his daily ritual of reading Martha’s letters:

They were not love letters, but Lieutenant Cross was hoping, so he kept them folded in plastic at the bottom of his rucksack. In the late afternoon, after a day’s march, he would dig his foxhole, wash his hands under a canteen, unwrap the letters, hold them with the tips of his fingers, and spend the last hour of light pretending. He would imagine romantic camping trips into the White Mountains in New Hampshire. He would sometimes taste the envelope flaps, knowing her tongue had been there. More than anything, he wanted Martha to love him as he loved her.... (1)

Cross, trained to kill the enemy without hesitation, handles Martha’s letters with a gentle tenderness that in the opening pages sets a unique tone for a war novel. We understand more about Cross from his connection with the feminine in musings on Martha than we would have from an opening scene of violent combat. O’Brien effectively presents Cross’s (unrequited) love, reminiscent of Jake Barnes’ ardor for Lady Brett Ashley in Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*, as a means to contrast his virtue and innocence with the brutality and pain of a corrupt war he neither believes in nor wants to fight. When Martha sends Cross a small pebble that she found along the shore, he makes a habit of carrying it around in his mouth just so he can feel closer to her. As he felt the stone on his tongue, “his mind wandered. He had difficulty keeping his attention on the war. On occasion he would yell at his men to spread out the column, to keep their eyes open, but then he would slip away into daydreams, just pretending, walking barefoot along the Jersey shore with Martha, carrying nothing....Sun and waves and gentle winds, all love and lightness” (8-9). Cross does not

imagine fire-fights, ambushes or Silver Stars as he leads his men through the jungle; he thinks of love and sunset walks on the beach.

Even as his men undertake reconnaissance outside the village of Than Khe, Cross escapes the tension and danger of the mission, the stillness and tedium of the dry paddy, by dreaming of Martha, her dancing, her kisses. Lee Strunk draws the unlucky number, and the men wait nervously as he crawls into a dark Viet Cong tunnel opening beneath the ground. After five long minutes, Cross, fearing a possible cave-in, peers down into the darkness, when

suddenly, without willing it, he was thinking about Martha. The stresses and fractures, the quick collapse, the two of them buried alive under all that weight. Dense, crashing love. Kneeling, watching the hole, he tried to concentrate on Lee Strunk and the war, all the dangers, but his love was too much for him, he felt paralyzed, he wanted to sleep inside her lungs and breathe her blood and be smothered. (11)

His mind had abandoned its masculine post, its warrior's commitment to vigilance and protection. As Smith observes, when "he gazes suggestively down into the dark tunnel, he leaves the war and succumbs to a fantasy of perfect union between masculine and feminine, death and desire" (25-6). In the midst of Cross's reverie, Strunk emerges safely from the darkness, yet just as a sniper's shot kills Ted Lavender, who had wandered off to pee. The punishment for imagining the dissolution of his masculine self, an image he cherishes even when his own crushing death might ensue, is the loss of his platoon-mate, for whom he was responsible. Cross "felt shame. He hated himself. He had loved Martha more than his men, and as a consequence Lavender was now dead, and this was something he would have to carry like a stone in his stomach for the rest of the war" (16). Martha and the feminine are not what leave the men vulnerable, but rather misplaced desire. The implication is, to borrow a phrase from an Army ad campaign, that to "be all you can be" as a man, you must eradicate

desire for the feminine from your heart and mind. But what O'Brien wants us to understand is that such expectation is cruel, unnatural, and impossible. He presents us with an image of Cross burning Martha's letters and photographs over a small fire, realizing that it is only a gesture: "Stupid, he thought. Sentimental, too, but mostly just stupid" (23). The fire cannot touch the letters still "in his head," (23) nor can it immolate his human need for the feminine.

It is then an acute sense of grief and guilt, rather than rage, that leads Cross and his men to the subsequent scorching and destruction of the nearby village of Than Khe. He lashes out not toward Martha, as Smith and others have argued, but toward a paradigm of masculinity that prevents him from desiring love or embracing any vestige of the feminine, while still performing as a man who bravely and unfailingly protects his fellow men. After they destroy the village, Cross experiences a breakdown. He finds his ultimate refuge not in the slash-and-burn destruction of the village, but alone in the dirt, overwhelmed by the loss. He tries to literally bury himself,

[using] his entrenching tool like an ax, slashing, feeling both love and hate, and then later, when it was full dark, he sat at the bottom of his foxhole and wept. It went on for a long while. In part, he was grieving for Ted Lavender, but mostly it was for Martha, and for himself, because she belonged to another world, which was not quite real..." (16-17)

In order to survive, Cross must accept war as his only knowable reality, and determine that love and Martha do not exist. He hides his grief by going below ground to cry, and he denies himself the connection with love, telling himself Martha "did not love him and never would" (17). On the morning after Lavender's death, after Cross has burned the physical evidence of his love for Martha, he rededicates himself to his duties as an officer: "he would not tolerate laxity. He would show strength, distancing himself...[he] reminded himself that his obligation was not to be loved but to lead. He would dispense with love; it was not now a

factor” (25-6). Smith reads Cross’s response as the recognition that, “His survival as a soldier and a leader depends upon absolute separation from the feminine world and rejection of his own femininity” (27). What O’Brien wants his readers to reject instead is a masculinity that demands such separation from the feminine. Otherwise, men are left having to reze their desire for love—the thing O’Brien suggests they desire most—to perform convincingly as men; it is the abiding fear of not being considered a man, coupled with the forced disavowal of the inherent desire for love, that inflicts the ultimate pain and suffering.<sup>2</sup>

The feminine and the female are not the locus of blame for Cross’s “failure” to protect his men, but rather it is his desire—or, more precisely, his lack of “manly” fortitude to control such desire—that distracts him from the masculine obligation to protect, defend, and put brotherhood above all else. Femininity exists on a continuum, and in reality, of course, so does masculinity, but the culturally accepted ideals for masculine performance are rigid and narrowly defined. O’Brien seeks a continuum for acceptable masculine performance similar to the one he perceives for feminine performance, and resists a view of the relationship between the masculine and the feminine as static or binary. If, as Susan Jeffords reminds us, to be discursive and indecisive is to be feminine, then in many ways O’Brien and his narrator are *feminine* as they embrace the use of imagination and the reinvention (or repurposing) of memories as a way to survive the war. The narrator and his fellow soldiers consistently return to imagination as a refuge from the demands and failures of masculinity. In *Gender Trouble* Judith Butler adeptly asserts, “Because there is neither an ‘essence’ that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires,

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<sup>2</sup> There is a connection here with William Dean Howell’s “Editha,” the story of a woman who thinks a man who loves her must prove it to her, and so she sends her fiancé, a conscientious objector, to fight in the Spanish-American War. Editha reads newspapers and other propaganda to inform her views, and refuses to understand her fiancé’s opposition to war and fighting.

and because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis” (140). Traditional and entrenched expectations of masculine behavior assume precisely the opposite, actively cultivating the idea of an “essence” and “objective ideal” of gender. O’Brien intimates his desire to more directly challenge the supposed “fact” of gender, just as he does with “truth.”

In the same chapter, the narrator describes how “times of panic” during a fire fight were a rite of passage, during which the men would fall to the ground, begging not to die, pleading with God, “moaning” and twitching with the fear of imminent death (19). When the firing stopped, the men “would force themselves to stand...It was the burden of being alive. Awkwardly, the men would reassemble themselves, first in private, then in groups, becoming soldiers again” (19). Life is a burden in the war zone, and being a soldier means playing a role with limited range. The men were “afraid of dying but they were even more afraid to show it” (20). The demands for bravery, as well as physical and emotional strength, are constant, with the men considered only as brave as their last brave act. After the litany of personal things carried in the sacks by the men of Alpha Company, the narrator recounts the intangible things that also weighed them down:

...the common secret of cowardice barely restrained, the instinct to run or freeze or hide, and in many respects this was the heaviest burden of all, for it could never be put down, it required perfect balance and perfect posture. They carried their reputations. They carried the soldier’s greatest fear, which was the fear of blushing. Men killed, and died, because they were embarrassed not to. It was what had brought them to the war in the first place, nothing positive, no dreams of glory or honor...It was not courage, exactly; the object was not valor. Rather, they were too frightened to be cowards. (21-2)

Honor in war is based on the performance of a narrow set of masculine ideals, with the irony being that the highest honor goes to the soldier who has best faked his bravery and fearlessness. If manliness is conflated with this “proof” of bravery, then these “times of panic” are about more than the fear of losing one’s own physical life: they are about the fear of losing what O’Brien sadly acknowledges is more significant—one’s identity as a man.

The men in Alpha Company engage in desperate, masochistic proofs of their masculine strength through their ability to endure pain. The narrator describes how when an army dentist is choppered in to lecture the men on oral hygiene and to demonstrate the proper brushing and flossing techniques, Curt Lemon initially refuses to have his teeth checked. Lemon “didn’t mind blood or pain—he actually enjoyed combat—but there was something about a dentist that just gave him the creeps” (87). Despite his avowals not to be orally poked and prodded, Lemon does go into the exam tent when his name is called, but faints after a few moments, before the doctor even touches him. When he comes to, “there was a funny new look on his face, almost sheepish, as if he’d been caught committing some terrible crime” (88). He spends the rest of the day alone, “cussing [and] bawling himself out,” and the narrator figures that “the embarrassment must’ve turned a screw in his head” (88). Late that night he went and woke the dentist, complaining of a “monster toothache” and demanding that the tooth be pulled—“a perfectly good tooth” (88). The dentist obliged, and “in the morning Curt Lemon was all smiles” (88).

In comparison to some of the other stories in the text, this one about Lemon and the dentist might seem light and amusing, yet is a subtle reminder about the lengths men go to in

the effort to demonstrate and solidify, if only for the moment, their masculine image. In

“Why Men Love War,” William Broyles, Jr. reiterates a common trope:

The enduring emotion of war, when everything else has faded, is comradeship...Individual possessions and advantage count for nothing: the group is everything. What you have is shared with your friends. It isn't a particularly selective process, but a love that needs no reasons, that transcends race and personality and education—all those things that would make a difference in peace. It is, simply, brotherly love. (58)

The dark side of this devotion to brotherhood is how it functions as a way to maintain solidarity and act as a monolith in deflecting blame, keeping secrets, and enacting violence. Undoubtedly soldiers form a special bond with one another, but this bond also works as a construct designed to keep women and other non-veteran men out, and for the “brothers” to maintain power. Jeffords further argues that the “bond” between soldiers in Vietnam War literature, despite the writers’ poignant depictions, is actually “tenuous” (73). If these relationships were genuine and firmly rooted, Jeffords writes, then the men would not feel compelled to “display” and “enforce” their bond by way of aggressive force (73).

O'Brien's stories draw closer to Jeffords' assertions about the fragility of the bond, than they do to Broyles' conception of “brotherly love.” Both O'Brien and Broyles recognize isolation as the most significant threat in the war zone. Yet whereas Broyles claims men turn to comradeship to combat the threat, O'Brien suggests that masculine obligation challenges the authenticity of such comradeship by making even the smallest interaction a manly command performance. When asked about “love for his fellow soldiers,” O'Brien commented on his perception of the “incredible myth that fills the literature of war about fraternity and brotherhood. I say myth because it's just not, in my experience, *true*. It's much more of a mixture. There's a lot of love, but there's also a lot of real hatred that

goes along with it. I didn't love all my comrades. Some of them I despised. Many I was indifferent to" (Herzog Interview 108).

R.W. Connell, author of *The Men and the Boys*, challenges the argument of "biological essentialism" as it applies to a man's relationship with violence. Connell recognizes that "violent masculinities are usually collectively defined and/or institutionally supported, whether in informal peer groups, formal armies, or groups somewhere in between" (217). With regard to soldiers, Connell reminds us to be cognizant of the fact that "we are not just talking about individuals. We are speaking of masculinized institutions" (215). Rather than "natural" acts, displays of male aggression are continuous, deliberate efforts to reestablish and, if momentarily, to solidify the men's connection to one another. For O'Brien's "boys," emotional and mental fatigue, as well as sadness, surface as they endeavor to form meaningful bonds, find a secure sense of self, and, ultimately, stay alive.

In "How to Tell a True War Story," the narrator twice recounts (he mentions it four times in the 18-page story) witnessing the death of Curt Lemon, and how it affects the men in the platoon, particularly how it devastates Rat Kiley. In "The Dentist," the chapter that follows, he opens with: "When Curt Lemon was killed, I found it hard to mourn. I knew him only slightly, and what I did know was not impressive" (86). The narrator does, however, care for Rat, and when the latter reacts to Lemon's death by mutilating a baby water buffalo while the others watch, it seems the "anti-scene" to a typical portrayal of retributive war violence. Rat goes off by himself, crying and "[cradling] his rifle," as the rest of them "stood in a ragged circle around the baby water buffalo. For a time no one spoke. We had witnessed *something essential*, something brand-new and profound, a piece of the world so

startling there was not yet a name for it” (79, italics mine). Rather than reaffirming their bond as men, they seem isolated from one another.

O’Brien does not directly elaborate on what that “something essential” is, but there is no mistaking the significance it has for the author. Similar versions of the baby buffalo story appear in *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1973), *Going After Cacciato* (1978), and *The Nuclear Age* (1985). In a 1984 interview with Eric Schroeder, O’Brien attests, “Oh yes. I did see [the baby buffalo massacre]. It happened” (132).

O’Brien also had a friend—Chip Merricks is the real-life antecedent for the fictional Curt Lemon—who was blown into a bunch of bamboo. The stories of the baby buffalo and Lemon are inextricable from one another in our quest for understanding that “something essential.” Deep in the jungle, Lemon and Rat had devised a game of pulling the pin out of a smoke grenade and tossing it back and forth to each other, having decided “whoever chickened out was a yellow mother” (70). Even at play, the undercurrent of having to prove one’s degree of courage persists. One moment the two men are smiling and laughing, the next moment Lemon “took a peculiar half step, moving from shade into bright sunlight, and the booby-trapped 105 round blew him into a tree. The parts were just hanging there, so Dave Jensen and I were ordered to shinny up and peel him off. I remember the white bone of an arm. I remember pieces of skin and something wet and yellow that must’ve been the intestines. The gore was horrible, and stays with me. But what wakes me up twenty years later is Dave Jensen singing ‘Lemon Tree’ as we threw down the parts” (83). The narrator connects the repeated mention of Lemon’s death with the story of the baby buffalo massacre, which he claims to have told “many times, many versions” (78).

Shortly after Lemon's death, the men come across "a baby VC water buffalo" (78). That night, Rat strokes the animal's nose, and offers it something to eat from his rations. When the buffalo isn't interested in the can of pork and beans,

[Rat Kiley] stepped back and shot it through the right front knee. The animal did not make a sound. It went down hard, then got up again, and Rat took careful aim and shot off an ear. He shot it in the hindquarters and in the little hump at its back. He shot it twice in the flanks. It wasn't to kill; it was to hurt. He put the rifle muzzle up against the mouth and shot the mouth away. Nobody said much. The whole platoon stood there watching, feeling all kinds of things, but there wasn't a great deal of pity for the baby water buffalo. Curt Lemon was dead. Rat Kiley had lost his best friend in the world...for now it was a question of pain. He shot away the tail. He shot away chunks of meat below the ribs. (78-9)

Smiley comments, "In O'Brien, the fury is directed at the baby buffalo rather than a village of people, displacing some of the horror while not denying it" (611). It is incredibly horrific, but to recognize the violent abuse of the defenseless animal primarily as O'Brien's alternative to the familiar slash-and-burn retributive attack on a village misses the emblematic significance O'Brien attempts to convey. Nothing makes any sense at all. In the grand natural order of things, there is no such thing as a VC water buffalo, it's just a water buffalo, not an enemy water buffalo. Rat isn't reacting with hate for the enemy, but with confusion and pain for the senseless stupidity of his best friend's death. Lemon was a man laughing and playing; he wasn't an enemy man. This speaks directly to the utter desperation the men feel for having to play a role and accept the seemingly pointless consequences of a war they don't understand, waged against men (and women) who are cast as their enemies. Rat was seeking some recognition of his own love when he went to stroke and feed the baby water buffalo. When the animal failed to respond, he bombarded it with his intense feelings of pain and rejection. He reverts to hyper-masculine performance to efface the pain of unrequited affection; comfort in the "manly" display, however, is fleeting or never

actualized. When Rat retreats in solitude, “[cradling] his rifle,” his posture might be feminine, but it is one that reflects his primal, desperate need for love, and O’Brien’s portrayal admires his connection, albeit tortured, with those instincts (79). Rat wants something to love and something to love him back. He engages in a feminine act to cope with the pain, but he has to do it alone, and with his rifle as a trapping to reassure the world of his masculine strength.

The baby water buffalo, riddled with flesh-searing pain, is Curt Lemon, is Rat Kiley, is the narrator, and is Tim O’Brien. And, of course, it is a poor, helpless baby water buffalo. Perhaps, it was also something more. In a July 4, 1969, article that appeared in the *Minneapolis Star*, O’Brien wrote, “We took a POW after Chip [Merricks] died. I was a nice guy once, a real peace advocate—which I remain—a humanitarian. But I booted the dink around some, crying a little at the same time—crying and kicking, kicking that dink until maybe he’d turn into Chip.” Pain and sadness overwhelm his sense of hostility, but he still kicks the Vietnamese man and, in the retelling, refers to him with a racial slur. To survive in war, O’Brien became a person he never imagined. To survive in the post-war world, O’Brien imagines stories about what happened and about the person he has become.

The purpose of the invention, excusable or not, is survival, be it physical or emotional. In an interview with Tobey Herzog, O’Brien shares the following:

There was no Curt Lemon, in a way. There was a real guy who I used to model Curt Lemon after. But the thoughts that I put into Curt Lemon’s mind I invented: ‘Was it the sunlight killing me?’ must have been Lemon’s final thought. I invented that. It was imaginary. It never happened as far as I know, as far as anybody will ever know. Yet it is a way of getting at things that factual truth just can’t get at. The truth is, a friend of mine was blown into a bunch of bamboo. And I wasn’t even present. I was maybe a hundred yards away. And all I saw was the aftermath. I saw Chip’s body in the tree. But I didn’t see him step from the shade into sunlight. All of that is invented, the singing of ‘Lemon Tree’ is invented, because, of course, the guy’s name

wasn't Lemon; it was Merricks. That is a way the invention gets at a kind of truth, the truth in that case is the way the macabre response, which will often link humor to tragedy, can diffuse horror or at least make it endurable. (121)

The scene with the baby water buffalo, terrible as it is, functions similarly to diffuse the men's horror at the gruesome death of Curt Lemon. Perhaps, it also functions similarly for diffusing the horror of a different event in O'Brien's memory—one to which we are not privy. We must remember that the telling of the "truth" is a device for reaching the audience, but also for authorial catharsis.

Some time after Curt Lemon's death, and after the killing of the baby water buffalo, Rat writes a letter to the sister of his dead best friend. The narrator recalls how heartbreaking it was to watch him with the pen and paper:

Rat almost bawls writing it. He gets all teary telling about the good the times they had together, how her brother made the war seem almost fun...And then the letter gets very sad and serious. Rat pours his heart out. He says the guy was his best friend in the world. They were like soul mates, he says, like twins or something, they had a whole lot in common. He tells the guy's sister that he'll look her up when the war's over. (68)

When two months pass and the sister fails to respond, Rat calls her a "dumb cooze" (69). Again, Rat's attempts at seeking human connection and expressing love are met with what he perceives to be rejection. "I write this beautiful fuckin' letter," he says, "I slave over it, and what happens? The dumb cooze never writes back" (69). The derogatory reference to the woman is more than cringe-worthy, and O'Brien acknowledges as much immediately following its first appearance in the *The Things They Carried*. He might embellish a story to render the "truth" of the experience more palpable, but he isn't going to scale things back to make them more palatable. He warns the reader:

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. Listen to Rat Kiley. Cooze, he says. He does not say bitch. He certainly does not say woman, or girl. He says cooze. Then he spits and stares. (68-9)

O'Brien does not valorize Rat's word choice—it isn't decent, he says, it isn't virtuous; it's obscene and even evil—and we are not meant to overlook or excuse it, but rather to appreciate the rawness, the reality, and the pain that its use connotes. The universe seems to have rejected Rat's love—with the death of his best friend, with a baby buffalo indifferent to his attention, with a sister who doesn't write back—and he responds with a bitter insult that safely identifies him with the stereotype of dirty-talking guys at war. O'Brien want us to understand this as a sad reality, not as a boys-will-be-boys-so-get-over-it scenario.

Seventeen pages later, the narrator repeats the coarse phrase “dumb cooze” (85). Can we as conscientious readers be as understanding this time around? The narrator isn't nineteen, he isn't in a war zone, and, as far as we know, he hasn't just witnessed his best friend being blown to bits. He has just given a reading and shared the story of Curt Lemon, Rat Kiley, and the baby water buffalo, when he encounters a familiar situation. An older woman approaches him, one of “kindly temperament and humane politics,” and explains to him that “as a rule she hates war stories; she can't understand why people want to wallow in all the blood and gore. But this one she liked. The poor baby buffalo, it made her sad. What [he] should do, she [says] is put it all behind [him]. Find new stories to tell” (84). The narrator then tells us that he pictures Rat's face and his grief, and thinks, “*You dumb cooze*”

(85). Smith believes that O'Brien includes this moment "to solidify the male bond and ridicule and reject the feminine" (31). But it is the narrator, channeling Rat, who suffers feelings of rejection. "Because she wasn't listening," he says, "It *wasn't* a war story. It was a *love story*" (85). He wanted the woman to absorb a glimpse of the "something essential" that the men understood when they witnessed Rat's breakdown. The love is for Rat Kiley (and the love Rat had for Lemon), sure, but it is also the "aching love for how the world could be and always should be, but now is not" (82).

Smith argues that the women in *The Things They Carried* are "silenced," (17) and perhaps they are, but, at least in this instance, so, too, is the narrator. He shares the blame for the woman's misunderstanding, realizing that even though some twenty years later he "can still see the sunlight on Lemon's face," he isn't sure he'll "ever get the story right" (84). When he thinks to himself that the woman wasn't listening, and that she missed it being a love story, he follows with, "But [I] can't say that. All [I] can do is tell it one more the time, patiently, adding and subtracting, making up a few things to get at the real truth" (85). He isn't holding his tongue to be polite or politically correct; he simply knows he cannot give up on trying to depict the beauty in "how the sun seemed to gather around [Curt Lemon] and pick him up and lift him high into a tree," even as the "lifting" effectively blew him to pieces (85). He wants to recreate this memory as something beautiful in order to redeem it somehow, and for it to be something beautiful to the woman at the reading, and to other people like her. The listener, however, has to believe that a war story can be a love story.

With his persistent and conscious blurring of the line between truth and fiction throughout *The Things They Carried*, as well as the recurrence of versions of the Lemon/Merrick and buffalo episodes in several of his stories, O'Brien reveals an

undercurrent of emotion in this chapter that suggests his claim of “Oh yes...It happened” is more complex than its face value. Might the reality of O’Brien’s experience and role in the events be more similar to Rat’s than the narrator’s? The narrator expresses anger toward the woman at the reading for failing to validate *his* love and *his* loss, when what he ultimately seeks is absolution from the sense of shame and self-loathing, and the horror at his own misdeeds. By expressing anger and making a comment such as “dumb cooze,” the narrator is able to distance himself from the perception of vulnerability and weakness that he fears might attach to a man who admits pain, shame, and love for another man. He can claim it as a “love story”—which he truly believes it is—while still protecting his masculine image. O’Brien idealistically insinuates that if the woman appreciated it as a love story, acknowledged his suffering and returned the love, then maybe he, too, like Curt Lemon, could step “from shade into sunlight” to better endure the horror of his experience.

According to Smiley in “The Role of the Ideal (Female) Reader in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried: Why Should Real Women Play?*,” the older woman and the sister who never wrote back are “fictionalized [acts] of reading whereby O’Brien fashions his ideal reader” (Bloom 81). But what does his ideal reader need to do? Unlike Martha, Lemon’s sister, or the older woman, she needs to hear his stories, recognize his love, and understand his “truth.” Contrary to Smith’s perception of O’Brien’s stories as “hostile to femininity” and “[warning] women readers away from any empathetic grasp of ‘the things men do,’” O’Brien does not simply imagine that women can fulfill his criteria for the ideal reader; he truly *believes* they can and will. Related to his confidence in women, he believes in the feminine, be it found in men or women. In some places, O’Brien is guilty of assuming the binary opposition between masculinity and femininity; for instance, he seems to expect the

older woman to listen, accept, and understand—stereotypically feminine traits—because she is “kind,” “humane,” and female. He silently curses her when she fails to “get it,” but he does not reject her as an audience; rather he reminds himself that he has to keep telling the story until he gets it right, until *he* can tell it in a way that people understand. In other places, O’Brien rejects masculine and feminine qualities as limited to males and females, respectively. Jimmy Cross relies on love for his emotional survival; Rat Kiley assumes a cradling position in his deepest despair; Mitchell Sanders makes listening the moral of his story; and the narrator wants his war stories to translate as love stories. The feminine behaviors on the part of the men are not designed to connote weakness or a lack of masculinity, but rather survival and a source of strength. Idealized love relationships with women, as well as the feminine aspects in their own natures, are what the men turn to—even cling to—in their most desperate moments. And when those desperate moments are relived in memory, O’Brien’s characters again turn to women and the feminine for understanding and redemption.

The men who witnessed the baby buffalo massacre were dumbfounded by the “essential” horror of the spectacle. The woman at the reading missed the significance of what Mitchell Sanders put into words after he helped to haul away the carcass: “Well, that’s Nam. Garden of Evil. Over here, man, every sin’s real fresh and original” (80). Beauty and love in war stories are part of the “contradictory” aspect of truth that O’Brien explores. The glare of the napalm, the narrator tells us, is “not pretty exactly. It’s astonishing. It fills the eye. It commands you. You hate it, yes, but your eyes do not. Like a killer forest fire, like cancer under a microscope, any battle or bombing raid or artillery barrage has the aesthetic

purity of absolute moral indifference—a powerful, implacable beauty” (81). The idea of moral indifference seems particularly appealing amidst the consternation over what is “truth.” In a middle section of “How to Tell a True War Story,” Sanders tells the narrator a story about a platoon of men who were so haunted by the “invisible” voices and “spooky” sounds they heard at night in the jungle, they called in a full-blown air strike. He talks about how the guys tried to be “cool” lying there deep in the bush, hearing chamber music:

They hear violins and cellos. They hear this terrific mama-san soprano. Then after a while they hear gook opera and a glee club and the Haiphong Boys Choir and a barbershop quartet and all kinds of weird chanting and Buddha-Buddha stuff. And the whole time, in the background, there’s still that cocktail party going on. All these different voices. Not human voices, though. Because it’s the mountains. Follow me? The rock—it’s *talking*. And the fog, too, and the grass and the goddamn mongooses. Everything talks. The trees talk politics, the monkeys talks religion. The whole country. Vietnam. The place talks. It talks. Understand? Nam—it truly *talks*. (74)

Again, the experience of war juxtaposes surreal beauty and absolute terror. Sanders is frustrated with his telling of the story, because he so “desperately” wants the narrator to believe him, and he isn’t sure he “quite [got] the details right, [nor] quite [pinned] down the final and definitive truth” (76). But the “truth” of the story did get to the narrator, and he recalls how he sat in his foxhole that night, “thinking about...all the ways [he] might die, all the things [he] did not understand” (76). Later that same night, Sanders finds him in the dark to whisper that he finally figured out the moral of the story—“Nobody listens. Nobody hears nothin’. Like that fatass colonel. The politicians, all the civilian types. Your girlfriend. My girlfriend...you got to *listen* to your enemy” (76). Listen because perhaps then your enemy might not be your enemy anymore. Listen because you might find beauty alongside the horrific. Listen because things might not be exactly what you think they are.

Smiley wonders what it is that “shifts” when a woman listens and understands: “the man's experience has—what is it? Reality? Validity? Redemption? Instead of the sergeant who proclaims the soldier a man, it is the ideal female reader for whom O'Brien's characters perform their masculinity” (609). Mitchell Sanders does this with the narrator: he revises, and the narrator has to work to be the sort of listener that he knows Mitchell wants and deserves. O'Brien's ideal reader is female because he assumes that heterosexual male readers will identify with his portrayal of desire for the love of a woman, and the desire to engage in feminine acts without risking loss of masculine identity, as well as the pressure to negate these impulses in order to appear masculine. O'Brien's ideal male reader is aware of his own femininity, and yet negotiates a strained existence that conforms to the expectations of masculinity. He wants to give that male reader a voice, and perhaps to model freedom from such performance if in only the slightest way by owning his less-than-masculine moments: “I was a coward. I was afraid. I went to war” (61). O'Brien hopes it is not “masculine” or “feminine” behaviors and emotions that define his characters, but *human* ones. Sympathetic listening on the part of male and female readers marks a “shift” when it begins to allow a man to move away from masculine performance as proof of manhood.

“How to Tell a True War Story,” arguably the central story of *The Things They Carried*, first appeared in October of 1987 in *Esquire* Magazine. In that context, without a chapter to follow it, the final sentences of the story decisively encapsulate what O'Brien wants us to know about how to tell a true war story: “And in the end, of course, a true war story is never about war. It's about sunlight. It's about the special way that dawn spreads out on a river when you know you must cross the river and march into the mountains and do

things you are afraid to do. It's about love and memory. It's about sorrow. It's about sisters who never write back and people who never listen" (85). The double entendre *tell* might mean how to decipher or understand whether a particular war story is true, and/or how to relate or share a true war story. He specifies "sisters" who never write back (which in terms of story structure, connects back with the opening lines of the chapter), and then, without specification of sex, "people" who fail to listen. The commitment to listen that O'Brien so desperately seeks is complicated because the "truth" one needs to hear is in constant flux. Steven Kaplan suggests, "the most important thing is to be able to recognize and accept that events have no fixed or final meaning and that the only meaning that events can have is one that emerges momentarily and then shifts and changes each time that the events come alive as they are remembered or portrayed" (Bloom 119). Such a relationship with "truth" is exhausting, contradictory, and often painful, but ultimately, O'Brien argues, authentic and real. What we are asked to accept regarding "truth" is precisely what O'Brien wants us to *resist* in terms of masculinity. A man's response to events and circumstances might be up for judgment and censure, but whether those responses are masculine enough, and consequently whether he is man enough, should not repeatedly be called into question.

As *The Things They Carried* shows us, war is indifferent to love, either depriving men of it or decimating any semblance of it. Survival is separate from love, and the perception of functional masculinity is therefore necessarily imbued with the absence of love. But O'Brien does not absence love from his text; in fact, quite the contrary, as his stories often center on the imagination and ideals of love. Yet the stories illustrate time and again that to perform "successfully" as a man at war, one must cast aside love and imagination.

Whereas traditional expectations of masculinity might regard the need for love as weakness, O'Brien argues that war's—and masculinity's—deprivation of love challenges the essence of a man's humanity. We see evidence of this with Jimmy Cross in his love for Martha and his guilt over the loss of Ted Lavender, as well as with Rat Kiley in his sorrow and rage over the loss of Curt Lemon. In an interview with Eric Schroeder, O'Brien points out, "We think of the imagination as kind of a flighty thing when, in fact, it's an essential component of our daily lives" (128). The narrator in *The Things They Carried*, however, tells us, "imagination was a killer" (11). The distraction it created from both the tedium and the constant fear of death left the men even more vulnerable. Or so the men who were left to deal with the loss of a platoon-mate felt. Cross and Rat were surviving on love and imagination, but the cruel realities of war and the heightened expectation for masculine performance caused them to question whether they were brave enough, strong enough, vigilant enough, or man enough to avoid those realities. O'Brien asserts, "Memory and imagination as devices of survival apply to all of us whether we are in a war situation or not" (Schroeder Interview 135). The demands of masculinity, the rote memory of how to act like a man, especially amidst the trauma of war, deny imagination its voice, which interferes with the emotional, if not physical, survival of the men. In *The Things They Carried*, the narrator (and O'Brien) rely on imagination after the war in retrospect; the men "on the ground" in Alpha Company suffer when they attempt to imagine and love.

In "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," Rat Kiley, who, as previously noted, has a reputation for exaggeration, recounts a story from his time spent at an obscure medical outpost in the mountains of Chu Lai near a Green Beret base. When Eddie Diamond, the

ranking NCO, jokingly suggests that the area surrounding the Song Tra Bong River is so unguarded and seemingly safe that you could even bring a girl to the camp, medic Mark Fossie writes a letter to his grammar school sweetheart. Six weeks later, Mary Anne Bell arrives on a helicopter with a resupply shipment. At first Mark and Mary Anne play house “in one of the bunkers along the perimeter, while the other men in the company admire her long white legs and her flirtatious come-get-me energy (95). Things change, though, as Mary Anne’s rapture with the jungle intensifies. She picks up some Vietnamese phrases, helps the men repair arteries and shoot morphine, and eventually abandons hygiene to spend time disassembling an M-16 and learning to use it. When Fossie seems unnerved by the changes in her demeanor—the low pitch of her voice, “long elastic silences, her eyes fixed on the dark”—Mary Anne tells him, “It’s nothing....Really nothing. To tell the truth, I’ve never been happier in my whole life. Never” (99). A short time later, she begins going out at night on ambush, staying out “very late,” and then “one morning, all alone, Mary Anne walked off into the mountains and did not come back” (99, 115).

O’Brien said: “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong’ grows out of an anecdote that I heard while I was in Vietnam about a girl being in Vietnam. Well, I never saw her, but I heard it from enough places to sort of believe it....But Mary Anne and her seduction by the war, all that’s invented” (Herzog Interview 118). Because O’Brien tells us this, and because of the implausibility of it actually occurring, this story seems more than the others to illustrate how O’Brien creates “truth” to convey essential meaning. I want to be able to defend him, to continue to acknowledge the gross expectations of masculinity and his attempts to imagine an alternative, and to a significant degree, I still can—but not absolutely. In “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong,”—a story O’Brien himself thinks of as one of his most

feminist—another thread, a qualification you might say, emerges in his plea for a move away from the tenets of masculinity. He wants his readers to view as natural the feminine in men, and he demonstrates this by showing the ultra-masculine transformation of a woman, but what he struggles with is relinquishing the patriarchal power that comes with being male. O'Brien is not “hostile” toward women, as Smith argues, but even as he explores gender swapping, he at times remains hesitant to imagine fully a hegemonic power share with women. Yet feminist litmus test aside, there are several moments when Mary Anne's transformation does conjure the possibility of such a shift in power.

Shock value is a central component of this story, and Mary Anne's ultimate disappearance into the bush is vaguely reminiscent of Edna Pontellier's walking into the ocean in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, even if O'Brien's more precise focus is on what Mary Anne's experience shows us about the male experience. Katherine Kinney perceives a feminist angle to what O'Brien attempts with his depiction of Mary Anne gone-native, Kurtz-like even, as she “moves deeper in to the war without moving out of her gender identity as a woman....In a perverse way Mary Ann[e]'s trip answers directly Virginia Woolf's call—she moves away from domestic space, away from the future husband who presents himself as her identity and discovers herself in relation to the landscape and within herself” (151, 154).

Mary Anne's soliloquy supports Kinney's view:

‘You just don't know’ she said. ‘You hide in this little fortress, behind wire and sandbags, and you don't know what it's all about. Sometimes I want to eat this place. Vietnam. I want to swallow the whole country—the dirt, the death—I just want to eat it and have it there inside me. That's how I feel. It's like . . . this appetite. I get scared sometimes—lots of times—but it's not bad. You know? I feel close to myself. When I'm out there at night, I feel close to my own body, I can feel my blood moving, my skin and my fingernails, everything, it's like I'm full of electricity and I'm glowing in the dark—I'm on fire almost—I'm burning away into nothing—but it doesn't matter because I know exactly who I am. You can't feel like that anywhere else.’ (111)

Smiley convincingly argues that the experiences of O'Brien's male and female are more alike than different, as both become one with the world. She aligns the above passage spoken by Mary Anne with what the narrator describes in a previous chapter:

After a firefight, there is always the immense pleasure of aliveness. The trees are alive. The grass, the soil—everything. All around you things are purely living, and you among them, and the aliveness makes you tremble. You feel an intense out-of-the-skin awareness of your living self—your truest self, the human being you want to be and then become by the force of wanting it. (81)

Smiley notes that while “O'Brien has his female character taking the world inside her and his male character expanding out to become the world, his point seems to be less the gender stereotypes than the non-gendered Dionysian energy common to both descriptions” (605).

Though not gendered, the imagery and energy are decidedly sexual, and biologically appropriate. Smiley further asserts:

War destroys order, subverts higher processes such as reason and compassion, and returns us to instinct and our bodies. Such an explosive release allows men and women to be what they might have been without cultural restraints... Mary Anne illustrates not just the release war brings, but also how women (and this is gender-specific) are ‘freed’ when they travel outside of their culture and its definitions of what it means to be a woman. (605)

Smiley includes both men and women as the beneficiaries of the “explosive release,” but she only speaks of women in connection with the freedom that such release brings. The intense communion with aliveness that both Mary Anne and the narrator speak of does transcend gender distinction, and yet such moments of intensity are simply that—moments. For O'Brien's men, what precedes and follows those addictive, drug-like moments of piercing aliveness are hours and days of fearful waiting, of killing, and of trying to escape death. If a woman in Mary Anne's role as a Greenie were to stay in Nam, then she would likely experience similar fear, as well as the threat of rape or other abuse. Smiley's

assessment of the non-gendered release war brings must be read only in the context of these moments of aliveness; otherwise, her analysis overlooks the reality that while the war experience outside these thrilling points of contact with the life force might still return us to instinct and our bodies, it also requires men to comply with the cultural restraints for masculine performance either by ignoring those instincts or by suppressing their natural responses. War is not any sort of freedom for men; the momentary release from cultural restraint does not diminish how O'Brien's men struggle to actualize similarly non-gendered release in the entirety of their war experience.

After Mary Anne haunts Rat and Fossie with her soliloquy, the men wander out of the hootch and hear "in the darkness...that weird tribal music, which seemed to come from the earth itself, from the deep rain forest, and a woman's voice rising up in a language beyond translation" (112). Though her "language beyond translation" might defy understanding, it also evokes awareness of the innate, organic strength that Mary Anne possesses as a woman. When Rat later retells the story, he attributes part of why he and the other men "loved her" to how different she was from the girls back home, because "she was *there*. She was up to her eyeballs in it" (114). Martha, Curt Lemon's sister, and the woman at the reading do not comprehend the experience of war not because being female renders them unable, but simply because they were not there. Neither is O'Brien insinuating, as many writers have, that being female renders them unable to go to war. Mary Anne's language is "beyond translation" for Rat and Fossie because they are not accustomed to seeing a woman in a role of such power and self-possessed autonomy—a masculine role that is conventionally reserved for men. When the woman at the reading frustrates the reader with her failure to listen the way he needs her to, it is *his language* that is beyond translation. "It *wasn't* a war story," he wants to

tell her, “It was a *love* story” (85). And then, “But you can’t say that” (85). He can’t say it because we don’t expect a soldier to refer to his time at war—and his struggle with the loss of a male friend—as a love story; it isn’t manly. The narrator vows to “keep on telling it” (85), and even derives power from this feminine association with talking and retelling by asserting, “You can tell a true war story if you just keep telling it” (85). O’Brien seems desperate to include rather than “[exclude] women from the storytelling circle” (Smith 36), and he pursues love—both his love for women and his desire to be loved by them—as the means for inclusion. Just as Rat loves Mary Anne despite her “language beyond translation,” the narrator (and O’Brien) wants to be loved by the woman at the reading, even if she doesn’t understand his telling of the story.

O’Brien poses the question: Where is there an opportunity for men to be “freed,” to travel outside of their cultural expectations for what it means to be a man? Even when Mary Anne becomes her most masculine, we never think of her as less a woman. O’Brien wants similar freedom for men, for a man never to be thought of as less a man even at his most feminine. Boyle argues that “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” leaves open the possibility of gender being performed outside of a heterosexual norm, thereby suggesting a separation of the gender/sex pairing and a new and viable pressure on the masculinities of the Vietnam War: female masculinity” (92). O’Brien asks: What about male femininity? When Mary Anne embraces her freedom to access what is considered masculine, and comes to “know exactly who [she is],” the implication is that if fulfilling cultural expectations of femininity distances her from her masculinity, then it might also deprive her of fully knowing who she is. O’Brien’s further point is that when masculine expectations deprive men of their

femininity, then men, too, are prevented from fully knowing who they are.

During one of his legendary retellings of the all-American-girl-arrives-in-Vietnam-and-disappears-into-the-bush-as-a-warrior story, Rat defends its unbelievability: "She was a girl, that's all. I mean, if it was a guy, everybody'd say Hey, no big deal, he got caught up in the Nam shit, he got seduced by the Greenies. See what I mean? You got these blinders on about women. How gentle and peaceful they are. All that crap about how if we had a pussy for president there wouldn't be no more wars. Pure garbage. You got to get rid of that sexist attitude" (107). While Smith acknowledges Rat's critique of sexism, despite his use of sexist language, the two main points she makes about the passage concern Mary Anne's lack of "fully imagined" subjectivity, and how her existence is ultimately relegated to "outside the social order" (21). O'Brien's allusions to the war and the jungle's seduction of Mary Anne's soul might intimate a less than autonomous assertion of will when she disappears into the bush, but it could also be that her soul has communed with a power that patriarchy denied her. When the men find her in her lair, she whispers, "You're in a place...where you don't belong" (111). The possible meanings here are multiple. The implication could be that U.S. soldiers should not be in Vietnam, or, from a philosophical perspective, men should not go to war. Any moment in which a woman effectively tells white men that they do not belong constitutes some challenge to patriarchy. For O'Brien, Mary Anne symbolizes a woman who has understood his fear, his pain, and his love, and who, by telling him he shouldn't be there, is loving him back.

O'Brien seems quite open about what he doesn't know, but wishes he knew, about women. He is also trying desperately to tell us what he knows about men. Smith almost

mocks O'Brien when she offers, "O'Brien sounds theoretically sophisticated in such a passage [Rat's above comments], as if he's read plenty of French feminism" (21). She further points out that although Rat himself sounds like "a protofeminist," he ends up disappointing in his emphasis, rather than erasure, of gender difference. Yet this point of gender difference that Rat emphasizes recognizes not women but men as "other," as the ones who are different. Rat tells us what we already know, that it would not be so anomalous a story if Mary Anne were a boy, but he argues that it shouldn't be that way, that what happens to Mary Anne is "human nature...[it's] Nam" (97). O'Brien wants us to appreciate the sexist nature of such an attitude, one that assumes being enthralled with war is "a guy thing." The "blindness" that O'Brien refers to are the ones we wear when we assume that being born male predisposes one to an intrigue with war. Just as we recognize our preconceptions about "how gentle and peaceful [women] are" as "crap," we must similarly reconsider our notions of men as inherently violent and war-driven.

