

AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT

Brian Turner interviewed by Patrick Hicks

It was early April and he was back in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. It was unusually hot when we sat down at the same table where I first interviewed him back in 2008. The tape recorder whirred between us as we talked about some of our favorite writers. Brian Turner is immediately friendly and he has a gaze that tells you he is listening to every word you say. In eight years he has gone from total obscurity to some of the loftiest heights the literary world has to offer, and yet in spite of these accolades—and there are plenty of accolades—he is quick to downplay his success and shift the conversation to something else. “Humble” would be a good word to describe him.

Turner earned an MFA from the University of Oregon and lived in South Korea for a year before joining the United States Army. He served in Bosnia-Herzegovina with the 10th Mountain Division and he was an infantry team leader in Iraq with the 3rd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division. His first collection of poetry, *Here, Bullet* (2005), won the Beatrice Hawley Award, the Pen Center USA “Best in the West Award,” the 2007 Poets’ Prize, and it was a *New York Times* “Editor’s Choice” selection. In the process, he has also won a Lannan Literary Fellowship, an NEA Fellowship in Poetry, and the Amy Lowell Travelling Scholarship, among others.

His latest collection, *Phantom Noise* (2010), is garnering equal attention and it was shortlisted for the coveted T.S. Eliot Prize. He now travels the world for readings and he has made appearances on National Public Radio, the BBC, RTÉ

in Ireland, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, and *The News Hour* with Jim Lehrer.

Turner is unusually generous with his time and when he does book signings he listens to what his fellow veterans, of all wars, have to say. He nudges us to think about the long after-burn of war and our country's indifference to the impact we have upon lives thousands of miles away. He is soft spoken until you get to know him and, in front of an audience, his readings become dynamic explorations of literature and global politics. Whether he is comfortable with the role or not, he is rapidly becoming a voice that helps to explain the soldierly experience in Iraq and he is frequently compared to such Vietnam War writers as Yusef Komunyakaa, Bruce Weigl, and Tim O'Brien. Turner's books may well be read for years to come not only because of the art he has achieved, but also because it is the first poetic landscape we have of the Iraq War. He cracks open conversations that need to be had in this country and he does so with quiet humility. Veterans of all wars stand around him during book-signings and he listens to them. By so doing, he encourages the rest of us to do the same.

I've had the good fortune of interviewing Turner twice before: once in 2008 for an interview that originally appeared in *Virginia Quarterly Review* and then again in 2011 for a piece that ran in *The Missouri Review*. What follows is a compilation of those earlier discussions as well as something brand new, which appears at the end. The following pages therefore offer a wholly unique perspective because it spans four years and meets Turner at three different points in his creative development.

In all of our discussions, as soon as I hit *Record* on my tape player, he leaned in close, ready to talk:

PH: You earned an MFA, then you moved to South Korea for a year, and then you enlisted in the US Army for seven years. It almost seems as if you were searching for experiences outside of what you knew as a young man. What motivated you to enlist?

BT: I never really thought of it that way, but I wanted to see and experience life outside of what I knew. I come from a military background and I heard all these stories about adventure in other countries and things they'd seen—never about combat itself actually—but about other cultures. There was an exoticification of things that I knew nothing about and it was a lure that made me want to learn more about other places.

PH: We were talking earlier about the ethos of the warrior. Do you think you were drawn to that or curious about what it means to be a warrior in America?

BT: I don't think it was about wanting to be a hero, but it was about certain rites of passage or being branded by fire. Those are themes that probably, I hate to admit it, are in my psyche and that's part of my reason for joining up. Other things were more practical and mundane, like I was recently married and I was trying to set up my family and pay back my college loans. We didn't even have enough money for a pillow. The military took care of all of that.

PH: You are frequently compared to Yusef Komunyakaa and Tim O'Brien. I'm curious though about some of the Iraqi poets that you could also be compared with. I understand that you read Iraqi poetry while you were deployed. If we believe the old adage that poets and prisoners can tell us something about a nation, what did you learn from these Iraqi poets?

BT: I was definitely influenced by their work although I'm not sure it's visible. I think of Al-Jawahiri, and . . . I was looking for insight into the psyche there and how poets that lived there responded to their home and their history. I wanted to learn from that. I think my own work is definitely more of an American poetics that comes from Phil Levine and T.R. Hummer. I would say I was influenced more by the land itself than the poets there, although I learned a lot and wanted to include them within the work because they were a part of what I was experiencing. That's why you see quotes in *Here, Bullet* because I thought they were amazing writers. The free verse poets I was reading there—specifically out of the *Iraqi Poetry Today Anthology*—are more overtly political than I am. Their metaphors stretch further than mine do, but I found it all very interesting even though it hasn't influenced me yet. Maybe later it will in another book.

PH: One of your poems, "Eulogy", is particularly powerful because it addresses the taboo subject of suicide. Many soldiers have killed themselves while on active duty in this war, and no one really talks about it, so I wonder if this poem has opened any doors. Has discussion been generated at your readings or have you had families approach you about these quiet tragedies?

