This Thing Called Vietnam

> And no moves left for me at all but to write down some few last words and make the dispersion, Vietnam Vietnam Vietnam, we've all been there.
>
> —Michael Herr, *Dispatches*

In the twenty years since Michael Herr made his final moves in a few last words, much has changed. His 1977 sentiment that "we've all been there," that Vietnam was in both a metaphoric and realistic sense a part of all of us, was an accurate generalization. When *Dispatches* was published, we had lived with Vietnam—nightly in our living rooms on the evening news, as soldiers in the field and protesters in the street, as a matter of dubious foreign policy, and as the chief cause of domestic strife—for at least a decade, perhaps for two. In 1977, we had all been there; yet even today, despite the many changes in our world and our best efforts to sort out the aftermath of this painful, problematic, and perhaps pointless conflict, many are still haunted by the legacy of Vietnam.

It's a tough legacy to shake. How do we reconcile ourselves with the over 58,000 names on a black granite wall in Washington, DC? With the hundreds of thousands of combatants who were physically, psychologically, or emotionally devastated by the war? Or with the over 2 million Vietnamese who died fighting us? How do we reconcile ourselves with PTSD, Agent Orange, My Lai, veterans who returned to demonstrate against the war they endured, presidents and generals who may have been derelict in their duty, and secretaries of de-

fense who confess, in retrospect, that it was a tragic mistake, that "we were wrong, terribly wrong," and that "we often did not have time to think straight"? How can we as a nation reconcile ourselves with such a legacy? What lessons do we still have to learn, and why won't "that war" just go away?

It won't go away for me because of Mike Quinn. Irish Catholic, husband and father, naval aviator, Mike clearly heard the call of Camelot. As so many of his generation did, he asked what he could do for his country, not what it could do for him. I never knew Mike. I met his devoted wife, Kathy, in the spring of 1973, and I started working as a big brother with his three energetic sons, Patrick, Phillip, and Michael, when they were just 10, 8, and 6 years old. I came to know Mike, an A-6 pilot shot down in the late 60s, through the nightly prayers of three reverent sons: "God Bless Daddy and all the men missing in the war." I came to know Mike through the idealized memories boys have of missing fathers, through tattered photographs and tear-stained letters. After sharing three years with this close-knit family, I moved away from Colorado Springs, only to return a year later to an evolving legacy: "God Bless Daddy and all the men who died in the war." How do we reconcile ourselves with the legacy of Vietnam, and why won't that war just go away?

Wounds heal slowly, memories endure, and now thirty years distant from TET we're still struggling, both as individuals and as a nation, to reconcile ourselves with Vietnam. Yet fewer of us "have been there" today, fewer of us have the vivid personal memories associated with that searing moment in American history we call Vietnam. Today we instead live with the aftermath of the war, with the memories and stories that have mapped the legacy of Vietnam, that have come to stand for Viet-

nam. As Donald Anderson, in his introduction to an anthology of post-Vietnam stories—*Aftermath*—suggests,

> These stories are . . . about memory and love and resentment and loss and disbelief and defiance and humiliation and earnestness and blame and shame and blood and sacrifice and courage and sorrow. These are stories that, even if set in a past, seem to be written in an urgent and immortal present. Such stories are about what we must live with after any fought war, soldier or no. They identify us, these stories. *They are about us.*

I believe he's right—these stories continue to identify us because they are fundamentally about us. They're about the clarion call of Camelot, about all the Mike Quinns who answered it, and about the millions of ways the soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, nurses, correspondents, and others created their own stories in response to this thing we call Vietnam. They're about us because their stories continue to intersect with our lives in countless uncharted ways. And, most of all, because they're about us, we must hear them. That's the invitation of the many authors in this issue of *War, Literature & the Arts*. Poets, novelists, essayists . . . Vietnamese and American . . . wives and families, or prisoners of war . . . critics and students of the war . . . each invites us to listen to his or her story, and to listen carefully. "Vietnam Vietnam Vietnam, we've all been there" because they have told their stories, because we listen, and because, finally, they are about us. ❑

– Thomas G. Bowie, Jr.
Guest Editor



from upper left, then clockwise to center: John Clark Pratt, W. D. Ehrhart,
Dale Ritterbusch, John Balaban, D. F. Brown, Kali Tal,
and Yusuf Komunyakaa

[photos courtesy of D.F. Brown]