

Book Review

Passing through a Gate: Poems, Essays, and Translations.
John Balaban. Copper Canyon Press, 2024. \$24.00,
232 pp.

Reviewed by Joe Walpole

Spoiler alert: *Passing through a Gate: Poems, Essays, and Translations*, the latest collection from John Balaban—poet, novelist, memoirist, essayist, ecologist, moralist, archivist, traveler, teacher, translator, fundraiser, conscientious objector, hitch hiker, and list-maker extraordinaire—is a great book. Period. End of review.

But if you insist . . .

Passing through a Gate is a great book because it has the guts to explore great subjects with verve, eloquence, and panache. Expansive and ambitious, it takes on substantial themes with nuance and subtlety. Its main subjects are the ones Dante in *De vulgari eloquentia* declared were the proper subjects of poetry—love, virtue, war. In language that is intricate in syntax, pyrotechnic in image, dense in detail, and sonically alive, Balaban makes audacious use of what he calls “the essentials of craft” *Passing through a Gate* is a capacious book, roaming across the globe and ranging through time, from the ancient classical world to the contemporary American empire. It does not merely document a life but offers a vision of the world. A moral vision. An enlarged sense of the self. Though it peers deeply into the abyss and our hearts of darkness, it is ultimately and emphatically a life-enhancing book. Balaban likes to quote an old Vietnamese

proverb that says, "Go out today and return with a bucketful of wisdom." *Passing through a Gate* is John Balaban's bucketful of wisdom.

Dante said that the path to paradise begins in hell. Hell, for John Balaban, began in Vietnam in 1967. From his memoir and from earlier collections of his poetry, his backstory is familiar to us by now, but this new collection expands our knowledge. He was a graduate student at Harvard when, sickened by the American war in Vietnam, he volunteered as a conscientious objector to go to Vietnam. Never drafted, he was one of only forty-five or so conscientious objectors brave enough to go to Vietnam, exhibiting immense moral courage and integrity and not a little naiveté: "I thought I was going to do something to end the war by going." In Vietnam, he taught descriptive linguistics at a university in the Mekong Delta, but was wounded by shrapnel during the Tet Offensive of 1968 and had to be shipped back to the States for medical treatment. He returned to Vietnam, but this time as a volunteer for the Committee of Responsibility to Save War-Injured Children, locating children whose injuries from the war were so savage as to require medical treatment in the United States. In 1971, he hitchhiked throughout Vietnam on planes and choppers and riverboats, carrying with him a tape recorder and a brave heart, recording *ca dao*, the oral folk poetry of the Vietnamese people, poetry never before written down in any language.

The war gave him his first book of poetry, which won the Lamont Award for Poetry in 1974 and high praise from poets such as W.S. Merwin and Denise Levertov and Maxine Kumin, who wrote, "Balaban seems to me to be our moral spokesperson, our lyricist, exhorter, and consoler: in short, the poet we need." Thirteen more books and a shower of awards followed. He was twice nominated for the National Book Award in Poetry.

Despite what he observed in Vietnam—children wounded by bullets and cluster bomb flechettes and napalm and shrapnel and white phosphorous artillery shells, blinded and deafened, their spines severed: what he calls “the mayhem of war”—there are only occasional splashes of war gore in this collection. Balaban is not inclined to righteous declarations. He is, more often, a subtler poet, a writer of indirection, taking a slant-wise approach to his subjects. His main tool of indirection is the balancing act of contrasts. As Denise Levertov said of his writing, it is “capable of encompassing contrasts of beauty and horror perceived unflinchingly.” In a typical Balaban poem you might find beauty and horror hand in hand, for it is important to remember when discussing Balaban’s war poems that Vietnam was never just a war for him. He found two Vietnams: the war ravaged Vietnam and the eternal Vietnam. For most Americans, Vietnam is a war. For Balaban, Vietnam is a people and a way of being in the world. It is misleading—inaccurate even—to pigeonhole him as a war/anti-war poet. In *Passages*, there are only a handful of poems about what we would call the Vietnam War. In his last book, *Empires*, there was only one poem about what Balaban would call the American War.

