

## Breathing Out *In Country*

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Bobbie Ann Mason's 1985 Vietnam War novel, *In Country*, was published shortly after the unveiling of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington DC, a time when a number of Americans—especially veterans—began coming to terms with a strange war that managed to haunt nearly all who remembered it. Vietnam was a “strange war” for several reasons: the frightening technology which buzzed menacingly about the skies or clanked ominously across that lush and later desolate land ensured that the war was conducted at long range. The advent of the push-button age created a surreal sense of distance for those individuals whose hands were on the controls of the mighty machines. The effect of distance was furthermore enhanced by the near-simultaneous commencement of widespread television coverage that created a contradictory vision of the war for those safely ensconced back home, a vision engendering a sense of fascinated detachment combined with horrifying intimacy towards the flickering images sent from the other side of the world.<sup>1</sup> Finally, lasting from the late 1950s to the middle 1970s, the length of the war itself conspired with the deep social divisiveness which then smote the nation to make it all an era best forgot by its participants.

However, the Vietnam War was different for another, more significant, reason. In his 1988 essay, “Dispatches from Ghost Country: the

Vietnam Veteran in American Fiction,” Thomas Myers likens the experience of the war veteran who leaves home and travels to a foreign land to Joseph Campbell’s mythic hero quest, an adventure in which a hero embarks on a journey, undergoes trials, and returns. A lucid example of this myth is perhaps found in the experience of the Second World War in which American soldiers departed for overseas, slew the Nazi beast, and returned home in triumph. “Campbell’s monomyth, however,” says Myers, “includes more than the victory of the hero over the villain.... The mythic circle includes a voyage home, the bringing of the great boon to his society, the communal dispensation of hard-earned power and knowledge” (417). And in this case, he adds, “[t]he grunts were correct. Vietnam *was* different” (his italics 416). With Vietnam there was no “victorious triumph.” [T]he American veteran,” he writes, “and the culture that made him a warrior—emissary was left with an uncompleted cycle and a new riddle: If there was a collective boon—some irreducible knowledge, some unexpected power—within the sacrifice, what was it?” (417). Thomas Myers’ correlation of the war veteran’s experience with the hero cycle is informative and insightful, but, when considered in the context of Vietnam, I disagree with his conclusion. Vietnam veterans, I argue, completed the cycle and returned home to bestow on their “culture” an “irreducible knowledge” gleaned from their experience and that this “boon” is present in Mason’s novel.

In the realm of *In Country*, in its setting of the small Kentucky town, Hopewell, the boon is manifest in a remark made by the veteran, Tom. After encouraging the protagonist, Sam Hughes, to cease her search for answers about Vietnam and, thus, indirectly, from learning about her father who was killed there before her birth, he says: “Don’t mean nothing” (Mason 80). The phrase, “Don’t mean nothin’,” was something of a survivor’s mantra, chanted in the context of the often

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sudden, unimaginably violent, purposeless death of people and things held dear by Vietnam soldiers. In *Words of the Vietnam War*, Gregory R. Clark writes that the phrase was used in response to “bad luck, a buddy’s death” (Clark 149). A boon born from bitterness and darkness rather than sweetness and light, this succinct chant was murmured on the lips of returning veterans, including ones who came back to Hopewell, like Tom.

But when Tom speaks this phrase to Sam, he is talking in the context of a wrecked dirt bike and how easy it is to build another, ride it and wreck it, and then repeat the cycle of build and destroy. The bike itself is not worth repairing, maintaining, or preserving; it is an object without intrinsic worth, something to destroy and discard. The military mantra “Don’t mean nothin’” is transformed here into the guise of a civilian philosophy. This credo of detached indifference is reflected in Tom’s attitude toward life, whether it be the present time, as symbolized by his feeling toward the dirt bike or the past as represented by his response to Sam’s search. Everything made will be destroyed, so why care about anything? During the Vietnam war, with all its attendant destruction, soldiers confronted the abyss and learned that no thing had intrinsic value, least of all life. The “hard-earned” knowledge that everything means nothing forms the core of the philosophy transmitted by the “warrior-emissary” to his culture upon returning from *In Country*, by the warriors who returned to places like Hopewell. This essay will examine below how “the great boon” was acquired, how it was transmitted to the culture, what its affects were, and the means by which Sam responds to it, for therein lies the heart of Mason’s work.

