

COMMENTARY BY W. D. EHRHART

Words for John Balaban

NOT EVERY AMERICAN CAN SAY he got lost one chilly Saturday afternoon in Hanoi. Especially not in 1985, when Americans in Hanoi were about as common as feathers on a fish. But I can. So can John Balaban.

We'd been walking all afternoon, mesmerized by this ancient city, by the fact of our being in it. Old Hanoi, the Rising Dragon of antiquity become sleepy French colonial outpost become the very heart of the indomitable people who had defeated the most powerful empire the world has ever known.

The Temple of Literature. The One-Pillared Pagoda. The Lake of the Returned Sword. Ho Chi Minh's Tomb. And the people: the noodle shops and bicycle repairmen and vegetable venders. The lotus cutters. The Red River with its dikes and paddy fields. We have been like kids in a candy shop. Like sponges in a bucket. Wide-eyed. Amazed. Enchanted.

But now we were hopelessly lost in spite of my repeated insistence that I knew how to get us back to our hotel. Cold and exhausted from five hours of walking, we finally concluded that there was nothing for it but to hire a cyclo—a rickshaw-like bicycle—to rescue us. Ubiquitous as they had seemed earlier in the day, it took another 45 minutes to locate one. Finally, with Balaban negotiating because only he could speak Vietnamese, we settled with the driver on a price of 50 dong (then about \$3.50) and climbed aboard.

Which was no easy task: our third companion, Bruce Weigl, took up the entire wicker seat while Balaban and I perched on either arm of the chair. It was now pitch dark. As the driver pedaled along, working very hard to propel his 450-pound load,

John tried to talk with him, but about all we could discover was that the driver liked “Hotel California,” a song by the Eagles, an American rock band.

After awhile, I began to suspect that we were not going in the right direction. We seemed to be heading out of the city, rather than into it. But my directional credibility had long since evaporated, and I was rudely and gaily told to shut up. Perched precariously on the narrow arm of the cyclo chair, my rear end and left leg were by now asleep, which sounds more benign than it felt.

Soon, however, I was sure we were going in the wrong direction. Only a few hundred yards up ahead stood the Thang Long Hotel, where we had eaten dinner a few nights earlier with a group of disabled Vietnamese veterans. The Thang Long Hotel was on the edge of the city, a very long way from the Thong Nhat Hotel, where we were staying.

There followed a brief but energetic burst of shouting and general pandemonium. Then Balaban began to talk to the driver. I couldn’t, of course, understand anything he was saying. Except the words “Thang Long.”

“What hotel are you asking for, John?” I interrupted.

“The Thang Long.”

“That’s the Thang Long,” I said, pointing. “We’re staying at the Thong Nhat.”

“Oops,” Balaban replied.

“You want to try explaining this one to the driver?” I asked.

“No,” he replied. But he did. And it clearly wasn’t what the driver wanted to hear. He was panting hard and drenched in sweat. At first he refused to budge, as if he couldn’t believe what Balaban was saying. Then he shook his head, as if to say, “No wonder we beat them.” But he turned around, and off we went again.

At one point we were stopped by a policeman. There was a brief conversation between the cyclo driver and the cop, and then we were off again. “I think it’s illegal to ride three to a cyclo,” John said, “But the guy explained that we’re Americans and we’re lost, and the cop told him to beat it.”

Our driver was pedaling furiously now, anxious to be rid of us. On one narrow street, we overtook one of the old French-built trolley cars, the three of us cheering and urging our driver on, the trolley passengers hanging out the windows and laughing and pointing, and when we finally drew up even with the trolley driver, he waved and smiled and rang the trolley’s bell.

And then we were cruising around the far side of the Lake of the Returned Sword, and past Indira Gandhi Park and the Central Bank building, and finally there was our hotel. Our driver was whipped. He leaned over the handlebars, breathing like he’d just gone fifteen rounds with Smokin’ Joe Frazier. Then looked up and grinned. Even as I write this, he’s probably telling his grandchildren about the three crazy Americans he met one cold December night long ago.

