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**Severed Ears:  
An Image of the Vietnam War**

A piece of something dark and waxy,  
like a fig, ridged like a question mark,  
a human ear.

THAT DESCRIPTION COMES from a poem by Walter McDonald entitled "Digging in a Footlocker," which lists items found in a World War II trunk: uniforms, snapshots, medals, weapons, and human remains (teeth, bones, and the single ear). The enemy ear as war memento, unexpected in reference to World War II, is a recurring image in Vietnam War literature. Its recurrence in autobiography, fiction, and journalism testifies to its reality: U. S. soldiers did collect Vietnamese soldiers' ears. A recent newspaper column on the possible effects of Agent Orange on Vietnam veterans, their wives, and their children begins by describing a twenty-year-old snapshot of a soldier "wearing an Army helmet and holding a human ear in each hand" (Martin). The brevity of the description implies a familiar frame of reference for columnist and reader alike, a shared acquaintance with the image of severed ears.

In his discussion of helicopters and punji sticks, J. Palmer Hall argues that such imagery can tell us much about soldiers and about war. In books and films, helicopters and punji sticks (later, land mines) come to symbolize the American and Vietnamese ways of going to war. Large,

mechanical, noisy, the helicopters prove ineffectual against the primitive, handmade, hidden punji sticks and land mines, America's blustering technology ineffective in the face of the dogged patience and endurance of the Vietnamese (Hall 150-160). Severed ears, also very real, constitute another recurring and increasingly resonant image in Vietnam war literature.

With what language, what imagery, and what moral view do narrators choose to present us with severed ears? The works under discussion are Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*, Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, Larry Heinemann's *Paco's Story*, and Stephanie Vaughn's story "Kid MacArthur."

For Philip Caputo, in 1965 among the earliest of American combatants in Vietnam, the severing and displaying of human ears comes as an extraordinary shock. And he expects such shock for his readers. Describing some tough Australian commandos (with more experience of Vietnam than the Americans had yet had), Caputo tells how one of them

. . . pulled something from his pocket and, grinning, held it up the way a fisherman posing for a photograph holds up a prize trout. It was an educational, if not an edifying, sight. Nothing could have been better calculated to give an idea of the kind of war Vietnam was and the kind of things men are capable of in war if they stay in it long enough. I will not disguise my emotions. I was shocked by what I saw, partly because I had not expected to see such a thing and partly because the man holding it was a mirror image of myself—a member of the English-speaking world. Actually, I should refer to "it" in the plural, because there were two of them, strung

on a wire: two brown and bloodstained human ears. (63-64)

Caputo's moral position is clear: the Australian has done something both inconceivable and reprehensible, something that violates human decency.

At the time he meets the Australians, Caputo has seen little of the war. Somewhat later, after a successful assault upon a Viet Cong base camp containing both military documents and personal papers, Caputo the participant is aware of the enemy as human beings with real lives and capacity for pain and suffering, while Caputo the retrospective narrator is trying to determine how and when "the kind of war Vietnam was" began to corrupt and dehumanize its soldiers. "We retained a capacity for remorse and had not yet reached the stage of moral and emotional numbness," he writes, then adds, "Or so it was for the majority of the men. There were exceptions. At least one marine in the company had already passed beyond callousness into savagery" (117). Sgt. Loker reports to Caputo about Hanson, a rifleman:

"I caught the little sonuvabitch cutting the ears off one of those dead VC. He had a K-bar and was trying to slice the guy's ears off. The little jerk. Lordy, I took him up by the stackin' swivel and told him I'd run his ass up if I ever caught him doing that again." (118)

If the Australian commando had been "a mirror image" of Caputo, Hanson is something even closer, an All-American boy who "could have posed for a Norman Rockwell" (118). Yet Caputo distances himself, saying that he tried but failed to imagine Hanson doing what Loker described, that Hanson's act "was beyond understanding"

(118). He thinks of labels to explain Hanson, labels he cannot possibly apply to himself: "half-educated" and somehow disturbed, for "there had to be something fundamentally wrong with a man who could muster the cold-blooded nerve to mutilate a corpse with a knife" (118). Still brooding some nights later, Caputo tells Sgt. Colby, a veteran of Korea, of Hanson's act and his own incomprehension. Colby responds: "Before you leave here, sir, you're going to learn that one of the most brutal things in the world is your average nineteen-year-old American boy." Caputo, however, "refused to believe him" (129), knowing himself incapable of such an act—for now. But his earlier references to "retaining" a capacity for remorse and to one marine having "already" passed into savagery tell us that he is tracing that process in soldiers other than Hanson, that he is moving toward a recognition of his own latent savagery as well.

