

Laura Cario

Regarding the O'Brien Paintings...

I am too young to remember Vietnam. As a baby, I fussed and slept regardless of the fight abroad and the political argument at home. It took me years to understand that American soldiers in Vietnam had had difficulty discerning the enemy from the people they sought to protect. As a teenager, I did not recognize the importance of names and dates and the influence of Vietnam on this, my country. It is a mixed blessing for Americans that we can be ignorant of mortal conflict because only videogames have land mines. At some point for me, maturity prevailed, and I began to realize that I had friends who were the daughters of American/Vietnamese relationships. I became aware of veterans' stories whose snippets of conversation I might catch in passing. Textbook chapters described the concrete elements of what had happened in southeast Asia, but did not clarify why there seems to be something different about vets from the Vietnam era. My mother told me American soldiers were faced with children as enemies. I could not envision myself dropping my Barbies to launch a grenade at the fathers and mothers of my schoolmates.

I did begin to read about Vietnam, and sitting in the lunchroom at the middle school where I used to teach, I was distressed that a colleague and English teacher had never read Tim O'Brien's story cycle *The Things They Carried*. She had never heard of it, she said. How does a young woman explain to someone nearly twenty years her senior why this book should be mandatory reading? I can dissect O'Brien's cycle for the precision of its sentence structure and word choice, the death grip of its narrative, the brilliance and complexity of its organization and play with time, its conflicted nature about the balance of "truth-happening" and "story-happening," but there is something else, too. *The Things They Carried* is the one book that was able to explain to me why one veteran I know refuses to live any place but his van, why another now flings himself prostrate to God in a Pentecostal church, and why yet another jumps for the nearest window when a car backfires or thunder claps.

When presented with the challenge of creating artwork to complement and reflect upon O'Brien's work, I was thrilled. I wrote Mr. O'Brien a letter introducing myself and explaining my need to complete this project. In a sketchbook, I made a list of the stories and possible imagery from each.

Mary Anne in the “Sweetheart of Song Tra Bong” was the first painting produced. Being my favorite short story in the bunch, it came to mind quickly and was the easiest to capture—Mary Anne in the trance of her own song, a necklace of human tongues about her neck. And then I reread the book. O’Brien talks about readers who misunderstand the killing of the baby buffalo in “How to Tell a True War Story.” I can hear a certain soldier saying, “I mean, Christ, I’m just a boy.” I picture Curt Lemon stepping on a booby-trapped 105 round and being blown into a tree, his body parts ornamenting the branches. Kiowa sinking into a field of muck, the village toilet. The magic and mystery of Mary Anne left me in the face of even more graphic tales. Being suddenly less self-assured about this endeavor, I found the unsent letter to Mr. O’Brien and tore it up. I started painting rotten artwork and finally put the task aside for a while. Months later, I have found some degree of satisfaction with four paintings inspired by characters and events in the stories. And yet, I worry about this artwork in ways I haven’t worried about other paintings I’ve done. I worry out of respect for Vietnam vets. How dare I make any presumptions, draw any conclusions when I escaped a war by timing of birth and assignment of gender? Having wrestled with this work, I hand it over.

Laura Cario lives in Indianapolis, Indiana where she paints and teaches art. Aside from the occasional exhibition of her work, she is working on her first novel and has published in *Louisiana Review*.



Kiowa



On the Rainy River



The Things They Carried



Mary Anne