

JOHN GRISWOLD

*“Praise to Those Still Coming Through On
Song”: An Appreciation of John Balaban*

I WAS BORN AMERICAN IN A LITTLE CLINIC IN SAIGON, Vietnam, on Ho Chi Minh’s birthday. My dad had been sent to Vietnam—as he was to be sent to Afghanistan later—by Southern Illinois University Carbondale, as part of an Agency for International Development (USAID) team. In Saigon, he was assigned to Phu Tho National Institute of Technology but “got around quite a bit,” flying by four-person Pipers to cities in the Delta to help small industry. My mom, who’d been an elementary teacher stateside, taught English in Saigon.

We lived in a new subdivision owned and operated by the U.S. Embassy, JDP Compound, across from Tan Son Nhut Airport. Single-family homes were built on stilts, over carpools, and had big backyards. There was no rent. We had a maid who also cooked meals, and a driver we shared with other residents. My pigtailed sister had a pet monkey and rode to school in a bus with grenade screens over the windows. The compound itself had no walls around it. My mom said my dad kept a small pistol in the nightstand in case of guerilla attack, but she laughed that he was such a sound sleeper that they would have carried him off on the mattress without him waking.

My mom loved her job and Saigon, which she rarely got to leave. She spent her spare time sightseeing and shopping the stores and markets downtown and in Cholon, the ethnic Chinese district. She claimed to have seen the monk Thich Quang Duc immolate himself, and she told of hiding under the houses at JDP with other families when spent bullets fell into the yards after missing rebel South Vietnamese pilots dropping bombs on their own Presidential Palace.

It was a neocolonial life, and one might have expected her to remember Vietnam exclusively in terms of what the Vietnamese call “The American War.” But until her death at 85, she spoke of the Vietnamese people she had known and the beauty of the land. Vietnam itself—not her privilege in it—was something my mother never got over. After the war, it became a place of the mind for many of us.

It wasn’t until I was in my early 30s, just before official U.S. rapprochement, that I had a chance to visit again, backpacking from Saigon to Hanoi and back with a friend who’d been in the war. After we got back I wrote a book-length travel narrative and decided to quit my dead-end corporate job and return to school for a graduate degree.

I was using bookstores to research MFA programs and read about Vietnam, and it seems now like an accident that I found in the intersection of the two subjects a book called *Vietnam: The Land We Never Knew*. The photos were by Geoffrey Clifford, a helicopter pilot during the war, whose credits included *National Geographic* and *The New York Times Magazine*, and the text by John Balaban, who had written poetry, fiction, and nonfiction, and was then director of the MFA program in creative writing at the University of Miami, in Coral Gables. As I read what I could find of Balaban’s work in my suburban library and chain bookstores, my interest grew.

He’d gone to Vietnam during the war with International Voluntary Services and taught linguistics at Can Tho University, where he was wounded by shrapnel from an American cluster bomb during the Tet Offensive. After recovering he became a field representative in Vietnam for the Boston-based Committee of Responsibility to Save War-Burned and War-Injured Children, sending Vietnamese children to the States for medical treatment, then getting them home when there was a home to return to. He became, as he writes, “an expert in Vietnamese misery.” After being released from alternative service, Balaban went home and taught at Penn State. But he returned to Vietnam in 1970 on an NEH grant, with his young wife, to walk the paddies and villages and record oral folk poetry called *ca dao*, which few in the West knew existed. Since then, he’d published nine books and been a finalist for the National Book Award in poetry. I applied to and was accepted at Miami.

Watching him in the classroom for the first time was like being surprised at a live concert by the virtuosity of some musician you knew well from albums. We were aware, as he talked about Confessional poetry or postmodern novels, that we were one degree of separation from Robert Lowell and John Barth, his teachers. Unfortunately, he went on sabbatical after our first year.

