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From This Dark Place to the Other: Violence and Connection in the Poetry of Brian Turner

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FROM THIS DARK PLACE TO THE OTHER: VIOLENCE AND CONNECTION IN THE
POETRY OF BRIAN TURNER

by

ALAN SWIRSKY

(Under the Direction of David Dudley)

ABSTRACT

Brian Turner is a poet and American soldier who served in Iraq at the start of the 21st century. His poetry is about his experiences as a soldier interacting with the Iraqi people, his time in America following the war, PTSD, and the endless violence in the war zone. As a comparatively recent entry into the genre of War Poetry, his work pays homage to the writers who preceded him, like Wilfred Owen and Bruce Weigl, while also referencing Middle Eastern poets typically outside the scope of American literature. Through Turner's recurring themes and motifs, connections are established between people on opposite sides of the war, as the same violence that separates people paradoxically unifies them. Turner's poems are divided into categories of violent and nonviolent poems, where violence is quantified by the level of "noise" in each poem as defined by its imagery and structure. Turner's nonviolent poems ultimately point to the presence of peace in the poetry, where this strange unity of people affected by war produces a culture of understanding through loss and suffering, yet it acknowledges that war itself, and with it war poetry, will continue.

INDEX WORDS: Brian Turner, War, War Poetry, Bruce Weigl, Wilfred Owen,
Violence, Connection, Unity, Peace, Iraq War, Iraq, Baghdad,
America, Israel, Middle East, History, Victim, Extremist,
Insurgent

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POETRY OF BRIAN TURNER

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B.A., Florida State University, 2010

M.A., Georgia Southern University, 2015

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INTRODUCTION

In late 2013, I had the opportunity to travel to Israel as part of Birthright Israel, a cultural heritage trip for people of Jewish descent. Having never left the United States prior to my trip, I found myself unexpectedly comfortable in cities like Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Many Israelis, including a group traveling with us, were fluent in English, and many vendors accepted my credit card. The social climate didn't seem hostile, but it was impossible to forget that there was potential danger at any moment. Armed soldiers were a common sight, and we stopped at more than a few memorials to various wars and events in the country's history. The line between ancient and recent history often blurred. Wreckage from wars decades old sat untouched off of main roads and along hiking routes. Incomplete construction sites near the country's contested borders waited for either masonry or demolition. When we arrived at the gate to the Old City of Jerusalem, a structure several hundred years old at one of the most hallowed religious sites in the world, I looked up to see the walls punctuated by bullet holes made within the last century.

During a tour up Mt. Bental, our guide¹ gestured over the landscape to the East and said, "That's Syria. You can't go down there because there are still mines on the ground." Although I could not set foot into Syria, I thought about what might happen if I did cross the border. The people don't look any different from the Israelis (who are themselves so genetically diverse that one could hardly lay stereotypes on them), and I would be as much a stranger to everyone there as the Syrians were to the Israelis. Yet they *were* different because of an invisible line drawn on a map I did not have. I had never met anyone from Syria, and yet I was asked, implicitly, to stand against them, because I am automatically assumed to be pro-Israel due to my heritage despite not identifying as an Israeli.

A colleague of mine back home in Florida, who once told me he used to grow saffron in his home country of Palestine, spoke with me about our connections to the Middle East. I asked him, as a born Palestinian, if he had any strong opinions about the attitudes of the Israelis I met or the nature of Israel's relationship with Palestine. He responded, "Does it matter? Over here, we're all American."

As I've grown up in America, I've found it easy to think that war is something foreign and distant, relegated to newspaper headlines and the backdrop of movies and television shows; for the citizens of Israel and a number of other conflicting nations, however it becomes another element of daily life². The Middle East is often characterized in American popular culture as the heart of darkness, except for those countries allied with the United States. This produces a strong "Us" and "Them" mentality, as though people's geographic location forms the entirety of their identity.

When we talk about war, we are often talking about a war somewhere else, or from another time, but the effects of war are seldom limited to those directly involved. In a passage from Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West*, a few characters discuss what war is before antagonist Judge Holden claims that war itself has some agency beyond man, existing as an entity prior to mankind:

The good book says that he that lives by the sword shall perish by the sword,
said the black.

The judge smiled, his face shining with grease. What right man would have it
any other way? He said.

The good book does indeed count war an evil, said Irving. Yet there's many a bloody tale of war inside it.

It makes no difference what men think of war, said the judge. War endures. As well ask men what they think of stone. War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him. The ultimate trade awaiting the ultimate practitioner . . . War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god. (McCarthy 270-272)

As long as carnivorous species continue to exist, living things will come into conflict with one another. *Homo homini lupus*^a; humans have always fought other humans. While we are alive, there exists the chance that we may find ourselves in a contest for our own lives that may require the taking of someone else's.

Throughout history, war has been a part of literature and the arts. Some of the earliest known texts heavily feature war, violence, or conflict, like the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and Homer's *Iliad*. More recent examples draw upon conflicts throughout history: Dylan Thomas' "The hand that signed the paper" (1934) uses the vague hand of some unspecified authority figure to cause great destruction with an act as simple as signing a treaty; as the speaker opines, "great is the hand that holds dominion over / man by a scribbled name." W. H. Auden's "The Shield of Achilles" (1952) shows Hephaestos forging the shield for Achilles that normally would depict various scenes to represent the entire world, but this poem's shield depicts nothing but war, as the symptoms of suffering are "axioms" to the Hephaestos of the poem. Sara Teasdale's "There Will Come Soft Rains" (1920) imagines a world without war as being synonymous with a world without people.

^a "Man is a wolf to man."

What Thomas, Auden, and Teasdale have written about in their poems is nothing new; their poems imply that war is a universal negative, something to be avoided and feared. Still, war endures, and so too does our literature about it. In the last century, poetry about war and conflict has come to be known as “war poetry,” and the label has even been retroactively applied to material written before the 20th century.

The War Poet Association describes the genre of war poetry as something that emerged during the Great War, when young soldiers wrote poetry as a way to “express extreme emotion at the very edge of experience” (“What is War Poetry?”). One does not need to be a soldier to write about war, as later conflicts like World War II would leave no poet “untouched by the experience of war.” The poets who wrote (and died) during World War I came to be referred to as war poets, owing to their specific range of related subjects. Paul Fussell notes that English soldiers in World War I were “not merely literate but vigorously literary” (*The Great War and Modern Memory* 157) as a result of strong classical education and social trends advocating self-improvement through academic pursuits. Reacting especially to the emotional sentimentality of Romantic work, the poetry of World War I came to be defined by the disillusioned, fragmented lines of Modernism. Poems like Siegfried Sassoon’s “To My Brother” (1918) are situated chronologically alongside Wilfred Owen’s “Dulce Et Decorum Est” (1917-1918) despite major differences in tone:

“To My Brother”

Give me your hand, my brother, search my face;

Look in these eyes lest I should think of shame;

For we have made an end of all things base.

We are returning by the road we came.

Your lot is with the ghosts of soldiers dead,

And I am in the field where men must fight,

But in the gloom I see your laurel'd head

And through your victory I shall win the light. (Sassoon, *The Old Huntsman and*

Other Poems)

“Dulce Et Decorum Est”

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,

Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,

Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs

And towards our distant rest began to trudge.

Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots

But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;

Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots

Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling,

Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;

But someone still was yelling out and stumbling

And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime...
 Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
 As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
 He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
 Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
 And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
 His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
 If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
 Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
 Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
 Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
 My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
 To children ardent for some desperate glory,
 The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*

Pro patria mori. (Owen, *The Poems of Wilfred Owen* 117)

Where Sassoon sees a “laurell’d head” and seeks to “win the light,” Owen refuses to lie to “children ardent for some desperate glory” that war is worth the cost of fighting, and that nations deserve to have men die for them. Owen distinguishes between the soldiers (who are

colloquially called “boys” in the poem) and the “children” near the end being the ones chasing after glory and honor. While Sassoon’s speaker talks of the vague “field where men must fight,” as if by birthright and noble heritage, Owen strips the war down to its violent core, even going so far as to have his speaker step out of the moment and admit to the reader that he still feels helpless to save the phantom soldier who didn’t get his mask on in time, who continues to die before him while reaching out for help.

Jon Silkin claims that while the poets of World War I were not the first to write such damning material about the war, there was no “continuous tradition . . . of anti-war poetry from which these First War poets could draw sustenance” (*The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* 25). The Romantics and poets all the way back to Homer had anticipated the moral and ethical issues of the WWI poets, but lacked the experience “either of combat, or the times” (Silkin 29). War itself had not changed. Silkin continues to ask, referring to the time period commonly associated with Romanticism, “were the Napoleonic Wars so different in the misery they produced?”

In *Heroes’ Twilight*, Bernard Bergonzi discusses the change in poets’ perceptions of war by recalling two Shakespearean characters, Hotspur and Falstaff, from *Henry IV, Part I*. Hotspur chases honor and heroic ideals to his death, while the coward Falstaff embraces self-preservation above all else. To him, honor is no more than a word, and its intangibility and uselessness in the face of death and war render it as something with which he needs no acquaintance. Bergonzi extrapolates this triumph of the non-hero through several other texts published before and after the Great War. Looking at Fabrice from Stendhal’s *The Charterhouse of Parma* (1839) and Yossarian and Cathcart from Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* (1961), Bergonzi points out first the breakdown of the heroic ideal in these texts, then the gradual rise of the metaphorical survivor

crawling out of the rubble after the battle. Fabrice goes into battle with the ideal of heroism only to bear witness to violent atrocities that seem to squelch his thoughts with their intensity, while Yossarian and Cathcart reframe Falstaff and Hotspur, respectively: Cathcart endangers his own men in the pursuit of personal glory, while Yossarian views any man that would try to kill him as his enemy, regardless of allegiance. The impact the first World War (which Bergonzi asserts “can still very properly be referred to by its original name of the Great War”) had on British civilization meant that “the traditional mythology of heroism and the hero, the Hotspurian mode of self-assertion, had ceased to be viable; even though heroic *deeds* could be, and were, performed in abundance” (Bergonzi 17). The artistic representation of war had caught up with the reality; the positivity and idealist themes of war poetry like Sassoon’s early work could no longer stand with the poetry coming out of the Great War. To a character like Judge Holden, that “heroes” and “glory” are found in war is completely incidental; the events of war remain unconcerned with the well-being of those within it, leaving space for the Falstaffs and Yossarians of the world to let their voices be heard.

In *Poetry of the First World War*, Tim Kendall calls the shift from “idealism to bitterness” a “well-worn argument” as he cites David Jones’ observation that war had “hardened into a more relentless, mechanical affair.” While many poets came from “a world where gallantry and decency might still be possible” and descended into “an inferno of technological slaughter” (Introduction xx). Kendall insists that to be a war poet does not necessarily make one anti-war. “In accounts of the War and the art that it inspired, futility has defeated glory as the appropriate response,” he writes, but most war poets “believed the war to be necessary, [and] wanted the costs acknowledged and the truths told” (xxi). A war poet did not have to be “anti-

war” or even “anti-heroism,” but the notion that going to war bestows glory on the soldier has been diminished.

The poetic “hero” has practically dissipated into myth, along with poetic depictions of soldiers who might seek survival and escape instead of noble—but pointless—deaths. Glory, and glory found in death, has been reduced (in Owen’s poetry) to a “lie” told to younger generations. These trends continued throughout the twentieth century, through writers like Yusef Komunyakaa, Tim O’Brien, and Bruce Weigl. The latest in this line of war poets is Brian Turner, whose two poetry collections, *Here, Bullet* (2005) and *Phantom Noise* (2010), come from his experiences in Iraq as part of the United States Army. He writes about the Iraqi landscapes, daily life for soldiers and civilians, and a high level of violence concomitant with war.

When I traveled through Israel, I repeatedly encountered an extension of the American attitude that the Middle East is a dark and foreboding cavern, and in that darkness lie monsters in wait. Turner’s encounters show us the Iraqi people—people at war, but people nonetheless—who regard us with the same suspicion and caution. His poetry desperately attempts to prove to us that there are people, not monsters, on the other end of the gun barrels. His collections of poems find their origin in the fighting and move towards subjects like people’s lives affected by war, and his own intertwined history with war. Turner juxtaposes opposing ideas (e.g. peaceful days and moments of conflict) to draw attention to how people are divided by war. What Turner’s poetry reveals is that the world where American children grow up watching Bruce Lee movies and making improvised explosives and firearms with their parents is the same world where guns develop voices and Iraqi children are caught in IED blasts. We are culturally separated, but have the capacity to be unified under certain (sometimes horrific) conditions. In

“Al-A’imma Bridge,” Turner writes about a tragic bridge collapse in Iraq that cost almost a thousand people their lives. As he explores some of the imagined stories behind each victim, he blends the narration of their lives with world history, unifying all people and all nations in the tragedy of one country. Turner’s poetry reaffirms that writing about warfare and writing about humanity are not mutually exclusive. The struggle to both remain human in a warzone and retain humanity in the calm after the war is a universal one. By acknowledging that war and violence divide people, Turner’s poems center on moments of unity rather than destruction.

In an article titled “‘We Should Know These People We Bury in the Earth’: Brian Turner’s Radical Message,” James Gleason Bishop comments on the way Turner’s poetry seems “not to take sides” (301). In an interview with Bishop, Turner responds to Bishop’s inquiry about one of Turner’s poems, “Illumination Rounds,” and the sentiment the poem delivers on the human cost of warfare:

So many have died. So many have lost those they love. So many wounded, with trauma to be lived with for the decades to come. The very, very least we can do is to recognize the wide distribution of pain to which we are all connected. (301)

Turner does not specify nationalities, gender, or occupation in either his reply to Bishop or the poem itself. He has drawn on the universality of war without sticking to a strictly “American” perspective. He recognizes that the violence which drives us apart (i.e. acts of war between nations) paradoxically also tie us together.

