

Will Harris

Remembering Heaven's Face: An Interview with John Balaban

John Balaban is the author of ten books of poetry and prose, including four volumes which together have won The Academy of American Poets' Lamont prize (*After Our War*, 1974), a National Poetry Series Selection (*Words for My Daughter*, 1991), and two nominations for the National Book Award (*After Our War*, 1974, and *Locusts at the Edge of Summer: New and Selected Poems*, 1997). His *Locusts at the Edge of Summer: New and Selected Poems* won the 1998 William Carlos Williams Award from the Poetry Society of America.

In addition to writing poetry, fiction, and nonfiction, he is a translator of Vietnamese poetry, and a past president of the American Literary Translators Association (1995-1997). Perhaps his crowning achievement in this capacity was to transcribe some 500 poems from the oral Vietnamese folk tradition known as *ca dao*. Most of these poems had never been written in Vietnamese, let alone translated for a Western audience.

His books on Vietnam include *Ca Dao Vietnam: A Bilingual Anthology of Vietnamese Folk Poetry* 1980; *Vietnam: The Land We Never Knew* (with the photographer, Geoffrey Clifford), 1989; *Remembering Heaven's Face*, 1992, a memoir; and *Vietnam: A Traveler's Literary Companion*, 1996, which he co-edited with Nguyen Qui Duc. In 2000, Copper Canyon Press will publish his *Spring Essence: The Poetry of Ho Xuan Huong*. Balaban is currently Professor of English at the University of Miami.

This interview was conducted by email over a one-week period, the last week on June 1999. I caught John Balaban between a return from a one-month trip to Romania, and an engagement with the Port Townsend Writers Conference in Washington. In view of his time crunch, he was most gracious to focus on my persistent questions and to give very heart-

felt responses. What I found most absorbing about our discussion was his refusal to embrace the easy, all-resolving answer. What may seem the essence of contradiction is in fact, I believe, a profound sort of moral courage.

Harris: Let me begin with a personal anecdote that leads into a question. I attended a poetry workshop with Reg Saner a few years back. And I'd also developed a correspondence with the poet Keith Wilson, before I lost contact when I attended graduate school, then had a military assignment to Saudi Arabia during "the bombing season" a few years back. Anyway, through those conversations, poetry exchanges and letters, I never knew until the WLA issue a few printings back that both these men were considered "Korean War poets"—I was acquainted with altogether different works of theirs. So my lead question is do you consider yourself a "Vietnam" writer, or a writer who has been very interested in the Vietnam War at times in your past?

Balaban: Well, in a not-too-exaggerated sense, I am a writer who grew up in Vietnam. I went there at 23, opposed to the war, a conscientious objector who volunteered to do alternative service first as a linguistics teacher at a Vietnamese university (through the International Voluntary Services) and then, after the University got bombed and I was wounded in the city's siege at Tet, 1968, as the Field Representative for the Committee of Responsibility to Save War-Injured Children. I could have sat out the war at Harvard where, as a graduate student, I had started to publish both poetry and scholarship (an article on the Middle Scots poet, Blind Harry). But the moral agitation on campuses in 1967 obliged me, it seems in retrospect, to volunteer. So, like a lot of Americans, I came of age in Vietnam.

Harris: I had an opportunity to teach our department's "Literature of War" class this past Spring, and was pleasantly surprised to discover that a significant number of my students—I'd guess at least a third of my 30 or so students—had already read some aspect of your work, most frequently *Remembering Heaven's Face*. And it was very clear to me from the way they mentioned you in class that they held you as the moral standard by which to judge our actions in the Vietnam War. Whether they agreed or disagreed with you, they felt your work raised essential questions that any military member must consider when thinking about the Vietnam War.

Balaban: Good to hear. Anyway, it's not agreement but the taking of individual responsibility that is important. In the way the military academies now encourage questioning and individual responsibility, it's clear some lessons were learned from our failures in Vietnam. When my memoir came out, I was surprised by how many combat veterans wrote to say they liked the book, although some, like your students, had their disagreements. I even heard from no less than three CIA agents who worked in Vietnam. All this is a pleasant surprise and instruction for me.