When she begins her search for answers about the war and her father, Sam receives very little cooperation or concrete responses from either her uncle Emmett, who was there, or his fellow veterans like

Tom, and Pete, whom she often encounters on the streets of Hopewell. She then begins ransacking the library for historical sources and soon finds clues which convey the mysterious, political, origins of American involvement: "All the names ran together. Ngo Dinh Diem.... Ho Chi Minh. She got bogged down in manifestos and State Department documents" (55). "I've read about the domino theory," she later tells Emmett (60).

Unlike overt American involvement in the Second World War that began with the dramatic airstrike on Pearl Harbor, American involvement in Vietnam began in a withering crossfire of memos and manifestos. Sam's father, Dwayne Hughes, was killed early in the war, but from his letters and diary she finds he believed deeply in the reasons he was given for the war that were rooted in manifestos. Supplied with the rationale of the domino theory which projected a Red invasion of the United States if communism was not thwarted elsewhere, Dwayne vows his purpose to fight on behalf of protecting his family: "I can't forget what I'm here for," he writes (203). But after many of his friends have been killed, the geopolitics that informs Dwayne's early beliefs retreats under the onslaught of survival. He becomes increasingly scared, bitter, and the diary concludes with a last thought: "If we get out of this alive, it'll be a miracle" (205).

Dwayne died in 1966, still clutching a thread of the geopolitical purpose employed to justify and explain the misery, suffering, and death. But when Emmett and the others went to Vietnam, the thread had snapped and the purpose was lost. The paper rationale for the war was the first thing consumed by its flames. In its stead remained only the great green grinding machine, relentlessly destroying and being destroyed. Morale plummeted. Emmett tells Sam "that after 1969 the whole Army was stoned" (78), while Pete adds that "[Dwayne] probably had a

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sense of purpose. Later on, soldiers lost their drive" (135). Without a reason for the violence, the land just burned. Tom recalls seeing the sector where he served and thinking: "This looks like winter, but winter doesn't come to the jungle. It's always green in the jungle, but here was this place all brown and dead" (95).

In the Vietnam of *In Country* the color of death is brown, and it comes in various shapes and sizes ranging from the sweep of a swath of jungle down to the shriveled, severed brown ears which Pete carried with him back to Hopewell. His wife Cindy, though haunted by them, tells Sam: "They're so sweet looking. And brown. Like button mushrooms" (123). Through the shape and color of death, found in the motif of brown, soldiers carried back into their culture the hard won knowledge acquired from the experience spent in the purposeless void of a life-devouring abyss called Vietnam.

While Sam is waiting to receive Dwayne's diary—a "brown spiral notebook"—from her grandmother, she sits on the porch of their house contemplating the garden. "She recognized a plant with seed pods forming from some of the flowers. She remembered that when they turned brown those seed pods would explode, scattering their seeds" (200). After the monsoons of napalm, the brown seed pod stalk called the "Vietnam War" flowered and exploded, scattering into the trade winds its seeds, which took root in the New World garden in the semblance of those who returned home believing "Don't mean nothin'." The philosophy derived from this stalk wound itself about other plants of the garden and slowly choked the life from them.

The slow suffocation wrought by the war is evidenced in the quality of life found in the town. Hopewell has become Hopeless. When he returned, Emmett and his new hippie friends raised hell and plain wrecked the place, going so far as to raise the Viet Cong flag he had a

tailor sew for him while in Pleiku from the top of the town clock tower. Such escapades actively expressed in some way Emmett's experience, even though "nobody ever recognized that it was a Vietcong flag" (24). But after his friends departed, Emmett dealt with the war by adopting the banal routine of long hours spent drinking coffee at McDonald's in the morning and viewing repeated episodes of M\*A\*S\*H in the evenings, punctuated by afternoons spent puttering about and fiddling with gadgets (191). The routine drained fourteen years from his life. Although Tom and Pete have steady jobs neither has found a rewarding life or satisfactory work and both participate to a lesser degree in the kind of vapid existence exemplified by Emmett. This arid life, however, is not restricted to the returning vets, but it is also shared by the people with whom they come in contact. For example when Sam, Emmett, and their friend Anita Stevens were watching TV one night, "the color on the set needed adjusting... [but] no one got up to fix the color" (102). Although everyone noticed the color was wrong, none had the wherewithal to get up, walk over, and correct it.