BT: No one's really approached me about it other than to thank me for bringing the experience home. I expected more specific conversations to evolve out of that poem now that I'm back, but I'm not really finding that. It seems that many people are affected by that poem but it's a very difficult subject so it's hard for them to articulate what's going on inside them when they hear it.

PH: I suppose it's only natural to ask this question of you since *Here, Bullet* is a soldier's perspective of Iraq: Do you feel that the sacrifices over there are worthwhile?

BT: I was against the war from the beginning and nothing has changed since, other than a deepening and heightening of that belief. To me it just seems like a huge tragedy on a scale that I can't fathom or understand because the numbers are beyond my imagining. I can't really comprehend 500,000 people, for example. I can't understand each of them being dead and how that influences the world. The scale is just beyond my ability to understand.

PH: You have been reading your work all over the world and I wonder if you feel like you're becoming a *de facto* spokesman for soldiers of the Iraq War?

BT: If I'm anything, I'm only a small part of a larger conversation. I hesitate to think that I'm a *de facto* spokesman because, in some sense, I want to give voice to some of the things that I was a part of and saw, but each person has such a very different view of what has happened. There are so many voices. So many soldiers come home without talking, which is the normal mode of the warrior, where they tuck it away and "suck it up and drive on." That's what they say in the Army. I think it does a disservice to them and it does a disservice to the larger population because we need to know what war is about, as much as possible, so that when we *do* go to war we have a deeper appreciation of what is happening. And that appreciation seems to be lacking here in America, in my own view.

PH: Do you think that's one reason *Here, Bullet* has received so much attention? It's not just the power of your poetry, is it also that you show us something that we aren't seeing in the media?

BT: I think people want access into the experience of what's happening, and we know that journalism doesn't quite do it. It might describe some things a bit, but the detachment that a journalist has . . . Even by the very nature that journalists work, it often erases the emotional content or it doesn't explore it. If we don't have a connection to the human quality of the moment then we can't feel or experience that moment. With poetry, one of its domains is the emotional content so that's part of its territory. There are a lot of soldiers who don't have a voice and aren't able to articulate the things inside of them. Maybe many of them *want* to talk but they don't have the skills, so I may not be saying what they need. You know what I mean? I'm a very incomplete spokesperson because there are so many voices and my book even tries to acknowledge that because there are poems like "OP #71" and "OP #798". It's a discursive nod to the reader to say that—

PH: That there are other Observation Posts out there? Other viewpoints?

BT: Yeah, yeah. Where's #797? #796? #802? There are many other voices and experiences that this book doesn't go into and it's an incomplete book on its own. I'm trying to say that, but I'm also trying to say that there are many other voices that we need to hear. Like the Iraqi people. How often do we hear their voices?

PH: I suppose that explains why you've included phrases of Iraqi poetry, the Qur'an, and epics like *Gilgamesh* into the book.

BT: And in fact I wanted a specific Iraqi painting for the cover of *Here, Bullet*. I didn't know who the painter was, I didn't know his name or how to get a hold of him for permission, so that nixed that idea. For a future book I will have an Iraqi painting because I try to be inclusive of their work. I try to learn from them.

PH: I know there's a story behind the cover of *Here, Bullet*. There's a picture of you in full military battle dress and you're in the middle of the desert. You're quite small, actually, and we can't see your face. It's a very stark photo. There you are under the large words "Here, Bullet" and you look like a target. How did you arrive on using this image?

BT: The editor at Alice James Books asked me to send along a number of photos so that, while she was editing, she could get a feel for the people that show up in the poems. She wanted a visual feel for the landscape, and I think she was trying to

get closer to the material too. She came across one photo and said “this has got to be the cover”, but it was very contentious for me for several reasons. One, someone like Walt Whitman can put his face on the cover of his book, but I’m a rookie and that seemed pretentious to me. In the original photo I’m much bigger but they had to minimize me so that I could be an anonymous soldier, and then they did this watercolor effect to make it even more so. I wanted to take the focus away from me and move it towards just being a soldier. The second issue is the tire tracks that go from left to right across the cover. Behind me and to my left there was our Stryker, our vehicle, and it was in the photo. It was facing away from us and its ramp was down, and from the photo you could see inside the back. There was stuff inside that might be considered classified or secret, so it was just easier to take it out. The contentious part of the photo—and I struggled with this—on the cover just above my name in the lower half of the photo, between the photographer and me were three Iraqi prisoners. They were on their knees, their hands were flexcuffed behind their backs, and they had sandbags over their heads. Jackowski—he was my M203 gunner—he took the photo. The prisoner on Jackowski’s right had a leather jacket on and we’d written RPG across his back because he’d fired a Rocket Propelled Grenade. In fact, Jackowski was in the center of a circle of prisoners—about ten or thirteen of them—and the stance that I have in that photo looks sort of like John Wayne. That photo looks like “I came over here to chew bubblegum and kick ass, and I’m all out of bubblegum,” as they say in the movies. It just wasn’t right for a cover photo, especially with the sandbags over the heads because that’s now synonymous with torture. If I were someone walking into a bookstore—as we were talking about this during the editing process—I felt like some people would be repelled by that image. They would just think torture right off the bat, and this book isn’t about torture. There are books that need to be written about torture, and some of those are starting to come out, but my book isn’t about that. I wanted to invite people into the book rather than push them away.