There was a going-away party—also to celebrate his second National Book Award nomination—at an Italian restaurant in Coral Gables. All of us went, but I felt like I’d missed an opportunity. It was a bad time for me anyway, and I ate

something heavily Alfredoed, drank a glass of wine I couldn't afford, and started smoking again. We were all getting up to leave, when Balaban came over and said he needed some help in his yard. Given that my army service had included two years as a combat engineer, he wondered if I knew how to run a chainsaw. I said I was the guy, and he said I thought you might be.

We ended up working side-by-side in his garden for the next two years. He could have found someone cheaper, or paid me less, but I think he wanted to help us out. My future wife and I lived two blocks away, in a rented condo, and it was easy for me to throw on shorts, jungle boots, an old Mickey Mouse t-shirt, and a bandanna, and walk or ride my bike down to the Balabans'.

Moss grew on the roof of their low house under a spreading live oak, behind a screen of palmettos, bamboo, bougainvillea, hibiscus, and other plants I couldn't identify. A circle driveway, so deep in pea gravel I couldn't ride through it, came to the porch. Many times when I arrived, their daughter was practicing the piano. She had tamed a mutilated tomcat that always appeared in the undergrowth when I knocked, and his tail quivered as he squirted musk on the ferns in greeting.

Inside, the house was open, with cool stone floors and oriental rugs. There were orchids in pots, small objects from their travels on tables and bookshelves, and spider plants hanging in the solarium. One of their dogs was a manic little sausage that looked like it had escaped from an Eastern European circus, and he always used my entry as a chance to escape out the front door and run off down the street, barking. John cursed and went after him calling, "Bobo! Bobo!" and the cages of cockatoo, finches, and budgies shouted and peeped.

South Miami had been devastated by Hurricane Andrew a few weeks after the Balabans arrived. John wrote:

For days, Army cranes clanked by our houses
in sickening August heat as bulldozers
scraped the rotting tonnage from the streets.

Now their property was so dense and lush again that I had to walk in and under and through gardenia, guanabana, strangler vines, more bamboo, and sea grapes to discover the fence along its boundaries. There was a crescent of tough grass, but the yard was mostly a subtropical garden that demanded constant, backbreaking care.

We joked and talked as we worked. It was instructive to see how a real writer lived and thought outside a classroom, which may be what most MFA students hope to learn and is the one thing that most programs can't offer. I was too far behind John's understanding of Vietnam to discuss it intelligently but that rarely stopped me. He asked questions about deep-sea diving and other things I did know, and we talked about books, writers, and the poetical life. (I said I liked the *idea* of

Peter Matthiessen. He scratched the back of his head and looked off sideways, as he did in class lectures, saying, “I like *Peter Matthiessen*.”)

He held banana palms out of the electrical wires while I sawed through their trunks in five or six wet strokes with a brush saw. They came down like celery stalks, so it was a surprise to learn that other palms’ leaves become spiny, rock-hard husks when they died; I pole-sawed futilely while John swiped at them with a rake. We cast chemical fertilizers, cleaned algae from the koi pond and filters, and made runs to the nursery. A truck dumped more pea gravel for the driveway, and we spread it with rakes and shovels to try and smother the tropical crabgrass that shot rhizomes in every direction.

I carried as much of the heavy stuff as possible—tons of vegetable waste to the street for pickup, dozens of bags of mulch around the property to slit with my knife and pour on the ground—because I worried a little about his health. I’d seen contraptions in the house—an over-breather for sleep apnea; the traction device he’d built to stretch his back: a gallon water jug hanging from a pulley screwed into the ceiling over a wing chair, with a noose for his neck.

I knew from John’s writing and then from his gardening that he had a temper. I didn’t want any heart attacks or injuries, mine included. One morning he’d been trying to translate 18th-century Vietnamese poems but was interrupted by phone calls and then by our appointed time for yard work. It was as hot as it gets in South Florida in the summer and humid enough for prickly heat to develop under a wet shirt. John got trapped in a patch of bamboo he was trying to remove, which was all wrapped in kudzu. In his rage he blindly waved a little chainsaw, like a smoky light saber, over and around his head, bringing stalks and vines crashing down on himself. (I flatter myself to think that if I’d been there to help remove the massive steel hurricane shutters I’d helped him install, his finger wouldn’t have been broken when the stripped bolt refused to come out. “A boxer’s break,” his doctor told him, so I can imagine what happened.)

