



John Balaban, photograph courtesy Corolla Clift, 2003

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*Beyond War Poetry: War, Literature  
and the Heart of a Poet*

An Interview with John Balaban

**J**OHAN BALABAN HAS APPEARED IN THESE PAGES BEFORE. The 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *War, Literature and the Arts* is a fitting time to revisit and visit with this writer and teacher who came of literary age through war, but has moved far beyond it. Perhaps more than any poet in America today, Balaban lives the poetic truth first envisioned in this journal's pages.

John Balaban hurtled into the American war consciousness as a conscientious objector who nonetheless found himself in the literal maelstrom of the Tet Offensive in 1968, wherein he experienced war at its most profound and most disturbing. By his own account, he arrived in Vietnam wearing not army drab, but a Panama hat and white linen suit, there not to fight, but to teach linguistics at a Mekong university and, finally, after being wounded himself to work in a hospital treating war-injured children.

But war either ignores or changes rules, and Balaban left Vietnam altered by his experience, while not always understanding its trauma. He prefaces his 1991 memoir, *Remembering Heaven's Face*: "I volunteered to go to Vietnam, but as a conscientious objector to war. Like millions of other young men, I came home filled with memories that sometimes seem more real than my present life. But as a civilian engaged in alternative service, traveling alone on public buses or on riverboats, or hitch hiking on choppers and planes, I often saw a Vietnam that other Americans missed."

This memoir, benefiting from two decades of hindsight, assembles the singular insights and extreme emotions war triggers. Balaban finds his particular truth in war poems that have been collected in *After Our War* (1974), *Blue Mountain* (1982), *Words for My Daughter* (1991), *Locusts on the Edge of Summer* (2003) and *Path, Crooked Path* (2006). His lone novel, *Coming Down Again* (1985), takes place during the Vietnam War and loosely recreates some of Balaban's Vietnam experience.

But Vietnam became more than just a location for an ill-conceived and poorly executed war. It became the seminal place for a young writer to establish himself and a location from which an emerging writer would face his own bewilderments and verities. In 1971, Balaban returned to Vietnam and reflected on that trip in his memoir. "Why did I go back? Why did I take my young wife? To that place with horrors I knew with directest authority. All I can say now, as I think of myself sitting in the plane worrying over the same question, is that it seemed impossible not to go. So much had happened that year that it became *impossible* to sit still in our idyllic green dell in the Alleghenies." The poet's courage to rescue children and language has won him cultural ground that he continues to nurture. Even as the war he had survived raged, Balaban took the first steps in what has made him the foremost chronicler of Vietnam's oral folk poetry and an authority on some of its finest poets.

As we reconnect with him these many years later, Balaban has distinguished himself as a professor at Penn State and the University of Miami, and is now the Poet in Residence at North Carolina State University. He has translated and edited Vietnamese poetry including that of Ho Xuan Huong in the book *Spring Essence* (2000) and folk poets in *Ca Dao Viet Nam* (2003). Balaban also edited (with Nguyen Qui Duc) a prose collection entitled *Vietnam: A Traveler's Literary Companion* (1996). In 1999, Balaban established The Vietnamese Nom Preservation Foundation (<http://nomfoundation.org/>) whose mission is to preserve Vietnam's dying classic language. Perhaps it is Balaban's focus on the power of an image in poetry that also makes his own image so interesting.

We met John Balaban at his suburban Raleigh, North Carolina home, thick with gardens he created and tends to. Now 64, Balaban is an identifiably older version of his younger self—a photo reminder of that younger man still hangs on his refrigerator. The brushy mustache remains, and the Romanian face is still wide, open, and alive with intelligence.

"I'm up at 5:30 or 6:00—everyone else is still sleeping—so I can read *The New York Times* and then feed the animals, do whatever else, and get going," he tells his inquisitors as he prepares espresso, which he says he limits to two cups. "Otherwise, you can get pretty ill."

And then he sits. John Balaban is dressed in, if not pure white, at least cream colored clothing. A stack of nearly every book he has written is at his elbow.

**WLA:** You're sitting there with your works next to you—that's a lot of years. How do you feel looking at that stack of books?

**JB:** Well, you wish it were bigger. But what is it, 40 years and about a dozen books? I don't know that they're all there. They're so different. Here's a little novel for children, a memoir, a novel. A lot of them are about the same material, but in different genres. Early on it struck me that that initial experience in Vietnam was so overwhelming and so perplexing that writing a poem on the death of a friend wasn't the last word on it and that led to writing this novel called *Coming Down Again* which is about the death of that friend, Steve Erhart, which allowed me to do other things as well. And then I realized that there was a kind of necessary reductionism what John Updike calls making a vision out of reality. That for some accidental reality is interesting in itself but maybe not in following a story or plot line to its end. A memoir could handle things like that. So I looked at other things in the memoir. I was able to do in these various books, other than poetry, things that helped me make sense of those things that happened long ago, to my wife as well as to myself. And oddly enough today, I'm now looking at a film. There's a film group in Canada which is making a film about the Con Phung Island, the Phoenix Island that the Coconut Monk was on that so many of those people were on as well, as well as my wife and myself. So it doesn't seem to go away.

**WLA:** When you say it doesn't go away, what do you mean? War?

**JB:** Just the reverberations of the Vietnam War itself—that particular war. But I didn't start out intending to be a war poet in any sense at all. I started out as a classics major—Greek and Latin at Lincoln University and then Penn State University and then I kept it going at Harvard. I think if it hadn't been for the Vietnam War I would have been doing that.

**WLA:** Certainly studying with Robert Lowell, you were already along very literary lines in your classics background. So how did you translate yourself into this war situation from a guy who knows Greek and Latin and studies with Lowell, a fairly genteel poet—certainly not the Allen Ginsberg type at Harvard—to a poet who then moves so far outside of that world?

**JB:** There was a particular event at Harvard and that was Robert McNamara's coming to give a speech at the Kennedy Center, the newly opened and named Kennedy Center. And that speech of McNamara's was so extraordinarily offensive, morally offensive, offensive to your sense of your civic self, that that propelled me. Three days later, I wrote to my draft board and volunteered. I thought it was my duty to serve in my own way.