James C. Wilson has argued that Caputo blames the climate, the landscape, the Vietnamese, for his own eventual fall into brutality and inhumanity, that he justifies himself by blaming the war and "denies the very possibility of moral responsibility" (63). Cornelius Cronin, however, stresses that Caputo in fact feels his own personal guilt very strongly (83), and Thomas Myers argues persuasively that Caputo sees both his own transgression *and* his country's (98), that he learns to accept what the Korean veteran said about American boys "not only as a cultural generalization, but also as a personal accusation" (95). Whatever larger issues Caputo raises to help explain his later behavior, certainly in the earlier sections of *A Rumor of War* he ardently affirms the possibility of individual moral responsibility. For Caputo, the urge to remove a human ear from a corpse, and then to display it as a trophy, is profoundly immoral. Sgt. Loker reports Hanson's attempt not only to Lt. Caputo but also to Capt.

Lemmon: these soldiers, at least at this point in the war, still perceive clear boundaries between right and wrong, moral and immoral, and assume that those boundaries can and should be maintained.

Tim O'Brien reached Vietnam four years after Caputo, in 1969. Like Caputo, O'Brien, early in his tour, encountered a severed ear, produced not by an alien Australian or an American exhibiting "something fundamentally wrong," but by a respected, capable officer, Mad Mark, given the name not because of fanaticism but because he was "insanely calm" and dedicated to moderation, a "perfect guardian for the Platonic Republic" (85). After a night patrol, Mad Mark and the Kid return with a freshly severed ear, which they display by flashlight:

Mad Mark sat cross-legged and unwrapped a bundle of cloth and dangled a hunk of brown, fresh human ear under the yellow beam of light. Someone giggled. The ear was clean of blood. It dripped with a little water, as if coming out of a bathtub. Part of the upper lobe was gone. A band of skin flopped away from the ear, at the place where the ear had been held to a man's head. It looked alive. It looked like it would move in Mad Mark's hands, as if it might make a squirm for freedom. It had the texture of a piece of elastic.

"Christ, Mad Mark just went up and sliced it off the dead dink! No wonder he's Mad Mark. Like he was cuttin' sausage or something."

"What you gonna do with it? Why don't you eat it, Mad Mark?"

"Bullshit, who's gonna eat a goddamn dink? I eat women, not dead dinks." (87)

In contrast to Caputo, O'Brien provides details that domesticate the trophy: it looks clean from the bathtub, it feels like elastic. At the same time, however, the sense of the ear's vitality, its appearance of being ready to "squirm for freedom," remind us of its connection to something recently living.

O'Brien continues his narration by saying that Mad Mark called in gunships over the village—"We heard cattle and chickens and dogs dying" (87)—and that each time O'Brien woke during the night, the smoke "remind[ed] me of the ear" (88). In the morning, the Americans search the village and find the dead man from whom the ear came, his head turned "so that you could not see where the ear was gone. Little fires burned in some of the huts. Dead animals lay about. There were no people. We searched Tri Binh 4, then burned most of it down" (88). There the chapter ends.

Although O'Brien, as Eric James Schroeder notes, does not always spell out the point of his morality lessons, he is teaching lessons, even if sometimes judgment is suspended (122-23). Unlike Caputo, O'Brien does not express shock, nor does he explicitly judge either Mad Mark or the total destruction of the village, which Thomas Myers ironically identifies as an example of the new Platonic "moderation" (81). If Mad Mark is an excellent leader, and if he can slice up a dead human being like a sausage, what does O'Brien mean to imply about what makes a man an excellent leader in war, in *this* war? The ear, so casually sliced off, comes from a dead human lying amid the carnage of his village. It is not a piece of sausage.