PH: The violence in some of your poetry is really very startling. It leaps off the page and refuses to let go. One such poem is “16 Iraqi Policemen”. You drop us into an explosion and show us the bloody brutal aftermath. There is an otherworldly feel to this poem and we are forced to become witnesses whether we like it or not. Is this what good war poetry should do? Should it act as a type of witness?

BT: Very much so. I wasn’t writing the poems and thinking that I would have a book later, especially at the very beginning of my time in Iraq. When I came back

to my bunk to get some sleep, I'd turn to my notebook and write a journal entry of what had happened during the day. Sometimes I'd draw a little diagram of an ambush or how we patrolled down the street—professional development kind of stuff—sometimes poems would come out. I wanted to meditate upon what had happened. I wanted to get it down, what I had experienced that day, especially at the beginning because we were *swamped* with work and we had very little sleep. It was kind of fuzzy and I remembering thinking that I was going to forget things, and I didn't want to forget things, so it was a conscious act of memory to put these images on the page.

PH: This next question is difficult, and maybe you can't answer it, but what do you think America has learned from Iraq so far?

BT: I think America has learned very little, other than something so obvious that I can't even believe we needed to learn it: if you're going to invade a country maybe you need to have a plan afterwards. The plan might be better suited if it didn't have things like our tanks rolling past the museums, and the banks, and the police stations, and the schools, and people's house, and we just go and surround the Ministry of Oil. All it has is paperwork inside anyway. It's not even important. There's nothing in there protect, but it sent a big signal and the Iraqi people still remember this even if we forget back home.

PH: That was the Holy Grail we wanted to protect first.

BT: Sure seemed like it. The museums wouldn't have been looted if we were around to stop it. Having no plan afterwards, which is really obvious now, was a huge problem. There are things that we can't plan for but it looked very much like we assumed they were going to give us roses and kiss our cheeks and let us go back home. That's just so naïve. I worry that we won't learn from Iraq, and there's much that we can learn. It's one of the birthplaces of civilization, it's a wellspring of literature and art and mathematics and philosophy—there's *much* there, but have I learned Arabic yet? No. I've learned some but when am I going to learn their language and read their work and try to understand them better?

PH: What did you learn about human nature while you were in Iraq?

BT: I learned a lot about myself. But in the squad I was in, for example, I also learned how people react under pressure. I learned how abusive people can be towards each other, and then also how forgiving and kind people can be under that pressure as well. It made me really respect the people I worked with in my squad and my platoon more than I ever had when I was back with them in training. I still have resentments and they have resentments with me. Psychologies don't mix well sometimes—people don't get along—for example, a lot of times I *hated* my boss. I knew that he hated me too, but at the same time I loved my boss. I think he had the same care for all of us that worked for him too. If I saw him today, I'd buy him a beer. No matter how much we seemed *not* to get along, I still cared about people that normally I would turn away from and they'd probably turn away from me as well.

PH: Is that because of this hyper-compressed atmosphere that you find yourself in? That you all need to rely on each other?

BT: I think so. We all depend upon each other. I mean, if I got shot in some room I need to know that they'd bring me back out, and vice-versa.

PH: What are some of the difficulties or obstacles that you, as a veteran, now experience that you're back in the United States?

BT: Some of it was the transition into becoming Brian again because Brian didn't quite exist anymore. I had been in for seven years, so I had started to become something of a lifer-sergeant. I knew that I was getting out, but I was bitching a lot and counting my days down, but at the same time I had become used to all that. A lot of times here, back home, I'll see something that I think could be easily fixed—like in some store I'll see something inefficient—and I want to jump in and fix it, but it's not my place to do that. It's hard to check myself and relax a little bit. It's also simply things like when we were in Baghdad driving around and a car came up to close on the back of us we *had* to push them off. We had to give them warning signs and we often shot at people who were driving in their cars, and when I got back to Seattle—and to Tacoma—there's this crazy traffic and people are tailgating right on my bumper. I still had some of that same psychology where before I could shoot at cars and at people, but now I had to turn all that off. I had to realize that I'm just Brian back home, that I'm not some soldier on the street. It's hard not to be

a sergeant. I have to shift back to whoever I am now. I'm not the same Brian that I was before the service, so I have to figure out who I am if I'm not a soldier.

PH: What do you miss about Iraq? You were there for over a year—and maybe I'm trying to salvage something out of that experience—but what do you miss?