Harris: How do you feel about being held as a moral standard by fledgling members of the very service you found most morally at fault in the Vietnam War?

Balaban: I don't really think that they take *me* as a moral example. I think that I may have made the place and its circumstances come alive for them so that they could see a young man about their age, placed in warfare and trying, as best he could, to make moral judgments. Military academy cadets are bright young men and women and they should be drawn to problems of personal accountability. The *Tao Te Ching* tells us that "the sword is a cursed thing." The best soldiers know that.

Harris: Almost every review of your work emphasizes your conscientious objector status, and your in-country service during the war. But I found myself repeatedly encountering the "you" in *Remembering Heaven's Face* as the man some twenty years later, looking back upon the stances and happenstance of your youth, and ultimately reevaluating your status. I don't think you question the rightness of your choice to oppose the killing in this instance of war. But I think your memoir contains this agonized weighing of situational choices versus ultimate outcomes, ethical choices made within morally uncertain circumstances. For instance, when you take the gun and grenades to resist being killed as your friend Gitelson was, or when you stand guard at the field hospital during the Tet Offensive, or when you battle with the street punks rather than turn away. You praise your CIA friend Richard's ethical clarity on the one hand. You lambaste the majority of ineffectual do-gooder organizations on the other hand. Perhaps the larger questions inherent in the seeming inconsistency between acts and stances still aren't fully resolved by the end of the memoir—to your credit, I think.

Balaban: Well, I am not sure how to answer the question. Weighing ethical choices made within morally *clear* circumstances isn't much of a

task. When I went to Vietnam, things seemed simple, black-and-white. As I learned more, things got more complex. This does not change the simple truth for me about the wrongness of the war and its misuse of our military. Then, I might have seen the military as a force of evil; I don't anymore. Today, I think I would trust the testimony of an average soldier, more than the testimony of an average academic.

But to go back to this issue of re-evaluation: The moral questioner doesn't pre-select his evidence, or keep his or her replies prepared and tucked away, all typed-up in a hip pocket. You play it as it lies. This doesn't mean you become an ethical chameleon. Recently I gave a poetry reading in Berkeley. The war in Kosovo was under way and a woman in her 30's who had read *Remembering Heaven's Face* came up to me and said how much she admired the book and what did I think of the war in Kosovo. I said I was for the bombing and I think she was disturbed by my response, but I don't see the problem, or an inconsistency. I am against the slaughter of innocents which warfare always brings. But, given the failure of American foreign policy to avert the crisis, what was one to do? Stand by and witness the ethnic cleansing of Kosovars, or bomb to stop it as well as the future bloody plans of Milosovic? Difficult moral choice comes when you have to choose between two evils, not between good and evil. I suppose I was never the kind of absolutist conscientious objector that one admires so much among the Quakers. Sometimes the sword, although "a cursed thing," saves us from greater evils.

Harris: Some of your "background" and transitional paragraphs have a startling, compact clarity. One instance I can readily recall is when a South Vietnamese truck full of soldiers and their wives and children passes you, "hurtling along the bumpy road to a base camp somewhere off in the nowhere, to be mortared by the Viet Cong." In the introductory passages describing your move to Can Tho, you capture how the advent of Free Fire Zones in the surrounding countryside will inevitably destroy the farmers' and villagers' lives. I think passages like these led my students to compare you with Tim O'Brien—the seeming frustration, or absence, of moral outcome. Yet they recognize in your voice, as opposed to his, a "clearly stated moral intent," and tend to fix on that.

To try to crystallize the implied student question—do you see your own memoir and poetry as a "voice of moral intent," and do you see that voice as distinct from the background of Vietnam War literature to which yours is being compared?

