

**John Balaban**

from *Locusts at the Edge of Summer*

## **Collateral Damage**

*for Miss Tin in Hue*

"The girl (captured; later, freed)  
and I (collapsed by a snip of lead)  
remember well the tea you steeped  
for us in the garden, as music played  
and the moon plied the harvest dusk.  
You read the poem on a Chinese vase  
that stood outside your father's room,  
where he dozed in a mandarin dream  
of King Gia Long's reposing at Ben Ngu.  
We worry that you all are safe.  
A house with pillars carved in poems  
is floored with green rice fields  
and roofed by all the heavens of this world."

. . . Well, that was the poem, written  
in fullest discovery and iambics  
by a twenty-four-year old feeling lucky  
not long after those scary events.  
Three years later, he (i.e. yours truly)  
went back with his young American wife  
(not the girl above "captured . . . freed, etc.")  
and the night before the '72 Spring Offensive  
(which, you'll recall, almost took the city)  
tried to find Miss Tin's house once again  
. . . in a thunderstorm, both wearing ponchos,

and he (a version of “me”) clutching a .45 Colt while she, just clutched his wet hand. Of course, anyone might have shot us—the Viet Cong infiltrating the city, the last Marines, the jittery ARVN troops, or, really, any wretch just trying to feed his family. So here’s the point: *why would anyone* (esp. me, or my wife, or versions of same) even dream of going out like that? . . . Simple:  
A. *To show his bride a household built on poems.*  
B. *To follow love on all his lunkhead ventures.*  
Anyway, when we found the gated compound, we scared the wits out of the Vietnamese inside reading on the verandah by tiny kerosene lamps or snoozing in hammocks under mosquito netting who took us for assassins, or ghosts, until my wife pulled off her poncho hood, revealing the completely unexpected: a pretty. blonde. White Devil. Since Miss Tin wasn’t there, they did the right thing and denied knowing her, as night and river hissed with rain and a lone goose honked forlornly.

The next night, we headed out again, the monsoon flooding the darkened city, the offensive booming in nearby hills, and montagnards trekking into Hue in single file as their jungle hamlets fell to the barrage. I kept our jeep running, as my wife dashed out to give away our piasters to the poor bastards half-naked in the driving rain. She gave it all away. Six months, salary, a sack of banknotes watermarked with dragons, (except what we needed to get back to Saigon, but that’s another story) . . . the point here being: I often think of Miss Tin’s pillared house in Hue and those events now twenty years ago

whenever leaders cheer the new world order,  
or generals regret "collateral damage."

## Dogs, Dreams, and Rain

His old mutt stretches out and snores  
with oblivion that resembles grace  
as cold rains batter the beach house  
where he lies awake listening to rain  
running off the eaves, rattling the gutter,  
as the warm Atlantic thrashes the seawall.

The dog is unburdened by a past,  
untroubled by memories; futureless,  
harbors no anxious heart.  
Oh, every now and then a rabbit  
will zigzag through its dreams  
and the dog shakes with sleepy yelps,  
works its legs, and blinks awake.

Before lying down, it circles its tail,  
matting down grass on a Pleistocene plain,  
snuffling asleep under a glacial moon.  
Dogs huddled for millennia under pelting rain  
before human hands took them in.  
Who will shelter us caught in thunder  
as storms sweep in from the past?

In his rented house in the Florida Keys  
he remembers a night below Precious Mountain  
before he was domesticated like this dog:  
rain slapping the rubbery leaves  
of banana trees beside a canal,  
geese from the abandoned village  
slipping about the muddy bank  
near the canal kicking up with rain.

One was honking forlornly, stabbing the air  
with cracked blasts like a tenor sax.  
A bad set-up, even for a goose, not to mention  
him, running a detail on a peculiar mountain  
which he couldn't even see through the squalls.

He headed out alone below the palms  
bits of things flying in the storm  
as the monsoon thrashed the treeline.  
He sloshed around all day and never drew fire.  
Who says the VC were ever up there? Maybe.  
He sighted a lone mule packing opium  
through a bamboo thicket on the south side.  
He never figured where it came from.  
Never found the enemy.

So he called in airstrikes,  
radioed a chopper, and waited for his ride,  
spooked all night as he dozed in the downpour  
sunk in his poncho . . . spooked by geese  
and a gibbon screaming in a cave.

Even in the oddest realms—of fear, sleep,  
preposterous hopes, drugs, or maybe even dying,  
when thoughts skip in the skewed mind like tracers—  
a self emerges like a wary hound  
trotting out from a flooded banana grove  
to sniff the storm and then retreat.  
Even as the mind slumbers, and tires  
of holding its shape and thoughts  
—maps lost, radio dead, poncho leaking—  
we are stalked by selves  
skirting the shadows like dogs run wild  
in elephant grass hissing with rain.

\*

Later on, he saw in *Stars and Stripes* that  
The First Air Cavalry swept the mountain.  
Whole regiment listed as Missing in Action.

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