

“The Violence Within That Protects Us From a Violence Without”: John Balaban’s Hard-Bitten Lyricism in *Empires*

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In “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” (1942), a seminal wartime meditation on the palliative force of *poesis*, Wallace Stevens suggests that the nobility of poetry has much to do “with our self-preservation.” The expression of poetry’s nobility through “the sound of words,” says Stevens, not only “helps us to live our lives,” but survive the onslaught. In short, Stevens argues the nobility of poetry stems from a lyric poem’s ability to become a field of force in its own right, to counter the force of reality: “It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality.” For nearly a half century, John Balaban has deployed the poet’s craft (here it’s perhaps also useful to think of the German *Kraft*, signifying force, power, strength) as a mode of resistance, as a means of pressing back against and transforming brutality. An anomalous, pacifist veteran of the Vietnam War, Balaban has long been one of our finest poetic craftsmen working in the lyric mode. In his latest collection, *Empires* (Copper Canyon Press, 2019), Balaban once again demonstrates why he is celebrated as a major American poet. Balaban’s is a voice of towering aesthetic and moral authority, an essential voice shot through with a type of hard-bitten lyricism unparalleled, I believe, in contemporary American poetry.

Reading *Empires*, a collection which casts a cold eye on imperialistic hubris, it took me but a poem or two to recall why Balaban is regarded as one of our finest anti-war poets.

Widespread critical acclaim and National Book Award nominations long ago cemented

Balaban's status as one of the most vital voices to emerge from the Vietnam War. *Empires* not only confirms but extends that reputation. Building upon the kind of hard-driving, clear-eyed honesty we've come to expect from him, Balaban is at the height of his powers here, wielding his moral imagination in a moving condemnation of war. Here, the particular species of conflict placed under the gaze of Balaban's moral eye is imperial war and its devastating effects on nations and individuals alike. Balaban's insight into imperial power and corruption recalls, to some degree, Gibbon's or Spengler's efforts at charting the ascendancy and decline of empires, but the singularity of Balaban's achievement lies in the poet's ability to put a human face and fresh poetic spin on the scourge of imperialistic war. As America contemplates a future that threatens to be more even more precarious and dangerous than our present moment, Balaban's collection poses uncomfortable, yet necessary questions about our nation's affiliation with the seductive ethos, the fatal attraction of empire building. In amnesiac America, Balaban's poetic vision is as rare as it is essential. He is precisely the kind of memory-keeper we need at this moment of national soul-searching, a moment in which our very identity as a people is in crisis.

Understanding the immense panorama of violence called human history has been one of Balaban's constant preoccupations. Early in the collection, Balaban announces his intent to expose the wreckage left in the wake of empire building. He does so via a number of trans-temporal linkages that bring the toppled twin towers of 9/11 into significant relation with scuttled imperial ambitions across the ages, building image upon image of imperial "dreams collapsed" and cities "of gold . . . never found." What matures and ripens over the course of the book is an unforgettable crop of thirty-one poems born from the fruit of Balaban's desire to offer a sweeping critique of "imperial rubble." The poet makes his rhetorical aim clear from the

start as his book cover bears an image of haunting stone heads erected during the rise of the Kingdom of Commagene at Nemrut Dagi in what is now southeastern Turkey. As soon as the kingdom gained its ascendancy, the empire began to rot from within, crumbling into decline and ultimate oblivion. Later vandalized during and after the fall of the Commagene Empire, the cracked and damaged heads not only bear witness to imperial "dreams collapsed," but serve as a telling preview of coming attractions in Balaban's collection.