**WLA:** So it was just this crystallized moment where you saw Robert McNamara?

**JB:** It was a crystallized moment. Part of it was the chaos and the frenzy, which I never felt much part of because I didn't see that it led anywhere. Street demonstrations. I mean you always felt good for having done that, but they always made me feel a little bit silly and ineffectual. And so I thought I was really going to do something. I was very young and naïve, I thought I was going to do something to end the war by going. I also had this Quaker sense of witness that I thought took me there, but also, to go back to Robert Lowell, I had his example of making a moral stand. I was perfectly aware of his conscientious objection during WWII and that wonderful letter that he wrote to President Roosevelt. And so the sense of history that he kept in his poetry, the sense of moral obligations, the duty that he seemed to think poetry should embody—all those things sort of made me believe that this was something that I could reasonably do by going to Vietnam. Looking back it seems almost bizarre to me that I did those things.

**WLA:** When you say looking back like that, was that a young man's attempt to mature as a writer, or to gain experience as a writer?

**JB:** No, on the contrary I thought that I was kissing it all goodbye. I went with the sense that this may be the end of my career as a writer, which I thought was taking its own initial baby steps toward success. So no, I thought by going to Vietnam and becoming a conscientious objector and teaching linguistics at a university in Vietnam that was kind of it. And in fact, in a way it hasn't been helpful to me ever since. One, it took me out of a coterie of people that went on to become. . . .

**WLA:** Carolyn Kizer, people like that?

**JB:** Yeah, a whole bunch of people that were studying with Lowell. Richard Tillinghast and Frank Bidart, people like that in the same classroom.

They went off and they cultivated literary careers that would have been something probably I would have done too. So I sort of stepped off the bandwagon.

The other thing it did was it sort of made me a war poet and nothing else. And worse yet, I started doing translations so that made me a translator, not even a war poet.

**WLA:** You just said it put you on a path to being a war poet, and look that's why we're here. You're considered a war writer, you're considered a war poet. Yet—I don't want to say it was unwitting—but you sort of got thrown into a situation where you were trying not to fight; you don't specifically even write much about war anymore. Here we are 40 years later—who are you as a writer? How do you categorize yourself at this point?

**JB:** I don't know. I think any writer who would jump into answering that would first have to say “a foolish writer.” I don't know how I characterize myself. One is characterized by other people. So you can struggle against the categories laid on you, but that's about it. My first book was nominated for the National Book Award and was called *After Our War*, I mean that's sort of, to the degree that anybody in America thinks much about poetry at all, that became how they thought of me—within *that* framework. And then I returned to Vietnam collecting oral poetry, folk poetry on tape and that sort of sealed the identity. So I can't blame anybody but myself for those conceptions.

There's a quote that I like to make—from Dante—it's from his *De vulgari eloquentia* [on eloquence in the vernacular] prose work in which he talks about various things like poetry and the uses of it. He says the proper subjects of poetry are love, virtue and war. And that's always been resonant with me. I'm sure he was thinking of it in the traditional way, that these are in fact the classical topics from Ovid and Catullus to the *Aeneid*. But it also occurred to me that war is the great stage for love and virtue to display themselves, sometimes in the most remarkable ways along with their categorical opposites and so I guess a writer who's concerned with love and virtue *through* the lens of war. I suppose this is how I see myself still. Although I have been remarkably silent about this Iraq War because I'm speechless.

**WLA:** Well, take a stab there. How fitting is what you've thought about, written about in the past, for this day and age? Obviously there's more interest in war right now because of what's going on. Where does that put you?

**JB:** You say war. It's such a general topic that it means so many things to so many people it sort of means nothing to everybody. And for me the notion of war is a more complicated notion because it also means the inspections of the cultures that are serving up that war—winners and losers. So the Vietnam War led me into studying ancient Chinese literature and studying Vietnamese literature. I'm writing an essay right now, which is about a single poem that I've encountered over the decades. It keeps haunting me and returning. And at the beginning of the essay I talk about *the* Vietnam War and the work I did to evacuate war-injured children to this country. And there's a paragraph, the second paragraph of that essay that worries me because this handful of children out of the hundreds that we took care of, and there's just horrible things that happened to them. Some of them are alive today. Some of them perished. And I was thinking no one will read past the second paragraph because that's the notion of war, the human slaughter, we know it's terrible so why should we bother much?

But there's a paragraph before that and it talks about language and it talks about how the cultures greeted returning armies. For instance the Chinese in the T'ang Dynasty when the army would be returning from warfare would build a so-called Gate of Mourning, through which the whole army had to pass because they knew that war was a pollution. Whether they won or whether they lost, they still had to pass through the Gate of Mourning. So in that sense I have an insight into what war does to societies through just the huge number of individuals that are affected by it—family by family. I think finally with this Iraq War, people are beginning to see how distorting this is to individual families. How the distortion of life in those individual families leads to problems in their local communities. Criminal behavior, strange behavior, broken families, dysfunctional families, economic burdens placed on society in general to pay for the war, to pay for the aftermath of the war. Then how, in geopolitical terms, things get completely reconfigured because of a disaster that occurred in warfare. So I'm interested in those things. And they seem to be fairly large and not limited to *the* Vietnam War, whatever that may mean to people.

**WLA:** When you talk about language, it seems to have almost led you down certain roads. We know you learned Vietnamese when you went to Vietnam, but you had such a good background in Latin and Greek which unfolded to many languages. Were you following languages?

