

## **An Education in Arms: Brian Turner's *Here, Bullet***

Associate Professor Jason Shaffer  
English Department  
United States Naval Academy

A great and glorious thing it is  
To learn, for seven years or so,  
The Lord knows what of that and this,  
Ere reckoned fit to face the foe --  
The flying bullet down the Pass,  
That whistles clear: "All flesh is grass."  
—Rudyard Kipling, "*Arithmetic on the Frontier*"

The lines above, written by the greatest poetic chronicler of the British Empire, describe the relative inutility of a formal education (the haphazard learning of “this and that”) to prepare a young man for the harsh rigors of military duty in the Kurrum Valley in what is now Pakistan. For Kipling, the central lessons to be learned by any soldier in preparation for war are the potential for an immediate and violent death, and the inescapability of mortality, as evidenced in the message borne by the bullet, an allusion to the book of Isaiah (40:6). Yet military life, no less in wartime than in peace, and especially for an officer and for those on foreign deployment, depends on a constant process of learning. Certainly some of the lessons that war teaches are cruel: accidental deaths happen, one’s closest friends can vanish in an instant, brutal and horrific actions can begin to seem normal with repeated exposure, and violent death is a constant threat in a theater of war. Yet a service-member abroad in the world must learn other things, too. Some of these lessons can seem as formal as a scholastic education: geography, languages, history. Others are more intimate and more nebulous, such as whom to trust and how far or how to adapt Standard Operating Procedure to conditions in the field. In the sense that almost all war poems take the reader, if not the speaker, from a condition of innocence

and ignorance to the possession of certain important truths, whether the meaning of a word in a foreign tongue or the meaning of a death in battle, all war poetry is didactic—explicitly concerned with education.

Nor is it merely the poetry of war that concerns itself with education. One might readily say that the entire literature of war is devoted to this theme. Scarcely a military memoir is published that does not contain within it an element of the genre of the *Bildungsroman*, a novel in which a young, innocent, and ignorant protagonist gains experience (sometimes at the cost of their innocence and idealism) through a process of education. Likewise, war movies often tend to include at least one major strand of plot surrounding an “F.N.G” ([Expletive] New Guy) character who must be incorporated into a unit and learn the ways of surviving on the front lines. This thematic concern with the process of education is also on prominent display in the newest generation of war memoirs to emerge out of America’s incursions into Afghanistan and Iraq. Craig Mullaney’s *The Unforgiving Minute*, for instance, documents an entire series of “schools” through which Mullaney must pass: West Point, Oxford University (as a Rhodes Scholar), Ranger School, and finally Afghanistan (where, having lost a man in a surprise attack, the young Captain Mullaney is sarcastically told by a superior officer to get his head out of a book in his off-duty hours). Nathaniel Fick’s chronicle of his experiences in the Marine Corps, *One Bullet Away*, likewise begins with Fick at the crossroads of two distinct periods of his own education: about to graduate from Dartmouth with a B.A. in Classics, he opts to sign up for Marine Corps Officer Candidate School, after graduating from which he goes on to serve in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Indeed, Fick prefaces his story with an epigraph from the Greek historian Thucydides: “We should remember that one man is much the same as another, and that he is best who is trained in the severest school.” Mullaney, meanwhile, begins his memoir with a quotation

from the Kipling poem from which he draws his title, “If,” which presents a program for the construction of a moral man who would also make a fine officer. In both cases there can be little question that the schooling these men received represented an important phase in their lives, albeit that their academic and professional training served only as a foundation for the educations they received in the “severest school” of a combat theatre.

Like both Fick and Mullaney (a USMA history major), Brian Turner, author of *Here, Bullet*, underwent an education that combined (along with a healthy dose of “hard knocks”) the liberal arts and military professionalism with the often painful lessons of warfare. Turner holds a BA from Fresno State and an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Oregon, which he completed before serving for seven years in the US Army. Despite holding a college degree, he entered the service as an enlisted man, eventually deploying to Bosnia-Herzegovina during 1999-2000 and to Iraq in 2003-4. (As the back cover of the book notes, he eventually rose to become an infantry team leader in Iraq.) What is particularly striking about the lessons that Turner conveys to those who read his poems is the breadth of the lessons that he draws from the combination of boredom and danger that seem to define life in a war zone. Certainly, the first lesson that Kipling’s bullet teaches, the inevitability of mortality and the omnipresence of danger in war, is present in Turner’s work. Death is an inescapable background presence in *Here, Bullet*. Sometimes, death comes not at the hands of the enemy, but from within, as in the case of the young suicide that Turner remembers in “Eulogy.” In other poems, such as “2000 lbs.” or “9-Line Medevac,” Turner attempts to capture the chaotic tangle of voices and perspectives surrounding such dramatic events as a car bombing and a firefight in which two men are wounded and must be medically evacuated as soon as possible. Turner approaches the war as a student, absorbing not only the hard lessons of combat duty but also the language, history, and

culture of Iraq. He also absorbs the strange nature of a war that began with a miraculously rapid invasion before developing into a grinding counterinsurgency, a transition that was already underway when Turner and his unit reported to Iraq for duty in 2003.