Constructed around a series of imagistically and thematically-linked lyric mediations on imperial wrack and ruin, Balaban's collection filters the violent story of empire building through a kind of "Spenglerian memory." Reading *Empires*, I was frequently reminded of Yeats' prophetic assault on the ferocity and folly of empire building in his blood-dimmed collection, *The Tower*. *Empires* recalls a good deal of the conceptual richness and much of the emotional complexity in Yeats' indictment of imperial excess and corruption. Like Yeats, Balaban is a master memory-keeper who has seen, first-hand, the "butchery" upon which "civilization is built" (to borrow W.D. Ehrhart's powerful phrase). He, too, is a memory-keeper who sees how the past serves as prologue to the present. Like Yeats' landmark collection, Balaban's collection catalogues the murderousness of colonialism and anti-colonialism alike. Balaban's tales of empire are replete with ceremonies of innocence drowned and young men dead upon the road. Finally, Balaban tracks the brutal march made and the "mayhem" left behind by bitter, violent men in fine poems such as "Cibolero" where the rain of imperialism falls incessantly in "dark curtains / over the vast plain" of human history. But for all the ways Balaban's collection recalls *The Tower*, Yeatsian comparisons fall short of doing Balaban's collection justice. Balaban certainly has no stomach for the Irish poet's autocratic, elitist leanings. Closer akin to Joyce in temperament, Balaban is a

demotic soul who possesses an enormous gift for verbal play, humor, and polyphonic voicing, all of which are on display in *Empires*. This book is essential reading. Indeed, I have read few collections in the last decade that match the emotional range, prosodic complexity, and conceptual richness of *Empires*.

That Balaban should train his sights on the ferocity and folly of empire building should come as no surprise for this poet's long-time readers. The subject of imperial war, its terrible costs and consequences, has long been one of Balaban's central preoccupations. Perhaps no other living American poet has more fully explored the points of intersection between poetry, violence, and imperialism than Balaban. In *Empires*, Balaban's penetrating vision bears frequent witness to the insight that poetry and violence are often born in the same soil. An award-winning translator and authority on Vietnamese literature, Balaban once translated the poet-soldier Ho Chi Minh on this point: "The ancients loved those poems with natural feel: / Clouds, wind, moon, snow. Flower, rivers, crags. / A poem should contain strong tempered steel: Today the poet must learn to lead a charge." For his part, Balaban has resisted the allure of violence and sustained an unwavering commitment to nonviolent resistance. Upon his arrival in Vietnam in 1967, Balaban was certain of one thing, as he recalls in his remarkable memoir, *Remembering Heaven's Face*, "For all the confusion that engulfed me as soon as I arrived in Vietnam, I had come with clear conviction. I was opposed to the taking of human life. I was opposed to all war and, in particular, opposed to this war."

Balaban's Vietnam experience solidified his nonviolent philosophy and in turn gave rise to an impressive, wide-ranging body of work marked by what can profitably be called a poetics of violence. By this phrase, I mean Balaban deploys poetic artifice not only to filter and translate

his understanding of violence, but to resist its power to govern our lives. For Balaban and other ethically-responsible lyricists of violence, writing about the subject of violence entails all kinds of risks. In *Empires*, the struggle to make what Balaban calls songs “sung in a time of barbarians” involves tremendous aesthetic and ethical perils, but Balaban’s poetry is proof that the demanding work of employing verse to confront the problem violence is clearly worth the inherent dangers. In this respect, Balaban’s treatment of war and violence in *Empires* brings to mind the rationale Seamus Heaney once used to explain his preoccupation with the subjects of violence and war. Heaney, who like Balaban practiced a poetic of violence, once told an interviewer, “I just don’t know why I’m hesitating to say violence is a . . . legitimate subject . . . I think the greatest poetry gazes upon [violence] as a factor in human experience, recognizes it as deplorable, but then somehow must outface the deplorable or at least gaze levelly at the deplorable and put it in its place, place it in the scheme.” Clearly, Balaban is committed to a similar project. This poet, who has witnessed horrific acts of human destructiveness, reminds us that in spite of our capacity for barbarism, individual human beings have a heart-breaking capacity for survival, resilience, and decency.