When the men at the base camp are unable to understand and recognize what Mary Anne becomes, O'Brien effectively distances them from the common assumption that being male uniquely enables comprehension of evil, or somehow compels one to the dark and horrific seductions of war. Brenda Boyle observes, "Though O'Brien's stated intent is to demonstrate how anyone, even the most cherubic of young American women, could be corrupted by Vietnam, that this woman becomes unrecognizable even to the male characters supposed to be embodying American masculinity at war again suggests that female masculinity and male bodies behaving in traditionally feminine ways are deviant, intolerable, and threatening to monolithic masculinity" (99). Such a threat to monolithic masculinity is precisely what O'Brien intends. He aims to demonstrate the physical and psychological

dangers of judging masculine femininity and feminine masculinity as dangerous or deviant. The men are transfixed because she is seen as monstrous, and they are seen as doing the things men do, that the things men do are monstrous. We are to understand that it is equally a transformation for them. When Jimmy Cross or Rat Kiley demonstrate femininity, censure comes in the form of the death of a platoon-mate or best friend; when Mary Anne assumes masculine behaviors, she not only survives, she thrives. O'Brien wants us to see the contradiction between our perceptions of male femininity and female masculinity.

The narrator describes what happens to “all of them” in Vietnam, even Mary Anne:

The endorphins start to flow, and the adrenaline, and you hold your breath and creep quietly through the moonlit nightscapes; you become intimate with danger; you're in touch with the far side of yourself, as though it's another hemisphere, and you want to string it out and go wherever the trip takes you and be host to all the possibilities inside yourself. Not *bad*, she'd said. Vietnam made her glow in the dark. She wanted more, she wanted to penetrate deeper into the mystery of herself, and after a time the wanting became needing, which turned then to craving. (114)

This passage echoes other sections in the novel that talk of the spellbinding power of the war experience, and O'Brien does not qualify Mary Anne's entrancement in terms of her gender. In fact, he imbues her with the power to “penetrate.” When Fossie and the others go to the Greenie hootch in a futile attempt to get her back, she tells them, softly, they are the ones who “don't *know*” what it's like: “I feel close to myself....I know exactly who I am” (111). What frightens them the most seems to be her claim of self-knowledge. Nowhere in the story would we expect to hear one of the men claim to know exactly who he is; to the contrary, O'Brien underscores their innocence, confusion, and disconnection to self. What this suggests is that full knowledge of self involves awareness and connection with both the masculine and the feminine, regardless of sex. Mary Anne achieves this, even appears to the men as “perfectly at peace with herself” (110), but the men, afraid to traverse the bounds of

masculine expectation and appear in any way feminine, with consequences ranging from ridicule to death, do not.

In the McNerney interview, O'Brien attests,

[“Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong”] seems to me to be an utterly feminist story. It seems to me to be saying, in part, if women were to serve in combat they would be experiencing precisely what I am, the same conflicts, the same paradoxes, the same terrors, the same guilts, the same seductions of the soul. They would be going to the same dark side of the human hemisphere, the dark side of the moon, the dark side of their own psyches. (21)

The story is not “utterly feminist,” nor, for that matter, is O'Brien's description of what he thinks the story “seems...to be saying.” And despite his comments above from a 1994 interview, it is not particularly evident even that he was trying to write a feminist story.

O'Brien does show Mary Anne resisting patriarchal dominance when she eventually refuses Fossie's “compromise” (to wash her hair, abandon the bush fatigues and facial charcoal, and quit going on ambush, in exchange for becoming “officially engaged”), but she trades Fossie's control for that of the hyperbolically masculine “Greenie types,” who give him a “long stare” when they return from patrol as if to let him know that now she belongs to them (102). None of the men—“Seventeen years old. Just [children], blond and innocent” (105)—in Alpha Company experience what Mary Anne does, nor are they able to prevent it from happening to her. Both Fossie and the Greenies end up losing power over Mary Anne, suggesting a diminishment of patriarchal influence, and yet the jungle of war emerges as the new locus of power, rather than Mary Anne herself.

Earlier in the novel, O'Brien's narrator hedges a bit on what might have been his feminist responsibilities, reminding us, “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” (76). O'Brien desperately wants to abandon the

conscripts of masculinity, to find freedom in appearing vulnerable, weak, and still a man, but at the same time he does not quite renounce the assumption of patriarchal dominance. Smith notes, “Although he seems at points to engage and question conventional gender constructions, in the end he does so only to quell threats to masculinity and to re-assert patriarchal order” (4). O’Brien is comfortable with challenging masculinity, but not as comfortable with consistently disputing male hegemony; he generally wants to be masculine, feminine, and (mostly) in control. Even though Mary Anne tells the men that she has come to know exactly who she is, the narrator rationalizes her final disappearance by concluding, “She was lost inside herself” (115). O’Brien’s inability to overtly argue for the disruption of patriarchal power is directly related to his fear of losing his identity as a masculine man. And while it might follow that the incentive to retain that identity is directly tied to the power he enjoys in American culture as a white male, this reality is not what drives O’Brien. O’Brien and the characters he writes fear the loss of their masculine identities because they think it might prevent them from finding the thing they desire most—the love of a woman.

Rat’s shadow-like image of Mary Anne that closes the story might also signify a truth about the men who return home from war. These veterans might have witnessed or even partaken in savage monstrosities, might be shadows of their former selves, but back home, dressed in plain clothes and walking past us in the local supermarket, we expect them to cease being “dangerous” or “ready to kill,” and to function like “normal” human beings. Smith further asserts, “Ultimately, her change changes nothing” (21), and this is precisely the point O’Brien is making, but with a different relevance than Smith intends. The man who goes to war *is* changed, and yet comes home to find that his change, his sacrifice even, has changed nothing for him as a man. He must perform as if he has *endured* war and horror,

rather than having been changed by it, in order to fulfill masculine expectations and maintain his identity as a man. Just as we lament how “the men [in *The Things They Carried*] are allowed to maintain their image of the war-making female as an aberration from the norm, [and how] Mary Anne is denied the freedom or power to tell her own story” (Smith 21), we must similarly recognize how O’Brien’s images of feminine desire in his male soldiers make them aberrations from what we expect of men, and consequently deny them the full spectrum of both their masculine and feminine voices when they tell their stories.

Judith Hicks Stiehm writes, “many men feel they lose their masculinity when women do what men do” (55). In “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong,” it seems the loss of masculinity is precisely what O’Brien desires. When Rat and Eddie Diamond go out to check on Fossie, who has gone to look for Mary Anne, they step out into a night that,

has gone cold and steamy, a low fog sliding down from the mountains, and somewhere out in the dark they heard music playing. Not loud but not soft either. It had a chaotic, almost unmusical sound, without rhythm or form or progression, like the noise of nature. A synthesizer, it seemed, or maybe an electric organ. In the background, just audible, a woman’s voice was half singing, half chanting, but the lyrics seemed to be in a foreign tongue. (108)

The scene is charged with a steady sort of anticipation and a controlled energy. The narrator, who is recounting a story he heard from Rat, wants us to appreciate the primigenial significance of the scene he is about to reveal. Unlike the other women in the story who fail to listen or understand, the ultra-masculine Mary Anne knows more than the men, and possesses “another language outside patriarchy” (Smith 21). And yet with her “stacks of bones” and her “necklace of human tongues...elongated and narrow...threaded along a length of copper wire, one overlapping the next, the tips curled upward as if caught in a final shrill syllable” (111), it isn’t a language of matriarchy either. Even Mother Earth, at once

both “cold and steamy,” seems to embrace gender neutrality. The primitive imagery and the ornamental trapping of the “final shrill syllable” of tongues that symbolize patriarchal language suggest the “primordial ooze” of a new language and alternative gender orientation.

The suggested emergence of something new only works, though, if O’Brien also challenges our perception of femininity, and he does so with Fossie. As Mary Anne grows increasingly spellbound with the mysteries of the bush, Fossie grows increasingly ineffectual in his effort to control the relationship. The gender reversal is clear, as the masculine female figure goes out to hunt, and the feminine male figure stays “home.” Subtly, Fossie also begins to assume a more stereotypically feminine role. While Mary Anne is active and aggressive, Fossie is physically passive, using his words rather than his body. With the romance going awry, “Fossie [approaches] her and [tries] to talk it out, but Mary Anne just [stares] out at the dark green mountains to the west” (105). When Mary Anne returns from one of her initial patrols with the Greenies, Fossie “heard she was back,” and “stationed himself outside the fenced-off Special Forces area. All morning he waited for her, and all afternoon. Around dusk Rat brought him something to eat. ‘She has to come out,’ Fossie said. ‘Sooner or later, she has to’” (107). He is in the position of having to wait, of having his moves dictated by *her* choices; he is feminized by her assumption of the masculine role in the relationship. He finally tells Rat that he will “go get her” and “bring her out” (108), but later that evening Rat and Eddie find Fossie “squatting near the gate in front of the Special Forces area. Head bowed, he was swaying to the music, his face wet and shiny. As Eddie bent down beside him, the kid looked up with dull eyes, ashen and powdery, not quite in register” (108). The squatting and swaying, with a face wet and shiny, while not hyper-

feminine in the way that Mary Anne is masculine, are evocative of a woman's experience in labor before childbirth. Things revolve around Mary Anne now; she is central, whereas Fossie, who appears physically slight and secondary in his presence, is feminine.

As Rat describes the scene they discover in Mary Anne's lair, any mention of Fossie reinforces his connection with feminine mannerisms. Before entering the hootch, "[Fossie] wavered for a moment" (109). When he does enter and smells the "mix of blood and scorched hair and excrement and the sweet-sour odor of the moldering flesh," and sees the "strips of yellow-brown skin dangled from the overhead rafters," he makes a "soft moaning sound" (110). He "[murmurs]" when Mary Anne speaks to him, and "[seems] to shrink away" when she looks at him (112). Rat has to take Fossie's arm and help him up, at which point, paralyzed by this vision of Mary Anne, he whispers, "Do something" (112). These portrayals of Fossie reflect the expectations of femininity in a patriarchal society— indecision, lack of voice, and physical powerlessness. Rat is also feminine in his sentimental tone of his narrative. He pauses several times during the telling of this story to check in with his audience of fellow platoon-mates. Just before he imparts the last of what he knows about Mary Anne, how one morning she "walked off into the mountains and did not come back" (115), the thought of her fate overwhelms him: "Suddenly, [he] pushed up to his feet, moved a few steps away from us, then stopped and stood with his back turned. He was an emotional guy. 'Got hooked, I guess,' he said. 'I loved her'" (114). Mary Anne, on the other hand, is found in the hootch "with no emotion in her stare" (110). She is not an emotional gal. When Mary Anne vanishes for good, Fossie experiences what we assume is an emotional breakdown, is "busted to PFC,<sup>3</sup> shipped back to a hospital in the States, and two months later

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<sup>3</sup> In formal military terms, "PFC" stands for "Private First Class," the second lowest enlisted rank in the Army; in military slang, "PFC" stands for "Plain Fucking Crazy."

[receives] a medical discharge. Mary Anne Bell joined the missing” (115). A feminine male is deemed mentally unfit, whereas a masculine female simply disappears; society tolerates neither.

In order to reframe how we perceive the masculine, O’Brien also reframes our perception of the feminine. Even as he associates Fossie with the feminine, he avoids dismissing him as simply weak. The military might have rendered such a judgment, but the narrator and the other men care about Fossie and recognize his reaction to Mary Anne’s transformation as a valid human response, and one that offers him the strength to cope with a traumatic situation. The chapter ends with the image of Mary Anne “sliding through the shadows...wearing her culottes, her pink sweater, and a necklace of human tongues. She was dangerous. She was ready for the kill” (116). The woman in the story appropriates the masculine and not only survives, but thrives. Although Jeffords does not address O’Brien’s work directly, she argues that the “posture of protection/exclusion is indeed typical of the masculine as it perceives itself in relation to the feminine, in effect maintains the feminine as distinct and separate in order to insure its own constitution, its own continued viability” (61). With the resistance of this paradigm in “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong,” O’Brien suggests that men want out of their social responsibility to masculinity to the extent that it will allow them to perform their femininity without censure.

Alex Vernon argues that O’Brien fails in his effort to imagine Mary Anne as “a harmoniously androgynized figure” (317), though such a characterization does not seem to be what O’Brien attempts. O’Brien resists an androgynous portrayal because his sexual attraction and romantic love for a woman hinges on her possession and display of womanly traits, both physical and mental, even if it is those same traits that frustrate and thwart his

affections. Mary Anne awes the men with her ability to “go rogue” and abandon social obligations. Without confirmed reports of her death—“No body was ever found. No equipment, no clothing. For all he knew, Rat said, the girl was still alive”—she succeeds in discovering what neither the narrator nor O’Brien managed: a way, though perhaps unrealistic, out of the war (115). Back in the States, she escapes the war simply by being a female; in Vietnam, she escapes the war by embracing the masculine and vanishing into the bush—a world beyond social obligation. On one level, this is what O’Brien desires for himself. He wants to escape the pain of war by embracing the feminine, which he sees as offering comfort and the strength to endure, and he wants to exist in a world absolved of obligation to masculine performance. After Ted Lavender’s death, Jimmy Cross “led his men into the village of Than Khe. They burned everything. They shot chickens and dogs, they trashed the village well” (16). At first, it might seem that O’Brien justifies the destruction of the village as understandable rage at Martha over her refusal to love Jimmy back. But Jimmy “found himself trembling” and “tried not to cry” as he destroyed the village; he “did not want the responsibility of leading these men. He had never wanted it” (16, 167). He desperately wants an alternative for coping with his pain, as the act of destruction brings more pain and shame, and yet he knows he must “show strength,” “that his obligation was...to lead” (25, 26). Mary Anne is able to pick and choose how masculine and how feminine she wants to be, and has no obligation to anyone but herself. The narrator tells us that the men are instead left to contemplate the sad reality of “the things men carried inside. The things men did or felt they had to do” (25). O’Brien’s frustration with women and war is less about how being female allows one to avoid combat, and more about his perception of how women, apparently in any situation, are able to oscillate in the degrees of

expression of both their masculine and feminine aspects of self, and without censure by social expectations of gender.

When Rat and Fossie depart the hootch that night, they relinquish control, effectively leaving Mary Anne to her own (apparently quite capable) devices in the jungle. O'Brien might be making a comment on how war knows no gender; how "Vietnam had the effect of a powerful drug: that mix of unnamed terror and unnamed pleasure that comes as the needle slips in and you know you're risking something" (114). It would be war itself, then, and not the men who perpetrate it, that holds the power. O'Brien's men defy masculine expectation in their decision not to rescue the woman in "distress"—a woman they both love. They leave her not to dismiss a "war-making female as an aberration from the norm" (Smith 36), but because leaving her in the masculine realm signals O'Brien's acceptance of her there, and his parallel desire for men to more freely inhabit the feminine realm. O'Brien affirms in the McNerney interview that, "there is an unsubstantiated belief that gender determines bellicosity," and to deny women this capacity "is to violate a fundamental humanity" (20). Compared with the average enlisted soldier on the ground in Vietnam, Mary Anne achieves a degree of autonomy and freedom from the war out there in the bush. Fossie, deemed mentally unstable by men higher up on the chain of command, is physically and mentally circumscribed by the war and, thereby, patriarchal power. Because both the masculine woman and the feminine man remain outside the social order at the end of the story, the suggestion is either that they are untenable models, or, and O'Brien treads lightly here, that only with the dissolution of the patriarchal structure can we hope to contain them.

O'Brien hesitates to position his men as resistant to the masculine ideals that define

who they are, who they *have to* be, and yet this is the situation he puts them in time and again. His authorial role does not leave him immune to the threat of loss of manhood, and he certainly would not want to leave questionable the manhood of his soldier-boys who have already sacrificed so much. O'Brien struggles to lay bare the impossible expectations of masculinity, even as he finds himself still bound to his own performance of them. There is a pattern here: I don't like this war, but I am afraid *not* to go; I don't like these expectations of masculinity, but I am afraid *not* to fulfill them. And whether O'Brien thinks that patriarchy entitles him to love from women, or whether he thinks it confers manhood and therefore desirability, he does not seem quite prepared to give it up. Vernon remarks that O'Brien "does not mention what men do to women in their heads" (306)—not what some men or many men or most men do, but, apparently, all men. O'Brien is afraid that women, too, might believe that masculine performance, even as it perpetuates patriarchy, makes the man, and that to abandon it would be to risk love. He does intimate what he fears that women do to men in their heads: *nothing*. The subtext of fear is that men are not so much afraid *of women*, but of how their desire for the love of a woman might go unrequited, scorned, or left only to the imagination. The narrator suggests that to be accepted by women, the men must act and perform in certain masculine ways that are inauthentic reflections of the reality of their emotional experiences. Martha ignores Jimmy Cross's affections—both during the war and decades later; Curt Lemon's sister never writes Rat Kiley back; and, Mary Anne leaves Mark Fossie, with his promise of curly-haired children and a white picket fence. Vernon recognizes this as a string of betrayals for the men, arguing that, "Often when a woman character betrays a man in O'Brien's work, O'Brien appears to recognize the man's responsibility, the thoughts and behaviors on his part that led her to turn her back on

him....they know this, yet they can't ignore their hatred for her" (302, 309). What happens in the wake of the apparent rejections from these women is a rededication or overt performance by the men to demonstrate their commitment to the standards and ideals of masculinity. Burning letters and mutilating a baby buffalo, and the tears that follow both episodes, do not signal hatred for the women—the discontent is directed at the soldier himself for not being man enough to win her love or save her brother. O'Brien's work suggests this insidious effect of the expectations of masculinity, that because hating the impossible standards of manhood is unviable, they are left to doubt and hate themselves for not living up to them.

Even as Smith criticizes O'Brien for "using" the women in his work, she too acknowledges how some of his stories offer an opportunity to "glimpse the gap between the mask and the face, the wounded man behind the masculine pose" (28). O'Brien views women as crucial not only to the argument he is making about men and masculinity, but also to the possibility for a solution; his attempts to minimize the female role in dismantling masculinity signal his fear that women either do not care about male suffering, or will not recognize them as men without the masculine trappings. Smith points to how "the moments of deepest trauma in the book occur when the masculine subject is threatened with dissolution or displacement" (18). When O'Brien's soldiers experience this trauma, they do not fear the dissolution of their social power as males, but dissolution of their capacity to be considered men. O'Brien consistently seeks approval from women; seemingly desperate to be assured that what he has done is okay, that somehow it—and he—has value.

In "Women and the Combat Exemption," published in 1980, Judith Hicks Stiehm affirms the centuries-old connection between gender and war-making activities:

Let us assume that men need to feel masculine and women feminine. Now, as a woman's femininity, her uniqueness, lies in her capacity to bear children, she needs to demonstrate that capacity only once and that demonstration is absolutely definitive. It is good for all time and for all audiences. For men the proof of manhood is more difficult and unsure; depositing semen is a less heroic act than giving birth, and the status of fatherhood itself is rarely subject to empirical confirmation. Sadly, the chief defining role for men in society has become that of warrior—a role that in wartime is risky, unpleasant, and often short in duration. In peacetime, however, men lack the traditional means of proving they are men. There is no *rite de passage*, such as killing a lion and wearing a pelt, which proves them. Instead, like Hobbes's natural man, they must continually and indirectly prove both that they are adult and that they are not women. Masculinity is, in fact, ephemeral, fragile, and dependent on women not being the same. It seems that it is women who are biologically defined and men who are the second sex. It is men who must 'find themselves' and who depend on the 'otherness' of women to prove that they are men. If women were to enter combat, men would lose a crucial identity which is uniquely theirs, a role which has been as male-defining as child-bearing has been female-defining. Yet 'warrior' is not an inherently attractive role, and one wonders if a male would accept it if it no longer defined him as a man.<sup>4</sup> (55-6)

Certainly the fact that Stiehm's thirty-year-old argument reflects common beliefs still held today indicates the trenchant nature of gender expectations. If we "assume that men need to feel masculine and women feminine," even for the purposes of a discussion, then we risk reinforcing the very stereotypes and biases that limit and bind us. O'Brien argues that men also need to feel feminine and women masculine. The reality of women in combat—or in the boardroom—does not signify an opportunity for men to choose whether or not to accept the man-defining role of "warrior."<sup>5</sup> O'Brien suggests that being born male dictates adherence to the warrior role for those who want to be considered men—sharing combat opportunities does not rescind social expectations for the male performance of masculinity. Masculinity is "ephemeral [and] fragile," yet our expectation that males must consistently exemplify its proofs is fixed.

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<sup>4</sup> In the thirty years since this article appeared, women have entered combat in the United States Armed Services, albeit in low numbers.

<sup>5</sup> As with Vietnam, and possible future U.S. conflicts, "the draft board did not let you choose your war" (44).

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As O'Brien depicts it, being true to yourself, however feminine that self might be, not only leaves one vulnerable to being considered less than a man, but it can also get you killed. In "The Man I Killed," the narrator cannot stop staring at the corpse of the man he shot on the trail in Quang Ngai, lying there with "his jaw...in his throat, his upper lip and teeth...gone...a butterfly on his chin, [and] his neck...open to the spinal cord" (124). He feminizes both himself and the young man, as he imagines certain details about the young man's life, and conflates them with what the reader recognizes as reflections the narrator has previously made about his own life. He notices the dead man's eyebrows, "arched like a woman's," his clean fingernails, his "smooth and hairless" right cheek, his "narrow waist, [and] long shapely fingers" (124). As he stares, he imagines how the dead man,

would have been taught that to defend the land was a man's highest duty and highest privilege. He had accepted this. It was never open to question. Secretly, though, it also frightened him. He was not a fighter. His health was poor, his body small and frail. He liked books. He wanted someday to be a teacher of mathematics. At night, lying on his mat, he could not picture himself doing the brave things his father had done, or his uncles, or the heroes of the stories. He had hoped in his heart that he would never be tested. (125)

The narrator dreams up these details as he continues to stare at the man he killed, noticing how "his neck was open to the spinal cord and the blood there was thick and shiny"—an image that recalls the narrator's earlier story about the summer he spent before he was drafted on a "disassembly line—removing bloods clots from the necks of dead pigs" (124, 42). As he watches the dead man's wound slowly begin to stop bleeding, he imagines the trajectory of his own life. It was June 17, 1968, when Tim, the narrator, received his draft

notice, and he tried to tell himself that it had to be a mistake; after all, he was “Phi Beta Kappa and summa cum laude and president of the student body and a full-ride scholarship for grad studies at Harvard....I was no soldier. I hated Boy Scouts. I hated camping out. I hated dirt and tents and mosquitoes. The sight of blood made me queasy...and I didn’t know a rifle from a slingshot” (41-2). His initial bitterness (and self-righteousness) turned to fear when he began to realize “how [his] life seemed to be collapsing toward slaughter” (43).

As he stares at the dead man on the trail, conjuring the story of that soldier’s life, his connection with the corpse reminds us of his own storied struggle, from the summer before he deployed, to be brave and fight:

I felt paralyzed. All around me the options seemed to be narrowing, as if I were hurtling down a huge black funnel, the whole world squeezing in tight. There was no happy way out...[and] at the very center, was the raw fact of terror. I did not want to die. Not ever. But certainly not then, not there, not in a wrong war...I sometimes felt the fear spreading inside me like weeds. I imagined myself dead. I imagined myself doing things I could not do—charging an enemy post, taking aim at another human being. (43-4)

Substitute “town” for “village,” and the words that the narrator chooses to describe the dead man echo his own pre-war trepidation: “Beyond anything else, he was afraid of disgracing himself, and therefore his family and his village” (127). But the narrator valorizes his victim, recognizing bravery in the young man’s efforts to honor the expectations others had for him; when he judged his own similar actions, he found them to be cowardly. Overcome by guilt, he supposes that the young man courageously went to battle, despite “[knowing that] he would die quickly. He knew he would see a flash of light. He knew he would fall dead and wake up in the stories of his village and people” (130). The narrator wants to believe that the choices he and the young man made make them brave, yet he is afraid that only death can accomplish such a feat. When Kiowa asks the narrator, who cannot stop staring, ““You want

to trade places with him? Turn it all upside down—you *want* that?”, he is paralyzed by his inability to reconcile whether he might actually envy the other man’s death, as it seems to guarantee his heroism, and render his cowardly acts as brave ones. The narrator has proved his manhood by killing the enemy, while the other young man has secured his own by dying. Because masculine bravery determines manhood, staying true to their femininity, while it might have saved their lives, would have left them “dead” as men. The feminine man—which is every man—emerges as brave if he convincingly engages in masculine performance; or, if he avoids the prolonged charade and meets with death. Either way, he must deny a part of his true self. On the trail that day, the narrator contemplates the honor and appeal of death over such performance.

In “The Ghost Soldiers” story, O’Brien again invites us to accept the image of a feminized man. The narrator recalls that he has been shot twice during the war, and he relates a particular incident that occurred out by Tri Binh when Rat Kiley came to his aid:

Thank God for Rat Kiley. Every so often, maybe four times altogether, he trotted back to check me out. Which took courage. It was a wild fight, guys running and laying down fire and regrouping and running again, lots of noise, but Rat Kiley took the risks. ‘Easy does it,’ he told me, ‘just a side wound, no problem unless you’re pregnant.’ He ripped off the compress, applied a fresh one, and told me to clamp it in place with my fingers. ‘Press hard,’ he said. ‘Don’t worry about the baby.’ (189-90)

The narrator lies there throughout the day until dark comes and the fighting subsides. A chopper comes to take him and two dead men, and the narrator tells us, “Rat helped me into the helicopter and stood there for a moment. Then he did an odd thing. He leaned in and put his head against my shoulder and almost hugged me” (190). This scene is significant for how each of the men at various moments assume masculine and feminine roles. Rat is

genuinely courageous and strong in the midst of battle, and jokingly feminizes the narrator by mentioning pregnancy; yet he is also a sensitive caregiver, and expresses physical affection for his friend. The narrator “[feels] wobbly” and “[has] a sinking sensation” with the fear that he might die, and seems content to be reliant on the help of the more able-bodied Rat; yet he also refers to the almost-hug as “odd,” hesitating to recognize fully the male homosocial display as acceptable. O’Brien gives us an essential moment of human connection, when masculine and feminine blend and beautifully coexist—also symbolized by the reference to a baby—only to obscure it in the paragraphs that immediately follow by shipping a wounded Rat off to Japan, and launching into a detailed description of how the narrator sought revenge on the “green and incompetent and scared” medic, Bobby Jorgenson, who botched his second bullet wound and left him with an “ass [that] started to rot away” (190). The implication of the gender-swapping might have been that a man can be strong *and* feminine, that he might still retain assurance of his masculinity in his feminization. Or, rather, that’s what the implication *is*, only O’Brien does not allow himself to commit to the idea, even as he makes us aware that he contemplates it. He and his characters are ready, willing and, in most cases, able to be feminine, but they struggle with being feminized, with the perception of loss of power and having the role thrust upon them. In the page-and-a-half-long scene with Rat, the narrator’s feminization is associated with healing and human connection; yet the 26 pages that follow (in the same story) illustrate the intense feelings of anger, rejection, and hate that the narrator expresses for those who have, in various ways, feminized him.

Kali Tal prefaces her article “The Mind at War: Images of Women in Vietnam Novels by Combat Veterans” with the following quotation:

The mind at war with itself wants to be healed, but still clings to the old damaged way of being. And underneath resistance one always finds a reversal of the truth, another story, a hidden feeling, or a hidden experience. (Griffin 98-99)

These ideas speak directly to what O'Brien experiences. Even more fundamental than his want for romantic love, is his "hidden feeling"—his desire for human closeness. And while the brotherhood of war makes such closeness accessible and acceptable within the traditional constraints of masculinity, emotional human connection is still firmly ensconced in the feminine realm; a reality that leaves the men walking a tightrope to avoid feminization and still preserve the fraternal bond. The narrator experiences this firsthand when, after his second bullet wound, he is transferred to a "cushy duty" over at Headquarters Company (191). While he is there, Alpha Company comes in "for stand-down" (193). "By midnight it was story time," and as the narrator smiles and waits in anticipation, he also realizes:

In a way, I envied [them all]. Their deep bush tans, the sores and blisters, the stories, the in-it-togetherness. I felt close to them, yes, but I also felt a new sense of separation. My fatigues were starched; I had a neat haircut and the clean, sterile smell of the rear. They were still my buddies, at least on one level, but once you leave the boonies, the whole comrade business gets turned around. You become a civilian. You forfeit membership in the family, the blood fraternity, and no matter how hard you try, you can't pretend to be a part of it. (193-4)

Though the exclusion is rooted in a lack of recently shared experience, there is also a mutual sense of betrayal in the fractured brotherhood. The men in Alpha Company feel abandoned by the narrator, and the narrator feels as if all the trials and experiences they once shared now amount to nothing. Bobby Jorgenson was the new guy in the unit when the narrator left, and the narrator is still angry with the young medic and his slow, "clumsy fingers" that, just shy of letting him die on the battlefield, allowed the gunshot wound in the narrator's butt to develop gangrene (200). When the unit arrives at Headquarters, his obsession with getting

back at Jorgenson boils over. He wants to find the guy, but Mitchell Sanders tells him to “Let it ride”:

Sanders shrugged. ‘People change. Situations change. I hate to say this, man, but you’re out of touch. Jorgenson—he’s *with* us now.’

‘And I’m not?’

Sanders looked at me for a moment.

‘No,’ he said. ‘I guess you’re not.’

Stiffly, like a stranger, Sanders moved across the hootch and lay down with a magazine and pretended to read.

I felt something shift inside me. It was anger, partly, but it was also a sense of pure and total loss: I didn’t fit anymore. They were soldiers, I wasn’t. (198)

Just as O’Brien and his men are charged with banding together and excluding women from the storytelling circle, often in response to perceived betrayal by a woman, the men in Alpha Company feminize the narrator by excluding him from *their* storytelling circle. What these men want—what we all want—is acceptance, recognition, and inclusion. And yet as quintessential as the desire for human closeness is, men are compelled to hide this feeling, or obscure it with aggression, to comply with the expectations of masculinity. Even within the storytelling circle, men must mute and distort their own voices so as not to compromise their manhood.

Deprived of community with his former unit, the narrator focuses all of his energy on revenge against Jorgenson. Ironically, it is his rage against a fellow soldier that makes him sensitive to his own need for human closeness. At one point, he nearly calls off the prank; “what cinched” his going forward was seeing Jorgenson “sitting there with Dave Jensen and Mitchell Sanders...[fitting] in very nicely, all smiles and group rapport” (203). The narrator then plays on the common notion of the Vietnamese enemy as a ghost, which, similar to a secure grip on manhood, both haunts and eludes him:

It was ghost country, and Charlie Cong was the main ghost. The way he came out at night. How you never really saw him, just thought you did. Almost magical—appearing, disappearing. He could blend with the land, changing form, becoming trees and grass. He could levitate. He could fly. He could pass through barbed wire and melt away like ice and creep up on you without sound or footstep. He was scary. In the daylight, maybe, you didn't believe in this stuff. You laughed it off. You made jokes. But at night you turned into a believer. (202)

Hurt over his exclusion from the brotherhood and humiliated by having to “three times a day, no matter what...drop [his] pants and smear on this antibacterial ointment...[that] left stains on the seat of [his] trousers,” the narrator draws on these ghostly fears for a prank on Jorgenson (197). Just prior to the revenge sequence, the narrator has an encounter with Jorgenson that “almost makes [him] feel guilty” for the “little squirrel of a guy, short and stumpy-looking” (200, 198). Jorgenson apologizes, admits to how he “got all frozen up” when he should have been attending to the narrator’s gunshot wound, tells him, “Listen, man, I fucked up...I botched it. Period.” (199). When “for a second” the narrator thinks the guy “might bawl,” he tells us, “That would’ve ended it. I would’ve patted his shoulder and told him to forget it. But he kept control...It gave me an excuse to glare at him...He looked so earnest, so sad and hurt...I hated him for making me stop hating him” (199-200). In the paragraph that follows this run-in, the narrator makes it clear that his desire to inflict mental pain on Jorgenson results from “something [that has] gone wrong” within himself:

I’d turned mean inside. Even a little cruel at times. For all my education, all my fine liberal values, I now felt a deep coldness inside me, something dark and beyond reason. It’s a hard thing to admit, even to myself, but I was capable of evil. I wanted to hurt Bobby Jorgenson the way he’d hurt me...I remembered the soft, fluid heat of my own blood...I even remembered the rage. But I couldn’t feel it anymore. In the end, all I felt was that coldness down in my chest. (200-1)

An examination of masculinity aside, what the narrator describes is undeniable evidence of the sheer horror of war and the mental anguish it continues to inflict even after

the gunfire has ceased. He is angry because he has been emotionally eviscerated by his war experience. But because in this case his anger is projected onto another man, we do not screen it for misogyny or sexism, and can perhaps grant it the validity it deserves.

Expectations of masculinity that silence emotional expression and prevent catharsis of pain fuel such anger, and yet so often when the anger is male-on-male, it is likely to be more casually dismissed with an attitude akin to “boys will be boys.” This anger *is* unique among men not because they are born male, but because of what most cultures expect—and have expected for centuries—of those who are born male. O’Brien’s men instinctively seek human closeness to ease their anger and their pain, but also feel compelled to maintain a masculine distance, isolating their emotional selves from any enduring form of the same closeness that they so intrinsically desire.

The narrator experiences hatred for Jorgenson, and then a moment of empathy, which he promptly represses to resume his plan for revenge. As the narrator crouches in anticipation of the terror he will wreak, he experiences a range of thoughts:

There was a light feeling in my head, fluttery and taut at the same time. I remembered it from the boonies. Giddiness and doubt and awe, all those things and a million more. You wonder if you’re dreaming. It’s like you’re in a movie. There’s a camera on you, so you begin acting, you’re somebody else. You think of all the films you’ve seen, Audie Murphy and Gary Cooper and the Cisco Kid, all those heroes, and you can’t help falling back on them as models for comportment. On ambush, curled in the dark, you fight for control...Eyes open, be alert—old imperatives, old movies. It all swirls together, clichés mixing with your emotions, and in the end you can’t tell one from the other. (207)

He is disconnected not only from other humans, but also from himself. He is in a fetal position, the epitome of a dependent, vulnerable state, and yet at the same time forced to fight for control. And how does this man respond to the “swirl”? He rejoins with, “There was a coldness inside me. I wasn’t myself. I felt hollow and dangerous” (207). Then, in the

midst of the revenge act, he again finds an emotional common ground with Jorgenson, only to transition “awkwardly” from the moment of reconciliation to a mutual determination to seek further revenge on another comrade. He had enlisted the help of Azar to carry out the Jorgenson revenge—a series of flares, gas grenades, ammo can explosions, as well as ropes and pulleys rigged with sheets to resemble “ghosts”—but as Azar’s methods grew increasingly sadistic, the narrator realized that he had, in that moment, become the enemy “ghost” that he himself feared:

...I came unattached from the natural world. I felt the hinges go. Eyes closed, I seemed to rise up out of my body and float through the dark down to Jorgenson’s position. I was invisible; I had no shape; no substance; I weighed less than nothing. I just drifted....

I was down there with him, inside him. I was part of the night. I was the land itself—everything, everywhere—the fireflies and paddies, the moon, the midnight rustlings, the cool phosphorescent shimmer of evil—I was atrocity—I was jungle fire, jungle drums—I was the blind stare in the eyes of all those poor, dead, dumbfuck ex-pals of mine—all the pale young corpses, Lee Strunk and Kiowa and Curt Lemon—I was the beast on their lips—I was Nam—the horror, the war. (209)

Part of what drives him is the “swell of immense power. It was a feeling the VC must have” (208).<sup>6</sup> He constructs a display of power in the absence of his perception that he possesses any, and becomes his own enemy—a position with which, as a man, he is quite comfortable.

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<sup>6</sup> Kali Tal acknowledges that “the loss of the ability to empathize with, or care deeply about other people is a theme in all novels by Vietnam veterans. The conditions of combat demand that the soldier renounce empathy in order to survive. In warrior culture, the denial of humanity becomes a strength. But the line between soldier and sadist is easily crossed” (76-7). Tal references Susan Griffin’s analysis of a sadist: “[W]hat makes a sadist recognizable is that he does not feel. He glories even in his unfeelingness. His very coldness gives him power. He cannot be humiliated by rejection because he does not love....His passion is not for union or for closeness, but for dominance....On the deepest level of this drama we see that the sadist seeks to dominate, humiliate, punish, and perhaps even destroy a part of himself. And this part of himself is his feelings, which come from his body, and his knowledge of those feelings” (Griffin 55; qtd. in Tal’s “The Mind at War” 76-7).

Just before pleading with Azar to stop, he again discovers a connection with Jorgenson, and realizes to some degree that it is in part his desire for human closeness—or lack of it—that has driven him to terrorize another:

I could read his mind. I was there with him. Together we understood what terror was: you're not human anymore. You're a shadow. You slip out of your own skin, like molting, shedding your own history and your own future, leaving behind everything you ever were or wanted or believed in. You know you're about to die. And it's not a movie and you aren't a hero and all you can do is whimper and wait.

This, now, was something we shared.

I felt close to him. It wasn't compassion, just closeness. His silhouette was framed like a cardboard cutout against the burning flares.

(211)

The narrator literally begins begging Azar to stop, but to no avail. He hears “a whimper in the dark. At first [he] thought it was Jorgenson. ‘Please?’” he says to Azar (215). He is “trembling” and “hugging [himself], rocking, but [he] couldn't make it go away” (216). As the narrator realizes that attempting control in a position of such acute vulnerability is not possible, Azar, “almost as an afterthought, [kicks him] in the head” (216). This puts the narrator once again in the care of Jorgenson, who comes over to “wipe the gash”; but this time, as with his first bullet wound with Rat, the narrator “[feels] that human closeness” (217). After they apologize to one another, however, the moment turns “awkward,” and the narrator says, “‘Let's kill Azar’” (218). The focus returns to the profession of a desire (whether genuine or not) for violence, for warrior-like retribution, for the existence of a comradeship that depends upon a shared enemy (whether real or not). Human closeness, with its acknowledgement of dependence and need, is neither a viable nor sustainable option for these men.

“Speaking of Courage,” “Notes,” and “In the Field,” follow one another in the novel, and impart several soldiers’ affecting searches for human closeness. O’Brien depicts men as isolated by their profound pain. In many of the chapters in *The Things They Carried*, O’Brien’s tone borders on defensive, as his stories work to explain and sometimes justify the actions and reactions of the drafted soldiers-boys. In these three chapters—which span 50 pages and makeup 1/5 of the novel—it is the absence of defensiveness and masculine posturing by either the narrator or the other men that cultivates not only the reader’s sense of human closeness with the characters, but also the poignant realization that the characters so often suffer alone.

When the narrator first introduces Norman Bowker, it is to include, in the course of a nearly chapter-long enumeration of the things the men carried, that “Norman Bowker carried a diary” (3). We are also told that Norman, “otherwise a very gentle person, carried a thumb that had been presented to him as a gift by Mitchell Sanders. The thumb was dark brown, rubbery to the touch, and weighed four ounces at most. It had been cut from a VC corpse, a boy of fifteen or sixteen. They’d found him at the bottom of an irrigation ditch, badly burned, flies in his mouth and eyes” (13). These details gain particular significance in context with the three chapters specified above, where we learn that after the war Norman hanged himself at his hometown Y during a water break from a pick-up basketball game. The thumb is symbolic of the immense, unspeakable guilt Norman carries with him for not being brave enough, strong enough, man enough, to prevent the atrocities he witnessed, especially the death of his friend Kiowa. Emotionally numbed by survival training and trauma, and convinced that they have failed to be *enough*, the men trade their constant

anxiety over masculine performance for a similarly self-flagellating and self-destructive mental state—one of guilt.

When we encounter Norman Bowker in “Speaking of Courage,” it is the Fourth of July in 1975. With “no place in particular to go,” Norman spends an entire afternoon driving a tar road in a seven-mile loop around a lake in his hometown, wondering who might care to listen to his story from the war (137). It was a “good war story, he thought, but it was not a war for war stories, nor for talk of valor, and nobody in town wanted to know about the terrible stink [of the shit field where Kiowa died]. They wanted good intentions and good deeds” (150). As Norman continues his revolutions around the lake, he imagines conversations with the people he wishes he could talk to about the war. Yet rather than a masculine attempt to appear stoic, or an effort to avoid revealing events that might make him appear less than brave, Norman seems genuinely without the capacity to verbalize or otherwise express to anyone what he has seen and what he has done.

Norman is not on the outside of the storytelling circle; O’Brien’s point is that these men have no genuine storytelling circle at all because the voice they are expected to use is not authentic, and therefore not truly their own. Norman suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and he suffers from a prolonged and devastating lack of human closeness that stems, at least in part, from a fear among men that if another person were to draw too close, he or she might discover numerous “failures” in their performances of masculinity. One of the earliest studies of PTSD describes this stress reaction as “the price [the soldier] later pays for suspension of his emotions in the service of objective combat” (Hass and Hendin 7). Tal makes incisively lucid sense of the contributing factors:

War is the ultimate shock to male self-perception, shattering pretensions to self-control and to control over environment. War breaks down

the barriers between known categories, throwing the soldier into a situation where he must revise his ideas of reality in order to survive. One of the first categories to be violated is that of gender role. Though taught in basic training or boot camp to adopt a hypermasculine stance, the soldier naturally experiences 'feminine' emotions in combat, including fear, confusion, a sense of being out of control, and an emotional attachment to his comrades. The pain that accompanies the death, or horrible injury that often ends his relationships with comrades is understandably difficult to bear. Combat soldiers often deal with such emotions by repressing them in the face of more immediate needs for survival....The price he has to pay for not feeling anything about killing and dying is no longer feeling anything at all. (88-9)

Norman thinks about talking to Sally Gustafson, "whose pictures he had once carried in his wallet," but "she looked happy. She had her house and her new husband, and there was really nothing he could say to her" (139). He cannot relate to "happy." It is not so much that she might not listen or would not understand, but that he is isolated from her, and she from him, in what he can only imagine is her idyllic life in her "pleasant blue house" (139). The emotionless state that was a means for Norman to save his own life while he was at war, becomes a significant factor in why he ends his own life after he returns home.