- JB:** I had a lucky encounter at Harvard. Harvard was a home to Alfred Lord, who wrote *Singer of Tales* and his teacher and model was a guy named Milman Parry who collected the last oral sung poems in the Homeric tradition with the Guslar poetry of what was then Yugoslavia. And so when I was in Vietnam and I heard these first examples of an oral-sung poetry; I was perplexed by them because they were very brief—couplets sometimes—reduced to one couplet. So it didn't look familiar to me, because I was thinking of narrative poems and these are very short, brief, lyric poems in the first person. But it was that instruction and that schooling that told me how to go about collecting them and what to look for.
- WLA:** What about Kenneth Rexroth—was he influencing you at that time? He was one of the first poets to really delve into Chinese culture.
- JB:** He did it without knowing Chinese and he took some huge liberties, but I think that one book of his, *One Hundred Poems From the Chinese*, is still a fine book, and I knew that as an undergraduate as well.
- WLA:** That leads us to another question—Robert Bly wrote *Eight Stages of Translation* in 1983 after making a very strong point in the '70s about poets being necessary to translate poets. Before, when you were talking about being diverted as a translator, we thought that was very interesting because Bly's work brought Neruda and Vallejo to us in a way our own Spanish never could have.
- JB:** Tomas Tranströmer.
- WLA:** That's right, Bly did him a little later and introduced us to Swedish poetry. And so translating poetry has become more of an honorable tradition for poets. Could you talk about how your work as a translator of Vietnamese poetry has influenced your work? In other words, is there a payback or in the process of encountering another's language, has it become some of yours?
- JB:** The model again was Robert Lowell. He valued translation but he talked about it as a way of keeping your hand in. When you weren't writing your own poetry you could take on a translation and inhabit another poet's psyche and try to write a poem as if you were a medium that had been channeled into another consciousness. And then there was an essay I

remember by Philip Roth in *The New York Review of Books* that had a huge influence on my thinking about the value of translation—that it wasn't kind of a secondary lesser enterprise, but that it was a major and important enterprise in itself. And he said he thought it was—this was after he had discovered people like Milan Kundera and brought their work to the West in English—he said he thought it was the obligation of every writer to translate at least one book from a foreign language that no one else would have encountered before, and I thought, “Yeah, that's true. This country would be so much richer and wiser for that endeavor if writers would take it up.”

And as far as the payback of translation, with Vietnamese poetry, it's intensely lyrical and very subtle in terms of its structure. The folk poetry is metered and rhymed, but it's sung, so it has this beautiful quality to it which of course you can't bring into your poetry or even into a translation. But it has this interest in imagery that is intense, and it has precise diction, and it always has a reference to the natural world as a place of initial takeoff. There'll be couplets that begin a Vietnamese folk poem that have no apparent connection to the rest of the poem whatsoever. What it does serve is to put you into the poem right away—physically you're willing to step off into another place. And so the importance of that was reaffirmed in my own poetry about the same time that poetry in the US became more discursive and interested in philosophical issues in a kind of straightforward and rhetorical way.

**WLA:** How do you pull all this together for the purposes of teaching your students? Do you pull in the issue of translation and writing in different genres and also—this is sort of a three-pronged question—how do you also pull in the fact that you obviously went through a hugely traumatic event that powerfully focused your life as a writer? I can't imagine every student you've ever taught has had a similar traumatic event that's focused them.

**JB:** I would doubt that most of my students, except some of the graduate students who actually pick up a book of mine and read it, have any clue that I ever had a traumatic experience. They think of me as a nice old man. I mean, I never mention that I was even in the Vietnam War unless there's some particular event that brings it up.

In terms of translation, if it's a poetry class I always make translation from a foreign language one of the tasks, one of the exercises. And it depends on the class. You ask very frankly: “how many of you know a

foreign language.” And hands go up hesitantly. It depends upon the group. But if the group seems to actually know some other languages, then those people, at least, get that exercise. I also ask them to write a little one-page essay, saying what happened. What were the things you were real pleased with that you did in English when you transferred it from Spanish or from Chinese to English and where do you think you failed? And it’s amazing honest how conscious people are and able to talk about it, because it’s not their poem. And so what you hope as a teacher of creative writing is that that same habit of clarity and honesty and inspection can be brought to their own poetry when you’re not teaching them any longer and they’re off continuing to write.

And then these issues of form I think are real universals, much as it’s unfashionable to say that there are cross-cultural universals in the world today. In fact, rhythm is the basic borderline between poetry and prose, although the prose writers have caught up. You can’t deny their efficacy in cadencing their prose. Chinese may not be accentual-syllabic the way English is, but there is an off-on, off-on rule for tonal patterns as there is in Vietnamese. There are things that go on in Japanese that are quite similar—there are just different terms for it. Japanese does not have the same tonal habits as Vietnamese or Chinese, nonetheless it does have some similar terms of rhythm and form.

Imagery is for me, the *sine qua non*—without that nothing. And *that* goes across cultures too, despite current trends in American poetry to abstraction, abstract speculation. And fortunately there’s Ezra Pound. Ezra Pound understood all this 100 years ago in the creation of modernism. And the things that he had to say then—and he was sometimes ill-informed about what he was talking about, but later quite informed about Chinese and Japanese—still hold up today. So one can start out talking in classroom in a kind of historical way saying, “These ideas were the birth of modernism and here’s why, let’s look at them.” And those ideas are still at play, it seems to me. Precision in word choice, finding the right image, etc.

**WLA:** The idea of becoming a conscience or a witness in Vietnam and using language to do that becomes very powerful when one considers your background. And yet I don’t think poems have stopped war.

**JB:** No.

**WLA:** And sometimes we think they make them better. We grew up reading the *Iliad* cover to cover several times because we liked to see bodies dragged around a city.

**JB:** Well, we have Brad Pitt dragging poor Hector around the walls of Troy even today.

**WLA:** Is your translation of folk poetry and some of the literary gems in Vietnam a way to balance so many of the bombs and so many of the children we lost?

**JB:** No, because you can't. What it can maybe do is make us wiser about the world beyond this huge continent which seems like an empire unto itself. I remember once being in Sofia, Bulgaria, at a writers' conference and there was this Bulgarian cultural attaché and his Russian wife who were there and she remarked very interestingly that Americans and Russian Soviets, at that time, she said, were pretty much alike. And she said they were both so large that they were provincial in their notions about where the center of the world was and they didn't inspect what was beyond it all that well. And it's that kind of deathly ignorance about the rest of the world that marks our disasters, American disasters in this century.

In Vietnam if we had known Vietnamese history, we would have not ventured, I think, into that war. They were struggling for independence, but the idea was dominoes, dominoes falling. China's hegemony. If anything we would have come to their aid to fight the Chinese. If the US had a wider sense of things in Vietnam or Iraq or almost anywhere, I think we would have behaved differently.

