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**Among the Lightning Trees:
A Conversation with Brian Turner**

Born in Visalia, CA, in 1967, Brian Turner was raised in the rain shadow of California's Coast Range, the arid San Joaquin Valley. He spent his early childhood moving around the vast, agricultural hinterlands of the Central Valley and Sierra Nevada foothills. The no-bullshit town of Fresno was one stopping point for his family in the early seventies. But by age ten, Turner moved again, settling this time in a rural area outside Madera, CA. Turner says his memories of this stark, yet gorgeous, landscape are haunted by images of "coyotes hunting calves in the cattle rangeland nearby." He told me that growing up in this geography of extremes—a stretch of the Golden State known for scant precipitation, high crop yields, and desolate winter days stretching into weeks of dense tule fog—forced him to develop a raptor-like eye for discerning signs of life on the valley's barren dirt floor.

It has now been ten years since the publication of *Here, Bullet* (Alice James, 2005; Bloodaxe Books, 2007), Turner's first poetry collection. In that decade, Turner has cemented his standing as one of the most potent and widely recognizable literary voices to emerge from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. *Here, Bullet* earned the Beatrice Hawley Poetry Prize in 2005; the collection has been a best-seller many times over. Turner followed his first book of poetry with a second collection, *Phantom Noise* (Alice James Books 2010, Bloodaxe Books, 2012), which was short-listed for the T.S. Eliot Poetry Prize in England. Turner has extended this string of successful publications with his latest book,

My Life as a Foreign Country (W.W. Norton, 2014), which has earned high praise from critics and fellow war writers alike. Benjamin Busch, a former Marine infantry officer and author of *Dust to Dust*, called Turner's memoir a "brilliant fever dream of war's surreality, its lastingness, its place in families and in the fate of nations. Each sentence has been carefully measured, weighed with loss and vitality, the hard-earned language of a survivor who has seen the world destroyed and written it back to life."

See: <http://books.wwnorton.com/books/detail.aspx?id=4294988551>

To say Turner's recent success was a long time coming is an understatement. Turner began studying poetry at Fresno City College in the late 1980s, where he worked with the poet Ernesto Trejo. Later he earned a B.A. in English literature at Fresno State University, studying with Phil Levine, Connie Hales, Chuck Hanzlicek, and Steve Yarbrough. Nearly a decade later, Turner earned an MFA at the University of Oregon, where he worked with T.R. Hummer, Dorianne Laux, and Garrett Hongo. He subsequently taught English in Korea, then enlisted in the Army in 1998. Before and after earning his degrees, Turner tried his hand at various jobs, including stints as a farm worker, machinist, pickler, circuit board maker, dishwasher, and bass guitar instructor, among others. These formative experiences introduced him to the vicissitudes of low wage labor and inspired him to write an unpublished volume of poems about the plight of the working class. Before landing his first major publication with *Here, Bullet*, Turner completed seven other poetry collections, none of which was ever published.

Once Turner's star began rising, there was no slowing its ascent. He has been an Amy Lowell Travelling Poetry Scholar and has garnered literary awards ranging from a Lannan Fellowship to an NEA Literature Fellowship in Poetry. Interest in Turner's achievement has rapidly evolved from curiosity among a fairly narrow circle of critics and readers of war literature to adulation from a remarkably diverse audience spanning the globe. Turner's books and individual poems have been translated into more than a dozen languages. Between early September and mid-October of this year, Turner logged thousands of frequent flyer miles, travelling to more than a dozen speaking engagements in locations scattered across the planet (France, Colorado, New York, South Dakota, and the Netherlands). One week, he joined the St. Paul Metropolitan Symphony, where he helped composer Jake Runestad launch a lyric composition he and Runestad co-created to honor fallen veterans. A week later, Turner appeared with the Iraqi poet Dunya Mikhail at Paris' Musée des Beaux Art.

This interview was conducted between July and November, 2015, during a particularly eventful period in Turner's life. In September, Turner visited the Air Force Academy to deliver his second David L. Jannetta Lecture in eight years. He had just returned from the wake for his beloved father, Marshall Turner, who had almost been felled by a heart attack in 1995, but survived another twenty years and only recently passed away in late August. At the end of his three-day stay, I sensed Turner was running on empty. He was also all talked out, having endured a three-day, non-stop schedule of lectures, lengthy discussion groups, and a half dozen class visits. With a few hours to kill on the visit's last afternoon, I asked Turner if he wanted to step into the great silence of the foothills of the Front Range. When he expressed interest, I knew immediately what I wanted to share with him: several specimens of lightning-strike trees and Ute prayer trees atop an alpine ridge in the rain shadow of the Rockies. I picked the spot because Ben Busch's words about Turner and his memoir were still echoing in my brain—especially words like *lastingness*, *vitality*, *survivor*, *back to life*.



High on a ridge in the rain shadow of the mountain the Utes call *Tavakiev* (Sun Mountain), Turner and I climb a rip-rap path to a stand of survivor trees bent and twisted, but not broken, by lightning strikes whose temperatures likely rivaled those found on the sun's surface. Below the lightning strike trees we spot another set of survivors, centuries-old prayer trees, trained into curving bow-shapes by native peoples hundreds of years before, and poised now to launch petitions and blessings toward the sacred peak. Turner inhales the scent of butterscotch and vanilla issuing from ponderosa bark. As if scrying for signs of life on the ridge's dry floor, he scratches at shiny flakes of Pikes Peak granite with his boot toe. We stand in hushed stillness, listening to the breeze southing through pine boughs. There's no need for talk. Turner is content to admire the gnarled pine limbs and trunks that had once been badly burned and mutilated, but found a way to keep on going, righting themselves somehow, stretching upward again toward the sun. We bask in light and the glow of half-said things. Sometimes it is best to pause and rest in the space between words.

Interviewer: Readers coming to your memoir, My Life as a Foreign Country, for the first time should be prepared for something much more ambitious and wide-ranging than a conventional, cleanly chronological and factual account of one soldier's war experience. Did you set out intending to push the envelope in terms of narrative innovation and what you could pack into the skin of a memoir?

Turner: I did. I didn't know what I was going to write and what the book might teach me in the process, but I very consciously set out to make something that might also approach the word Art. Many wonderful writers have written tremendous through-line narratives and created memoirs connected to military experience that, for the most part, have a fairly conventional method to them. I didn't want to parrot what has already been done.

Interviewer: Your memoir revels in exploring the gaps between fact and fiction as well as the intersection of imagination and memory. What inspired you to carry readers into the experience of so many different soldiers and civilians caught up in various wars in many historical periods and places?

Turner: I think of books as doorways into the imagination. They are constructs and landscapes, some done in minimalist styles and some spread across vast stretches of space and time. I wanted to create something that would pique my own curiosity and create a kind of lyric tension throughout the process of reading *and* writing. I am in no way saying that what I've created here is doing what I'd set out to do. But, it is my best attempt, at this point in my writing and imaginative life, to make art from the raw materials of experience. To illuminate the profound, to question the known, to grapple with the word *beauty* when it intertwines itself with the word *loss* or *pain* or *ruin*. And, as much as possible, to ferret out my own weaknesses, my complicities, my hand in the making of experience. It's too much to place on any one book, or any one meditation, but I suppose that's why writers often write more than one book in a lifetime.

Interviewer: What was the genesis of the memoir—how did it announce itself to you?