Norman's guilt over the death of Kiowa, another soldier in Alpha Company, also contributes to his inability to achieve human closeness and, ultimately, survival as a civilian. Norman cannot physically quit circling the lake that "had drown [his childhood friend, Max Arnold]...keeping him out of the war entirely," and neither can he mentally stop circling the memory of how his war buddy Kiowa sunk to death in a "shit field" in Vietnam (138). Norman wishes he could tell his story to Max, who, similar to the Bible-carrying Baptist Kiowa, "liked to talk about the existence of God," and he foreshadows his own eventual suicide with his envy for how Max's death functioned like a magic trick, allowing him to escape the war (138). Norman also imagines a detailed conversation that he is unable to

actualize with his father, “who had his own war and who now preferred silence” (147).<sup>7</sup> He wants to tell his father, who in the imagined conversation is an attentive and encouraging listener, about the time he almost won the Silver Star, though both father and son would agree that “many brave men do not win medals for their bravery, and that others win medals for doing nothing” (141). But the story is not about a medal almost-won; it is about a friend whom Norman believes he almost saved—could have, should have, saved. The seven medals Norman did receive mean little to him, and he uses them against himself, at one point to highlight his lack of bravery, and then as a knowingly futile attempt to assuage his overwhelming guilt:

He would’ve explained to his father that none of these decorations was for uncommon valor. They were for common valor. The routine, daily stuff—just humping, just enduring—but that was worth something, wasn’t it?...because it meant he had been there as a real soldier and had done all the things soldiers do, and therefore it wasn’t such a big deal that he could not bring himself to be uncommonly brave. (141)

Guilt grants Norman a degree of power, a shred of masculine control, when he otherwise feels utterly powerless; for guilt encompasses both the grief and the pain, and allows the sufferer to think he is controlling the hurt, inflicting the wounds himself. What happened over in Vietnam might have been out of his control, and that challenges his perception of himself as a man; but the guilt beguiles him into thinking he is its master. Bereft of human closeness in his no-where-to-go civilian life, his memory of Kiowa, the friend he loved, provides him with the illusion of connection; even if the memory is at times a painful one, at least, he thinks, it lets him *feel something*, which has to be better than feeling nothing at all.

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<sup>7</sup> See Susan Faludi’s *Stiffed*. What “sticks to [the narrator’s] memory: Norman Bowker lying on his back one night, watching the stars, then whispering to me, ‘I’ll tell you something, O’Brien. If I could have one wish, anything, I’d wish for my dad to write me a letter and say it’s okay if I don’t win any medals. That’s all my old man talks about, nothing else. How he can’t wait to see my goddman medals’” (36).

The nearest Norman comes to human closeness is during a moment when he orders a burger and fries through an intercom, and a “tinny” voice asks, “What you really need, friend?” (152). Norman smiles, and begins,

‘Well,...how’d you like to hear about—’  
He stopped and shook his head.  
‘Hear *what*, man?’  
‘Nothing.’  
‘Well, hey,’ the intercom said, ‘I’m sure as fuck not *going* anywhere.  
Screwed to a post, for God’s sake. Go ahead, try me.’  
‘Nothing.’  
‘You sure?’  
‘Positive. All done.’  
The intercom made a light sound of disappointment. ‘Your choice, I  
guess. Over an’ out.’ (152)

In one sense, Norman defeats the prospect of meaningful conversation before it might occur. He convinces himself that others do not want to hear his story. Perhaps he thinks he deserves the pain of isolation, that he must bear the guilt—“the burden of being alive”—for his failure to show uncommon bravery in saving Kiowa (19). In another sense, he shows that despite his deep need to connect, he still has his pride—it is an *intercom*, not a human, and the voice on the other end is basically stuck listening. Again, O’Brien foreshadows Norman’s suicide—his final moment of human disconnect—with an image of the veteran’s virtual “[invisibility] in the soft twilight. Straight ahead, over the take-out counter, swarms of mosquitoes electrocuted themselves against an aluminum Pest-Rid machine” (151). Soon after the burger, though, Norman returns to his solitary looping around the lake, where he is free to imagine not only human connection, but also the Fourth of July fireworks, and how “the lake would sparkle with reds and blues and greens, like a mirror, and the picnickers would make low sounds of appreciation” (144). The townspeople want to witness that celebratory display honoring bravery and freedom, not to hear about the smell of the shit field where Alpha Company unknowingly set up camp, and where Kiowa “slipped beneath

the thick waters” (149). We recall the narrator’s pre-war expression of bitterness for the people in his own town, the ones whom he “detested [for] their blind, thoughtless, automatic acquiescence to it all, their simple-minded patriotism, their prideful ignorance, their love-it-or-leave-it platitudes, how they were sending [him] off to fight a war they didn’t understand and didn’t want to understand” (45). And how he “held them personally and individually responsible” (45). Norman is instead resigned to how the town,

...seemed dead...the place looked as if it had been hit by nerve gas, everything still and lifeless, even the people. The town could not talk, and would not listen. ‘How’d you like to hear about the war?’ he might have asked, but the place could only blink and shrug. It had no memory, therefore no guilt. The taxes got paid and the votes got counted and the agencies of government did their work briskly and politely....It did not know shit about shit, and did not care to know. (143)

But Norman needs the town to care; he needs them to know “how he had been braver than he ever thought possible, but how he had not been so brave as he wanted to be” (153). He needs people to want to hear his story, to listen to his story, and to have it become a part of their memories. Through the sharing of those memories, so, too, can they share the burden of guilt, and regain the human closeness that will enable them not only to endure, but also, possibly, to heal. This quest for absolution through the sharing of responsibility for what happened in Vietnam, as well as for what happens between men and women in our society, is central to why O’Brien writes.

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The idea that men who feel compelled to silence the feminine within themselves might react by also silencing the women in their lives is consistent with a warrior’s

survivalist mentality. It becomes a soldier's scorched-earth rationale for sexism: suppress, dominate, and override any perception of weakness at all costs to ensure one's own strength and viability. O'Brien, while not immune to this subtle use of such "logic," does engage male characters who either refuse to—or, in the midst of acute trauma, are unable to—silence their own femininity.

With his depiction of Linda in the final chapter, "The Lives of the Dead," O'Brien also challenges the paradigm by giving imaginative voice to the feminine; or, more precisely, having his narrator give his own femininity an imaginative voice.<sup>8</sup> Through dreams and storytelling, the narrator resurrects Linda, his childhood sweetheart who died of a brain tumor in the fourth grade, declaring,

Linda was nine then, as I was, but we were in love. And it was real. When I write about her now, three decades later, it's tempting to dismiss it as a crush, an infatuation of childhood, but I know for a fact that what we felt for each other was as deep and rich as love can ever get. It had all the shadings and complexities of mature adult love, and maybe more, because there were not yet words for it, and because it was not yet fixed to comparisons or chronologies or the ways by which adults measure things.

I just loved her....

Even then, at nine years old, I wanted to live inside her body. I wanted to melt into her bones—*that* kind of love. (228)

This avowal of love has the uncomfortable feel of a mandate, as if the power and force of his own love for her is enough to encompass—and speak for—them both. The narrator makes this assumption because Linda is his feminine self. Smiley suggests that "O'Brien's character appropriates the feminine, becoming an androgynous fusion of preadolescent Timmy and Linda" (75).<sup>9</sup> In a similar vein, Smith argues, "the concept of merging wholly

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<sup>8</sup> Giving his own femininity an imaginative voice is, of course, different from giving voice to a female character—something he does not accomplish in *The Things They Carried*.

<sup>9</sup> Smiley also contends that, "This fusion of woman and man is not the stuff of Woodstock and the casual sex of the Pill. This is not daily shopping lists and three o'clock feedings and the toilet seat (up? down?). This is a love

with another through ‘pure knowing’ has accumulated the weight of fear (Jimmy Cross and Martha) and danger (Mary Anne and the war), both of which are also associated with transgressing normal gender codes and dissolving the socially constructed self’ (22). But rather than a partner to a fusion or merging, Linda more accurately represents the narrator’s femininity, and, as a symbol of that, retains a degree of un-integrated separateness, despite his forceful desire for it to be otherwise.

The narrator relies on imagination and dreams in his quest for redemption and human closeness; rather than pining for the ideal female reader, he attempts to find her *within* him.<sup>10</sup> This internal search and ardent effort at self-reliance echo the narrator’s predicament with his conscience in “On the Rainy River,” the story in which he confesses to having almost fled to Canada, and to his embarrassment for not actually doing it. If Linda represents his femininity, then Elroy Berdahl represents his feminine conscience; the first is dead, the second he ends up ignoring.<sup>11</sup> But he also regrets each of those situations. In both stories, he repeats his guilty refrain of feeling as if he has never been brave enough. He makes himself

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of epic proportions in which soul mates merge and their union contains everything. In an age that takes sex and love so lightly, this is an exceptional claim to make for the love of a woman. That she is the means of spiritual redemption. That only through her can life become whole” (612).

<sup>10</sup> Smiley argues, “Not only does O’Brien construct an ideal female reader, he becomes her in Linda” (273). Her point differs from mine in that she does not recognize Linda as a symbol of redemption for the narrator’s feminine self. Smiley considers O’Brien’s depiction of Linda along the lines of “all those boringly familiar and too predictable functions of women’s place in men’s art. Too obvious to even deserve comment” (612). Smiley further suggests that the reason why “women readers play,” has to do with O’Brien’s gothic and Heathcliffian portrayal of love: “At the climax of the gothic, the hero (heretofore a public figure of great power who has amused himself by torturing and toying with a female innocent, the protagonist) realizes the woman he has been victimizing is not peripheral to his life, but its very center. She is his soul. His meaning. And he surrenders to her” (612). The analogy largely works, though differently than Smiley intends. The “female innocent” that the narrator has toyed with, is his own feminine self—he has victimized his femininity, and tried to force it to the periphery, but it is central to who he is as a man. His surrender is fleeting, because in the end, he is “Tim trying to save Timmy’s life with a story,” and a boy who wishes to survive as a man, must perform by leaving the feminine dead (246).

<sup>11</sup> As characters in the narrator’s stories, they assume similar traits: Linda is “slender and very quiet and fragile-looking,” and almost bald from her chemotherapy; Elroy is “skinny, and shrunken and mostly bald” (228, 48).

vulnerable by repeatedly referring to himself as a coward, but our recognition of his cowardice is safely tempered by its connection to going to war—something we expect a man to do. He clearly regrets his failure to be brave, and in these instances being brave means giving voice to his femininity and listening to his conscience. He recalls his inability to stop another boy who teased Linda by trying to yank off the red cap that covered her surgery stitches:

Naturally I wanted to do something about it, but it just wasn't possible. I had my reputation to think about. I had my pride....So I stood off to the side, just a spectator, wishing I could do things I couldn't do. I watched Linda clamp down the cap with the palm of her hand, holding it there, smiling...as if none of it really mattered.

For me, though, it did matter. It still does. I should've stepped in; fourth grade is no excuse. Besides, it doesn't get easier with time, and twelve years later, when Vietnam presented much harder choices, some practice with being brave might've helped. (233-4)

The need for “practice with being brave” directly references what the narrator wished for during his stay along the Rainy River. Elroy tacks an envelope to his door marked “EMERGENCY FUND” and drives him out into Canadian waters, where he occupies himself with fishing while the narrator contemplates both his history and his future. As the narrator's conscience, Elroy wants him to flee and takes him “across that dotted line between two different worlds,” which refers not only to the fluid nature of the U.S.-Canadian border, but also to the ebb and flow of the masculine and feminine aspects of his self. The narrator remembers,

My conscience told me to run, but some irrational and powerful force was resisting, like a weight pushing me toward the war. What it came down to, stupidly, was a sense of shame. Hot, stupid shame. I did not want people to think badly of me. Not my parents, not my brother and sister, not even the folks down at the Gobbler Café. I was ashamed to be there at the Tip Top Lodge. I was ashamed of my conscience, ashamed to be doing the right thing. (51-2)

In this moment, he identifies with the feminine that at other times speaks in a “language beyond translation”; he *wants* to obey his conscience when it tells him to run. He describes the “mute watchfulness” of his conscience, and how it was his “true audience”—both aspects that the narrator associates with the feminine throughout his stories (60). But the masculine—“an irrational and powerful force”—rules him, and shames him for considering his femininity. The narrator confesses, “Right then, with the shore so close, I understood that I would not do what I should do. I would not swim away from my hometown and my country and my life. I would not be brave” (57). With both Linda and Elroy, the narrator associates bravery with the feminine influence, while exposing the shame and cowardice cultivated by the masculine influence. “I survived,” the narrator tells us, “but it’s not a happy ending. I was a coward. I went to war” (61). So entrenched are the expectations for masculine performance, and so afraid is he at the prospect of not living up to them, that they sway even his judgment of what he knows is right.

As we read the story of the Linda, we already know she is dead; despite the imaginative resuscitation, the narrator does not conceive of his feminine self as surviving. He recalls how, “in the spring of 1956...on the first real date of [his] life,” he took Linda to see a World War II film titled *The Man Who Never Was*, in which the main character is a corpse (232). The plot of the movie involved a scheme to deceive the enemy by “[dressing the corpse] up in an officer’s uniform, [planting] fake documents in his pockets, then [dumping] him in the sea and [letting] the currents wash him onto a Nazi beach” (232). This could also be a metaphor for how the narrator felt when he arrived in Vietnam, having the body and appearance of a man, but feeling hollowed and not much like a man for the choices he felt compelled to make. He recalls how “it was a relief when the movie finally ended,”

and yet the film's thematic significance still seemed to resonate throughout his life (232). In "On the Rainy River," the narrator imagines that summer before the war through the lens of "old home movie: I'm young and tan and fit. I've got hair—lots of it. I don't smoke or drink...I can see myself sitting on Elroy Berdahl's dock near dusk, the sky bright shimmering pink, and I'm finishing up a letter to my parents that tells them what I'm about to do and why I'm doing it and how sorry I am that I'd never found the courage to talk to them about it" (54). This version of the narrator, one who writes a letter home to say he has fled to Canada, is also a man who never was. The narrator laments:

That old image of myself as a hero, as a man of conscience and courage, all that was just a threadbare pipe dream. Bobbing there on the Rainy River, looking back at the Minnesota shore, I felt a sudden swell of helplessness come over me, a drowning sensation, as if I had toppled overboard and was being swept away by the silver waves...My whole life seemed to spill out into the river, swirling away from me, everything I had ever been or ever wanted to be. I couldn't get my breath; I couldn't stay afloat; I couldn't tell which way to swim. (57-8)

In *The Man Who Never Was*, "the deception wins the war" (232). For the narrator, the deception in denying one's true self in order to live up to the normative standards of masculinity exacerbates the struggle—both internal and external—between the masculine and the feminine. The narrator fears he isn't a man *because* he ignored the feminine and performed the masculine. And yet he also knows that had he listened to his conscience and avoided the war, that choice, too, would have risked his identity as a man.

Guilt and self-doubt plague the narrator as he struggles with the predicament of how to act like a man. As he reveals his near-dodge of the draft, he states, "For more than twenty years I've had to live with it, feeling the shame, trying to push it away, and so by this act of remembrance, by putting the facts down on paper, I'm hoping to relieve at least some of the

pressure on my dreams” (39). Earlier in his life, after Linda died, he found sanctuary in his dreams, although he still associates his attraction to his own femininity with embarrassment:

My dreams had become a secret meeting place, and in the weeks after she died, I couldn't wait to fall asleep at night. I began going to bed earlier and earlier, sometimes even in bright daylight. My mother, I remember, finally asked about it at breakfast one morning. 'Timmy, what's *wrong*?' she said, but all I could do was shrug and say, 'Nothing. I just need sleep, that's all.' I didn't dare tell the truth. It was embarrassing, I suppose, but it was also a precious secret, like a magic trick, where if I tried to explain it, or even talk about it, the thrill and mystery would be gone. I didn't want to lose Linda. (244)

Even though he realizes that he cannot embrace femininity in the light of day, he clings to it in his dreams, and, there, wrestles with having it “die” within him. He confides that despite their shared silence, Linda “knew things nobody could ever know” and had “something ageless in her eyes—not a child, not an adult—just a bright ongoing everness that same pinprick of absolute lasting light that I see today in my own eyes” (238). The narrator works to “[keep] the dead alive with stories” and to save the part of himself that is Linda. He speaks to her in his dreams, for in real life, “down inside [he] had important things to tell her, big profound things, but [he] couldn't make any words come out” (229). At one point, when the narrator, as a boy, asked her what it was like to be dead, “she smiled and said, ‘Do I *look* dead?’” (244). Still uncertain, he asks again:

‘Well, right now,’ she said, ‘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?’ I said.  
‘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.’  
Linda smiled at me.  
‘Anyhow, it’s not so bad,’ she said. ‘I mean, when you’re dead, you just have to be yourself.’ (245)

The narrator is waiting for his book to be read, for his reader to acknowledge, accept, and thereby bring back to life the feminine self that he can only write about in stories. When you are dead, and, like that old book up on the shelf, nobody's reading you, only then can you be yourself. The narrator does not want to wait for death. He wants to be himself, a self that includes the feminine, while he is *alive*.

But in the final pages of the story, the narrator contradicts himself and denies the feminine once again. He claims to be “forty-three years old...still dreaming Linda alive in exactly the same way. She's not the embodied Linda; she's mostly made up, with a new identity and a new name, like the man who never was. Her real name doesn't matter” (245). This doesn't make sense: the name of the girl with whom he shared a love “as deep and rich as love can ever get” doesn't matter? (228). Apparently, not only is “the only good woman a dead one,” as Judith Fetterley once glibly charged with regard to Hemingway's work, but even better, is if she never lived at all (71). Yet this is not what O'Brien intends to suggest. Because Linda represents his own femininity, he not only must let her die to preserve his image as a man, he must deny she ever existed—even if, in nearly the same breath, he begs for her to be alive within him. The narrator alludes to disembodiment several times, and once as he contemplates his fate on the Rainy River, observing, “I had the feeling that I'd slipped out of my own skin, hovering a few feet away while some poor yo-yo with my face tried to make his way toward a future he didn't understand and didn't want” (54). He later acknowledges that, “as a writer now, I want to save Linda's life. Not her body—her life” (236). In the final paragraph of the story, he imagines seeing Linda “as if through ice, as if I'm gazing into some other world...where there are no bodies at all” (245). It is his body—what identifies him as male—that confines him to the expectations of masculinity. Even in

the final lines, just after he has attempted to deny Linda as a part of him, he refers to the feminine movements of his body as it *performs* “loops and spins...and a high leap into the dark...as Tim trying to save Timmy’s life” (246). In sexual terms, wanting the feminine alive within him suggests his openness to a paradigm shift, and yet, in keeping with the pattern throughout *The Things They Carried*, O’Brien cannot commit, for wanting her alive problematizes his masculinity. He struggles to convince himself, in contrast to the theme of the movie he recalls from his childhood, that it wasn’t deception that wins the war.

In his essay "The Magic Show," O’Brien offers insight into his imaginative vision:

The process of imaginative knowing does not depend upon the scientific method. Fictional characters are not constructed of flesh and blood, but rather of words, and those words serve as specific incantations that invite us into and guide us through the universe of the imagination...[where] anything is possible...[and where] the old rules were no longer binding. Language is the apparatus—the magic dust—by which a writer performs his miracles. . . . Beyond anything, I think, a writer is someone entranced by the power of language to create a magic show of the imagination, to make the dead sit up and talk, to shine light into the darkness of the great human mysteries. (177)

Ultimately, the narrator succeeds in breathing life into his femininity through the story of Linda, but his attempt to self-fulfill his need for an ideal female reader is untenable—and he knows it. He might need his characters, but his narrator also expresses the need for real “flesh and blood” women. Toward the end of the essay, as detailed above, the narrator alludes to the masculine and feminine residing together within him; near the beginning, he conceives of how it might be a flesh and blood reality. The narrator assumes a feminine voice by imagining a letter written by Martha to Jimmy Cross, a letter in which she describes finding a stone along the Jersey shore “precisely where the land touched the water at high tide, where things came together but also separated. It was this separate-but-together quality,

she wrote, that had inspired her to pick up the pebble and to carry it in her breast pocket for several days, where it seemed weightless” (8). Jimmy then finds human closeness in what he imagines the woman is offering—or in what he wants her to offer—as he daydreams of “walking barefoot along the Jersey shore, with Martha, carrying nothing. He would feel himself rising. Sun and waves and gentle winds, all love and lightness” (9). The burden of things carried is the central theme of the novel, and that weight vanishes through human closeness. Henry Dobbins with his girlfriend’s pantyhose around his neck, Jimmy Cross with Martha’s pebble in his mouth, Rat Kiley writing a letter to Curt Lemon’s sister—these are the soldiers’ substitutes for human closeness. O’Brien’s stories are his own attempts at human closeness, as he works to perform his miracle of having a woman love him.

A recurrent theme for O’Brien is the desire for—and failure of—people to listen. The act of listening, the signal that you care about what another person has experienced, is what O’Brien identifies as comfort and understanding, and the essential element that makes a move toward human closeness possible. The scene of the men stuck in the shit field, searching deep in the muck for Kiowa’s body, depicts how the men, having repeatedly suffered trauma and loss, are mentally isolated from one another, literally unable to listen to or *care* about what another beside them has experienced, and also unable to communicate their own guilt and pain. “A dozen old mama-sans” had yelled out to them through the rain “about how [the] field was bad news,” but they set up camp anyway (144-5). The unit’s lieutenant, Jimmy Cross, blames himself, repetitively murmuring, “My fault,” as he mentally drafts a letter to the dead soldier’s father (169). He shouts to one of his men (“not a man, really—a boy”), who was “reaching down with both hands as if chasing some object just beneath the surface....but the young soldier did not turn or look up” (163). In his mind, the

young soldier is also blaming himself for Kiowa's death, for "switching on his flashlight" and thereby inviting the mortar rounds (170). When Jimmy Cross wades over to him, he does not share his guilt and grief, but rather his frustration with not being able to find the picture of his girlfriend that he had shown to Kiowa with the flashlight. When Norman and Azar find Kiowa's body, with "a piece of his shoulder missing [and] the arms and chest and face [cut] up with shrapnel," they too suffer guilt (175). Azar says to Bowker,

'Listen...Those dumb jokes—I didn't mean anything.'  
'We all say things.'  
'Yeah, but when I saw the guy, it made me feel—I don't know—like  
he was listening.'  
'He wasn't.'  
'I guess not. But I felt sort of guilty almost, like if I'd kept my mouth  
shut none of it would've ever happened. Like it was my fault.'  
Norman Bowker looked out across the wet field.  
'Nobody's fault,' he said. 'Everybody's.' (175-6)

The possibility that even a corpse might be listening seems more believable to these men than the idea that anyone else is. The hypermasculine warrior culture that portrays the suppression of femininity and the denial of one's own humanity as strengths necessary for survival betrays these men in their hour of intense trauma and desperate need for connection. They are detached from an awareness of self, as "the filth seemed to erase identities, transforming the men into identical copies of a single soldier" (163). Their emotional numbness and disconnection from one another allows them to carry on with their performances of masculinity, with the expectations for such performance relying on their empathetic vacancy.

When extreme trauma paralyzes more traditional displays of masculinity, the men search for some semblance of bravery and strength through taking blame and assuming responsibility, actions that at least offer the men *something*; a degree of self-control or access

to power, even if it is over their own pain. Accepting blame for a thing that is not truly one's own fault might be construed in various contexts as an honorable act, and to some extent, O'Brien makes a knowingly feeble effort to convince us that such was the case there in the shit field, as well as later, when the narrator claims that the story he wrote of Norman's failure to win the Silver Star is actually his own story of how he failed to save Kiowa. But the reality is that these soldiers believe they have failed as men for not being brave enough or strong enough to protect and save Kiowa, despite how valiantly they tried, and they recognize no other choice but to clamor for a share of the blame in an effort to show they are at least strong enough, manly enough, to accept responsibility. The act of taking blame for something they understand they could not have prevented, but still somehow believe that as men they should have prevented, allows for both the illusion of control even over one's failure, and the movement away from appearing passively consumed by guilt.

The narrator takes the blame when he professes,

...for years I've avoided thinking about [Kiowa's] death and my own complicity in it. Even here it's not easy. In the interests of truth, however, I want to make it clear that Norman Bowker was in no way responsible for what happened to Kiowa. 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. (160-1)

What he claims might be true; or it might be that he experiences a degree of guilt in connection with Norman's suicide, and wants to honor and redeem him by taking up his burden of guilt. The narrator reveals that he originally wrote "Speaking of Courage" in response to a letter he received from Norman, asking him to "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 and just drives around town all day and can't think of a damn place to go and doesn't know how to get there anyway. This guy wants to talk about it, but he *can't*..." (157-8). The letter had

“haunted [him] for more than a month, not the words so much as its desperation,” and when the initial version of the story was first published, he “sent a copy off to Norman Bowker with the thought that it might please him” (159, 160). But the narrator himself had failed to listen: “[Norman’s] reaction was short and somewhat bitter. ‘It’s not terrible,’ he wrote me, ‘but you left out Vietnam. Where’s Kiowa? Where’s the shit?’ Eight months later he hanged himself” (160). Yet from his original failure to listen, the narrator transforms himself and the story, “[making] good on Norman Bowker’s silence,” and becoming a model for O’Brien’s ideal reader—a listener who is willing to internalize and own a part of the story she hears, and, through her love for the storyteller, share the burden of responsibility (160). This vision of an ideal reader is more accurately one of an ideal human, and although O’Brien emphasizes women as his listeners and healers of choice, this same model of human need applies to both sexes, including paternal, maternal, and other platonic relationships.

By having the narrator claim Norman’s failure to save Kiowa as his own, O’Brien challenges our understanding of blame similar to how he controverts our assumptions about truth. Our perceptions of who did what and when a particular thing happened are constantly shifting, making it,

...difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed, when a booby trap explodes, you close your eyes and duck and float outside yourself. When a guy dies, like Curt Lemon, you look away and then look back for a moment and then look away again. The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it *seemed.*” (71)

Here the narrator considers the complicated nature of truth, and yet his words also reflect how he construes blame and responsibility. It is just as Norman said: “Nobody’s fault...Everybody’s” (176). As he floats in the field of waste, Jimmy Cross thinks of how,

there had to be blame....You could blame the war. You could blame the idiots who made the war. You could blame Kiowa for going to it. You could blame the rain. You could blame the river. You could blame the field, the mud, the climate. You could blame the enemy. You could blame the mortar rounds. You could blame the people who were too lazy to read a newspaper, who were bored by the daily body counts, who switched channels at the mention of politics. You could blame whole nations. You could blame God. You could blame the munitions makers or Karl Marx or a trick of fate or an old man in Omaha who forgot to vote. (177)

In the end, we are all somehow responsible. As the narrator and the other men in the shit field each assume the blame for Kiowa’s death as his own, O’Brien recognizes how the sharing of culpability, even if also an act of self-induced torment, is a way to facilitate human closeness, and perhaps eventual healing, in the midst of trauma-induced isolation. At other points in the novel, rather than a dead body, it is the demand for masculine performance that induces a sort of trauma, isolating the men from one another through fear of failure to perform adequately. In either sort of instance, the men must have someone to listen to their stories—someone to bear witness to the memory of what they endured—if healing is to occur.

The narrator might be frustrated with “people who never listen,” but he refuses to give up on pleading with the reader to hear the “truth” in his stories, and to make them her own. The narrator recalls how, “twenty years ago I watched a man die on a trail near the village of My Khe. I did not kill him. But I was present, you see, and my presence was guilt enough. I remember his face, which was not a pretty face, because his jaw was in his throat,

and I remember feeling the burden of responsibility and grief. I blamed myself. And rightly so, because I was present” (179). Then he further commands our attention: “But listen. Even *that* story is made up. I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth” (179). O’Brien also wants us to acknowledge how those who didn’t pull the trigger—even if it was because they were not even at the war—might be just as responsible (if not sometimes more so) as those who did. “I was once a soldier,” the narrator tells us. “There were many bodies, real bodies with real faces, but I was young then and I was afraid to look, and now, twenty years later, I’m left with faceless responsibility and faceless grief” (180). The “story-truth” is, he tells us, “I killed him” (180). For the narrator, and for O’Brien, these stories qualify as textual plays for human closeness, but they succeed only if someone listens, and believes. Psychologist and Vietnam veteran Arthur Egendorf examines how “retelling one’s story [can be] an ancient cure....Retelling is likely to allow us to feel ‘more human’ afterward, for recapturing the past in a sensitive way” (69). But if “more human” also means “less a man” for how others might judge him or for how he judges himself, then the pain of silence might seem preferable to the promise of such a “cure.” O’Brien finds a way through the quagmire of such a threat: first, by playing with the concept of truth, and then by convincing us that a man who inhabits his own femininity, whether by desperation or rational choice, *is* brave. And while looking to bravery to validate manhood still might be a response to the conventional demands of masculinity, by making the *feminine male* brave, O’Brien attempts to at least redefine how those expectations might be met.

O’Brien also considers how the female listener can assume masculine power. “What stories can do,” the narrator reveals, “is make things present. I can look at things I never

looked at. I can attach faces to grief and love and pity and God. I can be brave. I can make myself feel again” (180). For such catharsis to occur, he needs for someone to acknowledge his grief and his bravery, and for someone to return his love. For O’Brien, this “someone” is most often a woman, and he wants his act of taking blame and acknowledging guilt to be honorable in her eyes and to qualify him as a man. The female listener, though arguably outside the storytelling circle in terms of not having a voice, is traditionally masculine here in her position of power; he is brave only if she believes his story. The demands of masculinity feminize him and his experience by making them depend upon the recognition of a listener for meaning, just as the female listener is masculinized by her possession of the power and authority to grant his story affirmation. Through this swapping of stereotypes and normative behaviors, there is also a degree to which O’Brien empowers the female by virtue of her femininity, as he attributes strength and control to the role of listener. For O’Brien, it seems that in some ways the male storyteller must perform as a striptease artist might, relying on the audience to determine his worth, and leaving him to wonder, Have I revealed enough? Too much? Am I a person you desire? Despite his sometimes-bitter resentment for having to “dance,” he does confront the constraints of masculine performance by consciously recognizing and leaving himself vulnerable to the power of his female listener.

But O’Brien seeks something more than love and approbation from his female listener. In the McNerney interview, O’Brien makes what Vernon recognizes as his “only open statement expressing any kind of hostility toward women and their relationship with war” (246):

Women are going to have to acknowledge that men are being treated unfairly when they are sent to war. I don’t think women have thought about it much. I think women, by and large, in western society have taken it for granted that they don’t have to serve in combat, and it’s not even thought

about much. It's just a given. It's as if God has somehow granted divine right to women: *You don't have to die in combat. You don't have to go through this horror.* Well, God didn't mandate this privilege, man did. Law did. Tradition did. Culture did. It seems to me that excluding women from combat is a clear violation of the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to our Constitution. We shall all be treated fairly. Why not only draft blacks, or only draft Albanians, or only draft Indians? There would be a revolution in this country in any of those cases. "How to Tell a True War Story" is meant to call attention to our fundamental inequity. Half our population is excluded from the horror of serving in combat. I want to call attention to that fact. (20)

O'Brien does seem angry, and perhaps arrogant in his suggestion that women have not thought about these issues. His frustration, at least on the surface, seems as much directed toward men as it is toward women, as he rightfully holds men responsible for "[mandating] this privilege." But O'Brien also takes the role of victim here, as he considers this exclusion of women from combat and such a policy's "clear violation of the equal protection clause" to be a female privilege, with the claim of inequity belonging to the men who are drafted. In his feminization of these "unfairly" drafted men, he partly holds women responsible for perpetuating patriarchy. It might be less problematic to find sympathy for such victimization if he were attempting to challenge the patriarchal structure; instead, he wants women to change how they behave *within* it.<sup>12</sup> Still, he does contest the gender status quo in a manner that suggests he is more afraid of what an end to patriarchy would mean for how he proves himself as a man, rather than a refusal or even lack of desire to share power with women. O'Brien is not calling for women to be drafted, or for women to begin serving in mass numbers in the military; his point is more precisely about our country's and our culture's

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<sup>12</sup> In "Women and the Combat Exemption," Judith Hicks Stiehm asks: "Is it possible that the aversion of men to the suffering of women is actually based on their feeling that when a woman suffers it is because men have failed to protect that woman? Is the pain they feel *for* women, or is it the pain of their own failure?" (53). It seems that freedom from the expectations of masculinity would also involve freedom from this sense of responsibility.

gender expectations, and his overwhelming sense that women do not appreciate the sacrifices men make when they go to war. His anger is for a man-made system that sends him to war to prove he is a man, and for the women whom he views as complicit in that expectation.

What the narrator wants from his female (and male) audience is the sort of listening that he ultimately gave to Norman, albeit posthumously: an *active* form of listening in which the listener's acceptance of the storyteller's memories effectively gives them life. The ideal listener participates in the story; for "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" (230). The narrator also desires that the ideal listener—the female listener—participate by sharing his responsibility and his guilt, in essence acknowledging, "I killed [Kiowa]," as part of her own "story-truth." And despite how this mutual recognition of responsibility seems to involve mute participation from women in the storytelling circle, O'Brien does not seem to intend that to be the reality. His single-minded focus is about how to cultivate the possibility for human closeness, and having his story heard and received appears to him as the most viable path toward healing. Yes, he wants to control the reception of his story, to have her listen the way *he* wants and needs her to listen. His failure, however, is not in wanting to silence her, but in not having considered that she might have something valuable to say. A man who listens to a woman reflect on *his* experience—not to mention her experience—with *his* war, does not fulfill the masculine role of being the one in power and control. O'Brien suggests that a woman who listens *does* retain such authority—does this imply that, in the context of war, listening is the only power she is capable to possess? Or, does he leave her without a voice because he is afraid of what she will say, of how she

will judge him as a man? Considering the absence of a woman in his stories who *is* empowered by her act of listening, as well as the presence of several women who do hold a power over him by their refusal to listen (the way he wants them to), one also wonders whether it is simply a failure of imagination, or the fear that her listening, despite being what he wants and needs, will grant her power based on knowledge of his vulnerability and weakness.

In spite of such fear, or perhaps because of the isolation and trauma that such prolonged fear has induced, O'Brien and his men are desperate for human closeness. The idea of shared responsibility by women through active listening appeals to O'Brien for its potential to suspend or diffuse the expectations for masculine performance—when his weakness and loss also become her weakness and loss, the perception of gender might shift and become more fluid. Yet the transition is incomplete, and the possibility for human closeness and healing less viable, if his strength and victory do not also qualify as her strength and victory.<sup>13</sup> He must risk the disruption and uncertainty of the masculine aspects of his identity, and reject the idea that only his masculinity can qualify him as a man, which is precisely what, over and over again, he asks from his female reader. O'Brien purposefully blurs the lines that define courage to distance performance from masculine demands. The narrator realizes,

Sometimes the bravest thing on earth was to sit through the night and feel the cold in your bones. 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....Sometimes,

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<sup>13</sup> The narrator modeled the sort of listening behavior he desires when he assumed Norman's guilt, claiming what was not brave as his own so that Norman could appear brave. Through this "active listening," he also gained for himself the power and the strength to confront what was "hard stuff to write," and to honor Kiowa by "thinking about his death," after having avoided it for so long (160).

like that night in the shit field, the difference between courage and cowardice was something small and stupid. (147)

Masculinity and bravery are like truth and blame: shifting and, ultimately, unknowable.

Feminist playwright Karen Malpede recognizes the imagination for its potential power to deconstruct our cultural orientation to war: “I mean quite literally that we need new rites, new myths, new tales of our beginnings, new stories that speak of new options open to us. The task before us is a task of the imagination, for whatever we are able to imagine we will also be able to become” (Gioseffi 132). O’Brien’s belief in the power of the imagination is integral to his endeavor to challenge our preconceptions and our knowledge of what is “true,” and it is also indicative of his recognition of the feminine as a source for strength and survival. The particularly uncertain nature of war challenges the masculine desire for finiteness, for control, and for certainty. To embrace the uncertainty, rather than to resist or deny it, is to embrace the feminine. When O’Brien creates stories and new “truths,” he reaches toward the feminine and the uncertain to reconstitute the rigid demands of the masculine with imagination and an appreciation of the fluid nature of truth. This emphasis on imagination as essential for emotional and perhaps physical survival is an acknowledgement not only of the power of the feminine, but also of the male desire for it. Richard Hugo observed, “An act of the imagination is an act of self-acceptance....Writing is a way of saying you and the world have a chance.” O’Brien works toward self-acceptance through his stories, attempting to conjure a self that inhabits both masculine and feminine realms with relative ease. The task is not always an easy one, even in his imagination. Still, he portrays the struggle as an endeavor of elegance and grace, and ultimately one of hope,

even in the midst of war. The narrator reflects on how striking it is to comprehend that “you’re never more alive than when you’re almost dead” (81). In those moments after a firefight:

Freshly, as if for the first the first time, you love what’s best in yourself and in the world, all that might be lost...although in the morning you must cross the river and go into the mountains and do terrible things and maybe die, even so, you find yourself studying the fine colors on the river, you feel wonder and awe at the setting of the sun, and you are filled with a hard aching love for how the world could be and always should be, but now is not. (81-2)

O’Brien consistently emphasizes how the responsibility to masculine performance constrains imagination and confines, though does not extinguish, hope. In a recent interview, he commented on the enduring relevance of *The Things They Carried*:

As long as that book is read, that guy is going to keep soaring into that hedge, or into that tree. And as long as the book is read, little Linda, at the end of the book, is going to keep skating on that ice, little Timmy will be in love with her and skating along. And that is what—I’m not saving their bodies, and I’m not even saving the memories of these people really, but I’m saving something that you hope is essential and enduring in the human spirit. The love of a little boy for a little girl, and a good friend that soared into a tree in a terrible war. And that’s something, it’s not everything, but it’s something. (*Big Think* Mar 2010)

For O’Brien, “truth” is whatever draws us closer to one another. O’Brien writes about having faith in the power of the collective human spirit to triumph over pain, and about how our capacities as men and women to recognize the essential goodness in one another gives us perpetual hope of finding ways to love.

## Chapter II

### The Male Desire for Feminine Influence in Ernest Hemingway's *Men Without Women*

*What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel! In apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world! The paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?*

-William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (Act II, Scene ii, 302-11)

In the fall of 1927, and in the wake of the critically acclaimed and commercially successful breakthrough novel *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), as well as the experimental short story collection *In Our Time* (1925), the publication of *Men Without Women* solidified Ernest Hemingway's status as a writer. And yet *Men Without Women* has suffered a history of relative neglect in the critical arena. Kenneth Lynn explains the lack of attention this way: "If *Men Without Women* was not destined to become the most widely influential book of short stories ever published by a twentieth-century American author, that was only because it followed *In Our Time*" (366). Despite Percy Hutchison's review in *The New York Times* in October of 1927 proclaiming *Men Without Women* to show Hemingway as a "master in a new manner in the short-story form," with "language sheered to the very bone, colloquial language expended with the utmost frugality...and the effect [being] one of continuously gathering power," the metafictional composite novel has endured a sort of second-child syndrome with critics and readers alike (9). Joseph M. Flora perhaps most prominently has taken *Men Without Women* under his wing from a critical perspective, asserting its

qualifications as a modernist composite novel and recognizing how Hemingway's turn to first-person narrative—six of the fourteen stories in *Men Without Women*, compared to only one in *In Our Time*—furthers both the metafictional aspect of the book and the sense of a collective protagonist” (*Eight Decades* 283-5, 295).

On Hemingway's disinclination to mesh his stories in the fabric of a broader narrative with the inclusion of interchapters, as he does in *In Our Time*, Flora imagines that Hemingway would concur with another composite novelist's perspective, that of Tim O'Brien: “I feel I'm experimenting all the time. But the difference is this: I am experimenting not for the joy of experimenting, but rather to explore meaning and themes and dramatic discovery...I don't enjoy tinkering for the joy of tinkering, and I don't like reading books merely for their artifice. I want to see things and explore moral issues when I read, not get hit over the head with the tools of the trade” (“Interview with Tim O'Brien” 269). O'Brien made these points about his experimental style in an interview published in 1983; in March of 2010, twenty years after the publication of *The Things They Carried*, his lengthy reflection on his own creative process as he composed the novel is also relevant:

It's nothing intelligent behind it, and it wasn't a rationally planned operation, but rather it's how the world comes at me. It comes at me in a mix of my imagination...I think we all live partly in our daydreams. Daydreams is the wrong word because it makes it sound syrupy and mystically...but I partly mean daydreams, and I partly mean just thought or anticipation of an event that hasn't occurred. And I think we all live there, and you certainly live there in a situation such as a war where you're partly—the reality of the world is in your face, and partly there's the wistful call of girlfriends and home and all the things you don't have but yearn for. Or you're living partly in your imagination and not in a war and you'll flow in and out of these two the way you would maybe in a cancer ward, or if your marriage is collapsing, or your father has died, or you partly have the stark reality of that corpse in that coffin...I don't and didn't plan in a cerebral way the form of *The Things They Carried*. I took advantage of what was natural to me. I intentionally knew what I was doing, but I was taking advantage of what really was pretty natural

to me. I live in at least those two worlds of imagination and the world we all live in. (*Big Think* Interview)

Again, Hemingway would likely recognize aspects of his own imaginative process in O'Brien's depiction. Twenty years after the publication of *Men Without Women*, Hemingway wrote a letter to William Faulkner that also speaks, with characteristically less verbosity than O'Brien, to his own artistic aims. In the letter, Hemingway refers to the writer's desire to make things real: "the great thing we would all like to do. To make it really how it was any really good morning" (SL 624). Hemingway then continues with a description of a scene from *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in which "the Pilar woman knows what the hell it is all about...where she is talking about the smell of death (which is no shit) and all the part with her man who was in bull fight business and where we kill the fascists in the village" (SL 624). He wants to know what Faulkner thinks about his effort at crafting that particular moment in the novel, and tells him, "Anyway [it] is as good as I can write and was takeing [sic] all chances (for a pitcher who, when he has control, can throw fairly close) could take" (SL 624). Both Hemingway and O'Brien attempt a certain experiential verisimilitude in their fiction that endeavors to expose the pain inherent in the human condition, and, in particular, the emotional trauma that they often project onto their male characters' experiences with masculinity.