BT: I miss walking near the Tigris. I don't miss the helicopters flying overhead and wondering what might happen, but if I could strip away the elements of war, it's the landscape itself I miss. There were some beautiful places over there. We were near the ruins of Nineveh, and I miss being out there, and I'd like to go out there now and explore them without a weapon in my hand. The guys I worked with—don't get me wrong, if they ever came across this I really miss talking with many of them, but we probably won't talk to each other again—we all heard each other's stories. I know everything about them, they know everything about me, we stood on guard shift and burned each other out on our stories. So when I was there, I was very eager to talk with some of the Iraqis that I came into contact with through the interpreters. We'd be out in some park in the middle of Mosul, for example, just sitting in a berm waiting to see if a mortar attack happens and we'd be there for hours. I'd just talk with these guys. It was fascinating to get an insight into their lives. I'd ask about their families, and what their dad did, and I'd learn about their family histories. I'd ask them about the park before the war—what was it like?—and we were in this one park that was overgrown with weeds—it's going to be a long time before it looks like a city park again—and this guy says that couples used to sneak out there and make love at night.

PH: That's a lovely metaphor for what the park used to be, and what it is now. It sounds to me like you miss access to the native stories of Iraq.

BT: They're amazing people. They have this life that I've never experienced before. They have a long poetic tradition, and I think someday it would be great to go back there without war taking place. It would be great to have some coffee and talk to them some more.

PH: I've never experienced combat but I've read a lot of "war literature", whatever that term may or may not mean, and I wonder when you pick up something by Wilfred Owen or Siegfried Sassoon or Tim O'Brien, you'll now read it differently than I possibly could. So, for example, when they talk about firing a gun you know

exactly what that feels like. How has your appreciation for that type of literature changed since Iraq?

BT: It's heightened more. When I read Sassoon now I hear more of the Victorian age, and I know he's a really good poet but for me it doesn't ring as true as Owen does. Owen has his boots in the mud and he's connected to kinds of trauma that I never even experienced. World War I was wholesale slaughter on a massive scale—this war [Iraq] is too though. I mean, we have 500,000 people dead but it's not like in groups of 30,000 in one day. So when I read these other writers—and I love Tim O'Brien's work—there's something about the visually surreal in his work that really strikes a chord. So does his sense of beauty juxtaposed with these incomprehensible images. I remember, for example, being in Mosul and going out to this firing line. We were registering our weapons to make sure the zeros were good, and I was walking the firing line to make sure my guys were doing their job. At one point I walked away to take a break, to get away from the shooting for a minute and clear my head, and I looked out into the valley. Between where I was and the city of Mosul, down in the valley, there was this tank graveyard. It had all these blown out vehicles and—

PH: From the Iraqi Army?

BT: Yes, from them. They crammed them all together and the whole place is overgrown with weeds. I looked down and saw these flowers blossoming. This is the classic poet's kind of thing: spring, flowers, *et cetera*. I remember hearing these guns fire in the background, and I'm there in this uniform because it's wartime, and there are all these dead tanks, but at the same time the earth is still doing its thing. It seemed really hopeful and amazing and surprising to me. It's odd because what was surreal for me in that moment wasn't me or the weapon I was holding, or the tanks, it was the flower. That seemed odd.

PH: Beauty had become surreal to you.

BT: Yes.

PH: How do you find moments of beauty now that you're home? That's one of our jobs as poets.

BT: It's hard for me because it's always tinged with something painful or difficult. I'm not sure that's the most healthy way to approach beauty . . . but, it is what it is.

PH: A few years ago you were unknown to the literary world. You were just Sergeant Turner leaving the Army. You didn't even tell your fellow soldiers you wrote poetry. What have the last few years been like for you?

BT: When I was seven or eight I initially wanted to be an historian—that was the first job I ever wanted—and then it shifted to wanting to be a baseball player. Then later again I thought I'd like to write books, so I got into poetry and it became this quest to have a book. I wrote seven books that didn't get published but my eighth book, *Here, Bullet*, was published. But prior to that I never thought about what happens *after* a book is published which is, when we're lucky, we get these amazing gifts of friendship with new people that bring interesting and various backgrounds with them. I've gotten to meet these incredible people, like yourself, and learning about your poetry and Northern Ireland from you, so meeting *you* has been amazing and if you multiply it out it's compounded exponentially by all these other people. It's been a gift.

PH: So it's been the friendships that have been the biggest blessing?

BT: Absolutely. I mean, there have been great awards that have allowed me to do certain things and without them— I was doing electrical work when I got out of the military and that's how I was paying the bills. I cobbled together four jobs and I was working from two in the morning until nine o'clock at night when I first got out. As the book started taking off I was able to slough off job-by-job until suddenly I was no longer an electrician and I'd become . . . a poet.

PH: What laid the groundwork for wanting to become a poet? Why were you drawn to this particular genre at such a young age?