We took breaks for iced tea or water under the banyan tree out back. He or Lonnie, his wife, always made us lunch, sushi or sandwiches, with cold beer. I had questions I wanted to ask John. He’d written that many of his colleagues at Penn State had thought he should get off the “Vietnam stuff.” I’d been around Miami’s English department long enough to figure that most there would think similarly. He writes in his memoir that, after Vietnam, those friends now gone “became more real and dear to me than anyone I could meet as I now re-endeavored as an academic.” There was something in the best literature that was also like loneliness, and I didn’t ask. One doesn’t question former teachers too closely, for what final lesson might be taught.

In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," T.S. Eliot defines "depersonalization," his mandate for great art:

What is to be insisted upon is that the poet must develop or procure the consciousness of the past and that he should continue to develop this consciousness throughout his career. What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality...the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material.

The writer must hold himself aloof from the "structural emotion" of drama, Eliot says, which is provided by the combination of "an intensely strong attraction toward beauty and an equally intense fascination by the ugliness which is contrasted with it and which destroys it." This makes for a tone of objectivity or authority.

The very notion of loss of self (in nature, in time, in culture) is a hard pill to swallow in the West. Our attitude is likely to be a fascinated horror, as in *Moby Dick* ("The intense concentration of self in the middle of such a heartless immensity, my God! who can tell it?"), or a paranoia and rage at otherness, as in *Nausea*.

Near the end of each semester a student inevitably asks me, "Why is literature always about bad stuff?" Part of the answer is that drama is conflict, but what students fear, maybe, is the long view of literature, which tends to strip away comfortable illusions about behavior, busyness, and agreed-upon importance and to remind them of otherness.

Eliot's depersonalized writing is meant as hard solace (both for artist and for reader), in exchange for the extinguishing of self, but it's very different from, say, the bliss of Buddhist repose. Eliot says:

There are many people who appreciate the expression of sincere emotion in verse, and there is a smaller number of people who can appreciate technical excellence. But very few know when there is an expression of significant emotion, emotion which has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet. The emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done. And he is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the

present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living.

(Or *always* living, perhaps. I've long suspected Faulkner was talking about himself as an artist when he wrote about old men "to whom all the past is not a diminishing road, but, instead, a huge meadow which no winter ever quite touches, divided from them now by the narrow bottleneck of the most recent decade of years.")

If time and distance in art are inconsequential to "what is already living," as Eliot says, then time and distance, overshadowing and outliving individuals, make each of us inconsequential in the long view of art. This begins to get at the root of why many of my students grow uneasy in the presence of literature.

The difference in Eliot between the history of the poet and the poems themselves is further confused when there are poets as thrillingly autobiographic as some are banal in their worldliness. The young in particular venture out to take the temperature of the world and temper themselves in the crucible instead. It's a time-honored romance that takes many forms—college, The Grand Tour, expatriatism, combat. Presumably any upheaval that brings new geographies, weather, languages, people, flora, and fauna, will do the trick.

John Balaban was spurred as a young man by a latent "sense of injustice" he shared with his father. He writes in his memoir, *Remembering Heaven's Face*, "Despite my father's military career, my parents' Eastern Church, Romanian heritage, my neighborhood violence, and my brother's example [of carrying a gun and punching a teacher "down the school steps"], I found myself attending Quaker meetings, picketing the Army's biological-warfare center at Fort Detrick, Maryland, and trying to take on in debate—at the local John Birch society, of all places—the legal counsel for the House Un-American Activities Committee."

Later, after attending Harvard, he applied for conscientious objector status from his draft board, with a wrinkle: He demanded to be sent to Vietnam to do his alternate service. He imagines how the men on the board must have laughed at this kid who "told them [he] was going to Vietnam whether or not they approved [his] status as a CO."