With war comes an interpersonal separation between the people of opposing sides, including both soldiers and civilians. Turner looks closely at the gaps between people and the

many failed attempts to cross them. Being a white American soldier in the heart of an unfamiliar and potentially hostile culture doesn't stop Turner from writing about the people, real or imagined, of Iraq. His poems stretch chronologically from the short daily lives of individuals to the extended histories of cities and nations. Many of the people who appear in his poems are given names. When necessary, he uses Arabic. In her article, "The Whiteness of the Soldier-Speaker in Brian Turner's *Here, Bullet*," Samina Najmi remarks on Turner's ability to remove himself from the established identity of an American soldier, claiming that this "enables empathy, not only between the speaker and the Iraqis of whom he writes, but also between the reader and the people of Iraq" (57). That Turner resists falling into the "trap" of the white male gaze lends not only an element of honesty to the work, but also a necessary compassion that keeps the marginalized groups from being swept aside.

In an article titled "The MFA at War: Proximity, Reality, and Poetry in Brian Turner's *Phantom Noise*," Michael Broek calls war poetry a "special genre," since the speaker is "both actor and acted upon" (35). In addition to being a soldier, Turner earned an MFA from the University of Oregon prior to enlisting. The circumstances of Turner's poetic experience and service are interesting. At first, Turner composed his work while deployed, submitting poems to publications from overseas. "War is just such a catastrophic event," says Broek, "that we expect anyone who has experienced it to require the space of years in order to be able to render anything resembling 'truth'" (35). Some of Turner's predecessors, like Komunyakaa and Weigl, waited years after their service to publish their work. This lack of "distance" between the experience of war and the resulting poems situates Turner closer to Owen and Sassoon. Second, Turner was not drafted, but made the conscious choice to enlist with the idea of writing in mind. In a 2005 interview conducted by Kim Mahler, Turner comments on his "okay" abilities as a soldier, and

describes his role in Iraq as an “embedded poet,” (101) in the same sense that there are “embedded reporters” overseas who view their primary responsibilities as reporting back what they see. For Turner, using poetry to preserve an impression of the world around him was not just a pastime but a priority.

Critics like Bishop, Najmi, and Broek, along with a 2014 memoir by Turner about his time in and after the army, cover Turner’s upbringing, his decisions to write and join the army, and his views on the people around him—fellow soldiers and civilians, Americans and Iraqis alike. Turner’s poems often deal with juxtaposition as he writes about both America and Iraq, and this juxtaposition extends to his poetic structure. His work features two major concepts that explore the relationship between violence and peace and the relationship between separation and unity.

His first primary concept is a level of “noise” present in his poems that operates both as a measure of how much dramatic action exists in a given poem and as a reflection of his recurring theme of distinguishing sounds of violence from more peaceful silence. A poem that sticks with an individual subject for a long period of time in the moments between significant actions (i.e. violence) has a lower “noise” level than the poems that hurriedly jump from subject to subject in moments of chaos. Poems like “Al-A’imma Bridge,” “2,000 lbs.,” and “At Lowe’s Home Improvement Center” have high levels of noise, as new instances of violent or dramatic action are introduced into the poems at a high rate. Poems like “Trowel,” “Viking 1,” and “In the Guggenheim Museum” are examples of quieter poems, where violence is either minimized or not included, and there is often a particular emphasis on actual silence. In Turner’s poetry, “noise” and violence are closely linked, while the quieter, meditative poems work towards a suggestion that peace is found in “silence.” His second recurring concept is imagery dealing with anatomy,

which uses the breakdown of physical structures (e.g. people, weaponry, buildings) to highlight ideas of separation and unity. His explorations into anatomy are seen when his perspective zooms in on individual pieces—parts of parts—of the people and objects of his poem. When studied individually, the *pieces* of things imply something about the whole. Turner's use of synecdoche is often coupled with violent imagery, and might almost appear ironic. While the smallest elements (bullet casings, blown-out chunks of concrete, scorched chassis of automobiles) add a depth of detail that illustrates the far-reaching implications of destruction, sometimes the piece stands for itself. A soldier cradles a severed arm. The ghosts of Iraqi translators carry their own heads. At one point, a moustache sits alone on a sidewalk following a bombing, the man it belonged to obliterated in the attack. The play of the synecdoche is halted in favor of calling attention to the fact that these items are literally no longer attached to people. In *Authoring War*, Kate McLoughlin argues that the “synecdochic approach” is often used to mask the “quantities” of war (e.g. the number of units deployed, or casualties), and stand-in terms like “detail [of soldiers]” work to “dehumanize” the soldiers they describe (McLoughlin 53). Instead, the parts of Turner's subjects—the organs, the tools, the instruments—often represent the *absence* of a complete person, and create for the reader the idea that the death of an individual is an immense tragedy, repeated over and over through his poems. Taking this further, the missing hands and eyes and other limbs in many cases lack any kind of identifier explaining who they came from, or which country they called home. When people are separated into parts, they are also being separated from other people; the violence that physically tears us apart metaphorically separates us as well.

In the first chapter, Turner's work is compared to two of his most prominent forebears, Wilfred Owen and Bruce Weigl. The three poets served in different wars, but their poetry shows

how the lessons of war repeat themselves through the situational experiences of warfare each poet encountered. In dialogue with Owen's and Weigl's works, Turner's poems reflect the idea that the experiences of war are something cyclical and inherited from one generation of soldiers to the next.

My second chapter will explore the "new" warzone of Iraq, Turner's battlefield, and what he finds there: people, violence, futility, and the failed connections among them. While Turner studied what he could of Middle-Eastern poetry during his service, he ultimately came away with the realization that he is but one voice at one point of a history too sweeping to be captured or imagined by a single person. In the present, Turner refuses to compromise his belief that the Iraqis deserve to be viewed as people and that their lives have just as much validity and meaning as any others. This chapter will look at some of Turner's battlefield poetry, as well as how he views his connections with the Iraqi people, from being separated from the civilians of Iraq to his connections with his assailants (recalling the "anatomy" motif), and how conflict and destruction bring people closer together.

In the third chapter, I examine how Turner's recurring elements show violence and peace in his poetry. If the statement made by a war poet could be simplified to what the poet has to say about war, the corollary question is, "What does the poet have to say about peace?" Turner's poetry presents so many moments of violence that the most jarring aspects of his work are when nothing explodes. Turner has learned hard lessons about other cultures through the unfortunate school of war, and his poetry postulates that peace, while difficult to realistically achieve, is not impossible. Historically speaking, violence and war seem unavoidable. Peace, in Turner's work, comes from muting the "noise" of war and finding peace in the silence. Suffering is mutual, and

violence almost unconditionally leads to suffering. If suffering unites people, peace should not divide them.

Turner emerges from the tradition of war poetry with the skills and experiences necessary for crafting competent poetry that manages to look beyond the battlefield to the world ahead, and the challenge of imagining a world without war. The poems provoke thought and discussion, not necessarily about the poet's style of internal half-rhymes and the avoidance of classical structure, nor about the ongoing political tensions between the East and West, but about the human-on-human violence, the moments where the readers are faced with the decisions that lead to destruction, and the questions of self-preservation, understanding others, and the value of all lives before them.

CHAPTER 1
ANOTHER YEAR OF BULLETS AND MORTARS AND MISSIONS: HOW WAR IS
PASSED DOWN AND SHARED THROUGH MULTIPLE GENERATIONS

Although Brian Turner did not enlist until later in his adult life, war had made its mark as part of his family history, as his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather served. In his memoir, Turner dedicates chapters to imaginatively recalling moments from prior wars he had never experienced—his grandfather carrying a flamethrower through Iwo Jima, his father flying over Russia on reconnaissance—and to creating stories about people of the other side of the wars his family fought. His waitress at an Austrian restaurant could be the great-granddaughter of the soldier who was responsible for gassing his great-grandfather. He thinks about a Japanese kamikaze pilot making morning preparations on the day of his final mission, then a young woman in Iraq looking in the mirror one last time before donning an explosive vest, and wonders if they had the same thoughts about their missions.

For Turner, the connections between people, even those at war with one another, did not begin with Iraq. These connections have always existed, sometimes stretching across time, for as long as people continue to do what others before them have done. As Turner went into the army following his father and grandfather in an effort to understand his family history, his poetry follows a similar tradition. Many of Turner's poems echo the works of those who preceded him. World War I poet Wilfred Owen and Vietnam poet (and personal mentor to Turner) Bruce Weigl stand out as heavy influences in Turner's work. Turner's poetic "DNA" from Owen and Weigl shows up in many of his poems as perspectives on similar events that link the poetry. While the environments and types of combat Turner deals with have evolved from the battlefields of Weigl and Owen, all three poets emphasize the human cost of warfare in their poetry.

Although his early work lacks the impact of the poetry he's known for, Wilfred Owen did not transform from Romantic idealist to Modern war poet overnight. In *Out of Battle*, Jon Silkin is quick to address Owen's attitudes toward his surrounding social climate prior to the war. "Owen was not," Silkin says, "a man for whom the war worked a miraculous and beneficial awakening . . . What the war did . . . [was] hasten the fusing of the lyrical poet with the socially responsive man" (198). Owen's poetry features strong anti-propaganda sentiments and observations on the futility of war. Writing at a time when war poetry was emerging from the old shell of ideas couched in national heroism and glory, Owen and other poets of World War I helped set a tone for war poetry that criticizes the act of war and treats it as something to be feared and avoided, not longed for. This tone would continue through World War II, Vietnam, and Iraq. In the *Norton Book of Modern War*, Paul Fussell describes the frustration in the poetry community about the onset of World War II, calling the situation "demoralizing . . . to fight the same enemy twice," and asking, "What is there to say except what has been said the first time?" (311) Fussell points out that missing from the Second World War are the "gung-ho celebrations uttered at the beginning of the First War . . . By the time Hitler invaded Poland and the Allies knew they would have to fight, the old illusion that war was anything but criminal and messy was largely in tatters" (312). Turner and other poets have developed their poetry in this post-Great War tradition, knowing that "heroes" are even more of a rarity and the conduct of battle has changed since the early 1900s. While Weigl is writing during the Vietnam War, "heroism" is dropped in favor of survival. The fear Weigl writes about is not of running into an enemy platoon or running out of bullets, but coming across a booby trap or burning alive in napalm—modern types of destruction that are as inhumane as they are gruesome—as well as the mental trauma of coping with atrocities committed on the battlefield.

Turner's war experiences and writing style more closely resemble Weigl's poetry than it does Owen's, but Turner often carries thematic cues from Owen. Some of the more significant poems that showcase very similar ideas come from the ties between Owen's "S. I. W." and Turner's "Eulogy," both of which feature a soldier committing suicide to illustrate the cost of war, and Weigl's "Burning Shit at An Khe" and Turner's "Wading Out," which use wading through excrement as a metaphor for the futility of the war. The three poets converge, coincidentally, in poems where one soldier meets another from the opposing faction: Owen's "Strange Meeting," Weigl's "Temple Near Quang Tri, Not on the Map," and Turner's "Two Stories Down."

Turner is certainly not the only poet to write about the same subjects Owen has, and it may be argued that there is a finite (though wide) range of subjects to be found in war poems. Bernard Bergonzi calls Owen's dominant theme the "slaughter, or maiming, apparently endless, of young men," and the many ways in which this destruction occurs, such as gassing, blinding, mutilation, and suicide (*Heroes' Twilight* 128). Turner deals with suicide in "Eulogy," a poem based on the suicide of Bruce Miller, Turner's real life friend and fellow soldier; Owen's suicide poem, "S. I. W.," centers on the reasons leading to the suicide of Tim, a fictional English soldier. Turner does not perfectly mirror the "endless slaughter of young men," but both poems make the suggestion that these suicides were indirect results of the war, and in Turner's case, Miller's death continues to haunt later poems.

Structurally, the two poems differ greatly. Owen's "S. I. W." is divided into multiple parts with their own individual titles ("The Prologue," "The Action," "The Poem," and "The Epilogue"), while "Eulogy" is told with no dramatic buildup and in very few lines. The poem is over and finished before it has revealed what happened—the entirety of its single stanza shorter

than the prologue in “S. I. W.” Also telling is the title—the ambiguity of a “Self-Inflicted Wound” is at the heart of Owen’s poem, while “Eulogy” implies that Miller’s death has already occurred.

Turner’s choice of title, “Eulogy,” is reflective and respectful of Miller rather than ironic, like “S. I. W.” Turner feels that Miller deserved something respectful to be said about him, and has introduced “Eulogy” at public readings with a bit of context about the poem. Turner has expanded on Miller’s suicide in interviews, references in later poems, and sections of his memoir. Speaking with Steve Inskeep of National Public Radio, Turner confesses that nobody knew why Miller, who was well-liked, took his own life: “I tried not to go into why he would do it,” Turner says of the poem; “I tried to do the opposite, and look at that maybe now he’s found some peace . . . I hope that if [the family does] come across [the poem] that they find it respectful.” Turner has commented that Miller’s name has been excluded from memorial recitals when the names of soldiers killed in the line of duty are read aloud.

The events that transpire in each poem are very similar: both poems are about young soldiers who take their own lives by shooting themselves. Beyond length, one of the major differences between the poems is Owen’s extended background for Tim in S. I. W., “from his family to his fear of combat. The poem begins with his father, who “would sooner him dead than in disgrace, - / Was proud to see him going, aye, and glad,” (4-5) and transitions quickly to Tim taking shelter from incoming fire as “once an hour a bullet missed its aim” (12) and his courage “leaked, as sand / From the best sandbags after years of rain” (15-16). Following Tim’s death, there is speculation as to how it happened—how accident has been ruled out, enemy fire is out of the question, and the evidence of the “English ball” (28)—and the poem ends with Tim’s burial with the weapon that took his life, and true words for his mother: “Tim died smiling” (37).

Turner eschews social context or background for Miller. With his death being clear from the title, Turner is able to reduce the act itself to a minimal utterance: “It happens,” (1) the “sound” that “reverberates off concertina coils” (6) and “lifts the birds up off the water,” (11) and triggers “voices / [that] crackle over the radio in static confusion” (14-15). In death, Miller finds “what low hush there is / down in the eucalyptus shade,” (17-18) as though he seeks nothing else. While Tim crouched beneath flying bullets, Miller only seems to escape a calm, inactive day to find a true, lasting peace outside the war. His suicide is the most violent act of the day, and of the poem; things were still until Miller’s gunshot disturbs the otherwise tranquil landscape.