The sausage image leads to the question of whether Mad Mark will eat the ear, and reminds us of Caputo's initial simile of a fisherman displaying a prize trout, and of McDonald's image of a fig. Mad Mark turns the question into an occasion for heterosexual as well as martial

bravado: "I eat women, not dead dinks." The connection of severed ears to food recurs in Michael Herr's first exposure to this sort of war trophy. In 1968 Herr, a correspondent rather than a soldier, has some of the innocence Caputo had earlier, and is, thus, a target for a joke. Herr is smoking dope with some infantry in the Vietnamese Highlands, when:

. . . a reedy little man . . . pulled a thick plastic bag out of his pack and handed it over to me. It was full of what looked like large pieces of dried fruit. I was stoned and hungry, I almost put my hand in there, but it had a bad weight to it. The other men were giving each other looks, some amused, some embarrassed and even angry. Someone had told me once, there were a lot more ears than heads in Vietnam; just information. When I handed it back he was still grinning, but he looked sadder than a monkey. (34)

This passage illustrates that the soldiers themselves have become indifferent toward the ears; without Caputo's shock and horror or the Kid's excitement, they react with amusement, embarrassment, and at most anger—which may be caused by the revelation of their secret to a correspondent rather than by anything they find shameful or upsetting about collecting ears. When reading Herr, are we to emphasize the human quality of sadness or the resemblance to a monkey? Herr himself seems moved more by the potential for making a fool of himself (it's a lucky thing he'd heard that "information" about ears) than by any shock or distress at the bag of ears.

In his book, Herr returns to ears twice more. One reference is in passing: "the kid who had mailed a gook ear home to his girl and could not understand now why she

had stopped writing to him" (148). Herr manages to have it both ways: identifying, as he does throughout his time in Vietnam, with the macho soldier rather than with the uncomprehending girl at home, but also winking at his civilian readers, telling us that he understands why she stopped writing. We have traveled far from Caputo's aghast reaction or the Kid whom O'Brien describes as "ecstatic" (87); the taking and keeping of an ear now has become so routine that the soldier in Vietnam assumes others, even his girlfriend, appreciate this symbolism of courage and manhood and victory. Everyone should own an ear.

Herr returns to the idea of routine and universality in his final reference to ears. Listing the standard photographs taken by American soldiers in Vietnam—all of them photographs of death and violence—he includes two types involving dismembered parts:

. . . the severed-head shot, the head often resting on the chest of the dead man or being held up by a smiling Marine, or a lot of heads, arranged in a row, with a burning cigarette in each of the mouths, the eyes open . . . ; a picture of a Marine holding an ear or maybe two ears or, as in the case of a guy I knew near Pleiku, a whole necklace made of ears, "love beads" as its owner called them . . . (198-99)

The mutilation and dismemberment of the dead enemy is here presented as routine. In fact, far from being an occasion for shame or rebuke, such brutality is memorialized in, Herr says, hundreds and even thousands of snapshots (like the one mentioned in the recent column on Agent Orange). The severed ear is now an occasion for pride, and is to be displayed not only to fellow soldiers and war



correspondents, but also to those looking at photo albums back home.

That the ears might have a planned effect on a specific audience is an idea picked up by Larry Heinemann in the more recent *Paco's Story*. Heinemann also uses the image of ears as a necklace—jewelry calling attention to the value of its wearer, and, like a medal, testifying to valor. Heinemann's ghost-narrator describes not only the ears but also the way in which they were obtained and then brought to the right condition to be worn and displayed:

[Jonesy] had thirty-nine pairs of blackened, leathery, wrinkled ears strung on a bit of black commo wire and wrapped like a garland around that bit of turned-out brim of his steel helmet. He had snipped the ears off with a pearl-handled straight razor just as quick and slick as you'd lance a boil the size of a baseball—snicker-snack—the way he'd bragged his uncle could skin a poached deer. He cured the ears a couple days by tucking them under that bit of turned-out brim of his steel helmet, then toted them crammed in a spare sock. The night that Lieutenant Stennett called it quits, Jonesy sat up way after dark stringing those ears on that bit of black wire and sucking snips of C-ration beefsteak through his teeth. (7-8)

The references to skinning a deer and to "curing" the ears, and the suggestive final sentence, reinforce the earlier writers' association of severed enemy ears with food. Again, as with Herr, there is no apparent shock or moral judgment. Jonesy knows just how to snip off the ears, just how to cure them, just how to string them, and the narrator admires this expertise.

