

## Book Review

*Passing through a Gate: Poems, Essays, and Translations.*

John Balaban. Copper Canyon Press, 2024. \$24, 232 pp.

Reviewed by Dale Ritterbusch

**E**arly in the literary response to the Vietnam war, John Balaban wrote *After Our War*, an extraordinary collection of poems stemming from his time in Viet Nam as a conscientious objector. Where other writers were fiercely polemical in their treatment, Balaban was a consummate artist following in the footsteps of all those great writers of war poetry beginning, in the modern era, with the WWI trench poetry of Sassoon, Owen, et al. After the Battle of the Somme, poets no longer looked skyward to record the pleasant flights of skylarks overhead, but to the carnage before them, the immense destruction of the landscape, no man's land where nothing was left alive except the rats feeding on corpses. So much for Georgian poetry. Needless to say, traditional poetic sensibilities were grievously offended. It must be remembered that in the annals of literary history, these trench poets changed the course of poetry. The old abstractions, duty, honor, courage, were supplanted by more direct observations. The "red, sweet wine of youth" was honestly then recorded as blood. The question that remained, moving from one war to the next, was how to write a poem about war that, aesthetically, was not an imitation of past literary successes. Balaban formidably responds to that question with an introductory essay in his latest volume, *Passing through a Gate*. This essay explores the validity of poetry generally and offers a defense of war poetry, poetry to confront the most terrible aspects of our inhumanity.

There are and will continue to be detractors, those who believe poetry should be above all this, existing on some ethereal plane where poets, like angels, record the best that we do in order to secure a place in some heavenly abode. Some of these detractors are scholars and veterans of other wars. Paul Fussell, for example, gave a lecture on war poetry at Penn where he dismissed the poems in the Vietnam war poetry anthology, *Carrying the Darkness*, finding nothing of value. Yet early in that volume are found poems by Philip Appleman and John Balaban. John mentions this volume in his essay, but he does not point out that among the weakest poems are those by poets of great reputation, none of whom had served in Vietnam. This essay, "War Poetry, Political Poetry, and the Invisible Powers," offers a validation of poetic art that should be read by all practicing poets and by anyone schooled in the humanities. It is up to each generation of war poets to find the proper aesthetic response, a difficult thing to do since the inkling is to duplicate past success. Balaban's poetry coming out of the Vietnam war has transcended past limitations, offering a distinctive body of work that defies the detractors, the readers that dismiss war poetry as a mere sub-genre unworthy of attention. Even Yeats dismissed war poetry as "sucked sugar stick."

In 1962, (three years before the 9<sup>th</sup> Marine Expedition Brigade landed at Da Nang), Balaban traveled from Philadelphia to Seattle "seeing America with nothing intervening." Several years later, he again traveled across the country, but this time after two extensive trips to Viet Nam. He recorded the difference: "The U.S. had changed. I had changed." His poetry reflects these changes with commanding insight. His travels and the literature that results are the equivalent of an Amerind vision quest, regenerative in its personal and cultural epiphany. These are journeys of some undertaking, not just a curious tourist's exploration of America, but an attempt to discover the country that spawned that interminable war; it is a spiritual journey, a

journey of self-realization, but not one of recrimination. As he writes in "Passing through Albuquerque":

In the moment when the locusts pause and the girl  
presses her up-fluttering dress to her bony knees  
you can hear a banjo, guitar, and fiddle

playing "The Mississippi Sawyer" inside a shack.

Moments like that, you can love this country.

In some measure these are love poems that bridge the war and our vision of what this country represents. The poems possess a profound, even spiritual, belief that, despite the war, transcendence is possible. In another piece he realizes, "I was called into a field of compassion / into a universe of billions of souls . . . ." "In Words for My Daughter," he writes this affirmation: "I want you to know the worst and be free from it. / I want you to know the worst and still find good."