Balaban: Sir Philip Sydney, at the beginning of the English Renaissance when many of our modern views of individuality and selfhood were formed, says, “virtuous knowledge results in human action.” This must be a derivation from Aristotle’s injunction to judge a person (or a dramatic character) by what he or she says and does. The moral effect of a writer like Tim O’Brien comes through making the scene so alive you think you are there, making the character so real, you think you have met him. Once, the fictional or aesthetic aims are realized, the moral aims are realized too. This is why *The Things They Carried* is so powerful. Some years ago in *The New York Review of Books*, Milan Kundera (in response to a stupid book by John Gardner entitled *On Moral Fiction*) said that fiction is immoral only when it fails to tell us something new about the human condition. A well-made story or poem is moral in itself, in its true making lies a moral gesture.

Harris: I have another background question—this one of a more political nature. Early in your memoir, you mention that you can’t “fathom how values like freedom, justice, and individual dignity—values that I had fixed as universals in my young American mind—could mean anything” among the mass of Vietnamese peasants who had no direct experience of or concern with democracy. Yet by the book’s end, you clearly suggest that “regulated freedom” and unity under Communism—presumably a reflection of the people’s will—may be insufficient as well.

Do you have any ideas of what sort of system might conform to the Vietnamese people? Do you see a fundamental error in the American mandate to “make the world safe for democracy” (a more euphemistic way or saying spread American-style democracy and capitalism, “by any means necessary,” throughout the world)?

Balaban: Freedom, justice, individual dignity must be important to everybody on the planet. The sentence you partly quote comes early in the book, I think, when I was describing the culture shock in my first glimpse of huge numbers of people in British Hong Kong and South Vietnam. As a young American who had never traveled much of anywhere, these prospects of peasant culture made no sense to me. Later I learned that Vietnamese have been debating their rules of society for thousands of years. Recently in Vietnam, General Tran Do, a hero of the war, declared Communism a dead end, and was kicked out of the Party. Let’s leave it to the Vietnamese, and to other peoples, to decide their own forms of government and society. American crusades are smug and dangerous. If we offer a valuable model, we shouldn’t have to hard sell it.

Harris: It seems to me that race is an inevitable subtext of most Vietnam writings. Yet you're one of the few popular writers I can think of to openly address this issue. One usually sees justifications such as "our buddy/buddies got killed, so we leveled the village." Or race is obliquely considered through My Lai-like cases, but the focus is on the moral horror that American soldiers could do such things, rather than on the policies such as Free Fire Zones that ultimately encouraged such massacres. In introducing the subject of evacuations of children injured in the war, you also include those breath-catching figures I'd not seen elsewhere in print—those Department of Defense estimates that we were conservatively producing 100,000 civilian casualties a year in that War, 60% of whom were children. Do you think our "racial intelligence" has improved since the Vietnam War, or do you think we still tend to respond to difference in other cultures through ignorance and even violence?

Balaban: There are over 200 million speakers of Arabic in the world. Do you think Americans have much of a sense of what they are thinking, or why? There are 76 million Vietnamese, more than the populations of England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and Canada thrown together. Isn't it the obligation of great empires (ours being one at the moment) to know the rest of the world? Isn't it risky not to? In the 9th century, when the Chinese T'ang empire extended its reach as far as the Caspian Sea, it also brought to its capital Nestorian Christians, Jews, Jains, Hindus, Zoroastrians, Moslems, etc., because China knew it needed to know the rest of the world. So, yes, I do think "we" are generally wiser about the rest of the world than, say, 30 years ago, but that's not saying much. Our characteristic American inability to speak foreign languages, the general indifference among American publishers to publish translations from contemporary foreign literatures, the dumb-and-dumber force of television and the Internet on the young, the general illiteracy with anything longer than 500 words, are all among the many factors which, at our peril, isolate Americans from the rest of the world. And so, we stumble forth blindly and sometimes with unforgivable violence.

Harris: One of the things that amazes me about discussions of the Vietnam War is that whenever we speak of what we may have learned as a consequence, even pundits from the general public lapse into "militarese." We immediately begin an abbreviated, outlined "lessons learned" discussion that centers on how much more effectively we've

learned to deploy force, support that force logistically, and rally the hearts and minds of our own people as well as the “host nation” around our use of force. What NON-MILITARY lessons do you think we should have—or perhaps did—learn from the Vietnam debacle?