Tim serves as an everyman for Owen to call out social attitudes toward the war and the problems that young soldiers faced on the front versus their expectations. He becomes a representative of the Great War, his death counted as another casualty, for reasons seemingly beyond his control. Miller represents the Iraq War without Turner needing to dive into his background or personal life. The reason for Miller’s suicide is not as important as the fact that Miller committed suicide at all. The connection between his suicide and the war is implicit—it could not have been the immediate threat of violence, and there is nothing in the poem to imply familial or social pressure—but Miller’s death, like Tim’s, adds to a statistic and might otherwise be forgotten if not for Turner’s poem. Where Owen ends “S. I. W.” with a report about Tim’s death, Turner ends “Eulogy” with a brief epitaph for Miller.

While Turner borrows from Owen the idea to use suicide as a central element to elucidate the toll war takes on soldiers, Turner’s dialogue with Weigl comes from the real-life experiences of both men. Somehow, both poets managed to find themselves partially submerged in fecal matter, and these moments are turned into metaphors for war as a whole. In “Burning Shit at An

Khe,” Weigl is tasked with burning the excrement piled up in the makeshift base toilets, for there’s no other way to empty them. The bulk of the poem is a narrative description of a soldier lamenting disposal duty, but the small details of the difficulties faced and the suffering inherent to the task operate metaphorically:

Into that pit
I had to climb down
with a rake and matches; eventually,
you had to do something
because it just kept piling up
and it wasn’t our country, it wasn’t
our air thick with the sick smoke
so another soldier and I
lifted the shelter off its blocks
to expose the homemade toilets:
fifty-five gallon drums cut in half
with crude wood seats that splintered.
We soaked the piles in fuel oil
and lit the stuff
and tried to keep the fire burning.
To take my first turn
I paid some kid
a CARE package of booze from home.

I'd walked past the burning once
 and gagged the whole heart of myself—
 it smelled like the world
 was on fire,
 but when my turn came again
 there was no one
 so I stuffed cotton up my nose
 and marched up that hill . . . (1-26)

The metaphor of the task of burning the excrement is a simple one: one soldier (and it seems arbitrary which one) needs to handle something the others are not subject to, be it getting killed in action, carrying out objectionable orders, or taking a major risk on a mission. “It wasn’t our country,” he laments, but the mess created there (the excrement—the war) will not simply vanish. The stench of the burning fecal matter smells like “the world / was on fire,” for the war is a global problem; the speaker, drawn by lottery, is held accountable for contributing to the destruction of the world. As the speaker climbs up the hill to the toilets, he can hear Vietnamese women laughing at him. While he is knee-deep in excrement,³ gusts from helicopters overhead prevent him from lighting the matches. All at once he feels the “stink / and the heat and the worthlessness” and escapes the pit as soon as he gets it ignited.

Turner’s event in “Wading Out” is less intentional—there’s no base camp, no lottery to lose, and no women laughing from the side. He describes his squad having to cross a body of still water that turns out to be septic runoff. Like the sewage field Tim O’Brien’s platoon encounters in *The Things They Carried*, the waste was in the soldiers’ path, and it wasn’t

immediately recognized for what it was—the platoon notices the stench as they set up camp, while Turner sinks down to his thighs before his realization. For Turner and his squad, it’s an unlucky-but-navigable physical obstacle, as they merely need to wade through it. The humor isn’t lost on him, but he quickly moves beyond the laughs to the

. . . months turning
 into years gone by and I’m still down there slogging
 shoulder-deep into the shit, my old platoon
 with another year of bullets and mortars and missions
 dragging them further in, my lieutenant so far down
 I can’t reach him anymore, my squad leader hunting
 For souls that would mark him and drag him under
 Completely, better than any bottle of whiskey. (14-21)

Like Weigl, Turner is sucked into something greater and more destructive than an uncomfortable physical hurdle. The entire squad, the time spent away from the war, the world Turner lives in—all of it is dragged through the septic runoff and rendered unsalvageable. The deeper Turner wades, the harder it is to escape and rescue others. What turns this into a direct commentary on the war is the “year of bullets and mortars and missions” that continues to drag his platoon in, and his squad leader being completely lost in his pursuit of violence. Weigl ends his poem with a shift from past-tense to present-tense, and reflects:

Only now I can't fly.
 I lay down in it
 And fingerprint the words of who I am
 across my chest
 until I'm covered and there's only one smell,
 one word. (53-58)

In *Dismantling Glory*, Lorrie Goldensohn comments on the war poetry of Weigl and his contemporaries, stating that “Vietnam War literature . . . becomes as much a literature of aftermath as a literature of recall, where poetry massively demonstrates the atemporal fluency of the combat experience” (258). The experience of combat becomes a part of the soldier that cannot be left behind or cleansed, even years after the fact. According to Michael Broek, Weigl waited about eight years after his experiences in Vietnam before writing poetry about his time there. The guilt and shame of being involved in Vietnam have not only stuck with Weigl but have defined him—years after the fact, he still cannot wash himself clean. At the end of his thoughts about the deep drag of the pit, Turner attempts to convince himself that there's an exit, and wonders if his war buddies will make it alongside him. Knowing that the stench will never fade, Turner asks, “If one day we find ourselves poolside in California, / the day as bright as this one, how will we hose ourselves off / to remove the stench, standing around a barbeque / talking football—how?” (“Wading Out” 25-28) Making it out of the war alive only seems to be a partial answer for Turner, while Weigl acknowledges that it does not end, and it only consumes, like “slow grazing fire” (Owen, “S. I. W.” 33).

The three poems where Owen, Weigl, and Turner come together share a common theme of connection with another (enemy) soldier through death or destruction. Owen's "Strange Meeting" has one soldier meeting an enemy soldier (revealed at the end of the poem to be one he killed the previous day) in Hell. Weigl's "Temple Near Quang Tri, Not on the Map" has a patrol looking for traps in a temple and ignoring the real danger of a man waiting to detonate an explosive. Turner's "Two Stories Down" is about an Iraqi man who jumps from a balcony and the American soldier who tries to save him.

"Strange Meeting" is mostly told through speech, as the speaker encounters and listens to his victim after realizing he is in Hell. Neither the speaker nor the man he killed are assigned a nationality, but they are clearly on opposing sides and can communicate through a common language. The victim tells the speaker, "Whatever hope is yours, / Was my life also" (16-17) equating the lives of the two men regardless of background and national identity. Britain, France, and Germany do not exist within the space of the poem—every country is grouped into the "nations" that "trek from progress" (29) as they march ever onward into warfare. Whether the speaker was English and the victim German or vice versa is irrelevant—both men ended up in Hell, coming from similar circumstances and meeting similar ends at the hands of soldiers fighting for causes worth questioning. The victim even responds to the speaker's "strange friend" (14) address with an un-ironic "my friend" (40).

Weigl's and Turner's poems are structured more like narratives. Like Owen's poem, however, Weigl employs a first-person speaker. None of the dialogue is specified or given quotes. The squad's point man wordlessly guides the troops inside the temple as they search for booby traps and munitions, the Commanding Officer tells the soldiers to move out once he is satisfied with their search, and the words of the small man sitting in the corner are never written.

His unrecorded language is the most important speech in the poem. One of the soldiers (not the speaker) “moves towards the man, / curious about what he is saying,” (29-30) and as they sit him upright from his contorted position on the floor, the soldiers see the explosive charge “wired between his teeth and the floor” (36). His words are never made clear to the reader, but the position of the charge in his mouth is key: his words, whether they were a warning, a threat, or a plea, are spoken through the bomb blast. The poem ends not with the narrating soldier, but with the image of “The sparrows / [bursting] off the walls into the jungle,” (37-38) which Turner seems to have echoed in “Eulogy” when the sound of the gunshot “lifts the birds up off the water” (11).

For Owen, the two opposing soldiers found connections with each other in death, after they had both been killed. In that death, it is established that the soldiers are not all that different from one another. In Weigl’s poem, the act of trying to communicate and understand someone from the opposing side (and the actual role of the man in the poem is never clarified, whether he was a soldier, an overprotective monk, or simply forced to be a living booby trap) ends in destruction. Turner continues this trend of attempted communication that results in death with “Two Stories Down,” but his formula differs from Owen and Weigl as a result of the type of warfare he has dealt with in Iraq.

“Two Stories Down” is quick in its acceleration from the dreamlike swimming in the air to the violent chaos of two men fighting for control of a knife. The central conflict is between an American soldier and Hasan, who initiates the poem:

When he jumped from the balcony, Hasan swam
in the air over the Ashur Street Market,

arms and legs suspended in a blur
 above palm hearts and crates of lemons,
 not realizing just how hard life fights
 sometimes, how an American soldier
 would run to his aid there on the sidewalk,
 trying to make sense of Hasan's broken legs,
 his screaming, trying to comfort him
 with words in an awkward music
 of stress and care, a soldier he'd startle
 by stealing the knife from its sheath,
 the two of them struggling for the blade
 until the bloodgroove sunk deep
 and Hasan whispered to him,
 Shukran, sadiq, shukran;
 Thank you, friend, thank you. (1-17)

Turner situates the event in a believable but nonspecific place like Weigl's temple "near" Quang Tri rather than Owen's Hell, and the primary action of the poem occurs when Hasan meets the American. While the two begin with distinct nationalities and affiliations, their identities fade once "the knife" is drawn from its sheath (presumably Hasan's, unless Hasan tried to steal the soldier's knife). There is no specific dialogue as the American, separated by a language barrier, tries to help Hasan with "an awkward music / of stress and care," until the end, when Hasan whispers "Shukran, sadiq, shukran," which Turner translates. These elements

represent a blend of the techniques Owen and Weigl employed: action driving the events of the poem, a blurring of ideological lines, and the use of specific dialogue (and Turner's use of "sadiq" echoes Owen's "strange friend").

Turner's differences come in part from the act itself—Hasan doing something dangerous and drastic to draw attention to himself, and the American soldier running in to help—and from the ambiguity that ends his poem: it is unclear who gets stabbed, and by whom. Hasan's leap from the second story is not high enough to believably be an attempt at suicide, and occurs near a random American soldier. The soldier did not approach out of curiosity like the unit in "Temple Near Quang Tri, Not on the Map," but out of a genuine attempt to help this man with broken legs, a man the soldier did not know and could not understand. His attempt to help is pushing against the barrier that separates the two men, and they become "friends."

The ambiguity in the stabbing at the end of the poem takes the emphasis away from the murder and the guilt—in the most likely scenario, Hasan's surprise attack caught the soldier off-guard, and his ending words thank the soldier for the opportunity to kill him in this way, but it could be argued that even a shocked soldier might be able to defend himself against the surprise attack by a man with broken legs and turn the blade around, where Hasan still might thank him for a merciful death. What has transpired here is a successful communication, a violent bridge between the two men, the knife a hyphen connecting one man to another on opposite sides of a war. In this case, *who* died is not as important as the fact that *someone* died, and this was caused, like in "Eulogy," by the war.

Turner carried volumes of Iraqi poetry^b with him in his assault pack while he served in Iraq. He carried the poems of those who wrote before him while composing his own work and

^b Turner mentions *The Muqaddimah (An Introduction to History)* and a volume of *Iraqi Poetry Today*; see "Journal: Day Five" in Bibliography.

submitting it for publication from overseas. He carried poetry into the war and would carry the war into his poetry, as Weigl did after leaving Vietnam. In Weigl's memoir, *The Circle of Hanh*, Weigl talks about what drew him back into writing about Vietnam after having left it behind:

I come from a long line of violence. In my life that's left I want to find a shape for the litany of terror to bring it into comprehension. The impossible and terrible beauty of our lives: that we use them up, that the hunger fades.

What endures is the story. The story circles back on itself if you let it have its way, and if you care for the words as if they were living things whose care your life depends upon, because it does.

Twenty years after I first stepped through that portal, the story led me back into the green everlasting jungle where I had always belonged. I let the story have its way and circled back on itself into the lives of far away people who had never stopped calling to me. It led me back to the circle of Hanh. (Weigl, *The Circle of Hanh* 7)

Weigl felt a pull toward telling his story, and returned to the guilt, the post-traumatic stress, to the war that he had never really left behind. He points to something cyclical, a story that "circles back on itself if you let it have its way." In "War Poets and the Ageless Anger of Achilles," Mark Stillman addresses the repetitive circle of those who go to war:

A history of endless human conflict has produced relatively few soldier poets, and what few poems survive possess an aura recognizable to combatants . . . If we

listen carefully and ignore the incessant drone of ever beating drums, we might catch wind of distant voices from the past, sometimes speaking foreign tongues, but relating the same elegiac tale. (Stillman 485)

For Stillman, those within the circle will be able to recognize others within it, and more importantly, will be able to understand and interpret the common experiences they share. These experiences transcend boundaries of time and nationality. That one war poet follows another is a given. Turner finds himself going to war following his father and grandfather, following Owen and Weigl, and charging straight into the excrement and cess of war that waits in his path to try to swallow him. The end of “Wading Out” includes the closing address, “after Bruce Weigl,” which suggests that Turner has waded in after him, perhaps one day to wade out, but more likely to be followed by the next war poet.

CHAPTER 2
SEE WHAT THERE IS OF KNIVES AND TEETH: HOW TURNER PORTRAYS WAR

In 1991, Ken Jarecke took a photo of a corpse in a truck in the middle of Iraq's Highway 8, in the final hours of Operation Desert Storm. The body was badly burned, with the skin and clothing completely scorched. The man's pained facial expression and teeth remain visible in the photo. He appears to have been trying to clamber out of the vehicle when he succumbed to the fire. Speaking to *The Atlantic's* Torie Rose Deghett, Jarecke discusses this and other photos from the Gulf War. "I don't know who he was or what he did," Jarecke says of the victim. "I don't know if he was a good man, a family man or a bad guy or a terrible soldier or anything like that. But I do know that he fought for his life and thought it was worth fighting for. And he's frozen, he's burned in place just kind of frozen in time in this last ditch effort to save his life." Patrick Hermanson, a public affairs officer traveling with Jarecke and other journalists, asked him, "What do you need to take a picture of that for?" Jarecke responded, "If I don't take pictures like these, people like my mom will think war is what they see in the movies" (Deghett).