Jonesy also knows how to use his necklace of ears for an effect we have not seen before, an effect not on his fellow soldiers or on the civilians back home but on Vietnamese civilians:

And the next afternoon, when we finally humped through the south gate at Phuc Luc, you should have seen those rear-area motherfucking housecats bug their eyes and cringe every muscle in their bodies, and generally suck back against the building. . . . Jonesy danced this way and that—shucking and jiving, juking and high-stepping, rolling his eyes and snapping his fingers in time—twirling that necklace to a fare-thee-well, shaking and jangling it (as much as a necklace of ears will jangle, James) and generally fooling with it as though it were a cheerleader's pom-pom. . . .

Every Viet in base camp crowded the doorways and screened windows, and such as that, gawking at Jonesy—and the rest of us, too. So he made a special show of shaking those ears at them, witch-doctor-fashion, while booming out some gibberish mumbojumbo . . . and laughing . . . . (8-9)

Jonesy's performance is aimed partly at the "motherfucking housecats," the traditional enemy of the frontline soldiers in all wars, those soldiers in name who stay safely behind the lines; and they are terrified, bug-eyed and cringing at this display of savage accomplishment. Jonesy's performance is also, however, aimed at the Vietnamese civilians on the base, whom the narrator describes as workers during the day but "zips at night" (8). Jonesy is threatening them: look, he seems to say, I have done this to your

people, I know you are really the enemy despite your daytime cover, I can do this to you too. This is what Americans do to Vietnamese.

The narrator admires Jonesy; the "housecats" are horrified, but because they envy and fear him, not because they disapprove morally; the Vietnamese only "gawk," staring without any emotion to which Heinemann gives a name. The garland of ears is presented neither as a crime, a violation of decency, a private trophy, nor a badge of achievement. The ear necklace is presented as a weapon, a means of threat and intimidation. In Heinemann's work, the ear evolves from a symbol of shame to a symbol of pride and object of usefulness.

Of course, the taking of an ear is hardly the worst moral act in any of these books, all of which consciously raise moral issues. Caputo accumulates evidence of American cruelty and inhumanity: the army making "exhibitions of the human beings it had butchered" (170) by hosing them down and displaying them for a visiting general; the platoon rampaging and burning a village, causing an old man to ask Caputo, "'Tai Sao? Tai Sao?' Why? Why?" (288), a question that haunts him; McKenna shooting an old woman who accidentally spat betel juice at him and then reflecting, "'the thing that bothers me about killing her is that it doesn't bother me'" (297). The examples culminate in the Giao-Tri incident, in the coldblooded killing of innocent men upon Caputo's wordless order and in his "secret and savage desire" for those deaths (300). O'Brien describes several incidents of gratuitous cruelty: soldiers throwing a carton of milk at a blind old man giving them showers (103); the tying and gagging and eventual beating of three old men, the symbolism of which is explicit in the chapter title ("Centurion"), the reference to Golgotha, and O'Brien's offer to one of the men of a drink of water (131-33). O'Brien ends his memoir with an examination

of the massacre at My Lai a year before his arrival. Herr is also disturbed by what he sees, observing of a man who has been using an M-16 on already-dead bodies:

I knew I hadn't seen anything until I saw his face. It was flushed and mottled and twisted like he had his face skin on inside out, a patch of green that was too dark, a streak of red running into bruise purple, a lot of sick gray white in between, he looked like he'd had a heart attack out there. His eyes were rolled up half into his head, his mouth was sprung open and his tongue was out, but he was smiling. Really a dude who'd shot his wad. The captain wasn't too pleased about my having seen that. (19)