After the war, Balaban took to the open road for consolation. With a walkie talkie, an orange backpack, and on a pair of crutches, he made his way to the American Southwest, asking himself if America was still a place he could live in. He left behind, temporarily, a wife and a daughter and a professorship at Pennsylvania State University. Much of his best poetry is about those odysseys.

So we learn much about John Balaban in these essays and poems, but *Passing* is not autobiography, not memoir, emphatically not confession. The book tells not of a writer’s life, but of the writing life. It is a defense of life lived in poetry, poetry as a way of being, a way of knowing the world. The book is an evolution of a sensibility. We watch as a poet’s self is built

from the things of the world. Balaban is no camera, no recording machine, emphatically no mere documentarian. The point is not reproduction. Though the poetry is dense with detail, observation is just a beginning. In "Along the Mekong," he writes:

Why, a reporter, or a cook, could write this poem,
if he had learned dictation. But what if I said,
simply suggested, that all this blood fleck,
muscle rot, earth root and earth leaf, scraps
of glittery scales, fine white grains, fast talk,
gut grime, crab claws, bright light, sweetest smells
--Said: a human self: a mirror held up before.

In the book's initial essay, "War Poetry, Political Poetry, and the Invisible Powers," he acknowledges the lowly status of poetry in America, quoting Saul Bellow, who calls poets "poor loonies" and elsewhere: "to be a poet is a school thing, a skirt thing, a church thing . . . poets are loved because they just can't make it here," a sentiment Balaban will mirror when he laments, "we live in a world with a simple sense of use / that doesn't include poetry and musings." Pity the poor loonies.

Worse, the world we encounter in *Passing* can be, as Thomas Hobbes wrote in *Leviathan*, "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." The poet's predicament is sketched out in the book's first offering, "Walking Down into the Cebolla Canyon," a remarkable poem that deserves a place among the finest in our time. The poem begins as nature poem. The narrator finds himself in a wilderness canyon amid "snow peaks rinsed in rose light" and a river that "stammers against

volcanic rocks and pools." The marvel of the river is its geologic age, making its way from prehistory to "our time when all assertions are suspect / to our century of assurances gone mute." The poet is at the jumping off place, like Dido in the *Aeneid*, who felt deserted by the gods under an "empty sky." We live in a time, the poem despairs, when we "gag on words like sour meats . . . So pity the poets, whose work is words / reduced to blather or fiery silences." But in "Walking Down into Cebolla Canyon," Balaban insists on a moral obligation to seek goodness, and the poet finds it in all he beholds, as he "wanders down past living metaphors." What the water brings to the poet—and brings to us: "anyone might drink here and be refreshed"—is what Dante said the poet must bring to his art: love. Or, as the last line of the poem sings, "Love like water makes the canyon bloom."

Read the rest of *Passing* and you will nod with the shock of recognition: Yes, the gods seem to have expired. Yes, time and space diminish us. Yes, mankind is violent at heart. Yes, civilization is built on the rubble of empires. Yes, war is savage. Yes, the innocent are ravaged. Yes, to all the bad news of our digital day. But still, soul—the poet's soul—claps its hands and sings. Because poetry offers benediction. Because poetry instructs and delights. Because poetry builds us a self. Because poetry is "the delicate thing that lasts." Because poetry like water makes the canyons bloom.

In a poem that Michael Wiegers, who wrote the forward to *Passing*, says makes him weep every time he reads it—"Words for My Daughter"—Balaban writes of violence, from the brutalities of his childhood to the horrors of Vietnam. He explains to his daughter that he speaks of these brutalities so that she, so that we can "know the worst and be free from it." He tells her, he tells us, "I want you to know the worst and still find good."