Turner reminds his readers of the strange position into which he, along with every other member of the American armed forces deployed to Iraq, was thrust in 2003 with the epigraph that begins *Here Bullet's* first poem, "A Soldier's Arabic": "This is a strange new kind of war where you learn just as much as you are able to believe." In 1937, Ernest Hemingway, who had been on the front lines and was injured in Italy during World War I as a volunteer ambulance driver, traveled to Spain for the *New York Times* as a war correspondent chronicling the Spanish Civil War for American readers. The quotation comes from a story that Hemingway filed early in his tenure covering the war in a country that he had come to love deeply during his earlier travels in Europe, one that in his short fiction and in his novel *The Sun Also Rises* he presents to his readers as a country full of mysteries. In both his fiction and nonfiction, Hemingway's Spain is a place where American travelers can learn hard lessons about life and death. In this particular dispatch Hemingway is reminded of the omnipresent danger to anyone living in a war zone as a shell from a Fascist fusillade lands in the street in front of his hotel and kills a passerby. The true lesson that the epigraph refers to, however, is one that Hemingway learns from a young American partisan who has been severely wounded—left blind and severely wounded in both legs—in the same battle that resulted in the stray round in front of Hemingway's hotel. The young man, Jay Raven, a social worker from Pittsburgh, tells Hemingway that he was wounded as his unit attempted to hold an untenable position against superior enemy numbers, a tale that Hemingway doubts as an improbable act of valor from a young American with the soft hands of an office worker and no military training. Only when Hemingway encounters Raven's

commanding officer, who verifies the story, does Hemingway learn the ultimate lesson of the anecdote: that this is a strange war indeed, and that in addition to its peculiar cruelty the conflict seems unusually capable of commanding acts of surprising valor from unlikely sources. Prepare for the unexpected, both Hemingway and Turner warn us.

The initial experience of Turner's deployment seems to reflect an experience far more akin to that of the neophyte Jay Raven (albeit, of course, that Turner had professional training and previous deployment experience) than that of the correspondent Hemingway, an old hand in Spain with a good grasp of the language. It is worth reminding ourselves, indeed, that every American in Iraq during the setting of the poem was in largely unprecedented territory. Unlike in Hemingway's Spain, but perhaps somewhat like Kipling's Central Asia, no pre-existing Iraqi military remained in place in 2003 to contain the chaotic forces unleashed by the completion of the American invasion and subsequent occupation. By the time American and allied forces reached Baghdad virtually all organized resistance to the invasion had disappeared, but this also meant that virtually no Iraqi military or paramilitary apparatus remained in place to be converted into internal security forces at the conclusion of the invasion. In April 2003 (whether through the occupiers' negligence or a sheer absence of manpower) widespread looting broke out across Iraq, a sign of further problems to come (Tripp 274-5). Indeed, as Ambassador Paul Bremer was about to deploy to Iraq later that year to take charge of the Coalition Provisional Authority, the interim occupying government in Iraq, he learned that many American forces were operating according to orders to plan on a rapid departure from the theater in the next few months (Dobbins et al 51). Obviously, conditions on the ground had changed, but the command structure had not fully caught up, and as the CPA and the military began making the necessary adjustments to the occupation plan it became clear that locating and recalling veterans of Saddam Hussein's

military in hopes of using them to form the core of the CPA's "New Iraqi Army" would be a multi-year process (61). During this time, occupying forces would have to provide the bulk of Iraq's internal security, especially as the CPA attempted to supply and train a new national police force and "De-Baathify" the civil service by purging adherents of the former Iraqi governing party (79-80, 112-19).

The already difficult problem of policing Iraq was intensified by the desperate economic circumstances that prevailed throughout the country before, but especially after, the invasion. Even such a basic commodity of modern life (at least to an American) as electricity was in short supply throughout 2003-4. The country's already degraded power grid, which cut out regularly during the invasion, was subjected to both looting and sabotage, requiring considerable attention from both the CPA and the military even as a rebellion among the country's Shiite population and an insurgency among the Sunnis began to emerge as major threats to internal stability, along with an increased presence of foreign fighters drawn to the opportunity to kill Americans (Shadid 104-5; Dobbins et al 120-1; Stansfield 176-7). During Brian Turner's time in Iraq, most of the infamous forms of violence that have come to characterize the Iraq conflict—the bombing of the Golden Mosque, bombings of crowded civilian areas, the detonation of Improvised Explosive Devices, suicide attacks on American troops often conducted by poor men for money—emerged or intensified. Out of a rapid, nearly bloodless victory (at least for the invaders) a very different war had emerged. In this war, as Brian Turner observes, the enemy may be seen or unseen, and the motive behind the attack that kills you may be a simple matter of economic survival. Such is the case for the men plotting an attack in "The Al Harishma Weapons Market," where Turner explains in plain, uninflected language, whether "Black marketer or insurgent-- / an American death puts food on the table, / more cash than most men earn in an entire year" (9-11). The

