"Echoes of War": In Conversation with Brian Turner

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Jaspreet Kaur (Left) and Brian Turner (Right)
Pictured on the campus of Punjabi University, Patiala, Punjab, India

Abstract

This interview endeavours to gain first-hand insight into Brian Turner's creative process and experiences as a war poet. The interviewer is pursuing her doctoral thesis on "Bearing Witness to Violence: A Socio-Cultural and Psychoanalytical Study of Select Modern World Poets." Brian Turner is among the selected poets, along with Anna Akhmatova, Nelly Sachs, Mahmoud Darwish, and Agha Shahid Ali. In the interview, the discussion focusses on Turner's two significant works: *Here, Bullet* (2005) and *Phantom Noise* (2010). The interview aims to understand Turner's philosophy of poetic witnessing, especially in relation to trauma, silence, and memory. Turner reflects on the psychological aftermath of war and the

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search for meaning amidst devastation. He laid special emphasis on how literature functions as a medium for understanding, processing and representing trauma, both for himself and the readers. He also contemplates the dual role of a soldier — both as an agent of violence and a witness to the suffering and death around him.

Keywords
Violent trauma experiences, violence and memory, witnessing as testimony, war literature, collective memory

Introduction

The poetry of Brian Turner (1967–) emerges as a poignant exploration of the intertwined themes of trauma and memory. Turner, both a soldier and a poet, served for seven years in the US Army. Although Turner enlisted late in his adult life, the influence of war and its impact entered his life much earlier as his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather also served in the army. He enlisted in the US Army in 1998 and was deployed to Bosnia-Herzegovina with the Tenth Mountain Division from 1999 to 2000. From 2003 to 2004, he was deployed to Iraq as an infantry team leader with the Third Stryker Brigade Combat Team, Second Infantry Division. Being stationed in some of the most dangerous areas in Iraq, he experienced firsthand chaos and violence of the war. He was engaged in major combat operations, which exposed him to brutal and inhuman realities of warfare. Living under dangerous conditions and witnessing traumatic events, fundamentally altered his outlook on life.

His war experiences bring a unique perspective to the visceral experiences of war, capturing the physical and psychological wounds inflicted by conflict in his acclaimed anthologies *Here, Bullet* (2005) and *Phantom Noise* (2010). His work delves deeply into the harrowing realities of the battlefield, reflecting on the profound impact of traumatic events on the human psyche. His poems reflect his experiences as a soldier engaging with Iraqi culture and its people, his post-war experiences at his home in America, his continuous struggle with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTST) and the relentless violence during the conflict. The harrowing experiences of combat and the subsequent psychological impact inform the recurring themes of trauma and memory in his work.

His first anthology *Here, Bullet* is mainly about the Iraq War, his regular confrontations with death and his miserable life in Iraq. *Phantom Noise*, published five years after the publication of *Here, Bullet*, chronicles his encounter with the past memories of war. The gaps between the publishing dates of the two works point toward the shadows of the war that have incessantly been following and

haunting his memories even after the official cessation of the war. The poems in this anthology highlight the unheroic aspect of war, indicating the futility of wars. Turner meticulously describes the shared experiences of the soldiers in his poetry. His military experience aids in exploring ambiguities of guilt, duty, and the moral complexities inherent in warfare.

The anthology *Phantom Noise* is a broader examination of the lingering impact of war on soldiers' minds, which persists even after they return home. Turner's vivid imagery and evocative language serve as powerful tools to examine the enduring effects of trauma and the persistence of memory. His poems not only bear witness to the visible and invisible scars of war but also interrogate the role of memory in shaping both individual and collective identities. By articulating the struggle to remember and the pain of reliving traumatic experiences, Turner's poetry provides a compelling examination of the complexities involved in representing trauma through language.

His other significant writings include a memoir, *My Life As a Foreign Country: A Memoir* (2014), and a novel, *The Kiss* (2018). The memoir blends prose and poetry to recount Turner's experiences in the Iraq War and his struggles with returning to his civilian life in the USA. The novel is a meditation on the enduring scars of war and offers a poignant exploration of human resilience, healing and the search for meaning lost by a soldier in the face of profound loss. It weaves an emotional landscape shaped by war, depicting its impact on the soldier as well as on the lives of those living around him. The novel concludes with the message that the power of love can prevail against the odds of life, including trauma.