Turner: From 2009-2010, I traveled to many places on the globe as part of an Amy Lowell Traveling Poetry Fellowship. I wrote several pieces short pieces for Peter Catapano's *Home Fires* blog at the *New York Times*. At some point, I think in

the fall of 2009, maybe, Ted Genoways, who was the editor at *Virginia Quarterly Review* (*VQR*), challenged me to consider the haibun as a form that might open up my writing. I'd never come across the haibun and didn't know the tradition, etc., but I was immediately intrigued by its possibilities and set out to try my own hand at them. (I've since traveled to Japan, in part, to visit Basho's grave—as a gesture of gratitude for his work and for his influence on my own thought process.)

After I'd filled about ninety pages worth of haibun-like material—mostly fragments that circled around war and violence and all that comes after—I sent this to Genoways and we whittled it down to twenty-two pages. That essay (“My Life as a Foreign Country”) was published in *VQR* and I knew, even as soon as I had the completed essay in my hand, that a book had announced itself. In other words, the essay now challenged me to ask, “What can I learn, using a similar approach, if I extended the meditation over the course of a book?”

Interviewer: Part of the lyric tension you've created in the memoir arises from a gift you have for infusing your reflections on war and violence with lyric insight and uplift at just the right moments, but the tension also comes from your willingness to set the personal—what some might call history with a little “h”—against the sweeping backdrop of History with a capital “H.” I'm curious whether you intended to fold the long view of American military History into your memoir from the start or were you initially aiming to just tell your own story?

Turner: Fragment by fragment, chapter by chapter, the meditation offered insights into the personal and the historical. I learned in the process of writing the book, with the belief that the ideas and possible connections do the work themselves—rather than me, the author, giving an account of my life, or a portion of it. In a sense, it is memoir as collage, memoir as Frankenstein, memoir that depends upon the vast gulf of the synaptic gap.

In general, I've noticed that I am quick to cast my view outward at the world and to avoid shifting focus to the interior (in order to recognize my ‘h’ within the larger word History). This isn't necessarily for the reasons one might guess. That is, I normally don't consider my own personal life to be of great interest for others. I'm not trying to be humble or self-deprecatory—I'm just calling it as I see it. However, I'm fascinated by the world that I live in. Around me, too, very close to me, incredible stories have taken place and continue to astound me.

Interviewer: Can you point to any key influences for My Life as a Foreign Country—any particular memoirs, memoirists, or other works of art you learned from or perhaps sought to emulate in some way?

Turner: Donald Anderson's *Gathering Noise* gave me a boost—as it encouraged me to think I might be on the right track, and that I wasn't completely out of my mind. I'd also include a wide range of artists and thinkers. Philip Glass comes to mind for large-scale compositions. I listened to a lot of Andrew Bird (especially the album *Noble Beast*) early on in the process, and I think that made a huge impact. His ability to introduce a melody, or a musical figure, and then transform it and test it and meditate on it over a series of seamless variations fascinated me. I think part of our work as artists/writers is to synthesize the world we live in through the particular lens we have been given: Sculpture, music, film, journalism, philosophy, painting, photography.

Interviewer: Many readers I've spoken with tell me they admire not only the stories in your memoir, but also how you tell them. In this regard, it's important to note that My Life isn't a typical, chronological account of a single soldier's war experience. In some ways, especially structurally, reading your book feels like reading a medieval interlace narrative such as Beowulf or the Mabinogion. The book is an intricate weave of digressions, loop-backs, and stories within the main story (your story). It's also important to mention that perhaps the most significant side stories are about some of the men you most admire—your father, uncles, grandfather—and how going to war informed their lives. In this way, your memoir becomes a meditation on something much larger than just the story of your war experience, isn't that right?

Turner: Part of what propelled me into the book was a question I've been asked over the past decade: Why did I enlist in the Army and serve in the first place? I often give a short-hand or sketch-like answer to this question, and it seems to make sense to others, though it's never been a fully satisfying answer to myself. That is, I'd say that I come from a long military tradition in my family (and extended family). What does that point to and what does that mean on a deeper, psychological level, though?

As I worked on the book and thought through this question, in part, chapter by chapter, fragment by fragment, I tried to avoid the reductive point that my previous answer had always alluded to—that my military service wasn't wholly my own, and that my own complicities and experiences were, in some small measure, complicities that those I revered had to somehow own up to. I

don't know if that makes sense. What I'm trying to say: I volunteered and I'm responsible for all that I've done or not done, all that I've been a part of or not been a part of. And yet. There's something about the passage from boyhood to manhood that I cannot separate from the tribe I was raised in. It's a kind of rite of passage, a place of common ground—even when the experiences in uniform are so incredibly different from one person to the next. Don't get me wrong—military service wasn't the be-all and end-all, the only rite of passage. But it's one of them. And it's something that binds me and my family together.

Interviewer: So at some point in the writing you discovered it was going to be impossible to tell your story truly without telling the story of these men as well?

Turner: You're right on the money. What starts out as a memoir about my time in uniform, my experiences in Iraq, especially, quickly turns into a broader meditation on war and service within a few generations in an American family. I thought I was asking the question—why did I join the military and go to war, and, perhaps, what did I learn there? But the book has other questions, larger questions, questions that I think go far beyond my own individual life. And that's a good thing. If it didn't, then I'd have left it as a very complicated and lyric diary and it would be in a box in storage with other things I've written.

A book has to ask questions and grapple with things that are larger than the author's own life. A book has to untether itself from its author and learn to wander through the landscape of the imagination on its own. A good book has to be able to stand on its own two feet and wander not only through the imagination of its author, but also through the imagination of the reader. No easy task, that.

Interviewer: Your memoir often swerves away from the actual mess of lived experience to the stuff of imagination. What prompted you to weave sections of fiction into the latticework of your personal stories and your family's war stories?

Turner: I think the first instance came when I was researching my grandfather's experiences fighting on Bougainville in the Pacific. As I conducted my research, I discovered fact after fact, fascinating in detail, but I realized that I wasn't finding a way into the *experience*.

I believe in the imagination as a *real* place, and that conviction gave me the fortitude to press on through the use of fiction—so that I might come close,

or closer, to an imaginative space that I could learn from and explore. Purists in creative nonfiction will balk, and I get where they're coming from, but I believe in using all of the imaginative tools available to the writer—as long as we signpost them and recognize the lenses we're employing as we explore the house of memory. Of course, I'm also expecting the good reader to be savvy and to recognize the pile of rocks, the broken branch on the trail, the arrows I've left for them to help them through the tangle of fiction and nonfiction.

Interviewer: How did you approach the recollected material in the book? Did you have any rules of engagement or boundaries you set for dressing up matter from what you call “the house of memory,” the recollection of actual lived experience?

Turner: One of the things I did was to share much of the work with veterans in my family, and friends who knew me and were a part of the chapters I'd written. This created great email conversations, often with many looped in, different military experiences being shared and stories I'd never heard before (like the one about my Uncle George in Japan, bartending on the side while serving in the Army—and how he became entangled with the Yakuza while there, the former bartender having his throat cut, and more).

They'd often come back with questions about what I'd written and, sometimes, rebuttals or additions. In fact, a couple of times I even inserted some of their email responses to me inside the text of the book. So, those conversations became a part of the meditation in a way that's available to the reader. Writers often talk about a book project evolving as an *organic* process—here's a very clear example of that process in action.

Interviewer: The composition of your memoir involved, at least to some extent, varying kinds and degrees of collaboration—not just with editors such as Ted Genoways from VQR, but also with combat veterans from your family. How important has it been for the veterans in your life to be able to share their war stories all these years hence?