Abundant in these poems are references to the natural world, a naming of the bountiful flora and fauna, the spaces our species shares with them. This is very much separate from what might be termed "nature poetry," a classification that has, over the years, been thought to define poetry but now has perhaps as many detractors as appreciators given the many prejudices and biases accorded the very nature of poetry, horrible pun intended. The first stanza of "Sitting on Blue Mountain, Watching the Birds Fly South and Thinking of St. Julien Ravenel Childs" at first glance appears merely a description of one facet of the natural world, documentation of the world of birds:

In a state of hysteria, the birds flap south.  
Cowbirds, grackles, blackbirds, starlings  
wink through the twilight in wavering lines  
which break to tumble on stubbled cornfield  
and woods which shrill with manic birds.  
They flutter in branches, jostle and peck,  
shuffle scaly claws along the boughs; nudge,  
nestle, then tuck their heads in sleep.  
At dawn, the flock will rise with shrieks,  
scatter up, circle, and shake themselves south.

In the next stanza, however, the poet questions the attention he has given to those birds: "Are these birds worth a whole stanza? Sure, / they point our noses south; our hearts to memory." And then he recounts a formidable family history including the Confederate surgeon who helped invent a partially submersible submarine/torpedo boat that was used to attack the Northern ironclad vessel, the USS New Ironsides. The hold of this history is strong, reminding us that the past is never really past; as the poet writes, "The past is large petalled and fades slowly."

In so many of the poems where there are elaborate descriptions of the natural world, we are given the visceral sensation of being part of that world, not merely as an observer, but as an integral part of creation. We are interconnected with the natural order, not separate from it, and in so many of these poems we see the natural world as a place of solace and spiritual growth. In the psyche, the natural world serves as a temple of contemplation, a refuge, a sangha. If you

read the story of Bui Ngoc Huông, one of the children Balaban helped bring back to the States for major surgery, you will see the need for places in this world to offer sanctuary.

“Loving Graham Greene” is a poem that requires a specialized knowledge reflective of experience so subjective that it is best appreciated by those who were there, those who suffered or endured the many losses of that war. This poem works on many levels as all fine poems do, but here, at the highest level, as several generations have passed, the war in large measure disappeared down the memory hole, eclipsed by more recent wars, the poem examines the hold the Vietnam War has, as all wars have, on those who live with such terrible, intimate knowledge, aware of the toll it takes on the human psyche. As Balaban writes elsewhere, “. . . Vietnam has a way of never letting one go.” And so, the war does not end for those so traumatically affected, and the lesson the poem brings is that wars are never over. Never.

The reach of war is far and long. Many years after the war had officially ended, a student of mine related the story of his father who committed suicide nearly a decade after that war ended because a good friend of his had died in Vietnam, and the father, because of a medical deferment, could not serve. The father, the son for a lifetime, unable to put the war behind them. It is difficult to measure the anguish this family has suffered as a result of the war, but it is indefensible not to try. There are many distressing stories like this, touching so many lives. Balaban’s Vietnam experience, his poems, and recollections, resonate such that those still feeling the trauma of that war know and understand intimately the far reaches of that war. If one considers war poetry to be somewhat esoteric in its appeal to a general readership of poetry, not given to universal interest, one fails to contend with the most pressing problems of the age, a bit like burying one’s head in the sand, or, to borrow another cliché, a bit like shooting one’s self in the foot, or both feet actually, as the most crucial and urgent concerns of our species are

not addressed. Balaban quotes Mona Van Duyn who said, "They (poems) work invisibly—they widen and deepen the human imagination; they increase empathy without which no being is truly human." "Loving Graham Greene" is a poem that creates such an empathic response. War poetry, love poetry, nature poetry—labels that demean the art. Is "Ozymandias" not a political poem? The best poems strike deep, engage the reader in the way that art does better than any other cultural construct; they provide insight into the most extreme complexities of human experience. Such remarkable poems are found in this volume, a compendium of some of John Balaban's previous work, work that persists, that has not lost its pungency, its deep-seated humanity, work that over a lifetime is still enthralling and revelatory.

**Dale Ritterbusch** is a retired Professor of English who has published seven full-length collections of poetry and short fiction. He is a veteran of the Vietnam War, serving as a liaison officer to JUSMAAG/MACTHAI in 1969. His unit received a Meritorious Unit Commendation for service in Southeast Asia, primarily for the aerial mines program, anti-personnel mines dispersed along the Ho Chi Minh trail and elsewhere to prevent enemy infiltration. His latest collection is entitled *All the Wealth and Splendor*.