The following interview was conducted at *Chair Poetry Sangat International Poetry Festival Patiala 2024*. This festival was held at Punjabi University Patiala, Punjab, India on December 5, 2024.

Interviewer (Jaspreet Kaur): I would like to thank the organisers of *Chair Poetry Sangat International Poetry Festival Patiala 2024* for giving me this opportunity to have a conversation with you. It's been really nice and I'm really happy to have your precious time.

Interviewee (Brian Turner): Thank you.

Jaspreet Kaur: I'm working on a PhD thesis in the Department of English at Punjabi University, and the title of my thesis is "Witness to Violence: A Socio-Cultural and Psychoanalytical Study of Select Modern World Poets." I have taken a few poets, including you — quite recent — and also Anna Akhmatova, Nelly Sachs (Holocaust writer, Nobel laureate), Mahmoud Darwish (Palestinian writer),

and Agha Shahid Ali, a Kashmir poet. I've been studying how violence is represented in their work. So, I have some questions for you.

Brian Turner: Okay, let's go.

Jaspreet Kaur: You wrote your first work *Here, Bullet*, which came out in 2005, *Phantom Noise* in 2010, and *My Life as a Foreign Country* (2014). It's been about two decades since you fought in a war. Do you think the experiences [of wars] still stay with you?

Brian Turner: Yes, definitely. It's an interesting thing because my first book came out in 2005, and, since then, I have traveled all over America and the world. I was looked at as an expert or someone who could share knowledge from this difficult experience. I spoke about love and loss as if I fully understood them. But when my wife passed away in 2016 from cancer, I learned much more about love and loss. The world sometimes teaches us more about things we thought we already knew.

Jaspreet Kaur: That's very true. I decided to work on this topic after reading your first anthology. It was captivating, and it truly captivated me. There were some images I still can't get them out of my mind, even after working on them for three years. One was the image of you holding the amputated arm of a fellow soldier. You also mentioned a poem called "Baghdad Zoo." Was it a real zoo?

Brian Turner: Well, that particular poem happened before I was deployed. The rest happened while I was there. A few poems were written shortly after I returned home but most happened during my deployment. The events in the poem are true. A man was mauled by a bear, and a baboon was found wandering in the desert. You didn't have to invent the terror and chaos and the way civilization was undone. Animals can be very vulnerable when humans fight. They often don't have a voice, so in terms of poetic witness, it seemed important to write about them. However, it also works on a metaphorical level, perhaps too much, as it might feel made up or untrue. I don't know if it's still accessible, but you can probably find a BBC article about it.

Jaspreet Kaur: I noticed a lot of silence in your poetry — ellipses, and pauses. Silence is often a very powerful presence in your work. How do you conceptualise silence in relation to trauma and pain in your poems?

Brian Turner: I wasn't overtly thinking about silence while writing. Looking back, I believe silence creates space for the reader to participate. It's a shared space for writer and reader to fill in. Some Arabic poets use ellipses to gesture towards reader, as I understand it, inviting them to complete the meaning. The poem becomes collaborative in that sense. I think it's a bit like what some Arabic-language poets do. If I understand correctly, it's a gesture to the reader, suggesting, "You know how to finish this; I don't have to say it."

Jaspreet Kaur: One question often on our minds is: For whom does a writer write? For themselves or for society? When you thought about getting your work published, what were you thinking?

Brian Turner: For *Here, Bullet*, my first book, the answer was different than it was for the others because I had written seven manuscripts before, none of which were published. After my third or fourth manuscript, if I could go back to my younger self, I would say, "I don't think the world wants to publish me." It seemed unlikely my books would ever be published. But I enjoyed writing poems and wanted to create longer, immersive experiences through book-length works.

Jaspreet Kaur: You answered it. I personally think this question can't be answered properly. But yes, I understood what you were trying to say.

Brian Turner: You know, for the poems written after that, I was more conscious of an audience. For *Phantom Noise*, I struggled to get the reader out of the room — I tried to bring them in during revision but not during initial generation. Sometimes, writing feels almost mystical — the language moves through me. The thing I love about writing is sometimes I'm consciously writing, working on a stanza, and I kind of know the story. So, I think, "This has to happen, therefore that." I enjoy that kind of thinking, but it's not what I'm addicted to in writing. What I'm addicted to, and it's rare, is when it feels like my life falls away, and I'm in a state that's not hypnosis, but it feels like the language moves through me and I have to catch it. I know it sounds mystical, but it surprises me.