In his non-fiction *Death in the Afternoon* (1932), Hemingway finds the writer's task to be knowing "truly what you felt, rather than what you were supposed to feel, and had been taught to feel" (DIA 2). Certainly O'Brien would agree. In *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien's characters consider the love and understanding of a woman as essential to their healing and contentment as men. In several of the stories in *Men Without Women*, Hemingway works to convince himself and his reader that his emotional survival is equally

viable in the absence of women. The title alone makes a statement; in context with the stories, we discover the implication of an inquisitive subtitle—*Men Without Women: Could It Work and Is It Preferable?* In a February 14, 1927, letter to Maxwell Perkins, his editor, Hemingway attempts to justify the title by explaining that in “almost” all of the stories, “the softening feminine influence through training, discipline, death or other causes” was absent (SL 245). In another letter to Perkins five days later, Hemingway writes: “Men Without Women may have struck you as a punk title and if it did please cable me and I’ll try and work for another one. I don’t know anything about titles here in Gstaad. You wrote me you wanted one by March—that was why I hurried it” (SL 246). The idea that the title was initially “hurried” and that Hemingway was open to changing it lend credence to a perception of the work as exploratory with regard to gender. The haste he reveals in his letter suggests a degree of emotion or gut response in his choice of a title, and we appreciate the fluid nature of his vision for how the stories coalesce, rather than viewing “men without women” as a dictum he wanted to make. As much as Hemingway at least in part might have hoped the answer to such a hypothetical subtitle query of “*Could It Work and Is It Preferable?*” to be “Yes,” the sense of loss, longing, uneasiness, and discontent that his male characters encounter in the absence of a woman to love proves his ultimate answer to be otherwise.

In her October 1927 essay-review, Virginia Woolf, while conceding that Hemingway was a “skilled and conscientious writer,” also wryly observed that in *Men Without Women* there were “many stories which, if life were longer, one would wish to read again” (*Collected Essays* 254). With regard to Hemingway’s title for the book, Woolf expounded:

Whether we are to understand by this that women are incapable of training, discipline, death, or situation, we do not know. But it is undoubtedly true, if we are going to persevere in our attempt to reveal the processes of the critic’s mind, that any emphasis laid upon sex is dangerous. Tell a man that this is a

woman's book, or a woman that this is a man's, and you have brought into play sympathies and antipathies which have nothing to do with art. The greatest writers lay no stress upon sex one way or the other. The critic is not reminded as he reads them that he belongs to the masculine or the feminine gender. (*Collected Essays* 256)

Woolf is generally right about a great writer not laying emphasis "upon sex one way or the other." But because *Men Without Women*, as well as much of the rest of Hemingway's oeuvre, so clearly lays bare his personal struggle precisely with the challenge of how to omit any emphasis "upon sex one way or the other," we must consider Woolf's valid observation less as the critique she meant it to be and more as a cue for us to consider whether he was able to transcend his "dangerous" emphasis on sex to create art. If we can determine that by leaving the reader conscious of his or her sex, Hemingway reveals to us something transformative in his understanding of how men and women relate to one another, then we might judge that he has, rising to Woolf's challenge, succeeded. Hemingway did not intend for the title to warn women that this was a book only for men. In *Men Without Women*, Hemingway is speaking at least as much to women as he is to men, perhaps even more so, for not only does he desire the feminine influence, but he also needs women to listen as he tries to convince himself that he is a good man.

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"Italy 1927" was the first-published incarnation of Hemingway's March 1927 trip through Italy with his friend Guy Hickok, and appeared as a travelogue in the "Opinion" section of the May 18, 1927, issue of *The New Republic*. In *Men Without Women* it became "Che Ti Dice La Patria?," offering readers three sketches from the ten-day journey. In a May 27, 1927, letter to Perkins, Hemingway asks if he saw the piece in *The New Republic* and

wonders if it might be “advisable” to include it at the end of what would become *Men Without Women*. Hemingway tells Perkins that the sketches “were more on the story side than anything else” (SL 252). As Flora reminds us, “readers of “Italy 1927” had every right to assume that the narrator of the magazine piece is the writer with the byline, Ernest Hemingway. Readers of the story must confront the narrator differently”—it is certainly a difficult task (*Reading* 70). There is either much fiction in his travelogue, or much truth in his short story; either way, we struggle to disengage our perception of Hemingway himself, along with his personal baggage, in the car with Guy, from an otherwise nameless narrative voice. Hemingway’s “fame was clearly growing among the reading public” along with the acclaim for *The Sun Also Rises*, and rumors began to abound regarding his personal life (Baker, *Life* 181). In a February 5, 1927, letter to his mother, he advises her not to confuse his reputation with those of his characters in *Sun*, a book she found to be “unpleasant,” nor to believe everything she heard, especially not the “legends” about his drinking, which, according to Hemingway, “are tacked on everyone that ever wrote about people who drink” (SL 244). In the aforementioned February 19, 1927, letter to Perkins, Hemingway details his increasing concern with the media’s circulation of inaccuracies regarding both his war service and his biography in general, and how it all might make him seem “a liar or a fool” (SL 247). Given these realities, it is plausible to think that Hemingway, not unlike O’Brien, purposefully strove to conflate fact, truth, and fiction when he published both “Italy 1927” and “Che Ti Dice La Patria?” It is also highly probable that because at the time of the publication of *Men Without Women* news of Hemingway having abandoned Hadley for Pauline had been widely disseminated, many readers would have been inclined to read biographically.

When Hemingway traveled to Fossalta di Piave, Italy, with his new wife Hadley Richardson Hemingway in the summer of 1922, he wanted to show her where he had served during World War I, even the precise location where he had lost a very good friend. The experience was not what he expected, however, and in a July 22, 1922, article for *The Toronto Daily Star* titled “A Veteran Visits the Old Front, Wishes He Had Stayed Away,” he writes:

I had tried to recreate something for my wife and had failed utterly...If you have pictures in your head...do not try to go back to verify them...The change in everything and the supreme, deadly, lonely dullness, the smooth green of the fields that were once torn up with shell holes and slashed with trenches and wire, will combine against you and make you believe that the places and happenings that had been the really great events to you were only fever dreams or lies you had told yourself. The past was as dead as a busted Victrola record. Chasing yesterdays is a bum show—if you have to prove it, go back to your old front. (*Dateline* 233)

With its real-life antecedent having occurred five years after Hemingway’s initial, unfulfilling return to the front, the trip to Italy depicted in “Che Ti Dice La Patria?” also invokes regret for its narrator who, if we read this narrator as a shadow of Hemingway, wrestles with the guilt of having utterly failed the same wife in a different way by leaving their marriage in ruins. Hemingway had fallen in love with Pauline Pfeiffer while still married to Hadley, and his apparently reluctant return to Italy was motivated in part by the need to secure his “Catholic credentials” by proof of baptism in order to marry Pauline in the Church (Meyers, *Biography* 194).<sup>14</sup> Marisa Anne Pagnattaro suggests that the trip forced Hemingway “to come to terms with the implicit hypocrisy of this act,” and that his experience with those emotions colored his writing in the story (37). The past as Hemingway remembered it might be dead, but the implications it has for him in the present are not.

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<sup>14</sup> Hemingway and Pfeiffer were married May 10, 1927.

Even if we resist the urge to place Hemingway as a character in the story, guilt and a sense of loss still temper the narrative reflections. Although Pauline referred to Hemingway and Guy's trip as "the Italian tour for the promotion of masculine society," the mood in the story is one of a somewhat thwarted bachelor's escapade, a warning against men being *without* women (Baker, *Life* 183). The absence of a female companion, or any mention of a female lover, coupled with the images of tension and constraint that open the story make us aware of the underlying pain and emotional turmoil beneath the narrator's casual exterior. In the first sketch in the story, as the car passes outside the villages, the narrator describes how "the fields were brown and the vines coarse and thick," and how the growth of the pear tree was restricted, its branches "candelabraed against the white walls" (56). Even signs of life convey stagnancy and death. The narrator notices that "the pear trees had been sprayed, and the walls of the house were stained a metallic blue-green by the spray vapor" (56). It is spring, but nothing is verdant. To protect the trees from pestilence, someone has sprayed them with a visible toxic film—there is no escape from some degree of poison and harm, only the means of transmission differ. When a young Fascist approaches the narrator's car, the narrator warns him that it will be uncomfortable, but the man does not care and instead climbs onto the running board and hoists "his right arm through the open window" (57). He does not quite take advantage of the narrator and Guy, but he treats them as his inferiors, first by *telling* them he will ride with them rather than asking, and then by putting "a parcel through the window" and demanding, "Look after this" (58). The narrator's earlier warning to the young man that the ride might be uncomfortable is also caution to himself for the journey ahead. When they finally stop the car to let him off, he "utter[s] the lowest form of 'thanks'" in Italian, and is "too dignified to reply" as the narrator waves his hand as a

farewell gesture (58). The story is often recognized as one of the more overtly political pieces in Hemingway's oeuvre, and there is humor in the narrator's portrayal, both here and elsewhere in the story, of the self-serving fascist attitude in Mussolini's Italy. Carlos Baker considers Hemingway's depiction of the effects of Fascism on the country and its people to be "derisory in tone" (*Writer as Artist* 184). The humor also functions to distract the narrator from his own uneasiness. The lack of respect that the young man shows him by ignoring his wave mirrors the lingering uncertainty and lack of respect the narrator has for himself because of the choices he has made in his life.

In "A Meal in Spezia," the second section of the story, the narrator and Guy choose one restaurant over another because "a woman standing in the doorway of one smiled at [them]" (59). The presence of a woman is an influential one for the two men. They are amused when they realize the place is a brothel, and that the woman who takes their order "wore nothing under her house dress" (59). Hemingway makes a political jab when Guy asks the narrator if he has to let the woman put her arm around his neck, and the narrator responds, "Certainly...Mussolini has abolished the brothels. This is a restaurant" (60). The narrator's effort at levity when he remarks to Guy, "Well...you wanted to eat someplace simple," and then Guy's response, "This isn't simple. This is complicated," together further the reader's understanding that things are misunderstood, and nothing is quite what it appears (59). The irony in Guy's statement is that the business of the brothel *is* simple—eat, pay for the services, and leave—it is everything else that is complicated. The narrator and Guy speak English, but when the girl mistakes it for German, the narrator goes along with it, specifying that they are "South Germans...a gentle, lovable people" (60). The girl then claims to speak German, though moments earlier she had mistaken English for German.

Flora reminds us that the Germans had been a “formidable foe” of the Italians in the Great War, making the narrator’s claim to be South German a conscious point about the deceptive nature of appearances and the frequent inability to distinguish between friend and foe (*Reading* 75). Miscommunication dominates the exchange in the restaurant as the narrator translates for Guy, who does not speak Italian. When the narrator tells the girl that Guy “is a misogynist...an old German misogynist,” she unknowingly replies, “Tell him I love him” (60). Language is a barrier, as is the understanding of what particular words mean, and the narrator amuses himself by taking advantage of the situation. In an effort to influence their perception of her, the girl—who, as Flora notes, “intrudes on their space as determinedly as had the young Fascist”—“smiled better on one side than on the other and turned the good side toward them” (74, 60). When the narrator asks what she has for dessert, she offers them bananas, which introduces sexual innuendo and the idea of multiple means and uses for a banana. When they ask for the bill, the girl tries to convince them to stay, but a man at another table, likely her pimp, tells her, “Don’t bother to talk with these two. I tell you they are worth nothing” (62). Moments later, when Guy and the narrator prepare to drive away, the narrator waves to the girl who now stands in the doorway. Like the young Fascist before her, “she did not wave, but stood there looking after [them]” (62). Again, as with the ignored hand wave goodbye in the first sketch, the narrator presents us with a scene that, while tinged with humor, involves others denigrating him, reinforcing the perception that he too questions his self worth. Things are not quite what they seem. The narrator and Guy are not the paying customers that the brothel staff first took them to be, nor is the brothel quite the restaurant that the narrator and Guy expected. As he stands up to leave, the narrator notices a “property sailor...with his head in his hands. No one had spoken to him all the time [they]

were at lunch” (62). This image of sadness and despair sets the tone for their dining experience in the next, final sketch of the story, and reminds us that the confusion and banter in the brothel was a distraction from the awareness of despair on the part of the narrator.

“After the Rain” is the final sketch in the story, and the title alone suggests a redemptive or baptismal quality to the travelers’ experience. What was previously dust on the roads is now “liquid mud”; “there was a big sea running and waves broke and the wind blew the spray against the car” (62). The narrator observes “a river-bed that, when [they] had passed, going into Italy, had been wide, stony and dry, was running brown, and up to the banks” (62-3). Reminiscent of the first sketch, the lack of fecundity connotes a sense of contamination and loss: “The brown water discolored the sea and as the waves thinned and cleared in breaking, the light came through the yellow water and the crests, detached by the wind, blew across the road” (63). The narrator’s description of the landscape reminds the reader of the Ebro River from “Hills Like White Elephants,” an earlier story in *Men Without Women* in which a couple discusses whether or not the woman will have an abortion, though the word *abortion* is never mentioned. In “Hills,” the man presses the woman to have the abortion so that the two of them, and especially he, might continue to enjoy their own adventurous lives. The brown water in “Che” suggests a figurative abortion of an old life, and, if we consider what Mark Ott calls Hemingway’s “autobiographical stew,” the sluicing of his attachment to his previous wife, Hadley (22). In a biblical context, which is in keeping with the baptismal evocation in the title, the figurative death that precedes rebirth requires the born-again Christian to reject a former life of sin for one of righteousness. For Hemingway, this would have meant a spiritual regeneration that absolved him from the sin of adultery and, because he was marrying a Catholic, divorce. Hemingway would have to accept not only the

death of his marriage to Hadley, whom he still claimed to love, but also the washing away of his remorse and regret, in order to have a new life with Pauline. The narrator envisions a cleansing wind, a new arrival after the rain that will detach from him the tempestuousness and turbulence signified by the crests. But because the crests “blow across the road,” and because he must drive along the road, the narrator cannot seem to rid himself completely of the guilt and complicity he feels for his role in creating the stormy crests.

When the narrator tries to clean his wind-shield after “a sheet of muddy water rose up” to hit it, the motion of the wipers only serves to exacerbate the problem by “spreading the film over the glass” (63). The feminine force of Mother Nature mocks his semblance of protection from her winds of change by muddying his wind-shield; later in the story, she blows in “through the crack in the wind-shield” (64). Ott identifies the clarifying effect of the wind as a pattern in Hemingway’s stories, as well as “the clarifying masculine companionship of Bill [of “The Three Day Blow”] and Guy” (22). Ott is right that both the wind and Guy’s company attempt to “cleanse [the narrator] of tragic emotions,” but the wind is a feminine element in this story. When the two men stop to eat lunch, they can see their breath in the uncomfortable cold of the restaurant and it forces them to keep their “hats and coats on” (63). The reader is again reminded of “Hills” with the narrator’s description of a man and a woman who “sat at the far end of the restaurant. He was middle-aged and she was young and wore black. All during the meal she would blow out her breath in the cold damp air. The man would look at it and shake his head. They ate without talking and the man held her hand under the table. She was good-looking and they seemed very sad. They had a travelling-bag with them” (63). The cold damp air, the visibility of the breath, and the couple’s silence convey a sense of life suspended. The baggage suggests an emotional

weight that the travelers bear. Even though the man shakes his head in what amounts to a rejection or lack of desire for her breath, a symbol of what her body and spirit can offer him, he still has love and affection for her, but must now sublimate it, holding hands under the table, as they—or at least he—prepare(s) to travel onward.

The narrator and Guy have left the restaurant and are driving beyond the town when “the wind struck the car and nearly tipped it over” (63). Guy remarks, “It’s good it blows us away from the sea,” and the narrator responds, “Well...they drowned Shelley somewhere along here” (63). “Away from the sea” would mean away from the tempest, but the narrator worries that he cannot escape the turmoil he has created in his life, and instead thinks of Shelley, whom some believed was drowned for being an infidel. Guy then asks, “Do you remember what we came to this country for?” and the narrator replies, “Yes...but we didn’t get it” (64). If the masculine trip was meant to be a recuperative balm for traumas provoked by feminine influences, it was not successful. Instead, the narrator and Guy find themselves buffeted about by the wind and disrespected by the Italian people. The narrator might be without women in the physical sense, but not in the mental or spiritual sense. Guilt and unease over how to be a good man to both the woman in his past and to the woman in his future—not the rejection of women altogether—dominate his thoughts. The third and final Fascist they encounter is a policeman riding a bicycle and carrying a revolver. He stops Guy and the narrator and fines them for having a dirty identification number on their car, even though it is legible. He spits on the road and tells the narrator, “Your car is dirty and you are dirty too” (65). The implication is that the narrator is responsible for having sullied himself, just as Hemingway thought he had done to himself by abandoning Hadley for Pauline. The narrator is defenseless against the corrupt policeman who doubles the fine in order to put half

in his own pocket, and likely internalizes the man's castigating comments because they are so reflective of what he already fears about himself. The encounter is also humorous, as if to deflect from both the narrator's lack of power or control and his underlying anxiety and self-doubt over the choices he has made.

"Che Ti Dice La Patria" translates as "What is the country saying to you?" and reflects a patriotic slogan of Gabriele D'Annunzio, a writer, political figure, and military hero of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The story ends with this line: "Naturally, in such a short trip, we had no opportunity to see how things were with the country or the people" (65). The irony is twofold. The trip might have been short, but clearly Guy and the narrator know that the people are vulgar, disrespectful, and self-serving, and that the country is saying, "You are not welcome here." This must have proved particularly troubling for Hemingway, who was at a personal crossroads on his trip to Italy in 1927. He was serving the Italian army when he was wounded, a defining life experience for anyone, and it would have pained him to find Italy this way. The second irony is that trying "to see how things were with the country or the people" *isn't* why they took the trip. Ott inaccurately argues that "time away from the softening feminine influences...reinforces [the narrator's] emotional independence" (22). While we might imagine that the narrator originally set out on the journey to find emotional independence, what he instead encounters is uncertainty and regret about his own role in the relationships in his life, as well as the realization that despite the pain, men without women—like Italy without democracy—is not a desirable state.

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Writer and Marine Corp veteran Andre Dubus considered Hemingway's "In Another Country" to be one of his "favorite stories written by anyone" (*Meditations* 46). The story is set *in* Milan in a wartime hospital, where a young American soldier—the narrator, and an Italian major go each day to use the machines that a doctor assures them will heal their injuries. The right hand of the major, who had been Italy's greatest fencer, is "little...like a baby's" and the fingers are stiff and shriveled (34). The narrator, once a football star, has a leg that "drop[s] straight from the knee to the ankle without a calf," and a knee that does "not bend" (34). Both men are isolated and at war with themselves. At one point, the major angrily tells the narrator that he is a fool to hope to be married someday, and then in the next scene we learn that the major has lost his wife to pneumonia. The men in this story are without women, but not because they want to be. In an essay titled "A Hemingway Story" from Dubus's *Meditations from a Moveable Chair*, Dubus writes about his personal challenge to decipher the story's elusive meaning. For a long while, thinking of the young man in the story who has a black silk handkerchief covering his face where his nose used to be, he judged the story to be about "the futility of cures" (46). Then one day Dubus went with Kurt Vonnegut, who at the time was his neighbor and colleague at the University of Iowa, to pick up Ralph Ellison at the airport. After his visit with Ellison, and after semesters' worth of insight from his students, Dubus began to recognize the story as being less about the futility of cures and more about "what it is that the physical curing cannot touch" (51). When Dubus mentioned his passion for "In Another Country" to Ellison, Ellison, "moved by remembrance," had recited the story's entire first paragraph:

In the fall the war was always there, but we did not go to it any more. It was cold in the fall in Milan and the dark came very early. Then the electric lights came on, and it was pleasant along the streets looking in the windows. There was much game hanging outside the shops, and the snow powdered in

the fur of the foxes and the wind blew their tails. The deer hung stiff and heavy and empty, and small birds blew in the wind and the wind turned their feathers. It was a cold fall and the wind came down from the mountains. (33)

This is Hemingway's liltily beautiful prose at its finest, and certainly Dubus and Ellison were right—it is a passage to be read, re-read, and read again. Hemingway was rather fond of the story too, having written Scott in November of 1926 to say that he had enjoyed “a grand spell of working,” and produced “a hell of a good story about Milan during the war” (*SL* 231). The fall season coupled with the images of cold and wind and light are vintage Hemingway. In *A Moveable Feast*, he wrote: "You expected to be sad in the fall. Part of you died each year when the leaves fell from the trees and their branches were bare against the wind and the cold, wintery light. But you knew there would always be the spring, as you knew the river would flow again after it was frozen" (39). The fall in “In Another Country” seems to be especially cold, and perhaps temporarily eclipses the narrator's and the major's faith that eventually the pain will subside and spring will arrive.

The men walk to the hospital at dusk, and while there are several ways to go, “always...you crossed a bridge across a canal to enter the hospital” (33). There is distance and isolation to overcome in their journey toward a cure. Hemingway contrasts the “electric light” of the opening paragraph with the natural warmth that emanates from the “charcoal fire” of a woman selling chestnuts on the bridge. The feminine influence is restorative, as the woman offers more than short-term comfort from the cold—“the chestnuts were warm in your pocket afterward” (33). The contrast between the falseness of electric light and the authentic warming of the woman's fire prepares us to mistrust the machines that are meant to repair the men's injured limbs. The doctor, an avid believer in the machines, asks the narrator, "What did you like best to do before the war? Did you practice a sport?" When the

narrator answers “football,” the doctor replies, “Good...You will be able to play football again better than ever” (33-4). But we doubt the doctor’s assurances, for the narrator’s knee is wounded, and “the machine was to bend the knee and make it move as riding a tricycle. But it did not bend yet, and instead the machine lurched when it came to the bending part” (34). The narrator does not respond to the doctor’s promise that he will play football again because what the doctor fails to understand is that “before the war” was a lifetime ago for the young man; he is different now and what he might “like best to do” is uncertain. The narrator recognizes that even if his knee returns to normal, he will not. Peter Halter considers the men to be “passively determined by [the war], and all that remains is to try to face what it has made, and is still making, of them” (526). The major, like Colonel Cantwell in *Across the River and Into the Trees*, suffers an injured hand. The major jests with the doctor by asking if he too will be a football star after the treatment. The doctor then shows the major “a photograph which showed a hand that had been withered almost as small as the major’s, before it had taken a machine course, and after was a little larger” (34). The major tells the doctor that the photograph is “very interesting, very interesting” but that he still has no confidence in “the machines that were to make so much difference” (34, 33). Still, the major continues to come to the hospital every day. At the end of the story we learn that the major had waited to marry “until he was definitely invalidated out of the war” (38). When his young wife grew sick with pneumonia, he continued going to the hospital in part out of desperation, and because it was the only thing he could do.

The narrator—who might be Nick Adams<sup>15</sup>—regularly walks home from the hospital with a group of other young soldiers, and they all have to endure shouts of contempt from the townspeople who “hated [them] because [they] were officers” (34). The most severely

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<sup>15</sup> See Joseph M. Flora’s *Hemingway’s Nick Adams*.

injured of the group “wore a black silk handkerchief across his face because he had no nose then...They rebuilt his face, but he came from a very old family and they could never get the nose exactly right. He went to South America and worked in a bank” (35). The narrator then tells us: “But this was a long time ago, and then we did not any of us know how it was going to be afterward. We only knew then that there was always the war, but that we were not going to it any more” (35). The narrator wants us to appreciate the advantage of retrospection, and to understand that at the time when the story takes place, what might have happened in the future and how injuries might have healed could be difficult to imagine. The only thing the men do know is that “there was always the war,” and the narrator seems to suggest that because of the war’s devastating effects, that was all they were capable of knowing. And because, until the narrator reveals that this story first took place “a long time ago” we easily could have assumed otherwise, we are left with the impression that these wartime experiences are an ever-present and indelible aspect of the narrator’s character. “We were all a little detached,” he tells the reader, “and there was nothing that held us together except that we met every afternoon at the hospital” (35). The narrator thinks that the “people who disliked” him and his friends “did not understand” the things that had happened to them at war (35). This lack of comprehension on the part of the people, however, is in contrast with what the men understand about the Cova, “where it was rich and warm and not too brightly lighted, and noisy and smoky at certain hours, and there were always girls at the tables and the illustrated papers on a rack on the wall” (35). Again the presence of women and their feminine influence provide the men with warmth, and an oasis from their hopelessness and detachment. There is light, yet also enough darkness to allow their injuries and deformities to go unnoticed. The men might not understand how the machines work, but

they do understand the healing effects of human contact. Male camaraderie might provide friendship and models for endurance, but connection with a woman is what these men gravitate toward for spiritual healing.

The narrator grapples with the divide between truth and appearances. When the other officers ask the narrator what he did to receive his medals, he “showed them the papers, which were written in very beautiful language and full of *fratellanza* and *abnegazione*, but which really said, with the adjectives removed, that [he] had been given the medals because [he] was an American” (35-6). The other men “had done very different things to get their medals,” and the narrator admits: “I knew that I would never have done such things, and I was very much afraid to die, and often lay in bed at night by myself, afraid to die and wondering how I would be when back to the front again” (36). Similar to O’Brien’s narrator in *The Things They Carried*, he feels isolated from the group because he is not a “hawk,” “although [he] might seem like a hawk to those who had never hunted” (36). He avoids any confusion over performance or appearances by not believing in bravery at all. The major believes the machines are an “idiotic idea,” but he still comes every day for treatment. He helps the narrator with his study of Italian grammar because it is a finite thing with specific rules and it affords him a modicum of control. The focus on grammar, however, lends a false quality to what had previously been smooth conversation between the major and the narrator. The major uses the grammar lessons to protect and distance himself from meaningful dialogue with the narrator, who finds the language that was once easy for him is now “difficult,” leaving him “afraid to talk to [the major] until [he] had the grammar straight in [his] mind” (36). When the major learns that the narrator has failed to learn his grammar, he loses his patience, and tells the narrator that he is “a stupid impossible disgrace, and he was a

fool to have bothered with [him]" (37). The major then demands to know what the narrator will do "when the war is over if it is over," and explodes with frustration when the narrator says that he hopes to be married:

"Why must not a man marry?"

"He cannot marry. He cannot marry," he said angrily. "If he is to lose everything, he should not place himself in a position to lose that. He should not place himself in a position to lose. He should find things he cannot lose." He spoke very angrily and bitterly, and looked straight ahead while he talked.

"But why should he necessarily lose it?"

"He'll lose it," the major said. He was looking at the wall. Then he looked down at the machine and jerked his little hand out from between the straps and slapped it hard against his thigh. "He'll lose it," he almost shouted. "Don't argue with me!" Then he called to the attendant who ran the machines. "Come and turn this damned thing off." (37)

What neither the narrator nor the first-time reader realize at this point is that the major is about to be told he has lost his wife to pneumonia. His rage stems from the enormous pain he must bear with the loss of the woman he loves. His visit to the hospital each day is an act of hope, despite his profession of disbelief in the machines; he cannot give up hope that his wife will live, and she is the cure he believes in. The narrator, beset with his own doubts and fears, also has hope that a woman can save him.

When the irate major steps away from the machines, he goes "back into the other room for light and massage therapies and the narrator hears him ask to use the doctor's telephone" (37). Not yet aware that his wife is dead, he is calling to check on her.

Hemingway again associates a man's desire for the therapeutic qualities of light and human touch with a woman. When the major returns from the other room, he pats the narrator on the shoulder and says:

"I am so sorry....I would not be rude. My wife has just died. You must forgive me."

"Oh—" I said, feeling sick for him. "I am *so* sorry."

He stood there biting his lower lip. "It is very difficult," he said. "I

cannot resign myself.”

He looked straight past me and out through the window. Then he began to cry. “I am utterly unable to resign myself,” he said and choked. And then crying, his head up looking at nothing, carrying himself straight and soldierly, with tears on both his cheeks and biting his lips, he walked past the machines and out the door. (38)

The juxtaposition of the words *soldierly* and *crying* is significant; Hemingway makes it clear that tears do not dispossess the major of his masculine, soldierly attributes. In this most excruciating moment of grief, the major’s ability to experience rather than resist emotion, and to resist isolation by reaching out to physically touch the narrator, is a show of human strength. Even though the major now seems to be a man without a woman, he isn’t really without her. Her death has supernaturally heightened his awareness of his love for her (and what we imagine is her love for him), making his connection with her an enabling force behind his newfound strength.

Hemingway does not leave the reader with the promise that the major will endure, but with the hope that he might. When the major returns to the hospital after a three-day absence, he wears “a black band on the sleeve of his uniform” (38). Now hanging from the walls of the hospital “were large framed photographs...of all sorts of wounds before and after they had been cured by the machines. In front of the machine the major used were three photographs of hands like his that were completely restored” (38). The narrator tells us that he does not know where the doctor found the pictures, as he had “always understood [they] were the first to use the machines” (38). Faith, hope, and the miraculous nature of cures are inexplicable, too. The major’s return to the hospital and the machines signals not a faith in the promise of the machines themselves, but a faith in the existence of some moment beyond the present one when the pain will be less—ultimately he has faith in his own capacity to

endure. The story ends with the major, indifferent to the photographs, “look[ing] out of the window” (38).

In his meditation on “In Another Country,” Dubus warns us that “to view human suffering as an abstraction, as a statement about how plucky we all are, is to blow air through brass while boys and girls march in parade off to war” (155). While faith might redeem us in the end, we must honor the reality of the suffering, and not allow the dignity with which we might endure to suggest that somehow the pain does not exist. His “looking out the window” signals his detachment from his surroundings—a temporary fix for pain. For the major, his life is there, but not in the same way anymore. At least for now, he must simply keep on keeping on. James Phelan asserts that “the ethical basis of ‘In Another Country’ is firmly rooted in love and courage, and despite its emphasis on loss, the heroic figure of the major gives it the most positive view of human possibility in all of *Men Without Women*” (*New Essays* 68).

Dubus would likely agree with Phelan. Dubus, like both Hemingway and the narrator in “In Another Country,” suffered a bad leg, his from a near-fatal car accident that left him in a wheel chair. In “A Hemingway Story,” he writes: “because of my own five years of agony, of sleeping at night and in my dreams walking on two legs, then waking each morning to being crippled, of praying and willing myself out of bed to confront the day, of having to learn a new way to live after living nearly fifty years with a whole body—then, because of all this, I saw something I had never seen in [“In Another Country”]”(57). What Dubus finally recognizes is that the story is one about healing, and his revelation is powerful:

The major keeps going to the machines. And he doesn't believe in them. But he gets out of his bed in the morning...He puts on his uniform. He leaves the place where he lives. He walks to the hospital, and sits at the machines. Every one of those actions is a movement away from suicide. Away from

despair. Look at him. Three days after his wife has died, he is in motion. He is sad. He will not get over this. And he will get over this. His hand won't be cured, but someday he will meet another woman. And he will love her. Because he is alive. (58)

Dubus wonders if Hemingway ever saw this in the story, and although we too might care to know, it does not matter. Healing is what the story is about.

\* \* \*

In “A Canary for One” a man is without a woman, but Hemingway also gives us women without men. In the story, an American lady who is traveling alone on a rapide train bound for Paris shares a compartment car and conversation with the narrator and his wife. The American lady is bringing home a canary that she purchased in Palermo in an effort to console her daughter, who remains distraught after her mother forced her to separate from the Swiss man she loved. As the train draws closer to Paris, a wreck alongside the tracks parallels the mess the lady has made of both her daughter's and likely her own life, and foreshadows the narrator's disclosure in the final line of the story that he and his wife are preparing to set up separate residences. Hemingway wrote “Canary” in September 1926; he and Hadley had separated in August after their train ride home from the Riviera, and the story is widely accepted as a fictional rendering of the end of their final trip together as husband and wife. Also in September, Pauline left Paris for her parents' home in Piggott, Arkansas, to begin the period of 100 days apart from Hemingway that Hadley had requested. Hilary Justice points to the late summer and early fall of 1926 as an “early personal nadir” for Hemingway that he then began to chronicle in his fiction (65). Justice also smartly

frames our perspective on this “quasi-autobiographical story” by reminding us that we know more today than Hemingway did when he wrote the story:

“He did not know how his personal love triangle would resolve (with his divorce from Hadley and his marriage to Pauline), or that he would marry a total of four times (with nary a month between each divorce and wedding), or, finally, that his reputation as a womanizing misogynist would, in some circles, outstrip his reputation as a writer” (67). Because at the time Hemingway wrote the story he did not, in fact, know that Pauline would return from Arkansas to marry him, Justice urges us to consider “Canary” as a story not only about his guilt over losing Hadley, but also about his fear that he might lose Pauline as well—if she did not return, he would have “risked everything for nothing” (Justice 69). If Hemingway’s letters are any evidence, then Justice is right. In a November 18, 1926, letter to Hadley, Hemingway conveys a considerable depth of apparently genuine affection for Hadley. He expresses remorse and sadness for how things transpired, as well as eternal appreciation for her love and support:

I would have never written any of them In Our Time, Torrents or The Sun if I had not married you and had your loyal and self-sacrificing and always stimulating and loving—and actual cash support backing...I won’t tell you how I admire your straight thinking, your head, your heart and your very lovely hands and I pray God always that he will make up to you the very great hurt that I have done you—who are the best and truest and loveliest person that I have ever known. (SL 228)

In keeping with Justice’s analysis that Hemingway feared he might lose both women, the somewhat heartrending tone of this letter to Hadley contrasts the anxious, self-conscious and codependent tone of the letter he wrote six days prior, on November 12, to Pauline. In the letter to Pauline, Hemingway seems helpless in his fear that he and she are “being smashed” by the distance of their geographies. He writes:

All I can think is that you that are all I have and that I love more than all that is and have given up everything for and betrayed everything for and killed off everything for are being destroyed and...that I can't do anything about it because you won't let me...I had just straight lonesomeness and waiting for you...the time goes so slowly and so horribly and so flatly that I feel as though I would have to scream out...maybe we'll come through and maybe and maybe and maybe and maybe. (*SL* 220-2)

Hemingway also had to worry about the disapproval from Pauline's mother, a devout Catholic, who had strong feelings regarding his mistreatment of Hadley. While the reasons and circumstances might be complex and his motivations not always admirable, Hemingway did not want to be a man without a woman.

The narrator's end-of-story revelation about the break-up of his marriage all but forces the reader to re-read the story, and, as Justice puts it, "to relive the experience with excruciating awareness, just as [Hemingway] did while writing" (74). The element of emotional catastrophe that might have rested somewhat subterraneanly on a first read, is writ large on a second read. In the opening paragraph, the narrator's description of the landscape is a metaphor for his predicament: "The train passed very quickly a long, red stone house with a garden and four thick palm-trees with tables under them in the shade. On the other side was the sea. Then there was a cutting through red stone and clay, and the sea was only occasionally and far below against rocks" (103). The rapid, ceaseless movement of the train mirrors the sensation the narrator must feel because the things he has set in motion are now utterly out of his control. The open sea, visible only intermittently, is out of reach, and overwhelmed by a section of earth cut near to its core. The narrator has little hope for relief, either emotional or physical, from the confinement of the lit salon compartment. The train is already "very hot" and "there was no breeze...through the open window" when the American lady "pull[s] the window-blind down," leaving "no more sea, even occasionally" (103). This

act of closing off the view of the open sea or any hope-filled glimpse at the horizon, signals her habit of inhibiting access to possible happiness, as she does with her daughter. With regard to the narrator and his wife, Ott observes that, “without the wind, they dwell in their unhappiness, still united in the poisoned emotions of their marriage” (22). The American lady is confident of her authority in many areas, not just with closing the window, and seems to announce to the compartment—for at this point in the story we do not yet know that she is speaking to the narrator and his wife—that the canary she travels with was bought in Palermo from a man who “wanted to be paid in dollars” (103). This fact is important to her because it validates her perception that American things are of superior worth and value. If the canary in the story is indeed yellow, though we cannot know for sure, and given that canaries have been bred in captivity as far back as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Hemingway might have been aware that the yellow color in the domestic canary is produced by a breeding mutation that suppresses the dull-greenish color found on wild canaries. The suppression of the characteristic that distinguishes the *wild* bird is symbolic for what the American lady is attempting to subdue in her daughter. She is bringing this bird home to her daughter as a substitute for the foreign lover that she has forbid her from having. Just as she suppresses the narrator’s view of the sea, she chooses a caged animal in an effort to mollify her daughter’s discontent over the suppression of her love. She recognizes that the canary “loves the sun,” but cannot seem to appreciate the love that her daughter, whom she refers to as “her little girl,” might have for the Swiss engineer student (105).

The narrator is looking back on his marriage, just as he looks back at the harbor when the train leaves the station; he recognizes that the safety of the love he once enjoyed is vanishing behind him, like “the last of the sun on the water” (104). Although the three

travelers are confined together, they are still isolated from one another, and the narrator already understands that he is without his wife. Hemingway would have felt compelled to suppress his guilt and shame over destroying his marriage to Hadley, as well as his simultaneous desire to be now with Pauline. As evening falls in the story, “the train passed a farmhouse burning in a field. Motor-cars were stopped along the road and bedding and things from inside the farmhouse were spread in the field. Many people were watching the house burn” (104). The fire suggests the uncontrollable razing of everything that once was in a happy home, with the most intimate of possessions strewn about as spectacle for passersby. Justice focuses on the noun *bedding* as it “connotes the related verb and invokes the iconographic marriage bed and the manner in which it was defiled” (68). Hemingway certainly was conscious that Hadley and Pauline would read this story, and likely he hoped they would choose to “listen” to the guilt and indignity the narrator bears for wreaking disaster on their lives. Shame and failure for having failed to prevent the havoc are implicit in the public display. The train races by the conflagration and there is nothing the narrator can do but watch it burning in the distance. In a letter to Scott written from Paris on September 7, 1926, Hemingway mentions that he and Hadley are “still” living apart: “Our life is all gone to hell which seems to be the one thing you can count on a good life to do. Needless to say Hadley has been grand and everything has been completely my fault in every way. That’s the truth, not a polite gesture” (SL 217). While Hemingway does show guilt and regret both in his letter and in the story, some readers might consider his praise of Hadley to be self-serving. Surely it is easier for him to take the blame and call her a heroine than work to prove the love he claims to have for her by staying in the marriage and finding a way to unscramble the mess he has made of his life. Inasmuch as “Canary” is autobiographical

despite also being fictional, Hemingway makes a major omission in the story—he plans to be with a different woman, not without one.

If the act of listening can heal, failure to listen as Hemingway depicts it can threaten ruin. When the train stops briefly in a station at Marseilles, the American lady, because she is “a little deaf,” lingers on the platform near the train car steps. Back in Cannes she had nearly missed reboarding, and “she was afraid that perhaps signals of departure were given and that she did not hear them” (103). Trapped in the compartment like the canary in its cage, the narrator is left to contemplate if he too suffers some sort of perceptive disadvantage in missing the signals of his marital demise. When he reveals that “for several minutes [he] had not listened to the American lady, who was talking to [his] wife,” the reader wonders how often during his marriage he might have also failed to listen to his wife. He tunes out the women because he is busy with his own guilt, mentally “pecking into” himself as the canary did to its feathers (105). O’Brien’s narrator in *The Things They Carried* responds internally with anger toward the woman at the reading who failed to listen, but on the surface he remains calm, telling her that the story of the mutilated baby buffalo “*wasn’t* a war story. It was a *love* story” (85). This Hemingway narrator recognizes his failure to listen in his own life and he fans his guilt with the realization; he too remains calm, even indifferent, on the surface, and continues to listen to the American lady simply because there is no where else to go. When the American lady at first mistakes the narrator and his wife for being English rather than American, the narrator responds by saying, “Perhaps that was because I wore braces” (105). Then he tells the reader: “I had started to say suspenders and changed it to braces in the mouth, to keep my English character. The American lady did not hear” (105). The narrator accepts this moment, albeit slight, in the comfort of a false identity. His

willingness to dissemble the American lady's perception of him then becomes ironic when she declares with delight, "I'm so glad you're Americans. American men make the best husbands" (105). Both he and his wife are painfully aware that he has not been a good husband. Another factor in the narrator's impulse to be considered of a different nationality, and one also supported by Justice, is that "Hemingway may have felt that his voluntary expatriation rendered him 'foreign' to his friends from the United States; certainly, his experiences with (or at least witnessing of) the wild side of Paris, the Montparnasse of the Jazz Age, alienated him in his own mind from Oak Park" (Justice 73). Hemingway never disavowed that he was an American, but he also was not always confident it was something of which to be proud. Justice suggests that this perception of self on the part of Hemingway is not so easy "to pinpoint biographically," and yet a September 1926 letter to Sherwood Anderson lends credence to Justice's view, and to the similar intuition I experienced on this topic before reading Justice (73). In the letter to Anderson, Hemingway refers to how "Americans are always in America—no matter whether they call it Paris or Paname)" (*SL* 218). When the American lady asserts her belief that "no foreigner can make an American girl a good husband," the narrator's wife replies "No...I suppose not" (106). The wife's assent is indirect and has the effect of a double negative, hinting that her agreement with the American lady's comment is complex and not straightforward, and, also, a reality in her own life to which she has reluctantly resigned herself.

The American lady keeps talking throughout the duration of the train ride, informing them that her daughter had fallen "simply madly in love" with a man from Vevey, but that she, the mother, forbid the relationship and "took her away, of course" (105). The daughter, who is to be the recipient of the canary, still is not over the loss after two years, but the

American lady remains confident that she did the right thing. It was a “very good friend” who had shared the advice about foreigners being unfit for marriage to American girls. The American lady had believed the friend; she could not have her daughter “marrying a foreigner” (106). Yet given her failure in the story to accurately hear the departure signal or the narrator or his wife, we cannot help but wonder if she heard her friend correctly, and if perhaps the forced unhappiness of her daughter is all the result of a misunderstanding from a failure to listen. The American lady claims to have “tried so very hard” to console her daughter, but she also failed truly to listen to her, refusing to grant what her daughter desired most. Her deafness seems almost a physical manifestation of the fact that she thinks only of herself, and the narrator appears conscious that he too has been somehow deformed by his selfishness and his inability or refusal to listen. When his wife tells the American lady, who is herself without a husband, that she knows Vevey on account of having honeymooned there years ago, the American lady, not having heard the wife but a moment prior say that she was in Vevey the fall, asks, “Were you there in the fall?” (107). It does not much matter, however, when the honeymoon took place, for no amount of listening now can repair the damage that the narrator knows he has caused in the past.