Back to what we were talking about. Poetry has this unique ability to go anywhere, you know it's like a passport, it's an instant visa stamp. You can travel into other cultures and poetry does that in kind of quick immediate ways. At this meeting in Bulgaria, at the height of the Cold War; it became apparent that the whole meeting—it was something like 400 writers from around the whole world—all of them had their tickets paid by Bulgaria. What is it, a country of 13 million people? Where did they get the money to do that? Put everybody up at a hotel, hire all these translators? Publish all the various things authors were saying for the local press? And surely it must have come because of the Cold War. And surely, as I suspect, the Soviets at the time were bankrolling part of it, because they were afraid of our missiles being carried into Luxembourg at the time. And Ronald Reagan's seeming willingness to push the envelope,

the nuclear envelope I guess, a little further. So it was interesting to me that most of the people invited as writers from other countries were poets. Because I think the Bulgarians, at least, had a sense that poetry says it. What does it say in the Academy of American Poets? “Poetry says it best?” In any case there’s an access. There’s an immediacy to it. So it seems to me that poetry in fact, contrary to what you said earlier, does have a kind of political power—or contrary to what W.H. Auden says, “makes nothing happen.”

Well, I don’t know that we can see a cause-and-effect relationship except in really spectacular moments. Like George Washington’s ordering a reading to his troops of—what was it?—Thomas Paine’s “the Summer soldier and the sunshine patriot.” He had this essay read out loud at Valley Forge in the depth of winter when his soldiers had their feet bound with rags because they didn’t even have shoes. And that turned the tide of the day. So there are rare moments when poetry has that kind of immediate effect. But, more generally, I think it has a civilizing effect, especially telling us about other peoples whom we discover aren’t really that much different.

**WLA:** You said in another interview—you were quoting Shelley who said “poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.” So how well are you doing your job as a legislator of the world and how well are other poets doing it at this point? We’re still at war. We’re at war all over the place.

**JB:** I don’t know what interview that’s from, but I know whenever I say it, I say it with a huge sense of irony and amusement. That was at the height of the romantic period when Shelley said that. But also was a period when poets actually had a hand in western politics. Were ambassadors, etc. And of course this doesn’t happen in the western world, at least in our part of it. Who wrote Rip Van Winkle? Washington Irving. I think he was the last writer / ambassador the US ever sent abroad. He was sent to Spain. So that’s not our habit.

**WLA:** In your novel, at one point, one of your characters—Lacey—quotes a poem and gets out of trouble. And we think in some of your poems that even happens, where the voice of the poet actually resolves some action.

**JB:** That could happen only in East Asia and in Vietnam. There’s a notion—if you take the ideogram—not that I can do this—but I’m following a Harvard professor, Stephen Owen. You take the word *Shih* which is

the Chinese word for poetry and you break down the etymology of the characters, and it means “*that to which what is on the mind intently goes.*” In other words, what’s that thing that’s really stirring in your heart and head? So the poem is the thing that is the vessel for that energy. And so it has an effect of the divine as it also traditionally did in classical Greek and Roman. We’re inspired because we’re breathed into by a god. And the god of course is Apollo, the god of poetry. Or if he doesn’t do it directly he’ll do it through one of his hyper-thyroid mediums—the Sybils and the Oracles who speak, not in their own voice, but in the voice of the god—often women speaking in a male voice because they’re filled with Apollo. Well, that sense of the divine still lingers in East Asia and in Vietnam. And yeah, you can win an argument if you quote the right poem. The opponent will sit down and shut up.

I did this once in an odd event, a street fight with a young thug of a cyclo driver who was going after my friend Steve Erhart. Days before they had had an altercation about the fare. Erhart was getting ripped off. And he wasn’t putting up with it. He threw what he thought was correct fare on the street and walked off.

Now we had come off the Coconut Monk’s religious island and the young cyclo driver and all his cyclo friends were waiting for us. He was a big tough kid. He and his group were hanging around where our ferry docked and there he was again and now he was spoiling for a fight. I said to him this Vietnamese proverb [Balaban says it in Vietnamese] which means “The wise man shuts his mouth. The strong man folds his arms.” And the kid looked at me like I just spoiled his day. It was like, if you’re going to pull that kind of thing on me—it’s like your preacher showing up or something. Or your rabbi suddenly telephoning just in the midst of a family argument. It just sort of put a damper on that whole kind of possible violence.

And then years later I was at an event in South Philadelphia for Tran Van Dinh, the former diplomat, who was then a professor at Temple University. It was his retirement party. A happy occasion at a local Vietnamese restaurant. And suddenly the door opened and maybe a dozen young Vietnamese men looking very surly and a bit odd in three-piece suits entered and spread out all around the room until they surrounded everybody. It was threatening. And one of them made a speech about Professor Dinh and his curious career—when he was 18 he was a colonel with the Viet Minh and was in charge of protecting the Lao royal family. And then he’d moved over to the South Vietnamese side and was for a brief while, the chargé d’affaires to the United States.

That group, at any rate, did not trust or like him. And they were saying really vile things about him and his family. I think they even dragged his mother into it.

Dinh kept looking over at me. Why, I thought, is he looking at *me*? And then he was motioning for me to get up and say something, to put a stop to this. I got up and I didn't have a clue on what to say, but I remembered that street fight thing by the Mekong and I said, "Excuse me, but you know the proverb as well as Professor Dinh and the other Vietnamese here." And I quoted the same proverb I just said to you. And the guy looked at me. And he knew that his job now was to come back with a proverb that would shut mine down. And he tried to do that and he fumbled it really badly. It was comical. What was comical was as soon as he realized he had kind of blown his lines, that he didn't have the poem right and it wasn't a quip, but just a clumsy attempt at one, he got all flustered and simply he left with his gang. And I just couldn't believe this one proverb had worked twice like that to dispense trouble. And so, yeah, in East Asia, in Vietnam, you can do those sorts of things.

**WLA:** The poet Richard Hugo was fond of saying "a poem isn't worthwhile if you don't risk sentimentality." We were wondering how you teach your students to deal with emotion in their writing or if you have a way in which you use your own emotions? How do you deal with your feelings as a writer?