ruthless logic of survival that governs the struggle for power in the streets of Iraq in this war bows before the unifying force of death. Iraq's wartime economy produces only one commodity: ghosts. Turner envisions two distinct nationalities of phantoms haunting the streets of Baghdad in "*Ashbah*," the ghosts of American soldiers wandering, "unsure of their way home, exhausted" while dead Iraqis "watch in silence from rooftops" (3, 9).

While Turner is, to be sure, an active participant in the conflict and even a leader within his unit, his poetry is remarkably detached and analytical, as evidenced by his deadpan depiction of men planning an attack and his dreamlike vision of the war dead's strange urban pageant. While capable of producing work of tremendous immediacy and even an intense, sensual lyricism (as in the surrealism of the poems that chronicle dreams caused by anti-malaria medication or the mournful music of "Cole's Guitar"), when not chronicling private memories Turner does not seem comfortable taking on the role of the old hand who will explain the world of the Iraq War to that ultimate F.N.G., the reader. He seems keenly aware of his own foreignness and strains to remind the reader that both he and they are very far from home in his poetry. At the same time, however, Turner engages his wartime experience with the discipline of an ardent student. While his poetic voice is not ostentatiously proud of the local knowledge that he has acquired, his poems frequently feature titles that draw on a basic Arabic vocabulary. They are also studded with allusions to Arabic poetry (or in one case to the ancient Mesopotamian epic of Gilgamesh) and demonstrate a not inconsiderable understanding of the Iraqis with whom he interacts. Often, Turner positions himself explicitly as a student, including one fanciful moment in "Alhazen of Basra" where he imagines himself making a pilgrimage back a thousand years to question a great physicist born in southern Iraq. Most often, however, Turner's teachers are the Iraqis with whom he interacts every day. It is no accident that Turner begins this book with "A

Soldier's Arabic," a language lesson that Turner explains in his note to the poem draws heavily on "an Arabic-English/English-Arabic phrasebook given to me by an Iraqi soldier."

This first poem is part language lesson and part lesson in survival, although the two subjects seem impossible to separate. (The title suggests the title of a foreign phrasebook issued for deploying troops, a book that could quite literally mean the difference between life and death.) Turner presents the reader with two basic words mastered early on by the student of almost any language: the words for love (*habib*) and death (*maut*). Love appears in a variety of forms in Turner's work. For his Americans, love of country and of one's fellow soldiers is joined with the love of those the soldier has left behind, and at times, one suspects, with a growing affection for the culture and the people he is both fighting and protecting, sometimes at the same time. The Arabic word for love, after all, is a mirror image of the word in Turner's American English, "written from right / to left, starting where we would end it / and ending where we might begin" (1-3). If learning the word for love opens up the possibility of learning to read the world backwards, as it were, the omnipresent threat of death reminds the martial novice that he is in a different world, one where the language bears "the cursives of the wind / driven into the veil of the unknown" (8-9). The desert environment, so alien to most Americans, evokes the powerful symbol of sand, the emblem of a physical and temporal environment that can swallow all petty human efforts as surely as the desert swallows the towering statue in Percy Shelly's "Ozymandias." Turner's sand reminds a reader of the leveling power of death just as surely as Isaiah (and Kipling's) grass. The speech of the region teaches the same thorny lessons as the physical environment, moreover. The Arabic language, made of "blood," "sand," and "time," conveys both the horrors of modern war and the great achievements of a proud and ancient civilization (10, 11). "To be spoken," Turner informs us, "it must be earned" (12).

The process of earning the right to speak this language, to communicate with people who may be allies, threats, or both, occurs over the course of a series of lessons throughout the book. Turner continues the language lesson in “What Every Soldier Should Know,” another poem with a title evoking a government-issue pamphlet. Some of the lessons provide basic etiquette for dealing with Iraqis, such as “Always enter a home with your right foot; / the left is for cemeteries and unclean places” (3-4) (Notice again the omnipresence of death in a war zone connoted by “cemeteries.”) Of even greater importance to the poem are the Arabic phrases that it teaches, along with advice on their usage and efficacy. The lesson here is not only linguistic, but also cultural and, in a very real sense, ethical. The Arabic phrase for “Stop! Or I’ll shoot” is, the poem informs the reader, “rarely useful” (5), while the phrase for “Good morning” is “effective” (6). Even in an environment decorated with poor, threatening English—graffiti declaring “*I will kill you, American*” (20)—the occupying soldier must learn to discipline his speech, not only by developing a reasonable command of the local language but also by learning to check his own use of physical and verbal force. That any one of the friendly, hospitable locals “may dance over your body tomorrow” does not, the poem suggests, change the need to approach the residents of an occupied territory with care and respect (28). The possibility of meeting a violent death at the hands of those one treats with politeness is, from this perspective, the sort of tragic bind that can produce the anger and fatalism on display in poems such as “The Hurt Locker” and the titular poem, but must be carried on with, regardless of the danger.

