

ROSS GRESHAM

*Perfume River*, by Robert Olen Butler

TOWARD THE END OF ROBERT OLEN BUTLER'S *Perfume River*, the two Quinlan brothers at the center of the novel finally reconnect at their father's casket. The brothers haven't seen each other in nearly five decades. In the late 1960s one (Robert) went to Vietnam; one (Jimmy) dodged the draft and moved to Canada. Now, in a moving scene, they begin to recognize one another. What do they say? In Butler's novel there is only one possible subject: "Did you go off to Vietnam to face death?"

Every novel argues a vision of what it's like to be alive, and *Perfume River* argues for the overwhelming gravitational force of war. There's war and then there's everything else, pretend life, fifty years of going through the motions. Every major character is marked or scarred—is *characterized*—by their relationship with war or warriors—all generations, forward and back. The Quinlan father carries his sons' Vietnam choices to his deathbed. His own long life was defined by a few months riding with General Patton. His wife thinks that the old man has been sneaking off to see another woman, but she's wrong. In *Perfume River* he's sneaking off to have coffee with other World War II vets.

The novel portrays this overwhelming gravity and also enacts it. Present-day life is comparatively bloodless. Robert Quinlan and his wife are professors whose writing is so esoteric that it's hard to imagine even their peers are eager to read it ("The Prototype of the Twentieth-Century Antiwar Movement in the U.S.: John Kenneth Turner, Woodrow Wilson, and the Mexican Invasion.") They interact in prescribed patterns and in austere conversations about the timing of a jog or about whether to risk a second cup of coffee. Small wonder, then, that against this dull scrim the memories of war are a splash of color. Is life a plate of steamable quinoa? Or is life about being young, waking to gunfire...your Vietnamese girlfriend hands you her father's old pistol, and you sprint for your life through the streets of Hue?

Most authors do the same world over and over, but this constricted vision is not what Butler offered in his breakout collection *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*. The Vietnam War was also the occasion for those stories but by and large those characters had left war behind them. They cared about getting married. They had businesses and relatives to think about, and the tone of the book was often light-hearted. In comparison the world of *Perfume*

*River* is bleak and limited. So has Butler changed his mind about what it's like to be alive? It's a depressing conclusion but in these pages Butler has gone out of his way to strip the fictional masks. Robert Butler's protagonist is named Robert Quinlan. The men are basically the same in terms of age, profession, and situation.

The recent PBS broadcast of *The Vietnam War* made by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick was a cultural event, at least in my world, at least in the sense that if there were four of us heating lunch in the breakroom somebody would have seen last night's episode. Even if you weren't watching, you'd heard about it, you knew about it. Ken Burns' Vietnam series.

Which presents a bizarre contrast, because while most of reading America was aware the PBS Vietnam event, I have *never* chatted with anyone about the wars that our country is fighting right now. Literally I never have. Think of that: there's more cultural buzz about a TV show on Vietnam (which ended in 1975) than our current fighting in Afghanistan.

Part of the shock of *Perfume River* is that it presents a world in which no one can avoid the long reach of war. What would be the right metaphor? War is a dark sun whose radiation permeates everything, spoils everything. Whereas you set aside Butler's novel, let your eyes refocus, and return to a life where *no one* cares about war at all. *The Vietnam War* TV series presents a similar vision: an entire society convulsed and battling for its soul. Whatever you thought about Vietnam, you *did think* about it. At least that's what Butler and Burns and Novick seem to be telling me.

I'd always assumed that war protesters spitting on returning Vietnam veterans was a myth. In my life there's no group identity that isn't sustained by grievance, usually puffed up—either by inventing enemies whole cloth or by exaggerating their strength and vehemence. And many different political factions adore the narrative of the honest soldier scorned by mobs of ugly lefties. There was a whole series of popular movies when I was a kid (*Missing in Action!*). My old neighbor had a faded POW/MIA flag nailed to his window frame to protest someone's indifference to our prisoners betrayed and forgotten. Our new wars have inspired the comparably-themed bumper stickers SUPPORT OUR TROOPS, or Either Get Behind Our Troops or Get Out Front of Them! The verb tense is the imperative: SUPPORT OUR TROOPS (I do; you don't). This paranoid narrative is so persistent and powerful that I've

never seen it publically challenged. I assume it will live on forever, nourished by the tiniest anecdotes.

Anyway, my point is that the spat-upon Vietnam veterans seemed (to me) to be part of the same myth, the same flimflam, and the modern iterations are so obviously ridiculous that I assumed their antecedents were equally inflated.

But apparently not completely. Apparently some soldiers returning from Vietnam did take heat. Karl Marlantes is neither a simpleton nor a liar. It was a shock (for me) to hear him tell of getting off the airplane in his uniform, hearing his brother scheming to navigate him through the protestors at the airport.