Turner: I can't speak for them, of course, but I can tell you it's been tremendously valuable for me. My father died this past August. If I hadn't written this memoir and started up the conversation with him and his brothers, I'd be left with so many more unanswered questions. There are so many stories I never would have known. And even the stories I already knew were embellished upon and added to—or revised. The storehouse of memory was opened up

in our conversations and the great gift to me, in writing this book, was this internal family conversation.

Interviewer: You know I'm sorry for your loss. What a gift your father left, though, by sharing his stories. Without them it seems the memoir would be a much different creature. Who else did you reach out to share their own stories or their versions of certain stories you shared with them?

Turner: One of my great friends, the poet Stacey Lynn Brown, was an early reader. When I came home on leave during my time in Iraq, Stacey and I hung out in San Francisco. She's one of my best readers and we've been friends since grad school, so I knew that she could not only check my thoughts on my time home on leave, but her keen eye would be vital throughout the manuscript. In fact, I ended up simply inserting some of her comments directly into the meditation. In this sense, I allowed the development of thought, and the questioning of thought, to exist side-by-side within the book's internal dialogue on memory.

There's a long list of similar conversations, with different lenses into the work, and many have their hands in the making.

Interviewer: Given the immense pressure put on soldiers in combat, or on anyone living in extremis in the crucible of armed conflict, it stands to reason that their recollections of the wartime experience are going to be a mix of crystalline clarity punctuated with mis-remembrances and elisions. Do you think war stories need to be told and retold in order to get the memory of war right by filling in the gaps?

Turner: I can only speak for myself here, of course, but for me I think it's partly because I need to make sense of a disparate series of experiences, a year of my life, that doesn't really make all that much sense (while, at the same time, it all somehow makes more sense, or feels more *alive* to me, than much of the rest of my life). The writing of the book has helped me to gain more perspective. The intervening years have done their share, as well.

I also wonder if part of the assembly, and the telling of war stories, is to recognize the gaps as well. I don't have an answer for that, but it seems like this memoir grapples with that question. As an interlocked series of fragments that depend upon the reader to complete the connections between things, it seems to me that this memoir both struggles and depends upon silence, upon the unknown, upon the lost bridges somewhere in the vault of memory.

Interviewer: Through that interplay of imagination and memory, your memoir manages to transcend the historical moment that produced it. Your memoir inhabits the realm of art. But your book keeps carrying us back to concrete conflicts and the actual mess created by war, especially the Iraq War, a controversial war executed in a particular place and time. In this sense, is it fair to say there's a political dimension to your work? By political I don't mean partisan, but rather what Seamus Heaney once said of Sophocles and Yeats: both can be called political writers because they were interested in the well-being of the polis and the responsibilities incumbent upon members of the polis.

Turner: I once had a brief conference with the poet Dave Smith. That was over twenty years ago and yet the lessons from that 40-45 minute conversation still ring with great clarity to this day. He stressed the word *complicity* while talking about my work at the time (which was focused on class issues, labor warfare in America, and interpersonal relationships). I think part of my work involves recognizing complicity within me, interrogating it as clearly as possible, and then sharing that with others. It's not a confession—it's a challenge. It's an ugly gift I offer to others. I try to ask difficult questions and then, in the process of sharing the work, wait to see if those questions find a home in those who read the work. This is one approach. I hope the book works on several levels, and so this is just one way in which I hope the book might function in political terms.

Interviewer: In several different settings I've heard you ask audiences whether they ever stop to think how long we as a nation have continuously been at war. Do you think people are surprised when you quantify the number of consecutive years America has been at war or the number of Iraqi dead left in the wake of our most recent war there?

Turner: I'm a broken record sometimes, I know! I suppose the difficult questions bear repeating, though. And perhaps the difficult questions continue to ring throughout our lives, bearing deeper questions as the years go by.

I'm not really sure how or if the questions I ask find purchase in the psyche of those who hear them, but I know I'm surprised by the questions themselves, and what they yield. Sadly, I often have people come up to me, after a reading or conversation about the work, and they'll express their surprise—and share that they just hadn't quite put the dots together. For most people here in America, it rarely ever feels like there's war going on and that we are a part of the fighting, or the process of fighting. The sites of trauma are so removed and out of sight that our nation can simply go about its business. And I think it's a kind of illness. Soldiers fight a war, but it takes a nation to wage a war.

Interviewer: Broken record or not, somebody has to keep saying these things. Having watched you develop into an increasingly public figure over the past decade, I admire the vital themes you return to again and again in public settings. Your concern for our returning troops and vets, for example, is incredibly compassionate; you are genuinely interested in finding practical solutions to help this community. Did you at some point say to yourself, “If they’re going to give me this stage, I should use it to give voice to all the voiceless veterans our nation has thrown to the curb”?

Turner: One of my teachers (the late Philip Levine) spoke eloquently, passionately and in enduring ways about labor and working-class folks in America—and how he purposely set out to give voice to the voiceless. As much as I try to emulate Phil, that’s really not my approach (giving voice to the voiceless), especially on the subject of war, conflict, and all that follows. In fact, if you thumb through my first poetry collection (*Here, Bullet*) you’ll find a small series of Observation Post poems (like “O.P. #71” and “O.P. # 798”). I chose the numbers as a nod to the reader, a discursive move, I suppose, to beg the question, “Where is 72, 73, 85, 802, 945..?” In other words, I’m pointing out how tiny my own book is and gesturing to the vast number of stories that comprise the whole. That doesn’t mean I don’t do my best to ask the difficult questions, and to try to discover questions that startle the intellect into a kind of action.

Interviewer: I understand what you’re saying about not attempting to speak for other veterans in your writing. But when I’ve personally seen you speak publically (before military and civilian audiences alike), I’ve noticed that you invariably ask tough questions related to what might be called “war’s hidden costs and consequences”—questions of culpability and responsibility. You often ask questions some people would rather not think about: Are we getting it right in caring for veterans? Are we paying attention to the wreckage we helped create in theater and leave behind in the rear view mirror when we declare a truce and bring our forces home?

Turner: I know these points are redundant for most in the military community, but the vast population that isn’t connected to military service and the military community seem to be on auto-pilot when the conversation swings round to war in our time, care for veterans, care for civilians on the battlefields overseas, our commitments and responsibilities to the warzones we’ve fought and bled in as a nation, and more. I think I ask some questions that seem both obvious and hard and yet, they’re really just the starting points to conversations I really think we need to be having as a country but aren’t.

Interviewer: Thinking of all the lives squandered, the nameless, faceless dead, all the ghosts from all the wars you recount in your memoir, I'm reminded of a powerful line you quote from Marcus Aurelius' Meditations, a line suggestive of life's ephemeral nature. Doesn't Aurelius say something like human souls are nothing more than "leaves that the wind drives earthward" and "none of us have much time"? Pretty sobering material to be reading in a combat zone. Did you actually carry a hard copy of the Meditations with you into war or were you reading the book in electronic form?

Turner: I don't remember where I picked up the book, though I think I bought it at a bookstore in Tacoma, Washington, prior to the deployment, and carried it in my assault pack. It's in surprisingly good condition, considering all it went through. It's still marked with Iraqi currency. I was in Iraq from '03-'04, and digital cameras were common, and I think a few people even had sat phones, but Kindle and Nook and iPads weren't in everybody's hands back then. They didn't even exist yet. The war, from my point of view, started analog and very rapidly went digital. In fact, Colby Buzzell was in my battalion and I heard about him as 'some private getting shit from the brass for some blog he was running on the side.' It sounded cool to me, but, to be honest, I didn't actually know what a blog was at the time. This was 2004. Blogs were still a new phenomenon.