The difficult, sometimes elusive search for peace has long been a staple of Balaban’s aesthetic. In *Empires*, as with so much of his previous work, Balaban paradoxically resorts to the violence of the letter to achieve what Yeats called the end of art, namely peace. This explains perhaps why so many of the besieged speakers and characters inhabiting the poems in *Empires* are kept busy “looking for some peace.” But as Balaban suggests, the quest for repose in times of extreme violence can seem as impossible as “looking for a cricket in a field.” And yet, Balaban repeatedly makes clear his conviction that the desire for sanctuary is not a luxury; the act of

imaginative resistance is a *sine qua non* for survival. Many of the poems in *Empires* can thus be read as mini-quests for peace. Such is the case with “Gods and Empire,” a vital meditation on the work of the ancient poet-philosopher Xenophanes, who lived and wrote during the Persian imperial invasion of Greece in the 5th century BC. For Balaban, Xenophanes serves as a figure of the besieged artist working *in extremis*, a poet who survived the onslaught by continuing to compose verse even as he was tossed up and down Greece, fleeing the Persians: “Such is Xenophanes . . . / who looked into all things of earth and heaven / and made of them a song, sung in a time of barbarians.” But barbarians are not the only violent force Xenophanes and his comrades must press back against; a storm also pummels the poet and his fellow Greeks:

All day we trudged north along the Aegean, cold rain
squalling, whipping up whitecaps, churning sandbars,
eating the beach, rocking pines, hissing sand-sleet.
But the hardest storms came at night, scouring us
huddled in dunes as strikes of violet light flashed
off the cliffs, igniting our faces when thunder boomed . . .

Here, Balaban delivers a virtuoso prosodic performance in his trademark style, a style that Denise Levertov once described as “both tough and flexible, capable of encompassing contrasts of beauty and horror perceived unflinchingly, and of juxtaposing bitter reminders of our sleazy and cruel *fin de siècle* with a tenderness of feeling and language.” Balaban’s potent aural effects shot through with images of menacing beauty show that he is a worthy heir to Xenophanes’ poetic legacy. The lines quoted above transform the brutal pounding of the tempest into a sonic *tour de force* built upon a barrage of plosives and sibilants that approximate thunder-crack,

torrential rain, and the hiss-and-sizzle of wind blasted sand. The sumptuousness of Balaban's sensory feast does not stop there. Once the violence of the storm subsides, the poem's sound system shifts into a mode of repose; sibilance softens as the coupling of vowels via long "o's" (*rainbows, those*) and double "oo's" (*moon, smooth*) perform an intricate mouth-music, a euphonic caress that calms and soothes following the storm's violent assault:

. . . By morning,
the sea was calm and we saw the sun and moon
together. So close they almost touched. The shoreline
was now rain-rinsed, wind-brushed, smoothed,
and all about strewn with the crania of huge jellyfish
fading like lanterns in the sunlit air, under a rainbow,
dying like gods in throes of contemplation . . .

In a world wracked by myriad forms of violence, lyrical reprieve is a necessity. Like Issa's haiku "crickets on a stick / floating downstream / still singing," Balaban suggests that the work of the poet is to stand in for the elusive field crickets gone missing in our world. Balaban's collection reminds us how desperately we need the cricket's song, a song "sung in a time of barbarians."

With an eye to America's conflicted status as a global hegemon, Balaban invites us to take a hard look at our nation's imperial ambitions, viewing them through the looking glass of empires across the ages. Several poems about the troubled political and social landscape of contemporary America serve to suggest that ours, too, may be an imperium adrift, fraying at the edges, on the verge of some terrible collapse. The first poem in the collection, "A Finger," opens onto an image of the twin towers toppled by the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The grim work of human

remains recovery is conducted by postmodern “figures in Tyvek suits . . . gloved, gowned, masked / ghostly figures search rubble for pieces of people.” Surveying what some might view as the wreckage of *Pax Americana*, the poem’s speaker continues, “This is where the snip of forefinger begins its journey.”