BT: I played the trumpet from elementary school through high school and then switched to bass guitar in my late teens. That's when my best friend and I decided to form a rock band that would one day tour Japan, rule the world, all that. I initially thought that taking poetry classes at the local college would help me to write better lyrics for the band but I quickly realized they are—for me at least—very different

creatures. I still play in that band with my life-long friends, by the way, and I still don't write the lyrics.

PH: Before you joined the military, what did you write about? What was your early writing career like?

BT: The poems I wrote prior to military service, and during the early years of my time in uniform for that matter, spanned a wide range of subjects. I wrote several manuscripts, none of them published as books, though many of the poems were published individually. I wrote a book about invention. I wrote another about South Korea. Bosnia. Labor and work. A failed marriage. And so on. I don't think this should surprise anyone. We live short lives and we live in a world that is nuanced, fascinating, and complex. There is simply too much to write about and not nearly enough time.

PH: Let's talk about your second book, *Phantom Noise*. There is a jitteriness—a disjointedness—about your return to civilian life. I'm thinking specifically about "At Lowe's Home Improvement Center". Can you talk about that poem?

BT: I went down to Lowe's for a project I was doing at home, and Lowe's isn't like an old hardware store where you have three boxes of finishing nails. They have a hundred-foot long wall of nails. At first, I found the wrong kind of nails—they were building scaffolding nails—so they're double-headed and if you have the light shining on them in the right way they look like a pile of firing pins. They'd fit exactly into the kind of weapon I used to carry, the M-4. It's a carbine that's a cousin of the M-16, but it's basically the same weapon. The firing pin is the part that hits the primer on the bullet and, as I was looking at these nails, I realized I was seeing the war in my life. When I saw that, I started to look around the store and I wondered about other imagistic rhymes I could find. What here reminds me of what I saw in combat? Like the ceiling fan department, right? I counted all these fans and they look a lot alike, at least imagistically, they rhyme with the rotors of a helicopter. The cash register when it opens and slides shut—you know, the metal ones?—they sound a little bit like a machine gun being charged.

PH: What do you mean, a "machine gun being charged?"

BT: That's when you pull back on the charge and you [*makes sound of bolt being moved back and forth*]. It's that sound you hear in the movies, and when you listen to a cash register drawer being shut you can hear that sound. So anyway I went out to my car for a notebook and came back into Lowe's to start taking notes on the store. I found all these images that were there, like ceiling fans up above, and I realized they were helicopters flying above all these shoppers walking below. We were living in a world of war without recognizing the war we were in. It seemed to me that this is an important thing that—not just myself—but all Americans need to be doing. If we're going to wage war against another country we can't have this vacuous shopper mentality back home. But it wasn't just indicting that, it was really just recognizing the psychic disconnect and understanding that there is a kind of trauma to walk by things and go numbly on without dealing with our lives. I kept taking notes until some guy came up to me and asked about building plaster—I guess it looked like I knew what I was doing—and I turned to him and said, "I'm a poet". He looked at me like I was a grapefruit or something.

PH: Many of the poems in *Phantom Noise* discuss the challenge of coming home. It's like you have to unlearn this defensive posture that kept you alive in Iraq. You seem to be saying that keeping the war on the perimeter isn't going to help you at all—you need to open the door and welcome it in.

BT: I think I had to realize that more for myself because I was trying to move on with my life. In fact, I was trying to write a book between *Here, Bullet* and *Phantom Noise* called *Summertime*, which I haven't tried to publish and I don't think I ever will. It's just a book I had to write, you know? It's about Florida, and it's gothic, and completely different because it's about love and romance and beauty. I thought after *Here, Bullet* if I write another war book I'll be stereotyped like an actor in Hollywood and whoever does the casting, well, I'll be in that folder rather than in multiple folders. But the war poems were very insistent.

PH: I know you're good friends with Bruce Weigl and you've met other Vietnam War poets like Yusef Komunyakaa. What are your conversations like about these two different, but yet similar, wars?

BT: Bruce Weigl and I just read at the Guggenheim together and it's the only time I've ever done this, but we were sort of throwing poems back and forth with each other. It seemed like we were almost talking about the same war. With

Bruce of course he's got great craft and also great maturity so he could throw back much better than I could. We did about a dozen poems. It seems like there *is* a conversation between the wars and I think some of the Vietnam veterans—I can't speak for them—but it seems they are trying to readdress some things they didn't feel with the World War II and Korea generations. It seems like they try to mentor and assist in helping. Bruce has often been like a mentor to me. I don't know if he would say that, but that's how it feels.

PH: As a nation we don't remember the stampede on Al-A'imma Bridge which killed 1,000 people in 2005. And yet "Al-A'imma Bridge" is the longest poem in *Phantom Noise* and it's also one of the most haunting. Tell me about its construction.