Balaban: If we had known anything about Vietnamese history, we would have been aware of their 1000-year struggle for independence from Chinese domination. This would have ameliorated our Cold War fears of long term Chinese/Russian influence in Vietnam, and it might have set us in a different direction with the Vietnamese at the end of WWII. Was Ho Chi Minh more a nationalist than a communist? I suspect the former, as did the American OSS officers who worked with him to fight the Japanese in Indochina. So, let’s suppose that this is true. Then, the whole war might have been avoided. We might have had an ally in Southeast Asia instead of an enemy, as well as the destruction of millions of lives, and the setting of the world against “American imperialism.” Our blunder in Vietnam gave added years to communism in the Soviet Union and elsewhere. So, to go back to my earlier suggestion, we need to learn the histories and literatures of other cultures. We need to understand their aspirations and struggles. Learning these things of course is also a lot of fun. Whole worlds open up. One’s own world opens up by comparison.

Harris: Early in your memoir, you mentioned being motivated to action by “a sense of injustice,” and the realization “of another, possible society.” Could you expand upon what you meant then by that better America? And in the twenty-five or so years since you first had that dream, do you think we’ve approached that goal, or are we receding from it?

Balaban: I must have been thinking of Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society. Instead of putting our national treasure into a better, more equal America, he squandered it in Vietnam. Something like 500 billion dollars simply lost because Johnson had to pay for the war, but did not dare raise taxes to pay for it. And the bill, of course, keeps adding up in the annual costs of caring for soldiers after the war. Huge tragedy. I think Johnson really had a great vision for America. And squandered it.

Harris: You capture a bit of anecdotal history that I’m very interested in having you elaborate, if possible. You refer quite matter-of-factly to virtual communities of black AWOL soldiers throughout your book.

Can you say a bit more about your “common knowledge” of these areas and communities, since their mention is fairly unique to your book? I discovered a similar situation with some African American expatriates in Saudi, to my great surprise.

Balaban: There were black G.I.s who went AWOL, lived with Vietnamese women, had large families, and often had enterprises behind locked gates. I remember one restaurant/whore house that served “soul food.” Long after the war, I asked a Vietnamese General if he knew what happened to these men because it was clear they had cut all ties to the U.S. and weren’t coming home. This was General Tran Kinh Chi, now retired. He said that indeed they were very hard to extricate but that they were all put on planes out of Saigon and deposited in Bangkok. Beyond that, he didn’t know what happened to them. One wonders what happened to their Vietnamese families.

Harris: I think I’ve nearly “questioned you out” on *Remembering Heaven’s Face*. But I’ll ask you a few more questions, mostly dealing with differences in cultures, before moving on to some of your other works.

The first is about your visit to Hanoi in the late 1980s. When you mentioned that you had no fear of moving down Hanoi’s streets alone as a Westerner, I had this shock of recognition. Even in the midst of “the bombing season” in Saudi Arabia, I had the overriding sense as I walked the streets of Riyadh in civilian attire that I was actually safer there than I would be walking the streets of Houston, Chicago, New York, Washington DC. I guess my question is WHY IS THAT SO? Why is it that our idealism and democracy can produce such unsafe environments, while we can experience such ease of soul and safety in “foreign,” and even presumably hostile, cities?

Balaban: Beats me, but we are violent sons of bitches. Cormac McCarthy is the guy to read on this, especially *Blood Meridian*.

Harris: You contrast America’s inability to get over the Vietnam War, with Vietnam’s own success at putting the War in its past and getting on with its progress. Do you think you can put your finger on why we have such a problem “getting over it,” while the Vietnamese apparently don’t have as much of a problem?

Balaban: They fought for their independence. Why would they have a hard time getting over that? We killed over 1 million North Vietnamese

and Viet Cong soldiers and perhaps 2 million civilians (North and South, men, women, and children) and we lost nearly 60,000 Americans. What did *we* fight for? Harder to get over. Furthermore, it was our longest war. And we lost. They won. Beyond that, there are the simple facts that for us Vietnam is a war; for them, it's their country with a long history. Over half of the 76 million Vietnamese alive today were born after the war. They have other things to worry about.