Knowing the worst and still finding the good is the true aim, formidable, of Balaban's discernment. He seeks consolation, even celebration.

Swear by the locusts, by dragonflies on ferns
by the minnow's flash, the tremble of a breast
by the new earth spongy beneath our feet
that as we grow old, we will not grow evil . . . swear
by this dazzle that does not wish to leave us—
that we will be keepers of a garden, nonetheless.

The power of Balaban's craft lies in the power of his imagery. His truth springs from specificity, full-bodied and whole-hearted. Balaban is spare with abstract speculation, knowing it usually corrodes into platitudes and received wisdom. No ideas but in things, you'll remember. A typical Balaban poem begins with an image, putting us in the world, in a place, grounded. You always know where you are in a Balaban piece. Landscape is both background and foreground, for who we are is inseparable from where we are. This is not setting. It is us in proper perspective. Place is the point, whether it is Vietnam or Taos, New Mexico, or the Acropolis. We belong.

Balaban's sense of detail is granular, almost molecular. He names the world and so claims his place in it. Balaban loves to catalogue things. Animals, flowers, colors, rock formations, verbs, names of poets, a list of crimes in a small town. The cataloguing for Balaban is a reflection of the richness both of the world and of language. A Balaban poem is awake with sound. These are poems musical, lyrical—beautiful. Listen to the wind in the aspirated *h*'s and undulating *w*'s

of "The wind was husking, hushing, hosting / worrying the slimed leaves of the wood." Or feel the hardness of the pillow the poet lies his head on in the concussive sounds of "A cool ceramic block, a brick / just larger than one's cheek / cream-colored." Can you hear the lone cricket in "as crickets called, I creaked a rocker on our paint-peeled porch"?

Part of his craft is to avoid the obvious, so Balaban rarely uses end rhyme; he prefers the subtler approach, echoes hidden in the middle of lines: "a massive vault in the Basalt cliff" or "their long hair twinkling with chinks of ice" or "plied the dawn with inquiring song." As in Gerard Manly Hopkins's rove rhyme, Balaban's rhyme often skips from the end of a line to the middle of the next. For instance, you can hear his rhyme at play in the lines, "wondering why the locals were lying / and snapping mosquitoes whining at his ear / He had all the right gear, just couldn't get there."

He is at his best when writing about his love of family. He writes for his daughter, "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." He writes for his father, too, a complicated man of genius and of bad temper, with whom he managed a rudimentary reconciliation late in his father's life, as revealed in "Driving Back East with My Dad," when he notes, "it was good, being alive together, taking in the road, / mindful of where we had come, and moving on." He also writes of one of his sisters, who had taken care of him when he was young, the way he had taken care of wounded birds when he was a boy. At the end of the poem, he can only wish that she now receive the benediction of someone or something that will help her get up and fly away like the birds he once rescued. And in "The Gift of Morning Water," his mother appears to him in the voice of an old pueblo woman after a night of peyote ceremony, a visitation that leaves him

"Stunned, and now weeping," for "here I was made a gift I hadn't known how much I wanted, the voice that called my name the first morning of my life."

This solitaire who hit the open road to find himself and his country is also the most gregarious of men. *Passing* contains many poems addressed to friends, dead and alive, American and European and Vietnamese, some of whom were public figures such as Gloria Emerson, Sean Flynn, and John Steinbeck IV. Of the dead he writes in "The Goodbyes," eloquently, "This is our hardest trial; these, our bleakest times / Not our own going, but the going of others."

