

Escort

John Balaban

As readers of *War, Literature & the Arts* must know, poems about war--poems set in a wartime landscape--run peculiar risks. Back in 1968, I sent some of my first poems about Vietnam to my former teacher, the writer John Barth, who wrote back:

The poems get it said, even to me, who do not find very much war poetry successful if it has more than one topical proper name in it. Most of Lowell's and Bly's & Who-Have-You's Vietnam verse, sincere as its horrification and indignation is, will fare as badly as Karl Shapiro's V-Letter poems, I believe, once the bloody war is over and the verses have to survive on their excellence alone.

Similarly, W.H. Auden, in his preface to a book of poems set in World War II, noted that

The problem for a poet in writing about modern war is that, while he can only deal with events of which he has firsthand knowledge--invention, however imaginative, is bound to be fake--his poems must somehow transcend mere journalistic reportage.

These concerns of reach and authenticity sometimes pushed me to turn to memoir (*Remembering Heaven's Face*) or fiction (*Coming Down Again*) and even to scholarship, as you can see in the preceding essay and a couple of books (*Ca Dao Vietnam*) and (*Spring Essence*).

But here are some poems that I hope that can still stand on their own.

--John Balaban

After Our War

After our war, the dismembered bits

--all those pierced eyes, ear slivers, jaw splinters,
gouged lips, odd tibias, skin flaps, and toes--
came squinting, wobbling, jabbering back.

The genitals, of course, were the most bizarre,
inching along roads like glowworms and slugs.

The living wanted them back but good as new.

The dead, of course, had no use for them.

And the ghosts, the tens of thousands of abandoned souls
who had appeared like swamp fog in the city streets,
on the evening altars, and on doorsills of cratered homes,
also had no use for the scraps and bits
because, in their opinion, they looked good without them.

Since all things naturally return to their source,
these snags and tatters arrived, with immigrant uncertainty,
in the United States. It was almost home.

So, now, one can sometimes see a friend or a famous man talking
with an extra pair of lips glued and yammering on his cheek,
and this is why handshakes are often unpleasant,
why it is better, sometimes, not to look another in the eye,
why, at your daughter's breast thickens a hard keloidal scar.

After the war, with such Cheshire cats grinning in our trees,

will the ancient tales still tell us new truths?

Will the myriad world surrender new metaphor?

After our war, how will love speak?

Along The Mekong

1. Crossing on the Mekong Ferry,

Reading the August 14, 1971, *New Yorker*

Near mud-tide mangrove swamps, under the drilling sun,

the glossy cover, styled green print, struck the eye:

trumpet-burst yellow blossoms, grapevine leaves,

--nasturtiums or pumpkin flowers? They twined

in tangles by our cottage in Pennsylvania.

Inside, another article by Thomas Whiteside.

2, 4, 5-T, teratogenicity in births;

South Vietnam 1/7th defoliated; residue

in rivers, foods, and mother's milk.

With a scientific turn of mind I can understand

that malformations in lab mice may not occur in children

but when, last week, I ushered hare-lipped, tusk-toothed kids

to surgery in Saigon, I wondered, what did they drink

that I have drunk? What dioxin, picloram, arsenic

have knitted in my cells, in my wife now carrying

our first child. Pigs were squealing in a truck.

Through the slats, I saw one lather the foam in its mouth.

2. River Market

Under the tattered umbrellas, piles of live eels
sliding in flat tin pans. Catfish flip for air.
Sunfish, gutted and gilled, cheek plates snipped.
Baskets of ginger roots, ginseng, and garlic cloves;
pails of shallots, chives, green citrons. Rice grain
in pyramids. Pig halves knotted with mushy fat.
Beef haunches hung from fist-size hooks. Sorcerers,
palmists, and, under a tarp: thick incense, candles.
Why, a reporter, or a cook, could write this poem
if he had learned dictation. But what if I said,
simply suggested, that all this blood fleck,
muscle rot, earth root and earth leaf, scraps
of glittery scales, fine white grains, fast talk,
gut grime, crab claws, bright light, sweetest smells
--Said: a human self: a mirror held up before.

3. Waiting for a Boat to Cross Back

Slouched on a bench under some shade,
I overhear that two men shot each other on the street,
and I watch turkey cocks drag cornstalk fans

like mad, rivaling kings in Kabuki
sweeping huge sleeve and brocaded train.