BT: I thought it should be much bigger, maybe ten or fifteen pages, but it's one big breath and it's hard to sustain that. I'm still a young poet so it's hard to get the *longer throw* of a poem. I'm working towards that, I think. The four- or five-page poem is about as far as I can throw a line right now but I'm hoping in the future to throw it maybe further. With this particular poem, I saw this epic moment with so much tragedy involved and in such a short period of time. The poem is very incomplete but I've learned to deal with that. There are fragments in "Al-A'imma Bridge" because there's so much missing in the poem. What was interesting for me, when I started writing this poem, was that I knew I'd meet some of these people that were falling off the bridge—at least fictionally—but I didn't know I was going to have the Battle of Karbala, or the German Luftwaffe from 1941, or Alexander the Great falling with them. That's of course what falls. Each person holds the world so, as they fall, everything they have gathered goes with them.

PH: In "Jundee Ameriki" [translation: American soldier] you discuss a suicide bombing and how a soldier at a VA has fragments of the explosion still trapped under his skin. Over the months it worms its way up as "slivers of shrapnel" and as "diamond points of glass". Do you have bits of a suicide bombing lurking beneath your own skin?

BT: I think in a way we all do. That's what I hope the poem does as it works outward. No, I didn't take any shrapnel specifically but I think in some way all of us who went over there did. The Iraqis themselves have taken much more. I don't know, it's a very difficult thing . . . I'd heard about car accidents where the body weeps out glass and other material, which is an interesting line. I tried to get the

word “weep” into the poem but it caused too much attention to itself, and I wanted the poem to be quieter and let the material do its work. The reader should weep, not the poem. There are some Eastern European poets where the poem weeps, but it doesn’t seem to be a part of the American mode.

PH: You also have a poem called “Guarding the Bomber”. What inspired it? Presumably you had to guard a suicide bomber that was only *partially* successful in blowing himself up.

BT: The poor guy. I say “poor guy” but I know some people who wouldn’t agree with that at all. I didn’t guard him but he was in one of the Connexs near where I was sleeping with all my gear. From my understanding, he was trying to construct a bomb and made a mistake. It blew off all four limbs and he became a sort of trunk, or torso, with nubs for limbs. When he was being guarded I remember thinking: who is he being guarded against? Of course, he was being guarded against American soldiers who might try to do him harm. I mean, he couldn’t go anywhere. He couldn’t do anything. What could he do? Maybe bite someone? But he didn’t even have the strength to do that. When I started writing the poem it became a vehicle to help me understand why someone would try to make a bomb. Why would they want to do that type of combat, that type of fighting and violence? At the very end it isn’t the soldier trying to reach in and help him, he’s trying to help the American. He’s reaching up through these invisible stumps that have been burned off in the world of America. I still don’t know what that means exactly but I don’t want to articulate it either. The poem should do that.

PH: We didn’t have suicide bombers in Northern Ireland but the act of placing a car bomb and then walking away from it was something that—

BT: This guy was making a bomb like that. It happened inside his house. I don’t know if he was making a car bomb or a road side bomb, but he blew himself up. He wasn’t making a bomb to put on his chest and he wasn’t hoping to martyr himself, as far as I can tell. He was hoping to build one of these, maybe, road side bombs that killed people. And then he’d make some more.

PH: That’s very familiar to Northern Ireland. I hear an echo there. You’ve also been outspoken about a subject we don’t hear much about in the military: sexual assault. “Insignia” reminds us of the women who serve, and it opens with the

epigraph: “one in three female soldiers will experience sexual assault while serving in the military.”

BT: You know, when I was in Kuwait, before we crossed the border to go in, there was a black out—which means they close down all communications back home—no phone, no internet, that kind of thing. It was a very big camp with thousands of soldiers and someone said one of the PXs had been broken into and stuff had been stolen, so that was a major incident, and everything was shut down to find this person. One of the female soldiers reported that she had been assaulted. I remember immediately the guys were trying to figure out which woman it was, but they weren't trying to figure out who the guy was. When they figured out who the woman *might* be, the conversation shifted to guys saying, “Oh, she was a slut” or she was . . . they started denigrating her. It quickly shifted to, “Oh, she's probably trying to get back home because she's afraid to across the border.” This was another type of assault against her character. It seemed really disturbing to me. It still does. And then when I heard this figure from Katie Couric on the news I started thinking—well—even if this number is not quite correct, even if it's only near that number—I started thinking about my sister serving in uniform, being where we were and having people trying to kill her in a combat zone and *then*, when she's back on base, where people are still trying to kill her with mortar attacks and rocket attacks, and then somebody to her left or right is trying to assault her—well. I went into the VA Hospital at Palo Alto for a project I'm doing with the NEA and as I was going through there the administrator was talking about the TBI Ward—the Traumatic Brain Injury Ward—and she called it a “campus”. She said there was another campus about twenty minutes away where there were men and women who had been sexually assaulted in Iraq and Afghanistan. The women I knew about, but it never crossed my mind there would be men who had been assaulted by others and that they'd require treatment back home. I forget the numbers but I remember being surprised at how many people were there. It's a big problem and it seems to me that's what we, as writers, do.