As intricate, even pyrotechnic as the poems can be, the essays are much sparer. The prose voice is simpler, conversational, plain-spoken. It is a very reader-friendly prose where clarity is all. My favorite among them was the one that ended the book, "The Writing Life," which offers a glimpse at the other side of the writing life, a reminder that writing doesn't resolve life. The writer remains, for better and for worse, a human being. After a sketch of the rewards and disappointments in his writing life, the essay tells a story of a time Balaban was invited to write at an empty ranch house at the eastern edge of New Mexico, "a place so remote it wasn't easily found on Google Maps." Upon arrival, he took a walk to investigate his surroundings, but soon lost his way. Hatless under a searing sun, his frail flip phone unable to get service, without any sense of compass, he wandered for what would prove to be about five hours and fifteen miles, until, providentially, as Balaban tried to follow train tracks to somewhere, anywhere, he was rescued by a train repairman riding on the rails. The essay reminds us of the existence of goodness in the world, but also that getting lost is inescapable in the writing life.

Philip Roth once wrote that a writer has an obligation to translate at least one work of art from a foreign language that no one else has ever encountered before. In *Passing*, Balaban

fulfills that obligation in spades. A significant part of this book is devoted to Balaban's translations of Vietnamese oral folk poetry called *ca dao*, a 2000 year-old poetic tradition. In 1971, the war still raging, Balaban roamed the Vietnamese countryside recording more than 500 samples of *ca dao*, few of which had ever been written down before—in any language. *Passing* presents 25 samples of his translations of *ca dao*. Vietnamese is a tonal language, one in which the same syllable spoken at different pitches can mean entirely different things. That rise and fall of syllables presents a major challenge for the translator, especially considering that the *ca dao* are sung, acapella. The *ca dao* folksongs cover a range of subjects—love, loneliness, gardens, exiled kings, concubines, moons and fish traps, for instance—but the simplicity belies a multi-layered set of meanings and clear-eyed imagery, always with a reference to the natural world to start things off.

Also included in *Passing* is a cohort of translations of poems by the concubine-poet, Ho Xuan Huong, whose work is replete with what Balaban calls “her devilish double entendres, an audacious poetry for that culture and age.” It took Balaban ten years to translate her work. This reviewer cannot vouch for how good the translations are, but those with more intimate knowledge of Vietnamese have attested to its art. As Tran Van Dinh, a former *charge des affaires* to the US, has written about Balaban's *Spring Essence* (which is a translation of Ho Xuan Huong's name), “The fact that he has finished the project is in itself a victory. The fact that his translations are true to the genius of this powerful woman is a triumph.”

In the book's last poem, “Back then,” the narrator is searching for peace of mind but finds it as difficult as “searching for a cricket in a field.” In his restless quest, he gets lost, his car breaking down, the battery dead, our narrator confounded—after all, “he had all the right gear, just couldn't get there.” Then, one evening, he follows a mule deer to higher ground as the dark

closes in on him. He reaches a ledge where he makes camp. Fog pours in. His sleep is a turmoil of dreams, "troubled with bat squeaks, / with wild burros braying along the nearby creek." Only with the dawn, the clarifying light of dawn, does the confusion of things evaporate, the bats asleep, the burros grazing peacefully. A tree is no longer a crucified man, but "a tree again, rocking in the wind"—the thing itself in its own ordinary glory. The sunlight restorative, the narrator is recalled to his senses, listening to one last thing as "a canyon wren, perched in a willow, / plied the dawn with inquiring song." It is not a stretch to wonder if the birdsong at dawn is the music of poetry, asking its own questions, seeking its own answers. We end with a sense that the narrator has found, if not his cricket, perhaps something better, his birdsong, a muse.

Passing turns out to be, after all the gore and desolation Balaban has experienced, a courageous, unsentimental defense of poetry in our lifetime. For Balaban, "the raw tongue stammers out / an urge towards paradise, a version of ease."

Blessed be the poor loonies.

A writer and a teacher (retired), **Joe Walpole** is, like much of the rest of the world, currently at work on a memoir. His work has previously appeared in literary magazines such as *Agni* and *the Missouri Review*, and in general features periodicals such as *the Sun-Sentinel* and *Filipinas Magazine*. A graduate of both the Pennsylvania State University and the MFA program at Florida International University, Joe lives with his wife, his daughter, and his dog in Inverness, Florida.