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ved by it (if I can put

it like that)—and we admire him for feeling as a person should.

And keep in mind that nothing can harm one of nature's citi-
zens except what harms the city he belongs to. And nothing harms
that city except what harms its law. And there is no so-called mis-
fortune that can do that. So long as the law is safe, so is the city—and
the citizen.

34. If you've immersed yourself in the principles of truth, the
briefest, most random reminder is enough to dispel all fear and
pain:

... leaves that the wind
Drives earthward; such are the generations of men.



Your children, leaves.

Leaves applauding loyally and heaping praise upon you, o
turning around and calling down curses, sneering and mockin
from a safe distance.

A glorious reputation handed down by leaves.

Interviewer: That image of dry, wind-scattered leaves wind engenders a powerful insight found in some of the greatest war literature—namely, that going to war and being a cog in the military machine can do real damage not only to one's sense of a stable self, but also to one's sense of particularity and worth as an individual. This kind of "dis-integration of the self" can occur on all sorts of levels: psychological, social, political, and spiritual. Did you ever sense this kind of thing happening to you in uniform, perhaps even before you went to war, and how did you deal with it?

Turner: I read the *Bhagavad Gita* long before my time in the military, and I think some of the thoughts in it have resounded throughout my life. I value and take comfort in the idea that billions of souls take in the oxygen of our time beside me, and I beside them. I'm not troubled by my ordinarieness in the face of such wild numbers. Aurelius comes to mind, as well, and Homer before him. *Leaves that the wind drives earthward.*

Interviewer: What kinds of things threatened or diminished your sense of autonomy or dignity while you were in uniform? What helped to mitigate this kind of thing?

Turner: One of my struggles in uniform was with ineptitude—both my own (especially my own!) and in those with power above me. I often struggled to reconcile my thoughts toward incompetent leaders above me with my respect for the rank and the institution itself. In garrison, this was particularly difficult; in Iraq I was fortunate enough to serve in a great platoon, with one of the finest Platoon Leaders I ever served with, and I'm certain their smarts and professionalism are part of why I'm alive and writing books today. A couple of the guys in my squad went on to become Green Berets. These are the soldiers I was lucky enough to serve beside. One of them failed his citizenship test while in Iraq, while serving and fighting in a combat zone. I would love to hear his thoughts on your question, too.

*Interviewer: In the memoir, you capture what it means to experience the loss of self in a poignant scene where you show yourself getting ready for deployment and realizing you're just a number without an address. At that point in the story, I had the sense you were feeling pretty much like Aurelius' scattered leaves. That scene is the epitome of **Aloneness**. Is that a fairly common feeling among deploying soldiers or was that sense generated by your particular life circumstances at the time?*

Turner: I can only speak for myself on this, but I do have a sense that others fought internally with similar issues. Some had loved ones back home, children and families that depended on them, in part, and their experiences were, I believe, very different from my own. I saw the photographs in their helmets, in our vehicles, in their hooches. Of course, my mother and father were and remain close to me, but I'd recently divorced and I really felt adrift. I was older than most, too, so I remember thinking that if one of us had to die, it should probably be me, because I'd lived so much more, I'd had more time on this planet, I'd loved and lost and I'd been given more days of sunlight to think about the eternal questions we all must grapple with. There's nothing heroic in what I'm saying, and I definitely don't want it to sound that way. It was just simple math. I'd lived more and, if one of us had to die, why shouldn't it be me? I'd been given more time, and I didn't have a bright young family that depended on me.

Here's something that doesn't get talked about too much and doesn't fit the heroic model I often see portrayed in movies. In my squad, while in Iraq, every guy that was married or had a girlfriend was dumped while we were overseas—except for me (I'd divorced just before deployment) and the squad leader (he divorced and remarried in the years after). Each seemed to cope with these things in their own way, and we usually gave a guy a wide berth for a few days, respecting his space, until he found a way to get back to something that resembled his usual bearing.

Interviewer: When did you realize you were beginning to lose the moorings to your old self and did you try to combat this in any way apart from writing while still on active duty?

Turner: I realized it during one of the very first days in Basic Training, at Ft. Benning, Georgia. Bald, standing in what seemed like an infinite row of bald human beings, utterly devoid of distinction or individuality, with the bald head directly in front of me only about three inches away from my nose, and I remember thinking, "I have made a colossal mistake." That initial rupture of self and reconstitution as a new version of myself has been useful, in retrospect—as it was such a clear example of how to restart a life, how to reinvent one's self, and, more importantly, that I could survive and thrive *after* that rupture.

Interviewer: The big joke in the Odyssey, one of the greatest coming-home-from-war stories ever written, is that Odysseus tells the Cyclops he is a Nobody. This is a joke of sorts (there's punning wordplay in the Greek), but the joke saves his life, but as Oscar Wilde says, "Every jest is a truth in the womb of time." Ten years at war, separated from keith and kein, and a skein of ceaseless wandering has made Odysseus a Nobody on all sorts of levels (as a husband, father, king, member of a community). In a way, isn't this one of the central insights of your book—that the real battle faced by many soldiers isn't just going to war, but trying to become a new kind of Somebody rather than a Nobody after war?

Turner: Absolutely. Part of the process of the memoir is to take stock of myself as I emerge out of history, both personal and collective. Much of the current wave of war-related writing is concerned almost completely with this very question. Perhaps this is because of the multiple-deployment nature of service in these contemporary war zones. Return after return after return. The military comes home, again and again and again, and still we don't seem to comprehend—as a nation—what they bring with them.

Interview: Is there anything we as a nation absolutely need to know about the burdens military members carry home? In your discussions with veterans, both writers and non-writers, are there any essential, common threads of experience that emerge and to which we as empathetic citizens, as a nation, should be paying attention?

Turner: I might suggest something unorthodox and incredibly difficult to do. Perhaps a couple of things. One, that we as citizens do what we can to recognize our own responsibilities in relation to the wars our nation wages. Two, we might work to create civilian bridges, friendships, and creative collaborations with people in other countries. I'm doing all I can to evolve and, if possible, to live my life as a global citizen. In terms of the men and women who serve in uniform, as well as those who are veterans, I recommend simply befriending them. What better thing can we offer than to become someone's friend?

Interviewer: If you could give veterans any insight into the kinds of things that worked for you as you sought to rediscover, resurrect, or remake Brian, what would that be?

Turner: It's different for each person, but, in general, I might say, "Take it slow." Coming home is a life-long process. As you try to make sense of the past, and your own part within it, I'd hope that you also learn how to approach the rest of your life.

I'm often asked to teach creative writing workshops to veterans, and it's often expected that I'm there to help them sort their way through the war(s) they carry inside of them via the process of writing. That's part of the process for some, no doubt about it. That said, I'm also trying to share writing tools and approaches with them that might help them as they write their way into the rest of their life.

Interviewer: Maybe we should step back for a moment. Isn't there's a risk in overstating the negative effects wrought by the kind of assault on the sovereign individual soul, on the autonomous self, that I've been claiming can occur in war? After all, some people really do seem to discover themselves and develop positively as a result of their military and wartime experiences. Am I out of my mind to say this?

Turner: I get that, completely, and you're definitely not out of your mind. I suppose my concern is when someone who has been in combat doesn't seem to have a complicated reaction or layers of complication connected to their time in service. It's all so messy and layered and filled with grey areas. So it's hard for me to understand those who appear to me like a clear blue sky over a lake so clear and blue you can see the bottom—and yet there's nothing dead or damaged struggling down in the deep to reach the light of day.