It is shared regret and anxiety over the choices they have made—and continue to make—in their lives that keeps both the American lady and the narrator up at night. The young man from Vevey studied engineering, was from a “very good family,” and used to take her daughter on long walks” (107). She worries that she made the wrong choice, but there is not going back now, and she must live with the consequences. The narrator, in a similar mental predicament, must have been awake to know that “all night the train went very fast and the American lady lay awake and waited for a wreck” (104). The American lady

mentions that her daughter too was sleepless after her mother forced her loss of love. To some extent, the narrator identifies with both of these women. The inability to sleep was also a condition Hemingway knew well. In the September 1926 letter to Anderson, Hemingway writes of “living this side of the bughouse with the old insomnia” (*SL* 218). In the letter to Scott dated the same day, he reveals: “Still having been in hell now since around last Christmas with plenty of insomnia to light the way around so I could study the terrain I get sort of used to it and even fond of it and probably would take pleasure in showing people around. As we make our hell we certainly should like it” (*SL* 217). The narrator similarly realizes that he must accept and make the best of the circumstances he has created.

As the train draws closer to Paris, the American lady’s fear comes true when they pass “three cars that had been in a wreck. They were splintered open the roofs sagged in” (107). As the train speeds by the scene of the smash up, the narrator matter-of-factly says, “Look...There’s been a wreck” (107). The three damaged cars represent the three damaged lives in the compartment. Justice rightly underscores the story's dependence on specific images “of previously inviolate spaces burst open by catastrophe,” and calls our attention to how such dependence mirrors “Hemingway's own reliance, in his writing, on publishing (literally, making public) previously private matters; like the burning house, the daughter's engagement, and the wrecked train cars in the story, Hemingway's marriage (and possibly his love affair) had been cracked open and thus destroyed. Things once whole are now forever broken” (65). On the train’s approach to Gare de Lyons, the narrator draws his attention to the leveled fortifications and the grass that “had not grown” to fill the new space (106). The restaurant cars and the sleeping cars are “wooden” and “brown,” with no signs of life nearby (106). The narrator guesses at what might transpire later on the tracks, “if that train still left

at five,” and “if that were the way it were still done” (106). He is painfully aware that his situation will not improve, at least not right away, and he tries to come to terms with his uncertainty and sense of displacement.

When the travelers begin to disembark, the narrator hands “bags through the windows” of the train, the same windows that at the start of the story momentarily offered a glimpse of the sea. The guilt and pain he suffers for having ruined his marriage is the emotional baggage that will accompany him into the future. Expelled from the hot confines of the compartment and “out on the dim longness of the platform,” his “wife said good-by and [he] said good-by to the American lady” (107). A first-time reader of “Canary” receives what Flora calls an “emotional jolt” in the final sentences: “We followed the porter with the truck down the long cement platform beside the train. At the end was a gate and a man took the tickets. We were returning to Paris to set up separate residences” (*Reading* 122, 108). The veteran reader already understands what the separate good-bys to the American lady inferred—there really was no “we” anymore. In October 1926, the month after Hemingway wrote this story, *The Sun Also Rises* was published. These are the final lines of that first Hemingway novel:

“Oh, Jake,” Brett said, “we could have had such a damned good time together.”

Ahead was a mounted policeman in khaki directing traffic. He raised his baton. The car slowed suddenly pressing Brett against me.

“Yes,” I said. “Isn’t it pretty to think so?” (247)

Hemingway wrote “Canary” in September 1926 and while by November it had been accepted for publication in *Scribner’s Magazine*, it did not appear until the April 1927 issue. Near the end of the story, the wife, speaking with the American lady about her honeymoon in Vevey, muses that, “It *was* a very lovely place” [emphasis added] (107). Whether we think

only of the fictional fate of the narrator and the wife, or, if we also consider the significant biographical parallels for Hemingway and Hadley's relationship, it is hard not to recall those final lines from *Sun*. Love, though it might be lost, was once "a very lovely place"—"isn't it pretty to think so?" (*MWW* 107, *SAR* 247).

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"Very lovely" is probably the furthest thing from what any critic has said about "An Alpine Idyll." Written in the spring of 1926, it immediately follows "A Canary For One" in *Men Without Women*. When Hemingway first submitted the story to the editors of *Scribner's Magazine*, they rejected it, deeming it too shocking for their more refined readers. The revulsion on the part of critics is in response to the facial maiming of a corpse by a Swiss peasant who was unable to bring his wife's body down from the mountain for burial during the winter. The story takes place in May, and two Americans, a narrator and man named John, have returned from the mountains to the valley after a month of skiing. The men agree that the trip lasted too long, and they are relieved finally to reclaim the taste of both beer and civilization. But things are not so civil amongst the townspeople. On the way into the valley, the narrator and John pass a cemetery where a sexton and the peasant, Olz, are filling a grave with dirt. Later, the sexton and Olz end up at the same inn with the two Americans, and, after the Olz leaves, the narrator and John learn that he had just buried his wife. The sexton and an innkeeper who refers to the peasants as "beasts" tell the story of the man's inability to bring his wife's corpse down to the parrish sooner on account of the heavy snow, and how the peasant, waiting for the spring thaw, preserved his wife's body by freezing it in his shed. All winter the peasant went to the shed for wood, and while he worked he hung a

lantern from his wife's mouth, causing significant damage to her face. Hemingway eventually found publication in *American Caravan* in 1927, and the staff reviewer there deemed the story "a gruesome tale, written with great economy of detail" (*Critical Heritage* 214). The same year, Joseph W. Krutch of *Nation* focuses on the skiing portion of the story as the aspect that "makes the reader suddenly weary both physically and spiritually" (548). Twenty-five years after its initial publication, the grisly effect had not worn off, leading Edmund Wilson to point to "a detectable streak of morbidity" in the story, and to ask "How else can one explain 'An Alpine Idyll,' a relatively pointless tale?" (340). Richard Hovey relegates the story to the realm of the "grotesquerie," and Arthur Waldhorn joins him, regarding it as "a grotesque tale" (*Critical Heritage* 9, 37). Baker, while recognizing the "Chekov-like" quality of tale, also identifies an "inhuman lack of feeling" in the peasant's treatment of his wife, and suggests that the story reflects a taste "for the macabre" (*Life* 168). Yet if we heed Flora's advice, we recognize that "An Alpine Idyll" is a story "about perceiving stories," and we must therefore dismiss the disapproving critiques and instead align our critical eye with Hemingway's narrator, who "knows better than to accept conventional interpretation" (*Nick Adams* 208).

Critics who consider the peasant's disfiguring of his wife's corpse to be the grotesque element in "An Alpine Idyll" miss the meaning of the story. Hemingway had read Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925)—we can be sure he possessed a broad understanding of the grotesque. In an April 20, 1926 letter to Fitzgerald, Hemingway writes, "Have not seen Sherwood Anderson's note book<sup>16</sup> though I believe I should order it to get a lot of new ideas," and then, with regard to a draft for the *The*

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<sup>16</sup> *Sherwood Anderson's Notebook*, essays and sketches (1926).

*Sun Also Rises*: "I have tried to follow the outline and spirit of *The Great Gatsby*..." (SL 200-1). What destroys the characters in *The Great Gatsby*, and what makes them grotesques, is an obsession with the external and the material that deprives them of genuine connection with themselves, others, or the natural world. Nick Carraway, the narrator in *The Great Gatsby*, describes the emptiness that he imagines Jay Gatsby to suffer:

...he must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream. He must have looked up at an unfamiliar sky through frightening leaves and shivered as he found what a grotesque thing a rose is and how raw the sunlight was upon the scarcely created grass. A new world, material without being real, where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted fortuitously about...like that ashen, fantastic figure gliding toward him through the amorphous trees." (129)

In "An Alpine Idyll," it is not the peasant who is the grotesque, but the innkeeper, and, to a lesser extent, the sexton. In his own bizarre way, the peasant had found a way to retain a degree of human closeness in his time of pain and loss. The sexton, incredulous at the sight of the wife's mangled face, asks, "Did you love your wife?" (114). When Olz replies, "Ja, I loved her...I loved her fine," we have no reason to doubt him (114). The innkeeper's heartless and inhumane reaction to Olz is a cautionary tale for the narrator, who has been in the mountains of Silvretta for so long—"too damn long" (110). The narrator's sense have been dulled—he has "forgotten what beer taste[s] like"—and he is "tired of the sun" and its relentless heat (111). Because the narrator has overindulged in leisure and isolation, and has been unable to "get away from the sun," he has risked his connection with darkness and his understanding of the human condition. Hemingway suggests that when we fail to listen to the suffering and pain of others, then it is we who become grotesque and beastly.

The glacial hardness of the mountain peaks connotes the masculine, and when the men "[come] down into the valley," the image is a sexual one, and at the very least connotes

their return to softness, curvature, and feminine influence. The men “need,” as Flora puts it, “to return to the world of men with women” (*Nick Adams* 209). As they enter the valley, they come upon a churchyard where a burial is taking place, and they stop to watch “the sexton shovelling in the new earth. A peasant with a black beard and high leather boots stood beside the grave. The sexton stopped shovelling and straightened his back. The peasant in the high boots took the spade from the sexton and went on filling in the grave—spreading the earth evenly as a man spreading manure in a garden” (109). Robert Gajdusek draws our attention to how “Hemingway has carefully established that there is complicity between nature and man, between the seasons and heights and snows and the alienation and estrangement from mankind inside man himself” (Beegel 172). “The grave-filling looked unreal” to the narrator, for he “could not imagine anyone being dead” (109). The narrator thinks of the dead person and says to John, “Imagine being buried on a day like this” (109). When John replies, “I wouldn’t like it,” the narrator says, “Well...we don’t have to do it” (109). “We don’t have to do it” does not, as one might suppose, mean “we don’t have to be buried.” Instead, we see the narrator’s effort at empathy and sensitivity as he alters his perspective to identify with the peasant. “We don’t have to do it” means they do not have to endure the grief of burying a loved one. In this context, we also might re-read the line “Imagine being buried on a day like this” to emphasize the incongruity of death on the very hot “bright May morning,” rather than the unpleasant thought of dying and being buried. Darkness is precisely what the men need a dose of after their “tiring” month in the sun, and the narrator is instinctively reaching out for the shadowy regions of emotional experience as he studies the burial. In the final days up on the mountain, the men needed “dark glasses” as a defense against the sun (110). Removed from the valley and the shade for “too long,” the

narrator senses that in order to retain his humanity, he must reestablish both a connection with the darkness in himself and an appreciation for the darkness in others. In *Kafka on the Shore*, Haruki Murakami, writes:

The world of the grotesque is the darkness within us. Well before Freud and Jung shined a light on the workings of the subconscious, this correlation between darkness and our subconscious, these two forms of darkness, was obvious to people. It wasn't a metaphor, even. If you trace it back further, it wasn't even a correlation. Until Edison invented the electric light, most of the world was totally covered in darkness. The physical darkness outside and the inner darkness of the soul were mixed together, with no boundary separating the two. (225)

The peasant, Olz, who uses a lantern and not electricity as a source of light, would be well acquainted with the two forms of darkness to which Murakami refers. It was not only the snow and the long winter nights that prevented him from bringing his wife down for burial, it was also the darkness in his heart and soul at having lost the woman he loved. The lantern he hung on her mouth allowed him light for gathering wood to make a fire against the darkness and the cold. In contrast to the skiers, Olz had too much darkness, and he relied on his wife, even after her death, as a source of light that enabled him to endure until spring arrived and darkness thawed.

The narrator and John sit at a table in the inn drinking beer and sifting through a “bundle of letters”—another sign of their prolonged isolation from the human exchange. It is easy for the reader to discount John as a source of emotional nourishment for the narrator because he spends most of the story either sleeping or asking to eat. The unnamed narrator might be Nick Adams, and Flora argues convincingly that he probably is.<sup>17</sup> If he is indeed Nick, then he has war experience in common with Olz, who is wearing “his old army clothes” with “patches on the elbows” when he enters the “drinking room” where the narrator

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<sup>17</sup> See *Hemingway's Nick Adams*, 200-212.

sits (111). This connection is significant. As men at war, both Nick and Olz likely would have seen bodies in far worse shape than the dead wife's. Bodies and body parts assume different meaning and value on the battlefield, and what is sacred to the soldier might repulse the average citizen, a reality Hemingway foregrounds in "A Natural History of the Dead." In O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, "Norman Bowker, otherwise a very gentle person, carried a thumb that had been presented to him as a gift from Mitchell Sanders. The thumb was dark brown, rubbery to the touch, and weighed 4 ounces at most. It had been cut from a VC corpse, a boy of fifteen or sixteen. They'd found him at the bottom of an irrigation ditch, badly burned, flies in his mouth and eyes" (13). Despite the implicit horror of the act, Bowker and Sanders are in some strange way honoring the dead boy, and trying to make sense of why they are fighting and why he is dead. Olz's experience with his wife's body signifies a similar process of trying to come to grips with the unimaginable suffering and loss that is inherent in the human condition and magnified in war. Even in the inn, the narrator has not yet managed to escape the sunlight, as it "came through the open window and shone through the beer bottles on the table" (111). Olz, however, looks "out of the window" as if drawn toward the sun. He had entered the inn with the sexton, named Franz, but leaves alone for a different bar after only one drink. As soon as he is gone, the innkeeper and the sexton talk about him in German dialect, and the narrator can tell they are amused. Curious, the narrator invites the innkeeper to have a drink with him. The innkeeper sits down and immediately says to the narrator, "Those peasants are beasts" (112). Then he repeats it again: "He's a beast. All these peasants are beasts" (113). The narrator asks him what he means, and the innkeeper calls the sexton over to help him tell the story of how Olz disfigured his wife's corpse.

Flora's comparison of the innkeeper to the American lady in "Canary for One" is apt; just as she ignorantly and insensitively repeats her judgment that American men make the best husbands, the innkeeper reiterates his obtuse declaration that peasants are beasts (*Reading* 137). As the innkeeper tells the narrator about the death of Olz's wife, he mixes up the months and dates, and twice the sexton has to correct him. He does not care about the man or his wife, and cannot be bothered to remember the specifics. The sexton, who takes over the storytelling at the innkeeper's direction, describes a priest who is similarly heartless. The people in the church were aware that the wife had a heart condition and was often not well, and they had assumed that was what caused her death. When the priest looks under the cloth that covers the dead woman's face, he asks Olz, "Did your wife suffer much?" (114). Olz replies that she did not, but what the priest fails to ask about is Olz's suffering. The priest, the innkeeper, the sexton, and even John, are beastly toward Olz in their lack of care and respect for his pain. The priest presses Olz to tell him how his wife's face came to be disfigured. Finally, Olz tells him: "Well," he said, "when she died I made the report to the commune and I put her in the shed across the top of the big wood. When I started to use the big wood she was stiff and I put her up against the wall. Her mouth was open and when I came into the shed at night to cut up the big wood, I hung the lantern from it" (114). The priest asks, "Why did you do that?" and Olz replies, "I don't know" (114). "Did you do that many times?" the priest asks, to which Olz responds, "Every time I went to work in the shed at night" (114). Her disfigurement did not occur in a moment of anger or with a single strike, but rather it was gradual and over time, paralleling Olz's grieving. He returns to the woodshed each night and places the lantern in her mouth because like the major in "In Another Country," who also lost his wife to illness, he must keep up with his routines to

endure the pain. The major looks out the window to find his hope; Olz hangs a lantern from his wife's jaw. Flora urges us to ask who's to say how a man responds to his wife's death (*Nick Adams* 204). Olz desires for his wife a Christian burial in a churchyard; he did not, after all, burn her in his fire, a point that Hemingway likely wanted us to notice, as her body was hard and stiff like the wood.

In "The Book of the Grotesque" in *Winesburg, Ohio*, Anderson writes, "[i]t was the truths that made the people grotesques. The moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood" (22). When Olz leaves the inn, the sexton and the innkeeper both assume that they know the truth about why he leaves, and they attribute it to shame, but they are wrong. In "A Canary for One," the train car where the characters ride is restricted and confined; the landscape, beyond their reach, is open, even burst apart in places by a house fire and a motor-car wreck. The narrator in "Canary" feels as if everything personal in his life has been strewn about, rummaged through, and made public. In "An Alpine Idyll," the characters have easy access to open physical spaces. What is confined and restricted is the characters' desire to comfort and understand another's suffering and pain. Olz leaves the inn as an act of self-preservation and in an effort to secure for himself the sort of inviolable personal space that the narrator in "Canary" realizes he has surrendered. The narrator in "An Alpine Idyll" is a good listener, and we know that he is sympathetic toward Olz. When the sexton finishes the story, he asks the innkeeper, "Do you think it's true?" (115). The innkeeper replies, "Sure it's true....These peasants are beasts" (115). O'Brien of course would argue that it is true and it isn't true and that it doesn't much matter either way.

What's true is the way it affects the reader, and how it sheds light not only on the human condition, but also the sometimes-horrific manner in which we treat those we love.

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In “Now I Lay Me,” the final story in *Men Without Women*, Hemingway, with subtle, graceful continuity, returns us to the novel's first story, “The Undefeated.” At the close of “The Undefeated,” the bullfighter Manuel Garcia, after having valiantly attempted to prove himself still worthy of his profession, lies at night on a hospital bed, gored, bloody, and near death. He has barely managed to kill one of the bulls in a heroic nocturnal battle that probably will end up costing him his life, and, as he wavers on the brink of unconsciousness, his concern is that perhaps he has not proven himself as a man. When Zurito, his picador, jokingly raises a pair of scissors as if he were going to cut off Manuel's coleta, the pigtail that distinguishes a man as a matador, Manuel summons the remarkable energy to sit up on the operating table as a show of resistance. In a state of delirium, Manuel “weakly” says, “I was going good....I was going great” (32). At least in part because he is a man without a woman—indeed, there are no women at all in the entire story, Manuel then asks “for confirmation” from Zurito to affirm the strength of his masculine performance: “Wasn't I going good?” (32). Zurito assures him by saying, “Sure....You were going great,” and the story ends with Zurito watching as Manuel lies there in the hospital, an anesthesia cone over his face to lead him into unconscious sleep and very likely death (32). In “Now I Lay Me,” Nick Adams also lies in a hospital, and does everything in his power to avoid sleep, for fear that if it comes, his “soul would go out of [his] body” (129).

“Now I Lay Me” opens with Nick awake on the floor of a wartime hospital in Milan. Traumatized by a nighttime wounding that nearly killed him, Nick avoids sleep by imagining trout streams, by praying for every one he can remember from his past, and by talking with his orderly, John, who is also awake. The pre-death sleep that comes over Manuel is precisely the sort of sleep that Nick fears and resists. As Nick listens to the silkworms outside the hospital windows, and engages his mind to avoid sleep, he reveals:

I myself did not want to sleep because I had been living for a long time with the knowledge that if I shut my eyes in the dark and let myself go, my soul would go out of my body. I had been that way for a long time, ever since I had been blown up at night and felt it go out of me and go off and then come back. I tried never to think about it, but it had started to go since, in the nights, just at the moment of going off to sleep, and I could only stop it by a very great effort. (129)

These sentences from the opening paragraph of the story direct the reader to recall accounts of Hemingway’s own wounding in 1918 at Fossalta on the Piave, and even echo Malcolm Cowley’s record of what Hemingway told Guy Hickok, his traveling companion in the trip that inspired “Che Ti Dice la Patria?,” in reference to his injury. Of Hemingway’s account, Cowley wrote:

A big Austrian trench-mortar bomb, of the type that used to be called ash cans, exploded in the darkness. ‘I died then,’ Hemingway told his friend Guy Hickok. ‘I felt my soul or something coming right out of my body, like you’d pull a silk handkerchief out of a pocket by one corner. It flew around and then came back and went in again and I wasn’t dead any more.’...For a long time [Hemingway] was afraid to sleep except by daylight, because he had been blown up at night. He thought that if he ever again closed his eyes in the darkness the soul would go out of his body and not come back. (McCaffery 39)

Lynn describes Nick Adams as Hemingway’s “stalking horse for exploring his anxieties” (45). Margot Sempreora states that “seeing Nick as a kind of stand-in psyche—an experimental, remembering, reacting consciousness for Hemingway—allows us to consider

the metafictional relevance of Nick the writer to Hemingway the writer, and to observe the parallels in their motives, materials, and methods of telling tales” (23). “Now I Lay Me” certainly qualifies as evidence of these parallels, and as the story progresses, we see further influence of Hemingway’s biography on Nick’s experiences as Nick contemplates his earliest memories of his parents’ marriage. Carl Eby considers that Hemingway has “confused the symptoms of shell shock” with those caused by childhood trauma, and certainly Nick makes direct connection between both sources of pain in his life as he lies awake in the hospital (195). Paul Fussell’s analysis of how soldiers assimilate their war experience provides context for why Hemingway or Nick might merge his memories of traumatic events:

When a man imagines that every moment is his next to last, he observes and treasures up sensory details purely for their own sake...Fear itself works powerfully as an agent of sharp perception and vivid recall....Subsequent guilt over acts of cowardice or cruelty is another agent of vivid memory: in recalling scenes and moments marking one’s own fancied disgrace, one sets the scene with lucid clarity to give it a verisimilitude sufficient for an efficacious self-torment. Revisiting moments made vivid for these various reasons becomes a moral obligation. (327)

Some feeling of pain, whether physical or emotional, whether lingering from the initial injury or self-inflicted, becomes perhaps the only thing to convince a wounded soldier that he is still alive. Nick does seem to be suffering a form of shell shock, and we know that Hemingway’s own childhood was at least as trauma-inducing as his war experience. Indeed it hardly seems right to expect either Hemingway or his narrator *not* to “confuse” and superimpose the most traumatic events in his life. Some experts estimate that in World War I, shell shock was responsible for more than forty percent of the casualties. Physicians at the time specified the condition as an inability to meet the demands of one’s gender, and noted weeping and fatigue in otherwise hearty males.<sup>18</sup> Psychiatric treatments for shell shock focused on treating the

illness as the result of insufficient manliness, and methods included having the patient's comrades laugh him out of it, making appeals to his manhood, and returning him to battle, which was ultimately thought to be the best "curative" (Kimmel 133). When men encountered trouble performing as they were told men should perform, their troubled response—their shell shock—was normalized. Elaine Showalter writes: "if the essence of manliness was not to complain, then shell shock was the body language of the masculine complaint, a disguised male protest not only against the war but against the concept of 'manliness' itself" (175). In an effort to still perform as a man, Nick has to submerge any complaint or protest, and relive it alone in the confines of his psyche. Nick clings to the stories from his past to stave off sleep and fear of physical death, and also to prevent an emotional numbness—the pleasure of trout-fishing and the painful memories of childhood both work to assure him that he can still feel *something* and that he is still alive.

Similar to how *In Our Time* makes the connection between war and bullfighting, *Men Without Women* relates war with marriage. In "Che Ti Dice la Patria?," the narrator's reflections resonate with the guilt and hypocrisy Hemingway himself confronted as he returned to his old front and sought to legitimize his marriage to Pauline in the Catholic church by invalidating his marriage to Hadley. In "A Canary for One," which Hemingway wrote around the same time as "Now I Lay Me," the narrator's marriage is breaking up, and the story is reflective of the train ride Hemingway and Hadley took back to Paris before they moved into separate residences. In "An Alpine Idyll," Nick passes along the story of a peasant, also a former soldier, who mourns the wife he loved and ends up disfiguring the face

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<sup>18</sup> Note the striking similarity to the narrator's experience in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1899).

of her corpse. “In Another Country” is especially relevant to the recurrence of the interplay between marriage and war in “Now I Lay Me.” Nick is the narrator in both stories, and in the initial drafts for what became “Now I Lay Me,” Hemingway had first titled the story “In Another Country—Two.” Although “Now I Lay Me” falls last in *Men Without Women*, chronologically the events precede those in “In Another Country,” and this placement is significant when we consider how differently Nick views marriage in each story. We recall that in “In Another Country,” the major responds to Nick’s comment that he will likely get married after the war by adamantly declaring that “a man must not marry” (37). In “Now I Lay Me,” John insists the opposite, and tries to convince the uncertain Nick by saying, “A man ought to be married. You’ll never regret it. Every man ought to be married” (136). In both stories, Nick yearns for intimacy and human closeness with a woman, regardless of either the major’s warning against marriage or his own disillusionment with the institution. In “Now I Lay Me,” he struggles to differentiate his desire for love from his perception of marriage as emasculating, and to reconcile the trauma of his war wounding with the traumatic memories of his childhood.

In “Now I Lay Me,” being “blown up at night” is not the only thing that has traumatized Nick; he also suffers from the memories he has of his parents’ dysfunctional marriage. One of the devices he uses for staying awake is saying his prayers, and trying “to pray for all the people [he] had ever known” (131). He begins by reaching for his earliest memory, which leads him to “the attic of the house where [he] was born and [his] mother and father’s wedding cake in a tin box hanging from one of the rafters, and, in the attic, jars of snakes and other specimens that [his] father had collected as a boy and preserved in alcohol, the alcohol sunken in the jars so the backs of some of the snakes and specimens were

exposed and had turned white” (131). An attic is a place for things that are all but forgotten or rarely used, and air that is stagnant and stale, and, with the wedding cake dangling prominently, each of these elements contributes to Nick’s recollection of the state of his parents’ marriage. The images from this memory are static, separate, and disconnected from one another. The tin box—symbolic of female genitals—is suspended from the ceiling, and the snakes—symbolic of male genitals—are sequestered in jars. As Nick pursues this memory, he recalls that when his grandfather died, the family moved to “a new house designed and built by [his] mother,” at which time “those jars from the attic” were burned along with the other things that “were not to be moved” (131). Hemingway’s mother did design and finance a house for the family, and his father was a naturalist with collections and specimen jars. With this first fire that Nick recounts, he tells us that he “could not remember who burned the things,” but then he details a fire for which his mother clearly is responsible (131). When Nick’s father returns home from a hunting trip, he discovers that his wife has “been cleaning out the basement” and has burned his “stone axes and stone skinning knives and tools for making arrow-heads and pieces of pottery and many arrowheads. They had all been blackened and chipped by the fire” (132). Multiple critics have pointed to this burning as the symbolic castration of Nick’s father by his mother, and certainly Nick identifies and sympathizes with his father.<sup>19</sup> Lying on the hospital bed, he remembers bringing his father a rake and some newspaper so that his father might sort through his charred possessions. After his mother had gone inside the house, his father said to him, “Take the gun and the bags in the house, Nick....Take them one at a time....Don’t try and carry too much at once” (132). His father “spread all the blackened, chipped stone implements on the paper and then

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<sup>19</sup> See Flora’s *Reading Hemingway’s Men Without Women* or Hovey’s “‘Now I Lay Me’: A Psychological Interpretation.”

wrapped them up” (132). The fiery destruction of these symbols of his father’s manhood is directly linked to Nick’s injury, and his subsequent uncertainty about his masculinity.

The mental and physical damage Nick suffered after being “blown up at night” left him “chipped,” like those stone implements, of his original strength, and in an effort to preserve what he fears are only relics of his former masculinity, he “wraps” himself up and rejects John’s ideas on marriage as a panacea. He remembers that his father “walked into the house with the paper package and [he] stayed outside on the grass with the two game-bags” (132). The image of himself as a young boy sitting alone with dead animals in bags speaks to how Nick associates having narrowly escaped death in the Italian front with the trauma he suffered as a child from the marital war between his parents. The reader might connect this fire and the possessions strewn in the road with the narrator’s description of the house fire alongside the train tracks in “A Canary for One,” and also consider the connection to Hemingway’s marriage trouble and his impending divorce from Hadley. Furthermore, Paul Smith solidifies the assumption of Hemingway’s parents as the biographical antecedents for Nick’s parents in the story by verifying that in a surviving draft of “Now I Lay Me,” Hemingway wrote “Ernie” instead of “Nicky” (“Typewriter” 88). In that early manuscript, the only one known to show Hemingway so directly eliding Nick’s identity with his own, instead of having the wife smiling as she greets her husband, it reads: “I’ve been cleaning out the basement, dear,” my mother called from the porch, “and |Ernie’s|/Nicky’s/ helped me burn the things” (Smith, *Reader’s Guide* 173). The draft version elevates our appreciation of the significance of this disturbing event in Hemingway’s life, as we understand that his mother not only made him complicit in the symbolic emasculation of his father, but she also inflicted further pain on both father and son by making sure that his father knew he was

involved. As Nick concludes the sharing of this memory, he recounts how he eventually took the game bags into the house, and says, “in remembering that, there were only two people, so I would pray for them both” (132). The two he will pray for are his mother and his father, but the reader is aware that inside the house there are at least three people—his mother, his father, and himself, and the fact that Nick specifies “two” rather than simply stating that he would pray for them both implies a death or loss of identity for one of the persons. It is possible for Nick think of each three as having his or her identity compromised: his mother is heartless and inhumane in her mistreatment of her husband; his father is made a shell of a man by his mother’s cruelty; and Nick’s emotional well-being and perception of self are compromised by the ruined state of his parents’ marriage. Hemingway endured the tumultuous effects of all three of these possibilities in his own life, and in a 1948 letter to Malcolm Cowley, he wrote, “I hated my mother as soon as I knew the score and loved my father until he embarrassed me with his cowardice.... My mother is an all time all american bitch and she would make a pack mule shoot himself; let alone poor bloody father.”<sup>20</sup> In an earlier letter to his parents, dated February 5, 1927, Hemingway underscores his mother’s habitual self-centeredness and makes clear where his empathy lies: “You may never like any thing I write—and then suddenly you might like something very much. But you must believe that I am sincere in what I write. Dad has been very loyal and while you, mother, have not been loyal at all I absolutely understand that it is because you believed you owed it to yourself to correct me in a path which seemed to you disastrous” (*SL* 244).

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<sup>20</sup> This hatred was mainly fueled from his belief that his mother, Grace Hall Hemingway, was responsible for the 1928 suicide of his father, Clarence Hemingway, but Hemingway certainly harbored animosity toward his mother before his father’s death.

In "Now I Lay Me," Nick translates his early understanding of his parents' damaged relationship to a distrust of marriage in general. When he talks with John, we recognize that he desires women and their feminine influence, but, with his masculinity already threatened by his wounding at the front, he is unable to put himself at what he perceives to be further risk to his manhood. With no model for a marital relationship based on love, or at least not one that he shares with the reader, Nick cannot conceive of marriage as anything less than emasculating. His memories, whether of trout fishing or of "all the animals in the world" or of the "kinds of food and the names of all the streets...in Chicago," are flanked by trauma, either of his earliest childhood recollections of his parents marriage, or of his wounding at war (133). Nick tells us, "I tried to remember everything that had ever happened to me, starting with just before I went to the war and remembering back from one thing to another. I found I could only remember back to that attic in my grandfather's house. Then I would start there and remember this way again, until I reached the war" (131). He is trapped, afraid, alone, deprived of dreaming by his sleeplessness, and literally unable to conceive of the future; he does not want to be without a woman or without love, he just is not in a place where he can risk anymore of himself. John, a man from Chicago who was conscripted into the war when he came to Italy to visit his family, is also awake in the room with Nick, whom John calls Signor Tenente. When Nick hears John stirring, he asks, "You want to talk a while?" (134). When John agrees, Nick asks him to tell him about Chicago, and to tell him "about how [he] got married" (134). John has told him about these things before, but Nick, who relies on the ritual of his memories to get him through the night and needs to maintain a tight grasp on consciousness, wants to hear the stories again. But when John tells him that his wife is "making good money with the place," and that "she runs it fine," Nick does not

ask him anymore about his wife, instead he worries that they are waking up the other patients by talking and asks John if he wants to smoke (134). A few moments later, when John mentions his wife again to say that she “don’t read English but she takes the paper just like when [he] was home and she cuts out the editorials and the sport page and sends them to [him],” Nick once again avoids further questions about his wife and asks about his kids (135). Nick wants and needs to hear about love, “how [John] *got* married,” not about the dominant, potentially masculine role his wife plays in their marriage as the wage-earner and the one who decides what he reads. When John reports that his children are “fine kids but [he] want[s] a boy. Three girls and no boy. That’s a hell of a note,” the implication again is that John’s masculinity is subdued and overwhelmed by the feminine power dynamic in his family. It is because of his children that he is not sent to the front to fight, and while it has nothing to do with the fact that his children are girls, it contributes to Nick’s perception of women as the controlling force in John’s life. Nick is desperate for some connection with the soft rather than threatening influence of the feminine, and for some reassurance that when he is with a woman, his masculinity will remain intact.

John is willing to listen to Nick, and he worries that Nick is not sleeping. John says to him, “You got to get all right. A man can’t get along that don’t sleep. Do you worry about anything? You got anything on your mind?” (136). When Nick replies that he doesn’t, John tells him, “You ought to get married....Then you wouldn’t worry” (136). John suggests that Nick could find “some nice Italian girl with plenty of money,” and that because he has “good decorations” and has “been wounded a couple of times,” he should have no problem finding a potential wife (136). Nick tries to put John off by remarking that he “can’t talk the language well enough,” and then by repeatedly saying “I’ll think about it” (136). What John

does not realize is that a girl with money reminds Nick of his mother, and the financial power she wielded over his father. When John tells Nick that not speaking the language is irrelevant, saying, “To hell with talking the language. You don’t have to talk to them. Marry them,” he overlooks what Nick desires from a feminine connection—mutual understanding, communication, and respect (136). Nick himself likely does not realize that he seeks these qualities, but he does know that everything his experience thus far has informed him about marriage suggests that marital union cannot provide the safety and comfort he currently lacks in his life. When he and John talk about smoking, John asks him, “Did you ever hear a blind man won’t smoke because he can’t see the smoke come out?” (134). Nick says he doesn’t believe it, but the irony is that his inability to conceive of a relationship with a woman as a source of love and fulfillment relates directly to his apparent failure to have ever witnessed such a union.<sup>21</sup> John falls asleep, and first Nick listens to him snore, and then he “lay in the dark with [his] eyes open and thought of all the girls [he] had ever known and what kind of wives they would make. It was a very interesting thing to think about and for a while it killed off trout-fishing and interfered with [his] prayers” (137). Eventually, however, he returns to remembering trout streams, which is what had engaged him earlier in the evening, before he began his prayers. He goes “back to trout-fishing, because,” he says, “I found that I could remember all the streams and there was always something new about them, while the girls, after I had thought about them a few times, blurred and I could not call them into my mind and finally they all blurred and all became rather the same and I gave up thinking about them almost altogether” (137). The thoughts about trout-fishing offer Nick reassurance and confidence in his masculine authority and control.

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<sup>21</sup> In “Ten Indians,” also in *Men Without Women*, Nick is very comfortable with the positive energy and influence of the Garner’s marital relationship.

Nick's initial description of the trout stream illustrates that he has displaced any erotic energy or passion he might be capable of having for a woman by focusing instead on his boyhood pleasure for fishing. He conceives of the activity of fishing in terms similar to how one might imagine experiencing the contours of a woman's body: "I would think of a trout stream I had fished alone when I was a boy and fish its whole length very carefully in my mind; fishing very carefully under all the logs, all the turns of the bank, the deep holes and the clear shallow stretches, sometimes catching trout and sometimes losing them" (129). But losing control over a trout is different from losing control over a woman. If he "could find no worms" in the "bare moist earth" then he could "cut up one of the trout [he] had caught and use him for bait" (130). Again, the inference to sexual genitalia seems vivid, but in this scenario, Nick is in control, and it is he who makes the cuts (wounds) and who controls life and death. In *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien's narrator also attempts some mastery over life and death through dreaming and telling stories; he wants to keep both himself and the dead alive so that they might continue to search for love. Nick is similarly desperate for love and intimacy, but, for now, he must will away those desires, as he does sleep, in an effort to maintain a grip on his very soul. James Phelan writes that Nick's "desire for the intimacy he seems unable to have motivates him to keep returning to both the scene between his parents and the night he spent talking and thinking about marriage with John, a night clearly linked for him with his wounding" (60). In *The Things They Carried*, Norman Bowker repeatedly circles a lake that reminds him of his experiences with loss and pain in Vietnam. Norman's acute need for human closeness and catharsis through telling his stories compete with his inability to make himself vulnerable and actualize human contact—even though he likely intuits that he literally cannot survive without human closeness, risking a loss of self by

telling his stories, after he has already lost so much, is something he is unable to do. But Nick is different from Norman. Although the memory of his parents' marriage is traumatic for Nick, he returns to it as a way to temporarily harden himself against his genuine desire for the "softening feminine influence" of a woman (*SL* 245). He fears that his war trauma already has left him so soft, vulnerable, and possibly emasculated, that with anymore "softening," he might well lose himself as a man.

Nick tells us that he "gave up thinking about [girls] *almost* altogether," and that he knows John "would feel very badly if he knew that, *so far*, [he has] never married" ([emphasis added] 137). Just as he realizes that eventually sleep will have to come, so too does he recognize, if vaguely, that eventually his desire for the feminine influence of a woman will render him vulnerable to love. He might not believe, as John advises, that marriage will "fix up everything," but neither is he willing to abandon the prospect entirely (137). Linda Wagner-Martin reminds us that Hemingway had considered suicide before his wedding to Hadley, and had written to Pauline in November of 1926 to say that he was feeling depressed and was uncertain that "he had the right to marry again" (*Literary Life* 66). Our understanding of Hemingway's trepidation and torment over the prospect of marriage, however, is complicated by the unmistakable love and affection he seemed to hold for both Hadley and Pauline. His letters to each woman are evidence of his devotion and love, and in a September 1927 letter to his father, Hemingway wrote: "After we were divorced if Hadley would have wanted me I would have gone back to her. She said that things were better as they were and that we were both better off. I will never stop loving Hadley nor Bumby nor will I cease to look after them. I will never stop loving Pauline Pfeiffer to whom I am married. I have now responsibility toward three people instead of one" (*SL* 258). Despite his

guilt, his fear, his traumatic childhood memories, and his perception of the weight of his “responsibility,” Hemingway consistently sought the love of a woman as a balm against his own frequent sleeplessness and other anxieties. To be sure, at various times he also blames his wives and other women for his own suffering, but the point never seems to be that he ultimately wished to be a man without a woman.

Hemingway’s stories invariably demand to be read more than once, and “Now I Lay Me” is no exception. In *Men Without Women*, the reading of one story often directs the re-reading of another. At the end of “Now I Lay Me,” Nick reveals that John comes to visit him several months later in a hospital in Milan; this detail not only lends credence to the assumption that Nick is the unnamed narrator in “In Another Country,” but also prompts readers to return to that second story in the novel. In “The Undefeated,” the ritual of the bullfight offers Manuel an identity and a purpose. In “In Another Country,” Nick, having previously relied on the rituals of prayer and recollection in “Now I Lay Me,” again finds his bearings through ritual as he crosses one of three bridges to go to “the hospital every afternoon” for his treatments (33). In a very real way, ritual encourages hope and survival for these men, and delivers them from one moment to the next. When Nick in “In Another Country” tells the major that after the war he “hope[s] to be married,” he perfunctorily might be giving the answer that he knows John would want him to say, but that does not seem likely. Flora tells us, “the narrator [in “In Another Country”] is prepared to talk about himself with great honesty, and the things he tells us about himself correspond so exactly to the details of “Now I Lay Me” that there need be no hesitation in seeing this as a Nick story” (*Nick Adams* 136). If we trust what Nick says, and we have no reason not to, then we understand that in “In Another Country,” Nick is able to think past the trauma of being

“blown up at night” that beset him in “Now I Lay Me,” and to conceive of his future (129). He has translated his father’s counsel regarding the heavy game bags into a way to approach his recovery—he takes things “one at a time” and does not “try and carry too much at once” (132). In “Now I Lay Me,” hope is just beyond Nick’s reach; in “In Another Country,” he has secured it. In “Now I Lay Me,” Hemingway associates fire with destruction and the threat of emasculation as Nick recalls both his parents’ marriage and his war injury, but in “In Another Country,” the fire is inviting, as it is tended by a woman who sells roasted chestnuts that remain “warm in your pocket afterward” (33). The title “Now I Lay Me” references a bedtime prayer common among children as far back as the eighteenth century: “Now I lay me down to sleep/ I pray the Lord my soul to keep,/ If I should die before I wake,/ I pray the Lord my soul to take.” If we considered the title only as it relates to the final story in the book, then we understand its irony, for peaceful sleep, the innocence of childhood, and a willingness to relinquish his soul to the Lord are not things available to Nick. But, if we consider the final title “Now I Lay Me” in the context of the novel as a whole, then we understand it as a survivor’s tale. Flora highlights that with “In Another Country” as the second story and “Now I Lay Me” as the last, “in a sense, Nick’s war plight frames the book” (*Nick Adams* 113). Because we have already read “In Another Country,” as well as the rest of the stories, when we read “Now I Lay Me,” we already know that Nick has discovered a way to close his eyes and survive, pain and loss notwithstanding. Nick’s emotional trajectory in these two stories arches the book and informs our perception of other characters and their plights in the remaining stories. Along the journey as readers, we are reminded of a phrase that Hemingway himself is known to have cherished: “*Il faut d’abord durer*”—“first one must endure.”

In *Men Without Women*, Hemingway gives us men who endure various forms of pain, loss, and challenge to their masculinity, but he hardly gives us evidence that he or his male characters truly want to be without women. One might even be inclined to think that the stories conspire together to warn men *against* being without a woman. In fact, the dearth of female characters in the stories creates an absent-presence that elevates our desire to contemplate their relationship to and influence on the male characters. We might not always like what we discover, but with Hemingway, we can almost always be certain it is real. As a female reader and critic of the novel, I too am a feminine force amidst its pages. In a July 1923 letter to Bill Horne, an old roommate from Chicago who served with Hemingway in the American Red Cross Ambulance, Hemingway wrote: “So you’re in love again. Well, it’s the only thing worth a damn to be. No matter how being in love comes out it’s sure worth it all while it’s going on” (*SL* 87). This is something. This is hope. This is faith in love. Through it all, Hemingway held—sometimes gently, sometimes fiercely—to this belief in the power of love, and to his desire to find it in the arms of a woman.