Like the soldiers who collect ears, this man has been mutilating the dead—and seeming to love it. For Heinemann's Paco, the worst is the gang rape, described in excruciating detail, which the narrator identifies as “a moment of evil . . . [after which] we would never be the same” (184). Slicing an ear off someone dead hardly compares with torture of the living, wholesale destruction, gang rape, and massacre. So what is so awful about cutting off an ear? Caputo shudders at the cold-blooded mutilation of a corpse, as if the sanctity of death were violated. His reaction suggests also that he still sees the enemy dead as human and as individuals deserving of respect in death; he does not yet see the dead in terms of kill ratios and body counts. O'Brien also sees the Vietnamese as human, reporting with sorrow and disgust repeated examples of American cruelty toward Vietnamese civilians and communities. The impression in Herr and in Heinemann that severing ears is an instance of everyday good fun underlines the loss of a sense of the sanctity of human life or death.

The food imagery suggests cannibalism, a powerful taboo; although no one in fact consumes an ear, mere flirting with the idea broaches the division between human and inhuman behavior. Only Caputo omits the association with food, which would have been a horror at that point beyond his capacity to imagine. We are civilized; we do not eat one another—even if Jonesy sucks red meat while stringing his ears.

As “sucking” beefsteak and Herr’s description of the gunner who had “shot his wad” suggest, the passages about the ears are also freighted with sexual imagery. Mad Mark’s assertion that he eats women, not “dinks,” stresses not only the sexual but the heterosexual: I eat women, not men, for sexual pleasure. Herr’s soldiers use ears as gifts to their girlfriends and as “love beads,” statements of sexual as well as martial accomplishment. And Jonesy’s dancing display of his necklace, with Heinemann’s use of the gerunds “twirling,” “shaking,” “dangling,” and “fooling with it,” might just as well be a display of his genitalia. Further, the removal of the ears is symbolic castration, signalling the enemy’s destroyed potency; the display of the ears is a way of appropriating that potency. (Cannibalism is also, of course, a way of appropriating the other.) As male soldiers “castrate” the male enemy and exhibit the trophies for a male audience, which appreciates the act and the evidence as the female audience at home does not, the homoerotic overtones are also strong.

Jonesy’s display of the ear necklace for the Vietnamese underlines that there is a racial issue as well as a sexual one. Caputo and O’Brien both describe the ears as brown, while Herr refers to a “gook ear”; presumably the ear, “dark and waxy, / like a fig,” of Walter McDonald’s poem came from the Pacific war. We do not mutilate the bodies of people “like us,” only of those from an alien race. That Jonesy is black only adds an ironic twist to this notion.

Racism dehumanizes the racist, and the trophies of ears—and the increasingly brazen flaunting of these trophies—show such dehumanization. The journey has been from a sense of the sanctity of life and death to the complete objectification of an enemy seen only in the mass—kill V.C., raise the body count—or as unrelated parts (ears, heads), not as whole individuals.

This is not, of course, a journey taken by all or even most American soldiers. Caputo, O'Brien, and Heinemann, veterans all, were sensitized rather than brutalized by their war experience: sensitized to issues of morality, violence, good and evil, humanity and inhumanity, which became not abstract conceptions but everyday reality, and which they explore in part through the symbolism of the severed ear. They show us the place of the ears in the daily combat experience of Vietnam; a noncombatant woman, Stephanie Vaughn, examines the trophy ears in a different context, that of the soldiers' return to the United States and civilian society. Seeing the ears in a light other than that of crude macho bravado, Vaughn sympathetically explores the post-war experience of Vietnam veterans.

In Vaughn's "Kid MacArthur," the narrator, Gemma, twice is offered severed human ears. On the first occasion, a Vietnam veteran in her freshman composition class offers her a severed ear as "a present for the end of the course" (104). When, politely (and nervously, thinking he must be angry or on drugs), she declines, he thinks she does not like that particular ear and reaches into his bag for a "better" one. Eventually he gives her, instead, a bottle of vodka, and she realizes that "he had been sincere in wanting to give me a present" (108). No more willing to receive the gift than the girlfriend of the soldier Herr describes, Gemma—and Vaughn—nevertheless can see the offer of the ear not as aggressive sexual display but a tentative, ineffectual attempt to share something valuable.