Interviewer: I love that figure. The only place you could find that kind of clear blue sky over a clear blue lake was the Lake Tahoe of my childhood. These days, Tahoe looks fine from thirty thousand feet, but when you walk the strand at Sand Harbor you see signs of trouble. The lake isn't ok, is it? Can we take the take the metaphor further?

Turner: What's more troubling to me is a nation that can conduct war, sometimes multiple wars, and pay no attention to them, know little about them, if anything, and move on to the next one with little reference to what has come before.

Clear blue skies over a clear blue lake. Not a cloud in sight.

Interviewer: If Derek Walcott gets it right when he says, "The classics can console. But not enough . . .," I wonder how important it was for you to read Marcus Aurelius prior to the invasion of Iraq. Is there something of the Stoic in you?

Turner: I think there was something comforting in it, I suppose. His work added to my own sense of detachment, I think, while strangely also adding to

a sense of common experience—in a generational and millennial way, if that makes sense. Reading Aurelius is like listening to a voice made of stone. It has an elemental, resounding quality to it that, given the right setting, can draw out the profound importance of a given moment. And I felt as if I were about to enter one of those moments. I was in one of the great doorways of history, and Aurelius offered a voice with a timeless quality to it. The strange thing is that I also, in equal measure, could sense how utterly mundane and banal it all was, too. So I experienced an odd mixture of dread and boredom, fascination and professionalism—all on the eve of crossing from Kuwait into Iraq.

Interviewer: What other books did you read during your tour in Iraq?

Turner: There were several, but among them . . . *Iraqi Poetry Today*, an anthology of Iraqi poetry published by King's College London. My Dad sent *Papillion* and *Banco: The Further Adventures of Papillion* by Henri Charrière and *The Long Walk* by Sławomir Rawicz, which, sadly, I've lost somewhere along the way. Great books. My LT was an English major at West Point, and a writer, too—who I hope will one day write a book that will sit very comfortably on that high shelf of rare and necessary words. He had a foot locker with a good number of books in it. I remember talking with him about novels and the books he had, and he'd loan me one from time to time. That's how I came across Hemingway's dispatches as a journalist.

Interviewer: You mentioned once that your father was an avid reader. Judging from remarks in your memoir, it seems many other people may have had a hand in leading you to books. Were there many books and readers in your home growing up?

Turner: I was raised mostly in the country and my father, Marshall, was indeed an avid reader. Voracious, really. This is pre-internet and in a rural setting. Coyotes hunting calves in the cattle rangeland nearby. Cable television didn't yet exist and there were only five or six grainy television channels in total. So: information didn't exist in a fluid river, a wide ocean, the way it does now. My mother and father served as the ocean. The books that moved through the house were the rivers that poured into the ocean.

My uncle (Jon Turner) and aunt (Cae Turner-Bernard) were also strong early influences on my imaginative life. Aunt Cae was (and still is) known as the wordsmith in our family. She embodied the role of the writer—offering a role,

a way of being, that I might strive for myself. In addition to being a veteran of the Vietnam War, Uncle Jon ran cattle in the foothills near Mariposa, California (not far from our home in Madera), played guitar and sang in folk festivals, as well as teaching drama and English classes at the local high school. He would often give me a pile of books when he stopped by—in order to augment the thin reading list I had at my own school. I still have those books to this day. Most are general literature anthologies, while some are devoted to specific genres and modes. One standout: *Just What the Country Needs, Another Poetry Anthology* (1971).

Looking back on the bookshelf now located (for the most part) in memory, I can see the tracts of Confucius sitting side-by-side with Donald Hamilton's episodic fiction about an American counteragent, Matt Helm. My father would often read novels while we cleaned the dishes after dinner—in a way that replicated the serial story mode of newspapers back in the day. It was a way of savoring a story and, as I see it now, a way of living with a story or a book. Among other things, that practice instilled a great sense of value to the work itself and to the importance of the imagination in our lives.

Interviewer: Although you've said you were terribly shy as a kid, you appear to be at home in front of a crowd. Did you inherit the storyteller's gift from your father?

Turner: My father was a brilliant man. And he was also a great performer, though he never would have agreed to that assertion. In my mind's eye, I can return to that kitchen to hear him savoring the words as he reads from the book in his hands, and the characters begin to rise and shake off the book-dust from their clothes, my father's voice becoming their voices so they might speak again and call out from the chaptered landscapes they've long since been marooned in.

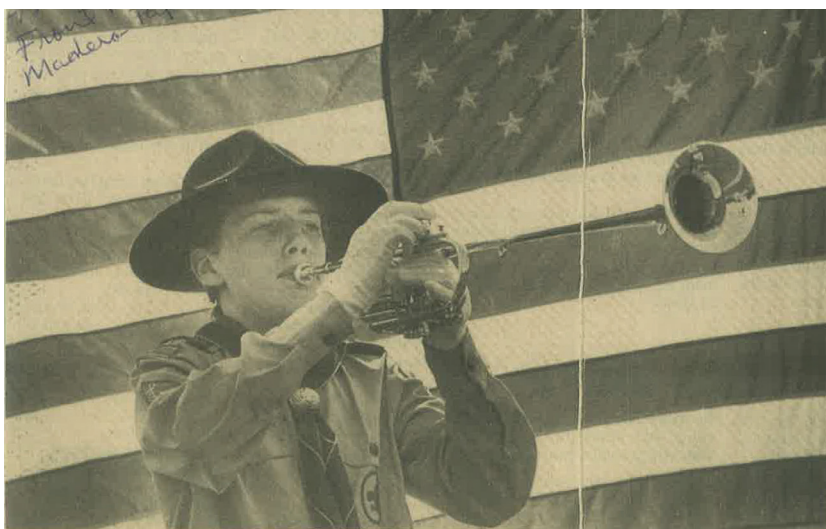
Interviewer: Your collection Here, Bullet suggests you weren't just reading books in your down time while deployed. It seems you were listening to and thinking about music and song lyrics which appear in a number of poems in that first collection.

Turner: Absolutely. I listened to a tremendous amount of music. I remember my platoon once prepping for a nighttime raid in Mosul, and someone had Credence Clearwater Revival playing. I was enjoying the music and thinking it somehow fit perfectly with the moment when another soldier in the platoon exclaimed, "That's not our music. That's the soundtrack to a different war, man."

My own soundtrack included Wilco, Black Rebel Motorcycle Club (B.R.M.C.), Beck, Thievery Corporation, the Australian band Jet, and... How much time do we have here?

Interviewer: So staying connected with and listening to music was a big part of your time in Iraq. But you play music as well and you have been in few bands over the years, right? Where did you get your start performing music?

Turner: I played trumpet from elementary school into college. In my late teens, I picked up the bass guitar as a member of The Dead Guys (with Brian Voight, Skip Buhler, and Russell Conrad). It was a Central Valley band that shifted through band members over the years, changed names often, and was, for me, one of the great joys of my life. If you look in the Notes section of the memoir, you'll find a hyperlink to a song from our last album ("Believe Everything"). It's one of Brian Voight's songs. He was the primary songwriter for the band and he played guitar. He was my best friend since I was seven years old and really was more of a brother than a friend. He died in 2012 from cancer. He was (and continues to be) one of the biggest artistic influences in my life. I included the hyperlink in the book so that others might hear and enjoy his music.