Empires contains numerous images of civilizational decay, many of which illuminate the cost of establishing and maintaining an imperium. Balaban’s vision of America is one that acknowledges the contradictions inherent in our conflicted democratic experiment. In founding and furthering democracy, Americans have often failed to recognize and resist the fatal attraction of imperial aspiration. In “After the Inauguration, 2013,” Balaban’s speaker finds himself on a train returning to North Carolina from Washington D.C. As night begins to fall, an Amtrak coach carries the speaker and his fellow passengers, most of whom are black, into the dark underside of America where revenants of our violent past inform the present:

. . . Farther south,
past Richmond, something like snow or frost glints off a field
and you realize it’s just been gleaned of cotton
and this is indeed the South. As if to confirm this fact
to all of us on Amtrak, some latter-day Confederate
has raised the rebel battle-flag in a field of winter wheat.

Living memory clouds and colors present-day reality as the speaker and his fellow travelers descend deeper into the heart of Dixie. Balaban explodes the contradictions at the heart of our democratic experiment, the ruse of our “exceptionalism”:

At dusk, just outside Raleigh, the train slows

and whistles three sharp calls at a crossing in Kittrell, NC.
Along the railroad tracks, under dark cedars, lie graves
of Confederates from Petersburg's nine-month siege, men
who survived neither battle, nor makeshift hospital
at the Kittrell Springs Hotel, long gone from the town
where our train now pauses for something up ahead.

The poem closes by recalling the tragic homecoming of an African-American soldier, the violent welcome awaiting him as he returned from America's imperial adventure in Southeast Asia:

Nearby in Oxford, in 1970, a black GI was shot to death.
One of his killers testified: "that nigger committed suicide,
coming in here wanting to four-letter-word my daughter-in-law."
Black vets, just back from Vietnam, set the town on fire.
Off in the night, you could see the flames from these rails
that once freighted cotton, slaves, and armies.

So many terrible truths revealed. Perhaps America has always been, from its very inception, a democracy in decline—a democracy always threatening to slip into a sick parody of justice and freedom. Perhaps the clash between our democratic ideals and the darker angels of imperialistic dreams (slavery, Manifest Destiny, Indian Removal and genocide, white supremacy) have always jeopardized the Republic's integrity. In an elegiac meditation on the aspirations of the Revolutionary Army, a poem called "Christmas Eve at Washington's Crossing," Balaban wonders what sacred bonds, if any, can be said to hold our Republic together at this perilous moment in our history. Recalling the sacrifice Washington's men gave for a dream of liberty,

Balaban asks: "What word could call us all together now? On what riverbank? / For what common good would we abandon all?"

I recall asking Balaban a similar question when he visited the United States Air Force Academy to deliver the 2009 David L. Jannetta Distinguished Lecture in War, Literature & the Arts. My query ran: "Beyond the Blue Star Highway System created by Eisenhower, that vast web of trade and commerce, what binds an American in San Francisco to someone living today in Phoenix or Jersey? What glue holds us together as a nation?" Balaban's reply was immediate, emphatic: "The Constitution." Further discussions with the poet provided insight into what might be called the "constitutional" underpinnings of Balaban's aesthetic. This poet's antiwar stance seems to stem from an unwavering commitment to that Constitutional bedrock which values human life and demands that individuals are afforded respect and dignity.

During his lecture, Balaban addressed a thousand cadets, future custodians of American firepower, who had gathered to hear this sixty-something pacifist. Balaban detailed his experiences during the Vietnam War. He explained how he, too, like the cadets in attendance, had once "abandoned all" in service to his nation, but unlike most of his contemporaries drafted into service, he refused to take up arms against the Vietnamese. Instead, he performed alternative humanitarian duty in Vietnam:

During the Vietnam War, I volunteered as a civilian conscientious objector and worked as the field representative for a private agency that treated the most severely wounded children. The children that we brought to major U.S. teaching hospitals were riddled by bullets, slashed by cluster bomb flechettes, blinded and deafened by tossed grenades, had their lips and jaws shot away, their spines

severed. Others had their limbs blown off, including one 12-year old boy left with only an arm after a road mine blast. Another boy had his chin glued to his chest by napalm. One girl had her eyelids burned off by a white phosphorus artillery shell. One gun-shot toddler survived the massacre of her family in a ditch because she was protected by their bodies. I could go on. And, indeed, the memory of such suffering would have been my sole, unadulterated sense of Vietnam hadn't my job often taken me into the countryside to explain to parents what we could possibly do for their children at hospitals in the United States. Oddly, that work afforded me a glimpse of another, more enduring Vietnam. Improbable as it might seem, this glimpse came on snatches of poetry and song that led me into a realm of beauty and wisdom beyond the mayhem of the war.