There are one too many brawls in John's memoir to call him a do-gooder, and I think of Hemingway's comment on Pound: "He was...irascible but so perhaps have been many saints." In the poems, there are too many bouts of joyous Chinese-poet drunkenness and ironic-Byronic self-regard to ever accuse him of an evaporative self. But if the life is a Romantic's, the work is largely Modern restraint, compression, and distillation.

Early in his published work he begins the turn outward toward the emotion of the poem, away from the history of the poet, in part by returning to Vietnam during the war to record Vietnamese folk poetry called *ca dao*,

short, lyric poems, passed down by word of mouth and sung without instrumental accompaniment by ordinary individuals—poems whose simple purpose...is ‘to stimulate the mind, train the observation, encourage social intercourse, and enable one to give vent to his complaint.’ In the West we sometimes measure civilizations by their physical monuments: cathedrals, walls, fortifications. In Vietnam, in rain forests swept by annual monsoons, there arose a wet rice, agricultural civilization with a cultural continuity of millennia which... has left few monuments other than this poetry and song.

He gathered these song-poems from an ancient mandarin, from his former palanquin-bearer, from riverboat merchants, high-school teachers, children, mothers, Viet Cong deserters, farmers “running hand plows behind water buffalo,” and others. “[In 1971] I made ten such journeys into various parts of the South,” he writes, “taping whoever would speak to an American, recording usually at night when the singer’s day work was done, taping by kerosene lamp, running my recorder on batteries, often picking up mortar and rifle fire in the background as these lone voices sang poetry they had learned from song.”

Here’s one called “The Red Cloth”:

Sad, idle, I think of my dead mother,
her mouth chewing rice, her tongue removing fish bones.
The Red Cloth drapes the mirror frame:
Men of one country must love one another.

“The mirror,” John writes, “which was traditionally part of the family altar, represented Heaven. And the red cloth? Surely, the human heart residing close to it.” (The mother, one feels, must have been a victim of that enmity of nations.) His *Ca Dao Vietnam* represents the first time *ca dao* have been translated and collected into any Western language.

John’s own poetry is influenced by Asian poetry, perhaps by way of the Imagists, who also knew Asian literature. Ezra Pound writes that an Image, as he, T.E.

Hulme, and F.S. Flint conceive it, is “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.” Imagism’s “enabling text” is Pound’s haiku-like poem “In a Station of the Metro”:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Pound distilled the poem from dozens of lines, and what remains is a sharp, even sharp-edged, glimpse of people as fragile as cherry blossoms, lined up along the thundering wet tunnels of the Paris subway. It’s nearly hallucinogenic in intensity.

John’s nature images, especially, strike me as having been influenced by Su Tung-p’o or Tu Fu (or Pound’s translations of Rihaku, Li Po, and others):

A mottled cur with a grease-paint grin
laps up fish scales and red, saw-toothed gills
guttured from panfish at the river’s edge.

Or:

But I too am baffled
by the moon rocking in the hemlocks,
by the moons rocking in the stream.

A later tenet of Imagism was that it embody “a hardness, as of cut stone,” which much of Modernist literature strived for, as in Eliot’s, “The emotion of art is impersonal.” It’s a disinterested interest, the “inhuman” view of Ortega y Gasset. It’s Joyce’s “artist, like the God of the creation, [who] remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.” It’s the quality in Hemingway’s early stories that led one critic to call them “nightmares at noonday.” And it’s Chekhov’s “cosmic” point of view, as one critic calls it, as if we were being observed by something too distant for empathy.

Frost said, “Education is the ability to listen to almost anything without losing your temper or your self-confidence.” The best art often has the ability to see clearly and yet remain calm enough to speak, which shifts the emotion from the poet’s own (presumed, else why’s there this poem?) reaction—the “history of the poet”—to somewhere inside the poem where it can act more directly and mysteriously on readers. To some readers, this sounds cold.

John has a poem called “The Guard at the Binh Thuy Bridge,” in *Locusts at the Edge of Summer*, which shows us a quiet morning, in which a soldier has

slung his carbine barrel down to keep
the boring dry, and two banana-clips instead of one
are taped to make, now, forty rounds instead
of twenty.