Although the disjunction between the world of war and the civilian world dooms the effort, we are moved to feel sadness at that disjunction, not horror at whatever actions the soldier committed in war.

The second appearance of an ear comes when Gemma visits her brother, MacArthur, who is living alone (and, from his parents' viewpoint, aimlessly—Gemma is sent to learn his "plans") after his return from Vietnam. MacArthur shows her an ear sent him as a Christmas present by his former comrade Dixon, now hospitalized, and remembering the earlier ear, Gemma solidifies her awareness of the gap between military and civilian experience and her sorrowful—not angry or horrified—understanding of what has been done *to* these young men, not what they have done:

Even in my imagination, I could not go where [MacArthur] had gone. All I knew was that somewhere in the jungle had been a boy named Dixon, a boy from Oklahoma, who had grown up on land just like the land my father used to hunt while MacArthur trailed behind with bright-red boxes of homemade ammunition. But now Dixon was a nut who sent ears through the mail, and MacArthur was unemployed and living alone in the country. (129-30)

Both Gemma and MacArthur see Dixon's act as that of a "nut," of a boy whom war made not a man but a madman. But MacArthur will travel all the way to West Virginia to see his friend, and when Gemma leaves and MacArthur gives her the ear, she accepts it, "because he was my brother" (132-33). Not knowing what to do with the ear, she keeps it under the front seat of her car, and five years later leaves it there when she sells the car to an

eighteen-year-old boy, a boy who clearly reminds her of what her brother might have been had not the war given him an “implacable expression” and a body that said “nothing could startle or move him” (129). Despite her inability to find a proper “place” for the ear, Gemma understands now that the ear was not a challenge but an offering, and her acceptance of it an affirmation of her bond with the soldiers of her generation, and against those, like her father, who failed to understand the reality of the Vietnam war or its profound effects upon its combatants.

Gemma remarks to the reader,

You probably have heard about the ears they brought back with them from Vietnam . . . . worn like necklaces . . . . looked like dried fruit, or like seashells, or like leaves curling beneath an oak tree. The mind will often make a metaphor when it cannot make anything else.  
(106)

Gemma points to the need both to tame and to interpret the image of the severed ear, to “make” something of it. That soldiers frequently cut off and displayed ears, and that writers, over time, have focused on this behavior, underlines how compelling both the action and the image are. For Caputo, early in the war and early in his tour in Vietnam, cutting off an ear is so far beyond the limit of what he assumes to be human and moral that he cannot conceive of doing it—even when he has in front of him two examples of people who can do it without apparent compunction. As the war proceeds—and as more books are written—the shock and the horror attaching to the gesture wear off. To make a necklace of ears becomes commonplace. A reader comes to expect an ear episode: oh yes, the ears, I know about them. Although not even the female civilian



Gemma is as appalled as Caputo was, all the writers recognize that the ears are not simply evidence of primitive brutality but resonant, complex images.

To focus on the imagery of the severed ear is to look at only one aspect of the Vietnam war experience. It is a crucial aspect for Caputo, whose autobiography addresses the question of how this can happen, of how what seemed beyond the realm of human possibility becomes possible, then common, then accepted. O'Brien and Heinemann, and to a lesser extent Herr, are also concerned with this question, while Vaughn seems more interested in the aftereffects of the war, and the way in which the ears symbolize the difficulty of the veteran's re-integration into American civilian society. The severed ears—a realistic detail made resonant by these writers—thus provide a precise, controllable symbol of larger issues. Like torture, gang rape, and massacre, the ears remind us of dangerous, powerful temptations to our humanity: unholiness, cannibalism, sexual perversion and violation, racism. War weakens some men's resistance to such temptations. What happens to men in war, and what happened to men in *this* war? What happens to men when they return from war?

Caputo's summary, hyperbolic and harsh, calls our attention to one reading of the Vietnam experience: "Everything rotted and corroded quickly over there: bodies, boot leather, canvas, metal, morals" (217). The ears, carefully cured and preserved, did not rot; they survive to shock us if we can still be shocked, and to provoke us to ask what happened. □

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