Jarecke's photo is only one of many pieces of multimedia that show the true cost of war—a human life extinguished in some violent act. Materials like his photo help bridge the gap between the combatants' experience of warfare and the perceived experience of war by those not involved in it. At the time, the photo was deemed too graphic for the American public and went unused in many media outlets. Today, the graphic content in the photo might be more permissible. While the photo has not changed in the past two decades, our reactions to it may have. When I first came across the photo, the most striking thing about the image of the burned corpse was that it was over twenty years old. The image of a charred corpse, while grisly and disturbing, didn't seem to stand out among the other photos I had collected, save for Jarecke's quotation about his mother beneath it. If I want to find more images like it, I can open Google and type in any combination of words relating to the Middle East, war, or violence. Some of the

photos, like those depicting the ruins of a collapsed building, something that was never human, failed to register with me as “violent.” Over a long enough period of time, and with enough violent material made available, the possibility exists that we become desensitized to the point that our reactions to the dismembered parts of people become indistinguishable from our reactions to the rubble and rebar of destroyed architecture. The contemporary alternative to Jarecke’s photo might be any of the YouTube videos filmed by marines who cheer in excitement as they watch JDAMs obliterate enemy positions.

Violence isn’t something American people typically encounter on a day-to-day basis. Americans are warned of risks to our safety, but many of us aren’t forced to face them with any regularity. Our instincts of self-preservation steer us clear of intentional conflict, and that contributes to a gap in understanding between soldiers and the civilians they protect. Even with material like Jarecke’s photo available, the average civilian cannot easily understand what soldiers go through in a warzone. Violence scares people, yet soldiers are expected to deal with it head-on, despite being just as scared as the rest of us.

Soldiers are often not given a choice about how they interact with violence. For those stationed in conflict zones, the outbreak of violent action initiates trained responses to assess, protect, fight, and survive. As wars continue to occur, the models for conducting warfare are updated to reflect the advances in technology and tactical training that replace older methods. Brian Turner’s poetry accounts for these changes when compared to that of his predecessors, especially as he goes into detail about the equipment and approaches to combat that he and his fellow soldiers employ. His poetry features a field of battle that is not easily defined. Gone are the textbook battles with their clear front lines. Instead, soldiers are required to remain on their guard to fight against an enemy who hides among civilians and attacks seemingly at random.

The cost of combat is not a gain or loss of territory as much as it is a body count, a certain percentage of which is civilians. War has changed, and our embedded poet is on the scene.

Upon entering Iraq for the first time in late 2003, Turner reflects on the new environment he is set to inherit:

We know our prelude will be different from the trenches of the First World War or the front lines of Korea. We won't hear the battle in progress and work our way toward it as baggage trains of wounded, exhausted soldiers and civilians carrying their lives on their backs travel in the opposite direction. Our battle space—and perhaps it's a cliché now—will occur in a 360-degree, three-dimensional environment. When we entered this desert, the available calculus involved in the creation of any new moment changed. Anything is possible. A dead farm animal on the shoulder of the road could harbor an improvised bomb sewn into its belly. A bullet might ride the cool currents between one human being and another. A hellcat missile or a TOW missile might rend the moment open. (Turner, *My Life as a Foreign Country* 16)

The battlefields of the present-day Middle East scarcely resemble the fields of the American Civil War, the trenches of World War I, or the various scenes of carnage of World War II. Turner knew Iraq would be a new, less predictable battleground from those of previous wars. The potential for the eruption of violence was constant, and with it a sudden death. Enemy combatants were not easily identified. Guerilla tactics were compounded by technology

allowing for remote explosives, long-range armaments, and the relative accessibility of weaponry to anyone who wanted to take up arms against the occupying soldiers.

A significant part of what made the insurgents such a dangerous enemy was their willingness to sacrifice the lives of Iraqi civilians and bystanders in their attacks, while the Americans tried not to hurt noncombatants if they could avoid doing so. Not long into the Iraq war, American soldiers occupied Mosul and other Iraqi cities. Although unwilling to risk extensive fighting in the city due to the high population of civilians, the Army nevertheless had to remain on guard for surprise attacks. The insurgents, on the other hand, were willing to take Iraqi lives to disrupt peacekeeping efforts during the war.

Turner highlights this unpredictability by juxtaposing poems with vastly different subjects in his collections. Poems about suicide bombings are placed in sequence with poems about surveillance duty and reconnaissance missions. Poems about setting off explosives go alongside those about dealing with the aftermath of someone detonating one. As if following Jarecke, Turner documents the moments of the war he encountered to reflect his experiences in the field, rather than corroborating what poets like Owen and Weigl have said before.

One of Turner's early poems, "The Hurt Locker," serves as an overture to his view of the war. The poem seems to directly address its readers, with Turner challenging them to understand what he's written about how this war operates:

Nothing but hurt left here.
 Nothing but bullets and pain
 and the bled-out slumping
 and all the *fucks* and *goddamns*

and *Jesus Christs* of the wounded.

Nothing left here but the hurt.

Believe it when you see it.

Believe it when a twelve-year-old

rolls a grenade into the room.

Or when a sniper punches a hole

deep into someone's skull.

Believe it when four men

step from a taxicab in Mosul

to shower the street in brass

and fire. Open the hurt locker

and see what there is of knives

and teeth. Open the hurt locker and learn

how rough men come hunting for souls. (1-18)

Turner urges the reader to “believe it” that there can be no hesitation when violence erupts. It can come from anyone, anywhere. The image of the child soldier seems utterly contrary to the perception of a “normal” war fought by adults, and yet the people in the room have only a few seconds before the grenade goes off. The men stepping from the taxi might almost seem casual, arriving in a four-door automobile instead of a surplus humvee, until they draw their weapons and open fire. Neither the sniper nor his victim is assigned any nationality or side in the poem—it’s one more sniper and one more enemy and one more bullet forming a

bridge between the two. The expectation that war is fought on open battlefields between uniformed opponents looking into the whites of each other's eyes is dead. And besides this violence, there is nothing left.

"The Hurt Locker" reveals the paradox of how violence operates in Turner's poetry: violence, at least initially, forms the only real connection between Turner and the Iraqis. In his memoir, Turner mentions soldiers dealing with locals, going to the markets, and working with coalition forces, but these moments of interaction were insufficient for really coming to an understanding of those people's culture. While Turner took it upon himself to learn what he could about Iraq, his poetry uses violence, often bound with spiritual connotations, to span the divide between the opposing sides. The experience of combat—not haggling in markets or studying the landscape—brought people closer together.

The American public and the U.S. soldiers are separated from each other by the violence that many noncombatants cannot comprehend. What the soldier has experienced on the battlefield, including time spent training to develop certain automatic reactions relevant to fighting, is something that most civilians do not see or understand. With regard to the war in Iraq, the largest influences on the average American's perception of the war is probably a combination of media coverage, pop culture references (e.g. films about the war, like *Jarhead* and *The Hurt Locker*, the latter unrelated to Turner's poem), and word of mouth. Our military and the insurgents they face do not share a common language, country of origin, or history. It's a common misconception that America sent troops to the Middle East to fight Muslims, but being a Muslim does not make one a combatant, even if some insurgents are Islamic extremists. What is shared, what forms the entirety of the connection between people on either side, is the all-encompassing threat of violence (which has the potential to connect combatants to non-

combatants). It's a gross oversimplification, but Turner's poetry relies on it—remove the violence from these poems and suddenly there's no connection, and no communication at all, and no reason for there to be. Turner's poetry reflects a newer kind of war, where violence is openly shared and can erupt at any time from anyone. Though violence brings people together, not surprisingly, it is neither glorified nor sought out. In "Sadiq^c," Turner warns that violence, once loosed, is destructive to the person committing the act as well as the victim:

It should make you shake and sweat,
 nightmare you, strand you in a desert
 of irrevocable desolation, the consequences
 seared into the vein, no matter what adrenaline
 feeds the muscle its courage, no matter
 what god shines down on you, no matter
 what crackling pain and anger
 you carry in your fists, my friend,
 it should break your heart to kill. (1-9)

In the epigraph to the poem, Turner quotes the Persian poet Sa'di, who seems directly to address the threat of a soldier impatient to kill, saying that there's a certain "condition of wisdom" in an archer's patience (not unlike an infantryman from today), "because when the arrow leaves the bow, it returns no more." That violence and potential killing are within the realm of possibility for a soldier serving in Iraq should not make any of those actions lighter on his or her conscience.

^c "Friend."

The message of the poem itself is an old one, which is the point Turner makes by quoting Sa'di, a poet from Iran circa the 13th century. How this message is applied has changed: returning to the training of modern soldiers, what is expected of the soldier who finds himself facing the twelve-year-old rolling a grenade into the room? Either he fails to pull the trigger and the child loses the grenade, or he pulls the trigger, killing his young enemy, and finds himself in the “desert / of irrevocable desolation.” This soldier can no more stop the child’s grenade from exploding than the bullet can lose its course due to glare from the desert sun. This still says little of roadside bombs left as traps for vehicle convoys, civilians acting as decoys for insurgent attackers, and suicide bombers. There is a perpetual threat of death, and still Turner maintains that “it should break your heart to kill,” even if killing is a necessity.

Turner’s longest poem, “2000 lbs.,” strongly illustrates how violence creates connections between people. In it, a suicide bomber detonates a 2,000-lb explosive in a busy market square in Mosul. The poem doesn’t seem to be centered on any specific day or particular event, but is indicative of the random and intense violence that could break out at any moment.

The poem opens with anticipation, beginning “simply with a fist, white-knuckled / and tight . . . [with] two eyes / in a rearview mirror watching for a convoy,” and a “thumb trembling over the button” (1-3, 6). We aren’t given a whole figure, a complete person, but the parts of him—as though he has already been dismembered and dispersed by his own device, the synecdoche foreshadowing the end of the poem. Before the button is pressed, the speaker’s perspective jumps to six simultaneous moments, the brief lives of a handful of unrelated people who are affected by the same event.

The next five stanzas focus on individuals at different points in their lives, some lost in thought and some busy with idle daily activities, who are all a part of this moment of the bomb

detonating. Two of the stanzas show American soldiers Sgt. Ledouix and Lt. Jackson, ostensibly part of the convoy the bomber had been awaiting. The other three stanzas show Iraqi victims: Sefwan the cab driver, Rasheed and Sefa bicycling by, and an old woman and her grandson. Each stanza melds a brief look at the victim's life with the expanding reach of the blast wave. Sefwan is remembering a lost love, implicitly something he caused, as his "last thoughts / are of love and wreckage" (22). Sgt. Ledouix, thrown from a gunner's hatch, reflects in his final moments on his wife and his "wedding ring on his crushed hand," (45) juxtaposing the vulnerability of the human body with the integrity of his spirit. Rasheed and Sefa cycle through the scene and see their reflections in the plate glass display, with mimicking manikins behind it. Their reflections are decimated, and the manikins that "stood as though husband and wife / a moment before . . . now lie together in glass and debris," (59-60, 62) as Rasheed's and Sefa's bodies might be arranged following the explosion. Lt. Jackson had been blowing bubbles innocently out of the Humvee window for passersby when he finds himself waving around bloody stumps at the ends of his arms. The old woman slowly dies beside her grandson, yet refuses to let him go, "as though singing him to sleep" (85).

Each of these people, in his or her moment of death, has been separated from something well loved, something that brought happiness into the world. Even though the poem goes into specific detail with only a few victims, the implication is that many more people suffered in this particular attack, and they too have been likewise cut off from something they valued. The exception is the bomber himself, who separates himself physically to spread himself spiritually, as if he intends the blast to carry some kind of message to those around him. When we finally return to the perpetrator who pressed the button, we see

. . . the man who triggered the button,
 who may have invoked the prophet's name,
 or not—he is obliterated at the epicenter,
 he is everywhere, he is of all things,
 his touch is the air taken in, the blast
 and the wave, the electricity of shock,
 his is the sound the heart makes quick
 in the panic's rush, the surge of blood
 searching for light and color, that sound
 the martyr cries filled with the word
 his soul is made of, *Inshallah*^d. (98-108)

By spreading himself out and literally touching everyone, he has “communicated” his ideology. As the bomber disintegrates, he becomes a spiritual entity, as he becomes a part “of all things,” including the air. The bomber never exists as a complete living person in the poem, only being referred to once as “the man who triggered the button,” in the past-tense. His purpose is to touch everyone else in the poem, the people whose lives he's altered or ended.

The imagery and diction in this stanza are softer than in much of the rest of the poem; the bomber seems more like the calm eye of a storm rather than the force of hatred made manifest. Unlike those who suffer, he has already found peace. The “sound the heart makes quick” and the “surge of blood” are cause for panic, but are also processes of the body versus the unnatural skin tearing and bones crushing. The violence is present, hidden behind the blood “searching for light and color” as it leaves the body, and the word “Inshallah” that carries the bomber's soul is also

^d “Allah be willing.”

the blast wave, but the primary force of the stanza is how “his touch is the air taken in,” how his literal reaching out and touching others is how he communicates his ideology. Where violence separates one person from another, and separates people from the lives they lead and the things they love, Turner has transformed this destruction into a tragic foundation. People are forcefully connected in this act—the poem makes no distinction for the Iraqis or Americans affected by the blast, uniting them in sorrow and death.

The final stanza shows the somber aftermath of the explosion. A telephone line hangs, split, “crackling / a strange incantation the dead hear” (110-111) to show the separation of the spirits of the dead from their physical bodies and the unity of “the dead” themselves. There are no Americans and no Iraqis. The “dead,” collectively, wander “confused amongst one another, / learning each other’s names . . . / speaking *habib*^e softly, one to another,” (112-113, 116) sharing in their mutual pain and suffering what they had been unable to share in life. The scene of this bombing is one of the web strands in Turner’s “wide distribution of pain to which we are all connected” (Bishop 301). The dead have been brought together through the bridge of violence. The passage disregards a religious afterlife in heaven or any other paradise that would imply further separation between people. In this way, the poem also distances itself from similar poems like Wilfred Owen’s “Strange Meeting,” in that the dead are not in “Hell” and they are not being explicitly punished.