Harris: From your work preserving the *ca dao* folk poetry from war eradication to your return to address the Institute of Literature in Hanoi some twenty years later, your literary efforts are infused with the underlying belief that poetry has moral and political force, precisely because it has cultural significance. And yet you point out Philip Freneau's death as a pauper, and your "recent look into the [Vietnam] Institute's card catalogue, where the only American entries are John Steinbeck, Jack London, Mario Puzo, and assorted mysteries left behind" after our evacuation of the country. Given these circumstances—our country that still gives scant attention to its poets, and a recognition of more "transfer value" in American fiction than American poetry—how does American poetry function as a moral and political force?

Balaban: *Somehow.* Like everybody else, I can't read most of it, but when I find something brilliant, it seems like it's all that counts. Just recently I have been knocked out by a reissue of Carolyn Kizer's first book of poetry, *The Ungrateful Garden* and an odd, highly original book that I haven't made up my mind about: Arthur Sze's *The Redshifting Web*. Two years ago, I heard W.S. Merwin read his update of William Dunbar's "Lament for the Makers" and then last year I heard Robert Fagles read in Greek and in English a passage from Homer's *Odyssey*. In moments like that, all the indifference to poetry is meaningless, all the bad poetry is forgotten.

Harris: You point out that the Institute of Literature in Hanoi was formerly the Temple of Literature, where gifted men from all social classes were trained with the intent of becoming mandarins, or provincial governors. You also note that this tradition continued until 1919.

Balaban: Anyone interested in the values of the Vietnamese mandarin should read a new book, a memoir of her family by Duong Van Mai Elliott entitled *The Sacred Willow* which I reviewed for the *Washington Post Book World*.

Harris: This approach to governing is obviously a radical departure from our own, which has become largely “class-ist,” technocratic, and business managerial. Are these differences merely cultural, or do you think there’s an abiding advantage to expecting our governors to be humanists? I have to admit that being an American, a soldier, and (currently, at least) a skeptical academic, I find my own question to seem almost ridiculous—a continuation of the “Why we need the arts and the National Endowment for Arts” morass. Still, I think it’s important to raise the issue for a militarily oriented audience.

Balaban: Actually, Thomas Jefferson was aware of this system of selecting civil servants through examination in the Classics and advocated it for Americans. Besides creating a civil service imbued with humanistic values, it created a civil service free from class privilege because anyone, no matter how humble, could rise to the top of Vietnamese governmental affairs according to how well he placed in the Imperial exams. To the degree that contemporary Vietnam has departed from this in favor of Communist pedigree, *nomenclatura*, its management has suffered.

Harris: I’ll transition into other concerns with a mention of the poet you introduce at the end of *Remembering Heaven’s Face*, Ho Xuan Huong. Do you intend to produce a full volume of her translated poetry, or will you continue to include selected translations of particular poems in your own volumes of poetry?

Balaban: After ten years of trying, I have indeed finished a book of translations of Ho Xuan Huong, complete with an introduction describing her work and amazing life, endnotes on each poem, and a “tri-graphic” text, i.e. poems in contemporary written Vietnamese, my English translations, and also the *Nom* calligraphic writing system that she wrote in. Through some miraculous help from Vietnamese linguists, mathematicians, and computer experts, this will be the first time *Nom* has ever been printed—even in Vietnam it was published either by woodblock or by hand. The book will appear in the fall of 2000 from Copper Canyon Press, one of the last two presses in the U.S. to publish only poetry.

As an offshoot of this project, I am helping to start a foundation to preserve the 1000-year literature in *Nom* that is in danger of extinction. We will be calling ourselves the Vietnamese *Nom* Preservation Foundation and will be a tax-deductible charity. Look for us on the Internet.

Harris: Both Carolyn Forché and Keith Wilson mentioned to me years ago that winning a major poetry prize, or even getting a book of poetry seriously considered by a major press, took more than simply writing enough good poems to fill a text. Both poets said you have to have some unifying and relevant theme to ultimately hold the poems together (even if loosely) and attract a reading audience. Both also mentioned that you have to be a good reader of the prospective editor's publications. As a winner of both the Lamont Poetry Selection (*After Our War*, 1974) and the National Poetry Series (*Words for My Daughter*, 1991), do you have any additional suggestions for prospective poets?