I no longer remember when I first met Balaban—the late 1970s, or maybe 1980. But I'd first encountered his poetry in 1974, years before we finally met, when Jan Barry and I were putting together *Demilitarized Zones: Veterans After Vietnam*. Barry had come across a collection of Balaban's poems published earlier that year called *After Our War*, and we were both deeply taken with Balaban's work. We ended up including seven of Balaban's poems in our anthology, and Balaban's writing has been a staple of my life ever since. In 1987, in the course of an essay called "Soldier-Poets of the Vietnam War," I had this to say about him and *After Our War*:

"Balaban is an anomaly: a soldier-poet who was not a soldier; indeed, he opposed the war and became a conscientious objector. But he chose to do his alternative service in Vietnam, first as a teacher of linguistics at the University of Can Tho, then as field representative for the Committee of Responsibility to Save War-Injured Children. Later returning to Vietnam independently in order to study Vietnamese oral folk poetry, he spent a total of nearly three years in the war zone—learning to speak Vietnamese fluently and even getting wounded on one occasion—and he is as much a veteran of the Vietnam War as any soldier I have ever met.

"Because of his unique situation, however, Balaban brings to his poetry a perspective unlike any other. 'A poet had better keep his mouth shut,' he writes in 'Saying Good-by to Mr. and Mrs. My, Saigon, 1972':

Unless he's found words to comfort and teach.
Today, comfort and teaching themselves deceive
and it takes cruelty to make any friends
when it is a lie to speak, a lie to keep silent.

"While Balaban's poems offer little comfort, they have much to teach. Years before Agent Orange was widely acknowledged for the silent killer it is—the deadly seed sown in Asia only to take root at home among those who thought they'd survived—Balaban wrote in 'Along the Mekong':

With a scientific turn of mind I can understand
that malformation in lab mice may not occur in children
but when, last week, I ushered hare-lipped, tusk-toothed kids
to surgery in Saigon, I wondered, what had they drunk
that I had drunk.

And his 'The Guard at the Binh Thuy Bridge' is a frightening exercise in quiet tension—the way it was; the war always a hair trigger away, just waiting to happen:
How still he stands as mists begin to move,

as morning, curling, billows creep across
his cooplake concrete sentry perched mid-bridge
over mid-muddy river.

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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.

“Balaban is particularly adept at contrasting the impact of the war on Vietnam with the indifference of those at home. In ‘The Gardenia in the Moon,’ he writes: ‘Men had landed on the moon. / As men shot dirty films in dirty motel rooms, / Guerrillas sucked cold rice and fish.’ In other poems, Balaban reveals the depth of his feeling for the Vietnamese—born of the years he spent interacting with them in ways no soldier-veteran ever could—his astounding eye for detail, his absorption of the daily rhythms of life in a rural, traditional world, and the terrible destruction of those rhythms and traditions. In ‘Orpheus in the Upper World,’ he offers perhaps an explanation for the hundreds and even thousands of poems written by those who fought the war:

For when his order had burst his head
like sillowy seeds of milkweed pod,
he learned to pay much closer watch
to all things, even small things,
as if to discover his errors.

“Not all the poems in *After Our War* deal with Vietnam. But if some of the non-Vietnam poems occasionally reveal the graduate student laboring to flex his intellectual muscle, they also reveal the poet’s ability to transcend Vietnam and reach out to the wider world around him.”

As I look back now, I realize I’ve written a lot about Balaban’s poetry over the years, and that last sentence above is just about the harshest thing I’ve ever had to say about it—not because I can’t see the flaws and weaknesses, but because there are so few. Later in that same essay, “Soldier-Poets of the Vietnam War,” I had this to say about Balaban’s second collection, *Blue Mountain*: “Here are poems ranging from the American West to the southern Appalachians, from Pennsylvania to Romania, along with eloquent elegies to friends and family members.