The drab hens huddle, beak to beak,
in queenly boredom of rhetoric and murder.

A mottled cur with a grease-paint grin
laps up fish scales and red, saw-toothed gills
guttled from panfish at the river's edge.

In Celebration of Spring

Our Asian war is over; others have begun.

Our elders, who tried to mortgage lies,
are disgraced, or dead, and already
the brokers are picking their pockets
for the keys and the credit cards.

In delta swamp in a united Vietnam,
a Marine with a bullfrog for a face,
rots in equatorial heat. An eel
slides through the cage of his bared ribs.
At night, on the old battlefields, ghosts,
like patches of fog, lurk into villages
to maunder on doorsills of cratered homes,
while all across the U.S.A.
the wounded walk about and wonder where to go.

And today, in the simmer of lyric sunlight,
the chrysalis pulses in its mushy cocoon,
under the bark on a gnarled root of an elm.
In the brilliant creek, a minnow flashes
delirious with gnats. The turtle's heart

quickness its taps in the warm bank sludge.

As she chases a frisbee spinning in sunlight,

a girl's breasts bounce full and strong;

a boy's stomach, as he turns, is flat and strong.

Swear by the locust, by dragonflies on ferns,

by the minnow's flash, the tremble of a breast,

by the new earth spongy under our feet:

that as we grow old, we will not grow evil,

that although our garden seeps with sewage,

and our elders think it's up for auction--swear

by this dazzle that does not wish to leave us--

that we will be keepers of a garden, nonetheless.

Loving Graham Greene (for Gloria Emerson)

"But in Indo-China I drained a magic potion, a loving-cup which I have shared since with many retired *colon* and officers of the Foreign Legion who eyes light up at the mention of Saigon and Hanoi." –Graham Greene, Introduction, *The Quiet American*.

So there he was, decades after the war,
rattled and adrift, waiting in the waiting room
of a shrink in New Mexico, of all places,

an office in a garden by an adobe house
its tin roof aflame with sunlight
as the sun humped across blue sky

and hummingbirds raced to plunder heads
of purple cosmos and bee balm while sunflowers
looked up like a congregation seeking benediction.

Beyond the garden, the river surged over
canyon rocks and piñon snags where big trout
lurked in the cold shadows of dark pools.

He was on vacation; he hadn't planned this visit.

The wife and kids were taking the trail ride.

He had found the name in the phone book.

After a lot of babble and blubbing, the guy
asked him if he knew what was wrong,
what was hurting him so, why he was crying,

why he was here. He shook
his head "no." No,
he didn't know.

"Still a reporter?" *Yes.*

"Successful?" *Yes, pretty much.*

"Happily married?" *Well, yeah.*

"But your eyes," he said, "are dead,
except when you mention Vietnam
and then a little spurt of epinephrine

zings your system and your eyes light up."

The therapist charged sixty bucks,
suggested he take up skydiving.

*Driving back to the riddled heap of villagers
from which someone had pulled out a live 3-year old,
past the berm wire where they were still yanking off*

the bodies, he was flying in a chopper when it dove down

to open up on a lone elephant in a field of sugar cane.

After a gin fizz on the veranda of the Continental Palace,

he was back at the motel where everyone was by the pool,

the kids all lit up after their trail ride high on the canyon rim,

where the air was sweet with pine and bear grass, the sky clear.

Mr. Gai's Poem

The French ships shelled Haiphong then took the port.

Mr. Gai was running down a road, mobilized

with two friends, looking for their unit in towns

where thatch and geese lay shattered on the roads

and smoke looped up from cratered yards. A swarm

of bullock carts and bicycles streamed against them

as trousered women strained with children, chickens,

charcoal, and rice towards Hanoi in the barrage lull.

Then, Gai said, they saw just stragglers.

Ahead, the horizon thumped with bombs.

At an empty inn they tried their luck

though the waiter said he'd nothing left.

"Just a coffee," said Mr. Gai. "A sip

of whisky," said one friend. "A cigarette," the other.

Miraculously, these each appeared. Serene,

they sat a while, then went to fight.

Giai wrote a poem about that pause for Ve Quoc Quan,

the Army paper. Critics found the piece bourgeois.

Forty years of combat now behind him

--Japanese, Americans, and French.