Brian Turner, playing a soprano bugle for the Madera Thunderbirds drum, fife, and bugle corps will be among those taking part in Memorial Day services Monday honoring the na-

tion's war dead. This is the first year the newly formed corps, Troop / Post 380 of the Boy Scouts of America, will be participating.

(Photo by Bob Durrell)

Interviewer: Are you still in a band?

Turner: After Brian Voight's death, I really didn't think I'd ever be involved in another music project in my lifetime. I'm still not sure what changed exactly, but I've recently picked up the bass and horn again. Over the past few months, I've taken part in a very intriguing recording project—working on an album with a Dutch artist and musician—Roel Vertov—and his band, The Retro Legion. My memoir has been translated into Dutch and published in The Netherlands with de Arbeiderspers. Since publication, I've begun to collaborate with a number of Dutch artists, painters, and writers (including Roel Vertov).

Interviewer: I understand you've recently started playing flugelhorn. That's an interesting instrument to pick up. It has martial connections, I believe. Wasn't it used on battlefields to call in the flanks or wings of an army (Flügel being German for wing)?

Turner: I picked up the flugelhorn this year, as it seemed like the appropriate horn for the project I'm working on with Vertov—both for the tone of the instrument and the symbolic/thematic connections to the work. (The album is called *Love Songs to the Bombers Flying Overhead*.)

Interviewer: Ground pounders will appreciate the title, I'm sure. The Air Force has its uses, no? I like that idea of a poet sharpening (or re-cutting) his musical and performative teeth on the flugelhorn. I'm thinking of those time-honored ideas about a line of poetry being the release and completion of a single breath and the poet's role as a conduit of "inspiration." I'm saying all this because I've been told flugelhorn is a tough instrument to play—as I understand, it takes a lot of breath power and control is required to make those gorgeous strains.

Turner: It's a beautiful instrument and it reminds me that each musical phrase has a brief lifespan with a beginning, middle, and end. It is a physical presence that interacts with the phrases that preceded it and those that follow. In a more practical sense, playing the flugelhorn reminds me, as a poet, that the imagination is carried by the breath. The timing and spacing, the intonation and inflections of language, mirror the musician's craft. This is true whether the words are recited aloud or 'voiced' within us as we read silently to ourselves.

Interviewer: I want to probe a bit further into the place of breath and spirit in your writing. In step with a long poetic tradition, you artfully weave wind and breezes and spirits into

various poems and your memoir. Can you talk about the place of wind and breath in your imaginative world—the place of spirit(s) in your writing or why you often mention ghosts in your public readings?

Turner: One thing I might touch upon (something I said earlier): I believe the imagination is a real space, or series of interconnected and adjacent landscapes. It is inhabited by the past—a past that is haunted by the present. We are the spirits that visit the past, through the conduit of memory and dream. The opposite is true, too. Language is one of the transports that carries us between worlds. I know for some people I must surely sound like a typical Californian right now. I get that. But what I don't understand is how some live without being continually baffled and amazed by the ineffable mystery we are a part of.

Interviewer: Maybe they're breathing bad air. Some people are completely out of breath, it seems. I'd like to dig even deeper into Section Four of the memoir where you tell a story which gives new meaning to the trope of a poet's control of breath and breathing. In this scene, your unit identifies some suspicious men who appear to be concealing AK-47s, and you suggest that the way a soldier is able to control his breathing can sometimes mean the difference between life and death. You have a bead on one man in particular. Turns out your breath control saves this suspicious man who turns out to be from Chicago. You calmly decide, at the last possible second, not to shoot. Isn't it true that breath control, staying focused, concentrating, literally saves you from having to live out the rest of your life with the memory of that man's slain spirit on your conscience?

Turner: Absolutely. Of course, I also have to give great and enduring thanks to Parazoo—who was quick-thinking enough to recognize the badge on one of the men and to save his life. I would have shot at least one of the men had it not been for Parazoo.

Interviewer: I probably read Section Four two or three times before it dawned on me that you might be suggesting the poet and the marksman are close akin. Have you thought much or written about the relationship between the poet and the marksman?

Turner: I've often thought of the similarities between the professional work and approach of the soldier with that of the writer's craft. As a soldier, I was told and often repeated to the soldiers that worked with me the following common phrase, "Pay attention to detail." The writer shares the exact same mantra. The details are what make the difference.

Interviewer: What you said earlier about the way Basho and the haibun tradition inspired the VQR essay fascinates me. The VQR essay has haibun written all over it, but the memoir isn't so insistent about sticking to the form, though there are recognizable haibun appearances such as Section One-Hundred and Twenty-One. After you wrote the VQR piece, did you keep your eye on the haibun tradition—or at least the spirit of haibun—as you shaped the memoir?

Turner: Absolutely. The twenty-two page *VQR* piece was originally ninety pages of haibun and broken fragments that were then all broken into fragments, sorted into like groups, gutted and cut down to essential material that had juice to it, and then, with these much smaller 'like' piles of fragments, the essay used a 'braiding' technique to interweave the fragments together.

Before braiding, though, it might be useful to know... Each 'like' grouping (war experiences/ father-grandfather/ childhood memories/ intimacy and loss/ etc.) was cut down considerably and then put into a sequence, in order to suss out the internal arc contained within each 'theme' or 'thread.' Once each group had a sequence and an internal arc, all of the groups were then 'braided' together, not unlike taking four or five separate character arcs and then fusing them, braiding them together.

So, while it started out as a series of explorations and experiments in haibun, the form itself was broken down into elemental parts and then reassembled. That's how the first chapter came into being.

I then ended up writing a version of the entire book that used that chapter as one of nine chapters. Each chapter took a different stylistic approach: one was ALL haibun, another a three-act play, another..., another..., etc. That version of the book turned out to be unreadable, or so *avant garde* that the *avant garde* started bleeding from their ears. Ugh. So, back to the woodshed. I took the ENTIRE book apart and broke it down again to its most elemental parts, gutted and cut tremendous amounts, reordered using the method for the *VQR* piece, reassembled, rewrote, and so on, draft by draft by draft, until it is what it is today.

Alex Bowler, my editor at Jonathan Cape, had his sleeves rolled up and worked alongside me—draft by draft—until the book was done. He's an old-school editor. I often say that he's proof that the word *editor* can be synonymous with the word *artist*. He never compromised or rushed the work along it was a tremendous boost to be able to collaborate in the deconstruction and reconstruction of the book with him.

Interviewer: Sounds like tearing apart and putting together the slant six engine in my old '69 Valiant. What a mess in the making, but all that building and rebuilding around the haibun concept made for a very readable narrative after all. To my mind, the underlying haibun approach pulls lyric and narrative together in very productive ways in the memoir. By exploring the hybrid possibilities offered by the form, did you find any truth in Ted Genoways' suggestion that haibun would open up your writing in other respects?

Turner: It mostly helped with the approach to the memoir, and it helped me to cross the border from one genre to another. It was crucial and pivotal in that effort. In a larger sense, I think each book and each new project leads us into new territory. We have to find new ways to cross from one project into another. In other words—what helps us this time will likely inform but not fully help us with the next project.

I'm not interested in falling into a formulaic approach. This can sustain a successful writing life, true enough, but it won't expand the known and help the writer to grow as an artist, as a thinker, as a human being.

Interviewer: Do you have a daily writing routine or do you take each day as it comes?

Turner: I write mostly in bursts of energy. Two weeks, three weeks solid. I'll be up until four or five in the morning and then wake up at ten or eleven. When I'm not in one of those intense periods, then I almost always have several projects in the air, and I'm a workaholic, and a bit of an insomniac—so my daily life is peppered with moments when I feel a compulsive need to jot down a phrase or a scrap of language (even though I have no idea where it might find a home).