“Still, lingering memories of the Vietnam War persist. In ‘News Update,’ he chronicles the lives—and deaths—of friends he’d known in the war zone: ‘Sean

Flynn / dropping his camera and grabbing a gun'; Tim Page 'with a steel plate in his head'; Gitelson, his brains leaking 'on my hands and knees,' pulled from a canal. 'And here I am, ten years later,' he muses:

written up in the local small town press
for popping a loud-mouth punk in the choppers.
Oh, big sighs. Windy sighs. And ghostly laughter.

In 'For Mrs. Cam, Whose Name Means *Printed Silk*,' he reflects on the dislocation of the refugee boat people:

The wide Pacific flares in sunset.
Somewhere over there was once your home.
You study the things which start from scratch.

And in 'After Our War' (the poem, not the book), he writes:

After our war, the dismembered bits
—all those pierced eyes, ear slivers, jaw splinters,
gouged lips, odd tibias, skin flaps, and toes—
came squinting, wobbling, jabbering back.

After observing wryly that 'all things naturally return to their source,' he wonders, 'After our war, how will love speak?'

"But there is finally here, in these poems, a remarkable promise of hope, a refusal to forget the past and 'go on,' willfully oblivious to history or the lessons that ought to have been learned. In 'In Celebration of Spring,' he insists:

Swear by the locust, by dragonflies on ferns,
by the minnow's flash, the tremble of a breast,
by the new earth spongy under our feet:
that as we grow old, we will not grow evil,
that although our garden seeps with sewage,
and our elders think it's up for auction—swear
by this dazzle that does not wish to leave us—
that we will be keepers of a garden, nonetheless.

More than transcending the Vietnam War, in *Blue Mountain* Balaban absorbs Vietnam and incorporates it into a powerful vision of what the world *ought* to be."

In another essay, "Praise the Poet," I wrote of *Blue Mountain* that "one expects poems about the Vietnam War from the author of *After Our War*, of course. Indeed, those who insist that it is time to put Vietnam behind us may well deserve to be convicted of a felony. But beneath the expected bitterness and cynicism and irony of poems like 'News Update,' there is also a remarkable willingness not only to acknowledge that terrible past, but to build something lasting and good out of it [as he demonstrates in 'In Celebration of Spring']. It is this affirmation of what is worthwhile, and the refusal to knuckle under to all that is not, which carries Balaban far beyond Vietnam into the more general and ultimately more durable realm of shared experience.

"Balaban manages to deliver sentiment without sentimentality, emotion without embarrassment. Although his elusive *Blue Mountain* is 'only as large as a thought,' the range to which it belongs stretches from Ovid's Black Sea city of exile to the Pueblo ruins of New Mexico, from antebellum Charleston to Kate and Gary's Bar in Red River. And Balaban covers that territory with authority and conviction.

"I have seldom, in fact, encountered a collection of poems so consistently solid. Each poem in *Blue Mountain* is a mother lode so rich that it is likely to take one week to finish the book. Particularly impressive is Balaban's knowledge of the flora and fauna that surround him wherever he is; his poems read like botanical and biological catalogues. Moreover, he observes keenly and in great detail all that he sees. The best part of *Blue Mountain*, however, is its constant insistence upon the dignity of the human will. Insane we may be. Certainly foolish and shortsighted and capable of brutishness. But if he finds despair and sadness in the worst that we are capable of—and he does—he finds also courage and hope in that human will which has thus far permitted us to survive.

"Into that peculiar silence which only parents have, / she retreated, and, now, she has entered forever,' Balaban writes of his mother in 'Words for the Dead':

But if all things crave themselves more clearly,
we who issued from the cells of her body, whose
first impulses flexed with the rhythms of her heart,
are each partial flesh and seed of her craving
for wistful things. That are her. And will not die.

It is this continuity, however tenuous and vulnerable, that Balaban celebrates. One worries about heaping praise so lavishly as not to be believed. But this book is good, and there is no way around it. 'Praise the poet,' says one of the 'Inscriptions from the Black Sea Tombs.' And indeed, *Blue Mountain* proves John Balaban worthy of praise."

