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Silence and Self-Harm

Understanding Unconventional Voices in *The Things They Carried*

Sarah Cannon

For the soldiers in Tim O'Brien's collection of short stories, *The Things They Carried*, silence is a catalyst for self-harm. After Dave Jensen breaks Lee Strunk's nose in "Enemies," O'Brien describes "a silent tension between them" (60), and it is inside that silence that Jensen decides to hurt himself. In "Notes," Norman Bowker never speaks of his trauma either. After his suicide, his mother says, "Norman was a quiet boy . . . I don't suppose he wanted to bother anybody" (154). Both Jensen's self-inflicted violence and Bowker's suicide are coupled with descriptions about silence and a lack of communication. These moments pull readers into the critical conversation surrounding war trauma and communication, which are commonly characterized as being incompatible. In fact, critics address this concept most often as the "incommunicability of war" (Smith). The theory argues that war is impossible to articulate because of how traumatic it is. Literary critic Susan Farrell, brings in a clinical perspective, explaining that "traumatic memories tend to be . . . 'wordless,'" but then ironically explains that the best process of recovery "must involve a narrativization of traumatic events" (186). This paradigm is based on the dilemma that in order to heal, soldiers

must use words to articulate something that is wordless, which is impossible. It places soldiers behind the seemingly impassable barrier of silence on the road to healing.

While these critics read silence as an inevitable barrier toward healing, *The Things They Carried* actually suggests a more productive interpretation. Tim O'Brien's novel explores the problems of this narrow definition and exposes an understanding and response to silence that contributes toward healing rather than hinders it. His words inform not only the literary conversation, but also the conversation regarding non-fictional U.S. veterans, who, according to a recent veteran suicide assessment, are twice as likely to die of suicide compared with non-veterans in the general population (Darkins 272). The novel reworks our understanding of silence until silence no longer barricades conversation, but facilitates it.

Despite the claims of truth being unattainable and war being incommunicable, *The Things They Carried* actually reveals the communicative power of war. O'Brien presents trauma not as an isolated event to be articulated, but rather a dimension of space—an alternate reality—that soldiers enter through the door of a disturbing event. Language, in this dimension, is not a functional medium of communication but a rigid container inside which the truth of trauma simply does not fit. Trauma's dimensions prove to be incompatible with the chronological normalcy of spoken language, so self-imposed violence instead assumes the role of functional communication by becoming not merely an indicator of mental instability but also an expression of complex truth. These truths have a voice—not in sound, but in silence. By perceiving silence as something to listen to, healing is made possible, since healing, in the text, is the act of being heard. Listeners can hear and respond to the trauma in whatever language it may be, producing a level of understanding that is not simply the digestion of compact squares of information, but an assumption of responsibility on the part of the listener to accept that message in whatever form it may be and respond to it. Since silence is the organic voice of these truths, it is no longer a barrier of communication but rather a facilitator of it. War, therefore, is actually communicable—not despite the silence, but because of it.

Trauma in *The Things They Carried* is not a disturbing event itself, but rather a whole new dimension of reality, with a disturbing event acting only as the door. It is a place distinct from the chronological logic of day-to-day living where time becomes muddy and stable truths become slippery. This

is what makes it difficult for the soldiers in the story to “separate what happened from what seemed to happen” (67). They are trying to comprehend their experience in the context of a dimension that is foreign to them—a dimension where reality merges with illusion until they become one and the same. Soon, the soldiers no longer try to separate reality from fiction but rather accept them as part of the same environment, which allows “what seems to happen [to] become its own happening” (67). This language illuminates the idea that trauma is its own dimension, where the distinction between reality and illusion is irrelevant. The illusions become part of a new dimension—their “own happening.” The trauma is not the “subject of O’Brien’s work,” as described by critic Mark Heberle, but rather the “medium within which and out of which his protagonists are impelled to revisit and rewrite their life experiences” (xxi). In short, trauma is a destination: a world that soldiers can visit and the place they go to discover their stories. Rather than being the objective fact of the narratives, trauma is the thread from which they are woven.