Once a book begins to congeal, though, then I really lean into it and it becomes a kind of overriding obsession. I don't usually try to corral the feeling. In fact, I enjoy it and I've come to recognize when that's happening. My wife, who is also a writer, usually knows when I'm diving into a project like this before I even fully realize it. (She has a similar process and I've learned when to recognize the space she needs to dive into her work as well.) This isn't madness or mania. This is a deep and concentrated period of living. I think of it as a way of respecting the imagination and living alongside it, rather than trying to shelve it and compartmentalize it. It's a gift. I'd like to tell the gift to arrive every day at seven a.m. so that we can unwrap it, but it doesn't work like that for me.

However, the process of revision, the act of reading as a writer, the conversations on art with other thinkers, paying great attention to the world within and without, and more—these are also part of the process of writing a book. These are things I do throughout the day and they are wed to the work that eventually finds its way to the page. I don't think there's any secret formula, though I do think a writer needs to love what they do, and they need to be in it for the long haul.

Interviewer: Looking at your oeuvre as a whole, I've seen your more recent poems open up in lots of ways, especially when we compare them to the poems which appear in Here, Bullet. There's a distinct movement, for example, away from the prevalent short line of the first collection toward the more consistently extended lines of the poems in your second collection, Phantom Noise. What inspired that transformation in lineation?

Turner: I think part of this has to do with the breath. I'm naturally digressive and tangential, and the long throw of the line is more capable of emulating that thought process. That said, I'm trying to learn to avoid superimposing my natural line over any given subject. *Here, Bullet* was the first time (in a large scale way) in which I wrote in response to experience and the lineation reflected the experience (rather than superimposing a musical line over a given theme or experience).

And so, part of my work as a writer is learning to adjust and alter and accentuate my natural artistic inclinations with the needs of the work itself. Some would call this a question of voice, but it's far more complicated than that.

Interviewer: When addressing the question of lineation, Seamus Heaney once differentiated between the "strength of stunt" and the "attraction of stretch." Do you have any preference for writing longer or shorter lines?

Turner: I enjoy both. In fact, part of the draw of prose is the accordion-like properties involved in the musical construction of larger work. The book, at a musical level, resembles a symphonic work. There's need for the stretch and flexibility of phrase, as well as the punch of a short line. Just as a long melodic line can fascinate and sweep the mind off its feet, one note can punch the listener in the gut and drop them to their knees. One note can be devastating. One word can change everything. It's true in stories and it's true in life.

Interviewer: What kinds of forms and lines, if any, are you experimenting with these days?

Turner: Trade secrets, man. Trade secrets.

Interviewer: I've read that Basho developed the haibun not only as a way to open up possibilities for extending the haiku moment, but also as a way to write about his travels. Is that correct? I'd like to hear more about your knowledge of Basho and haibun because I find stories about the evolution of forms fascinating.

Turner: Me, too. It's our great fortune to inherit the work of phenomenal writers and thinkers. Part of our work, I think, is to step off from the known, the traveled, the explored, in order to expand the boundaries of the known. As Basho needed to expand the known by adapting and altering contemporary practice, we need writers and thinkers to do the same in our own time.

Part of what I find fascinating in Basho is that he inserted the journey directly into the artwork so that the epiphany arose from it. In another sense, he gave us more time and space to spend with him. The lyric moment is stretched in the haibun, given room to breathe and develop, and I imagine it felt liberating to him at the time.

Interviewer: Is it fair to think of your memoir, which after all had its origins in the VQR haibuns, as a kind of travelogue—traveling across different wartime geographies as well as across vast expanses of historical time?

Turner: Exactly. It's part of what I was after in the structure and construction of this memoir. If I could somehow have many of the disparate elements or fragments exist simultaneously, then I'd be one step closer to what I was after than what I was able to achieve here. Still, I think the reader holds an idea and then another echoes to create a kind of simultaneity. In that sense, it approximates what I was going for overall.

Interviewer: I'd like to switch the subject to war poetry. I wonder whether the legacy of Wordsworth's formal pronouncements in the Preface about the desirability of pleasure in poetry has something to do with the notion that there's no place for war in the lyric. And yet, isn't the best war poetry successful and memorable precisely because it embodies a response to the dissonance between the nastiness and suffering of war and the pleasure of form and language and sound and image?

Turner: Yes. I'd agree. I'd add, maybe, that the work needs to avoid romantic traps while recognizing what's lost and what's loved within the moment. That's where the beauty really is, if it's there at all—not in the embellishments but in the gestures, however minute, toward loss.

Interviewer: On that score, I think it's important to note that what sets your poems of beautiful wreckage apart from reckless, highly romantic war poems like Brooke's "The Soldier" is that your poems don't elide nastiness and terror from the representation of death. So what are you up to, what are you aiming for in aesthetic and perhaps ethical terms by merging images of the actual bloody mess with lyrical release?

Turner: I'm not sure I can put it into words. I'm also not sure if I should—as I think it's the reader's work. I'm really not trying to be oblique, it's more of an attempt to respect the reader's position vis-à-vis the work itself. I might share something Philip Levine once tried to teach me. To paraphrase, he said: If you want readers to experience loss, you have to give them something to love—and then take it away from them.

Interviewer: The way you represent your own wartime experience and the experience of various speakers in your poems seems to echo a fairly constant refrain in war literature, at least war literature since the Great War. I'm thinking of the idea you sometimes explore which suggests that war has a way of unbinging the psyche. War has a penchant for hollowing out or dismantling souls. Do you find it ironic how this psycho-spiritual process runs counter to so much of what the warrior ethos and the myth of war would have us believe: that going to war will make you better, stronger, and give you a certain moral clarity unavailable to the uninitiated?

Turner: Amen to that. It's a dirty, nasty, ugly, morally ambiguous and complicated in ways that mostly defy comprehension. Those who know the most about war, I'd argue, are the civilians caught on the battlefield—who are rarely ever consulted for their wisdom on the matter. I'm thinking of Dunya Mikhail's incredible poem about war, in which War is personified—"The War Works Hard."

Who listens for wisdom when the great sweep of history rises in a tremendous and dangerous swell before our eyes? Our fascination with death and ruin and words like glory and courage make me think of the carriages filled with spectators headed out to watch the Battle of Bull Run on July 21st, 1861. Of

course, that fascination finds its spectators in every generation, and I don't see that abating anytime soon, sadly.

Interviewer: I'm currently editing an anthology of war poems and in the process of corresponding with you and putting that book together, I've been reminded how much our understanding of war is expanded and enriched by civilian perspectives like that found in poems like "The War Works Hard." The anthology would be incomplete without civilian voices, civilian witness. Why do you think we've so often failed to consult civilians for their experience and knowledge of war?

Turner: I think it may be because we're often fascinated by *intention*. For some it might be the romantic pull of the hero/heroine, while for others it might be the allure of organized or sanctioned death. Words like *murder*, *obscenity*, *ruin*, come to mind. And death. Death with a capital D.

Interviewer: You've helped me understand where Yeats was perhaps coming from in his critique of what he called Wilfred Owens' "passive suffering." Maybe Yeats didn't see the possibility for intention or tragic joy in the meat grinder of the trenches. So if I'm hearing you correctly, the civilian perspective isn't interesting to some people because they're the ones being killed rather than doing the killing. I once read that ninety percent of those killed by war in the twentieth century were civilians. What can we do to recognize and memorialize that kind of slaughter?

