“Amazing,” Dave Jensen said. “My whole life, I never
seen anything like it.”

“Never?”

“Not hardly. Not once.”

Kiowa and Mitchell Sanders picked up the baby buff-
falo. They hauled it across the open square, hoisted it up,
and dumped it in the village well.

Afterward, we sat waiting for Rat to get himself to-
gerher.

I never seen it before.”

Mitchell Sanders took out his yo-yo. “Well, that’s
Nam,” he said. “Garden of Evil. Over here, man, every
sin’s real fresh and original.”

How do you generalize?
War is hell, but that’s not the half of it, because war is
also mystery and terror and adventure and courage and dis-
covery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and
love. War is nasty; war is fine. War is thrilling; war is drudg-
erly. War makes you a man; war makes you dead.

The truths are contradictory. It can be argued, for in-
stance, that war is grotesque. But in truth war is also
beauty. For all its horror, you can’t help but gape at the aw-
ful majesty of combat. You stare out at tracer rounds un-
winding through the dark like brilliant red ribbons. You
crouch in ambush as a cool, impassive moon rises over the
nighttime paddies. You admire the fluid symmetries of
troops on the move, the harmonies of sound and shape and
proportion, the great sheets of metal-fire streaming down

from a gunship, the illumination rounds, the white phos-
phorus, the purply orange glow of napalm, the rocket’s red
glare. It’s not pretty, exactly. It’s astonishing. It fills the
eye. It commands you. You hate it, yes, but your eyes dis-
not. Like a killer forest fire, like cancer under a microscope,
any battle or bombing raid or artillery barrage has the aes-
thetic purity of absolute moral indifference—a powerful,
implacable beauty—and a true war story will tell the truth
about this, though the truth is ugly.

To generalize about war is like generalizing about
peace. Almost everything is true. Almost nothing is true.
At its core, perhaps, war is just another name for death,
and yet any soldier will tell you, if he tells the truth, that
proximity to death brings with it a corresponding proxim-
ity to life. After a firefight, there is always the immense
pleasure of aliveness. The trees are alive. The grass, the
soil—everything. All around you things are purely living,
and you among them, and the aliveness makes you trem-
ble. You feel an intense, out-of-the-skin awareness of your
living self—your waviest self, the human being you want to
be and then become by the force of wanting it. In the midst
of evil you want to be a good man. You want decency. You
want justice and courtesy and human concord, things you
never knew you wanted. There is a kind of largeness to it,

a kind of godliness. Though it’s odd, you’re never more alive
than when you’re almost dead. You recognize what’s valu-
able. Freshly, as if for the first time, you love what’s best in
yourself and in the world, all that might be lost. At the
hour of dusk you sit at your foxhole and look out on a wide
river turning pinkish red, and at the mountains beyond,
and although in the morning you must cross the river and
go into the mountains and do terrible things and maybe die, even so, you find yourself studying the fine colors on the river, you feel wonder and awe at the setting of the sun, and you are filled with a hard, acrid love for how the world could be and always should be, but now it is not.

Mitchell Sanders was right. For the common soldier, at least, war has the feel—the spiritual texture—of a great ghastly fog, thick and permanent. There is no clarity. Everything swirls. The old rules are no longer binding, the old truths no longer true. Right spills over into wrong. Order bleeds into chaos, love into hate, ugliness into beauty, law into anarchy, civility into savagery. The vapors suck you in. You cannot tell where you are, or why you are there, and the only certainty is overwhelming ambiguity.

In war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself, and therefore it's safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true.

Often in a true war story there is not even a point, or else the point doesn't hit you until twenty years later, in your sleep, and you wake up and shake your wife and start telling the story to her, except when you get to the end you've forgotten the point again. And there for a long time you lie there watching the story happen in your head. You listen to your wife's breathing. The war's over. You close your eyes. You smile and think, Chris, what's the point?

This one wakes me up.
In the mountains that day, I watched Lemon turn sick—ways. He laughed and said something to Rat Kiley. Then he took a peculiar half sleep, moving from shade into bright sunlight, and the booby-trapped 705 round blew him into a tree. The parts were just hanging there, so Dave Jensen and I were ordered to shoo up and peel him off. I remember the white bone of an arm. I remember pieces of skin and something wet and yellow that must've been the intestines. The gore was horrible, and stays with me. But what wakes me up twenty years later is Dave Jensen singing 'Lemon Tree' as we threw down the parts.

You can tell a true war story by the questions you ask. Somebody tells a story, let's say, and afterward you ask, 'Is it true?' and if the answer matters, you've got your answer.

For example, we've all heard this one. Four guys go down a trail. A grenade sails out. One guy jumps on it and takes the blast and saves his three buddies.

Is it true?

The answer matters.

You'd feel cheated if it never happened. Without the grounding reality, it's just a trite bit of puffery, pure Hollywood, untrue in the way all such stories are untrue. Yet even if it did happen—and maybe it did, anything's possible—even then you know it can't be true, because a true war story does not depend upon that kind of truth. Absolute occurrence is irrelevant. A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth. For example: Four guys go down a trail. A grenade sails out. One guy jumps on it and takes the blast, but it's a killer grenade and everybody dies anyway. Before