

JOHN BALABAN

Four Poems

Words for My Daughter

About eight of us were nailing up forts
in the mulberry grove behind Reds's house
when his mother started screeching and
all of us froze except Reds—fourteen, huge
as a hippo—who sprang out of the tree so fast
the branch nearly bobbed me off. So fast,
he hit the ground running, hammer in hand,
and seconds after he got in the house
we heard thumps like someone beating a tire
off a rim his dad's howls the screen door
banging open Saw Reds barreling out
through the tall weeds toward the highway
the father stumbling after his fat son
who never looked back across the thick swale
of teazel and black-eyed susans until it was safe
to yell fuck you at the skinny drunk
stamping around barefoot and holding his ribs.

Another time, the Connelly kid came home to find
his alcoholic mother getting raped by the milkman.

Bobby broke a milk bottle and jabbed the guy
humping on his mom. I think it really happened
because none of us would loosely mention that
wraith of a woman who slipped around her house
and never talked to anyone, not even her kids.
Once a girl ran past my porch
with a dart in her back, her open mouth
pumping like a guppy's, her eyes wild.
Later that summer, or maybe the next,
the kids hung her brother from an oak.
Before they hoisted him, yowling and heavy
on the clothesline, they made him claw the creekbank
and eat worms. I don't know why his neck didn't snap.

Reds had another nickname you couldn't say
or he'd beat you up: "Honeybun."
His dad called him that when Reds was little.

So, these were my playmates. I love them still
for their justice and valor and desperate loves
twisted in shapes of hammer and shard.
I want you to know about their pain
and about the pain they could loose on others.
If you're reading this, I hope you will think,
Well, my dad had it rough as a kid, so what?
If you're reading this, you can read the news
and you know that children suffer worse.

Worse for me is a cloud of memories
still drifting off the South China Sea,
like the 9-year-old boy, naked and lacerated,
thrashing in his pee on a steel operating table
and yelling, "*Dau. Dau,*" while I, trying to translate
in the mayhem of Tet for surgeons who didn't know
who this boy was or what happened to him, kept asking

“Where? Where’s the pain?” until a surgeon
said, “Forget it. His ears are blown.”

I remember your first Halloween
when I held you on my chest and rocked you,
so small your toes didn’t touch my lap
as I smelled your fragrant peony head
and cried because I was so happy and because
I heard, in no metaphorical way, the awful chorus
of Soeur Anicet’s orphans writhing in their cribs.
Then the doorbell rang and a tiny Green Beret
was saying trick-or-treat and I thought *oh oh*
but remembered it was Halloween and where I was.
I smiled at the evil midget, his map-light and night
paint, his toy knife for slitting throats, said,
“How ya doin’, soldier?” and, still holding you asleep
in my arms, gave him a Mars Bar. To his father
waiting outside in fatigues I hissed, “You, shit,”
and saw us, child, in a pose I know too well.

I want you to know the worst and be free from it.
I want you to know the worst and still find good.
Day by day, as you play nearby or laugh
with the ladies at Peoples Bank as we go around town
and I find myself beaming like a fool,
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.

Collected in *Locusts at the Edge of Summer: New and Selected Poems*, Copper Canyon
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The Lives of the Poets

The country is proud of its dead poets. It takes terrific satisfaction in the poets' testimony that the USA is too tough, too big, too much, too rugged, that American reality is overpowering. . . . So poets are loved, but loved because they just can't make it here.

Saul Bellow, *Humboldt's Gift**

Fact is, it's a reality that grinds us all,
even those who whisper to themselves: *If I
were not such a corrupt, unfeeling bastard, creep,
thief, and vulture, I couldn't get through this either.*
Still they collapse at meetings, on tennis courts,
pig valves going ka-boom in their hearts,
pitching into their *Wall Street Journals*
as the train lurches home to the Hamptons,
as the cab crawls uptown to the condo on the Park.
Dying in their dandruff, on their treadmills,
taking their sips of dioxin seepage,
eyes fried by computer screens and boredom.
The huge need for cocaine said it all.

Well, these were the thoughts that came to me
on a high wooded bluff outside Port Townsend
just after Levertov died. Her *Times* obit
ran next to some admiral's from the Vietnam War,
apparent adversaries, now side by side,
true to their conflicting truths.
The hand that gives. The hand that takes.

*All italicized quotes are from Saul Bellow, *Humboldt's Gift* (Viking, 1975), p. 117.

All about me clumps of sweet pea, purples
and pinks, cascaded down the grassy hillsides
as dawn mist raveled a wreath through inky tops
of Douglas firs. Far off, the distant Strait
of Juan de Fuca pulled tides below a cloudbank
and ferry foghorns called, each to each.
Can sung words calm the guns of a steeled fleet?
(*Orpheus moved stones and trees. 'But a poet
can't perform a hysterectomy or send a vehicle
out of the solar system.'*) At Sotheby's,
Ginsberg's top hat went for \$258 after
the bad gray poet launched his last exhalation.

Unsettled, I drove to Seattle's Blue Moon Tavern
where soon I annoyed a man in straggly hair
and baseball cap, reading Cicero through wire-rims,
hunched at the beat-up bar and railing at me,
"Man, I *told* you. I don't *know* those people!"
My mistake. He looked like he might have
perched on that barstool reading Latin
for decades since abandoning a dissertation.
But he didn't know Roethke, or Hugo, or Wright,
whose framed lugubrious black-and-whites
still hung from the rough plank walls
where once they drank and howled like Humboldt.
The only woman among them: Carolyn Kizer,
with her huge sultry eyes and severe French hat,
Dorothy Parker to this Algonquin of moonstruck boozers.

