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I spent the first seventeen years of my life on a small farm (small meaning somewhere around four hundred acres) in the hills of eastern Kentucky. As an adult exiled from home, I look back on days of innocence. I went to a one-room school during the first grade, and every morning my mother would pack our lunches with egg-and-biscuit and blackberry-jam-and-biscuit sandwiches. She would pop a pan of popcorn and pack a small brown bag for each of us -- there were three of us going to Dry Fork School at the time. And so off each day I would go to school with my two brothers and my biscuit sandwiches and my bag of home-made popcorn. Popcorn which had been wrestled from the soil by my father's large, callused hands -- hands shaped by years of hard work, gentled by the years of handling the earth. Popcorn which had been popped in the hour before daylight by my mother, after she had milked and fed the cows and the dogs and the cats and baked biscuits and made gravy for breakfast to feed her husband and the five kids, two of whom were too little to go to school. Popcorn which was the fruit of the labor of my family on their ancestral land. And as soon as I got to school, I would trade that bag of popcorn to my best friend, Betty Faye Jones, for a moon pie because that moon pie was store-bought and tasted like heaven to me.

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I started this project a few months ago identifying deeply with those critics who decry the empty lives of the Mason characters. I told myself how accurate those critics are, and how sad that accuracy is, because the advent of shopping centers, of rampant consumerism rang the death knell on that idyllic rural Kentucky life enshrined in my golden memories. But Mason's work refuses to be dismissed that easily; it rejects a facile romanticization, or an easy slide into the nostalgic.

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Mason often defends her characters from what critics call their "bleak and depressing lives" (Gholson 40). For
example, Linda Adams Barnes calls Mason's characters "freaks...being forced to conform to untraditional
lifestyles" (141). Mason argues that while the characters of her work may be caught in the midst of tremendous
social and/or cultural change, the change offers possibility for growth rather than a retreat into the grotesque or
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to afford to buy electronic keyboards and Atari games, or new shoes.

A scene near the end of In Country always jerks me out of my own inclination to drift into a nostalgic reverie
about my childhood in Kentucky. In the scene, Sam drives over the back roads to visit her father's parents' farm
to get a diary he had kept in Vietnam before he was killed. Passing old farms and country graveyards and "new house
trailers perched on blocks in bare fields," she finally gets to the narrow land leading to the farm (192). She hasn't
seen her grandparents in two years. She has dinner with them (dinner is the mid-day meal in Kentucky). During
dinner, Sam's Aunt Donna and Mamaw talk about Donna's husband's sister who has just moved into a new brick
house with "all its appliances...[and] a video-cassette recorder and a bedroom suit that cost a thousand
dollars" (195). After dinner, Sam walks over the farm, consciously trying to "see" the place where her father grew
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fields along the fence rows, picking wildflowers, and then goes down to the creek before returning to the house.
Mamaw has found the diary and gives it to Sam. Although Sam had originally planned to spend the night with her
grandparents, she makes a sudden decision to leave. With a Coke and some chocolate-chip cookies, she sits "on a
bench beside some plants at the center of the two wings of the mall" and discovers that in Vietnam her father
"smoked and drank and murdered" (205).

As Sam drives home from the mall she angrily rejects her father and all his family, the whole Hughes clan:

They were ignorant and country anyway. They lived in that old farmhouse with the decayed smell she always remembered it having -- the smell of dirty farm clothes, soiled with cow manure. In
their bathroom earlier, she had almost slipped on the sodden rug that lay rotting around the
sweating commode. In the living room, the television was missing a leg, and a complicated old antenna -- all claws and a fan of rods -- sat in a corner, looking like a monster from outer space. The contraption was an effort to pick up cable so that Pap could catch the Wildcats' basketball games. Mamaw picked peas in a rusty bucket with a rag plug stopping up a hole.

Sam has discovered that her father, whom she has known only through pictures of a young, awkward boy, truly suffered, that the horrors of Vietnam were much worse than she could ever have imagined, even with her "morbid" imagination. Her rejection of his suffering leads to her rejection of him and his family and their decaying farmhouse with its smells of manure and dirt and sweat. The fact that she seeks refuge in the mall to read the diary does not surprise me -- it is Ernest Hemingway's "clean, well-lighted place" writ large. Nor is it surprising that her Aunt Donna speaks longingly of a new brick house full of modern appliances. What the mall offers, what the new brick house offers, is an escape from an environment that is sometimes unbearable. Sure, there are wildflowers and creeks with wild goose-plum trees and honeysuckle vines, but there are also mangy dogs and rot and decay. This scene forces me to acknowledge that the rural Kentucky of my past was not always a pastoral paradise. I remember family dinners where folks were "telling stories and making their own music and having fellowship." But I also remember rusty buckets and cow manure and being shut out of "fellowship" because of my gender.

