

JOHN BALABAN

Back then

Looking for some peace of mind
was like searching for a cricket in a field.
He'd head out, following his best directions
only to drive around from noon to nightfall
past bogs and cornfields and tangly woods.
His car would get stuck, or the battery die
and he would have to hump it to a farmhouse to call for a tow.
Back in town, he would sit at the bar with a beer,
wondering why the locals were lying,
and slapping mosquitoes whining at his ear.
He had all the right gear, just couldn't get there.

One evening he spotted a mule deer
ambling up a hillside path
and he followed it to higher ground
as a huge moon rose off the ridge
where he caught the scent of pine needles.
So he kept on until dark, reaching a ledge
overlooking Phantom Lake and the ghost town,
His breath fogged in the cooling mountain air.
Moonlight seemed to pour from his nostrils.
He made camp there, sleeping that night
in a mess of dreams, troubled with bat squeaks,
with wild burros braying along the nearby creek.

At dawn the bats were pocketed upside down
in the canyon wall rinsed in pink light
and he saw the burros grazing wheatgrass and sage.
At the canyon head, a cave yawned open
but empty of the voices that muttered in the night.
And the blasted tree, high on the mesa rim
—that writhed at dusk like a man crucified—
was a tree again, rocking in the wind.
Stars gone, the sky streaked in sunlight.
A canyon wren, perched in a willow,
plied the dawn with clear, inquiring song.

JOHN BALABAN is the author of twelve books of poetry and prose, including four volumes which together have won The Academy of American Poets' Lamont prize, a National Poetry Series Selection, and two nominations for the National Book Award, *After Our War* (1974) and *Locusts at the Edge of Summer* (1998). His *Locusts at the Edge of Summer: New and Selected Poems* won the 1998 William Carlos Williams Award from the Poetry Society of America. Balaban is a director of the Vietnamese Nôm Preservation Foundation and Professor Emeritus of English at North Carolina State University in Raleigh.