O’Brien helps us see that, in this dimension, language is not a functional medium of communication but actually a rigid container inside which some truths simply do not fit. O’Brien shows us that despite the need to communicate war, “you can’t even tell a true war story” because “it’s just beyond telling” (68). War literature, as critic Lorrie Smith points out, seems to be defined by this paradox. She describes it as the “unbridgeable gap” between writer and reader that is created by the “impossibility of its task—the communication of the traumatic experience” (17). At first glance, it may be tempting to say that the reason for this communicative difficulty lies in the nature of trauma and the unfamiliarity of its dimension, but O’Brien’s emphasis on people and their inability to “tell” a true war story points directly to language as the culprit for the silence. Critic Elissa Greenwald points out that since the war, linguistic thinkers have also tackled this dilemma. She points to a particular poet—Adrienne Rich—who has actually attempted the “forging [of] a new language,” because she too recognizes the need to “form a new mode of truth-telling to counteract the distortions of official language during the war” (97). Conventional language simply cannot express the realities that Vietnam imposed on the United States and, more specifically, its veterans. Language is not an easy medium of communication, but instead a rigid non-container of truth. In the end, it is not war that is incommunicable, but conventional language that is unable to effectively communicate.

O’Brien then shows that the medium of communication for trauma is not language but action, namely self-imposed violence. Before his suicide,

Norman Bowker tries to tell Tim how frustrated he is about not being able to talk about his feelings, but the full sense of this frustration is not realized until the narrator says: "Eight months later he hanged himself" (154). This tragedy is packed with a deeply intense message of pain, which we realize too late was overlooked, despite Bowker's attempts at explaining it through language. The suicide itself becomes a medium of communication that is able to reach depths outside the range of language. The physical body can then be considered, as critic Ashley Green describes, as "the text by which incommunicable trauma expresses its presence" (3). If the body is the form of text, communication is no longer abstract; it is tangible. It is something can be touched, heard, seen, and felt. It is a three-dimensional message, unlike language, which could be considered flat and linear in comparison. This three-dimensional quality is what makes it compatible with trauma, since it is also three-dimensional. The integrity of the message does not have to be filtered, processed, and tailored to fit the rigid container of language, but can be expressed directly onto the skin, defining self-imposed violence as a sincere form of communication for trauma.

Seeing self-imposed violence operate under this functional definition shows us that it is not merely an indicator of mental instability but also an expression of complex truth. Readers unacquainted with trauma may find it strange that the soldiers "found release by shooting off their own toes or fingers," because we don't normally see self-harm as serving any sort of functional purpose (21). However, this excerpt helps us see that the violence provides a functional pain through which the truth of trauma can be communicated and, in that moment, released. Sometimes the only time that outsiders will comprehend the pain of trauma, as articulated by critic Janice McLane, is "when the entire body 'cries'—when it bleeds from a cut" or another form of pain (114). The fact that no other form of communication can accurately capture the essence of that pain reveals how complex the message is. The medium is a message of confusion and contradiction—a pain that relieves. This paradox becomes the soldiers' medium of communication because they live in a contradictory reality, a place where trauma blurs the lines of real and imagined until they become indistinguishable. That contradictory reality is most authentically expressed as a symbol through self-harm, since self-harm is also a contradiction—a release from trauma through inflicting

another kind of pain. The paradoxical nature of self-harm exposes its communicative capabilities in the context of trauma.

Silence is the voice of this trauma; it catalyzes self-harm and thus causes communication. O'Brien describes the silence as something audible: "'Hear that quiet, man?' [Sanders] said, 'That quiet—just listen. There's your moral'" (74). O'Brien does not suggest that silence has a voice that would make noise if it had the chance, but rather that silence is the voice—the thing to listen to. This idea of silence as a voice runs parallel with McLane's argument that sometimes "there is a voice but not coming out of your mouth," which leads to the formation of a "mouth on your skin"—alluding again to the catalytic relationship between silence and self-harm (114). Because silence is a voice, it is not something to be ignored, but acknowledged and listened to. The way Elroy Berdahl responds to Tim's silence in "On the Rainy River" shows how responding to silence is possible, and works as a functional means of communication. Berdahl never pries because, despite the fact that "words [are] insufficient," he still understands—"not the details, of course, but the plain fact of crisis" (49). Tim's silence is enough for Berdahl to assess the situation and respond in a meaningful way, demonstrating through the placement of the emergency fund on the door that "the man knew" (51). The silence itself transfers energy, tension, and other indicators of crisis that language never would have been able to explain. It does not suggest incommunicability, but rather facilitates communication. It is not a barrier to communication, but a voice.