While the impersonal, dehumanizing ferocity of empire building provides thematic and structural focus in *Empires*, it would be inaccurate to say the subject of imperialism is Balaban's sole concern. Showing the vulnerability and resiliency of human beings living *in extremis* may be Balaban's greater concern. What is perhaps most striking about his critique of imperialism is the terrible specificity with which Balaban treats the effects of violence on people. Balaban is, in fact, often at his best detailing the consequences of wartime brutality on individual human lives. He exposes the deplorability of violence by showing what it does to flesh-and-blood people caught in the cross-hairs. Lest his representations of violence fall into abstraction, Balaban typically names the victims of war and violence. Often the historical personages portrayed are poets, real poets bending and buckling under the bone-crushing force of imperial power. On the Black Sea, Ovid dons a "helmet to defend the ramparts" even as he tends a dying "boy he paid to massage

his feet." Anna Akhmatova slips the bonds of Stalinist terror and travels to decadent Miami. Xenophanes flees up and down the Aegean, escaping Persian armies. In all of this, Balaban seems to see an image of himself. As a relief worker, poet, essayist, memoirist, and translator, Balaban has repeatedly placed himself in the cross-hairs of conflict. The fighting poets of Balaban's poems figure the herculean labors that Balaban himself has undertaken to counter the bane of war and the baleful consequences of imperial violence.

The toughness and timeliness of Balaban's poetic vision inheres in its openness to what the ancient Greeks called *deinosis*, showing things at their worst. Rich in detail and implication, Balaban's most arresting images are often subtly, yet strategically deployed. The best of these image complexes are at once unnerving and efficacious; they cut to the core of the limbic system and lodge there. One such image capable of stopping readers in their tracks appears in a poem about Chögyam Trungpa (known to many as Rinpoche). Recalling this Buddhist master's harrowing escape into India from Tibet, Balaban recalls how Rinpoche, the eleventh Trungpa Tulku, fled invading Chinese troops with his fellow monks who "abandon[ed] their burning temple / where the obdurate slumped over altars / with bullet-hole Third Eyes oozing / gunpowder and pineal, black blood." Here Balaban uses the term *Third Eye* (the locus of power and wisdom in the forehead of deities such as the god Shiva) to describe the wound made at the bullet's point of entry and the way death becomes a gateway to the astral realm. The yoking of different realities through the term *Third-Eyes* is at once disturbingly violent and beautiful. The image spiders out in contradictory, mind-blowing directions. To contemplate images of horror in Balaban's poems is to hear, see, and feel the dangerous intersection of violence and beauty.

Balaban's war experience schooled him in the heinous things humans do to one another. As such, he does not hesitate to rub our noses in what is most threatening and destructive in human nature. Balaban's spotlight on atrocity is probably not what most contemporary readers of poetry go looking for in a poem: it is certainly not soothing or cathartic, but it topples our illusions, challenges our complacency. Lest we be shielded from the truth, Balaban reminds us what a violent, murderous lot we humans can be. Such is the implication in Balaban's reworking of one of the last poems written by the Romanian poet Benjamin Fondane, "Préface en Prose." Written in 1944, the year Fondane (who wrote under the name Fundoianu in Romania) and his sister were shipped to Auschwitz where they perished, this hard-boiled lyric was penned by Fondane prior to his being captured by Third Reich henchmen. Translated with Donka Farkas, Balaban's revival of Fondane's French-language poem gives a stunning afterlife to the poet's indictment of Nazi terror:

I am talking to you, my opposite Others,
I am talking man to man
With that bit of myself which remains a man,
That bit of my voice still stuck in my throat.
My blood is on the streets, may it—oh, may it not –
Cry out for vengeance.
The hunter's horn is sounded. The hounds are on the track.