Samina Najmi recalls the character Sefwan’s final thoughts of “love and wreckage” (22) and expands that to each victim in the poem. Najmi argues that the “multiple centers of consciousness in the poem exemplify how poetry at its best enables empathy and the kind of connectedness that Rukeyser, Templeton, and others have posited as the most potent form of artistic resistance to war” (Najmi 65). She suggests that identity should be mutually constructed

^e “Love.”

and not autonomously established in order to create the bridge of empathy between victims of multiple nationalities, and between the reader and the victims.

As the bomber in “2000 lbs.” is physically destroyed, it’s in his separation that he attains a strange grace. Turner is not defending the reason for the suicide attack, but he knows that the bomber believed his own reason to be valid enough to pursue, and worth dying for. As he becomes “of all things,” his parts connect with the ruined parts of others. The full sequence of violence is complete: the walls that prevent understanding are broken down, and from those pieces a bridge is formed, between the murderer and the victims as well as amongst the victims.

The war, as it exists in Turner’s poetry, is a constant source of pain and suffering for those involved, regardless of nationality, religious ideology, or age. The “Hurt Locker” itself is a kind of Pandora’s Box, containing all the misery and pain, all the suffering concomitant with waging war. The evils locked within Pandora’s Box have become the horrors of war in “The Hurt Locker,” and the speaker invites readers to see, to believe, and to learn: “see” what there is of knives and teeth, “believe” it when they see it, and “learn” how rough men come hunting for souls. All of these are a consequence of opening the box and unleashing them. But as Pandora’s Box also held within it “hope,” here Turner has put an emphasis on building connections with other people, and showing compassion for people we might have never interacted with otherwise. These connections, like “hope” in Pandora’s Box, are buried beneath the violence in the “Hurt Locker.”

Near the end of his collection *Phantom Noise*, Turner has a poem called “Ajal,” in which an Iraqi mourns his son, named Abd Allah, who was killed by some kind of explosive blast. The poem’s epigraph defines “Ajal” as “the appointed time of death which Muslims believe God has determined for every individual; it cannot be delayed or hastened” (*Phantom Noise* 78).

Turner's acknowledgement of the idea of *Ajal* allows the idea to be applied to his other poems. Perhaps it was Abd Allah's time to die at that moment in "Ajal," and in death he is reunited with his mother, who "will know the way" to Mecca (28). For the victims of "2000 lbs.," they too might have converged on their mutually appointed moment. All of the victims *share* their suffering. They understand the loss of children and the lack of fulfillment, and though they are separated by physical distance, age, personal experiences, and the moments of their lives that contributed to their loss, they all greet one another in the ruined aftermath and softly say, "*habib.*"

CHAPTER 3
THE PATH OF THE SUN'S JOURNEY BY NIGHT: WHERE TURNER FINDS PEACE IN
HIS POETRY

America's involvement with the Middle East is only about a century old, but the connections formed between people who share in similar experiences are not dependent on national history. In "2,000 lbs.," the victims share in death what they never shared in life. In the war with Iraq, violence has been unavoidable, and although people can establish a tragic connection through it, Turner's poetry posits that this is not the only way to understand others.

Beneath the war that rages through his poems, Turner shines a light on Iraqi culture and history in an effort to present the Iraqis as people, not the Other, to Americans. Two different people from any two countries are not automatically "opposites," and Turner works to erode the barriers between the Americans and the Iraqis. To do this, he writes not just about moments of violence, but also moments of peace, defined by a level of "noise" that rises in conjunction with the level of violence in a poem; the "loud" poems are more violent, while the "quiet" poems are peaceful. If people of both countries are capable of violence, then people of both countries are capable of peaceful interaction as well. The difficulty of understanding another culture comes from a person's unwillingness to know and communicate with others, with Turner using "darkness" as a metaphor for the barrier to understanding, and "light" as the shared knowledge that brings people closer together.

While Iraq's history is much longer than America's, both countries have participated in various wars throughout the years. For Turner, it is crucial to establish Iraq as a country with a rich history that has also been affected by war, especially in the centuries prior to its independence in the 20th century. Turner illuminates the country's past in the service of

understanding the culture as he imaginatively recalls the Siege of Baghdad in his poem, “Ancient Baghdad.”

Ash blackened the sky in 1258, blood
ran in the rivers of Dajla and Farat,
the House of Wisdom burned to the ground
and the caliph was trampled to death by horses.

This was ancient Baghdad, July, and hot.
After 50 days of siege and 40 days of plunder
800,000 lay dead in the streets, beheaded
by Mongols, many bodies thrown to the river.

. . .

Downriver, villagers stood at the banks
where bodies drifted past, learning
from water’s deep and rapid transport
how the dead come in constant supply.

And if we could stand among them
as bodies blacken in flame, plume upward,
smoke flattening against heaven—if we could stand
in the House of Wisdom as the invaders

darken the river with texts and scrolls,
 the old stories burning around us,
 the very frame itself catching fire—
 what would we have to say of loss? (1-8, 13-24)

The speaker mourns the approximate 800,000 dead and watches dogs feeding on bodies in the streets, thematic ancestors to the bullets that would hunt (with) men and chew them apart centuries later. Survivors see bodies drifting down the Tigris River, learning “how the dead come in constant supply,” and these dead will later stand on the banks of the Tigris as the victims of the Al-A’imma Bridge collapse drift in the same currents in another poem, “Al-A’imma Bridge.” The Siege of Baghdad is one of the most significant acts of an invader’s aggression in Iraq’s history.^f Hulagu Khan, grandson of Genghis Khan, besieged the city and forced its surrender after twelve days before pillaging and ransacking what was left. The event is credited with marking the end of a period referred to as the “Islamic Golden Age,” a period of major scientific and educational advancement in the Middle East during the Middle Ages—the House of Wisdom was a place dedicated to amassing and documenting information from thinkers from all cultures—and leaving the region destitute for generations afterward. Following Iraq’s liberation from Turkish occupiers during World War I, a British commander named Stanley Maude addressed the Iraqis:

^f At this time, Baghdad was the capitol of the Abbasid Caliphate.

Since the days of Hulagu, your city and your lands have been subject to the tyranny of strangers, your palaces have fallen into ruins, your gardens have sunk in desolation and your forefathers and yourselves have groaned in bondage.

(Frazier, "Invaders")

Iraq was never able to recover the lost glory of the Islamic Golden Age. All of this destruction occurred long before America earned its independence. As if rendered helpless by his own question, Turner asks, "What would we have to say of loss?"

By contrast, the poet says very little of loss in America. Of the poems that look into the past, many are about Turner's childhood and his memories of a country that seemed to celebrate violence, sometimes indirectly. The whole of "The Whale" is focused on the disposal-by-detonation of a whale carcass beached in Oregon:

It is 1970

and the summer of love is over.

I am three years old, barefoot,

running along the surf

near Florence, Oregon,

where an eight-ton sperm whale

beached itself and died, the carcass

rotting now,

an entrance carved into its massive flank
for cases of dynamite, 500 pounds of explosives
necessary to rend open the interior
so scavengers can pick the skeleton clean—

but for me, it is the doorway to another world,
the body of the sacred I might enter into,
its eyes drained of all but a giant benevolence,
flukes wide as the tail fins of bombers
overhead, my mother

hoisting me to her hip as engineers argue
blasting caps and stand-off distance,
equations to undo the intricate puzzle
of muscle and bone—

the way life waits for us all
with great patience, the electrons orbiting
in their shells like distant planets we never see,
the constellations which bind the universe
undone this day, at least for this one body
beached on the sand as we witness the blast
from the sawgrass dunes,
the sudden

jolt of nerves as the body absorbs
 the shockwave, beach-sand shot upward
 in jets of tissue and meat,
 the local news reporter dropping to his knees
 to cover his head with a clipboard
 while the cameraman does the same,
 my mother shielding me with her torso
 turned away from the blast

 and I remember everyone smiling
 afterward, laughing, each of us amazed
 the day a god was blown to pieces on the beach
 and we all walked away from it, unscathed. (1-41)

War exists outside the poem's immediate scope, but the whale blown apart with dynamite is celebrated with the same enthusiasm as 4th of July fireworks that symbolize America's fight for independence, and the speaker still mentions the "500 pounds of explosives" necessary to destroy the carcass and the "tail fins of bombers" that the three-year-old would not recognize, but the adult soldier would.

James Gleason Bishop adds some additional insight on the political landscape of 1970: "By mid-year, a third of a million U.S. troops are still in Vietnam. In August, heavy B-52 bombing occurs along the Demilitarized Zone . . . On April 30, President Nixon announced that U.S. and South Vietnamese forces will enter Cambodia" (Bishop 302). As Bishop says, Turner

“suggests without suggesting” that the whale is a symbol for America’s ongoing issues resolved through the use of force. Destruction has become casual, and it is closely entwined with America’s history.

Various other poems throughout *Phantom Noise* continue Turner’s growth through the years. In “.22-Caliber,” teenaged Brian helps his father assemble an improvised weapon, piece by piece (not for the first time either—“Homemade Napalm” has an even younger Brian helping his father make an explosive). The poem declares a date—1981—and Turner recalls an advertisement on the back of a magazine called *Soldier of Fortune* that he describes as depicting “an armed mujahedeen lying in the prone / on a rocky overlook, the coupon below him / promising: *Buy a bullet, Kill a Commie*” (“.22-Caliber” 15-17). Turner practices firing the makeshift weapon at “paper targets / with their circles driven inward, / an exercise in muscle memory. / I am learning how to connect / with the small dark silence / carried within the center of all things” (19-24). Earlier in Turner’s life, while attempting to learn martial arts by watching the television program *Kung Fu*, he listens to the wisdom of the character Master Po:

Close your eyes—what do you hear?

(I hear the water. I hear the birds.)

Do you hear your own heartbeat?

Do you hear the grasshopper at your feet?

(“Bruce Lee’s Enter the Dragon” 12-15)

These early life connections to conflict set a tone for his life that will always ring with violence. Like the Siege of Baghdad marked Iraq, his personal history has been marked by war,

and as he grows he begins to attune himself to the sounds of it. He learns to listen to the world around him and gradually begins to form an idea of the “small dark silence / carried within the center of all things” (“.22-Caliber” 23-24). Most of his poetry comes from his experiences at war, with noise imagery playing a major role in his perception of the battlefields, whether the poems are about the encounters he has as a modern soldier, or the acts of war he imagines in the past of his childhood or the distant past of Iraq.

The noise of war in Brian Turner’s poems can be deafening. Poems across both *Here*, *Bullet* and *Phantom Noise* are explosive with the sound of detonation waves and overflowing with “all the *fucks* and *goddamns* / and *Jesus Christs* of the wounded” (“The Hut Locker” 4-5). Mortar Rounds “howl” as they scream down from the “high angle of hell” (“Howl Wind” 4). In “What Every Soldier Should Know,” Turner cautions, “You will hear the RPG coming for you. / Not so the roadside bomb” (11-12). Even the guns themselves are given voices⁴, as bullets bring words like *Inshallah* “hissing through the air” (“Inventory” 13-14; “Here, Bullet” 11).

In his explorations of moments of violence, Turner deals with a level of noise commensurate with the amount of chaos and violence proliferating in a given poem. I use the word “noise” to refer not just to the aural imagery of the poetry, but to the level of dramatic action, usually driven by some form of violence, in each poem, as well as the frequency of subject and perspective shifts. The greater the noise level, the more violence there is in the poem; the less noise a poem has, the more peaceful it is. “Phantom Noise” demonstrates both literal noise as an element of the poem and a high noise level:

There is this ringing hum this
bullet-borne language ringing

shell-fall and static this late-night
 ringing of threadwork and carpet ringing
 hiss and steam this wing-beat
 of rotors and tanks broken
 bodies ringing in steel humming these
 voices of dust these years ringing
 rifles in Babylon rifles in Sumer
 ringing these children their gravestones
 and candy their limbs gone missing their
 static-borne television their ringing
 this eardrum this rifled symphonic this
 ringing of midnight in gunpowder and oil this
 brake pad gone useless this muzzle-flash singing this
 threading of bullets in muscle and bone this ringing
 hum this ringing hum this
ringing (“Phantom Noise” 1-18)

The speaker is trying to work off the effects of a loud blast or some ordnance that might leave a “ringing” in his ears, but in this poem, the ringing isn’t caused by any one particular event. While some of the events described in the poem are often related to loud noises, like the “ringing / shell-fall” and the “muzzle-flash singing,” the speaker’s focus shifts to other things he has experienced or thought about that do not necessarily produce noise, but all directly relate to the stress and violence of war, such as the “threading of bullets in muscle and bone,” the

gravestones of children with their “limbs gone missing,” and the enigmatic placement of “rifles in Babylon.” The rapid introduction of new images keeps any one item from being too significant, except the repeated “ringing” that threatens to swallow the poem. Every piece somehow relates to combat and the speaker’s inability to “mute” it.

“Phantom Noise” seems particularly high-intensity for how much noise occurs in such a short poem. Some of Turner’s longer poems will alternate between loud and quiet stanzas. Recalling “2000 lbs.,” each stanza changes the perspective in the poem to the next victim. While each individual stanza is relatively “quiet,” all of them are tied together by the suicide bomber’s detonation. The attack interrupts the characters’ daydreams and leisurely activities, with Turner showing how calm, peaceful life is torn apart by an act of war. Some of Turner’s other large poems, like “Al-A’imma Bridge” and “At Lowe’s Home Improvement Center,” employ similar structures of having multiple quiet stanzas that feature fewer directly violent actions with frequent perspective shifts that support the larger violent events in the poem, like a massive bridge collapse in “Al-A’imma Bridge” or a disturbing PTSD episode in “At Lowe’s Home Improvement Center.”

Poems with a lower noise level often avoid directly mentioning violence, and in some cases avoid referencing the war itself. Many of these poems are ostensibly about something other than fighting, using the war as a foundation for the actions of the poem, like “Trowel”:

The day before the Kurdish holiday
 Hussein and Abid stir the muddy paste
 with a shovel and their bare hands.