### Chapter III

#### Ernest Hemingway's *Across the River and Into the Trees*: You Can't Well Be a Man Without Being Vulnerable to Love

*The key turns holy  
as though a god moved through it  
wonderingly, alone, unknowing, unknown.*  
-Tennessee Williams<sup>22</sup>

Ernest Hemingway's fifth novel, *Across the River and into the Trees* (1950), was, according to Susan Beegel and most others, "a shattering failure, the most devastating of the author's career" (*Eight Decades* 515). Carlos Baker recalls in his biography, "The American reviews bristled with such adjectives as *disappointing, embarrassing, distressing, trivial, tawdry, garrulous, and tired*. Many said that the book read like a parody of [Hemingway's] former style" (*Life Story* 486). Baker also reported that Hemingway was "deeply wounded by the negative reviews" of this post-World War II novel (454). At one point, he responded to the criticism with bitterness, but also with a somewhat uncharacteristic tinge of resignation, "Sure they can say anything about nothing happening in *Across the River*, all that happens is the defense of the lower Piave, the breakthrough in Normandy, the taking of Paris...plus a man who loves a girl and dies" (qtd. in Mellow 561). Trouble was, the protagonist, Colonel Richard Cantwell, often makes similar comments—at once bitter and then resigned—a fact that seems to have not gone unnoticed by the critics who had already maligned Hemingway for what Philip Rahv recognized as his lack of "aesthetic distance"

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<sup>22</sup> Williams wrote this stanza on the inside back cover of his copy of *ARIT* found in his Key West home. John S. Bak, *Homo americanus* (Cranbury, NJ: Rosemont Publishing and Printing Corp., 2010) 277.

(*Critical Heritage* 67). Indeed, reviewers took notice. A writer for *Time Magazine* observed:

Like Hemingway, Colonel Cantwell was in the Italian army as a young man, was wounded, and was decorated by the Italian government. Like Hemingway, he has a game knee, loves Venice and Paris, was with the first troops to reach the French capital, takes a dim view of Field Marshal Viscount Montgomery, dislikes books on war by writers who never got near the fighting. Colonel Cantwell, like his creator, addresses women he likes as 'daughter,' was divorced from a war-correspondent wife, loves art and hunting, talks a carefully arranged language of tough-guy sentimentality.

Alfred Kazin found "pity" for the work, and "embarrassment that so fine and honest a writer can make such a travesty of himself"; Cantwell, Kazin noted, "is literally a composite of all the Hemingway heroes" (101). Delbert E. Wylder goes so far as to refer to Cantwell as a "tyrant hero" (194). As Hemingway's contemporaries, these critics expected, apparently with ten years of baited breath, "better" from the widely acclaimed author of *A Farewell to Arms*; yet they also possessed a more tabloid-like intimacy with the details and events of his life—his contentious marriage to and divorce from Martha Gelhorn, for instance, or his relationship with eighteen-year-old Venetian Adriana Ivancich.<sup>23</sup> But a more recent reader, even one who has gleaned enough about Hemingway's biography to notice the overlap in *Across the River*, does not *know* Hemingway as the 1950 critics felt they did, and therefore his glaring failure to separate himself from his hero might not, to that reader, seem so overwhelming. For whatever the reason, in recent years and particularly since the posthumous 1986 publication of *Garden of Eden*, some critics have extended *Across the River* a belated welcome into the Hemingway canon.

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<sup>23</sup> See Ann Doyle-Anderson's reprint of four articles ("Ernest Hemingway's Letters to Adriana Ivancich," "Hemingway, Adriana Ivancich and the Nobel Prize," "Hemingway: A Final Meeting with Adriana Ivancich at Nervi," "The Letters of Adriana Ivancich to Ernest Hemingway") in *RE:AL*, 21.1 (Spring 1996).

Even in 1950, however, the novel appealed to Tennessee Williams, who that year wrote in a piece for *The New York Times*:

I could not go to Venice, now, without hearing the haunted cadences of Hemingway's new novel. It is the saddest novel in the world about the saddest city, and when I say I think it is the best and most honest work that Hemingway has done, you may think me crazy. It will probably be a popular book. The critics may treat it pretty roughly. But its hauntingly tired cadences are the direct speech of a man's heart who is speaking that directly for the first time, and that makes it, for me, the finest thing Hemingway has done. (SM9)

Williams noted in his journals when he read each of Hemingway's novels, and at one point commented that he always read each one at least twice (*Notebooks* 603). In contrast to his reception of *ARIT*, Williams wrote of the critically acclaimed *A Farewell to Arms*: "The writing is good but the book superficial. The man seems brutal and stupid, or false" (*Notebooks* 525). In another entry, Williams wrote that he thought Hemingway was "mistaken about fear" in the latter's depiction of its crippling effects in "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," and argued instead that "[a]t least afterwards [fear] is an aphrodisiac. And I think even during it might be" (*Notebooks* 359). What might be more likely is that Hemingway did experience the aphrodisiacal effects of fear, but was confused and even tormented by how to express his sexual energy, which also accounts in part for the misogyny he expresses in his writing. Despite having met Hemingway only once, Williams seems to have possessed an incisive understanding of the man's emotional intricacies, and observed: "If [Hemingway] drew pictures of pricks, he could not more totally confess his innate sexual inversion, despite the probability that his relations have been exclusively (almost?) with women. He has no real interest in women and shows no true heterosexual eroticism in any of his work" (*Notebooks* 649).

In 1980, Williams would explore this idea on the stage in *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*, his “ghost play” that centers on the relationship between F. Scott Fitzgerald and Zelda Fitzgerald and is set in Asheville, North Carolina, at the Highland Mental Hospital where Zelda is a patient. Zelda had remarked on the queer nature of the rapport between Scott and Hemingway, and Williams follows in the same vein. In the first scene of the second act, Scott and Hemingway taunt a singer about his gender, and then engage in an exchange replete with sexual innuendo and mutual affection. Hemingway suggests that Scott (who, like Cantwell, has a “damaged ticker”), wishes he could have appropriated Zelda’s gender, and then apologizes, but continues, “It’s often observed that duality of gender can serve some writers well” (64). In an aside that immediately follows, Williams writes, “[He approaches Scott. For a moment we see their true depth of pure feeling for each other. Hemingway is frightened of it, however]” (64). Hemingway at first tries to deny Scott’s claim that he uses his “inexhaustibly interesting and complex nature” to endlessly portray himself in his books; he demands of Scott: “Don’t be a bitch. Where’s the resemblance between Colonel Cantwell of *Across the River and into the Trees* and, say, the wounded American deserter from the Italian army in *Farewell to Arms*?” (64). When Hemingway capitulates, exclaiming, “Fuck it!—You know as well as I know that every goddam character an honest writer creates is part of himself. Don’t you?—Well, *don’t* you?,” Scott replies, “We do have multiple selves as well as what you call dual genders” (65). The two men then recall a time at Chalon-sur when Scott was catching pneumonia and Hemingway cared for him, having found him to be “touchingly vulnerable,” though also “disturbing,” with his “skin of a girl, mouth of a girl, the soft eyes of a girl” (66). When Scott refers to Hemingway’s “A Simple Enquiry” (1927), a short story appearing in *Men Without Women* in which a major indirectly, and ultimately

unsuccessfully, propositions a nineteen-year-old male orderly, Hemingway first speaks of another short story titled "Sea Change," about a homosexual couple, and then talks about how "blasting [his] exhausted brains out with an elephant gun" was to "expiate the betrayals" he made in his "solitary life" (67-8). The scene ends with Hemingway then rejecting his own use of the word "solitary," and responding angrily when Scott says, "I suspect that you were lonelier than I and possibly you were even as lonely as Zelda" (68). The men call out for Hadley and Zelda, respectively, and the scene fades out. Beyond the suggestion of homoerotic desire between Scott and Hemingway is the recognition of the clear anguish and distress that Williams imagined the desire to have caused for Hemingway, and how that surfaced in his writing, with Cantwell being no exception. When both men call for their wives at the end of their dialogue, they might be returning away from their love for one another, back to the heterosexual guise of what is expected, but, as Williams affirms with the twice-mentioned idea of dual genders in the play, they are also returning to the women whom they also clearly love, if not in a different way. John S. Bak points to "the curious contradiction between Hemingway the heteromasculine myth incarnate and Hemingway the sensitive writer obsessed with sexual and gender identification" (53). There is no evidence that Cantwell suppresses homosexual desires, and yet his lack of sexual climax with Renata might indicate that he is otherwise fulfilled sexually, and rather seeks her and her spiritual love for their powers to redeem him. Might Cantwell's relationship with Renata offer pre-death redemption from past homosexual desires or acts by at least symbolically reaffirming his heterosexuality? If we read into Williams' analysis of Papa, then maybe. Whether sexually or spiritually or both, Hemingway's Cantwell wants and needs the feminine influence of a woman.

*Across the River* is, as Williams wrote, “honest,” and not simply for the overt reflection of real-life antecedents. The honesty emerges in the unexpected degree of vulnerability revealed in Colonel Cantwell’s bearing of his heart that pushes the reader to reconsider how Hemingway conceives of his male characters’ responsibility to masculine performance. Jeffrey Meyers keenly recognizes that “when we separate Hemingway’s hero from his public persona and recognize the confessional mode, it becomes as much better book than critical judgment has hitherto (pre-1985) allowed” (*Biography* 25). It does not follow that autobiographical impulses in a work of fiction inevitably indicate a confessional form, and yet Meyers is right; this is what Hemingway achieves.<sup>24</sup> Cantwell, though he grimaces with bitterness and pain, embraces his own weakness and accepts it as part of being a man. What emerges is the recognition that the masculine male can be “weak” without compromising his manhood, and that the love of a woman (and for her) has the power to reconstitute his “weakness” as strength. Cantwell begins to realize, if only faintly, that what the traditional expectations of masculinity tell him is weakness, is not weakness after all, but rather a different sort of strength, and one that still qualifies him as a man. This confessional mode and these hints at revelations of vulnerability complicate our ability to distinguish

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<sup>24</sup> John Aldridge offers a similar as well as sympathetic view of Cantwell as a “realistic projection of the tired, ailing, and disillusioned man he had by then actually become. And as the distance narrowed between himself and his heroes, his writing lost a crucial dimension. He began to try to *live out* his fantasies instead of projecting them in his fiction...It is even conceivable that in the end Hemingway succumbed to the limitations of the philosophy he had for years been developing in his work and endeavoring more and more to practice in his life. But that philosophy was tenable only for a young and healthy man who could afford to be cynical since his hold on life was vigorous, and he could never really believe in the possibility of his own death. Thus, when because of age and failing health, Hemingway could no longer do the things that made you feel good afterwards, when the eyesight began to go and the legs went bad, and the condition of the liver would not allow you to drink, and it was no longer fun to hunt or fish or make love, then the limitations of that philosophy became intolerable. By then, however, there was no turning back. There was no way of building another more durable or complex set of values. Hemingway had succeeded in becoming his heroes, and finally he was beginning to die with them” (426-7). John Aldridge, *Saturday Review* 53 (10 October 1970), 23-6, 39, in *Critical Heritage*.

Cantwell as a true (accordingly to traditional definitions) Hemingway hero; and, I think, that is precisely what Hemingway intended.

In *Hemingway's Genders*, Nancy Comley and Robert Scholes assert our need “to see a writer’s life and work as a network of codes that are cultural in origin but subject to selection, rejection, and modification by individual” (3-4). Comley and Scholes recognize Hemingway’s “exceptional will to textual power: an extraordinary strength in choosing and rejection what his culture offered him, enabled in part by the abrupt displacement of his youth that forced him to compare the culture of Oak Park with the cultures of Europe and of war,” just as they reject the idea that Hemingway “came close to achieving, in his life or in his work, a unified structure of thought and feeling that could be called the Hemingway Code” (4). For our purposes here, it is also advantageous to consider the previous prevailing critical understanding of the Hemingway code as we distinguish Cantwell from it, and thereby offer further credence to Comley and Scholes’ view. It is significant, too, that in *Across the River* Hemingway himself seems to defy not only the idea of a “unified structure of thought” or particular protagonist paradigm as inescapable in his writing, but also the expectations of his critics and readers, who, as noted above, panned the novel. Robert Penn Warren elaborates on the predicament of the prototypical Hemingway hero:

The shadow of ruin is behind the typical Hemingway situation. The typical character faces defeat or death. But out of defeat or death the character usually manages to salvage something. And here we discover Hemingway’s special interest in such situations and characters. His heroes are not squealers, welchers, compromisers, or cowards, and when they confront defeat they realize that the stance they take, the stoic endurance, the stiff upper lip mean a kind of victory. If they are defeated they are defeated upon their own terms; some of them have even courted their defeat; and certainly they have maintained, even in the practical defeat, an ideal of themselves—some definition of how a man should behave, formulated or unformulated—by which they have lived. (1-2)

Though Philip Young's terms "code hero" and "Hemingway hero" are dated, as are the clarifications made by Earl Rovit, who recognizes the relationship between the two as that of "tyro" and "tutor," or student and teacher, respectively, they are useful for an understanding of how Cantwell defies earlier paradigms for Hemingway protagonists, and for how in *Across the River* Hemingway confronts rather than replicates the predicament laid out by Warren. Rovit writes, "The tyro, faced with overwhelming confusion and hurt inherent in an attempt to live an active sensual life, admires the deliberate self-containment of the tutor who is seemingly not beset with inner uncertainties. Accordingly, the tyro tries to model his behavior on the pattern he discerns" (55). Rovit further attests that the tyro is a complex character who never attains the "state of serene unselfconsciousness" that the tutor manifests (55). Cantwell, though, rejects defining his life as what the classic Hemingway hero takes it to be—a training ground for dying well—and instead reinvents it with Renata.

Charles Oliver argues that the novel demonstrates a common Hemingway theme of "maintaining control over one's life, even in the face of terrible odds," and Cantwell, age 51, does indeed appear to proceed with certainty and forbearance toward what we know from the start will be his death (3). But there is also a renunciation in his approach to this mortal procession, as he both challenges and resents those forces, military and otherwise, that controlled and defined him for so many years. Cantwell believes that both the military and the women in his life have betrayed him, and he vacillates between bitterness and self-flagellation for his feelings against them both. He refers several times to the three women he loved and lost, as well as to the three battalions and countless men lost under his command. He criticizes his ex-wife to whom he still pays alimony, and whom he claims threw him over to advance her own journalistic career, for not conceiving a child; "she hired out for that.

But who should criticize whose tubes?” (250). Cantwell is bitter and disparaging about his own military service: “I wished to be, and was, a General Officer in the Army of the United States. I have failed and I speak badly of all who have succeeded” (230). At one point he tells Renata, his nineteen-year-old mistress, ““in our army once, a general officer through chicanery obtained the plan of the maneuver. He anticipated every move of the enemy force and comported himself so brilliantly that he was promoted over many better men. And that was why we got smacked one time”” (200). Cantwell had believed in and strove to perform honorably the precepts and codes for what made a worthy soldier and what might qualify him as a brave man. He is unable to disguise his resentment for those who won glory on false pretenses, and he has begun to realize that perhaps the codes and expectations themselves are illusions, and he struggles to reject their influence on him. The narrator mocks the military hierarchy by describing Cantwell, who was annoyed at having suffered a slight seizing of his heart, as a “four star general now, in his wrath and in his agony and in his need for confidence” (184). He desperately needs Renata, who convinces him that a beat-up old body and a string of military failures are integral and admirable aspects, rather than antithetical ones, to whom he is as a man. When she encourages him to purge his anger, he recalls “a man named Georgie Patton who possibly never told the truth in his life,” and how if he himself “had lied as others lied...[he] would have been a three-star general” (111). But when Renata then asks, “Would it make you happier to be a three-star general,” he answers, “No...It would not”—and we actually believe him (111). He has her now, after all; with her love and her beauty and her miracle power of listening. Throughout *Across the River*, Cantwell demonstrates a willingness not so much to defy the precepts whose fulfillment he

once believed would make him a man, but, more precisely, to gracefully put aside his allegiance to them in acceptance of both love and his own failures.

Cantwell is, of course, a Hemingway hero, but not a typical one, nor the one many critics seem to expect him to be. He does face defeat and death, and he does salvage something from the bitterness of those realities. Yet most of his angst stems from his understanding that his defeats—either in his military career or his personal life—were *not* on his own terms. He resents the reckless and crooked nature of leadership by an army and a country that led him and his men to die, saying, “We are governed by what you find in the bottom of dead beer glasses that whores have dunked their cigarettes in” (208). The defects of his body are also beyond his control; he complains of his heart, “I do not see why that one, of all the muscles, should fail me” (112). Kathleen Verduin concludes that “Cantwell himself seems to parody the ultra-masculine Hemingway hero” (8). When we first meet Cantwell, he has already discovered that the ideals upon which he attempted to model his life are now worthless to him. The narrator reports that earlier he had found “the exact place where he had determined, by triangulation, that he had been badly wounded thirty years before,” and defecated there (26). He studies himself in the mirror numerous times throughout the text, and at one point tells himself, “You are one half a hundred years old, you old bastard you”; “an ugly man” with a flat gut (168, 107). The narrator tells us that Cantwell’s physical image of himself is distorted; he cannot see “the old used steel of his eyes nor the small, long extending laugh wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, nor that his broken nose was like a gladiator’s in the oldest statues. Nor did he notice his basically kind mouth...” (107). This repeated act of self-examination in the checking of his reflection—and the failure to appreciate what is really there—signals Cantwell’s inner conflict and

uncertainty with his own identity, and the disparity between the man he thought he wanted to be and the man he now finds himself to be.<sup>25</sup> Cantwell differs from the prototypical Hemingway hero in that he ends up refusing to let this struggle define him as a man, and instead allows the love and influence of a woman to absolve, if not absolutely, his self-doubt, his guilt, and his pain. He submits to pleasure rather than pain as a way work through his thoughts about his lost battles and how death “is a lot of shit” (202). In those moments, he finds solace with Renata, who, while lying with him in his hotel room,

...kissed him kind, and hard, and desperately, and the Colonel could not think about any fights or any picturesque or strange incidents. He only thought of her and how she felt and how close life comes to death when there is ecstasy. And what the hell is ecstasy and what’s ecstasy’s rank and serial number? And how does her black sweater feel. And who made all her smoothness and delight and the strange pride and sacrifice and wisdom of a child? Yes, ecstasy is what you might have had and instead you draw sleep’s other brother. Death is a lot of shit, he thought. (202)

Ultimately, he ends up in the same place as the usual Hemingway hero—facing death with equanimity—but it is not because he has “[held] tight against pain”; instead, “he held [Renata] as close as he could and he tried to think about nothing” (Young 56; *ARIT* 210).

Renata, who “[shines] in her youth and tall striding beauty...[her] pale, almost olive colored skin, a profile that could break your, or any one else’s heart, and her dark hair, of an alive texture,” serves an oasis for Cantwell (78). From a structural standpoint within the text, his liaison with her, replete with the “fun” of sexual and gastronomic pleasures, occurs in the midst of the duck hunt scene that, while it occurs in part at the beginning and in part at the end of the novel, precedes his death. His time with Renata, whose name means “reborn” in

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<sup>25</sup> In “The Way it Was,” a chapter that first appeared in Carlos Baker’s *Hemingway: The Writer as Artist* (1972) and was reprinted in Harold Bloom’s *Ernest Hemingway* (2005), Baker contends that Hemingway includes mirrors and mirrored reflections in his work to reflect his characters’ efforts to control their view(s) of life. Baker further concludes that even with the best intentions, the mirrored image will show distortions of truth, because “the way it was” is only an exterior view and “facts are distorted in the very attempt to avoid distortion” (67).

Italian, is refuge and catharsis from the bitterness of his past, and though it only spans three days, we are meant to consider that she has altered his perception of life. The number three is significant for Cantwell here and elsewhere: reference to the number three appears twice when he contemplates and then desecrates the land where he was wounded; Cantwell lost three battalions; he loved and lost three women; he pleasures Renata three times; and he experiences three seizures of his heart in the lead-up to his death. She offers him a “rebirth” that serves as a sort of last rites to a wounded warrior, with the repetition of “three” as suggestive of Christianity’s Trinity, and the promise of being “born again” as Jesus Christ was, after being crucified, one of three men, and then rising again on the third day. She recognizes courage in his feminine vulnerability rather than his masculine self-denial, and he in turn both accepts and requites her love. When he wonders, on the drive in from Trieste, “Maybe they treat me well because I’m a chicken colonel on the winning side. I don’t believe it, though. I hope not, anyway,” we recognize his awareness of personal failures, but also a refusal to let them define him absolutely—he wants to be transformed (33). It is this desire for transformation on the eve of death, when stoic indifference and a stiff upper lip need only endure a day or two longer, that distinguishes Cantwell and reframes our perception of what Hemingway, at this stage in his career, suggests it means to be a man.

By equating male femininity with strength, desirability, and even manhood, Hemingway attempts to challenge gender binarism, and re-code the Hemingway hero. Critics have argued otherwise. Northrop Frye contests that, “the role of Contessa is that of a more attractive version of a deferential yes-man”; Meyers rules that “the function of Renata, who allows and encourages Cantwell to explore himself, is more as an interlocutor and extension of her lover than as an independent and substantial being” (612; *Critical Heritage*

27). Ultimately, though, Renata redeems Cantwell; first, recognizing his defects as proofs of courage and loving him them; and, then, by guiding him toward the thing he wants most—“the grace of a happy death” (220). The disbelief he expresses for how his heart is the particular muscle failing him now, suggests not only that the muscle has been long underused, but also his regret given that now it is the muscle he is most open to using. This newfound openness springs largely from the reality that with death imminent, and everything else in his life lost, the way that Renata makes him feel outweighs the sense of security that clinging to any last masculine vestige of self preservation might have offered. In this penultimate battle with his heart, he can know the taste the victory that has eluded him his entire life. As she rests against his body on the bed in his hotel room, there is a tenderness and beauty in the sensual energy even as we are clearly aware that sex will not occur: “They lay together now and did not speak and the Colonel felt her heart beat. It is easy to feel a heart beat under a black sweater knitted by someone in the family, and her dark hair lay, long and heavy, over his good arm. It isn’t heavy, he thought, it is lighter than anything there is. She lay, quiet and loving, and whatever it was that they possessed was in complete communication” (199). Cantwell’s catharsis is in being free to have her heart, if only for a moment, beat for his. His sexualized-but-unsexed communion with Renata seems to be the evolution of Jake Barnes’ un-actualized desire for his relationship with Lady Brett Ashley in *The Sun Also Rises*. Neither Barnes’ nor Cantwell’s lack of sexual performance countervails the reader’s recognition of their sexual attraction to Lady Brett or Renata, respectively, but rather underscores the men’s shared longing for a connection with the women beyond the physical.<sup>26</sup> In fact, for Cantwell, it is even an effort at nonsexual physical intimacy that

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<sup>26</sup> Jake Barnes’ problem is one of impotency, but this is not as clear for Cantwell. We simply know that he did not have intercourse with Renata.

intrudes upon and disrupts the connection he enjoyed just moments before, when what “they possessed was in complete communication. He kissed her on the mouth gently and hungrily, and then it was as though there was static, suddenly, when communications had been perfect” (199). If Lady Brett was, as Edmund Wilson first tagged her, “an exclusively destructive force” (238), or, as Leslie Fiedler calls her, a “demi-bitch” (319), then Renata is the healing anti-bitch, even if, as Meyers puts it, she is a simple character, “a beautiful, wealthy and adoring pot of duck soup” (*Critical Heritage* 300). Simply developed or not, Renata reconstitutes Cantwell’s connection with his own failing heart (and his manhood, as I will address below), calling him “the lion-hearted” and accepting the imminence of his death “without even a glance, and playing what there was she held as you put down all the cards, having counted exactly” (210). She holds his weaknesses to the light, calling attention to the beauty she sees in them; then she holds Cantwell himself in her arms, loving him as he makes peace with his mortality. Renata is his access to this strength that will afford him the “happy death” he desires, but is not sure he deserves. More than acting as a “yes-man” or “interlocutor,” she does, as her name suggests, give him new life. She also possesses the powers of both money and a noble family—things that are forever out of Cantwell’s reach; she enjoys the late, languorous sleep of youth—a thing that Cantwell longingly envies; and, in that she is ambiguously unavailable when he calls, she is independent from his control. Though ultimately he will be the one to leave her with the “emptiness” when he dies alone to preserve his dignity, she also leaves him after their sexual encounter on the gondola to preserve her dignity as an unwed woman, and also because she has already been pleased to orgasm by Cantwell three times and the night is, well, over. Renata “opened the door with the key, which was in her bag.”<sup>27</sup> Then she was gone and the Colonel was alone, with the

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<sup>27</sup> Richard Fantina points to John Paul Russo’s observation that Renata “experience[s] three orgasms to

worn pavement, the wind, which still held in the north, and the shadows from where a light went on. He walked home” (152). She has a room of her own, and a light within, that he may not access.

Just before she leaves him alone on that pavement, he complies with her request for a goodnight kiss, and the narrator tells us that he “loved her so he could not bear it” (152). His tutors, the military heroes he had admired for so long, have failed him. What he discovers with Renata is that he is a man *despite* his embattled performance of masculine ideals, rather than because of it. Similar here to the dynamic between Frederic Henry and Catherine Barkley in *A Farewell to Arms*, Cantwell credits Renata with masculine strength, just as she admires the softer, gentler, and still manly, aspects of both his body and his mind. Renata “[runs] her fingers very lightly over the scarred hand,” and says, ““I love you when you are gentle”” (84). Cantwell spends several nights in his hotel room alone, yet in lengthy conversation with the self-portrait Renata has given him. At one point, he inquires of the portrait:

‘Can you maneuver?...Good and fast?’  
Portrait said nothing and the Colonel answered, You know damn well she can. She’d out maneuver you the best day you were ever born and she would stay and fight where you would eff-off, discreetly. (160-1)

Richard Fantina observes this, along with Colonel’s other behaviors, as “an extreme form of devotion to a female subject and highlights traits already apparent in the earlier portrayals of Jake Barnes, Frederic Henry, and Robert Jordan” (89). But this speaking to a portrait of a woman differs from what we might have expected of these previous Hemingway men. In

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Cantwell’s none” (88). As Russo puts it: ‘Renata has satisfied her selfish desire’...[here] Hemingway created characters who embody several of the qualities of the dominatrix and her slave” (Fantina 88; John Paul Russo, “To Die is Not Enough; Hemingway’s Venetian Novel,” in *Hemingway in Italy and Other Essays*, Ed. Robert W. Lewis, New York: Praeger, 1990, 133-180, p. 166).

Cantwell's moments of solitude, self-reflection, and consideration of his failures and weaknesses, he turns to the feminine within himself, as symbolized by his conversation with the portrait, for understanding, empathy, and even admonishment. According to Michael Reynolds, Hemingway learned in Paris that "to write, a man must cultivate that feminine side of himself" (*Paris Years* 98). With Cantwell, Hemingway also seems to have discovered that living in general, and especially dying, might also benefit from such cultivation. Cantwell prefers the living, breathing Renata to her portrait, differing in this respect from Robert Browning's Duke of Ferrara, who, as George Monteiro observes, finds his last duchess "more alive, for him, as a representation on canvas, than she was when present, cleansed now as she is of the sins the Duke had seen in her" (43). In a 1953 interview, Jackson Burke asked Hemingway if he could put into words his theory of the novel. Hemingway responded, "Hell, no. I don't make theories. I write books. My books are about people doing real things. I write about lovers and cowards and brave men and fools, showing acts of love, cowardice, bravery, and foolishness." Burke then asked, "Like Robert Browning?" Hemingway replied, "He's one of the greatest poets in the English language. I wouldn't say I write like him, but he did write about the same things I do." This final comment also might easily have been made by Tim O'Brien regarding Hemingway's literary influence. Yet O'Brien deflects somewhat on others' notions of his literary lineage, saying of Hemingway in one interview:

It's more of a similar background than a literary influence. Minnesota's second nature to me, from being a Boy Scout and a YMCA Indian Guide there. And we had similar experiences as newspaper writers and covering war. I'm less certain about courage than he is, a little more tentative, and a lot more full of ambiguity. We begin in the same general terrain, but then Hemingway goes one way into the forest, and I go another. (von Busack Interview 1995)

While the thematic parallels between the two writers are undeniable, O'Brien deserves his own space in the forest, even if Cantwell is a glimpse of Hemingway heading in the same direction.

Cantwell needs Renata to cleanse and redeem him, even if she must persecute him, too. He continues the imaginary dialogue, supposing that even an inanimate painting of the woman he loves would berate him and his rank by replying, "'The hell with you' ... 'You low class soldier'" (161). His military experiences have not, as promised, made him a man, but, instead, have riddled him with self-doubt and made him question whether he deserves to be considered a man at all. It is in these moments that Hemingway wants us to admire Cantwell's vulnerability and desire for change. In another scene with the portrait, Cantwell says, "Real soldiers never tell any one what their own dead looked like" (235).<sup>28</sup> Yet "real soldiers," especially Hemingway's previous ones, do not talk to portraits, either. Cantwell *does*, though, and we are not meant then to doubt that he is a real soldier; only a changed one, and, perhaps, a better one. In the midst of one of his many stories, Renata, an avid, encouraging listener, asks,

'Do you have anything against armour?'

'Yes. Most of the people inside of it. It makes men into bullies which is the first step toward cowardice; true cowardice I mean. Perhaps it is a little complicated by claustrophobia.' (136)

The "armour" might as well be the constricting demand for masculine performance; in this isolation from authentic expression of their masculinity *and* their femininity, fear and self-doubt spring up, and yet the expectations for performance remain trenchant. Hemingway argues that when a man is trapped behind this "armour" of masculinity, which shields the world (and sometimes the man himself) from his true nature, even as it promises to keep him

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<sup>28</sup> Ernest Hemingway famously did in "A Way You'll Never Be."

“safe” by making him a man, cowardice results in the form of senseless aggression and violence. Cantwell is ready to shed the literal armor of his military career, as well as the protective shield of masculinity that has prevented him from living and loving with his heart.

“... you are not supposed to have a heart in this trade,” Cantwell tells Renata (127). Cantwell realizes, perhaps too late, that he does have a heart. Renata, though not a code hero, at moments does the work of the traditional code hero by guiding him through his hurt and confusion, and helping him figure out how “to live in it.” On his drive to meet her, he passes through the Italian countryside and recalls his numerous battles, the injuries he took, the men he lost under his command, and the enemy men he killed. At one point he catches sight of “a sail moving along,” and wonders, “Why should it always move your heart to see a sail moving along through the country?...Why does it move my heart to see the great, slow, pale oxen?...and a wolf, gaited like no other animal, gray and sure of himself, carrying that heavy head and with the hostile eyes” (32). He identifies with these solitary things: the sail, inanimate, at the mercy of the wind; the oxen, often castrated males, stubborn in nature; and the lone wolf, cast out by the leaders of the pack. Instead of holding tight to this solitude that has defined him for so long, Cantwell seeks connection as he approaches death. He realizes that only with Renata’s love (and listening) can he make peace with his defeats, and discover a prescription for how to die gracefully. Much of Cantwell’s angst stems from the realization that despite how faithfully he has performed as a man, his life has happened *to* him, rather than being autonomously enacted *by* him. This differs from O’Brien’s narrator, who holds himself responsible, almost as a form of penance, and loathes himself for making the wrong choice by going to war. For Cantwell, the war has emasculated rather than masculinated him, and his memories plague him:

He looked up at the light on the ceiling and he was completely desperate at the remembrance of his loss of his battalions, and of individual people. He could never hope to have such a regiment, ever. He had not built it. He had inherited it. But, for a time, it had been his great joy. Now every second man in it was dead and the others nearly all were wounded. In the belly, the head, the feet or hands, the neck, the back, the lucky buttocks, the unfortunate chest and the other places. Tree burst wounds hit men where they would never be wounded in open country. And all the wounded were wounded for life. (222)

He needs Renata to recognize his pain, exorcise his resentment, and reestablish his belief in his own worth as a man. She tells him, “Just tell me true and hold me tight and tell me true until you are purged of it; if that can be” (207). ““Let me be angry for you,”” she says, ““I would rather have you tell me [about your war experience] than anything. Then we can share it”” (211). Rather than dispel his fear that he lacks control of his own life, Renata offers him a comfortable position within his experience of powerlessness—a position in which what seems weak is instead worthy and strong, and in which being a man does not depend upon one’s being in control.

Renata gives frequent and tender attention to Cantwell’s right hand, “which had been shot through twice, and was slightly misshapen” (58). Soon after the two reunite for the first time, Cantwell declares his love, and Renata responds, ““Let me feel your hand...It’s all right. You can put it on the table...I wanted to feel it because all last week, every night, or I think nearly every night, I dreamed about it, and it was a strange mixed-up dream and I dreamed it was the hand of Our Lord”” (82). The religious connotations underscore the concept of rebirth, and liken the scars on Cantwell’s hand to the stigmata. There is also the implication that Renata, the one who delivers Cantwell into his rebirth, to an extent represents the young Virgin Mary (given that she and Cantwell do not seem to consummate their love), who, according to the Bible, learns of her immaculate conception when the angel

Gabriel, visiting her in a dream, tells her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus” (*New International Version*, Luke 1:30-1). When Renata asks if she can touch the hand, as long as it does not hurt, Cantwell replies, “It does not hurt. Where it hurts is in the head, the legs and the feet. I don’t believe there’s any sensation in that hand” (82). But she believes in the energy of his hand, recognizing power and strength in what he perceives as defect and weakness. She tells him, “You’re wrong....Richard. There is very much sensation in that hand” (83). For Young, Nick Adams is the primary antecedent for our understanding of Hemingway’s lineage of wounded men. When a shell lodges in Nick’s spine, it

is of a piece with the blows he took when he saw the jackknife Caesarean, the nearly decapitated Indian, the battler and the blackjacking Negro, when he felt himself forced to repudiate his mother and his girl friend, when he hit the cinders after a blow in the face on a freight train. This wound, which is to be the same wound which ‘emasculates’ Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises* and is to hospitalize Lt. Henry in *A Farewell to Arms*, and whose scar Col. Cantwell bears more than thirty years later in *Across the River and Into the Trees*, is significant even beyond these facts. From here on in the Hemingway hero is to be a wounded man, wounded not only in physically but—as soon becomes clear—psychically as well. (Young 40-1)

Cantwell suffers both physical and psychic wounds, but has closed himself off from the pain and vulnerability connected with their presence. Young further recognizes the wound in Hemingway’s men as an “outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual dis-grace” (13). Renata promises to help Cantwell reclaim his lost spiritual grace, to be “born again.” When she asks him to put his hand on her body, he asks, “My good or my bad?” and she replies, “Your bad...The one I love and must think about all week” (208). The reader recognizes that by this point Cantwell’s inquiry is rhetorical; he is well aware of her devotion to his injured hand, and yet he depends upon her reassurances to dispel his prevailing focus on what he considers to be his defeats. Renata holds his wounded hand—his weakness—and

repeatedly and intently asks him to tell her about the war, which ends up being about his defeats. She asks, “‘Don’t you see you need to tell me things to purge your bitterness?...Don’t you know I want you to die with the grace of a happy death....Tell me some more please and be just as bitter as you want” (220). She draws attention to his vulnerability and forces him to confront his pain in a way that not only does not compromise his manhood, but also allows him to accept death with peace and dignity. Renata asks him again if she might hold his hand and he tells her “it’s so damned ugly,” to which she replies, “You don’t know about your hand” (95). In so much as weakness is associated with femininity, this is *her* domain; the power over his hand—and his heart—belong to her. In *Across the River*, Hemingway begins to suggest that such feminine power and influence are valid and real, and central to the salvation of the (new) Hemingway hero.

Renata convinces Cantwell to appreciate his wound for how it allows her to love him, and, in turn, him to begin to love himself. He says to her, “You can hold any damn thing. But, Daughter, sometimes you don’t just hold. That is for stupids. Sometimes you have to switch fast” (151). Though he addresses Renata, he is speaking to himself here, warning against the temptation to keep a stiff upper lip and hold tight. He becomes aware that “[h]e had been noticing nothing but her lovely face,” and he thinks to himself, “I’ll get killed sometime that way” (96). He realizes that while being vulnerable might get him killed, he no longer cares—and the not caring feels good. When Renata informs him that there is, in fact, “very much sensation” in his hand, we are aware that she could just as easily be referring to his defective heart. He tells her, “the bad thing[s] [are] gone the way the mist is burned off the hollows in broken ground when the sun comes out....And you’re the sun” (95). She challenges the things he thought he knew, and gives new life to the parts of Cantwell that he

thought were worthless:

“You don’t know how important things that are said are.”

“They are a damn sight more important when you put them on paper.”

“No,” the girl said. “I don’t agree. The paper means nothing unless you say them in your heart.”

“And what if you haven’t a heart, or your heart is worthless?”

“You have a heart and it is not worthless.” (112)

Cantwell seems aware of the worth and capacity of his heart, but he has been thoroughly trained to ignore that muscle in order to preserve and ensure his image as a man. When a glass-eyed waiter brings him a drink he does not want, he thanks him and drinks it anyway out of empathy, for “[h]e only loved people, he thought, who had fought or been mutilated. Other people were fine and you liked them and were good friends; but you only felt true tenderness and love for those who had been there and had received the castigation that everyone receives who goes there long enough. So I’m a sucker for crips, he thought...” (71). He “wish[es] [the man] did not have that glass eye,” which stirs sympathy within him, because he would “rather not love anyone” (71). Love might mean risk and revelation of weakness, but it also means not having to be alone; if Renata, “[his] best and last and only and one true love” can love his weaknesses and assure him of his manhood, then, really, he has nothing left to lose (106).

Upon his arrival in Venice, he urges the *Gran Maestro*, with whom he shares membership in a playful secret society called the Order, to do what is “forbidden” by policy by having a drink with him. The *Gran Maestro* responds, “...everyone must comply with his duty, and here the rules are reasonable, and we all should comply with them; me especially, as a matter of precept” (58). But Cantwell, tired of a life in response to what others have told him to do, convinces the *Gran Maestro* to have the drink anyway, “thus, violating orders and the principles of precept and example in command” (59). Later, when

Renata asks him, “What is your great sorrow?” he answers, “Other people’s orders” (194). The two lay together in his hotel room while, per her request, he reminisces about the war, though he repeatedly worries that he is boring her (206, 214, 216). She tells him, “Please talk, I’m taking care of you” (222). Her act of listening facilitates his catharsis, and offers him the chance to die free from the pain of his defeats. Throughout this purging process, he struggles to let go of his belief, based upon his understanding of the ideals for masculine performance, that he is a failure as a man. Even the moments of victory seemed to him hollow and false, if they “were fighting a beaten enemy whose communications had been destroyed” (125). He tells Renata that he is not working anymore, “only preparing the best way to be over-run” (99). Cantwell recalls one of his battlefield losses,

“It was a good regiment,” he said. “You might even say it was a beautiful regiment until I destroyed it under other people’s orders.”

“But why do you have to obey them when you know better?”

“In our army you obey like a dog,” the Colonel explained. (222)

The military has simultaneously broken him down and deemed him a failure for breaking. The demand is for masculine performance, yet within the confines of an emasculating system. Obeying is the only thing he is confident he can do well, and he enacts a similar pattern of behavior, though with different result, in his relationship with Renata.

Fantina points to Cantwell’s masochistic tendencies and observes, “The colonel places Renata’s pleasure before his own and neither insists upon, nor is he offered, any corresponding sexual release as he remains in a suspenseful anticipation which is gratification in itself” (88). Gilles Deleuze further recognizes how the efforts to secure the affections of a “superior” woman facilitate “the hope of a rebirth of the new man that will

result from the masochistic experience” (66).<sup>29</sup> Cantwell does desire rebirth as a new man, and he easily submits to Renata’s sexual demands. Shortly before their sexual encounter on the gondola, though, Renata’s confidence and ease with her role momentarily irritates

Cantwell:

“...thank you for not asking me for more war episodes.”

“Oh you are going to have to tell them to me later.”

“*Have to?*” the Colonel said and the cruelty and resolution showed in his strange eyes as clearly as when the hooded muzzle of the gun of a tank swings toward you.

“Did you say *have to*, Daughter?” (134)

Renata quickly capitulates and assures him she did not mean it that way, and he responds, “You can use *have to* if you want, Daughter. The hell with it” (134). There is temerity on the part of the Colonel as he endeavors to accept his weaknesses, embrace his femininity, and still recognize himself as a man. This rare flash of the vicious aspect of his nature reveals the military paradigm of dominance and order under which he has clawed out his survival for so many years. He consciously submits to Renata’s powers of healing and transformation, but he hardly considers her in control; he is clearly not willing to do anything based upon her telling him that he *has to*. And despite her power to rebirth him, he must discover his feminine on his own, and she tells him so in these moments of intimacy: “You are making the discovery. I am only the unknown country” (145). As he gives to her sexually, and works to find nonsexual gratification for himself, we sense that he does discover something, and is willing to enter into a sort of marital covenant to secure it: “He kissed her then and he

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<sup>29</sup> A recognition of masochism is apt and worth mentioning, though I will not prolong a discussion of it here. See Kaja Silverman’s exploration of alternative masculine sexualities, and “the larger political implications of these ‘deviant’ masculinities, some of which indeed say no to power” (2). *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, (1992). Also, see Carol Siegel’s analysis of empowerment: “[M]asochism can, in essence, transform the male body from an instrument of punishment for women into a medium through which women can generate pleasure for both themselves and their partners” (119). *Male Masochism, Modern Revisions of the Story of Love* (1995). (Both Silverman and Siegel are referenced by Fantina.)

searched for the island, finding it and losing it and then finding it for good. For good and for bad, he thought, and for good and for all” (143). It is also likely that his anxiety over the loss of his masculine role was heightened moments before when Renata declared, “I want to be like me only much, much better and I want to have you love me. Also, “she said suddenly and unmaskingly, ‘I want to be like you. Can I be like you a little while tonight?’” (134).<sup>30</sup> The choice of the word *unmaskingly* seems against character for Renata, as we have little if any additional evidence that she is anything other than the devoted young mistress that she appears to be. However, Cantwell’s ire, coupled with the idea that simply because Renata is a woman she must be operating in deception, is characteristic of Hemingway, who “embodies his fears of powerful women in a fictive ‘bitch,’ [in an effort to attack] not only or primarily the woman but rather male passivity and dependence on women—traits he found in himself.”<sup>31</sup> Even as *Across the River* suggests Hemingway’s effort to make his classic hero more dynamic, old demons abound.

Despite Cantwell’s moment of intense anger, he does allow Renata to “play him”; after she has directed the gondoliere, she orchestrates her own sexual pleasure and narrates it as if she is leading a military conquest. Amidst their frequent declarations of love for one another, she instructs him on how to hold her, when to kiss her, and where to sit:

The Colonel said nothing, because he was assisting, or had made an act of presence, at the only mystery that he believed in except the occasional bravery of man.