Similarly, Sam's mother (Dwayne's wife) Irene opts, too, for the materially comfortable but passive and barren life. She exchanges her colorful youth for the dull Emmett-like routine of her marriage. When she weds the mediocre IBM salesman, Lorenzo Jones, Irene compromises her vitality for financial security and a flaming red Trans Am. Furthermore, she turns her back on the past completely, even to the point of nearly forgetting Dwayne. "I hardly even remember him," she says (167). When Sam questions her about the war, Irene replies, "It was all such a stupid waste. There's nothing to remember," a civilian echo of the warriors' mantra, "Don't mean nothin'" (168).

However, even Sam herself is not exempt from feeling the symptoms of suffocating indifference. When Irene warns her to eat better or

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“you’ll lose your health,” Sam replies, “So what?” Health and life, however, are inextricably entwined, and Sam’s apathy towards the former indicates a listlessness for the latter. The indifference towards life expressed in the Vietnam generation has been transmitted to the next generation where it has transmuted into apathy and evolved finally into a fatal ennui. When Sam disappears to Cawood’s Pond without warning, Emmett fears she has committed suicide. “I was afraid you’d kill yourself,” he later tells her. “So many kids these days are doing it. On the news the other day, those kids over in Carlisle County that made the suicide pact—that shook me up” (224). Suicide, especially on the part of “many kids” either alone or in a pact, is an act which ultimately translates into the words “Don’t mean nothin”.

Against this backdrop of the arid life lived by her family and friends, an aridness pervading much of Hopewell and reaching into Carlisle County as well, Sam resolves that “[s]omething had to change” (190). The first action she takes is to steel herself with a purpose, something, one should recall, absent from the lives lived *In Country* since the death of Dwayne. Dwayne’s death provides her with a purpose. Although he exists only in the faded memory of those who knew him and in the image of an old photograph, the “only picture of her father,” that Sam keeps in her dictionary, her search for his identity charts the path by which she leads herself and Emmett out of the hopelessness of Hopewell (58).

At first glance, a dictionary would seem an unusual place to store a keepsake, but the fact she values the dictionary enough to place in it her only picture of Dwayne is an indication that Sam recognizes, albeit unconsciously perhaps, the power of language to shape reality. Recalling how she was asked once in school which book she would prefer to have with her on a deserted island, Sam chose a dictionary, even though

"Miss Castle had wanted them to choose a Shakespeare play or the Bible" (143). A dictionary, Sam reasoned, would give her the power to write her own story. "With a dictionary, she could make up any book she wanted to" (143). Through language, Sam finds the ability to "write her own story," chart her own course, and free herself from the surrounding stagnation. When Tom tells her: "Don't mean nothing," Sam rejects his philosophy by reversing his language and declaring: "Everything means something" (80). She thus begins to reshape her world.

When beginning the search, Sam cannot imagine anything about Vietnam. In her mind she can only picture the country as a place of palm trees and sand. "All I can see," she tells Tom, "is a picture postcard" (94). But Sam has a vivid imagination which she allows to range freely. For example, after Emmett tells her of the claustrophobia he felt in the war, Sam translates this experience into a feeling she can comprehend. While riding out to Cawood's Pond in the back of a pick-up truck, "[s]he bounced along the mattress, feeling like a soldier in an armored personnel carrier because she couldn't see where they were going. Emmett had once told her how claustrophobic those vehicles were..." (34). Her imagination provides the means for her attempt to cross time through shared experience. Through these efforts, the "picture postcard" of Vietnam she holds in her mind gradually recedes into a more realistic imaginative vision of the shell-blasted jungle and shattered bodies, as seen by vets. As others learn of her imaginings however, Sam is discouraged from her search. After she tries to pry information from Emmett, he tells her: "Your imagination is bad enough as it is. I'm not going to feed it" (54), and Irene reinforces Emmett's observation, telling her, "You have a horrible imagination, Sam" (57). As her search progresses, she encounters ever-increasing levels of resistance.