Not all of the lessons to be drawn from Turner’s poems are so direct, however. He shows an impressive awareness of Iraq’s geography and history in his poems, but to understand the full impact of the echoes of history that resound amid the gunfire and explosions of the Iraq conflict, the reader may have to dig a bit on their own. A poem such as “Kirkuk Oilfield, 1927,” offers a

far richer sense of history if the reader is aware that the newly formed Iraq Petroleum Company sank its first well in Kirkuk that year, and that the well overflowed and flooded the surrounding countryside with crude before it could be capped (Marr 42). This moment marks a critical stage in the development of the modern Iraqi state, and Turner's commemoration of it, especially in the poem's opening comment by an Iraqi observer, "*We live on the roof of hell*" (1), offers a suggestive comment on the influence of petroleum production on Iraq's place in geopolitical history. Likewise, the unknown old man's comment to his much younger interlocutor, "*Boy, you must learn how to live here*" (7), might apply equally well to an Iraqi or to an American soldier, and the moral and physical danger evoked by the poem seem to reflect not only the past and present, but almost to peer into the future. By 2006 the once relatively peaceful, multi-ethnic city of Kirkuk, with its sizeable Kurdish population, would become a place of heightened ethnic tension owing to the immense economic power offered by its oil reserves (Stansfield 190, 200). Such history lessons offer, if nothing else, perspective, but also, one hopes, they offer a sense of the dangers embedded in the land and the people of Iraq—and, indeed, in the human heart more generally speaking. "The roof of hell" to which the old man refers might be not merely the city of Kirkuk, with its deadly riches embedded under the soil, but indeed our entire violent world. The soldier-speaker in much war poetry, and no less in Turner's than elsewhere, seems to act as a moral stand-in for the reader in the process of their own education in the often-violent ways of the world.

Turner's poems offer lessons, but it seems to be in the nature of this poet to question even that which he has learned at the greatest personal cost. His book concludes with a number of poems that offer both final observations and troubling questions. Perhaps most vividly, the

speaker of “Night in Blue,” a poem set on a flight out of Iraq and back toward home, asks a series of questions about moral development away from the battlefield:

Has this year made me a better lover?

Will I understand something of hardship,

Of loss, will a love sense this

In my kiss or touch? What do I know

Of redemption or sacrifice, what will I have

To say of the dead—that it was worth it,

That any of it made sense?

(6-12)

At the end of this deployment, the speaker of Turner’s poems has only his memories, the knowledge of war and of humanity that he has drawn from his sojourn in a strange country half a world away. In time, these lessons may come to mean less than they meant during his time in Iraq. Lessons that seem essential for survival during deployment do not guarantee the service-member a coherent understanding of their experiences later in life. As Turner’s speaker returns home on a jet, moreover, the book’s two final poems remind the reader that knowledge learned on the local level must eventually be converted into wisdom. In “Caravan,” turner offers a

picture not of nomadic traders crossing the desert, but rather a contrasting diptych: one picture of American container ships bringing supplies to the troops in theater, and another of the stunned American survivors of a bombing in Baghdad picking up the dismembered corpses of their fallen comrades. “*No matter the barking of dogs, the caravan marches on,*” says the Iraqi proverb that Turner provides for an epigraph. More powerfully still, Turner drives home this point about the relatively fleeting nature of human existence, especially in time of war, by closing the book with “To Sand,” another powerful evocation of history’s answer to human efforts in this volume:

To sand go tracers and ball ammunition.

To sand the green smoke goes.

Each finned mortar, spinning in light.

Each star cluster, bursting above.

To sand go the skeletons of war, year by year.

To sand go the reticles of the brain,

the minarets and steeple bells, brackish

sludge from the open sewers, trashfires,

the silent cowbirds resting

on the shoulders of a yak. To sand

each head of cabbage unravels its leaves

the way dreams burn in the oilfires of the night.

(1-12)

With this nocturnal vision, the reader's education at Brian Turner's hands is complete. While some wisdom has been acquired, at least by Turner's speaker, little has changed in Central Asia between the era of British imperialism and the era of American interventionism. Only the medium has changed in the lesson taught by Kipling's timeless bullet. All flesh is not grass, but sand.

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