What I discovered in my journey through Mason's works and into my own past over the last few months was that I do not finally agree with the critics who have single-mindedly lamented the encroachment of the modern world into an agrarian Kentucky paradise. Rather, I think I agree with Mason when she says that for her characters, "for all of them, the oldest to the youngest, the world is opening up in both promising and disappointing ways" (Wilhelm 38). Of course, I am ever conscious of the possibility that I've been seduced by the blue light special, the possibility that I'm still trading my bag of popcorn for a moon pie.

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This web page is maintained by 
Dr. Harold D. Tallant, Department of History, Georgetown College 
400 East College Street, Georgetown, KY 40324, (502) 863-8075 
E-mail: [htallant@georgetowncollege.edu](mailto:htallant@georgetowncollege.edu)

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**Border States: Journal of the Kentucky-Tennessee American Studies Association, No. 9 (1993)**

**BOBBIE ANN MASON'S NEW KENTUCKY HOME**

Anita J. Turpin
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Bobbie Ann Mason's New Kentucky Home

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A scene near the end of In Country always jerks me out of my own inclination to drift into a nostalgic reverie about my childhood in Kentucky. In the scene, Sam drives over the back roads to visit her father's parents' farm to get a diary he had kept in Vietnam before he was killed. Passing old farms and country graveyards and "new house trailers perched on blocks in bare fields," she finally gets to the narrow land leading to the farm (192). She hasn't seen her grandparents in two years. She has dinner with them (dinner is the mid-day meal in Kentucky). During dinner, Sam's Aunt Donna and Mamaw talk about Donna's husband's sister who has just moved into a new brick house with "all its appliances...[and] a video-cassette recorder and a bedroom suit that cost a thousand dollars" (195). After dinner, Sam walks over the farm, consciously trying to "see" the place where her father grew up, to see it the way he would have seen it and remembered it while he was in Vietnam. She walks through the fields along the fence rows, picking wildflowers, and then goes down to the creek before returning to the house. Mamaw has found the diary and gives it to Sam. Although Sam had originally planned to spend the night with her grandparents, she makes a sudden decision to leave. With a Coke and some chocolate-chip cookies, she sits "on a bench beside some plants at the center of the two wings of the mall" and discovers that in Vietnam her father "smoked and drank and murdered" (205).

As Sam drives home from the mall she angrily rejects her father and all his family, the whole Hughes clan:

They were ignorant and country anyway. They lived in that old farmhouse with the decayed smell she always remembered it having -- the smell of dirty farm clothes, soiled with cow manure. In their bathroom earlier, she had almost slipped on the sodden rug that lay rotting around the sweating commode. In the living room, the television was missing a leg, and a complicated old antenna -- all claws and a fan of rods -- sat in a corner, looking like a monster from outer space. The contraption was an effort to pick up cable so that Pap could catch the Wildcats' basketball games. Mamaw picked peas in a rusty bucket with a rag plug stopping up a hole. (206)

Sam has discovered that her father, whom she has known only through pictures of a young, awkward boy, truly suffered, that the horrors of Vietnam were much worse than she could ever have imagined, even with her "morbid" imagination. Her rejection of his suffering leads to her rejection of him and his family and their decaying farmhouse with its smells of manure and dirt and sweat. The fact that she seeks refuge in the mall to read the diary does not surprise me -- it is Ernest Hemingway's "clean, well-lighted place" writ large. Nor is it surprising that her
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Aunt Donna speaks longingly of a new brick house full of modern appliances. What the mall offers, what the new brick house offers, is an escape from an environment that is sometimes unbearable. Sure, there are wildflowers and creeks with wild goose-plum trees and honeysuckle vines, but there are also mangy dogs and rot and decay. This scene forces me to acknowledge that the rural Kentucky of my past was not always a pastoral paradise. I remember family dinners where folks were "telling stories and making their own music and having fellowship." But I also remember rusty buckets and cow manure and being shut out of "fellowship" because of my gender.

What I discovered in my journey through Mason's works and into my own past over the last few months was that I do not finally agree with the critics who have single-mindedly lamented the encroachment of the modern world into an agrarian Kentucky paradise. Rather, I think I agree with Mason when she says that for her characters, "for all of them, the oldest to the youngest, the world is opening up in both promising and disappointing ways" (Wilhelm 38). Of course, I am ever conscious of the possibility that I've been seduced by the blue light special, the possibility that I'm still trading my bag of popcorn for a moon pie.

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