The poem "Here, Bullet" came very quickly, in about 12 to 15 minutes. It ended up on the page almost exactly as it is now. There was only one word I changed, from "finished" to "complete." The rest was a straight draft. I folded it up, put it in a Ziploc bag, and carried it with me for the rest of my time in the country. This brings me to the audience aspect. Why did I do that? I think it was because the poem is a conversation with the bullet, and with death and life. Also, months before, when we were training for Iraq, I was an infantry soldier, and we

would do side schools to teach us other skills. One of them was for mortuary affairs specialists. I was sent to them to learn what to do in case of an ambush where there are bodies on the road. We had to set up security and properly care for the dead so that bodies didn't get mixed up and you didn't send a mother and father the wrong body. I knew the man who taught the class—I changed his name in the book. I was consciously thinking that if I were killed, my body would go through his office, and he might be the first, or perhaps the only, person to read the poem. So, I didn't have the same connection to an obvious reader as I did afterwards. After *Here, Bullet* gained a lot of attention, I knew the book was coming out, and I was very conscious of what people might think because I could read the reviews of the first one. It was hard to get them out of the room so I could just discover.

Jaspreet Kaur: What is the origin of the phrase 'put them in the hurt locker' in your poem "The Hurt Locker"?

Brian Turner: While in Iraq, my squad leader said this to me at one point. I believe he was frustrated at being attacked often while not having a chance to respond—as we experienced a number of indirect attacks (mortar fire, roadside bombs, etc.). This frustration built up over time and at one point he turned to me and said, "Sometimes I just want to put them into the hurt locker." The phrase stuck with me and about a week or two later I wrote the poem ("The Hurt Locker") in my notebook.

Jaspreet Kaur: You used many Arabic words and phrases in your work. The epigraphs are also primarily from Arabic culture and their holy scriptures. This must have been a conscious choice on your part. For the very first poem, "A Soldier's Arabic," did you aim to connect with them, or what was your reason for incorporating their language?

Brian Turner: It was their land. I was a foreigner and an occupier in their world. I was also fascinated by my surroundings. I remember thinking, on a very practical level, but also on a deep, spiritual level, about what happens when you die. I had met a photographer in America who used to photograph Civil War battlefields. She said she could feel the spirits of the dead there. It was a haunting feeling. I had that in mind when I went to Iraq. I wondered, is that how it works? If I were killed, would I be left on some rooftop for eternity, among people whose language and culture I don't understand? It was a profound and unsettling thought.

Also, before I left, I wanted to understand the world I was going to as much as possible. In September 2003, before we departed, King's College London published an anthology called *Iraqi Poetry Today*. I got a copy and carried it with me in my rucksack. So, I was reading these poems and their translations while I was there. This created a conversation for me as I wrote my own poems. But again, I didn't think anyone would read this book. I didn't even know I was writing a book; I was just writing in my notebook for myself, my family, or some friends. I'm glad I did. But that first poem, "A Soldier's Arabic," has some problems now. I wish I had not put it as the first poem or even included it in the book. I think there's something not true enough about it. It reflects the idea that to be spoken, a thought must be earned. It's very much a soldier's motto: "You can't talk about this unless you've been there." But all of America was there. The clothes I wore and everything was supplied by them. Even if they don't know it, they are part of the work, whether they want to be or not. It's very complicated, but there's a connection.

The idea that you have to have experience to write about something is not an old approach; it's about cultural appropriation and misrepresentation, even within the ranks of soldiers and their experiences. I don't think I was thinking about that clearly at the time, but afterwards, I considered it. That particular poem feels like it closes the door on many people who are connected to that experience, even if they didn't have my specific experience. There are millions of experiences, but all are welcome into that difficult poem and experience. So, I would probably cut that poem now.

Jaspreet Kaur: You know, my first impression was that you put this particular poem on the very first page to pay a tribute, to show your respect for their culture, and to make them feel special, since you were considered their enemies.