Because Hussein's arm is scarred
 elbow to wrist from the long war with Iran,
 he holds the trowel in his left hand, pushing

 mud against a bullet-pocked wall, the cement
 an appeasement which Hussein pauses over,
 waiting out his hand's familiar tremor,

 then burying the lead, its signatures
 like dirt-filled sockets of bone
 which he smooths over and over. (1-12)

The perspective remains static as Hussein and Abid repair the wall, and the action of the poem is minimal. The war is in the background, as seen in Hussein's scar and the bullet holes in the wall—the very reason the two men are doing their job is because the war has left its mark on the wall. What Hussein and Abid are doing is important to the poem: they are *repairing* the wall, in spite of the war going on. Even though Hussein is injured as a result of the war (like the wall he is fixing), his action in the poem is constructive in a way that is not suggestive of violence (unlike young Turner building a homemade gun with his father in “.22-Caliber”). The poem is not about “peace,” but could be described as “peaceful,” leaving the war largely out of the picture in favor of focusing on the natural calm and silence between people.

Silence is fragile in Turner's poetry. Many poems have a kind of stillness to them, such as the “Observation Post” poems that simulate Turner's experiences on watch duty, or the gentle

imagery found in “*Milh.*” The action in these poems occurs between moments of violence. The threat of destruction looms over every poem, but not all poems are “interrupted” by violence. It’s possible for violence to shatter the peace of a quiet poem, but silence cannot interrupt noisy poems as easily. In “Eulogy,” Miller’s suicide shatters a “blue day of sun” (8) where “tower guards eat sandwiches / and seagulls drift by on the Tigris River,” (2-3) and the sound of the gunshot “lifts the birds up off the water” and causes voices to “crackle over the radio in static confusion” (11, 15). Ordinary days become violent. The days Turner spends watching the desert for signs of movement could also be the days on which people lose their lives. In “Curfew,” the speaker draws attention to the things that didn’t happen that day, describing how

. . . policemen sunbathed on traffic islands
 and children helped their mothers
 string clothes to the line, a slight breeze
 filling them with heat.

There were no bombs, no panic in the streets.
 Sgt. Gutierrez didn’t comfort an injured man
 who cupped pieces of his friend’s brain
 in his hands; instead, today,
 white birds rose from the Tigris. (6-14)

The speaker’s comment on the lack of violence makes it seem as if *this* day is the unusual one. The description of the man “who cupped pieces of his friend’s brain” seems specific

enough to suggest that this is something the speaker has recently seen, or that Sgt. Gutierrez had to do, and they are still coping with that realization. It almost negates the more positive events, like the policemen sunbathing and the families doing laundry. By drawing attention to these moments, Turner reveals the cost of war. Poems that only ever featured heavy, brutal moments of violence without showing what is at stake would lose impact. When the reader does not know anything about the ordinary lives of the victims in poems like these, their deaths become meaningless.

Neither side of the cultural divide is ever assigned the “role” of being loud or violent, and as civilians like Hussein and Abid and the children from “Curfew” are able to experience peace, those involved with the fighting experience their own moments of silence. In “The Al-Harishma Weapons Market,” Turner writes about an Iraqi gunsmith who tends to his shop and sees to his four-year-old boy, calming him while distant gunfire echoes elsewhere in the city:

At midnight, steel shutters
slide down tight. Feral cats slink
in the periphery of the streetlamp's
dim cone of light. Inside, like a musician
swaddling a silver-plated trumpet,
Akbar wraps an AK-47 in cloth.
Grease guns, pistols, RPGs—
he slides them all under the countertop.

Black marketeer or insurgent—
 an American death puts food on the table,
 more cash than most men earn in an entire year.
 He won't let himself think of his childhood friends—
 those who wear the blue uniforms
 which bring death, dying from barrels
 he may have oiled in his own hands.

Akbar stirs the chai,
 then carries his sleeping four-year-old,
 Habib, to bed under glow-in-the-dark
 stars arranged on the ceiling. Late at night
 when gunfire frightens them both,
 Habib cries for his father, who tells him
It's just the drums, a new music,
 and the tracery of lights in the sky
 he retraces on the ceiling, showing the boy
 how each bright star travels
from this dark place, to the other. (1-26)

The poem begins with Akbar cleaning and maintaining an AK-47 assault rifle, but the middle stanza seems to take place beyond the poem, as if the lines are thoughts in Akbar's mind as he heads toward his other duties. The labels of "black marketeer" or "insurgent" aren't as

important as Akbar's reason—"an American death puts food on the table"—and his struggle to distance himself from the collateral damage of his work; his long-time friends have chosen instead to become part of the Iraqi police force, wearing the "blue uniforms / which bring death" and who may be killed by weaponry "oiled in his own hands."

The heart of the poem comes in the final stanza, as Akbar the father comforts his son, Habib, whose sleep under the glow-in-the-dark stars is disturbed by the gunfire outside. He tells his child it is "*music*" that sounds beyond the walls, and that the distant lights of tracer rounds and muzzle flash are the paths stars take as they travel through the sky "*from this dark place, to the other.*" The "music" of the gunfire calls back to the earlier simile of Akbar being a musician handling an instrument. But more important is what his speech to Habib says about Akbar's beliefs as an Iraqi. By calming his child with ideas of music and the imagery of stars falling through the sky, he's trying to hide the truth of war from his son; it could very well be that until Habib is old enough, he will think of his father as an instrument vendor. Akbar's assurances that the stars travel from "this" dark place to "the other" shows that he sees the war as something universal, and that while he may fear the occupying forces, he recognizes that darkness is not exclusive to one side. Akbar is not the stereotypical single-minded terrorist. Instead, he's a father trying to protect his son, named for the word for "love," and he knows the world as a whole is a dangerous place.

Turner could have easily portrayed this man, who engages in a very violent trade, as a villain, an enemy in a story where America fights the bad guys, but to do so would be disingenuous. Akbar himself may or may not be anti-American, but he's human. He does not outright engage in any violence in this poem. His awareness of it and his willingness to play even a small part keep him from being innocent, though his role as a family figure makes him

sympathetic. Taken in isolation, the final stanza of the poem could almost be about a different character altogether, as Akbar the gunsmith and Akbar the father seem like two different people (even gunsmiths get frightened by gunfire) linked by a common motive to protect Habib from noise.

Akbar may be hostile toward Americans, yet he can still have moments of silence and peace where he can care for his son. His comment that “each bright star travels / from this dark place, to the other” has an interesting double meaning. In one, the lights are bullets, rockets, and any projectile with an ignited path that goes from the darkness of a gun barrel into the “small dark silence” (“22-Caliber” 23) of a person’s body. In the other, the “dark places” are America and Iraq, two distinct countries with their own violent histories and cultures that are both “dark.”

What constitutes “dark” is not made entirely clear, though Turner addresses darkness and light in other poems, sometimes with contradictory meanings. Light is literally produced by gunfire and explosions, and the bright, hot sun is mentioned frequently. In certain instances, light and darkness take on different meanings, connected to one another and associated with living people. In “Easel,” the painter Nather has painted a picture of people under the sun without painting the shadows “to hold them down,” calling shadow “light’s counterpoint, the dark processing / of thought” (13, 15-16). Turner, as a frightened four-year-old in “Lucky Money,” crosses over the pen of a bullmastiff growling at him from below in “the deep pit of midnight” (20). The interplay of light and dark are not new ideas for Turner, either. Two poems in particular address both history and light: the final stanza of “Gilgamesh, in Fossil Relief,” and “Alhazen of Basra.” In the ending of “Gilgamesh, in Fossil Relief,” the speaker says,

History is a cloudy mirror made of dirt
 and bone and ruin. And love? Loss?
 These are the questions we must answer
 by war and famine and pestilence, and again
 by touch and kiss, because each age must learn
This is the path of the sun's journey by night. (17-22)

The idea that light travels (as a person travels) recalls Akbar's sentiment that stars travel from one "dark place" to another. What the stanza itself suggests is that darkness is necessary for light to travel. Darkness is the "dark processing" of light, the "path of the sun" as it travels over the "deep pit of midnight." In "Alhazen of Basra," Turner seeks out one of the greatest minds of the Islamic Golden Age:

If I could travel a thousand years back
 to August 1004, to a small tent
 where Alhazen has fallen asleep among books
 about sunsets, shadows, and light itself,
 I wouldn't ask whether light travels in a straight line,
 or what governs the laws of refraction, or how
 he discovered the bridgework of analytical geometry;

I would ask about the light within us,
 what shines in the mind's great repository
 of dream, and whether he's studied the deep shadows
 daylight brings, how light defines us. (1-11)

Turner is not asking for clarification about the ideas Alhazen is known for, but to ask about what exists *within* people, specifically “the light within us,” and “how light defines us.” The fragile silence of the poem is not threatened, by either the impending Siege of Baghdad or the distant wars in the 20th and 21st centuries. Turner is seeking out light, something that has been a part of “us”—all of us—for all time, even when it gets swallowed up in war. At no point does Turner ever suggest that anyone—either American soldiers or Iraqi insurgents—is evil. We might all come from what Akbar calls “dark places,” yet we are defined by light.

Darkness is concomitant with the noise of warfare, and ultimately a lack of understanding between people. When the fighting settles, when the noise lowers, there exists a sense of peace and calm, but it is fragile. When a young Turner learns how to aim for the “small dark silence / carried within the center of all things,” he learns how to disrupt the fragile peace with violence. As an adult and a soldier, Turner seeks to understand “the light within us . . . / . . . how light defines us.” Light, in this context, is something that wards off the dark so we might see and understand the people in that darkness, but is perhaps too small on an individual scale to conquer the collective darkness of a country.

In a 2006 blog post for the Poetry Foundation, Turner discusses his own studies of Iraqi poetry and culture before introducing “Alhazen of Basra” with his thoughts on writing and being a part of the Iraq War. He explains,

there are millions of people in Iraq. There are hundreds of thousands of Americans (and those from many other countries as well) involved in the war in Iraq (they are either there, have been there, or will soon be there). My own story, my own act of witnessing, is only one voice from among the many stories which need to be told. Still, no matter how small and insignificant I might feel within so vast an experience, as a writer I must speak to what is wrong in the world. As writers, and artists, I believe we must give witness and testimony to pain and conflict and loss. (Turner, “Journal, Day Five”)

What Turner is capable of doing, as a writer, will never be enough to stop a war—the “light” within him only shines so far. What he *can* do is allow his light of understanding to reach the next person over, to illuminate some corner of the world that is commonly thought to be shrouded in darkness, like the Middle East. The light should not come from gunfire and explosions, but from within us; we need to cultivate peaceful silence to understand one another, rather than the growing clangor of war. When we fail to acknowledge another person’s history and culture, we fail to understand that person. We lose sight of the fact that he, too, has suffered, and we ignore the *wide distribution of pain to which we are all connected*.⁵

Turner finishes *Phantom Noise* with a poem titled “The One Square Inch Project,” named for the single spot in the Olympic National Park in which silence is asked of all visitors. Turner observes:

There is a small red stone placed exactly on the spot
where silence grows. It is a gift. It was given by the Elder
of the Quileute Tribe, David Four Lines, and I will not disturb it.
And I put nothing in the *Jar of Quiet Thoughts* nearby.
Because there is not one thing I might say to the world
which the world does not already know. (12-17)

Turner no longer has to stand among the dead, and acknowledges the connection between silence and peace. He does not need to ask, “What would we have to say of loss?” because any answer in words would ruin the peace.

CONCLUSION

As I keep up with the people I met in Israel, I ask about their lives, their families, the people they meet and interact with. I want to “know these people / we bury in the earth” (“Illumination Rounds” 33-34). But never in my life have I had to legitimately ask the question about someone I know, “Are they still alive?” The harsh reality is that the Middle East is still a dangerous place.⁶ That Brian Turner has written poetry about his experiences in the Iraq War is almost expected; what would be jarring would be a collection of poetry about Iraq that in no way references ongoing conflicts. And such poetry exists, but reading collections of Middle Eastern or Afghani or Iraqi poetry still carries the impression to a Western eye that *this* is anomalous, that poetry from *that place* must be about war.

To literary characters like Judge Holden or Auden’s version of Hephaestus, war is a part of the order of the world. It continues to endure as technology improves and makes new mechanisms of warfare possible. It continues to endure despite our current era being referred to by some as “The Long Peace,” or the period in which the major superpowers of the world are not in conflict with one another.

Turner did not seek to turn himself into an instrument of destruction beyond what he found necessary as a soldier. He is a human who went to war, like the poets who preceded him, and his contributions to the tradition of war poetry include documenting his time in the Iraq War, and trying to understand the people he encountered. He codifies violence with noise, and gives value to the quiet moments bookended by acts of war. He illuminates a corner of the world that remains dark for too many people.

Turner's impact on war poetry is not measured by his confirmed kills or his entries into combat, but instead the influence he exerts on the next war poet, who goes to war with a copy of *Here, Bullet* or *Phantom Noise* in his assault pack, who already understands the need to communicate and form connections with people we don't understand, who can wade a little further into the cess of war than Turner, Weigl, Owen, and everyone before, and who will know that he cannot come back clean. Turner's output currently consists of almost 100 poems spread across two collections, a handful of blog posts, reviews, articles, and interviews, and a memoir. Almost all of it relates to his experiences as a soldier. Even if his future collections are about anything else, he has been marked by something he can never rid himself of.

As a child, watching whales explode and making firearms with his father, Turner came into contact with the future that would define him. In "Viking 1," he looks into the night sky toward the distant surface of Mars:

In the old days, they say the desert Arabs hung lanterns
 high in the date palms, a guide for friends and strangers
 traveling by night. And maybe that's what I'm doing
 as I search for lamps in the night's vast amphitheater,
 even if I don't know how to put it into words—
 I'm searching for the face on Mars, so much like our own,
 made from dust and to dust returning, the wind's erosion
 calling into the void with that brutal instrument, pain.
 And like so many before me, I listen.

I want to hear how the great questions posed by ruin
are given the elegant response of stone. (14-24)

All he can do is carry a torch into the dark that will light a path for others to follow. He understands that human history doesn't have to be divided into the history of nations or politics, but war nevertheless shapes our course. Eventually, he and everyone after him will be dust (with the hope being that this end is not due to war). Someone will follow and ask these same "great questions posed by ruin" of human civilization, for what reasons wars are waged, and what has been lost in the fire. And their answer will come from headstones in Arlington National Cemetery, cairns atop Mount Herzl, and the ink washed into the soil on the banks of the Tigris. If they remain quiet and listen closely, then this new poet may, like Turner, be able to turn pain into poetry.

