

Poems before *The Things They Carried*

1. The Guard at the Binh Thuy Bridge by John Balaban

How still he stands as mists begin to move,
as morning, curling, billows creep across
his cooplike, concrete sentry perched mid-bridge
over mid-muddy river. Stares at bush green banks
which bristle rifles, mortars, men -- perhaps.
No convoys shake the timbers. No sound
but water slapping boat side, bank sides, pilings.
He's slung his carbine barrel down to keep
the boring dry, and two banana-clips instead of one
are taped to make, now, forty rounds instead
of twenty. Droplets bead from stock to sight;
they bulb, then strike his boot. He scrapes his heel,
and sees no box bombs floating towards his bridge.
Anchored in red morning mist a narrow junk
rocks its weight. A woman kneels on deck
staring at lapping water. Wets her face.
Idly the thick Rach Binh Thuy slides by.
He aims. At her. Then drops his aim. Idly.

Waist Deep in the Big Muddy by Pete Seeger – song

It was back in nineteen forty-two,
I was a member of a good platoon.
We were on maneuvers in-a Louisiana,
One night by the light of the moon.
The captain told us to ford a river,
That's how it all begun.
We were -- knee deep in the Big Muddy,
But the big fool said to push on.
The Sergeant said, "Sir, are you sure,
This is the best way back to the base?"
"Sergeant, go on! I forded this river
'Bout a mile above this place.
It'll be a little soggy but just keep slogging.
We'll soon be on dry ground."
We were, waist deep in the Big Muddy
And the big fool said to push on.
The Sergeant said, "Sir, with all this equipment
No man will be able to swim."
"Sergeant, don't be a Nervous Nellie, "
The Captain said to him.
"All we need is a little determination;
Men, follow me, I'll lead on."
We were, neck deep in the Big Muddy
And the big fool said to push on.

"Our memory is a more perfect world than
the universe: it gives back life to those who
no longer exist."

— Guy de Maupassant

All at once, the moon clouded over,
We heard a gurgling cry.
A few seconds later, the captain's helmet
Was all that floated by.
The Sergeant said, "Turn around men!
I'm in charge from now on."
And we just made it out of the Big Muddy
With the captain dead and gone.
We stripped and dived and found his body
Stuck in the old quicksand.
I guess he didn't know that the water was deeper
Than the place he'd once before been.
Another stream had joined the Big Muddy
'Bout a half mile from where we'd gone.
We were lucky to escape from the Big Muddy
When the big fool said to push on.
Well, I'm not going to point any moral,
I'll leave that for yourself
Maybe you're still walking, you're still talking
You'd like to keep your health.
But every time I read the papers
That old feeling comes on;
We're, waist deep in the Big Muddy
And the big fool says to push on.
Waist deep in the Big Muddy
And the big fool says to push on.
Waist deep in the Big Muddy
And the big fool says to push on.
Waist deep! Neck deep! Soon even a
Tall man'll be over his head, we're
Waist deep in the Big Muddy!
And the big fool says to push on!

"I can only note that the past is beautiful because
one never realises an emotion at the time. It
expands later, and thus we don't have complete
emotions about the present, only about the
past."

— Virginia Woolf

2. The Asians Dying BY W. S. MERWIN

When the forests have been destroyed their darkness
remains

The ash the great walker follows the possessors
Forever

Nothing they will come to is real

Nor for long

Over the watercourses

Like ducks in the time of the ducks

The ghosts of the villages trail in the sky

Making a new twilight

Rain falls into the open eyes of the dead

Again again with its pointless sound

When the moon finds them they are the color of everything

The nights disappear like bruises but nothing is healed

The dead go away like bruises

The blood vanishes into the poisoned farmlands

Pain the horizon

Remains

Overhead the seasons rock

They are paper bells

Calling to nothing living

The possessors move everywhere under Death their star

Like columns of smoke they advance into the shadows

Like thin flames with no light

They with no past

And fire their only future

3. ["My father does his own dental work"]

BY CATHY LINH CHE

My father does his own dental work.

A power drill and epoxy

and steady hands—

On Christmas Day, he mistook

the Macy's star

for the Viet Cong flag.