**JB:** My notion is that if you deal with it right up front, right on the page, it's not going to work. So I often quote Blake: "Never seek to tell thy love, love that told can never be." And you wonder: "Well, why not? Why shouldn't you seek to tell your love? Why is it that love that's told can never be?" Simply because—who was it?—Whitman who said "logic and sermons never convince." So the trick is to find some way of conveying that emotion—whatever it is that made you want to write the poem in the first place—of conveying it and getting it under the radar to the reader. The reader doesn't want to be preached to, that's for Sundays. And so, it isn't that one has to stay distant from emotion. Hardly. But it has to be how you make it happen in the poem. You have to *cause* in the reader the emotion that you had. That's an incredible task.

**WLA:** Is the foundation you started in Vietnam more of the way you're channeling some of your old war feelings these days?

**JB:** I guess right at the bottom of it there's a sense of repair. But, Vietnam became interesting all by itself. My way of introduction was obviously the war, but there's nothing about the war in my interest in serving the old script literature. It's simply that in Vietnam, there was a writing system that lasted for about 1,000 years. It looks like Chinese. It used the Chinese radical system as its own basis to represent Vietnamese speech. It was discontinued officially by the colonial authorities in 1920, and effectively, the people who read and wrote were an elite class, a mandarin class. And they're essentially gone from the planet. But the remnants of it are everywhere including thousands and thousands of texts that almost no one, including most Vietnamese, can access or read even if they could get to them. So wanting to preserve that, I'd be just as much interested in Tibetan or Navajo writing—just the idea of anything as precious as that—a whole cultural heritage being lost. A whole written heritage being lost. One thing led to another. So I guess in some sense, my staying with it must have something to do with the Vietnam War. But no one in Vietnam goes around talking about the war anymore. Most of the people alive today in Vietnam were born after the war was over. I mean, they don't know what you're talking about and their minds are really on something else altogether.

**WLA:** Are you trying to get away from your earlier moniker as a war writer?

**JB:** Yeah, and if you ask people like Bill (W.D.) Ehrhart, another good poet. All of us are trying to get away from that because it's become a kind of a . . . war poetry has seemed to become a sub-genre. Or at least I think it is in contemporary American minds to the degree that their minds are on poetry at all. But the people who talk about poetry, write about poetry, their minds are not on war poetry. I think they think that's a sort of sub-category of politics maybe, not even poetry maybe.

**WLA:** I think the category of war poetry is confusing. Because to call you a war poet is, of course, ironic. To call you an anti-war poet doesn't work either. Your work is not about the heroics of winning a battle or knowing when to walk away from one, but at some times, at least in your memoir or in the novel, you have been strong. I won't say violent. I know that at a young age you blocked a father's punch. And you were a Quaker or seemed to be influenced by Quaker thinking.

**JB:** Right, that's true.

**WLA:** Yet you strike me as the kind of guy we would like to have in a street fight next to us.

**JB:** You probably touched on something. Americans, when they hear that you're a conscientious objector, they sort of think, "Hmm, the guy's kind of a cowardly guy, he'll run at the sight of violence." On the contrary, I think many conscientious objectors have a strong streak of violence in them and that in fact that's why they became conscientious objectors. They are troubled by it. They want to deal with it, contain it. Unfortunately, I think that anybody who went to Vietnam probably came back with a more enhanced penchant for violence than they had when they went.

I was walking in Boulder with John Steinbeck IV when the whole notion of post-traumatic stress was becoming a public topic for the first time. And I said, "John do you think we're affected by this?" Because it seemed to be something that only soldiers would be affected by. And he looked at me and he said, "Balaban—you're not stupid—of course we were." And it sort of dawned on me as obvious. I thought it only had to do with people that were in combat. And I was discounting my own moments proximate to violence, my own witnessing of that, my work with war-injured children, and my anger. Here I had been, as Steve Erhart put it: "in the burned baby business." How did I think I was going to get away scot-free from that and not think about it for the rest of my life?

And then when I came back there were these episodes that I had to deal with—probably the reason I asked Steinbeck the question—because they always had to do with traffic violence. Arguments in traffic. Once I got arrested for assault. One of the things about post-traumatic stress is that one develops an exaggerated sense of justice, and the feeling that you need to step in and correct things right away. So I got in some trouble. And finally it stopped because getting arrested when you're a college professor doesn't help your standing in the community. So that put a stop to it. I got off with a \$50 fine, a summary offense, because the judge was kind of amused I'd done this. The 25-year old who had chased us in his car was a full head taller than me. When we were both asked to stand up in the courtroom. The cops in the back row burst out laughing and the judge, when he banged his gavel for order, was smiling. The person I'd whaled on had chased my wife and me in his car and was yelling obscenities. When I stopped my car on the street, I went back to his and punched him. As it happened, an off-duty cop in his car saw it in his rear

view mirror. And this guy had a big head of hair. So in the cop's rear view mirror, in silhouette, it looked like a man was beating up a woman driver, because I had punched him right through the open window of the car. So the cop parked his car and came bounding across a lawn with his gun drawn and put a stop to it.

So the question for me was: where does all the rage come from that would make me do such a thing, and I think it had to do with Vietnam, although that might make sound too simple.

**WLA:** I didn't know that there was a way for COs to go to Vietnam.

**JB:** I didn't either, but I did grow up outside Philadelphia, and there's still a remnant Quaker culture there. I had a friend who was a Quaker in high school and I joined the Southampton Monthly Meeting of Friends. So I did have access to people who were counseling kids my age, and I knew there were certain rights that I had, and so in that sense I was lucky. If I'd been born in Kansas, or in Oakland, California, I probably wouldn't have known to do that.

I wasn't the only civilian CO. There were about 40, 45 of us (I learned after it was all over), who pled conscientious objection and went to Vietnam. But when you consider, what—600,000 soldiers were there in any given year, then it's a small number . . . 45 or so people.

But let me tell you a happier story. Most of my alternative service in Vietnam was spent working for Committee of Responsibility to Save War-Injured Children which evacuated war-injured children to hospitals in the U.S., children whose injuries were so extensive they could not be treated in Vietnam. At one point COR sent me and the other young field representative, Dick Berliner, to get a telegram from the U.S. Congress asking the government of Vietnam to let us evacuate children *en masse* after the Tet Offensive. He and I went first to Edward Kennedy's office and we spoke to his chief executive person, Dale DeHaan. And DeHaan looked at the telegram that we had written, improved it, and then he said, "You go here," because he knew which Senate offices to go to. All the various senators or aides asked was: "Kennedy's behind this? You spoke to Dale DeHaan?" Sometimes they'd check to make sure that was true. Everyone we went to signed on.