PH: Shed light?

BT: We're sort of like comics in that we try to see the line and we cross over it. I'm not sure comics do it in a healing way but authors often do it so that we can learn and maybe shed light so that it can get fixed. This has been very helpful, this poem [“Insignia”], because I've gone to the four service academies and I've read it there.

At the Air Force Academy, for example, and I'll be at Annapolis later in the fall. This is the Officer Corps of the future and they need to do more than just "check the box." There *is* a definite awareness and people take classes on sexual assault but there needs to be a very strong influence from that section of the military in order to crack down on it. They need to realize that the person who perpetrated it is a criminal, and if you want to talk about an "enemy" that person is an enemy because they are undermining everything these other men and women in our military are trying to do. They're an enemy.

PH: You also have a number of poems in *Phantom Noise* about your youth but these aren't exactly full of innocence. I'm thinking about "Homemade Napalm," ".22 Caliber," and especially "The Whale," which is about a beached whale you saw getting blown up. The image of tissue and meat raining down onto the sand is really powerful. Was this a conscious decision on your part, this backwards glance to the 1970s, or did these poems surprise you when they started to appear?

BT: Well, actually, April Ossmann—she was the editor at Alice James Books and she now has a manuscript consulting business—she's really good with both the poem in front of her and the global project of the book, which is a rare creature. I have lots of friends who are good at one or the other but she's good at both. I sent this manuscript to her when I was down in Texas and she said she liked what was going on and that she wanted to work with it, but before she could she just asked this question: "Where are you now"? That was the question. "Where are you now?" That question led me to ask where I was and where I came from. Like I said a few minutes ago, I scrapped about thirty or forty percent of the book, and I cut those poems out, and I wrote new poems. These are the ones you're asking about. I suddenly found these childhood poems coming into the book where there was the war, but I didn't know there was war. I hadn't quite seen it before.

PH: Now that you're becoming a spokesman for the soldierly experience in Iraq do you feel a greater responsibility to learn more about their culture? It seems that you'll always be known for your ties to Iraq. You seem more and more bound to that nation.

BT: I would agree with that. It goes back to Bruce Weigl and our discussion about mentorship because one of the things he said to me when he started to go back to Vietnam after his service in the military—when he was talking to one of

his counterparts there—I think it was in Hanoi—this man said, “You Americans are very strange. First you come here with your bombs and your bullets, and then later you come with your poets.” It seems to be ringing true with us now. History doesn’t repeat itself, but it does rhyme, and we seem to be doing the same thing again. I don’t want to seem as if I’m standing in for a culture like I’m trying to learn *for* America but I’m just curious about this place where I could have given my last breath. I could have died there or been maimed horribly . . . If you’re a finance clerk or an infantry soldier like I was, or an American tax payer, then everyone is actually involved in this process even if it’s difficult to know exactly how we are involved in slaughter, murder, death, rape, dislocation, and the shifting of people’s lives in general so the idea of having a dream in life is completely shattered. The idea of living and surviving is the norm. This is present day Baghdad. There is no real future. There is only the work today, and the work today puts food on the table. They’re not thinking about going to college or doing humanitarian work on the side, that’s not the average experience from what I see. I’m fascinated by the culture and, as a poet, it’s one of the wellsprings of poetry because the oral tradition shifted to the written page there and—

PH: You’re thinking of the Babylonian Empire?

BT: It shifted to clay tablets and papyrus and stone there. It went from the campfires and professional rememberers—those repositories of dream—and it went to the present day where we can read their work because it’s been handed down to us.

PH: You have a tendency to pull back in your poetry and give us a wide-sweep of Iraqi history. You remind us that Americans are only a tiny fragment of the story compared to this very old and rich nation.

BT: A lot of people in that area would agree very much with what you just said. They hope for another flowering where Baghdad becomes a city of peace, the dome of Islam, because not so many centuries ago it was the capital of the world. It was the biggest and most populated city in the world. Being situated where it was, the Spice Road cut right through it and so poetry, and philosophy, and mathematics made it one of the centers. After the Mongols came down and sacked it in 1258—it was more irrigated then, they had a great irrigation system—and the Mongols, when they sacked Baghdad, they just trashed the irrigation system. It ruined

everything because the people weren't able to revive quickly enough to fix it and it hasn't changed over the centuries. Desertification has happened. It's never really flowered to be what it once was. It's something they look back on with a sense of sadness and a hope that it will come back.

PH: You've got a poem in *Phantom Noise* called "Sleeping in Dick Cheney's Bed". It just leaps off the Table of Contents, or at least it did for me.