Recognizing silence as a voice is what makes healing possible, since healing, in the text, is the act of being heard. It is not a medical transformation from broken to whole, but rather an empathetic understanding and validation that can only come from the listener. The soldier Mitchell Sanders's observation that "nobody listens" is not a literal observation of a lack of aural activity but an acknowledgement that there are silent implications underneath his stories that he yearns for others to understand despite the fact that they cannot be adequately spoken (73). This passage implies that being heard would satisfy Sanders' compulsive need to tell and retell stories that simply cannot be adequately expressed through language. It would provide resolution, rest, and closure. Because the message is silent, it requires a type of hearing that does not come from the ears, but rather the empathetic depths of the soul. It is the type of hearing that Norman Bowker would have benefited from had his father responded to Norman's clumsy attempts to silently express his

pain with a simple “I hear you” (140). He could have been the “sympathetic listener” that Susan Farrell claims is necessary “for the healing process to begin” (86). Healing from trauma does not come about naturally over time, as does a physical wound on the flesh. It is not a spontaneous natural reaction, but rather a deliberate empathetic witnessing, dependent on the investigation and communicative reciprocation of the listener.

If being heard is healing, then being ignored is death. It forces a feeling of nonexistence upon he who wishes to communicate, causing a sort of emotional death which O’Brien shows is distinct from the physical. This type of death is explored in the novel during “The Lives of the Dead” (213). Linda is a friend of Tim’s who died when he was young and continues to appear and speak to him in his dreams. O’Brien exposes that ignoring is a form of death when Linda, even though she is dead, contradictorily says she is “not dead,” except for the moments she feels she is “inside a book that nobody’s reading” (232). The moment she feels the most dead is when she is being ignored. In fact, she does not even consider herself dead when she is being remembered, despite her physical decay. This dialogue shows that being ignored is itself a layer of death, one level beyond the physical, and that it is capable of afflicting all souls, whether they are physically alive or dead. This sort of death exists in all dimensions, and comes about because of the lack of responsive communication. It happens as a result of the irresponsible assumption that silence is always a void, and therefore, something to be ignored. Being ignored is an emotionally crushing death that puts the speaker inside a box that no amount of expression can free him from.

Ignoring—the refusal to communicate—introduces a new type of silence, which is not a facilitator for communication, but rather a form of war. This type of silence is not the voice of trauma; it is the silence that potential responders to trauma force onto the victim by ignoring him. It places a wall between the responder and the victim, leaving the victim alone in a fight between himself and his thoughts. Ambiguity thrives on this battlefield and drives the victim toward self-destruction. This is why Jensen says it was like “fighting two different wars” when he was trying to make sense of the silence between him and Lee Strunk after their fight (60). He is referring not only to the physical war he is fighting, but also the war going on in his mind as he attempts to find some sort of clarity in the ambiguous “silent tension” between him and Strunk (60). In this war, his mind struggles to grasp onto certainty that is being forcefully concealed. It is a war of mental role-play and

what-ifs in an attempt to stumble upon the truth, which proves unlikely since the other party is deliberately concealing it. In the battle with his thoughts, Jensen imagines worst-case scenarios: “a grenade rolling into his foxhole,” and “the tickle of a knife against his ear” (60). These scenarios eventually win the mental war, and Jensen self-destructs. The scenarios convince him it would be better to “break his own nose,” rather than seek reconciliation (60). The ambiguity created by the act of ignoring is a dangerous space because of the war it creates between the victim and his own mind. It pits the victim against himself until the anxiety is too much to bear and he turns to self-harm as a solution—a level of pain he can control rather than the alternative which is unknown to him and possibly worse. It launches the victim onto an inescapable war inside his own mind.