And so here were, two, young Americans who were 23, 24 something like that, who had walked into the main parliamentary building of their country, walked up to representatives without interference, offered a telegram and by mid-afternoon we had 35 Senatorial signatures on the

telegram. And I remember walking outside the building and saying to Berliner: “This is an incredible country that we’re in that you and I can do this. This is amazing.”

I thought that was the end of my dealing with Vietnam. Later, I gave testimony before the House Judiciary Committee, and my statement got into the Congressional Record. I thought, “That’s it, that’s all one can do. I’ve done what one individual can do.”

**WLA:** Some training as literary people involves finding the essential myth of someone that you’re involved with in a literary way. We’re trying to get at your central myth . . .

**JB:** If you find it, you let me know.

**WLA:** Here’s a working theory: Huck Finn on the Mekong?

**JB:** (Laughing) Huck Finn on the Mekong.

**WLA:** What do you think of that?

**JB:** Let’s see: Huck Finn on the Mekong. I have no idea, it’s obviously an adventure story. Risky adventure is the other undeniable fact of being in warfare, or as my friend Erhart said: “Living on the cusp between the two major categories.” I said “what major categories?” He said “life and death.” He said “things get real bright.” Your adrenaline never pumps as hard as when someone’s trying to kill you, I suppose. Some veterans miss that adrenaline rush, even those who hated the Vietnam war. But Huck Finn, I don’t know about Huck Finn.

**WLA:** One of the things that always strikes us in hearing writers talk, is that they seem to have had these worlds of experiences that feed into who they are and how they write. And we would imagine for students it would be a little bit daunting to think, if you’re writing what you know because that’s what they’re told: “Write what you know.” How do you acquire the kind of experience and the kind of just extraordinary events that feed into what a writer can write? You seem to have had a whole lifetime of it already. How do you impart that kind of thing to your students?

**JB:** Well, to be a good writer you don’t have to have had extraordinary or dramatic experiences to make that happen. Right? I mean look at John

Updike. Basically his great success—those Rabbit books—have to do with Shillington, Pennsylvania, which is as small-town Pennsylvania as possible. And somehow he found in that enough human drama to write wonderful things. I think that's what you have to convince them of. And if you're any good as a teacher you learn enough about your students to know what it is in fact in their background. To be sure that's a naïve and kind of a pastoral notion that you will be disappointed by time and again—you really do find people that are total emotional biographical blanks—but more often than not you don't.

And one of the reasons I've enjoyed, say, Penn State where I taught for a long time, or now North Carolina State University, is that it's fairly working class. Not to say that you have to be working class to have remarkable things to write about, but somehow some of the backgrounds... When you have a student in your class who has learned welding, you just know there's a string of events that's happened in that person's life for having held a welding torch that no one else is going to know much about.

**WLA:** Is your return to Vietnam, your yearly return now, a way to stay in touch with that part of you that was so alive? How do you keep that high life-focus that seemed to come out of Vietnam for you and go through so many years of professoring? Is that a contradiction or a tension for you?

**JB:** No. If I could earn my living just running the Nom Foundation, I would. Because all the work that needs to get done won't ever get done in my lifetime. I'm hoping someone else will pick it up. Part of the pleasure of going to Vietnam is seeing these projects through.

Right now we're creating a digital library for 4,000 ancient texts that literally, when you pick them up can crumble in your fingers or if you open them to the light, the bookworms drop out onto your shoes. These ancient books are being eaten alive and they're going to be gone rather soon.

We're taking a photographic image, a highly calibrated photographic image of every page of 4,000 books and we're making an accessible digital library for the National Library of Vietnam. So this would preserve them forever. It's a huge project.

But the abiding pleasure of Vietnam is surprise. It's always been surprise. There's always more to learn about the place that you never would have guessed. And I think that there's no end to that.

I have a friend who is a spice merchant in Vietnam. He's an American who settled there. He has a factory now—they sell most of the cinnamon that is used in the United States. And cinnamon grows on cassia trees and it grows only in certain places. The best cinnamon in the world grows in these high mountain valleys below the Chinese border in Vietnam. And so once when I was there, after I'd done my foundation work, he said, "Come on, let's take off." And we went away for a couple of days in his Land Rover to see the cassia farmers in the mountains. There was one point where we came to a gorge with the river running down below and a kind of wood-and-rope cable bridge across it. We stopped at the bridge and he said, "You better get out here." And I was really relieved. But then he said, "And walk ahead and tell me if there are any cracks." So I walked in front of his car and he crept behind me with the Land Rover. It was like something out of Indiana Jones. Things like that happen in Vietnam.

There's an American former movie producer who's settled there and he's opened a nightclub, a movie place, and a restaurant. I went to hear some traditional music. So here's this American who has a kind of Shanghai 1930s nightclub. And on stage there's this old blind performer who is playing one of these ancient instruments and it was really kind of surprising and wonderful. There are always discoveries like that.

And within these texts . . . we haven't had time to translate a single one of them yet, but every now and then I'll get the title and I'll go through it with somebody who can read that ancient script. (I can't.) And I'll realize there's an interesting poem here, or elsewhere a medical treatise, or an ancient song, or a map. This digital library will keep people busy and interested forever, for decades and decades.

**WLA:** So in a sense, on top of being a poet, and a prose writer, and an essayist, and working on this film thing that you mentioned earlier, and a translator, and a professor, you've also turned into a bit of an archeologist here, or an anthropologist. How do you balance these roles and still stay . . .

**JB:** Married? How do you still stay married? Because how much time does that allow you for anything like a personal life? Not a lot. And so it's really a real balancing act. And the Nom Foundation has become too much for me. 2009 will be 10 years of doing it and I'm hoping to find someone that can take it over for me, or finally find a large enough grant, because I raise all the money for it myself, and that's exhausting, that's exhausting. A small foundation out in California has come to our aid, but they're not so small that they aren't a significant support, so they've

kept us going. But we need to apply for large grants from like Ford or the Freeman Foundation, Atlantic Philanthropies—all these large foundations that have interest in Asia. Unfortunately, few have any interest in the old culture.