NOTES

1. Our guide for the duration of our trip was a man named Menashe Golan. He was in his late 30s, a former survival specialist in the Israeli Defense Force, and spoke English well enough to convince me he'd dealt with plenty of Americans. At one point during our tour, Menashe told us about his father and his two close friends, all three soldiers fighting during the Six-Day War, drawing straws to decide which of them was going to travel to which theater of combat. His own father drew the Golan Heights, and each one made an agreement that, if they survived, they would change their last name to their respective conflict. What surprised me most about this is that Menashe never learned his family's original name before his father died. What is for one member of the family a symbol of triumph and pride became for another the roadblock to his history. He had been touched by the war before he was born.

2. Early on in our trip, we listened to a lecture by a man named Neil Lazarus, a political scientist and Israeli Affairs Specialist. He spoke to us for an hour about the "layered" political backdrop of Israel, America's involvement, and the numerous threats toward the nation and its people. Along with our group of 40 Americans were 8 Israelis between the ages of 22-26. Lazarus asked them to stand if they had been injured or knew someone who had been injured or killed as a direct result of an undeclared attack on Israel, not including IDF duty. All of them stood. He concluded with the darkly humorous quip that talking about terrorist attacks in Israel is akin to talking about the weather in America, as any given day might be "cloudy with a chance of rockets." After showing us civilian-recorded cell phone footage of a missile attack on Tel Aviv earlier that very week, he ended his lecture as he began: "Welcome to the region."

3. According to Dante, Hell's 8th Circle—the Malebolge, specifically Bolgia II—is where sinners guilty of the minor fraud of flattery are submerged in shit and whipped by demons. The women laughing, the futility of trying to light the match, and even the helicopter gusts that seem to mirror Lucifer's wings blowing winds over the Cocytus give the whole poem an infernal shade.

4. In “The Inventory from a Year Lived Sleeping with Bullets,” Turner uses the phrase “Talk the Guns,” which shows up in various lines of his poetry as a jargon-command for “open fire.” In a 2009 interview with St. Louis Magazine's Stefene Russell, Turner mentions that his then-in-progress second collection was called “Talk the Guns,” before it would release in 2010 as *Phantom Noise*. While noise and sound play a major role in Turner's imagery, it's of particular note that a working title for the collection (which is also not the title of any of his currently-published poems) would give the primacy of voice to the guns and weaponry.

5. During the later stages of writing, I came across Neil Halloran's interactive documentary called “The Fallen of World War II,” that used web-based interactive charts to illustrate the catastrophic losses through the entirety of World War II. Following the end-of-presentation revelation that WWII was responsible for an approximate 70,000,000 deaths (total—this figure includes soldiers and civilians from all countries involved), the documentary goes on to show that since that time, no other conflict has come anywhere close to that body count. For several decades running, the major superpowers of the world have not fought one another, though smaller conflicts still occur. And even though “The Long Peace” may imply

either a pending large-scale struggle or the realized fears of nuclear deterrence, the documentary remains optimistic about the future, and offers an interesting perspective on peace: “Peace is a difficult thing to measure. It’s a bit like counting the people who didn’t die in the wars that never happened” (Halloran).

6. Israeli customs marked our American passports with something resembling a sticky note rather than a stamp. This note was removed upon our departure, so that customs agents in any country with sanctions against Israel would not detain us for questioning.

APPENDIX

The hand that signed the paper

The hand that signed the paper felled a city;
 Five sovereign fingers taxed the breath,
 Doubled the globe of dead and halved a country;
 These five kings did a king to death.

The mighty hand leads to a sloping shoulder,
 The fingers' joints are cramped with chalk;
 A goose's quill has put an end to murder
 That put an end to talk.

The hand that signed the treaty bred a fever,
 And famine grew, and locusts came;
 Great is the hand that holds dominion over
 Man by a scribbled name.

The five kings count the dead but do not soften
 The crusted wound nor stroke the brow;
 A hand rules pity as a hand rules heaven;
 Hands have no tears to flow.

The Shield of Achilles

She looked over his shoulder
 For vines and olive trees,
 Marble well-governed cities
 And ships upon untamed seas,
 But there on the shining metal
 His hands had put instead
 An artificial wilderness
 And a sky like lead.

A plain without a feature, bare and brown,
 No blade of grass, no sign of neighborhood,
 Nothing to eat and nowhere to sit down,
 Yet, congregated on its blankness, stood
 An unintelligible multitude,
 A million eyes, a million boots in line,
 Without expression, waiting for a sign.

Out of the air a voice without a face
 Proved by statistics that some cause was just

In tones as dry and level as the place:
 No one was cheered and nothing was discussed;
 Column by column in a cloud of dust
 They marched away enduring a belief
 Whose logic brought them, somewhere else, to grief.

She looked over his shoulder
 For ritual pieties,
 White flower-garlanded heifers,
 Libation and sacrifice,
 But there on the shining metal
 Where the altar should have been,
 She saw by his flickering forge-light
 Quite another scene.

Barbed wire enclosed an arbitrary spot
 Where bored officials lounged (one cracked a joke)
 And sentries sweated for the day was hot:
 A crowd of ordinary decent folk
 Watched from without and neither moved nor spoke
 As three pale figures were led forth and bound
 To three posts driven upright in the ground.

The mass and majesty of this world, all
 That carries weight and always weighs the same
 Lay in the hands of others; they were small
 And could not hope for help and no help came:
 What their foes like to do was done, their shame
 Was all the worst could wish; they lost their pride
 And died as men before their bodies died.

She looked over his shoulder
 For athletes at their games,
 Men and women in a dance
 Moving their sweet limbs
 Quick, quick, to music,
 But there on the shining shield
 His hands had set no dancing-floor
 But a weed-choked field.

A ragged urchin, aimless and alone,
 Loitered about that vacancy; a bird
 Flew up to safety from his well-aimed stone:

That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third,
 Were axioms to him, who'd never heard
 Of any world where promises were kept,
 Or one could weep because another wept.

The thin-lipped armorer,
 Hephaestos, hobbled away,
 Thetis of the shining breasts
 Cried out in dismay
 At what the god had wrought
 To please her son, the strong
 Iron-hearted man-slaying Achilles
 Who would not live long.

There Will Come Soft Rains

There will come soft rains and the smell of the ground,
 And swallows circling with their shimmering sound;

And frogs in the pools singing at night,
 And wild plum trees in tremulous white,

Robins will wear their feathery fire
 Whistling their whims on a low fence-wire;

And not one will know of the war, not one
 Will care at last when it is done.

Not one would mind, neither bird nor tree
 If mankind perished utterly;

And Spring herself, when she woke at dawn,
 Would scarcely know that we were gone.

Burning Shit at An Khe

Into that pit
I had to climb down
With a rake and matches; eventually,
You had to do something
Because it just kept piling up
And it wasn't our country, it wasn't
Our air thick with the sick smoke
So another soldier and I
Lifted the shelter off its blocks
To expose the homemade toilets:
Fifty-five gallon drums cut in half
With crude wood seats that splintered.
We soaked the piles in fuel oil
And lit the stuff
And tried to keep the fire burning.
To take my first turn
I paid some kid
A care package of booze from home.
I'd walked past the burning once
And gagged the whole heart of myself—
It smelled like the world
Was on fire.
But when my turn came again
There was no one
So I stuffed cotton up my nose
And marched up that hill. We poured
And poured until it burned and black
Smoke curdled
But the fire went out.
Heavy artillery
Hammered the evening away in the distance,
Vietnamese laundry women watched
From a safe place, laughing.
I'd grunted out eight months
Of jungle and thought I had a grip on things
But we flipped the coin and I lost
And climbed down into my fellow soldiers'
Shit and began to sink and didn't stop
Until I was deep to my knees. Liftships
Cut the air above me, the hacking
Blast of their blades
Ripped dust in swirls so every time
I tried to light a match
It died

And it all came down on me, the stink
 And the heat and the worthlessness
 Until I slipped and climbed
 Out of that hole and ran
 Past the olive drab
 Tents and trucks and clothes and everything
 Green as far from the shit
 As the fading light allowed.
 Only now I can't fly.
 I lay down in it
 And finger paint the words of who I am
 Across my chest
 Until I'm covered and there's only one smell,
 One word.

Eulogy

It happens on a Monday, at 11:20 a.m.,
 as tower guards eat sandwiches
 and seagulls drift by on the Tigris river.
 Prisoners tilt their heads to the west
 though burlap sacks and duct tape blind them.
 The sound reverberates down concertina coils
 the way piano wire thrums when given slack.
 And it happens like this, on a blue day of sun,
 when Private Miller pulls the trigger
 to take brass and fire into his mouth.
 The sound lifts the birds up off the water,
 a mongoose pauses under the orange trees,
 and nothing can stop it now, no matter what
 blur of motion surrounds him, no matter what voices
 crackle over the radio in static confusion,
 because if only for this moment the earth is stilled,
 and Private Miller has found what low hush there is
 down in the eucalyptus shade, there by the river.

S. I. W.

I will to the King,
 And offer him consolation in his trouble,
 For that man there has set his teeth to die,
 And being one that hates obedience,
 Discipline, and orderliness of life,
 I cannot mourn him.
 W. B. YEATS

I. The Prologue

Patting good-bye, doubtless they told the lad
 He'd always show the Hun a brave man's face;
 Father would sooner him dead than in disgrace,—
 Was proud to see him going, aye, and glad.
 Perhaps his mother whimpered how she'd fret
 Until he got a nice safe wound to nurse.
 Sisters would wish girls too could shoot, charge, curse ...
 Brothers—would send his favourite cigarette.
 Each week, month after month, they wrote the same,
 Thinking him sheltered in some Y.M. Hut,
 Because he said so, writing on his butt
 Where once an hour a bullet missed its aim
 And misses teased the hunger of his brain.
 His eyes grew old with wincing, and his hand
 Reckless with ague. Courage leaked, as sand
 From the best sand-bags after years of rain.
 But never leave, wound, fever, trench-foot, shock,
 Untrapped the wretch. And death seemed still withheld
 For torture of lying machinally shelled,
 At the pleasure of this world's Powers who'd run amok.

He'd seen men shoot their hands, on night patrol.
 Their people never knew. Yet they were vile.
 'Death sooner than dishonour, that's the style!'
 So Father said.

II. The Action

One dawn, our wire patrol
 Carried him. This time, Death had not missed.
 We could do nothing but wipe his bleeding cough.
 Could it be accident? - Rifles go off...
 Not sniped? No. (Later they found the English ball.)

III. The Poem

It was the reasoned crisis of his soul
 Against more days of inescapable thrall,
 Against infrangibly wired and blind trench wall
 Curtained with fire, roofed in with creeping fire,
 Slow grazing fire, that would not burn him whole
 But kept him for death's promises and scoff,
 And life's half-promising, and both their riling.

IV. The Epilogue

With him they buried the muzzle his teeth had kissed,
And truthfully wrote the Mother, 'Tim died smiling'.

Strange Meeting

It seemed that out of battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.

Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
Lifting distressful hands, as if to bless.
And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,—
By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.

With a thousand fears that vision's face was grained;
Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,
And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan.
'Strange friend,' I said, 'here is no cause to mourn.'
'None,' said that other, 'save the undone years,
The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,
Was my life also; I went hunting wild
After the wildest beauty in the world,
Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,
But mocks the steady running of the hour,
And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.
For by my glee might many men have laughed,
And of my weeping something had been left,
Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,
The pity of war, the pity war distilled.
Now men will go content with what we spoiled.
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.
They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress.
None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.
Courage was mine, and I had mystery;
Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery:
To miss the march of this retreating world
Into vain citadels that are not walled.
Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels,
I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,
Even with truths that lie too deep for taint.

I would have poured my spirit without stint
 But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.
 Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were.

‘I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
 I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned
 Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
 I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
 Let us sleep now. . . .’

Temple Near Quang Tri, Not on the Map

Dusk, the ivy thick with sparrows
 squawking for more room
 is all we hear; we see
 birds move on the walls of the temple
 shaping the calligraphy of their wings.
 Ivy is thick in the grottoes,
 on the moon-watching platform
 and ivy keeps the door from fully closing.

The point man leads us and we are
 inside, lifting
 the white washbowl, the smaller bowl
 for rice, the stone lanterns
 and carved stone heads that open
 above the carved faces for incense.
 But even the bamboo sleeping mat
 rolled in the corner,
 even the place of prayer, is clean.
 And a small man

sits legs askew in the shadow
 the farthest wall casts
 halfway across the room.
 He is bent over, his head
 rests on the floor and he is speaking something
 as though to us and not to us.
 The CO wants to ignore him;
 he locks and loads and fires a clip into the walls
 which are not packed with rice this time
 and tells us to move out.

But one of us moves towards the man,
 curious about what he is saying.
 We bend him to sit straight

and when he's nearly peaked
 at the top of his slow uncurling
 his face becomes visible, his eyes
 roll down to the charge
 wired between his teeth and the floor.
 The sparrows
 burst off the walls into the jungle.

Wading Out

Ad Duluiyah, Iraq

We're crossing an open field, sweating in December's heat,
 with 1st Squad covering from the brush to our left.
 I could be shot dead by a sniper, easily—
 this could be the ground where I bleed out in 90 seconds,
 but it won't be. There's a patch of still water
 I'm about to walk into as I always do,
 too much adrenaline and momentum in my stride,
 boots sinking ankle-deep and still I slog forward,
 M-4 held up over my head. Fiorillo sinks to his knees
 to my right—then backs up, makes it out
 of the septic runoff I'm up to my thighs in,
 the stench filling my nostrils, and it's funny enough
 once the mission's done, *Turner running in to swim*,
 but no one's laughing anymore, the months turning
 into years gone by and still I'm down there slogging
 shoulder-deep into the shit, my old platoon
 with another year of bullets and mortars and missions
 dragging them further in, my lieutenant so far down
 I can't reach him anymore, my squad leader hunting
 for souls that would mark him and drag him under
 completely, better than any bottle of whiskey.
 And I keep telling myself that if I walk far enough
 or long enough someday I'll come out the other side.
 But will Jax and Bosch and my lieutenant make it, too?