Murder, atrocity, manslaughter—these are recurring subjects in Balaban's collection. In one of three superb translations from Romanian poets who suffered under tyranny, Balaban translates a poem by Ștefan Augustin Doinaș in order that we face the fact of our species'

bloodlust: "Endlessly, on the fields, in the archways / on the street, in woods, on altars, in bed, day and night, someone commits murder." In *Empires*, Balaban does double duty to reinforce this idea. In another poem, two journalist friends (Sean Flynn and Dana Stone), who themselves "dealt in the clarities of force," are gunned down at a Saigon roadblock. In "Cibolero," Balaban details a catalogue of human depravity listed in the jail log of San Miguel, NM, county detention center, a litany of man's inhumanity to man which reads like "a catechism": "Criminal Sexual Penetration in the first degree . . . Assault with a deadly weapon. Assault with intent to commit a violent felony, with intent to commit mayhem."

"The key word here is 'mayhem,'" avers the speaker of "Cibolero." But why? Why so much violence in one collection? In a volume focused on imperial wars and violence, Balaban's point seems clear: imperial war is not the only instrument of evil and depravity. On the stage of Balaban's moral universe, violence wears many masks, plays many parts. Violence always seems to be waiting, watching somewhere in the wings. Even when Balaban creates a brief respite from brutality (such as a string of exquisite nature lyrics in the collection's second half), we come to expect the Arcadian interlude to be interrupted by some sort of death mask looming over the poem's landscape or the appearance of violence just around the corner in the collection's next section. When Balaban's poems shift into a less foreboding register, they still thrum with the pulse of violent forces shaping the physical and spiritual universe. In an uncanny, oddly humorous account of a 1950s killing spree carried out by the poet's "doppelganger" (a Romanian-Australian murderer named John Balaban), the poet Balaban swerves from a consideration of his namesake's crimes to confess his own capacity for brutality:

. . . I recall another John Balaban,

a road-raged wacko who attacked a carload of young drunks
on a snowy night, hooking one arm in the driver's window
and dragged along by their car skidding the ice-crusted road
as he wailed punch after punch onto the driver lurching away,
everyone in the car screaming as he hung on, his legs kicking
to find footing, still punching, until the tires finally got traction
and the car sped off, dropping him facedown in the slush.

The poet must strive to counteract destructive forces at work not only out there in the universe, but in himself. Concentrating on the violence within, the poet channels and translate it into the force field of poetic language and form. The point of lyricizing violence is to travel a path beyond violence into wisdom by means of resistance and transformation. The end of art is peace.

This commentary could perhaps give the impression that Copper Canyon Press should consider packaging *Empires* with a generous dose of Prozac. But for all his attention to *deinosis*, Balaban seems most interested in celebrating the way "snatches of poetry and song," as he likes to say, can lead us "into a realm of beauty and wisdom beyond the mayhem of the war." Balaban is a master manipulator of the limbic system, understanding the need for weaving pastoral counterpoint and the balm of beautiful song into the web of chaos. Accordingly, *Empires* gathers momentum, accrues emotional and intellectual force by repeatedly toggling back and forth between soothing moments of repose and a vast panorama of violence. Because it rises to the level of art, this volume escapes being a mere catalogue of killing. In *Empires* what we have is the aesthetic triumph of one of our finest and fiercest lyricists of violence. His work in this

regard situates him in the tradition of notable lyricists of violence from the past (Homer, Virgil, Sophocles, Dante, and Milton). It certainly earns him a place among the best contemporary lyricist of violence such as Seamus Heaney and Linda Gregerson.