**WLA:** Not even the Asians themselves?

**JB:** That's changing and we may have been the factor to change it. The huge flood of American popular culture, I think, has actually troubled Communist party officials in Vietnam, because they see the threat of their own cultural heritage being wiped away. And whereas this ancient literary culture in Marxist terms is really part of the feudal era, now they are starting to see that in that feudal era there were enduring cultural views that are worth young people knowing about.

And so, we've held two conferences in Vietnam. And, of course, you can't hold a conference in Vietnam unless the authorities agree to it. So we're sort of accepted now, and the next trick for me, if I could ever pull this off, would be to get the government cultural authorities actually to take over the funding because we have trained four employees that do this work in Hanoi. Our office staff should become a permanent institution. After eight years now they have such incredible skills on the computer. We've taken, for instance, the great classical text of Vietnam, *The Tale of Kieu*, 3,254 lines of poetry—for the Vietnamese it's like Shakespeare for us—and we've digitized it so for the first time in history people can actually go to the original text, not the modern Vietnamese renditions, and we have the poem searchable line by line, word by word and we have posted no less than five versions of it from the 1800s into the early 1900s. I mean, no one's done that kind of work before. So it's a remarkable feat. If we were to stop now we could quit and claim success, but there's still a lot more to do.

**WLA:** How do you stay true to who is the essential John Balaban, and who *is* the essential John Balaban? Is he a writer, is he a fundraiser, a translator?

**JB:** When we all went to college and we said we wanted to be writers, it seemed to me the common wisdom was that you had to be a fiction writer or you had to be a poet and you had to make a pretty early choice. Or if you couldn't, then you probably weren't any kind of writer. Updike, again, is a good model here. He's someone who started out as a poet, became a fiction writer, is a superior critic—I have his "More Matter" on

my desk now—he's written wonderful criticism. And while he may, even in a recent altercation with Salman Rushdie, be accused of being a certain limited kind of writing; in fact he's a profound writer who's written admirably about writing that's wildly different than his own, particular taste in writing. What would you call his taste in writing? Realism? I don't know.

**WLA:** Eclectic?

**JB:** Eclectic, yeah. *The Witches of Eastwick* as well as the Rabbit books. But in that interview that you guys did with him, he talks about the three Johns—and there's really a fourth one. Updike also was friends with my teacher, John Barth. I couldn't think of two writers more different in their literary habits than John Barth and John Updike.

**WLA:** Barth writes these big thick books with long tales flowing all over the place. In fact we wanted to ask you about that—"The Floating Opera"—you wrote a poem.

**JB:** Called "The Floating Opera." Barth was my undergraduate academic adviser and probably had a bigger influence on me more than anybody. At Penn State he went and got a scholarship for me because I was on my own in college and had to pay my own way, so that helped a great deal. And when I was in Vietnam he sent me books, which helped my sanity stay afloat. I haven't been in touch with him much lately. Well, I saw him a year ago, that's about it, but that was at a big public event. I'm in some of his books by name, and that gives me great pleasure. *The Friday Book*—there's even an essay called "A Poet to the Rescue," about my work in Vietnam. And then I'm footnoted, sometimes by name in a couple of other books. Because he writes fiction that you can footnote.

**WLA:** Well you've mentioned John Barth, obviously Robert Lowell, you've said you like the work of Richard Hugo, you've mentioned Updike. Who would you consider have been the biggest influences on your writing going back and who are the influences going forward?

**JB:** Going forward. Going backward, I guess William Carlos Williams was my first powerful influence. And obviously there are two drastically different poets, and Lowell's written about this in a really interesting way in his essay called "Dr. Williams." What did he say? He just couldn't

figure out how a William Carlos Williams poem worked. But it was infuriating because he said it was as if America belonged especially to Williams. And these poems that arrived, they would be part paddlewheel, part galley and some kind of Rube Goldberg ship worked by hand and anchored to a filling station. I think part of why I liked Williams and why I still like Williams, has to do with Williams's own sense of the importance of imagery. "No ideas but in things." It's in that poem: "Let the snake wait under his weed and the writing be of words, slow and quick, sharp to strike, (quiet to wait,) sleepless."

And then Lowell said the poetry of his generation—(Allen) Tate and people like that—was all for putting on "the full armor of the past" and taking on big topics. Love, virtue, and war—the Dantean topics. And that certainly is attractive to me. And there are certain things that a William Carlos Williams poem can't do. Stevens said, Wallace Stevens said—"all images aren't equal." Some just aren't going to produce that much. Some are only going to produce fairly slight moments of insight. Maybe powerful moments, but they're just moments. Whereas a Robert Lowell poem, like "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket," produces a vision of the world. So both contrary poets were powerful influences. And Barth's learnedness and his huge humor that plays in all his prose and his sense of the ephemeral nature of one's own identity, that was immensely and still is immensely important. So, yeah, they remain influences.

As far as the future—I don't know. I look around at contemporary poetry and there doesn't seem to be much that attracts me, but maybe that's just because I'm part of it and just see it as competition or rivalry, I don't know.

You asked me earlier about teaching and I don't think you want to teach people to write like yourself. I think if you're really skilled, you want to figure out what it is that they might write, given what they've shown you already; where they might be headed. And so I think a real good teacher knows a lot of things. So part of your obligation is just to know it all and so to that degree I'm embarrassed that I don't know my contemporaries that well. I usually rely on my graduate students to tell me who to read because I don't have that much interest anymore. But recently I was a judge for the National Book Award for Poetry and I found lots of contemporaries I admired, poets like Barbara Hamby, Ron Slate, the perennially good Maxine Kumin, my new colleague Dorianne Laux, and the extraordinary Iraq war veteran from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Stryker Brigade, Brian Turner. This will contradict what I said before, but a difficulty in

answering the question is the plenitude of poets in the U.S. Good and bad.

**WLA:** You're also, as you point out, a busy guy. It's funny, the core you come back to is the poetry.

**JB:** Yeah.

**WLA:** And how does that center you? How do you still manage to work that into your life so poetry stays a part of who you are?