Brian Turner: I agree with all of that. It's just the last note of the poem that I disagree with. I think it's too small of a note. But it resonates with other veterans. They read it and say, "Yeah, that's right." But what about everybody else?

I wanted the book to be a conversation. When I incorporated other voices, I thought it was important to hear their ideas, even translated into English, to create a sense of dialogue. I could see from the news that America—including myself—was not steeped in Iraqi history. I knew about Gilgamesh, and I was fascinated by it. When I finished high school, I wrote a list of books I thought I should have read, and a version of Gilgamesh was on it. It feels so foundational. As a poet, it's where the spoken word crosses over to the written language. I found myself in Mosul, in the northern part of the city. There's a large city park

with hills on the outside. It was snowing, and in the distance, I could see people who were homeless because of the war. They had created small shelters from whatever they could find. There was smoke from fires and clouds above, with the city's ambient light reflecting. I was wearing night-vision goggles. I was on point, the first soldier walking in a platoon of about 40 or 48 of us.

I remember thinking about my job—the wind direction, the smoke, and the dogs, so we wouldn't get upwind of them and make them bark. I was thinking about tracks in the snow. I was trying to do my job, but at the same time, I was thinking, the reason this is a preserved park is because these are the ruins of Nineveh. This is where *Gilgamesh* was written down and shared across entire civilizations—the Babylonians, the Sumerians—all the way to Madera, California, where it was published in an English version I fell in love with.

Jaspreet Kaur: That leads me to my last question. The title of my PhD thesis is "Witness to Violence: A Socio-Cultural and Psychoanalytical Study of Select Modern World Poets." What is witnessing, according to you? People define it as testifying or keeping things in your mind to tell someone else. How is witnessing different for a poet than for a normal person?

Brian Turner: I love journalism. I was talking to a journalist last night, and she does amazing work. I'm a fan of journalism; their work is so important. But in Iraq, for example, if there's an explosion where four people are killed and eleven are wounded, the news might not even spell out "four" because it takes up more space. They turn four human lives into a number. We need that information; we need to know what is happening. So, journalists have a very important job. But I think part of the poet's work is to pull humanity out of the news. In terms of poetic witness, it's about thinking, who is inside that number? What did we lose? What did they love? Who did they care about?" When we talk about loss, a poet's job is to go to a much deeper level than just "four people, eleven wounded."

Jaspreet Kaur: Now that you're an established poet, do you feel a burden to write for someone else, to fulfill a certain purpose, or to satisfy other people's desires? Can an established poet ever write just for themselves?

Brian Turner: Yes, I write for myself. I published three books last year. I had to write them. I think it's important that writers stay true to their experience as much as possible, so that they can discover things. I believe in the act of discovery—that writing is a way to see a little further into the darkness. We can write to be popular and sell books, but I know that I wrote seven other books before my

first one was published, and no one wanted to read them. I've had many other jobs, and I know that even if no one reads my next books, I will still write them. I write them for myself first, and I know that might sound selfish. It is the tool I have that works best for trying to understand this world. The language… I struggle with it every day, all day, my whole life. As a child and into my twenties, I had a massive stammer. I had trouble speaking, but I would listen. And when I finally figured out how to make and say sentences aloud, I asked myself, "What am I going to say?" It's a world that needs love, but it also needs to see things as they are. Maybe I can be one part of that conversation.

Jaspreet Kaur: You are not selfish at all. Thank you so much for your time.

Brian Turner: I would add a couple of more things. I don't really see myself as this "established person." I get it—on paper, on a resume, I can see that. But when I'm walking around town, I'm just Brian. I can go to these big conferences with lots of poets, and my ego can get very big with the attention. But all I have to do is step outside my door—nobody knows me. It's a beautiful thing, and it keeps me grounded. Many of my friends aren't poets, so they'll say, "Oh, great, you've got a new book. Okay, let's go do something else." They appreciate what I do, but we have a bigger life together. It reminds me that this is not the only thing that matters. There is a responsibility for established writers to help up-and-coming writers. I was helped by writers before me, so each of us finds different ways to try to do that. I fail many times, but I think it's important for us to try to help the next generation to find their way. Suicide is a real thing. Loneliness and depression are real. And maybe poetry is a way for people to find a healthy center.

Jaspreet Kaur: That's a beautiful thing to say. You have a really beautiful soul. I loved talking to you. Thank you so much.