This home-front hostility is not a big part of the Vietnam television series, yet for people my age I suspect it's the great revelation. Wait, what happened? A *country* at war? Arguing about it? A million people gathered on the Washington mall? President Johnson reined-in domestic spending because of the war's spiraling costs? He did? But why? I keep getting tax cuts. When George Bush invaded Iraq he sent me a check in a mail, labeled George Bush's Tax Cut for the American People.

Early in my years teaching at the Air Force Academy we would sometimes assign George Herring's history of Vietnam, *America's Longest War*. Herring dates the conflict from 1950 until 1975 but by if we use the more conventional start date of 1965, we see our conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq have stolen Herring's title. Vietnam lasted 10 years and we're at 16. We're on track to lap the old record. These days, instead of Herring, we assign Dexter Filkins's *The Forever War*.

You do the math and wonder for a moment (but only a moment) which a soldier would rather have: a country that shouted (and spat?) and cared, and eventually brought everybody home...that or our current setup, where nobody can find Afghanistan on a map but where uniformed soldiers are so popular that they're used to hock every kind of product. (Budweiser went ahead and just called themselves "America" right on the beer can.) Flags large enough to drape an entire football field. Parades at every hand.

Actually, soldiers seem to like their current setup. The military is its own thing, more and more. The *LA Times* reports the half our active-duty military lives in just five US states, usually in isolated bases that are cities unto themselves. The soldiers come, by and large from military families in a self-perpetuating cycle, and they don't mix with colleges, culture, or

Congress: “America's recent wars are authorized by a U.S. Congress whose members have the lowest rate of military service in history, led by three [make it four] successive commanders in chief who never served on active duty.”<sup>1</sup> These soldiers and the returning veterans are a remarkably uncomplaining lot. VA hospitals may falsify 90% of the data about how long they make people wait for an appointment, but whenever I dip into military blogs, the loudest voices care more about whether all the black guys stand straight for the anthem at a football game. Or whether Bowe Bergdahl gets the punishment he deserves.

And let's face it, if soldiers are happy with the arrangement, well, the rest of us have a pretty slick deal.

The one downside is that we are going to wait a long time for novels like *Perfume River*. Maybe we'll never see them again, at least not written by combat soldiers. Great war books aren't about what it's like to fire a weapon or guard a road but instead about a country or a time. I may not recognize Butler's grim vision but it *is* a vision, and a broad one. He swings for the fences.

More than anything that happens with the characters in *Perfume River*, the novel's developments are about war's spreading stain. For one thing we come to learn that it's not just Vietnam. World War I. World War II. Robert Quinlan's wife studies the semiotics of Confederate monuments (pretty prescient; the novel came out in 2016, before the summer of Southern monuments). The novel tells us that war has always happened. It always will. The boys will always want to fight—or maybe it's better to say that the boys will always feel an obligation to do so. The boys will fight and the girls will be turned on by it. If the happenings in *Perfume River* veer away from impending tragedy, these revelations about war only get worse: The actual experience is invariable tawdry. If you do manage to shoot an enemy, it's an ugly, confusing experience. Yet the core desire is so strong that the old men disregard their own crippling experiences and still foist the original delusions on their sons. War may have wrecked dad but it's inconceivable that he'd warn off junior. On the contrary. He'll beat him with fists if he doesn't volunteer.

At the same climactic funeral Robert's grandson reveals that he's just joined the Marines. At this point Robert knows everything the book knows. He's seen the damage war has done to generations. And the response is bland. He's not happy with the boy's choice but

he puts off the conversation. Why not more? If what Butler says is true—if this world is the true one—then shouldn't Quinlan scream and scream until the roof comes down?

My own son is a junior in high school. This year he did a “unit” on the Vietnam War. Vietnam doesn't feature in any of his video games so this class is most of what he knows. When it was finished we talked. Unsurprisingly, with such a long, messy war, what survived to pass to him are the best stories—the torture of American POWs in the Hanoi Hilton—American troops massacring peasants in villages—things that happened but that are statistically insignificant. They film well. (I signed a permission slip so he could watch Oliver Stone's *Platoon*.) What my son didn't know yet was how the war crept to a start. How it managed to sustain for a decade.

My son's good pal, a year ahead of him in school, just enlisted in the Marines. Kids can contract to enlist before they graduate. He's a beautiful, kind kid, and plays all the high trumpet solos with the jazz band.

I bet that whenever someone with my life encounters this vision presented by Butler, or by the television series, we're always going to be of two minds. While watching or reading we can just about be convinced. Maybe our country really was at war, back in the day. You listen to the soundtrack behind the PBS documentary and it's really good. It's inconceivable that some future *Afghanistan* documentary will be able to find comparable hours of music, because our pop songs have nothing at all to do with Afghanistan, nothing at all. They might as well be written on a whole different planet. So just for a minute we can imagine that time.

But the moment fades. You can only really know what you see, so then it's the world of *Perfume River* that's far away. It might as well be on the moon.

#### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup>Zucchino, David and David Cloud. “Special Report U.S. military and civilians are increasingly divided.” *Los Angeles Times*, 24 May 2015.

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