Down on the surface of the river,

Anchored in red morning mist a narrow junk
rocks its weight. A woman kneels on deck
staring at lapping water. Wets her face.
Idly the thick Rach Binh Thuy slides by.
He aims. At her. Then drops his aim. Idly.

The poem never gets overtly excited (although the fragments at the end point to something breathless, both in the viewer's anticipation and in the marksman's breath-hold for better accuracy), but it makes me want to shout in fear, for the soldier's bored (in two meanings) motion puts human life in a gun's sights. Idly.

There are consolations in this tradition, beyond the unflinching gaze at what is most human. Among them is an ironic humor that often works by the transcendence of time or place. In *Path, Crooked Path*, there's a poem called "Ibn Fadhlan, the Arab Emissary, Encounters Vikings on the Volga River, A.D. 922." The final lines read,

O Caliph, through forested lands, west and north,
one finds only infidels with vile habits.
Some are Christian. Nothing will come of them.

And in the final verse of "Some Dogs of the World," there's an old Parisian flâneur we all know:

Fancy people. Fancy food.
And here comes Spot bopping along
la rue Buci, a veritable boulevardier
pausing to lift a hind leg and pee, while cocking
one admiring eye on the elegant sidewalk diners.
Ah, *mes semblables*.

If the mutt can identify with us, there is an opening for self-recognition in his vulgar, cocksure show. That too contains the consolation of connections, or can, if not stripped of individual scale. When the view is stripped of specifics and puts

entire civilizations contemporaneously in an eternal present, it has a very lonely feel, as in “Varna Snow”:

Greek and Roman, Getae, Thracian, Bulgar,
Slavs, Avars, Goths, Celts, Tatars, Huns,
Arabs, Turks, Russians, and, now, the U.S. Navy.

And “Hissarlik” begins this way:

This is the dust
of nine cities,
royal as the poppy,

each grown
over the sediment
of the last.

But reading John’s own poems and translations, you gain the camaraderie of poets as far-flung as Basho, Li Po, Anna Akhmatova, American John Haag, Georgi Borrisov, Bulgarians Kolyo Sevov and Lyubomir Nikolov; epigraphs by Homer, Polybius, Brecht; the people who wrote, remembered, and sang folk *ca dao*, and the many characters who live to speak again, from Ovid, miserable in his exile in Tomis, to Root Boy Slim, “lead singer and composeur for his Sex Change Band.”

The title of my essay comes from John’s “The Lives of the Poets,” in which he chooses sides forever and for good with a community against “the hand that takes”:

So, praise to those still coming through on song,
a bigger tribe than one can name and tough
as anything put up by corporate America....

One of the most challenging and sustained poetic connections John has made is to Ho Xuan Huong, an 18th-century Vietnamese concubine and a poet, whose work John collected and translated in *Spring Essence: The Poetry of Ho Xuan Huong*.

John writes in the introduction, “The great poetry of this period—like Nguyen Du’s famous *Tale of Kieu*—is filled with individual longing, with a sense of ‘cruel fate,’ and with a searching for something of permanence. Warfare, starvation, and corruption did not vanquish poets like Nguyen Du and Ho Xuan Huong, but deepened their work.”

Ho Xuan Huong [her name means “spring essence”] “constantly questioned the order of things,” especially the fundamentalist Confucian ideas that a woman “when unmarried, should obey her father; when married, her husband, and, if widowed, her son.” A woman of her time could be justifiably abandoned for seven reasons, ranging from failure to bear a child to gossiping to having an incurable disease. In this atmosphere, John writes, “Her verbal play, her wicked humor, her native speech, her spiritual longing, her hunger for love, and her anger at corruption must have been tonic.”

She chose to write in Nôm, an ideographic script that represented Vietnamese speech, instead of in the “mandarin elite’s” Chinese. John compares this choice to Chaucer’s to write in English and Dante’s in Italian; it gave her poetry “a special Vietnamese dimension filled with the aphorisms and speech habits of the common people.”