*The weakness of the spiritual powers is proved
in the childishness, madness, drunkenness, and despair
of these martyrs. . . . They succumbed, poor loonies.*
One thinks of Roethke weeping over a dead mouse
cupped in his huge hands. Of Hugo sweating out
a hangover in the bleachers of a sandlot game.
Lew Welch walking off forever into the scorpion Sierras.

Hart Crane over the side of a ship. And Jarrell falling in front of a car. And poor John Berryman jumping from a bridge. (And Plath and Sexton gassing themselves.) Delmore Schwartz, Humboldt Humbert, shouting from the moon.

So, praise to those still coming through on song,
a bigger tribe than one can name and tough
as anything put up by corporate America:
Maxine Kumin with her horse-broke neck, still
writing, still hitching up and riding Deuter.
William Meredith struggling back toward speech.
Hayden Carruth raising a toast with his “poet’s
cheap, sufficient Chardonnay.” Richard Wilbur
calling us to morning air awash with angels.
Merwin in Hawaii, Snyder in the Sierras,
both taking the nothingness of *sunyata*
to conjure up a habitation.

Walking

their Sonoma farm with Kizer’s husband John,
we stopped before a storm-struck, twisted peartree,
a remnant from an orchard of 100 years ago.
Out of the hulk of its blackened trunk,
one smooth-skinned branch sent forth some leaves.
“Still blooming?” I asked. “Madly,” he said.

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ERHART

Birds have nests; men have ancestors.

—*Vietnamese proverb*

- 1 Standing in a soybean field,
on a rocky scarp above the sea,
the two of us, in dispossessed thirties,
scan nude bathers on the shore below,
as gulls, winged flesh all salt,
might scour for shellfish.
Angry and red on Erhart's belly
the football stitch stings with sweat
where they cut into his cancer.
But look at him here today:
climbing cliffs, getting his peek,
dismayed only that the naked man below
who sidles into a tide-cut cave
lures not a girl, but another gay.
As I watch him watch a girl in the surf,
Erhart remarks that "birds have nests;
foxes have their holes, but the Son of Man
hath nowhere to lay his head."
"Birds have nests," I add. "Men have ancestors."
Erhart's father died manic and alone.
A whore-child gave birth to Erhart
at twenty-seven, in Asia, across the Pacific
that glints on these bathers and defies our stare.

Wonderful news today: Cambridge man receives letter-bomb.

—*Newsbawker in London*

2 Outside Middlesex hospital
the student unions queue,
marching behind a rent-all truck
from which a band plays "Hello Dolly."
They want bigger scholarships.
Inside Middlesex, a blonde moppet
zaps Erhart with cobalts
to make his cancer go away,
those narsty nodes, that ugly clavicle
blossoming into a Kali-flower.
She says it will be all right:
Never once has she died
for all her patients she's radiated.
Erhart is going to India to meet
a wonderful Indian guru, leaving England
to its henna-haired boys and big women.
Outside, the Bobbies badger the crowd.
Inside Erhart's insides
his ionized cells are blue with rage
like Tantric demons blue-faced with rage.

- 3 At night, by the Ganges, by a pyre guttering
foul smoke and gaseous licks of flame—
by a dog gnawing the ankle and foot
of a woman cremated during the day—
Erhart, hunched as if he had a chest cold,
pisses on a flat rock and looks up at the stars,
at Bernice's Hair, at the Lost Pleiades,
at Orion about to hurl his spear of stars.
In L.A., a G.P. thought Erhart had an ulcer.
The surgery didn't work. After the vegetable
diet, the German carrot-juice treatment,
the yoga chants, the asanas, the "breaths of fire,"
after the sautéed-lemon-rind cure,
the acupuncturist, the Reichian masseuse,
after all the death-defying fucking in London
Erhart has come to see Sai Baba
who can materialize Swiss watches
and pillars of holy ash. (But can he kill the Big C?)
What else is left? Filipino psychic surgeons?
If one plays at dying, he doesn't die at all.
(In a closet in my farmhouse in Pennsylvania
Erhart's manuscripts fill his flight bag,
stories and articles, published and unpublished,
the film clips he shot on battlefields in Vietnam.)
The river tide washes the embers of the dead.
Erhart, diving and flying in a whirl of methadone
and realization, watches for star-nesting birds;
spies a man-bird: beaked, crimson-winged,
with a body of gold—Garuda,
who routed the gods, their wheel of blades
who severed the snake guard, spat back its poison,
whose wing-beat rush could stop the world.
Who spat back the poison. Who dwells in the sun.
Keep moving, friend, and don't look down.

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*Dead for Years, Erhart Arranges
to Meet Me in a Dream*

So the cyclo driver, looking like a praying mantis
with his mirror sunglasses, straddling his blue-and-orange
detailed, lawnmotorized chair, and sucking a toothpick,
met me at the corner just like Erhart said.

Neither the driver nor I, befuddled by the phone call that
woke me from my dream, registered much surprise.
In one's post-war sleep, the dead still ring up
and Vietnamese cabbies hustle American streets.

So I just plunked down on his saggy vinyl cushion
and he varoomed a blue cloud all the way to Saigon.
Trouble was, I forgot the address. The driver got skeptical.
Did this American know how to behave in a dream?

I said I'd pay double fare, and we tooled around old streets
with new names, looking for familiar bars, the PX. Finally,
I just gave up. I bought the driver a beer at the Bo Da cafe.
He said it all looked strange to him too, get used to it.