While Balaban explores how beauty sometimes stands at the cutting edge of terror, his work spends as much time focused on the triumph of human aesthetic achievement and the wonders of the natural world. In one the finest virtuoso displays of his gift for writing nature lyrics, a poem called "Tide Pool," Balaban's mouth music opens our ears to a seaside "opera mimicking / our desire for an imagined home, in a place / forever perishing, a place to live." In this sea-wracked spot which Balaban aptly calls "a place forever perishing" (for the pool is constantly being reshaped by tidal forces), the very violence of natural processes paradoxically makes this "a place to live." Balaban's tide pool is a harrowing, yet fecund environment, an ecotone brimming with "little lives" trying to procreate and survive "in their amorous wriggles as the "crashing sea punch[es] holes below the shelf / flushing innocent worlds, leaving only / a stone stage for water dramas beneath the sky / an existential entertainment . . ." Here Balaban's sound system might seem as good as it gets, but earlier the poem's opening lines provide an even more perfectly pitched rendition of the natural sublime doing its violent work:

Here the ancient lava slid into the sea,
hissed up steam clouds, then cooled into stone
making a moonscape in the volcanic shelf
pocked with basins, cracked by runnels
where tides chafe canyons day and night
scooping out clear shallow pools,

sand-bottomed cisterns, where sun shaft
and tide-froth ply their metaphors.
At the pool's edge, a hermit crab with ivory claw,
pop-dot blue eyes, and strawberry whiskers
sidles off under some dead shell.
In the tidal rinse, blue neon fingerlings
flit between the rocks. Fiddlers swim away
at the shift of a shadow and deeper down
beneath wrinkles of light in the tide-washed crooks
the ink-purple urchins wait for whatever.

Here, the mouth-music of "Tide Pools" sings the harsh wonders of the natural world as convincingly any ancient Irish or Old-English nature lyric. The hard-driving rhythms of these sibilant-and-plosive laden lines ring true in their recreation of sounds generated by the violent birth of a seaside lava shelf. The collection contains many such moments of exquisite sonic precision. Balaban's artistry reminds us that, despite our brutalities, ours is the only species that can paint, compose sonatas, hew cliff dwellings out of sandstone, and craft metaphors. We humans are a daunting mix of contradictions, and it is the artist's vocation, Balaban's poetry suggests, to train our attention on the terrible beauty that can arise from this tension.

For Balaban to lyricize violence as he does in *Empires* is not to prettify, valorize or dignify brutality; rather Balaban's hard-bitten lyricism serves as a necessary act of transformation, an attempt to control and redress the violence inherent in human experience through the force of poetic language and form. Balaban writes about violence in hopes of outfacing it, in hopes of

putting violence in its proper place within the scheme. *Empires* certainly shows things at their worst, but Balaban refuses to allow violence to have the final say. Balaban has this to say to violence: You may reign and run rampant and destroy for a time, but, Violence, you will not win; you will not crush our shared capacity for creating beauty and realizing our desire for truth and justice. When Balaban's speakers and characters secure momentary respite in the green shade of stunning pastoral interludes, we know that these besieged humans, like the traumatized shepherds of Virgil's *Eclogues*, sing to make the road easier. They sing, too, because they acknowledge the hard truth that around each bend in the country lane lies the potential for violence. Many soldiers, civilians, and journalists lie dead upon the road. The blood-dimmed tide threatens to drown the ceremony of innocence at any moment.

As Balaban suggests, we cannot afford to forget that war and violence are near constant factors in human experience. If not war, then some other form of violence waits and watches in the wings—natural disaster, cancer, assault and battery, rape. The quest for imaginative refuge from the onslaught is not only desirable; it is essential to our individual and collective survival. We have to “keep looking for some peace” even if the quest proves as hard as finding “a cricket in a field.” To surrender the dream of peace is not an option. A century ago, Freud and other modernists warned of the peril facing humanity if we failed to tame our most violent, our most destructive tendencies. We did not heed those warnings. In the wake of two world wars, nuclear strikes and arms races, and the bloodiest century known to humankind, the twentieth century spawned a class of poets who made it their mission to warn, to tell the unadorned truth about our capacity for annihilating ourselves, our entire species, other species, and even the planet we call home. Balaban writes from the heart of this tradition. His is a voice still singing true, singing

steadily in hard-bitten lyric strains. In *Empires*, "the key word is 'mayhem,'" but the answer is always poetry, "the delicate thing which lasts," the thing that mingles and rises with the fragrance of acacias and "poplar fluff," the thing that "floats over imperial rubble."

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