Balaban: I've also won the William Carlos Williams Award and two nominations for the National Book Award, but I can't say that it's changed my life much. I keep thinking that if I won some real money, I could write more, both translations and my own writing: for instance, a novel I have started, set in Romania, and a book of poetry based, but not overtly, on Buddhist precepts. As for prospective writers: forget awards; worry about the writing.

Harris: More than many writers I know, your poetry and prose are intimately entwined. Would you say that your poetry—which was published first—served as the impetus for your prose pieces such as *Remembering Heaven's Face*? Or that your collection of letter copies and journal entries, gathered with the intent to ultimately write a memoir, fed your poetry?

Balaban: I think genres have individual properties: they offer or deliver different insights. I kept learning from experiences in Vietnam by looking at them in poetry and, again, in prose. Once I wrote about the same event (the death of Steve Erhart) in poetry, fiction, and nonfiction, each time seeing something new that the obligations of the genre revealed, or so I'd like to think. Poetry might be powerful in imagery or rhythm, but it's not very effective with dialogue or plot, so the same remembered event, first addressed in poetry, might yield something different in prose.

Harris: When WLA editor Donald Anderson first asked me to interview you a year ago, I encountered your edited work *Vietnam: A Traveler's Literary Companion*. Yeah, yeah, I thought—since Balaban edited this work, I'll read the Foreword and move on. After reading the Foreword I thought, well, I'll read a couple of the stories. I was stunned by Thiep's

opening tale, “Salt of the Jungle,” and read the first three stories before looking up. I was later struck by the aphoristic power of Ninh’s “A River’s Mystery,” and realized how much I had missed by my general ignorance of Asian writers.

Balaban: Well, the same thing happened to me as I saw the stories come in. (This is what I mean about the surprise and delight of discovery of a foreign culture). Thiep is world class. He’s like Borges, as I said in my introduction, and I was right that he had never heard of the Argentine master. This is Vietnam beyond the war: Vietnamese who are funny, Vietnamese who are sexy, Vietnamese who are alive in a brilliant universe.

Harris: I wonder whether you could say a little about how this collaborative effort with Vietnam writers developed.

Balaban: I just got asked by the publisher. My name comes up in regards to translating from Vietnamese. That’s also how I ended up working with Geoffrey Clifford, the ex-chopper pilot who took those exquisite color photos for *Vietnam: The Land We Never Knew*, which, by the way, is going to reappear next as a traveling exhibit from the Smithsonian Institution.

Harris: In *After Our War*, you set numerous traditions side by side in comparison (or perhaps competition?)—medieval Christian, Confucian, Buddhist, Hindu, Greek heroic, Vietnamese oral. What did you want your reader to carry from this montage of cultural exposures?

Balaban: I’d hate to think of such references as comparison or even as montage. I revere the great literary traditions of the West and East Asia. Whatever allusion is there in my writing is there because it was a means of making sense. I didn’t have a program of cultural contrasts.

Harris: *Words for My Daughter* brings us back to that opening question of whether you consider yourself as a Vietnam writer, or a writer still interested in your Vietnam experience. Only five poems, I think, directly mention the War (“Words for My Daughter,” “Thoughts Before Dawn,” “For the Missing in Action,” “The Water Buffalo,” and “Mr. Giai’s Poem”). I guess we could add your two Huong translations (“Tavern by a Mountain Stream,” and “Spring-Watch Pavilion”) as indirect Vietnam poems. But arguably the whole movement of the book—the need to travel the “desert wastes” (“Peyote Villanelle”) of the American

West in order to find “Moments . . . that . . . you can love this country” (“Passing Through Albuquerque”)—suggests a parallel journey into your own interior, to address the remaining wastes of the Vietnam War. Is this an “overread” on my part, or would you say that post-Vietnam spiritual and cultural reconnection are the underlying themes of this book?