“Please don’t move,” the girl said. “Then move a great amount.”

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<sup>30</sup> This dynamic presages the dynamic between Catherine and David Bourne in Hemingway’s *Garden of Eden*.

<sup>31</sup> Scott Donaldson, *The Cambridge Companion to Hemingway*, (1996), p.185. Also from same: “Writing retrospectively in 1943, [Hemingway] admitted: ‘Take as good a woman as Pauline—a hell of a wonderful woman—and once she turns mean. Although, of course, it is your own actions that turn her mean. Mine I mean’” (*Selected Letters* 554).

The Colonel, lying under the blanket in the wind, knowing it is only what man does for woman that he retains, except what he does for his fatherland or his motherland, however you get the reading, proceeded. (143)

Of course, it only works for her to play him, if he plays, too, by assuming the feminine role. Cantwell not only retains his connection to his manhood as he “assists” and services his partner, he finds a degree of honor in the act. He considers an orgasm and an act of bravery equally mysterious, yet he also believes in the possibilities of both. Each moment of climax—whether a sexual zenith or exceptional heroic risk—appears to depend upon and reflect the man’s performance, yet such moments are not only fleeting, but also not within his control. On the battlefield or in this gondola-bedroom, someone else must tell him when to move and when to be still, and even then he lacks agency and phallic power; he thinks he failed as a man when he lost his three battalions, and he wonders if he has similarly failed to prove his masculine dominance when Renata experiences three orgasms in the absence of penetration. Renata then signals her sexual “success” with a war metaphor, proclaiming, “I’m you now....And I just took the city of Paris” (146). But just as Cantwell did not climax, neither did he take Paris. In her role as him, Renata succeeds in the places where he has failed, and this is symbolic of her effort to transform him (just as she relied on him to momentarily “transform” her) and his perception of himself as a defeated shell of a man. As her supplicant, Cantwell succeeds in pleasuring her with his wounded and weak hand, making that physical manifestation of defeat a source of power for him as a man. By submitting to her needs as well as to his own love for her, Cantwell finds himself dependent and uncharacteristically vulnerable; by accepting such a position, he rejects a solitary progression toward death and discovers a “new” way to be a man.

In the same passage, Renata asks Cantwell about Michel Nay, who “was always one of [her] greatest heroes” (146).<sup>32</sup> Cantwell agrees, replying that he was once one of his heroes as well, “until Quatre Bas,” where Nay was,

“Awful...Forget it. Too many rear-guard actions coming back from Moskava.”

“But they called him the bravest of the brave.”

“You can’t eat on that. You have to be that, always, and then be the smartest of the smart.” (146)

A man is considered only as brave as his last brave act; the expectations for masculine performance are as impossible as they are relentless. Fantina observed of the dynamic in *The Sun Also Rises*: “Hemingway implicitly condemns contemporary Western standards of manhood but while indulging in the depiction of wounded masculinity he projects a self-conscious vision of a restructured male subjectivity” (87). Yet Hemingway’s Cantwell suggests that wounded masculinity can be repowered when merged with the feminine, even if the path to such redemption is not smooth. Though Renata is meant to offer Cantwell a rebirth, she is as vulnerable to reinforcing performance expectations as Cantwell is to continuing to perform. Just after he tells her about having to be “the smartest of the smart,” she again requests,

“Tell me about Paris, please. We should not make more love, I know.”

“I don’t know it. Who says it?”

“I say it because I love you.”

“All right. You said it and you love me. So we act on that. The hell with it.”

“Do you think we could once more if it would not hurt you?”

“Hurt me?” the Colonel said. “When the hell was I ever hurt?” (147)

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<sup>32</sup> Hemingway very likely would have known that in 1814, Ney defied Napoleon’s orders to march on Paris. The type of hero Renata admires is one who defies expectations.

The redemptive power of a love relationship promises to rescue the Hemingway hero from suffering alone, but Hemingway also suggests that the demands placed on a man in love might function similar to those placed on a man at war. He must invincibly claim to have never been hurt, and to remain indefatigable in his efforts to prove his strength—in this case, his ability to bring her to orgasm. As Renata reveals his capacity to please her and win her love with what he thought were his defects and failures, Cantwell struggles to avoid reengaging with the self-destructive pattern of masculine performance. Renata forces him to confront this vulnerability, telling him, “You know you’ve been hurt,” to which he replies, “Exactly....Let’s forget it” (148). Then he asks her,

“Why do you like the hand?...”  
“Please don’t pretend to be stupid, and please let’s not think of anything, or anything, or anything.”  
“I am stupid,” the Colonel said. “But I won’t think of anything or anything nor of nothing nor of his brother, tomorrow.” (148)

The emphasis here and elsewhere in *Across the River* on not thinking is, even if only by default, an emphasis on *feeling*. The Colonel realizes that he is “stupid” if he squanders love and connection with another human being by thinking too much. His relationship with Renata is what he might salvage from his wreck of a life, and this defiance of pre-death solitude, though a constant effort for him, distinguishes Cantwell as an evolved version of the Hemingway hero.

On their first night together, Renata gives Cantwell a handful of square emeralds that she inherited “from [her] grandmother, and she had them from her mother who had them from her mother,” and she suggests that he “could keep them in [his] pocket like a lucky piece, and feel them if [he] were lonely” (99). When she wants him to take the jewels, and he is unsure, she says,

“You should [take them], please, to give me pleasure.”  
“I’m not sure it’s honorable.”  
“That is like not being sure whether you are a virgin. What you do to give pleasure to another whom you love is most honorable.”  
“All right,” the Colonel said. “I will take them for better or for worse.” (100)

She persuades him to accept the stones—again, with the language of marriage vows—in terms that a man might use to convince a woman to have sex with him. She wants him to “give himself up” to the rebirth of himself as a man who desires to love and be loved. She offers the stones—a symbol of the matriarchal power of her lineage—to Cantwell, seemingly as a replacement for his testicles. She effectively re-masculates him; giving him new cojones, or, as Young would say, “guts” (96). She directs him to touch the stones:

“‘Richard,’ the girl said. ‘Put your hand in your pocket to please me and feel them.’ The Colonel did. ‘They feel wonderful,’ he said” (101). She tells him to pleasure himself on the *jewels* that now to some extent belong to both of them. In her power, she urges him, “[p]ut your right hand, your real hand, in your pocket once and tell me how you feel” (111). By guiding this act, Renata puts his weakness (his wounded hand) in direct contact with the symbol of manhood she has given to him. Again, at her direction, he “put his right hand in his pocket and felt what was there, first with the tips of his fingers, and then with the insides of his fingers, and then with the palm of his hand; his split hand” (125). He gains confidence in this masculine act, and begins to touch the stones even without her prompting. Alone in his hotel room, he took them from his pocket and “looked at them, feeling them slide, cold and yet warm, as they take warmth, and as all good stones have warmth, from his bad hand into his good hand....The stones felt good” (154). Cantwell then places the stones in the pajama pocket on his chest, where “[t]hey were hard and warm against his flat, hard, old, and warm chest” (154). The stones are like his body, and reassure him of his identity as a man.

The next day, he puts them in his “upper left hand pocket,” placing Renata’s healing symbol of a renewed manhood over his ailing heart (182).

Because the narrator frequently renders Cantwell’s interactions with Renata in military terms and situations, and because so much of their time spent together involves her listening to his remembrances of various battles, the reader understands that Cantwell’s love for her is not wholly separate from all that he once was. Narrative references to the progression of an infantry attack punctuate everything from their most intimate moments, to their discussions about what to order from the menu. When she tells him that she “has a disappointment about everything,” and that she cannot marry him, “[s]he said it as a flat statement and it came to the Colonel in the same way as a message came from one of the three battalions, when the battalion commander spoke the absolute truth and told you the worst” (105). The figurative rebirth that Renata actualizes is not a rejection of his former self, but a re-creation, so that he might be like himself, “only much, much better” (134). What might help to make him much, much better, it seems, is recognizing strength in his failures and weaknesses, and understanding how such identification reinforces rather than diminishes him as a man; what might make this happen, it also seems, is the love and influence of a woman. As Hemingway affirms and explores these possibilities, he still shows resistance to the idea of having to depend upon a woman. His protagonist loves Renata, but there are also moments when Cantwell diminishes or objectifies the young woman: he calls her Daughter; he twice likens either her loveliness or her gait to that of “a good horse”; he says she speaks like a cat; and compares her to “the figure-head on a ship” (140). He also uses the word *cunt*, though not in reference to Renata. While hardly an excuse for the denigration, Cantwell objectifies Renata in an attempt to distance himself from the healing

that their love relationship brings him. He fears that while his pain and sense of failure have not made him a man, his ability to endure those defeats has, and if Renata removes the hurt that he considers inextricable from his identity as a man, he might be left with nothing.

Robert W. Lewis considers Renata to be the apotheosis of womanhood in Hemingway's writings, for "[s]he, like Henry James' Maggie Verver [*The Golden Bowl*], blends and represents the achievement of 'idealism, sex, love, and civilization,' his Beatrice getting him (Cantwell) ready for paradise" (182). But, as Jaime Barlowe-Kayes points out, representing Hemingway's ideal of womanhood is not quite a position to which one might want to aspire:

Women are inspiration, muses, sexual temptations and release from sexual tension; they serve as nurturers, solvers of domestic problems, and creators of conditions which allow men to go on accomplishing—and making decisions. Even Hemingway's ways of holding women in esteem marginalized them—kept them as objects, playthings, nurturers, allotting them the no-power of domestic power. Hemingway's highest praise for women was that they did not complain, although that did not keep him from abandoning them. (27)

Barlowe-Kayes' observations are valid; what if, for instance, we consider Renata to be little more than Cantwell's laundress, "cleaning" his conscience of its obsession with defeats, wounds, and weaknesses, and then returning it to him, free of self-loathing and doubts over masculine performance, ready for death.<sup>33</sup> This vision of Cantwell would also fit the

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<sup>33</sup> John O'Hara, a noted defender of Hemingway and *ARIT* when it debuted, does not view Renata, or Hemingway's other female characters, as admirably portrayed: "But the Hemingway heroines, as distinguished from the Sinclair Lewis ones, have a way of catching up with you after you have passed them by. You read them; you see them played by Helen Hayes, Elissa Landi, Ingrid Bergman; you put them away. And yet in later years you form your own non-theatrical picture of them out of what you remember of what Hemingway wrote, and what you have seen of living women. If Rita Hayworth or Ava Gardner should play Renata it will be easy to understand why either actress was cast, but it will probably only postpone a personal picture of the heroine of *Across the River and Into the Trees*. There are not many real things about Renata; in fact, she has so few individual characteristics and attributes that after the inevitable movie has been made, it may be much easier to form your own idea--and almost entirely your own--of what Renata was intended to be" (201).

paradigm for the Hemingway hero.<sup>34</sup> But the depiction of Renata in *Across the River*, while hardly evidence of a revolution in how Hemingway portrays women, represents a small but perceptible shift toward a recognition of women as more than simply nurturers or creators of conditions amenable to male action. Cantwell realizes that he desires “fun” and companionship in life, over having to “hold tight” and approach death alone, and he is willing to release his grip on his failures and defeats in order to obtain such connection. Though he does not want her to join him on the final duck hunt primarily because he wishes to spare her the “ugliness” of what he knows will be his death, her feminine presence does accompany him. As he sits, waiting to shoot, he says to himself, “I wish you were here now and we were in the double blind and if we could only just feel the backs of our shoulders touch. I’d look around and see you and I would shoot the high ducks well” (259). Moments after these thoughts, Cantwell pulls back his gun and shoots toward the sky: “The drake came down on the ice, just outside the perimeter of the blind, and broke the ice as he fell. It was the ice that had been broken to put out the decoys and it had re-frozen lightly...The drake had hit with his head down and his head was under the ice. But the Colonel could see the beautiful winter plumage on his breast and wings” (259). The drake is Cantwell; the re-breaking of the ice suggests that even without Renata physically present, the breakthrough that she made with him—that first break in the ice—would hold. The position of the drake’s head under the ice is reminiscent of Renata’s instruction to “think of nothing”; and

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<sup>34</sup> Jeffrey Meyers places Cantwell in context with Hemingway’s other protagonists and evaluates him somewhat harshly: “Cantwell shares many characteristics of Hemingway’s heroes. He moves on familiar terrain, and runs his life through his mind to purge his bitterness. Wounded and defensive, he tries to control every aspect of his existence and walks with a slightly exaggerated confidence...he exudes expertise and conveys to a devoted novice inside knowledge about everything from opening wine to cutting clams. His pride in trivial expertise is a feeble compensation for his overwhelming sense of failure. He has a desperate and rather pathetic desire to be liked and admired, and to be constantly reassured that he is liked and admired...Like all Hemingway heroes, he is doomed to defeat and death; and the ultimate test of his character is the way he faces death.” (*Critical Heritage* 27)

Cantwell's notice of the beauty of the bird's breast and wings reflects his final acceptance of the beauty of his own body. He imagines "[giving] her a vest made of the whole plumage the way the old Mexicans used to ornament their gods" (259). Renata has saved him from himself, and, consequently, from the fate of a lonely death. She does something for him that a man could not do himself, and for that reason, in Hemingway's world, she matters.

Cantwell knows that he cannot give her the vest, and he spends his time behind the blind contemplating what he possibly can give to her. Among other things, he considers, "[w]hat I would like to give her is security, which does not exist anymore; all my love, which is worthless; all my worldly goods, which are practically non-existent..." (267). Finally he decides, "I better just give her my love" (267). He breaks his determination to "think about [his] girl," and instead recalls a time from the war when "he had not fulfilled the complete spirit of the Geneva Convention which was alleged to govern the operation of war" (269). He had taken a chance, defied the rules of engagement, and trusted his instincts—and he was right. He considers how Renata would be proud of him for such choices, but he also tempers his self-satisfaction with his awareness of how little one right move matters in the grand scope of the continued demand for masculine performance: "I've been right over ninety-five percent of the time and that's a hell of a batting average even in something as simple as war. But that five percent when you are wrong can certainly be something" (270). He first thinks he will not tell any of this to Renata, saying to himself, "I'll never tell you about that, Daughter. That's just a noise heard off stage in my heart. My lousy chicken heart. That bastard heart certainly couldn't hold the pace." But he immediately wavers, and says, "[m]aybe I will [tell her]" (270). This is emblematic of his struggle to vanquish completely his demons and surrender to his heart. Cantwell refers, as he has before, to the dual nature of

his heart, and his language in this instance seems to indicate that he is renewing his determination to give up the old “bastard” part of his heart in exchange for the new of his heart that has the capacity to share and love. He affirms this choice again when, at the end of the duck hunt, he saves a crippled mallard drake:

The sedge moved and the dog came out with a mallard drake in his jaws. The gray white neck and the green head were swaying up and down as a snake’s might move. It was a movement without hope....

‘I’ll take him,’ the Colonel said. Bobby!’

He took the duck from the dog’s light-holding mouth and felt him intact and sound and beautiful to hold, and with his heart beating and his captured, hopeless eyes.

He looked at him carefully, gentling him as you might gentle a horse.

‘He’s only wing-tipped,’ he said. ‘We’ll keep him for a caller or to turn loose in the Spring. Here, take him and put him in the sack with the hen.’”  
(273)

Just as Renata found something beautiful and worthy of life in Cantwell, he finds the same in this initially hopeless drake. He recognizes himself in the drake, and, aware of how Renata healed him, he chooses to save the duck by placing him with a hen.

What Cantwell achieves in the moments leading up to his death seems very much like a “state of serene unselfconsciousness” that, according to Rovit, tends to elude the traditional Hemingway hero (55). When Cantwell says his final goodbye to Alvarito, his duck-hunting guide, he reminds him to give Renata his love, and tells him to “Consider me not a Colonel” (278). He is at peace with his realization that he is “no longer of any real use to the Army of the United States. That has been made quite clear” (281). He tells himself, “Now take it easy.... Any further concern you may have is about yourself and that is just a luxury,” but he can’t help himself (281). He thinks of the ducks he promised to those at the hotel, and the sausage he forgot to give to Bobby. He ensures that his driver knows the way back to Trieste, and he writes a note to be sure that, “in the event of [his] death,” his shotguns and the

portrait will be returned to Renata, “their rightful owner” (282-3). He makes these last preparations while suffering the first two of his final four heart attacks. Rather than a parody of the Hemingway hero, the depiction of Cantwell proposes dynamic possibilities for the tyro, and casts light on alternative dimensions of heroism. The goal—to die with grace—might remain the same, but attaining it is more complex. The new hero demonstrates bravery not by holding tight, but by being courageous enough to let go. Cantwell’s third attack hit him and “gripped him so he knew he could not live” (282). He checks again to be sure his driver knows the way, and then he climbs into the backseat of the car to lie next to the portrait of Renata as he meets his death. Margaret O’Shaughnessey explains that with Cantwell, Hemingway “offer[s] a vision of beauty and love that goes beyond the death and destruction at hand.” (Sanderson 209). Cantwell does not need Renata in order to die, but he does need her in order to die *well*; she helps him to achieve the latter because he connects and loves, rather than stoically holding back in order to give semblance of enduring.

Hemingway seems to have discovered a vision of feminine worthiness that does not compromise this hero's capacity to die well. Even if, as was written in the 1950 *Time Magazine Book Review*, in *Across the River* “Hemingway, once a master of dialogue, seems to have forgotten how infantrymen—even colonels—really talk and think,” maybe it is because he *wanted* to forget.<sup>35</sup> His protagonist discovers the possibility of a meaningful love relationship that allows “the grace of a happy death,” as well as a life with satisfaction and “fun,” if not also pain and struggle. As though to signal his acceptance of the rebirth Renata has given him, ““The hell with sorrows,’ the Colonel said with his eyes closed and his head resting lightly on the black sweater that was his

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<sup>35</sup> Carlos Baker considers the writing of the book a necessity for Hemingway to objectify his war experiences (*Hemingway: The Writer as Artist*, 265).

fatherland. You have to have some damned fatherland, he thought. Here is mine” (208). Renata’s love still demands masculine performance, but she expands the parameters for what qualifies as masculine by making viable what he thought were his weaknesses and defeats. As Cantwell welcomes Renata’s feminine influence, he identifies with his own femininity. Tennessee Williams once said, “No living person doesn't contain both sexes. Mine could have been either one. Truly, I have two sides to my nature” (Gussow 49). Cantwell considers his capacity to love her with “all [his] heart” a “great miracle,” and in his final hours he resists a retreat from emotion. During their last meal together, he silently ponders different ways to say good-bye, and decides upon “farewell, a long farewell and take it with you where you go. With handles, he thought” (246). What he and Renata have between them has substance, and is not easily left behind. Amid his final and even desperate declarations of his love, he and the *Gran Maestro* informally induct her into their Order, which, while a playful gesture, suggests the desire to make her an insider in some way. As the hour of his departure, and his death, draws closer, Cantwell, while lying on his bed with Renata, “looked up at the play of the light on the ceiling. It was reflected, in part, from the Canal. It made strange but steady movements, chanting, as the current of a trout stream changes, but remaining, still changing as the sun moved” (215). He no longer identified with the solitary wolf, the stubborn ox, or the lone sail—he is moving up stream now, like a trout, swimming with other trout, still toward death, but changed by the current of life.

## Chapter IV

### Tim O'Brien's *Tomcat in Love*: Hell Hath No Fury Like a Man Betrayed

*A promiscuous man...is never really satisfied...  
What he is looking for is completion of himself.*  
-Tennessee Williams (*Notebooks xv*)

Perhaps the only way possible to come to some understanding of the repulsive and thoroughly misogynistic, if not also often boring, language and exploits of Tim O'Brien's Thomas Chippering, is to construe them as a hyperbolic displays of masculine prowess and self-confidence by a man who desperately lacks even a modicum of either attribute. And while O'Brien's beleaguered narrator of *Tomcat in Love* (1998) does seem intent on earning the empathy of the reader—Chippering addresses the reader as “you” in footnotes, and imagines his reader's own story of betrayal and loss of love—one must overlook, in addition to the vast amount of disrespect toward women, a great deal of absurdity and seeming meaninglessness. Yet we might better begin to decipher what motivates Chippering's decidedly compulsive obsessions if we consider what Samuel Beckett's character Nell declares in *Endgame*: “Nothing is funnier than unhappiness...it's the most comical thing in the world” (18). In fact, the playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd, with their depictions of a godless universe in which human existence lacks purpose, and wherein logical communication gives way to irrational dialogue and, eventually, silence, would likely recognize a kindred spirit in O'Brien. Like Hemingway's Cantwell, Chippering is looking for redemption from a lifetime of betrayals. As a seven-year-old boy, Chippering watches as

Herbie, his best friend, attempts to nail Lorna Sue, Chippering's future wife and Herbie's sister, to a plywood cross. He begins his narrative by recalling this seminal childhood experience, and then subjects the reader to a verbal torrent, detailing the events leading up to his divorce, his escapades as a linguistics professor, his lingering ghosts from his days in Vietnam, his desperate and ill-conceived search for both companionship and revenge, and finally his near-suicidal nervous breakdown. Chippering is desperate for someone to listen, but he subjects everyone within earshot to his highly intellectual, though frequently vapid and condescending, fixation on words. Yet within this framework of absurdity, O'Brien does attempt to bring meaning to the adventures of his wayward Chippering, as the latter struggles with how betrayal and a desire for vengeance both pervert and deform his efforts to fulfill his human need for love and recognition as a man. And despite the comedic form, *Tomcat* is still vintage O'Brien, at least according to him:

I try to write about the human heart under stress. (War is stressful. Love is stressful.) In this sense, then, *Tomcat In Love* represents no fundamental departure for me. Granted, I set out to write a book that would make people laugh, and certainly the comedic tone of the novel presented interesting new challenges. Yet my raw materials remain pretty much the same: the things we will do to win love, the things we will do to keep love, the things we will do to love ourselves. (Bookreporter Interview 1998)

In another interview, he comments on the dark intent of the comedic aspect: "The hero of the narrative says, 'All for love. All to be loved.' We can laugh at this, or we can cry. In this book, I wanted to laugh. Laughter does not deny pain. Laughter—like a wail—acknowledges and replies to pain." (*Bold Type*, Sept 1998). *Tomcat* is the O'Brien we know, yet with a twist.

Make no mistake, *Tomcat* is also a novel about war. The title itself references the F-14 fighter jets that flew in Vietnam.<sup>36</sup> The primary antecedents for Chippering's ranting obsession with betrayal and revenge stem from his experiences in Vietnam, and from his fear of the Greenie ghosts that continue to haunt him. Of course, there is the obvious analogy between love and war, but for O'Brien, the focus is less on any battle between men and women, and more on the battle waged between man and his own heart. O'Brien has said in various interviews that Chippering's extreme actions suggest all humans' desperate search for love and affection. In *A Trauma Artist*, Mark Heberle draws direct parallels between the trauma of O'Brien's own war experience and his writing, as well as between the trauma of Chippering's war experience and his dysfunctional life. Heberle writes, "[a]lthough the war is uncovered as a traumatic experience for Chippering, his own self-representation, his unreliability as a narrator, and even the pervasiveness of his traumatization subvert the conventional solemnity of the subject" (259). In his dramatic, contradictory style, Chippering avers, "Vietnam itself came as a relatively minor insult to prior injury, almost entirely uneventful. Only a single episode deserves attention, yet this incident goes far to explain the human being I have since become" (58). He is finally able to share the events with a janitor named Delbert, who finds him tied up in his underwear in a hotel bar after two female bartenders leave him "trussed up" there as punishment for his "whole sleazy personality," and for being an "old fog[y] on the make" (150, 151). What we begin to understand, though, is that Chippering, despicable as much of what he says and does is, is not actually "on the make"—in fact, with the exception of Mrs. Kooshof, he makes excuses and a quick exit when women actually propose following through on the physical intimacy that he

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<sup>36</sup> Two discarded titles: "A Dictionary of Love" and "In Defense of Thomas Chippering" (telephone conversation, April 10, 1997) (Heberle, 259).

so cloyingly seems to have sought—rather he is woefully inept at making viable human connections. By objectifying and “coming on” to any woman he encounters and then appearing oblivious to the fact that he has met with rejection, he unconsciously repeats the pattern of betrayal that he endured during his war experience. Despite the pain and unhappiness it causes him, Chippering’s relationship with betrayal is comfortable and therefore difficult to excise because it is what he expects and what he *knows*.

This seems to be the only viable thread of sympathy a reader might have for Chippering, and it is a tenuous one. It can be hard to get past paragraph after paragraph of Chippering’s first-person narrative voice, which Heberle refers to as “minimaniacally solipsistic, preening itself fastidiously on its own pretensions to intellectual and erotic mastery when not breaking down into childish self-pity, resentment, or rage” (260). For instance, he brags to the reader, “...women find me attractive beyond words. And who on earth could blame them? I stand an impressive six feet six; my weight rarely exceeds one hundred eighty pounds. In the eyes of many, I resemble a clean-shaven version of our sixteenth President, gangly and benign, yet this is mere camouflage for the man within—a recipient of the Silver Star for valor” (27). Yet his obsession with love, and the cycle of betrayal and vengeance that he perpetuates in pursuit of what he thinks is lost love, prevent the human closeness that he so desperately desires. He wants and needs people to listen, but he sabotages his own needs through his obsession with language, and how he uses it to obscure truth and to prevent his own vulnerability. The “certain leather-bound love ledger,” which ostensibly is the deciding factor when Lorna Sue Zylstra ends their marriage, is emblematic of Chippering’s ineffectual efforts to communicate his desire for acceptance and understanding. He tells the reader that the ledger “was a diary of sorts, a carefully quantified

record of my life as a man of the world. (Names. Dates. Body types. Hair color. Other such vital statistical data)” (80). But as (funny?) offensively objectifying of women as such a journal is, it also is not quite what it seems. He has not been intimate with any of these women, and the lists actually represent a catalogue of what in his mind are mini betrayals by women who rebuffed his advances; the ledger is a sort of word-driven vengeance against them. Despite his bombast, Chippering seems aware of the irony of his ledger as a record of his life as a man—it is a record of his defeats in terms of his masculine prowess and sexual conquest, not claimable proof of his manhood with the expectations his “world” has for masculine performance. “If necessary,” Chippering says, “we will lie to win love. We will lie to keep love”; this too reflects his predicament in maintaining his image as a man (77). Various characters in the book tell Chippering that he is a manipulator, and he is; yet his dramatic efforts at manipulation and distortion of the truth are attempts to mitigate or deflect the betrayals and rejections that he perceives to be as challenges to his manhood. The words that he uses to distract the reader from an awareness of the self-loathing that stems from his doubts about his performance of masculinity, are also the words that make this reality abundantly clear. Affectations aside, he is not the quintessential man’s man he seems to think he is supposed to be: “Though it is awkward to acknowledge personal inadequacies, I must concede that I was not cut out for the grim business of soldiering. I am a tall, somewhat gawky man. Athletically disinclined. A distinctive stride—pelvis forward, elbows sideward—an intellectual’s abstract tilt to the jaw” (58). Chippering counters these “inadequacies” by attempting exaggerated proofs in other areas—sexual, intellectual, vengeful, and misogynistic—of his compliance with the stereotypes of manliness, and pretends not to notice (perhaps another fulfillment of the masculine stereotype) when he falls

wildly short of impressing anyone. When he admits to having “concocted a counterfeit psychiatrist to solve a counterfeit problem—a sacred lie to save a marriage,” he could also be referring to how he has to “fake it” in his performance of masculinity to measure up to standards that are inauthentic representations of manhood (16). O’Brien parodies the construct of masculinity, suggesting that Chippering’s absurd words and actions are appropriate in so far as they are in response to an equally absurd sets of standards and expectations that prevent men from actualizing self-love and meaningful human relationships.

In interviews, O’Brien has been adamant that his novels are not about Vietnam, but about the “things a guy does for love.” O’Brien contends: “It’s like calling Toni Morrison a black writer or Conrad an ocean writer or Shakespeare a royalty writer. Your subject matter is given to you. I don’t write about bombs and bullets, I write about the human heart. Conrad’s novels aren’t about oceans and ships and things, they’re about human beings. There’s that tendency to tag things in this culture, and the artist has to resist the tag” (Edelman Interview). This expressed desire to reject “tags” in our culture might also apply to our expectations for performance of gender. Still, the past—which for O’Brien and Chippering does involve Vietnam—consistently informs the future in *Tomcat*. Chippering intones that “we move forward by looping briefly backward,” but his obsessions with the past dominate his narrative and impede his emotional movement “forward.” In Chippering’s loop back to Vietnam, his reflections on his precipitous involvement in Vietnam are reminiscent of those shared by the narrator in *The Things They Carried*: “I was always an inert young man, the reactive type, a tardy and somewhat petulant respondent to the world, almost never an initiator. Events dictated. I complied. By this process, the war sucked me

in, and in January of 1969 I found myself filling sandbags at a forward firebase in the mountains of Quang Ngai Province” (57). Chippering’s sardonic tone differs, however, from the more confessional, self-reflective style of the narrator in *The Things They Carried*, as does his characterization of himself as a victim or a pawn in the game of war. Yet both Chippering and the narrator in *The Things They Carried* offer self-portrayals that are at odds with what we might expect from a soldier; Chippering’s language underscores his submissive, tractable fulfillment of war, what is perhaps considered the most manly of pursuits.

Chippering’s protestations regarding the war are elitist—he remarks on how “the food was called *chow*—a word that speaks volumes”—but there are also serious points about war and manhood made amidst the levity (57). He describes how his days in Vietnam,

...seemed to stretch out toward infinity, blank and humid, without purpose, and at night I was kept awake by endless drone of mosquitoes and helicopters. (Why wars must be contested under such conditions I shall never understand. Is not death sufficient?)

The year 1969, to put it politely, was not my happiest. I felt marooned; my health deteriorated.

Surrounded by bunkers and barbed wire, sealed off from the real war, I spent that year as an awards clerk in a battalion adjutant’s office, where my primary chore was to compose and process citations for gallantry in action—Silver Stars, Bronze Stars, Purple Hearts, et cetera. In the beginning, I suppose, I rather enjoyed manufacturing these scenarios of human valor. (58)

His aside about how risking death is not considered “sufficient,” while posited in a humorous context, speaks directly to the male anxiety that in any given situation, one might not be considered manly *enough*. Chippering writes the citations for awards that designate particular actions as brave, and he recognizes their false, manufactured quality; in the right context, with the right compilation of words, any act can be made to seem gallant. He not only acknowledges his complicity in this often-arbitrary method for contriving courage, but

also reinforces the inanity of such awards for bravery by giving himself the Silver Star when he calls in an air strike on his own comrades who have betrayed him. He rhetorically asks the reader (and himself), “Why, then, was I there? Certainly not out of moral conviction. Nor to seek adventure, nor to test my masculinity. (Never a problem. I am amply hormonal, a fact upon which clever women often comment)” (57-8). But clearly he is concerned with how his masculinity is perceived, just as he is also aware of how impossible it is to prove, or at least not with any lasting effect. “The brief answer—the silly answer” he tells us, “is that I was conscripted. Yet I did nothing to avoid this fate. When the draft notice arrived, in my first year of graduate school, I chuckled and promptly returned to my books. Imagine my surprise, therefore, when our country’s claim upon my person turned out to be in earnest” (58). Chippering’s point about doing nothing to avoid this fate of going to war, reminds the reader of the narrator in *The Things They Carried* who considers himself a coward for not dodging the draft, but in this case, the reader is not sure whether Chippering is suggesting that the draft was an insult because his manliness was already quite evident and therefore he could skip the whole war thing, or if he “chuckles” because he is rather aware, as he has hinted, of his failure to measure up to the conventional standards of masculinity, and he hardly takes it seriously that the army would want actually *him*. Either way, and I think O’Brien revels in validating both interpretations, the idea that our standard judgments of masculinity might possess any meaning at all emerges as the biggest joke.

Chippering’s sangfroid over his masculine sexual prowess is a cover for his supreme doubts about his ability to measure up. When he finds himself lost in the jungle of Vietnam, abandoned and betrayed by his compatriots, “[e]verything had become everything else: trees

blending into more trees. To go down I had to go up. But I could not *find up*” (61). Out of this desperation, and smarting from the hurt and embarrassment of the other men’s disloyalty, Chippering focuses his energy on vengeance: “All day, as I trudged along, my thoughts were wired to an internal transformer of despair and rage. I yelled at the jungle. I envisioned scenarios of revenge, how someday I would acquire the means to retaliate against my six so-called comrades. Napalm strikes. Grenades rolling into foxholes. I smiled at these thoughts, then found myself trembling” (61). Thoughts of revenge offer him a mental defense against his fear that he is inadequate as a man; making such plans of reprisal a reality allows him to perform as the sort of man that he thinks others expect him to be—to defend his manhood, though even he is not sure he believes in it. When he reveals that, “[t]error kept [him] going,” we understand that alone in the jungle he feared for his physical life, but also for the fate of his image as a man” (61). We find pity for Chippering because throughout the novel his maniacal fixation on revenge stems from the fear that those who through their betrayals have made him look less than a man, might actually be right. O’Brien has mentioned in interviews that he considers Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* a seminally inspirational work, and yet I think he wishes to rescue the men in his own work from the darkness that threatens their hearts. He wants men to be true to themselves, regardless of the expectations of masculinity, and he also raises the possibility that the performance has gone on for so long, that many men might be in denial over their failure to be true. In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad wrote, “We live as we dream—alone” (38). But O’Brien, whose protagonist confesses about war, “I felt marooned,” seems to be fighting for an end to such a desolate, lonely male existence (57). In part through humor, O’Brien attempts to disassociate being a man from being non-reactive, unemotional, and unattached.

Such a theoretical notion of a reformed image of manhood is only possible, if women—and other men—agree to validate it. The double-bind for Chippering is that, with language and folly, he has obfuscated the authenticity of his own person for so long, that he is no longer able to trust his own instincts, or believe in himself as a man. He is no longer in Vietnam, but his enduring sense of internal disorientation echoes his experience in the jungle nearly three decades earlier: “Lost, I told them. Lost as lost gets. Abandoned in those mountains, no compass, no north or south, just the dense green jungle blurring into deeper jungle, and for two days I followed a narrow dirt trail that led nowhere. Here was a place where even *lost* gets lost. Everything was a mirror to everything else. And none of it seemed real” (144). In this passage, Chippering is trying to tell Peg and Patty, the two bartenders who tie him up for being an “ogler” and trying to “scam on” them, about the betrayal he suffered in Vietnam. They pretend to be interested in listening, telling him that they “dig Vietnam types...Studs...Stallions” (144). He seems vaguely aware that they are mocking him, but he is so desperate to tell his story, and so self-absorbed, that he simply keeps talking, and increases the reader’s awareness of how deeply his war experience informs his current situation. He confesses, “[b]y my third day in the mountains, lost had become a state of mind. I was not myself. I was an infant—a lostling—part of the rain forest, part of the sky, and at times the very notion of singularity dissolved all around me” (146). In his present life, he is lost as a man, and a lack of singularity seems resonant for this waywardness as well. Back in the jungle, he claims, “I had lost the *me* of me—my name, its meaning—those particularities of spirit and personality that separate one from all, each from other. I was a grubworm among grubworms. One more fly in God’s inky ointment” (147). He feels betrayed by his compatriots for being left alone, but at the same time he also resents feeling a

lack of singularity in his identity, as he trudges on in the service of what men are supposed to do. At his personal nadir, he discovers “the soul-killing dimension of true lostness. Or, more accurately, the utter absence of dimension. Without up, I asked, where is down? Without hereness, how does one locate thereeness?” (146). For Chippering, the implication for being lost at war as a metaphor for being lost in life is that now he is alone without human connection, and alone without his own “*me*”—isolated not only by the betrayal of others, but also by how he has betrayed himself in his failed attempts to meet the expectations for masculine performance. Just as O’Brien considers his own (and several of his protagonists’) failure to defy the draft as cowardice, we might also read Chippering’s inability to *find* his true self in defiance of prescriptive masculine behavior to signify a lack of courage. What seems to be Chippering’s perpetual flaw is that his construction of the world as one of betrayal renders him unable to make himself vulnerable to genuine love, and by consequence, he disingenuously, though purposefully, plays the role of a tomcat to protect himself—if the love and affection are not real, then the rejection and betrayal cannot be either.

A tomcat, on the prowl for sexual gratification, is almost by definition *not* in love, and most of the time, Chippering seems most in love with himself. But hunger for true love from a woman is the motivating factor in much of Chippering’s behavior, and his (faux) obsession with large-scale sexual conquest serves as a protective veneer enabling him to continue to deny his fear that he is not loved at all. The idea of a tomcat *in* love is paradoxical, and intriguingly reflects comments O’Brien has made in interviews about how the United States should have dropped love on the people of Vietnam, instead of bombs—

which would have fallen from F-14 Tomcat fighter plane. Chippering is emotional at times, and he makes statements that are revealing in part because on the surface they, too, seem contradictory. As he begins to implement his attack against his ex-wife Lorna Sue, her brother Herbie Zylstra, and her new husband whom Chippering refers to as the “tycoon,” he explains his position:

Here it is sufficient to underscore three salient consequences of the whole experience: my sensitivity to people leaving me, my terror of betrayal, my lifelong propensity for exacting vengeance. It should be clear, too, that I am not without backbone. The timid scholar in me perished forever in those mountains. Stung by treachery, I learned how to respond. And in Tampa, abetted by Mrs. Robert Kooshof, I would soon be bringing some extremely serious shit to bear. (62)

He draws a connection between his victimization and his desire for revenge, and calls upon the latter as proof of his masculine strength. He is *made* emotionally vulnerable by betrayal, rather than arriving at the uniquely human condition by his own volition, and it is this that he fears emasculates him. He relies on his dexterity with words—though even words threaten to betray him with their multiple meanings—to derive a degree of authority amidst his overwhelming sense of powerlessness. Heberle points to O’Brien’s characterization of words as “unstable and idiosyncratic,” and the same analysis seems valid for how O’Brien depicts the complexities of truth and love (xxii). When asked in an interview about his focus in *Tomcat*, he says, "What's really true is not a philosophical thing; it's a plaguing thing....What does somebody really think? Does she really love you? And if she says she does, to what degree? If you stop loving someone, did you ever love them? If you say you're committed and later you're not committed, well, was the first thing commitment? You see what I mean? This kind of thing has always interested me" (*New York Times* Interview). Chippering is buffeted about O’Brien’s exploration of the uncertain and ephemeral nature of

love, but there is never any doubt that love is the one thing he desires above all else, and that his acts of retribution are a way for him to maintain contact with the people from whom he seeks love. In the same *New York Times* interview, O'Brien reveals the autobiographical antecedents for various aspects of *Tomcat*: "I went through a terrible time in 1994, and I wanted to look back on it through a lens of humor." The "terrible time" O'Brien refers to included a divorce and the publication of his essay "The Vietnam in Me," which details his near suicidal experiences after taking his girlfriend (for whom he had left his wife) back to Vietnam on assignment, and then returning home to discover the girlfriend was leaving him for another man. In a November 1998 phone interview, O'Brien tells Heberle that the first girl he fell in love with was a nine-year-old named Lorna Lou, and he identifies the Worthington, Minnesota, setting for *Tomcat* as his hometown, which he admits to "mock[ing]...relentlessly," (xxiii).

Chippering's perception of love and war as similar games of pain, betrayal, and deception echoes O'Brien's own experiences. Chippering remembers how during his first sexual encounter, with he and Lorna Sue perched on the frost-covered hood of his father's Pontiac, she cried out, "It hurts!" and he thought, "who could blame her" (48). He construed this act of lovemaking as a way to "test our courage," as if, like war, human intimacy is something one has to brave. At first, "suddenly terrified, full of doubts, weakened by a strange biological fuzziness" ("*Perform*: the word loomed before me like a locked door)," he tells her that he is "calling it off" (103). Expectations for sex and love and proof of manhood are entangled and confused, and he would rather avoid performance altogether than risk failure—a pattern that echoes throughout his life. He repeatedly reminds us that he is obsessed with love, and will do anything to obtain it, but he is clearly confused

about what true love is, and how to separate it from his experience of pain and treachery. He admits that, “[f]rom childhood on, I had been consumed by an insatiable appetite for affection, hunger without limit, a bottomless hole inside me. I would (and will) do virtually anything to acquire love, cheat for love, beg for love, steal for love, ghostwrite for love, seek revenge for love, swim oceans for love, perhaps even kill for love. Am I alone in this? Certainly not” (157). What he cannot seem to do for love, though, is make himself vulnerable and open to it; even in the final chapter, living in paradise with Mrs. Kooshof, he still clings to his pattern of self-protection and deception. He keeps a love ledger of the physical attributes of the women he encounters, paying attention to their bodies and their external features because to appreciate their interior qualities would mean he not only had to listen—a near impossibility for him, but also that he had to reveal something about himself, and such a position of defenselessness scares him. His verbosity is camouflage and cover for his heart, and prevents any meaningful connection with his emotional self, thereby precluding his capacity to realize a genuine love relationship. On some level, Chippering understands this about himself, but has no idea how to remedy it; “this love drive,” he says, “went haywire at a very early stage. Like some horrid cancer, the need for affection multiplied into a voracious, desperate, lifelong craving. The benign became malignant. Desire became compulsion. Hence my hosts of females acquaintances; hence innumerable peccadilloes and compromises and heartaches and broken promises and embarrassments and outright humiliations” (158). His tomcatting antics are impulsive attempts to find human connection, as unsustainable as those connections might be, without emotional risk. What he thinks is his “love” for Lorna Sue is more like a masochistic addiction and not really love at all. Eventually Chippering understands the reality of his relationship with Lorna Sue, but at

the same he cannot seem to stop believing in the ideal that has propelled him for so many years: “All those years of willful ignorance. Hiding from the truth. Fooling myself. The girl of my dreams—my one and only—but like the summer stars she was beyond reach, utterly unknown, a bright and very distant mystery” (319). On the final page of the novel, Chippering, though planning a wedding with Mrs. Kooshof and claiming to be on the mend and “reclaim[ing] [his] life,” makes a final plea to Lorna Sue, whom he has addressed throughout his narrative under the guise of “you”: “Believe this: He loved you. He still does. He knows his transgression and feels it like a loosened tooth in his mouth on the morning of your anniversary, and on your autumn birthday, and when the snow does not come to Fiji on Christmas Eve” (342). By obsessing about the unattainable love of Lorna Sue, and by ignoring the genuine, present love of Mrs. Kooshof, Chippering might think he is protecting himself from betrayal and loss, but he ends up continuing to betray himself, and losing out on true love.