(*Spring Essence* is the first sizable collection of her poetry in a Western language, and the first book in history to have Nôm printed in type. The 1,000-year-old script is shown, on each spread of the book, with its modern Vietnamese translation and John’s English.)

As a result, perhaps, Ho Xuan Huong earned “immediate and continuing acclaim” as a poet, despite being what Frances Fitzgerald calls “the brilliant bad girl...throwing her erotically-charged darts into the sexual hypocrisy of all ages and cultures.”

Some of the poems are hilariously, gorgeously filthy. Here’s the dirtiest poem about a catfish that I know, “The Wellspring”:

A narrow path descends through brush
to the bright water of your wondrous pool.

Under a footbridge’s pale twin planks
the pure spring shunts in shimmering rills.

Tufts of sedge surround its mouth.
A golden carp glides midstream.

Finding this well, so virginal and clear,
who would put a catfish here?

Similarly, here’s “River Snail”:

Fate and my parents shaped me like a snail,
day and night wandering marsh weeds that smell foul.

Kind sir, if you want me, open my door.
But please don't poke up into my tail.

Other poems move beyond imagery to present character through sex, such as in “The Lustful Monk” (Vatican, take note):

A life in religion weighs heavier than stone.
Everything can rest on just one little thing.

My boat of compassion would have sailed to Paradise
if only bad winds hadn't turned me around.

And other poems comment on gender inequality (still with sex—that “tomb standing all alone,” engorged with the importance of its corpse!), such as “At the Chinese General's Tomb”:

I see it up there in the corner of my eye:
the General's tomb standing all alone.

If I could change my fate, become a man
of heroic deed, couldn't I do better?

John says he was “sustained” for ten years translating Ho Xuan Huong's poetry by her “lonely, intelligent life...her stubbornness, her sarcasm, her bravery, her irreverent humor, and her bodhisattva's compassion. She is a world-class poet who can move us today as she has moved Vietnamese for two hundred years.”

Spring Essence begins with John's own *ca dao*, and his translation of the couplets end the book:

Ở bên trời Mỹ vẫn mơ.
Nguồn sông còn chảy, tình lơ lai rai.

Trăm năm, tiếng khéo ngân dài:
Trên sông, cổ nguyệt nhớ hoài Xuân Hương.

Under the American sky, still dreaming.
The riverhead runs on, cloudy feelings float away.

Over the years, a clever voice echoes.
On the river, an old moon recalls Xuan Huong.

Wit and intelligence echo out of antiquity, bringing humanity and enduring good humor to soften our hard, even dismaying, recognitions.

“Words for My Daughter,” collected in *Locusts at the Edge of Summer*, starts with a litany of violences, big and small, that John has seen or grew up knowing about, from an “alcoholic mother getting raped by the milkman” (and the discovery by her son, who “broke a milkbottle and jabbed the guy / humping on his mom”) to

... a cloud of memories
drifting off the South China Sea,
like the 9-year-old boy, naked and lacerated,
thrashing in his pee on a steel operating table
and yelling, “*Dau. Dau,*” while I, trying to translate
in the mayhem of Tet for surgeons who didn’t know
who this boy was or what happened to him, kept asking
“Where? Where’s the pain?” until a surgeon
said, “Forget it. His ears are blown.

The poem has its reasons: “I want you to know the worst and be free from it. / I want you to know the worst and still find good.” I often read it to classes on the last day of the semester, as a final answer to why literature is “always about bad stuff.” The consolation of art is that, like life, it requires us to surrender our Selves, first to the thrilling terror that we are not the whole, and ultimately to the timelessness of extinction. Gaining this awareness as it’s couched in art is not loss. It’s homecoming to the human condition.

John is speaking to his daughter Tally in the poem, but by the end of it, I hear the poet speaking to his poem, readers speaking to their books:

I suspect I am here less for your protection
than you are here for mine, as if you were sent
to call me back into our helpless tribe.

JOHN GRISWOLD teaches at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. His poem “I Didn’t Know” appeared in WLA’s Special Double Edition, 2006. His novel *A Democracy of Ghosts* is forthcoming from Wordcraft of Oregon.