Wounded twice, deployed in jungles for nine years,

his son just killed in Cambodia,

Giai tells this tale to three Americans

each young enough to be his son:

an ex-Marine once rocketted in Hue,

an Army grunt, mortared at Bong Son,

and a volunteer hit by a stray of shrapnel,

all four now silent in the floating restaurant

rocking on moorlines in the Saigon river.

Crabshells and beer bottles litter their table.

A rat runs a rafter overhead. A wave slaps by.

"That moment," Gai adds, "was a little like now."

They raise their glasses to the river's amber light,

all four as quiet as if carved in ivory.

Palindrome for Clyde Coreil in Saigon

Pigeons flutter in the eaves of the Music Bldg;

here there are a number of beautiful women.

Amid the clutter of books on my desk,

I prop my feet, lean back, and read.

Hot lunches are served at a cafeteria nearby.

Each afternoon, I pick up The Times

A secretary brews coffee. I get paid for talking

to students who don't care what I say

about subjects I don't care to talk about.

When I can afford them, I buy good cigars.

Every now and then, you get cigars from home.

Puffing on one, you dicker with a shopgirl

over the price of a breakfast of frenchbread

and black coffee in a sugar-bottomed glass.

You study newsprint on a wrapper of dried squid.

Elephant grass and rice fields expand beyond the city.

Returning at evening, your feet plod along a street

crunching with fishheads, roaches, and shattered glass.

A bargirl telephones to see if you'll be in. Outside,

music flutters in the wings of rising pigeons.

Soldier Home

"At first Krebs . . . did not want to talk about the war at all.
Later he felt the need to talk but no one wanted to hear about it."

--Ernest Hemingway, "Soldier's Home"

Full moon over Beaufort Inlet, moon path streaming towards him
barefoot on the cold beach, watching wave crests rush the shore.

Out in the Atlantic silence, boat lights wink on a black horizon
as a Camp Lejeune chopper circles and circles a spot on the sea,

engine staccato louder than the waves, search light beams
brighter than the moon. Finally it breaks off and heads landward,

just a wasp shape crossing the moon, cutting lights at the shoreline,
its engine loud in the man's head. Not even the waves can drown it.

"Captains and soldiers are smeared on the bushes and grass;
Our Generals schemed in vain," Li Po wrote, twelve hundred years ago.

Thoughts Before Dawn

(for Mary Bui Thi Khuy, 1944-1969)

The bare oaks rock and snowcrust tumbles down.

The creaking eave woke me thinking of you

crushed by a truck decades ago

when the drunk soldier lost the wheel.

We brought to better care the nearly lost,

the boy burned by white phosphorus, chin

glued to his chest; the scalped girl;

the triple amputee from the road-mined bus;

the kid without a jaw; the one with no nose.

You never wept in front of them, but waited

until the gurney rolled them into surgery.

I guess that's what amazed me most.

Why didn't you fall apart or quit?

Once, we flew tow patched kids home,

getting in by Army chopper,

a Huey Black Cat that skimmed the sea.

When the gunner opened up on a whale

you closed your eyes and covered your ears
and your small body shook in your silk *ao dai*.
Oh, Mary. In this artic night, I lie in my bed
and rehearse your smile, bright white teeth,
the funny way you rode your Honda 50: perched
so straight, silky hair bunned up in a brim hat,
front brim blown back, and dark glasses.
Brave woman, I hope you never saw the truck.

The Guard at the Binh Thuy Bridge

How still he stands as mists begin to move,
as curling, morning billows creep across

his cooplike, concrete sentry perched mid-bridge
over mid-muddy river. Stares at bush green banks

which bristle rifles, mortars, men--perhaps.

No convoys shake the timbers. No sound

but water slapping boat sides, bank sides, pilings.

He's slung his carbine barrel down to keep

the boring dry, and two banana-clips instead of one
are taped to make, now, forty rounds instead

of twenty. Droplets bead from stock to sight;

they bulb, then strike his boot. He scrapes his heel,

and sees no box bombs floating towards his bridge.

Anchored in red morning mist a narrow junk

rocks its weight. A woman kneels on deck

staring at lapping water. Wets her face.

Idly the thick Rach Binh Thuy slides by.

He aims. At her. Then drops his aim. Idly.

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