When this communicative blockade happens in the text on a larger scale—between veterans and citizens—it becomes more than an internal battle; it is a civil war. Citizens block out veterans by refusing to engage in meaningful dialogue about the war effort, which creates an us-versus-them dynamic that spawns a civil war in the sense of national disunity. In their colloquial conversation, citizens in the novel silence the reality of the war by sticking to “simpleminded patriotism,” “prideful ignorance,” and romanticized “love-it-or-leave-it platitudes” (43). Despite the fact that they are speaking, they are simultaneously silencing other aspects of truth. Simpleminded patriotism silences the controversial aspects of the war. Prideful ignorance silences a more holistic and empathetic understanding of the veterans. Love-it-or-leave-it platitudes silence the soldiers’ complex moral code and simultaneous breaking of that code when they are forced to kill. By defaulting to these fallacies, civilians unwittingly silence the truth. This creates false perceptions of the soldiers’ involvement in the war, which further corrodes national unity. Citizens begin to make assumptions based on these perceptions that cause them to greet returning veterans disrespectfully with the juvenile name-calling of “baby killer,” spitting, and a general feeling of rejection, as reported by real veterans in an interview by the New Jersey Vietnam Memorial Foundation (“What Was it Like”). This was the ultimate manifestation of how far apart veterans and civilians had grown as a result of faulty communication and misunderstanding. In return, this experience taught veterans that, according to Jerry Lembcke’s review of the movie *Coming Home*, “this society is a lie and now this society does not want to deal with them” (68). The communicative disconnect was

no longer a matter of careless expression and inaccurate assumptions, but instead the beginning of a societal war.

In the text, understanding is more than just the digestion of information; it is an assumption of responsibility. It is a commitment from the listener to accept the message in whatever form of language it is compatible with. Understanding does not have conditions based on the articulative ability of the speaker or the functionality of the words. Exchanges in the text like the one between Bowker and the employee at Mama Burger in "Speaking of Courage" show us how unreasonable expectations in communication can prevent meaningful exchanges. The employee tries several times to get Bowker to open up about what is on his mind, but in a frustrated realization that "he could not talk about it," Bowker declines the invitation to speak and the employee sheds all traces of responsibility in the communicative effort by saying "your choice" and tuning out (147, 146). By blaming the failed conversation on Bowker's silence, the employee shifts responsibility away from herself. She denies the language through which Bowker's trauma needs to communicate, which is not words, but silence. She places an unreasonable expectation on Bowker to simply "choose" to articulate something that cannot be embodied by language. As we see in the text, this only leads to misunderstanding and, later, Bowker's suicide. Elroy, on the other hand, does not have unreasonable expectations. Instead, he takes responsibility in the communicative effort by accepting Tim's silence for what it is and responds in a meaningful way by placing the emergency fund on the door (51). He "never pried" because he "understood that words were insufficient," and he was committed to respond regardless of words unspoken (49). This type of understanding is not merely a cognitive processing of information; it is an assumption of responsibility in the communicative effort. It is a commitment to keep going—to keep pushing through the silence or confusion until finding the right response, which reaches toward the possibility of societal peace, veteran integration, and individual healing. This understanding is a commitment that would close the rift between veterans and citizens. As such, it is our responsibility as listeners and citizens to engage in the communicative effort.

Tim O'Brien helps us see that while trauma may be wordless, language is not the only means of communication. Silence is also a voice, and by listening to it, we can be a witness to others' trauma, which will help them on the road to healing. Rather than forcing trauma to fit into the rigid container of language, the listener can accept its message in whatever form it communicates.

Expanding our definition of communication to include silence requires that we also consider on whom rests most of the communicative responsibility—the speaker, or the listener. Many American habits of communication place the responsibility on the speaker. We typically expect an articulate speaker and a clear message in a familiar language. However, when silence is the voice, a large part of the communicative responsibility naturally falls on the listener. By redefining communication in the context of trauma, *The Things They Carried* invites readers to assume this responsibility; it invites us to hear the voice of trauma, listen to the silence, respond to it, and, as listeners, accept the responsibility to make these exchanges matter.

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