Throughout *In Country* is the recurrent image of Sam as a long di-



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stance runner. She runs for exercise regularly, once even going as far as ten miles. The image of the runner serves as a motif for the endurance Sam must acquire if she is to complete her search. For even as those close to Sam slight her imagination—her most effective tool—she encounters even more overt obstacles in the form of active discouragement. While researching historical sources, the scope and futility of the task come to her mind: “It bothered her that it was so hard to find out the truth” (70). Furthermore, her boyfriend, Lonnie, criticizes her by saying: “The trouble with you is read all those war books...” (187). Tom tells her plainly, “Sam, you might as well just stop asking questions about the war. Nobody gives a shit” (79), while Pete says, “Stop thinking about Vietnam, Sambo. You don’t know how it was, and you never will” (136). Even Emmett chimes in by adding that “Sam’s got Nam on the brain” (48). As a long distance runner though, Sam has the endurance to overcome the adversity of these hurdles and “go the distance.”

But equally as important as her intuitive grasp of the power of language, the expanse of her imagination, and her capacity for endurance, is Sam’s sense of compassion. The desire to understand through empathy the experience of veterans drives Sam to spend a night in Cawood’s Pond. The environs of the Pond are a swamp which seem so jungle-like that Emmett avoids it, since it reminds him of Vietnam (37–38). At night Sam feels the fear as she translates the sounds of the swamp into the language of the jungle war: “There were voices, messages, in the insect sounds. ‘Who’s next?’ they said. Or ‘Watch out’...” (214). While in her mind she heard the haunting sound of “the Doors moaning ominously, ‘This is the end... the children are insane’” (215).

Although Sam can make a tactical retreat from fear and return to the world symbolized by the safety of her nearby car, she chooses to stay exposed in the open terrain. The next morning, her fear comes to

the fore when she hears an intruder whom she imagines to be a rapist—an imaginative Kentucky woman's vision of a Viet Cong soldier. Together the breadth of her imagination and the depth of her compassion work to bring Sam to the nadir of her journey into the Valley: "Before long, the sun blasted though the swamp. Life was here and now. Her father was dead, and no one cared. That outlaw was dissolved in the swamp" (216). Through her formidable gifts and her journey to the Pond, Sam approached as near to her father's post and to the position of surviving vets as she could advance.

But from her forward position Sam is not only able to observe the dawn which heralds the end of her search, she is also able to help Emmett. Fearing for her safety, Emmett is drawn into the swamp and thus forced to confront the fear generated by it. This confrontation then combines with Sam's incisive demands—"Are you going to talk, Emmett? Can you tell about it?"—to trigger the recollection of one of his worst war memories (222). He was trapped for hours under the bodies of his dead friends while the jungle swarmed with Viet Cong. With Sam's help, Emmett braves the swamp, encounters a buried nightmare, and finally frees himself from his deadly routine. Revitalized, he later journeys to the Vietnam Memorial and finds those friends who gave him shelter on that long ago day.

After the immolation of the paper rationale for the Vietnam War, the soldiers of *In Country* returned from their journey with the boon born of their confrontation with the void of purposeless death: a philosophy of indifference towards life embodied in the phrase, "Don't Mean Nothin'." Upon their return, this knowledge entered the culture and began slowly suffocating society as seen in the hopelessness of Hopewell and the high rate of teenage suicide symbolized by the pact of Carlisle County. The transition from wartime's purposeless death into

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peacetime's meaningless life is the buried wound inflicted by the Vietnam War, a wound buried under material largess and passive routines, under neglected history and forgotten lives.

Reacting against the rampant lethargy around her, Sam embarks on her own journey. In so doing she recovers from the jungle the unnamed casualty of the war, the sense of living with a purpose. Sam's quest replaces the veteran's old boon of experience with a new one of knowledge: The coalition of language, imagination, endurance, and compassion lend to life vitality and direction, and with these, one can escape the arid life. Yet Sam's experience may also illustrate an important distinction between modern heroes and their mythic predecessors. Although she recovers purpose for herself and Emmett, Sam is unable to restore significance to society as a whole, as represented by the fact that at the end of the novel Hopewell remains largely unchanged. Evidently in modern times, everyone has to make his or her own hero's journey.

#### Works Cited

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<sup>1</sup> One should note however that for people caught on contested ground, the dog-faces of both sides—and the peasants trapped between them—the traditional experience of ferocious fighting was left largely unchanged by new technology.