

The Fourth Man

THURSDAY NIGHT, Oct. 4, 1990, Thomas Auditorium filled with students and faculty and community people to hear Tim O'Brien read from his latest work, *The Things They Carried*. I was late, not so late that I had to walk into a reading in progress but late enough to have to scan the sea of heads for an empty seat.

Dianne and Wes McNair were standing in the back, leaning up against the wall. Linda Britt and Valerie Huebner were already settled in their seats near the back, close to an aisle. Norma and I greeted them and talked briefly while scanning the crowd. It was good to see some familiar faces among a throng of so many new ones. I looked around feeling anxious and unconnected. The reading was about to begin. I spied a couple of spaces down front and shot around to the other side and down the stairs to the third row, inquired, and settled in. After I landed, I realized that the entire front row was empty. As I considered moving, Norma arrived and sat next to me. I surveyed the area and recognized a few students nearby. Within a couple of minutes, the front row filled.

In preparation for this evening, dutifully, I had begun to read *Going After Cacciato*, *Northern Lights*, and some stories from *The Things They Carried*. Although I was not at all prepared to like or be interested in war stories, O'Brien's powerful prose drew me in. In *Going After Cacciato*, I was intrigued, not only by the main character and his caper, but by the pursuit itself and the pursuers. Before I knew what was happening, I was after Cacciato too. So, I had been looking forward to this reading, and, as far as I was concerned, Tim O'Brien had a receptive audience.

Pat O'Donnell welcomed the crowd, announced the other artists in the series, expressed her hope that we'd all attend those readings too, and introduced Tim O'Brien.

A balding man in a charcoal-gray, V-neck sweater and well-washed blue jeans walked to the podium. His face was alert, his body taut, his eyes dark and direct. I had seen several book-jacket photos of him. Obviously taken years ago, they bore little resemblance to the man before me. In person, he had more age and less hair, looked more like a grocer than a celebrity. And he was short. Not only did the pictures on the books show a smiling, curly-headed, personable, outgoing face, but they were all head or bust shots, giving no indication of his stature. After imagining him bigger-than-life, it was

a bit of a shock when Tim O'Brien arrived in a real-life-size package.

Holding on to the sides of the podium, elbows out, the way speakers do, he began by explaining that the story he would read was originally called "Everybody Dies," but *Esquire* wasn't keen on publishing it with that title. He said it was necessary to know this to understand the first sentence, "But this too is true: stories can save us."

He read, hardly ever looking at the page. The story was so completely his that he was telling it rather than reading. He told it, complete with gestures and eye contact. He punctuated with silences, raised eyebrows, and grimaces. Lots of grimaces. He looked right at the audience and said his words, told his story about Timmy and Linda in love at 9 years old. He looked right at the audience, told his story about Kiowa and Curt Lemon, Ted Lavender and Rat Kiley. He looked right at the audience, sending out his message, telling his tale.

Intermittently, he paused to drink water from a clear, ridged, short, stout glass. He'd shift his weight, step back, lift the glass, swallow, lick his lips, and replace the glass on the podium. Even after it appeared drained, he'd pause, lift the glass to his lips, tilt his head back and swallow. At least three times, he lifted the empty glass coaxing the final drops down his throat. I wanted to run down there and give him some more water.

The story, now called "The Lives of the Dead," is about love and death and the sustaining power of stories. The images are sharp, stark, and shocking, the feelings raw and real; we are moved. The story shifts between the moral, emotional, and physical landscapes of Vietnam and O'Brien's childhood Minnesota. Both were fraught with courage, cowardice and confusion. We were with him. The audience was transported back and forth between Vietnam battlefields and a Minneapolis school yard, swinging between combat's first shocks and love's first certainties. We identified with Timmy's moral dilemmas, his inability to act, his longing to know, and his courage to cry. We identified with Tim's disgust and disbelief, his repulsion and reticence, and his plodding and perseverance. We could smell death, see bloat and feel shame. And, as the original title indicates, everybody dies: Linda from a brain tumor at 9, Lavender by a shot in the head, Lemon from a booby trap, and Kiowa in a shit swamp—everybody. Yet Timmy continues to dream Linda alive.

In Vietnam she is with him. Her presence sustains Tim through all those deaths. He recalls from a dream her startling reassurance, "Once you are really alive, you can't ever be dead."

And it was done. He finished telling his tale. There was a long round of applause, genuine appreciation for this man's directness, his craft, and his courage. He left the podium and slipped into the crowd. Pat announced that there were refreshments and that Tim O'Brien would autograph books. People streamed down the aisles towards the stage. We were swept into a cluster near the cider table and exchanged greetings and appreciation with familiar and unfamiliar faces alike, feeling connected now. O'Brien had disappeared. I couldn't find him anywhere. He was there, though, in the midst of admirers, now disguised as a Minnesota fan, in his dark-rimmed glasses and blue baseball cap. The writer and story teller were gone; the man remained.

Soon all the books were either bought or repacked. Some were signed and tucked under an arm or into a bag, and the crowd dispersed. I listened to Wes tell Tim his work had a ring of truth to it—it reminded him of the first time he read *Catcher in the Rye*. More dispersal. I also heard Tim tell someone that he had arrived early and watched the people come in. After seeing them, he selected his story. The crowd thinned. And my last image of the evening was four men looking into each other's eyes. Four men, squared off like the corners of the head of a long, sturdy, steel bolt that threads through, reaching the core. Four men: Tim O'Brien, Doug Rawlings, John Smith and a fourth man, whom I didn't know, standing there looking at each other, connected because they had been there.

—KATHLEEN BEAUBIEN

He sees it

As a child in the North country, all day he'd play
with brothers in a cold blue lake.
One night he dreamed he was burning in ice,
woke locked frozen, staring from his body.
To this day a mystery, and now it's
sixty-seven years in a wheelchair.
Others, he knows, are less fortunate.
At a dinner for the handicapped
confronted by a phalanx of retarded kids
he fled the room.
Watching a young woman
stagger spasmodically down the street,
he wept for a week.

Four pills a day, at almost a dollar each:
he can sleep, no more cramping
in the swollen fingers
and arms that won't bend to his face.
With long-handled fork and spoon he feeds himself,
shaves himself with a long-handled razor
(he pantomimes the gesture)
before he rolls off to his station
by the hanging baskets at the market entrance
with his apron of postcards —
loons, bears, fox cubs, and moose
knee deep in water, eyeing me.

—LEE SHARKEY

