

JOHN BALABAN

*For John Haag, Logger, Sailor, Housepainter,
Poet, Professor, and Grower of Orchids*

“I found myself in a dark wood where the right way was lost”

—Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 1, 1-2

Long ago, at his College of Glooms
he sauntered about in leather pants

striding the halls as if they were a deck
from his sailing days in the Merchant Marine

as if he were just there on shore leave
and had to make ship in Seattle

tailing trucks through snowy foothills
as flurries veered at his windshield

and brake lights blinked ahead on the turns
as he chanted to himself and the snow

all the poems he ever learned alone
on moon-washed nights when waves were listening:

Dylan Thomas. Wallace Stevens.
Even "The Ashtabula Bridge Disaster."

—squinting into the dark and saying poems,
overtaking a truck on the straightaway

driving hard until he hit Puget Sound
where the sea rushed the rocks on the beach

under a fat moon wreathed in fog
and the bellbuoy chimed all night.

And, now, at eighty, slumped in a wheelchair,
half-paralyzed, gaunt, short-term memory gone,

snow-white hair tied in a pony-tail,
ramming his foot-rest into the plaster wall

he pauses, remembering me from forty years ago, and
says my name, his old friend come to see him,

having driven here through sad country towns
past their pheasant farms and gunsmith shops,

wood-rotting, paint-peeling towns, their
forests long lumbered out, their coal, taken,

and Old Glory drooping on Memorial Day porches
in the indifferent glare of early summer.

"Man," he says, rolling back his wheelchair, "I didn't know
how much I missed you until I saw you again." Then asks:

"what is this place?" and returns to banging at the wall.

Calling into the dark wood where he wanders,
I say the names of women he lived with

and he stops rocking for a moment, and smiles,
finding himself once again in a good known place

as their shadows slip out from synaptic fogs
and he repeats their names. What else do poets do

but say the names that summon love?

Come Beatrice, and Lucia, bringer of light,
Poeta fui, e cantai. "I was a poet, and sang..."

JOHN BALABAN, now Professor of English at North Carolina State University, has been nominated twice for the National Book Award in Poetry, and is a winner of the William Carlos Williams award from the Poetry Society of America. He served in Vietnam as a conscientious objector and is known for his translations of Vietnamese poetry and his work to preserve Vietnamese writing in the ancient script called Nom: <<http://nomfoundation.org>>. John Haag, author of *The Brine Breather*, was Balaban's poetry teacher at Penn State.