In the twenty-five years since *Blue Mountain* appeared, Balaban has published three additional collections: *Words for My Daughter*, *Locusts at the Edge of Summer*, and *Path, Crooked Path*. Each subsequent collection only confirms and renews what was so evident in his first two books: that here is a poet of great power and tremendous range, an exceptional poet, a poet of lasting worth, a poet for the ages. The poems he wrote thirty and, now, even forty years ago still resonate while the newer poems are exactly that: new, fresh, exciting, each one a discovery.

The war in Vietnam, for better or worse the touchstone experience of our lives, is never far from mind, whether it be an old Viet Minh fighter reminiscing with three American veterans young enough to be his sons, or the tiny Green Beret at Balaban's front door on Halloween night, or the dog meat served to the vegetarian American by the Vietnamese district chief who'd been sent home from the war to die years ago but hadn't.

But vying for attention, indeed, bumping the old war off the front pages, are Balaban's cancerous and beloved dog Apples, an Arab emissary encountering Vikings on the Volga in the 10th century, the teachers who rescued Balaban from mental poverty when he was a high school boy, Van Gogh, Hurricane Andrew, snails, parrots, alligators, Eddie the homeless paraplegic shot by a cop while trying to steal a car. These along with poems translated from Vietnamese, from Bulgarian, from Romanian, from Latin.

Translations, in fact, are another whole facet of Balaban's life as a poet. In addition to his extensive work with Vietnamese *Ca Dao*, traditional folk poetry, he spent years translating the 18th century Vietnamese poet Ho Xuan Huong, in the process helping to retrieve the nearly-lost-forever ancient Vietnamese script called *Nôm* in which she wrote. And he's the only guy I know personally who's ever been awarded a medal declaring him a Hero of Bulgaria—for his work translating Bulgarian poetry.

As if all that weren't enough, Balaban has also written fiction for both adults and adolescents, *Coming Down Again* and *The Hawk's Tale* respectively, a nonfiction memoir, *Remembering Heaven's Face*, and the text for a book of photographs, *Vietnam: The Land We Never Knew*, in addition to editing *Vietnam: a Traveler's Literary Companion*. Not to mention teaching fulltime all these years at Pennsylvania State University, the University of Miami, and now North Carolina State University.

Best of all, for me at least, Balaban is as decent and great-hearted a human being as his poetry suggests. Let me speak again, if I may, from personal experience: I know for a fact that I was, for much of that 1985 trip to Vietnam, a most unpleasant traveling companion. For reasons I could not begin to understand at the time—though I came to believe after the fact that I was experiencing a kind of post-traumatic stress, a sort of “short-timer's syndrome” flashback with all the

uncertainty and anxiety those last days in combat seventeen years earlier had entailed—I became pathologically homesick during the trip.

I mean, for much of the trip, I was no fun at all. A pain in the ass would be a polite way of putting it. In retrospect, I wouldn't be surprised if I had never heard another word from Balaban as long as we both lived. But aside from one brief remark a year later when my book about the trip, *Going Back*, was published—a book that didn't begin to convey either my emotional tumult during the trip or Balaban's patient forbearance—he's never even mentioned it, though we have had occasion to be together often in the years since.

Most recently, in the spring of 2006, Balaban came to the Haverford School, where I teach, to give the annual Edward R. Hallowell Lecture, a series that has attracted the likes of Norman Mailer, Derek Walcott, Donald Hall, Edward Hirsch, and Tim O'Brien. A year later, my students and colleagues are still talking about his visit, about his rambling shuffling of papers between poems, about his affable and unpretentious demeanor, about his lilting rendering of the sing-song rhythms of the Vietnamese language, about his breath-taking, heart-stopping poems.

Indeed, I've heard him read "Words for My Daughter" on more than one occasion, as he did that night, and I cannot for the life of me figure out how he manages to get through it without choking up or bursting into tears. It gets me every time I read it. Or hear it. Every single time.



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