While watching

Forrest Gump, he told me

how he too carried a friend.

He squeezed

around my throat so tight,

I thought I'd die with him.

4. Second Tour

BY PENELOPE SCAMBLY SCHOTT

While my husband packed to fly back to Vietnam,
this time as a tourist instead of a soldier,

I drove to the zoo to say goodbye to the musk oxen
who were being shipped out early next morning

to Tacoma. We were getting lions instead.

When I got there, it was too easy to park.

The zoo was closing early so they wouldn't let me in.

I went back to my car and slid into the driver's seat.

Sobs tore from deep in my chest, I who had never
seen a musk ox and never cared until now.

Who'll Stop the Rain (song)

Creedence Clearwater Revival

Long as I remember the rain been coming down.

Clouds of myst'ry pouring confusion on the ground.

Good men through the ages, trying to find the sun;

And I wonder, still I wonder, who'll stop the rain.

I went down Virginia, seeking shelter from the storm.

Caught up in the fable, I watched the tower grow.

Five year plans and new deals, wrapped in golden chains.

And I wonder, still I wonder who'll stop the rain.

Heard the singers playing, how we cheered for more.

The crowd had rushed together, trying to keep warm.

Still the rain kept pouring, falling on my ears.

And I wonder, still I wonder who'll stop the rain.

"Scars have the strange power to
remind us that our past is real."

— Cormac McCarthy

(Translated by Nguyen Ba Chung and Fred Marchant)

8.From The Sound of Guns by Gerald McCarthy

At the university in town
tight-lipped men tell me the war in Vietnam is
over,
that my poems should deal with other things.

At nineteen I stood at night and watched
an airfield mortared. A plane that was to take
me home, burning; men running out of the flames.

Seven winters have slipped away,
the war still follows me.
Never in anything have I found
a way to throw off the dead.

9. Beautiful Wreckage BY W.D. EHRHART

What if I didn't shoot the old lady
running away from our patrol,
or the old man in the back of the head,
or the boy in the marketplace?

Or what if the boy—but he didn't
have a grenade, and the woman in Hue
didn't lie in the rain in a mortar pit
with seven Marines just for food,

Gaffney didn't get hit in the knee,
Ames didn't die in the river, Ski
didn't die in a medevac chopper
between Con Thien and Da Nang.

In Vietnamese, Con Thien means
place of angels. What if it really was
instead of the place of rotting sandbags,
incoming heavy artillery, rats and mud.

What if the angels were Ames and Ski,
or the lady, the man, and the boy,
and they lifted Gaffney out of the mud
and healed his shattered knee?

What if none of it happened the way I said?
Would it all be a lie?
Would the wreckage be suddenly beautiful?
Would the dead rise up and walk?

Lemon Tree (song) by Peter, Paul and Mary

When I was just a lad of ten, my father said to me
"Come here and take a lesson from the lovely lemon tree"
"Don't put your faith in love, my boy" my father said to me
"I fear you'll find that love is like the lovely lemon tree"
Lemon tree, very pretty, and the lemon flower is sweet
But the fruit of the poor lemon is impossible to eat
Lemon tree, very pretty, and the lemon flower is sweet
But the fruit of the poor lemon is impossible to eat
One day beneath the lemon tree, my love and I did lie
A girl so sweet that when she smiled, the stars rose in the sky
We passed that summer lost in love, beneath the lemon tree
The music of her laughter hid my father's words from me
Lemon tree, very pretty, and the lemon flower is sweet
But the fruit of the poor lemon is impossible to eat
Lemon tree, very pretty, and the lemon flower is sweet
But the fruit of the poor lemon is impossible to eat
One day she left without a word, she took away the sun
And in the dark she left behind, I knew what she had done
She left me for another, it's a common tale but true
A sadder man, but wiser now, I sing these words to you
Lemon tree, very pretty, and the lemon flower is sweet
But the fruit of the poor lemon is impossible to eat
Lemon tree, very pretty, and the lemon flower is sweet
But the fruit of the poor lemon is impossible to eat

"We thought to weep, but sing for joy instead,
Full of the grateful peace
That follows her release;
For nothing but the weary dust lies dead."
— **Louisa May Alcott**