If one day we find ourselves poolside in California,
 the day as bright as this one, how will we hose ourselves off
 to remove the stench, standing around a barbeque
 talking football—how?

after Bruce Weigl

2000 lbs.*Ashur Square, Mosul*

It begins simply with a fist, white-knuckled
and tight, glossy with sweat. With two eyes
in a rearview mirror watching for a convoy.
The radio a soundtrack that adrenaline has
pushed into silence, replacing it with a heartbeat,
his thumb trembling over the button.

A flight of gold, that's what Sefwan thinks
as he lights a Miami, draws in the smoke
and waits in his taxi at the traffic circle.
He thinks of summer 1974, lifting
pitchforks of grain high in the air,
the slow drift of it like the fall of Shatha's hair,
and although it was decades ago, he still loves her,
remembers her standing at the canebrake
where the buffalo cooled shoulder-deep in the water,
pleased with the orange cups of flowers he brought her,
and he regrets how so much can go wrong in a life,
how easily the years slip by, light as grain, bright
as the street's concussion of metal, shrapnel
traveling at the speed of sound to open him up
in blood and shock, a man whose last thoughts
are of love and wreckage, with no one there
to whisper him gone.

Sgt. Ledoux of the National Guard
speaks but cannot hear the words coming out,
and it's just as well his eardrums ruptured
because it lends the world a certain calm,
though the traffic circle is filled with people
running in panic, their legs a blur
like horses in a carousel, turning
and turning the way the tires spin
on the Humvee flipped to its side,
the gunner's hatch he was thrown from
a mystery to him now, a dark hole
in metal the color of sand, and if he could,
he would crawl back inside of it,
and though his fingertips scratch at the asphalt
he hasn't the strength to move:
shrapnel has torn into his ribcage
and he will bleed to death in minutes,

but he finds himself surrounded by a strange
beauty, the shine of light on the broken,
a woman's hand touching his face, tenderly
the way his wife might, amazed to find
a wedding ring on his crushed hand,
the bright gold sinking in flesh
going to bone.

Rasheed passes the bridal shop
on a bicycle, with Sefa beside him,
and just before the air ruckles and breaks
he glimpses the sidewalk reflections
in the storefront glass, men and women
walking and talking, or not, an instant
of clarity, just before each of them shatters
under the detonation's wave,
as if even the idea of them were being
destroyed, stripped of form,
the blast tearing into the manikins
who stood as though husband and wife
a moment before, who cannot touch
one another, who cannot kiss,
who now lie together in glass and debris,
holding one another in their half-armed embrace,
calling this love, if this is all there will ever be.

The civil affairs officer, Lt. Jackson, stares
at his missing hands, which make
no sense to him, no sense at all, to wave
these absurd stumps held in the air
where just a moment before he'd blown bubbles
out the Humvee window, his left hand holding the bottle,
his right hand dipping the plastic ring in soap,
filling the air behind them with floating spheres
like the oxygen trails of deep ocean divers,
something for the children, something beautiful,
translucent globes with their iridescent skins
drifting on vehicle exhaust and the breeze
that might lift one day over the Zagros mountains,
that kind of hope, small globes which may have
astonished someone on the sidewalk
seven minutes before Lt. Jackson blacks out
from blood loss and shock, with no one there to bandage
the wounds that would carry him home.

Nearby, an old woman cradles her grandson,
 whispering, rocking him on her knees
 as though singing him to sleep, her hands
 wet with their blood, her black dress
 soaked in it as her legs give out
 and she buckles with him to the ground.
 If you'd asked her forty years earlier
 if she could see herself an old woman
 begging by the roadside for money, here,
 with a bomb exploding at the market
 among all these people, she'd have said
*To have your heart broken one last time
 before dying, to kiss a child given sight
 of a life he could never live? It's impossible,
 this isn't the way we die.*

And the man who triggered the button,
 who may have invoked the Prophet's name,
 or not—he is obliterated at the epicenter,
 he is everywhere, he is of all things,
 his touch is the air taken in, the blast
 and the wave, the electricity of shock,
 his is the sound the heart makes quick
 in the panic's rush, the surge of blood
 searching for light and color, that sound
 the martyr cries filled with the word
 his soul is made of, *Inshallah*.

Still hanging in the air over Ashur Square,
 the telephone line snapped in two, crackling
 a strange incantation the dead hear
 as they wander confused amongst one another,
 learning each other's names, trying to comfort
 the living in their grief, to console
 those who cannot accept such random pain,
 speaking *habib* softly, one to another there
 in the rubble and debris, *habib*
 over and over, that it might not be forgotten.

Ajal

—the appointed time of death which Muslims believe God has determined for every individual; it cannot be delayed or hastened.

There are ninety-nine special names for God,
my son, and not so long ago I held you
newly born under a crescent moon,
and gave you the name which means *servant
of God*, and I did not speak of tanks,
the thunder of iron, missiles flying
over the rooftops of our city—I whispered
the call to prayer once in each ear.

It should not be like this. Abd Allah,
many years from now, your own children
should wash your body three times
after your death. They should seal your mouth
with cotton, reciting prayers in a wash
of light and grieving, a perfume of lemons
and jasmine on your skin.

It should not be like this, Abd Allah.
I wanted you to see the Ctesiphon Arch,
the Tower of Samarra, the Ziggurat of Ur.
I wanted to show you the Arabic language
written on the spines of the sawtooth mountains.
I wanted to teach you our family history,
and see where you might take it.

I cannot undo what the shrapnel has done.
I climb down into the crumbling earth
to turn your face toward Mecca, as it must be.
Remember the old words I have taught you,
Abd Allah. And go with your mother,
buried here beside you—she will know the way.

Ancient Baghdad

*Mother of the world, mistress of nations, heaven on earth,
city of peace, dome of Islam*

—Yakut Al-Hamawi

Ash blackened the sky in 1258, blood
ran in the rivers of Dajla and Farat,
the House of Wisdom burned to the ground
and the caliph was trampled to death by horses.

This was ancient Baghdad, July, and hot.
After 50 days of siege and 40 days of plunder
800,000 lay dead in the streets, beheaded
by Mongols, many bodies thrown to the river.

Some hid in wells and sewers.
Later, they rose from the stench
to walk the wailing streets, where wild dogs
slept with tongues panting, bellies swollen.

Downriver, villagers stood at the banks
where bodies drifted past, learning
from water's deep and rapid transport
how the dead come in constant supply.

And if we could stand among them
as bodies blacken in flame, plume upward,
smoke flattening against heaven—if we could stand
in the House of Wisdom as the invaders

darken the river with texts and scrolls,
the old stories burning around us,
the very frame itself catching fire—
what would we have to say of loss?

Maybe we'd begin to question the word
beauty, no matter what form it is recorded in—
cuneiform, papyrus, stone.

.22-Caliber

It's a Saturday. My father out in the garage
with a ball peen hammer, tamping.
Assembling a zip gun, teaching me
to clamp the small diameter pipe
to form a smooth-bore barrel,
bracket and finishing nail
as hammer and firing pin.

1981. The Soviets fight in Afghanistan.
Magazine racks carry *Guns & Ammo*,
Penthouse, *Hustler*, *Shooting Times*
& *Country Magazine*. It is a world
filled with ballistics, armor, lethal flights
of small metal rounds, spinning.
On the back cover of *Soldier of Fortune*
an armed mujahedeen lying in the prone
on a rocky overlook, the coupon below him
promising: *Buy a Bullet, Kill a Commie*.

Reload: I pull the hammer back
to fire over and over at paper targets
with their circles driven inward,
an exercise in muscle memory.
I am learning how to connect
with the small dark silence
carried within the center of all things.

Bruce Lee's *Enter the Dragon*

I drank a Seagram's Seven and Seven on 7/7/77,
when I was only ten and my Mom a bartender
at the Airport Marina lounge—where I mostly drank
Grasshoppers and Roy Rogers while Ed Burke
sang “Mr. Bojangles” and danced a slow shuffle
like he always did after Happy Hour,
six to ten P.M. , Sunday through Thursday.

I liked the pale-green Grasshoppers best,
mainly because I liked watching *Kung Fu*
with David Carradine as Kwai Chang Caine,
Master Po demonstrating wisdom—

*Close your eyes—what do you hear?
 (I hear the water. I hear the birds.)
 Do you hear your own heartbeat?
 Do you hear the grasshopper at your feet?*

When she could afford a sitter, I'd stay
 at the Alexander's—a family who ate chicken and rice
 even more often than we ate ham hocks and beans.
 The oldest son was rarely around, but he wore
 enormous aviator shades, looked like Bruce Lee
 driving up in his T-top Camaro, canary yellow,
 like sunlight. When he'd leave again
 I'd try to beat up little Ralphie, the youngest,
 by utilizing the black belt knowledge of karate
 I assumed I'd learned by visual osmosis, *film study style*,
 my own version of the Jeet Kune Do combat form.

One night, after the “Star Spangled Banner” played
 and the multicolored bars lit up the television,
 the room filled with a comforting low crackle of static,
 Mrs. Alexander startled Dana and me, catching us
 sleeping side by side—Dana
 (who once taught me how to French kiss)
 using my arm like a pillow, her face
 resting on my shoulder, one leg
 draped over mine, curled into me,
 both of us lying the way I'd seen couples
 do it in the movies, blue smoke the only thing missing,
 a Marlboro in my lips, burnt down to the filter.

Curfew

*The wrong is not in the religion;
 The wrong is in us.*
 —SAIER T.

At dusk, bats fly out by the hundreds.
 Water snakes glide in the ponding basins
 behind the rubble palaces. The mosques
 call their faithful in, welcoming
 the moonlight as prayer.

Today, policemen sunbathed on traffic islands
 and children helped their mothers
 string clothes to the line, a slight breeze
 filling them with heat.

There were no bombs, no panic in the streets.
Sgt. Gutierrez didn't comfort an injured man
who cupped pieces of his friend's brain
in his hands; instead, today,
white birds rose from the Tigris.

Gilgamesh, in Fossil Relief

for Sin-lege-unninni

In the month of Ab, late summer
of the seventh century B.C.E., a poet
chisels text into stone tablets, etching
three thousand lines and brushing them by hand,
the dust blown off with a whispered breath.

He is translating the old Sumerian epic,
reinventing the city of Uruk, the Wild Man
and the woman sent out to seduce him.
It is an old story now. It was an old story then,
full of gods and beasts and the inevitable
points of no return each age must learn.

In the mid-August heat of the year 2004,
an archaeologist pauses over an outline
of bone, one body's signature in the earth,
which he reads carefully with a camelhair brush
and patience, each hairline fracture revealing.

History is a cloudy mirror made of dirt
and bone and ruin. And love? Loss?
These are the questions we must answer
by war and famine and pestilence, and again
by touch and kiss, because each age must learn
This is the path of the sun's journey by night.

Lucky Money

It is 1971.
At Willie Lum's Hong Kong Restaurant
I am four years old and this is my very first job: carry the steaming tea by the bamboo handle,
deliver it to Willie Lum's ancient mother.
It is much more difficult than a simple balancing of heat over distance. There's the back kitchen,
gleaming in chrome, knives, the crackling of fluorescent lights.

There's the old man at the sink strangling the dishes, the dead look he has for children, that bang of pots in the slosh of the tub, and the back door, how to squeeze past its riveted metal sheets to the most difficult of all, the bridge, the plank— that weathered twelve- foot board which spans the ledge of the restaurant's back door to the porch of his mother's trailer and below that, seven feet down, chained on a leash of stainless steel— the bullmastiff, gnashing its teeth, its larynx growling from the deep pit of midnight, the nerves of my skin aware of the bats skimming the oak trees, walnuts forming in cerebral shells— and I walked out into the universe, the frightening unknown beauty of it, my hair turned electric. This is where I learned to walk the line over bristling fur, the rough lungs of a language calling up from the depths below, all I must ignore if I want to cross over, a boy of four with a pot of tea for an old woman buried in afghans, lit by Chinese lanterns, an ancient one who gives me red and gold envelopes, who says, *Lucky money. No spendee. Lucky money.*

The One Square Inch Project

Deep in the Olympic National Park, where black trumpet mushrooms rise from the deadfall and leaf rot, I follow the footpath leading to silence.

It is a type of medicine by landscape, this forgetting of my life— yesterday's drive up from Fresno, the auburn leaves of mountain ash, variations of maple, aspens in gold and rust and creamy yellows— all given to memory, hushed by the green work of water; moss, vines, forest canopy.

An owl shakes the morning frost from its feathers.
Roosevelt Elk work their way through the pines up the slope.
Water, dripping from the leaves. Water, in tiny rivulets.

There is a small red stone placed exactly on the spot where silence grows. It is a gift. It was given by the Elder of the Quileute Tribe, David Four Lines, and I will not disturb it.

And I put nothing in the Jar of Quiet Thoughts nearby.
Because there is not one thing I might say to the world which the world does not already know.

I sit. And I listen.

When I return to California,
to my life with its many engines— I find myself changed,
the city somehow muted, frenetic and fully charged with living, yes,
but still, when gifted with this silence, motions have more
of a dance to them, like fish in schools of hunger, once
flashing in sunlight, now turning in shadow.

Viking 1

*Viking Lander 1 made its final transmission to Earth
November 11, 1982*

On approach to Mars, dune fields in the distance,
the spacecraft descends within a storm of dust
before landing on the Golden Plain, Chryse Planitia,
which is a vast and stony desert, a graveyard
of shadows cast sanguine in their repose.

Cameras click in shuttered housings. The landscape
a pornographic scene caught in apertures
opened wide: sand tables in their martial aspect,
compass points, barchan dunes, the far horizon's body line
in rocky silhouette, where Earth is a small, warm light
rising zenith blue beyond the dusk, where I am still a boy,
barefoot on the wet grass of the San Joaquin valley,
the millions of miles between made closer by opposition.

In the old days, they say the desert Arabs hung lanterns
high in the date palms, a guide for friends and strangers
traveling by night. And maybe that's what I'm doing
as I search for lamps in the night's vast amphitheater,
even if I don't know how to put it into words—
I'm searching for the face on Mars, so much like our own,
made from dust and to dust returning, the wind's erosion
calling into the void with that brutal instrument, pain.
And like so many before me, I listen.

I want to hear how the great questions posed by ruin
are given the elegant response of stone.

How we, like Aphrodite, are seduced.

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