Turner: I think Sebastian Junger is really on to something with his idea, if I understand it correctly, to create a monument dedicated to civilians lost on the battlefield. I've stood near the hypocenter at Nagasaki and Hiroshima, so I know there are spaces like this, but I don't know of a monument in America that does the work Junger calls for.

Interviewer: I like Junger's idea too. I guess some would see the World Trade Center memorial in that light, but Junger's concept transcends any given war or atrocity it seems and it points to battlefield deaths. Switching gears, let's cast back to 2012 and an occasion when you told a group of my students that you didn't want to be Sgt Turner any more, that being Sgt Turner meant having to settle for a much smaller version of yourself. Did you ever discuss your thoughts in this regard with guys in your unit? In other words, did other people you served with share this sentiment?

Turner: I never did. This was something I figured out and learned how to articulate after my time in uniform. We all know this throughout our lives, I think, so there's nothing earth-shattering about it. We exist as versions of ourselves to the different people and communities that we interact with on a daily basis. The difference in combat, for the most part, is that we so wholly and completely exist within a given, specific, role.

Interviewer: You certainly devised a decisive response to the problem of Sgt Turner by killing him off in your memoir. At what point in the writing process did you decide Sgt Turner had to die in the book?

Turner: I'd been working on a novel, in fits and starts, for a couple of years prior to diving into the memoir. It wasn't working as a novel, but the main character intrigued me. The protagonist was a dead American soldier named Henderson. The attempt at that novel still sits in a box in storage. However, as I worked my way through the memoir, at one point it dawned on me that I needed to take the protagonist out of that novel, recognize him as myself, and suddenly the entire memoir began to make much more sense to me.

We often talk about veterans returning from combat zones carrying the landscape of war and their experiences within them, the way we might look at a tree ring and recognize a year of fire. Rarely do we see a combat veteran and recognize that they've left a part of themselves in a foreign land, like a ghost, haunting that landscape. This rings very true to me and I think it probably does for many others, too.

Interviewer: Did killing off Sgt Turner in the book provide you with a sense of redemption or some sort of resurrection in your flesh and blood existence?

Turner: It might take me another decade and some distance, I think, to answer your question. I'm too much inside of the process right now. Still, I do know this... As I killed off Sgt Turner, an immediate question arises—Who is Brian Turner? It's a question I'm learning to answer by starlight, at the end of each day.

Interviewer: Killing off a character in a book is one thing, but even dead characters seem to take on a life of their own after we close the books they inhabit. In your everyday life is Sgt Turner staying put as a dead man? Or have you had to find some way to integrate Sgt Turner's ghost into your new self and new life after war?

Turner: I'm definitely in a period of reinvention right now. I can see in the art I'm making and the approaches to art that I'm taking. At the same time, I think it would be a disservice to myself and to others if I somehow erased the memory banks and started with a fresh slate. Impossible, anyways. My lens into the moments will always be mediated, in the subtle and profound ways, by my experiences overseas and in uniform. One of the questions I have for myself is this: How do I integrate my wartime and military experiences into the rest of my life so that I can lead a full and healthy life, and, if possible, be useful for others along the way?

Don't get me wrong, I'm not constantly vigilant and thinking about things like this 24/7. Sometimes I'm just sitting on the porch drinking a cup of coffee with my wife and listening to the cardinals in the yellow rain trees out back. Sometimes I'm at a spring training game and hoping the best for guys that probably won't make the team this year. And sometimes, often at night, I'm thinking about things that were, things that are still very much alive inside of me, a part of me, and I'm in conversation with the dead.

If we're lucky and if we live long enough, I think this happens to us all. Though, admittedly, most won't choose to be Yankees fans like I am.

Interviewer: As a native Northern Californian, how did you ever wind up being a fan of the Evil Empire? In recent years have you ever questioned your relationship with the Bronx Bombers? Now, the Giants, there's a ball club . . . three out of the last five World Series pennants.

Turner: In the late seventies, I used to watch ballgames with my grandfather. We'd play catch out in the road (with the same glove he used prior to the war, a glove I still have) and we occasionally hit out at the batting cages, too. As a telephone lineman, he'd been sent back East during a strike to work on the lines in the tunnels of New York. I was told that he'd lived in a makeshift tent city near the Brooklyn bridge and that, once the day's work was done, he often went to see the Yankees play at the old ballpark. This is during the era of Whitey Ford and Yogi Berra and Mickey Mantle and Phil Rizzuto. Who wouldn't become a fan?

I wasn't aware of the Evil Empire's history of money and power when I first learned about them. I learned about them through their heroes and, in the year I leaned in to become a lifelong fan, they came back from fourteen games out in July to win the whole thing. For me, they were the underdogs, lifted up by an unlikely hero—Bucky Dent.

In fact, when I was in Iraq I received a message from *Elysian Fields Quarterly* (a literary baseball journal); I was told that a poem I'd submitted months before deployment ("Bucky Dent") had been accepted for publication. It felt bizarre and otherworldly, as if I'd received a message from another life.

Interviewer: Here's a grand view of human history question I've asked many other war writers. Do you think we're stuck with war—that our species' propensity for making war is hard-wired into us or can we make a break from what Joyce calls "the nightmare of history"?

Turner: I've listened to historical statisticians who assert that violent conflict has actually decreased over the past century, if I remember correctly. There are many who say we live in one of the most peaceful periods in human history, though this seems and feels counter to common sense—and it doesn't match up with my own sense of reality, either.

I also remember someone once saying that, in all of recorded human history, there have only been twenty-nine years of actual peace. Even if this stat proved to be one-hundred percent true, I'd argue that there was likely an unrecorded low-level conflict—one farmer with a grudge whacking another farmer late at night and acting like nothing happened the next day.

I wish I had an answer that might help to resolve this intractable quality, but all I have are questions. It's part of the reason I write books. Not to offer solutions, but as a way of thinking my way deeper into the questions that must be asked.

Interviewer: It's my hope you'll keep asking these complex, yet essential questions for a long time to come. Before we sign off, I think your readers may be curious what's in the hopper—what can they look forward to and when?

Turner: I've got several small projects (mostly individual essays and poems) in the works, as well as lyric collaborations with a couple of different music composers. There's another book-length nonfiction work in progress, too, and a collection of poems... You're not going to find any moss on this stone, man.

Interviewer: I look forward to reading the next installments. Thank you for spending so much time with WLA.

Turner: An honor, Tom. Thank you.

Thomas G. McGuire has taught war literature and Irish literature at the United States Air Force Academy for over a decade. A poet, scholar, and translator, he is currently completing a manuscript entitled *Violence and the Translator's Art: Seamus Heaney's Irish Transformations*. He also serves as WLA Poetry Editor.

Brian Turner is the author of two poetry collections and a memoir. After enlisting in the Army in 1998, he eventually rose to the rank of Sergeant and completed two deployments to war zones (Bosnia-Herzegovina and Iraq) before leaving the service in 2005. Turner currently directs the low-residency MFA program he founded at Sierra Nevada College, a Lake Tahoe campus located in the ponderosa pines just blocks from the largest alpine lake in North America (<http://www.sierranevada.edu/mfawrite>). Turner divides his time between his MFA directorship duties, full-time writing, and frequent travel to speaking engagements. He lives in Orlando, Florida, with his wife, Ilyse Kusnetz, a poet and the author of the T.S. Eliot prize-winning collection, *Small Hours* (Truman State University Press, 2014).