

Ink, Paper, and Preservation

By Tony Martinelli

Writing is a product of the human need to preserve. We save events and emotions, thoughts and theories, facts and fantasies, all of which would otherwise fall victim to the eroding sands of time. To write is to establish a record, a mark on history that is infinitely greater than the actual mark of ink on paper; or rather, writing creates history itself in the sense that much of our knowledge of things long past would be lost. So it is interesting then that we see books that preserve the pain and grief of death within their pages, as such emotions would be easier to simply forget. We see this discussion of death clearly in both *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien and *A Grief Observed* by C. S. Lewis.

One errant assumption is that these writings devoted to death are a way for the authors to separate themselves from the emotional burden and to forget the often traumatizing events. The very act of writing such things preserves them forever so it is unreasonable to assume that authors are attempting to bury their ordeals. In fact the opposite is true. Both C. S. Lewis and Tim O'Brien continued to carry significant psychological burdens following their experiences with death. C. S. Lewis admitted to obsessing over the death of his wife, and that no work had the power to bring her back. It is also clear that in *The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien fixates on the death of Kiowa, retelling the story a number of times, because it runs through his mind almost constantly. In "Notes," Norman Bowker explains how Tim O'Brien's writings bring back a multitude of memories and emotions, and it is the memories of his time in Vietnam that ultimately drive Norman to commit suicide.

Both C. S. Lewis and Tim O'Brien, however, recognize the therapeutic powers of writing. O'Brien explores this train of thought throughout his novel, blending fact and fiction to show that the technical facts of a novel are irrelevant, while the act of telling a story holds immense power. This is because the stories allow the tellers (or writers) and the listeners (or readers) to confront the past events together and understand one another more completely, where as facts alone merely summarize the events without considering a person's emotional experience. In "The Lives of the Dead," he explores how telling stories comforts him and allows him to deal with the painful past. Also, from each of the characters' descriptions we conclude that war, and by extension the killing and death, is chaotic. This is seen especially in the men's recollection of Ted Lavender's death. But for Tim O'Brien, using words to comprehend the experience is a way to impose order and power over death. He even creates a character with his name and vocation, to demonstrate through fiction who he is, in an attempt to better understand, from an emotional distance, the past as well as its effect on him. O'Brien goes on to say, "By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself" (O'Brien, 158). C. S. Lewis also considers death to be an indication of dissonance and disorder, which casts doubt upon his entire belief structure and he accordingly questions the acts of God directly. He uses his writing as a "defense against total collapse" (Lewis, 59), splaying his emotions across the pages. After much reflection, however, he concludes that his faith is much stronger than "a house of cards" (Lewis, 37) and that it is unreasonable for him to change his faith because of his wife's death.

Both of the authors therefore utilize writing as a means of meditation, a visible, readable pondering of thoughts and ideas. We can say then, that these writings are an examination of truth through ideas. In exploring death it is often meandering and indirect, a crooked path that leads to more and more paths. But perhaps it is not the destination which is important but the realization

of the author, that they are closer to truth than they have been previously. It is necessary to note Tim O'Brien's choice to lessen the importance of the objective facts surrounding any one individual while elevating the significance of the overlying truth of the effects of death and destruction on the soldiers. C. S. Lewis dissects the truth in his work in a much more tangible sense, questioning the existence of God and his nature. Perhaps, more relevant though, is C. S. Lewis's discussion of the fear of the "unknown" pertaining to the afterlife, though he ultimately decides such knowledge is unattainable, so fearing it is useless. In this way, he finds comfort with himself in spite of the fact that his questions pertaining to death and heaven remain unanswered.

Writing also offers solace, in that just as it may preserve the death and pain of a moment it can conserve the love and energy of a lifetime. Both Tim O'Brien and C. S. Lewis strive to provide the dead with a depth of character that sets them apart, preserving their identity. Every day, hundreds of people die from cancer, AIDS, cardiovascular disease, war, and thousands of other causes that you won't read or hear about, but each distinct personality that the authors provide separates their characters from the lifeless corpses that pollute the earth, thereby demanding from the reader an emotional response. Tim O'Brien muses that the act of telling a story allows the dead to become reanimated in the memories and emotions that the story evokes. Remembering the deceased in life rather than in death, we feel that they are still with us, though we cannot deny their striking absence from the present. This is exhibited when the platoon relives some of Curt Lemon's ostentatious acts following his death. C. S. Lewis pours his memories out in a similar manner, but he finds that this only brings him despair in that he will "[Never again have] The old life, the jokes, the drinks, the arguments, the lovemaking, the tiny heartbreaking commonplace" (Lewis, 42). Overtime C. S. Lewis begins to recognize that his

writing is not a subject of this despair but rather that this “bereavement is a universal and integral part of our experience of love” (Lewis, 50). In effect, C. S. Lewis is commenting on the power of love over death, and how his love for his wife remains even after she is gone.

Both authors dismiss death’s power in other ways as well. In *The Things They Carried* the characters trivialize death through their use of language. Because death has such a grasp over the intimate relationships the members of the platoon have with one another, when faced with the loss of a friend they use words like “kicking the bucket,” “zapped,” “greased,” and “lit up” partly in defiance of death, to lessen the realness of the experience. O’Brien writes at one point “They use a hard language to contain the terrible softness” (O’Brien, 20). C. S. Lewis however, basks in his own pain through his language, though he rejects death’s negative eminence in other ways. Most prominently he refers to death as releasing his wife from her painful body. Further in his contemplation of the afterlife and heaven, he effectively denies the existence of death defined as a “ceasing to be,” instead proposing that death is actually a transformation or metamorphosis from one state to the next.

In closing, we begin to see that these chronicles of death and grief are thinly veiled celebrations of the lives of the deceased. While many die with the hope that they have left an indelible mark on history, these authors have insured this for their subjects. The authors’ works present their memories about those who have passed, marking them in time with something far beyond a death certificate or headstone. Particularly it is these strong relationships, whether between men in a platoon or between a husband and his wife, that not only demand to be remembered but, in fact, persist in the face of death. Therefore while the dead may not be revived, we find that a form of love flowers through these darkened writings.