Balaban: Your reading is dead on. When I came back from Vietnam I hitchhiked all around the U.S.A. trying to see if it was home. I spent a lot of time totally alone in the high deserts of New Mexico: Bandelier Canyon, the Garapata Plateau, Cebolla Canyon, Albuquerque, Taos. The empty landscapes were great respites after the drone and bumper glare of the big highways where I had to talk and listen to inane and insane people just to get where I was going, which wasn’t very clear anyway. I remember hitchhiking to Boulder, Colorado to see my friend John Steinbeck, IVth, now dead, and he was talking about post-traumatic stress syndrome, then a new phrase, and, sort-of thunderstruck, I asked him, “John, do you think *we* suffer from PTSD?” He looked at me like I was stupid, reminded me of my work in “the burned baby business,”—children burned by white phosphorous and napalm, their chins glued to their chests, children with their mouths blown off, children shredded by our cluster bombs—and said, “*C’mon*, Balaban,” just as we nearly were run down by cyclists from the Red Zinger Rally.

Harris: In 1998 in WLA (“War, Poetry, and Ethics: A Symposium”), you mentioned that you discover the full depth of love, friendship and virtue in the midst of war—admittedly a partial paraphrase on my part. In *Words* I felt I encountered a maturation of those loves and friendships begun in the midst of war. For instance, you re-envision your relationship with Mary Bui Thi Khuy (*After Our War*, “For Mary Bui Thi Khuy, 1944-1969”) in “Thoughts Before Dawn,” especially in your last five lines of “Dawn”—a haunting recollection of “For Mary.” And I read “Estuary” as a beautiful, more intimate revisiting of your earlier love poem to your wife (*After Our War*, “Having Discovered a Snail Shell, the Poet Presents It in the Metaphysical Manner”). Perhaps you’d like to say a bit more about these poems, or other re-envisionings that I didn’t recognize. My central question here is an extension of both the poems and your comments at the 1998 War, Poetry and Ethics Symposium. I agree—and I think most soldiers would—that relationships formed within the press of war and prolonged deployment have an intensity perhaps unparalleled in a peaceful civilian environment. Do you think its possible

to hold that love without holding the trauma of war in which the relationships were formed? It seems to me that your re-envisioning may in part be attempting to do this, or at least arrive at some other suitable reconciliation with a painful shared past.

Balaban: The full quote is from Dante's *De Eloquentia Vulgari*: "The proper subjects for poetry are love, virtue, and war." My strongest friendships were formed in Vietnam: with John Steinbeck, Steve Erhart, David Gitelson, John and Alex Clarke. I've written poems for all of them; the first three, all dead, in *Locusts at the Edge of Summer*. For Alex and John, I wrote a marriage poem in *After Our War*. Clarke, a British surgeon, and Alex, a British nurse, cared for the children before we evacuated them to the United States for extended surgery and rehabilitation. War really lets you know who your friends are. Even if people are noncombatants, you can tell an awful lot about them by how they behave in the proximity of slaughter. This leaves one with a problem on returning home. I went from a war zone to a college campus. My academic colleagues, if you consider this, are mostly people who went from high school, or prep school, directly to graduate school and then to the classroom. The battles waged on the contemporary college campus are bizarre. As Dante suggests, where can love and virtue be tested more strongly than in warfare, where we see angels spring up and devils dance on our heads?

Harris: I think "Walking Down Cebolla Canyon" (*Words*) brings us full circle to the general issues we discussed earlier, about the possibilities of knowing what is "true" or "moral." It seems to me that you're saying these values don't exist in some objective form outside us, that we create them as we make our choices and experience their consequences.

Balaban: On the contrary, you could almost say that the exterior world, regarded by an open mind, is nothing but a moral instruction. This is why I have stayed a poet.

Will Harris, an associate professor of English at the United States Air Force Academy, edited the Academy's research journal *Discovery* for three years. He has published poetry and essays, with a forthcoming essay on the evolution of Zora Neale Hurston's literary style in *The Zora Neale Hurston Forum*.