**JB:** Well, in the last 10 years, I'd say, I've been in danger of losing that core and of drifting off from it. Mainly because I've moved a couple of times, I nearly died four years ago. I was in Romania and my bowel perforated and so on a Sunday night in the Transylvanian Emergency Surgery Hospital they cut me open and then I had two operations after that to put me back together again. So that distracted me for awhile. And the move here, I've gotten new roots here in North Carolina, a place I've really come to like, people I've really come to like. But I haven't written a lot of poetry. There's that one new book, *Path Crooked Path*.

And then just this last month, I was on the beach here in North Carolina. A friend loaned me her house. And I was writing poetry again. I had thought I was going to get back to work on the novel I was writing when I was in Romania, but in fact all these poems that I had been ignoring for a long time, that I had ideas about but ignored, they started showing up, and I'm in a better mood for that than I've been in a long, long time—to be back in touch with that.

**WLA:** Where are you touching for subject matter? It's interesting, you can sort of see the travelogue of where you've been and where you've lived, and there's that whole chunk in the Southwest, where clearly you went through at some point, so where's your head now in terms of pulling up those other poems?

**JB:** The real pleasure would be if I had reached a place after all this traveling around, figuratively and actually where anything could be the trigger for a poem. So I was at this house and I wrote this really sweet poem which was called "At Nora's house, Shepard's Point, Atlantic Beach, North Carolina." I just sort of drifted into the place where I'd been staying and sleeping and feeding myself for awhile.

And for a long time I'd been wanting to write something about the World Trade Center, about 9-11. My wife and I knew a little girl—well, we knew her when she was a toddler—and she died at 28 on the 105<sup>th</sup> floor of one of those buildings, the north tower. And so the trouble—to go back to the question of sentimentality—is that a topic like that is an invitation to sentimental excess, especially if you know someone personally—that the risk is just . . . I could never see a way of writing about that, so I had put the poem aside. And then I realized that I could *research it* in a real thorough way so that you could take a bit of somebody like a fingertip—in fact that's what it's called, "The Finger"—and just through the process of DNA coding, see how that finger traveled. Going through the whole process, the flow chart, as it were, of what happened on the site. Through the medical examiner's office; the people there in Tyvek suits that came to put things in baggies; how things were bar coded; how they were kept in certain kinds of tubes; and how the generators ran in these refrigerated trucks that were parked at the medical examiner's parking lot that finally became a memorial chapel, and how people lined up to get their cheeks swabbed or sent DNA samples from abroad; and how finally this finger was identified. So I wrote about that.

There were things I could not write about too. You remember that episode where there was a young woman in South Carolina, put her two little boys in her car and then let it slide into a lake? I'd been wanting to write about that for a long time and I spent at least a week trying to do that and just gave up finally. Couldn't make sense of it. I had this wonderful idea for the poem: Don't talk about the event at all—it's pointless, everybody will either know it, they'll know it and everyone will be properly appalled. But I was going to go back in time to a Native American sense of the place as a cursed place and have somebody, say around 500 AD, at some campfire, talking about not going near the place because it's going to be a bad place in some future time. And I did a lot of research into native animal and water spirits. But everywhere I turned with this poem it just ended in a dead end, because it's a man-made lake. [Laughs]. Right away, the metaphor was not going to go anywhere because it's a man-made lake so what do you do with that? So some of the time I spent was a failure. But I've never had time because of all these other things—and my scrape with mortality, for example—never had time to just fool around, the way you have to, to see if a poem is going to go anywhere.

**WLA:** How did it feel?

**JB:** Real good. It was fun. Even failure at least was a better enterprise than not writing poems at all.

**WLA:** Where did that whole Southwestern chunk of your writing come from? It seemed to be kind of a little fish out of water in terms of the other stuff you did. Where did that come from?

**JB:** Well, I went out there to work on this novel, *Coming Down Again*, at the Wurlitzer Foundation, I just needed a place where I could work quietly, and the result was I found myself in Taos, New Mexico and just knocked out by the place. I made friends. I was there like six months, it was a long stay. It was winter. So I still have friends there, still go out there as a result, and my daughter learned to fly fish trout out there.

**WLA:** The thing that always strikes us talking to writers is that how writers seem to have such fascinating lives. Is it the ability to see what's around you better? And how do you teach that to other people to do? Is it a sixth sense? How do you pull everything around you in—to then translate it back out in a written form? How do you bring it in and put it back out?

**JB:** You know, we all have these senses of ourselves. Right? We wander around saying, "I'm John Balaban, I'm doing this today, blah, blah, blah. I got to get this done. I got to get that done. I got to wear this pair of shoes rather than that pair of shoes and I got to get the car fixed, teach this class, go to this damn meeting I don't want to go to," whatever it is. And that's just your busy, ordinary sense of identity. But sometimes you slip into this larger sense of yourself. The Japanese say there's a big "I" and a little "I." The little "I" is this nattering, egoistic person who is fearful and defensive and aggressive and hungry all the time. And the bigger "I" is this larger person. Not really any different from the other one, but somehow, not as burdened with all those little needy things that characterize that other identity. And that is the person that is the writer, right? And, to answer the question, anybody can do that, everybody comes alive at certain moments and sees things in ways in way they wouldn't see them.

Then the question is, okay, people do that and they wake up to the world around them—so that still doesn't explain how you can write about it, right? And that's where the big mystery is. It's the mystery after the mystery. So how come an alerted mind, a woken-up mind can see things *and* make those things alive in an artistic work of some kind? I think because part of the nature of being awake in an unusual way at

certain times and places, whether it's in New Mexico or whether it's because you're pricked alive by the threat of violence either on the street or in a war or whatever, somehow *that*, by itself, is a creative act or leads to creative acts. Jean Genet, the French playwright, was asked what it was like to be a writer and he said, "How would I know?" He said, "When I'm writing I'm just there as a writer, I'm just writing. And when I'm not writing I'm an idiot, just like everybody else." He was kind of rude, you know.

The secret of being a writer whatever you're writing—prose or poetry—is keeping your eyes and ears open all the time, which is not so easy to do. In warfare somehow, in a way it seems like it's made easier for you because the war is sort of keeping your eyes and ears open. You're in a different state of agitation and attentiveness just because of what's going on around you. Just like when you travel to France or Japan, you see everything differently than you did back home in New Jersey, or wherever. You're sort of more attentive. Well, warfare will do that, I guess. Brighten up your eyes and ears.



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