If anything, perhaps we can admire Chippering for never giving up on love, despite his deviant, self-destructive methods—he is at war for love; it drives his every move, despite the fact that he has no idea how to obtain it. Paul Whitaker recognizes a connection between how America and Chippering struggle to assimilate their Vietnam experiences: “America today is governed by a generation still smarting from the ignominy of Vietnam; somewhere in her collective national psyche she longs for the chance to exorcise and avenge the shame of that humbling war. She also finds herself cast in the role of global police officer, intervening in ill-understood conflicts in far-off theatres” (45). Chippering aligns himself with the rest of humanity in his fixation:

Each of us, I firmly believe, is propelled through life by a restless, inexhaustible need for affection. Why else do we trudge off to work every

morning, or withhold farts, or decorate our bodies with precious gems, or attend church, or smile at strangers, or pluck out body hair, or send valentines, or glance into mirrors, or forgive, or try to forgive, or gnash our teeth at betrayal, or pray, or promise, or any of a trillion large and small behaviors that constitute the totality of the human trial on this planet?

All for love.

All to *be* loved. (157-8)

He struggles, however, with the simultaneous desire both to hug Lorna Sue and wish her well, and to blow her to “smithereens.” In his war for love, his intentions are good, but it is still a war. When he recalls his “wartime adventures in the verdant mountains of Southeast Asia” (300), it becomes hard to distinguish where the war ends and the sex begins:

Adding to the frenzy [of Chippering and Thuy Ninh’s sexual encounter] was an impressive B-52 strike in the mountains to the west. The planes were invisible. The consequence were not. Over Thuy Ninh’s bare shoulders, I could see the distant jungle take fire—bright orange, bright violet, bright black. An entire mountainside collapsed. Seconds later a heated wind swept down the gorge, soon followed by several rapid concussions. Thuy Ninh seemed not to notice. She arched her back and exploded. There were secondary explosions too, plus aftershocks, and then I closed my eyes and unloaded my own devastating tonnage. (159-60)

But Chippering mistakes the physical exchange for love, and overhears a fellow soldier named Goof remark, “This dude’s heart...is where his dick should be” (160). Chippering admits that he would “gamely oblige” to Thuy Ninh’s sexual directions and demands; ““Like *this!*”” she would exclaim. He suggests her feminization of him with the acknowledgement that “she filled up that part of me that needed filling” (160). He seems willing to be physically vulnerable, emasculated even, but unfortunately for him, his dick is *not* his heart, and what he thinks is love, is not. Amidst the fury of a late night bombing orchestrated by his comrades who several times cry out, “Love bombs!...Love, love, love!” while they devastate the countryside, Chippering realizes that Thuy Ninh is the sexual partner of all of the men in the villa. He concedes that, “[e]ven in war, I could not shake the curse of

romance. It was my destiny. The story of my life” (157). He comes to accept betrayal, and to some extent emasculation, as an indivisible part of love. Lorna Sue also directed his sexual urges, never allowing him to climax inside her—a non-event that Chippering refers to as his retreat” (109). During their first sexual encounter, she dressed sacrificially in all-white, and then, during sex, “hogged the blanket. She made whining noises. She yelled at me. Slower, she insisted. Faster. Gentler. Rougher. More romantic. She snaked an arm around my neck, yanked me down. She bit my throat. At one key juncture, when I began to falter, she emboldened me with the palm of her hand, levered me in again, beat on my buttocks” (105). Throughout Chippering’s remembrance of this scene, he never once objectifies her body or even describes it, which is in contrast to how she speaks of all the other women in the text. Chippering performs accordingly, accepting the image of Lorna Sue as sacred, and himself as the unworthy male capable of defiling her. Heberle writes that throughout the novel Chippering encounters “the rejection of male erotic and ideological authority” (268). At the very moment when Lorna Sue tells him that she is leaving him, his reaction is to “[push] [him]self up against her, as if sex could save [him], knowing it could not” (19). Yet despite his eventual revenge response, a conspiracy to firebomb her house in a replaying of his tract of love and war, Chippering seems to imply that he would accept emasculation if it meant he could achieve love. O’Brien is making a larger point here about how an adherence to socially constructed expectations of masculinity (and femininity) might prevent and distort love and human connection. For Chippering, love and war, the two defining factors in his life, become indistinguishable: “(It struck me, just in passing, that I might someday author a monograph on the eerie similarities between wartime combat and peacetime romance. Blood lust. Mortal fear. Shell shock. Despair. Hopelessness.

Entrapment. Betrayal)” (202). Chippering mistakenly thinks that vengeance is how the peacetime warrior, deprived of his goal of love, proves his manhood; but true bravery comes for the peacetime warrior when, risking ultimate betrayal, he confronts his fear of being vulnerable and is true to his heart.

When Chippering finally reveals the crux of his Vietnam story, how he was betrayed both by his comrades and by his lover, Thuy Ninh, it is in the company of Delbert, the janitor, who tells Chippering, ““All right, I’ll listen...Finish up that toilet for me, Those other ones too”” (154). Chippering then says that though “sanitation was not [his] cup of tea and never would be, there comes a time when one must pay a price for human sympathy” (154). The juxtaposition of human waste with Delbert’s at best half-hearted attention (at one point, Chippering asks if he is still awake) to Chippering’s experience indicates how we tend to ignore one another’s suffering, considering their pain worthless to our own experience. The more literal translation might be that finding human sympathy is a *shit* job; and, also, that despite how irritating, offensive, and desperate Chippering might be, he is alone, reduced to telling his story to a janitor in exchange for scrubbing a toilet. Carla, a twenty-something S & M salesclerk whose body is riddled with tattoos and piercings, is similarly impatient with Chippering as he makes sleazy advances at her while seeking her help in his purchase of deviant sex paraphernalia that he intends to plant in an effort of revenge to break up Lorna Sue’s new marriage. No stranger to self-inflicted pain, Carla tells Chippering, ““See, what people don’t realize...is that nobody can fucking *hurt* you if you’re *already* hurting. Am I right?”” (29). His incessant focus on revenge is in response to hurt and is a shield against further hurt, but it also shields against authentic human connection. On the same day that he loses his job at the university (for writing a thesis for a student who was blackmailing him

after he made sexual advances), he and Mrs. Kooshof become engaged, yet his mood is far from celebratory: “There was nothing to hope for. And without hope, our chief bulwark against madness, the human spirit becomes unpredictable and sometimes dangerous. I was hurt. And I wanted to hurt back. No longer for revenge—just to hurt and keep hurting” (235). Though he thinks he is protecting himself from further betrayal, Chippering hurts himself—betrays himself—by avoiding being vulnerable to true love, and so the cycle of hurt continues. O’Brien’s characters appear to be in a contest of sorts for who can suffer the most pain; for Lorna Sue, her emotional pain manifests itself as masochistically inflicted physical pain when she stabs her self with a pen and repeatedly reopens the wound on her hand from where Herbie tried to nail her to the plywood cross. At one point Lorna Sue tells Chippering, “...you don’t know what hurt *is*” (130). O’Brien argues that if as men and women we each cling to our own hurt, convinced that it is unique and somehow self-defining, then it threatens to consume us, and ultimately we’re all left hurting, and alone.

Acts of vengeance become a way for Chippering both to perform his pain and to perform as a man. The relationship between masculine performance and pain is significant, and is reflected by how Chippering responds to emasculation with bombs, both in Vietnam and in Minnesota. Sex and love (both romantic and fatherly) are also directly intertwined with his experience of war, pain, and betrayal. The novel opens with Chippering’s recollection of a time when he was an innocent seven-year-old boy, looking to his father for some understanding of truth and what it means to be a man. He and Herbie make an airplane from plywood, and homemade bombs from mason jars and gasoline. Chippering reveals that during that summer in 1952,

...the word engine did important engine work in my thoughts. I did not envision machinery. I envisioned thrust: a force pressing upward and

outward, even beyond. This notion had its objective component—properties both firm and man-made—but on a higher level, as pure idea, the engine that my father would be bringing home did not operate on mechanical principles. I knew nothing, for example, of propellers and gears and such. My engine would somehow *contain* flight. Like a box, I imagined, which when opened would release the magical qualities of levitation into the plywood boards of my airplane.

At night, in bed, I would find myself murmuring that powerful, empowering word: *engine*. I loved its sound. I loved everything it meant, everything it did not mean but should. (2)

While Chippering’s recount of this childhood memory comes from the position of an adult well-steeped in betrayal, his narrative voice as he depicts these hopeful, pre-betrayal moments is devoid of the overbearing narcissism that permeates the rest of his story. The title of this opening chapter is “Faith,” and for Chippering, the image of the engine, and the word itself, embody hope, fatherly trust, and belief in the possibilities for his experience as a man, including “everything [being a man] did not mean but should” (2). Chippering’s conception of the engine that he desires also involves the sexual imagery of thrusting, forcing, and pressing upward and outward, as well as his awareness that the objective attributes of its power are “man-made.” What he wants here is power, and he wants—or assumes—his father to be the one to give it to him. Chippering’s expectation that the penis could contain both the masculine power of thrust, *and* the feminine, vaginal, “magical qualities” that “open” and empower “levitation,” suggests his naïveté and even early misogyny. But his father fails him, bringing him a turtle instead, and leaving little Tommy “feeling stupid. The words *turtle* and *engine* seemed to do loops in the backyard sunlight. There had to be some sort of meaningful connection, a turtleness inside engineness, or the other way around, but right then I could not locate the logic” (3). If part of what Chippering sought from his father was an understanding of truth and what it means to perform as a man, then the lesson he received was one of duplicity and ineffectualness; and if the engine is a

metaphor for masculine power, then Chippering's merging of it with the image of a turtle, a cold-blooded reptilian that hides inside its shell, suggests how he assimilated this event into his developing perception of self. Alone that same afternoon with the turtle, Chippering recalls,

I felt a helplessness that went beyond engines or turtles. It had to do with treachery. Even back then, in a dark, preknowledge way, I understood that language was involved, its frailties and mutabilities, its potential for betrayal. My airplane, after all, was not an airplane. No engine on earth would make it fly. And over the years I have come to realize that Herbie and I had willfully deceived ourselves, renaming things, reinventing the world, which was both pretending and a kind of lying.

But there were also the words my father had used: 'One airplane engine, coming up.' (4)

The morning after his father has given him the turtle, Herbie comes over, tells Chippering that his father is a liar, "[t]hat's what father's are *for*. Nothing else. They lie," and then informs him that the airplane is now a cross (5). The boys then attempt to nail an apparently willing Lorna Sue to it, and again the potential meanings are multiple. Later in the novel, Herbie tells Chippering that it was Lorna Sue's idea to be nailed to the cross, though the reader never hears from Lorna Sue on the matter. If she was not willing, then the boys forcing her to do it is problematic; if she *was* willing, then O'Brien's suggestion that women present themselves as martyr in the context of his examination of gender is also troubling. Either way, it still seems to affirm the generally misogynistic framework of Chippering's tale. A third explanation might be that a female offers redemption and rebirth from the masculine realm of treachery and betrayal, but this, too, involves violence on the part of the boys toward the girl, and the theoretical necessity of *her death* in sacrifice for *his life*.

Heberle contends that "Chippering is an incorrigible son of baby-boom America...an inheritor of male privilege who can only awkwardly adapt himself to the gender revolution.

Whether playing with bombs or ogling cleavage, his gestures parody an old and young boys' network whose contradictions threaten its survival in the new century and whose dissolution may be both gracefully liberating and desperately destructive" (264). Indeed, Chippering does seem to alternately eschew the responsibility of his masculine performance, and embrace, even tout, its authority and spoils. He loathes his war experience and blames it for the long-term devastating effects on his psyche, but he also calls upon his status as a war hero to legitimize his credibility in various situations, to prove he is telling the truth, and that his motives are honorable. It is all parody, however, as Heberle suggests above, because his war hero status is self-designated, and we cannot trust anything he says, or anything that he says he has done. At one moment, in desperation, he detonates a mason-jar bomb in a community park and shouts at the young boy who has swindled him, "'You have been *fucking*,' I yelled, 'with a fucking war hero!'" (299). The ludicrous scene emphasizes the continued lack of understanding between generations of boys and men, as Chippering considers both his father and this boy to have betrayed him. O'Brien seems to argue that although Chippering's war hero status is a fabrication and a fraud, the rules of engagement are impossible and "rigged" (*Tomcat* 35) from the start, and that maybe it is those rules—as formalized expectations for masculine performance—that have created Chippering, and that clearly need reform. Chippering's performance of masculinity is a charade, a performance that mocks the requirement to perform. Rather than being dogged throughout his life by an act of cowardice, Chippering is haunted by the ghosts of his comrades who tortured him back in Nam, and who now want revenge for how Chippering bravely, albeit uncharacteristically, withstood their hazing. He claims, "Over all these decades...I have had to live with the consequences of a single, senseless act of valor. (It was an accident for Christ's sake!)"

(302). Spider, the specter of one of those comrades from Vietnam, visits Chippering as the latter plots his bombing of Lorna Sue's house (all while dressed in his tightly-fitting, thirty-year-old military garb and humming an old Vietnam ditty). Spider informs Chippering that he has followed, haunted and threatened to kill him all of these years because such is "[t]he cost of courage. You were supposed to scare" (302).

Chippering quickly discovered that "there was, of course, a price to pay," as the men bound his hands, covered his head, and made a show of a firing squad as punishment for calling in the airstrike that had them "poop[ing] fat monkeys" (301). He recalls:

it was ridiculous—like the war itself, like the bulk of human experience as I have rather cynically come to know it. A pitiful, unfunny joke. Little boys playing war. (Or a little boy, in my case, playing love). For the record, however, it is important to note that I comported myself with dignity throughout the entire incident, not once flinching, standing my incredulous, disbelieving ground in the face of inane eternity. I shocked myself. (If only Herbie had been there to witness it. For once—with style—I was his equal in matters macho. What had gotten *into* me? How and why such unexpected mettle? I will never know, I suppose, and I can only guess that my short-lived gallantry had its roots in simple statistical probability. Sooner or later even the cowardly mouse will roar.) (301)

O'Brien takes the common assumption that one act of weakness or fear will forever brand a man a coward and that he must constantly work to prove himself otherwise, and turns it around, creating what Spider refers to as "the burden of the brave...It's like a law or something. Chicken out, you're fine. Act the hero, man—even once—and you just fucking *know* you'll have to do it all over again" (302). Chippering suffers from his one moment of bravery, which in turn heightens his and others' awareness of his usual cowardice, and humorously insinuates that being brave once is worse than never having been brave at all. In his single moment of living up to the code for manly behavior, the code turns on him, placing his one manly act in the context of all his other cowardly ones. One might also wonder if

O'Brien does not have his protagonist perform the classic masculine gesture of deriding weakness as a show of one's own strength, even when the weakness is his own. Spider validates Chippering's Vietnam-in-Minnesota as an admirable paradigm for survival, telling him, "For the rest of us, Tommy, the war's history—gonzo—but in this really nifty way you've kept it going. That life-and-death edge, man, it gives *meaning* to everything. Keeps you in contact with your own sinnin' self....Thanks to me [haunting you], you're still in the Nam, still up in those creepy mountains. Seriously, I *miss* all that" (305). Again, what one might expect to hear from a veteran is not what these characters say, and what they do utter, while funny here, is derisive of the experience that the men in *The Things They Carried* confess to suffering. Certainly, this is in keeping with O'Brien's parodic intent, and the ultimate effect for both sets of men is the same—their time spent in Vietnam substantially defines them, and whether they loathe the days at war, simply loathe themselves, or both, they cannot live without some connection to their war experience. As Spider plays with a piano wire that he intends to loop around Chippering's neck, Chippering realizes, "[f]or better or worse, the whole terrifying business had given definition to the past couple decades of my life. That pursued feeling—it was something to believe in, a replacement for Easter" (305). With these two sentences, Chippering links marriage vows, war, betrayal, fear, and redemption; all the major themes in his life except for love, the thing with which he proclaims to be most obsessed. And if Lorna Sue on the cross is also suggestive of Easter, then it seems that at least here Chippering opts for the game of protecting himself from gratifyingly constant pursuit, rather than opening himself to the vulnerability of love and possible redemption from a woman. Earlier in the novel, he defends his keeping of a love ledger by saying, "I yearned for steadfast, eternal love, as represented by the lasting fidelity

of one woman, but at the same time I wanted to be *wanted*. Universally. Without exception—by one and all. I wanted my cake, to be sure, but I coveted the occasional cupcake too” (173). The untenable and impossible nature of what he expects from the world is a mirror for what he fears the world expects from him as a man, and O’Brien demonstrates that both are doomed to failure.

In an interview with Karen Rosica, O’Brien argues that, “In the case of Tomcat, he’s outraged at a woman leaving him. What he doesn’t understand, of course, is that she should have left him. He was a total jerk. And it’s that sense of blindness behind his outrage that was fun to explore in this book” (Smith 26). But the woman whom O’Brien refers to here and validates for leaving him is Lorna Sue, leaving the reader to wonder why, in the end, Mrs. Kooshof remains engaged to a not-significantly-reformed Chippering. Even as he relaxes somewhere in Fiji with Mrs. Kooshof and by the benefit of her money, he still keeps a love ledger, he still makes seeing a psychiatrist a pretense (something he also did with Lorna Sue), he still ogles women, he still withholds the truth, and he still pines for Lorna Sue. It seems at least plausible, especially given what we know from O’Brien’s own documentation of his divorce and his devastating loss over the woman he had left his wife for,<sup>37</sup> that Chippering be attempting to betray Mrs. Kooshof, or at least mistreat her, as a sort of symbolic vengeance against women in general. If so, the revenge backfires, because Chippering deprives himself of mutual love with a woman who clearly cares for him. He is able to be uncharacteristically vulnerable with Mrs. Kooshof, and this seems to be what draws her to him. When he first meets Mrs. Robert Kooshof, he is lying “supine,” mourning his “shriveled dreams,” his loss “under the winds of marital treachery,” and how “puny and

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<sup>37</sup> Detailed in “The Vietnam in Me,” 1994.

pitiful” his life now seemed (49). “And because the trail of human misery inevitably leads homeward,” he is “beside the birdbath,” just next to his mother’s rhododendrons, in the yard of his childhood home, which now belongs to Mrs. Kooshof (48, 49). When she discovers him, he has “made fists and [is] blubber[ing] at the moon” (49). In his most desperate moment of “faithlessness,” he has returned to the scene of his earliest betrayal—the yard where his father had given him a turtle instead of an engine, and by consequence, an early imprint about disappoint in connection with what it means to be a man. He cajoles her into giving him a drink of water, and, like no other woman before her, she falls victim to his charms.

He immediately starts living with her, calling her Mrs. Kooshof because she is still married, and because it offers him linguistic distance, an overt attempt to have words protect him from emotional intimacy. But he finds himself able to connect with her, and admits that, “as we locked limbs—face-to-face, more or less—I was surprised by odd stirrings of tenderness, even affection...I was at peace. I was quietly and vastly content” (68). She genuinely and openly listens to his stories, often told to defend himself in light of her observations of his past and present offensive behavior, and he realizes that, “[h]er churlishness...was mere camouflage for an immense vulnerability within...we shared a common hurt” (72). But as much as he desires affection and closeness, his familiar pattern is one of betrayal and revenge, and so he protects himself from her, and from his own feelings. When she asks him if he loves her, he equivocates, talks about “the nature of love, the physics of infinity,” and finally, ““Yes,’ [he]’d said, but was this a promise? Was this duplicity?” (121, 122). Desperate for love and human connection, but plagued by doubt over “whom to trust, what to trust, when to trust, how to trust?” Chippering repeats the same

words—“was this a promise? Was this duplicity?”—from the opening page of his narrative, resurrecting the trauma he experienced at his father’s failure to bring him an engine (150). Mrs. Kooshof, though, stays with him, endures numerous episodes in which he brings other women home, overlooks his maniacal obsession with revenge against Lorna Sue, withstands his frequent sexist mistreatment of her, and nurses him back to health after a near-suicide attempt and subsequent nervous breakdown lands him in the hospital. Just prior to his breakdown—an event that is broadcast across the airwaves as he auditions for role of Captain Nineteen in a children’s show, he recognizes in his own mind how Mrs. Kooshof “helped to bolster those cracking wall inside [him],” but he is either unable or unwilling to share his feelings of affection and need with her (241). He has been making the gasoline mason-jar bombs, complete with rag fuses, plotting a July 4<sup>th</sup> raid on Lorna Sue’s childhood home when she returns to visit, when he finds himself “squat[ting] there in the chilly dark, rocking on my heels, full of rage, full of hurt, quite literally beside myself. There were two Thomas Chipperings. A lonely seven-year-old and a man of shipwrecked, terrified middle age” (241). Beneath the satire, the irony and the humor, this is the essence of the man that O’Brien is writing about in *Tomcat in Love*.

As the chaos that he has wrought begins to close in around him, Chippering thinks to himself, “I was about to lose [Mrs. Kooshof] forever, exactly as I had lost everything else in my life. And I was powerless to prevent it” (308). He might believe that he is powerless, but he is not; he chooses not to give himself over to loving her because he still expects and fears betrayal and loss. There are moments, earlier in their relationship, where he comes close to mocking his own vulnerability, and using it to manipulate those around him. He recalls how, in Mrs. Kooshof’s presence: “Something collapsed inside. I was not intending it, but after a

second I heard myself rambling on about certain private insecurities. Misfit. Loner. How I sometimes felt empty inside. How I would do almost anything to fill up that hole inside me. A craving, I said—a love hunger. Always terrified of losing the few scraps that were thrown my way” (118). He does not want to lose her, but at the same time he is not sure how to successfully negotiate “keeping” her either. This uncertainty parallels the argument O’Brien’s work makes about masculinity: a male does not want to perform in a way that is not true to his emotional self, but neither is he aware of how to negotiate such an identity without risking the loss of his status as a man. As Chippering attempts to convince us of his own rebirth, Lorna Sue thwarts his plan for retribution with a revenge plan of her own. Once again, he finds himself by the birdbath of his childhood home and Edenic betrayal:

I stripped naked, dipped my hands into the birdbath, rinsed the charcoal away [from my face], lay in the grass to dry.  
 Lovely night, I thought. Stars.  
 A squandered life....  
 I stood up, naked as a baby, and let the Fourth of July bathe me. Each of us, I suppose, needs his illusions. Life after death. A maker of planets. A woman to love, a man to hate. Something sacred.  
 But what a waste. (319)

If ever a rebirth were a negative experience, or at least a lukewarm one, this would qualify. He then goes back inside to beg Mrs. Kooshof to marry him; after her eventual acquiescence, he admits: “I felt cuddly; I felt safe” (321). What follows their post-coital bliss, though, is a “wild” dream in which all the “very angry (hence resplendent)” women from his life,<sup>38</sup> as well as Jane Fonda, the Indigo Girls, and “burly” women from his “Methodologies of Misogyny” seminar, join forces both to execute him and to burn his love ledger. His description of the dream is replete with sexism and misogyny (he says that what makes the

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<sup>38</sup> It is significant that his mother does not appear in his dream. Her only mention in the novel is when she interrupts Herbie and Chippering’s childhood attempt to nail Lorna Sue to the plywood cross by asking, “What’s this?” (6).

women individuals are their varying bra sizes, “A to double-D”), and while the threat of death gives Chippering little if any cause for alarm, the immolation of his love ledger—his “life’s work”—causes him to “jerk upright” with fear (323). As the dream ends, the contents of the ledger, what he calls his “enduring gift to posterity,” goes “up in smoke,” and he says, “[a]s I did” (323). One might be tempted to think that by sharing love with Mrs. Kooshof, Chippering is able to relinquish his self-loathing, playboy ways and begin anew. Yet a more accurate description of the fallout from his Independence Day “rebirth” is that his self-performed baptism in the birdbath washed away the pain of past betrayals and freed him from his obsession with vengeance—certainly positive personality developments for Chippering. But, as we soon see in the final chapter, while the bent on vengeance is gone, he is back to his deceptive, “flirt-bird,” ledger-keeping tricks. If he still fears betrayal, he does not reveal it, which makes his failure to wholeheartedly love Mrs. Kooshof back, while continuing to sponge off of her, all the more contemptible.

Shortly after Chippering awakens from his bare-breast-filled dream, Herbie calls him to say that he needs his help—Lorna Sue has taken Chippering’s bombs and is threatening to detonate one in the attic of her childhood home. Mrs. Kooshof protectively follows him there, and then ends up disarming Lorna Sue as she prepared to blow them all to pieces—something neither Chippering or Herbie were able to do. Mrs. Kooshof effectively emasculates him with her show of power, and he again embraces the opportunity to relinquish (his attempts at) control. But in the end, once they are in Fiji, she is reduced to sniffing him for the scent of another woman, and checking under the mattress for tangible evidence of deceit. He might be working up to an outright betrayal of Mrs. Kooshof’s love, and perhaps he is also mildly aware that it would result in a betrayal of self. He has to make

himself vulnerable to love—not to the expectation of her loving him—but to his loving her, and, being open to being loved in return. This involves him loving himself, which is perhaps the missing link for Chippering underneath his layers of pretension and self-righteousness. Chippering’s ultimate post-rebirth failure to convincingly love her is explicable by a number of factors, including O’Brien’s self-avowed commitment to making this a comedic work, the lingering shadow of O’Brien’s own lovelorn life, and the idea that no matter what path the American man thinks he ought to pursue, he never quite seems to get it right. Heberle argues that in *Tomcat*, O’Brien is “laughing at conventional pieties of American maledom,” and that he “satirizes male fortitude” (291, 279). When Chippering auditions—and utterly “bombs”—for the role of Captain Nineteen, it is at the urging of a child (*Evelyn*) in the daycare where he works after having lost his professorship. He senses divine intervention in the child’s request for him to assume the part, as he thinks the lead-in description of the man fits him perfectly: “‘Once in every century there is born into this universe a special man. With the strength of Atlas. The wisdom of Solomon. The courage of a lion....You are that man,’ Evelyn tells him, repeating the lines from the T.V. show, ‘*You are Captain Nineteen. Today’s man of the future*’” (252). The fact that his breakdown occurs after he has squeezed himself into a dead man’s former Captain Nineteen costume in an effort to fulfill the heroic mission of a fictional TV character, only further underscores the precipitously destructive gulf that exists between expectations for masculine performance and the reality of what a flawed human is able to endure.

Chippering is no hero anyway. One might even consider him an anti-hero, particularly in his failure to take responsibility for almost anything that happens to him. “Throughout our lives,” he declares, “we are betrayed by improbabilities” (69). After he has

relinquished his devotion to revenge, he says, “it struck me that nothing in our lives ever comes to absolute closure—not love, not betrayal, not the most inane episode of youth. We are surrounded by loose ends; we are awash in why and maybe. An absence of faith, one might call it” (333). This idea of confusion as a persistent facet of the human experience is a theme O’Brien reiterates throughout the text, and especially with the emphasis on language and its unstable, unreliable, impermanent relationship with meaning. As Patrick Smith observes, in *Tomcat* “the chaos in the words themselves is a linguistic metaphor for war” (13). Language serves as refuge for the beleaguered Chippering, and he relishes the power, though not inviolable, of words. He avers, “In short, I am hazardous. I can kill with words, or otherwise” (27). Language grants him a conceit and, he thinks, a license, that is unparalleled anywhere else in his life. But words, like friends and lovers, can also fail and betray him. Words, he discovers, “are like embers. They smolder. They drop to the bottom of our souls, where for years they give off only a modest heat, and then out of nowhere a life-wind suddenly whips up and the words burst into red-hot, spirit-scorching flame” (37). As a Professor of Linguistics and a self-professed master of the human language, Chippering assumes this smolder authority of words as his own. With an abundance of confidence, but also with a piercing desire to *know*, he asks, “Are we bruised each day of our lives by syllabic collisions, our spirits slashed by combinations of vowel and consonant?....Can a color cause bad dreams? Can a cornfield make you cry? Do we irradiate language by the lives we lead?” (18). He both laments and rejoices as he declares, “Alas, the awesome power of words. They start wars, they kill love” (113). O’Brien explores the contradictory nature of language, and how our expectations for what it can and will do are constantly shifting, not unlike what it means to be a man.

In a March 2010 interview, O'Brien muses, "The words 'I love you.' As soon as they're uttered, I'm suspect. How much? And when will you stop? And will you? In what way do you love me? And what is love to you, by the way? Is it forever or is it until the next person who passes you? All this stuff complicates" ("Big Think"). Chippering, too, draws a close connection between love and language: "The betrayal of love, in other words, seems also to entail a fundamental betrayal of language and logic and human reason, a subversion of meaning, a practical joke directed against the very meaning of meaning" (165). What, O'Brien presses us to inquire, is *meaning*? Early on, Chippering avows, "accuracy matters," but that hardly seems true, and serves not only to prepare us for his unreliability as a narrator, but to iterate that words also lie (7). Chippering often attempts to control the language of others, either by not listening at all, filling the space with only his words, and even by methodically and repeatedly disconnecting the telephone ringers. He uses the absence of language as a form of denial and escape; people are still calling, whether it rings through or not—he just refuses to accept what they might have to say. When in the hospital following his nervous breakdown, he is unable—or unwilling—to speak for seven days, and this is reminiscent of the loss of language he suffered when he crept alone through the jungles of Vietnam. And despite blathering incessantly the entire length of the book, frequently professing his undying, earth-shattering love for Lorna Sue, he was unable to speak when he tried to propose marriage—"I said nothing, no words at all"—indicating his inability to be vulnerable to her, and perhaps, that the love was not real from the start (108). Smith asserts that "by losing his language, he comes closest to his essential nature, to the elemental dichotomy of life and death" (141). Chippering also recognizes the life-giving, redemptive, God-like power of language, and how it affects us as individuals: "Language is an organism

that evolves separately inside each of us. It kicks like a baby in the womb. It whispers secrets to our blood” (262). The secret that O’Brien seems to be whispering to us as readers is that we need a new script for our performances as men and women.

Plumbing for meaning in *Tomcat* runs the risk of overlooking the humor, and certainly there are a few laugh-out-loud moments. It is funny, for instance, when Chippering pretentiously drops his self-awarded Silver Star on Mrs. Kooshof’s dinner plate, lest she begin to underestimate him. Met with her laughter, he fishes the medal off her plate, cleans it off, pins it to his lapel, and responds, “Let us simply say that I more than earned this decoration....In point of fact, I was *too* brave....Believe me...even gallantry can be taken to an extreme. I repeat: *too* brave, *too* heroic, and the consequences have been dogging me ever since....Imagine, if you will, Lord Jim in reverse” (86). Most often, though, the efforts at humor are tinged with bitterness, which makes the laugh a more uncomfortable one, though that might be O’Brien’s aim: “I consider *Tomcat* a ‘serious novel’ —just as serious, for instance, as *The Things They Carried* or *In the Lake of the Woods*. Granted, the form of my novel is comedic. But at the same time that humor is rooted in the often painful realities of human experience” (*Bold Type*, Sept 1998). Yet there is also the tremendous degree of sexism and misogyny that, despite any claims O’Brien might make about comedic intent or his recognition of Chippering as a “jerk,” can be neither overlooked nor easily dismissed. If the argument is that the fictional character, not the author, exemplifies the misogyny, then the line of distinction in *Tomcat* is extraordinarily thin. O’Brien expresses the following concern:

I'm afraid some people are going to say that Chippering is such a sexist pig that O'Brien must be one," the author said. "I think I'm a pretty moral guy, a very moral guy, but I'm not perfect. How am I not perfect? I like girls. But I think this is a feminist novel. I'm mocking this guy, and he's not a stick

figure. He's a living, dynamic guy. He makes a lot of the mistakes I've made, but at the same time I'm laughing at him. (Weber Interview, Sept 1998)

I do not think we have to label O'Brien a sexist to find his portrayals problematic and reprehensible. O'Brien has also said in interviews that he thinks there is a Chippering inside each of us, men and women alike; perhaps, though, to then argue that each of us is responsible for Chippering's bad behavior as well. He wants us to believe that Chippering too suffers from a degree of sexism, but that he has little latitude to behave any other way, given his experiences of love, war, and betrayal. I am actually inclined to support this argument, in part, and have pinned this study to it in various ways. But *Tomcat* is not a feminist novel. Bruce Weber writes that "the book is wickedly unkind to both men and women as they persist in misunderstanding and manipulating one another" (Interview, Sept 1998). Maybe, but in the end, restoring male bonds and securing heterosexual male love is what matters most to Chippering. He comes to an oddly affectionate understanding with his compatriot Spider, who decides to justify both their existences by agreeing not to kill him, but to keep the mystery alive by continuing to pursue him in the shadows. He claims that although he lost a wife, he "gained back a friend" in Herbie, who has twice visited him in Fiji (340). And, he fashions himself into the spitting image of the tycoon, who stole Lorna Sue from him, by losing "twelve unflattering pounds...sport[ing] a Coppertone physique, a salt-and-pepper beard, [and] a suite of hand-tailored seersucker suits"—not to mention that he is also in a sun-drenched paradise with another man's wife (337-8). The women, on the other hand, are left on the outer perimeter of this circle of male camaraderie. Lorna Sue is deemed "sick"; Thuy Ninh is considered a prostitute; and Mrs. Robert Kooshof, whom Chippering refuses to recognize as Donna, continues to play the dupe. Chippering also summarily dismisses all of the other women from his life by conceiving of them as part of a "wild

dream.” When Chippering rhetorically asks, “(What is it that women *want*? I will never know),” we also know, whether it is meant to be funny or not, that he does not much care either, and proceeds to keep on doing whatever he wants (34). The slightest glimmer of hope for reform is in Chippering’s admission that “the proud, brawny tomcat still struts within me. Untamed, thank the Lord, but learning how to love” (340).

O’Brien opens *Tomcat* with a chapter titled “Faith,” and he closes with Chippering referring to love as “a matter of faith” (342). “Take heart,” Chippering says, “Brave the belief” (342). The points seems to be one of belief in the possibility that a woman can redeem a man and save him from his pain through her love—a concept that O’Brien shows a supremely intense desire to believe in throughout his body of work. Too often, however, the men in his novels, and perhaps O’Brien himself, neglect to recognize their failure to love themselves, and their failure to love women the way that women want and need to be loved, as contributing factors to the impossibility of their idyllic dream of redemptive love. O’Brien makes fun of Chippering, but there also appears to be an authorial resentment, not attributable to the character of Chippering, that expresses frustration with women for having the power to deny their love to men. Chippering’s confusion about how find and keep love seems predicated in part on a sense of disbelief that women are not obsequiously honored to play the role of redeemer. When an interviewer asked O’Brien, “Why are men so afraid of intimacy as opposed to sex or love?,” O’Brien replied, “Why are women so afraid of intimacy?” (Bookreporter.com, 1998). O’Brien ultimately wants us to believe that men simply want to love and be loved. On the most basic human level, we all need and deserve such comfort and security. With faith, as O’Brien urges, and a reassessment of our social

and cultural expectations for gender performance, perhaps men and women can at last discover a way to make love and not war. At least that's how O'Brien would want it.

## Conclusion

*I write for the still-fragmented parts in me, trying to bring them together. Whoever can read and use any of this, I write for them as well. -Adrienne Rich*

In writing this dissertation I have attempted to test how I, as a woman, might be an *inadequate reader* of Ernest Hemingway and Tim O'Brien. I have searched for the potentially female-reader-resistant interstices in their stories, and then defiantly worked to slip my way through, creating a feminist critical space that affirms the male desire for feminine influence. Such affirmation intends to liberate men from certain cultural expectations for masculine performance by rejecting the idea that male femininity might threaten one's identity as a man.

Both Hemingway and O'Brien portray male characters who are desperate for the feminine influence of a woman, and for the social freedom to identify with their own femininity. According to Kali Tal:

Most Vietnam novels contain two-dimensional women characters; women who, in Virginia Woolf's words, serve "as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice his natural size" (*Room 6*). But some of them also contain a female character who possesses greater depth: she is a literary/psychological instrument which the writer uses to heal himself. After all, if the problem lies in the veteran's self-image, the mere reflection provided by a flat female character would not provide a cure. Instead, the veteran must see something in the woman herself that helps him to create a new, post-war self. The veteran novelist generates these special female characters to play a therapeutic role—the alter ego who insists that the accumulated "masculinities" of the soldier are a trap the protagonist must escape. (95)

Yet a close examination of O'Brien and Hemingway's protagonists reveals a reverse looking-glass effect that reflects men who are driven by the fear that as men they are less than half of what other men and women expect them to be. Amidst their fear, the men recognize the healing and redemptive power of women and love, but they temper their desire in an effort to still fulfill their masculine performance. In *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien's conceives of women as unique and possibly heroic in their capacities to save him, and yet presents male characters who remain painfully unable to actualize their affections. O'Brien exposes the "femininities" of his men as a way to controvert expectations of masculinity and to transform his war stories into love stories. The ultimate transformation—the escape from their "accumulated 'masculinities'"—for O'Brien and his men is only possible, however, if the women who hear their story-telling truths choose to listen and love them in return.

The prevailing absence of women in Hemingway's *Men Without Women* demands that female readers listen. On a personal level, Hemingway knew that Hadley and Pauline would read the stories, and he might have recognized it as an opportunity to make clear his own pain and exorcise his guilt. For other female readers, an interior view of the male struggle to perform and endure in the absence of feminine influence is an appeal for women to acknowledge, and perhaps even help to assuage, the suffering of these men. More so than O'Brien, Hemingway veils his men's complex desire for feminine influence because he fears that such desire might diminish his and his characters' images as men, and that the feminine influence might render him so "soft" that he could lose his masculine strength to endure. In *Across the River and Into the Trees*, however, Hemingway reconstitutes his perception of what qualifies as strength. Colonel Cantwell finds redemption as he supplicates himself to Renata's feminine influence. Renata listens to Cantwell, transforming his weaknesses into

strengths, absolving him of his past failures, and offering him rebirth. With Renata, Hemingway, although he is a veteran of WWI rather than Vietnam, imagines a woman in the therapeutic role Tal refers to, as his protagonist Cantwell “see[s] something in the woman herself that helps him to create a new, post-war self.” While on the surface this savior-like portrayal of a woman might seem disparate from the common view of Hemingway’s oeuvre, my reading of *Men Without Women* argues otherwise, suggesting that in his earlier book, albeit in a less overt manner, Hemingway recognizes the love of a woman as a healing force, and her influence as something his male characters intensely desire.

In *Tomcat in Love*, O’Brien also makes what on the surface appears to be a departure from his usual themes. What we discover, however, is the ruse-like quality of his comedic form, as O’Brien’s narrator, Thomas Chippering, despite his numerous peccadilloes, is simply a man who wants to find love. And although Chippering might not quite be a new-age Cantwell, his plight is similar in that he too struggles to reconcile his self-doubt and his fear of vulnerability with his desire for love. In different ways, both Cantwell and Chippering finally realize that making themselves vulnerable to love will not risk their manhood, but will redeem them from the betrayals and failures in their pasts. With *Tomcat in Love*, O’Brien intends for Chippering’s hyperbolic antics and misadventures to signal the absurd nature of gender-based expectations for performance, and how they end up encouraging us to thwart our own efforts at love and human closeness.

There is hardly much mention of war thus far in the conclusion. Because war is considered widely to be a mythic proving ground for a man’s masculinity, and because war has so definitively influenced both Hemingway and O’Brien’s novels as well as their own lives, it might seem obvious, as it did when I began writing, to focus on war in connection

with how these two writers confront expectations for masculine performance. What has emerged from this study, however, is not a confirmation of war as a virtual petri dish for masculine performance, though it often serves in that capacity, but rather a recognition of war as a screen for O'Brien and Hemingway to identify with their uncertainties as men and to explore their feminine desires. If a man's status as a soldier or a veteran acts as a counterweight against potential aspersions to their identity as men, then war is indeed a proving ground, but war also becomes, at least with Hemingway and O'Brien, something men seek to prove themselves *against*. Hemingway and O'Brien's male characters must discover how to convince themselves they are still men when what they desire and how they are able to perform fail to meet expectations for masculinity.

When an interviewer asked Malcolm Cowley if there was one word he could use for Hemingway, Cowley replied "complicated" (*Conversations* 117). Cowley also said that Hemingway "had a gift for charming people by giving them his undivided attention. As [Hemingway] said, so few people know how to listen. That's one way he charmed people, by listening" (14). In his letters to friends, he often displayed similar charm with a different sort of listening; he took the time to ask about their families, he inquired with concern about the health of a friend they shared, and he responded with enthusiasm to the news from a previous letter he had received. O'Brien, I found, is a listener, too. When I told him, during one of our walks through campus, that my husband was singer and a songwriter, he asked me to send him one my husband's albums. Several weeks passed before I finally had the CD packaged up and ready for mailing, and I found that I still had the young woman with the tiara from the toy store on my mind. So I wrote him about what I was thinking. I filled a card, writing up the sides and onto the back. I described how his vulnerability and awareness

of the nuance of pain in himself and others had connected me to his writing. Then I told him that his attention and reaction to the human need of a stranger connected me to him somehow. I wrote these things rather frantically, in a quick burst, and then slipped the package into the mail. Panic and embarrassment quickly ensued—had I just written an incredibly sentimental and sappy letter to Tim O’Brien? A few days later, I received the following written in an email:

Heather, How wonderful and amazing to hear from you: I'd been thinking of you and our short time together just a couple of days ago, in a very depressing and lonely hotel room in Chicago. (When you don't hit it off with anyone, these gigs can be deadly to the spirit.) Coincidence, I guess, that your letter would come immediately afterward . . .but I don't know. Maybe the world connects people in ways we'll never understand. So thank you for those beautiful words in your letter, and for being a woman who puts some value on kindness. Those who most need little acts of decency and thoughtfulness are those who rarely receive them. The girl in the tiara seemed to me one of those. And of course, in her own way, she did shine with prettiness, as you do in your much different way. I'll put the CD on when I go to a work in about an hour—thank you for that, too. I hope the writing goes great guns, that it comes off your fingertips fast, and that you don't end up despising my name as a consequence of too much labor. Tim

As a young girl, I memorized Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken," and recently I began teaching it to my children. With Hemingway and O'Brien, I am reminded of lines from another Frost poem, "The Gift Outright": "Something we were withholding made us weak./ Until we found out that it was ourselves." Perhaps if we as humans focus more on listening to one another—actively, thoughtfully, compassionately listening—then maybe the things we carry, and what carries us through, will be each other.

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