BT: It's one of my favorites. I went to the Air Force Academy in 2009 and while I was there they put me up in their best room, which is a lodge on base. It happened to be this huge palatial suite where Dick Cheney had stayed so, as I wheeled my stuff in and got set up in the room, I went into the most difficult room, which was the bedroom, and as I looked at it I realized, "I'm going to sleep in the same actual bed where Cheney slept". I told them afterwards I *have* to write a poem about this and they all sort of laughed, but they invited me back and I read the poem while I was there. The poem has to do with torture where—similar to the "Insignia" poem which talks about rape—there are things which are sometimes easier to shuffle under the rug and not talk about. Or sometimes we hope to fix most of it so we don't have to deal with it. Torture I mean. Now we have an American President who I voted for, and I support, and I hope in many ways will succeed, but there is one blunder where I think he's wrong. In the same way we talk about the national debt and that we don't want to leave it to our children's children to fix that problem, I don't think we should leave it to our children's children to debate how we should fix torture. I understand President Obama has come out and said it's too divisive and that we're already polarized over it but I don't think it's a polarizing issue at all. If there are people involved in torture, it means they're criminals. Crimes are supposed to be prosecuted. It's not a *Republican* thing or *Democrat* thing. We can't go kicking peoples' asses around the world and then talk about the glory of our flag when it's undermined. And *we've* undermined it. We have to clean our house. So I felt like I had to have a poem in *Phantom Noise* and of course I have to look at myself before I look at anyone else. The poem basically talks about how easy it is for me to have a good night's sleep in Dick Cheney's bed.

PH: And that's how the poem ends. We expect you—the narrator—to have a troubled night of sleep. But you deny us that and you sleep quite well.

BT: “where he too has slept, the sheets a sublime reprieve / for my tired frame, the night a perfection of sleep.”

PH: Men you served with have popped up as characters in your poetry—I’m thinking about such familiar names as Bosch and Jackowski. How do they feel about your work? How do they feel about Brian Turner the soldier who is now Brian Turner the poet?

BT: They probably think it’s funny as hell. I haven’t talked to Bosch in a long time. Maybe he’ll read this and get in touch with me? The last I heard, he was a recruiter down in L.A. and he changed his email address so hopefully we’ll get in touch again. I’m sure we will. Bosch—his name—is so evocative, especially of Hieronymus Bosch’s work and that echoes with the present day idea of war. Bosch had originally joined the military to save money for school so that he could be a director. He wanted to make movies. I think he’d be okay with this, this being a character in the landscape of my work. He’s a really good guy and one of the best soldiers I ever served with and he’s a decent human beyond that. And Jackowski? He was a young guy and his knees were blown out so I think he finished up his time and got out. He got married and the last I heard he had a private detective business he was starting up. Smart guy. He was young at the time so he hadn’t filled out to his “full man body” and he had this baby face, so the girls loved him. They’d gravitate towards him like a magnet. He had this huge Adam’s apple and a voice like Bing Crosby. Really deep. It was like another body that didn’t fit him at all. He’s a good guy from Arizona. I hope to run into them in person.

PH: You published an article called “Firebase Eagle” in *Connecticut Review* last year and you’ve also recently published “Baghdad after the Storm” in *National Geographic*. Do you find your attention turning more towards fiction and nonfiction nowadays?

BT: That’s all I’m doing this year. It’s all been essays—or mostly essays—I’ve written one short story that will be included in an anthology that’s coming out soon. There are some really good up-and-coming writers working at the NYU Writers’ Workshop and some veterans are there. I think that’s going to be the first real, solid, wave of fiction coming out of Iraq and Afghanistan. A few of them are hoping to put together a short story collection, so I wrote a short story for them: “The Wave that Takes Us Under.” It’s about a platoon that’s gone off into the

dunes, and the sand starts coming, and they lose vehicle communication, and they basically get lost out there and then they get buried by the sandstorm. They all die in the sand. It's a metaphorical narrative. Everyone else is writing realist stuff but this is metaphorical.

PH: You haven't written too many stories?

BT: No. Well, when I was seven, my parents were getting married and I wrote them a series of short stories for their honeymoon. I thought they'd be bored because I didn't understand what a honeymoon was all about. Since then, I haven't really written many short stories. It was a good challenge. I'm a big fan of Ismail Kadare's work, the Albanian novelist, and he works in the fabulist mode quite a bit. I'm not sure that necessarily works in a short story but it seems to me there are other ways to get to the Iraq War other than, for example, just realist fiction.

PH: In the story, the sand envelopes this HumVee and it harkens back to the United States. You switch back and forth between Iraq and America. The setting changes on us.

BT: Yes. The main character is being washed under—or over?—by a sandstorm and the entire unit is erased by the sand. I thought it might work as a metaphor about what's happening in our country or it might act as a pointer for what may happen as people begin to forget about the wars and what's happened to the soldiers.

PH: If the other stories in this collection operate in a “realist mode” was this a conscious decision on your part to run counter to that framing of the war?

BT: I didn't know what was going to be in the collection initially. I was surprised when I read through it that there weren't any other stories going out on a limb. That's how it felt to me anyway. Can I do this? Is this going to be acceptable to others who have been there? Are they going to say, “This is bullshit, it's not like that. *That* never happened.” But it *is* happening, so it's the only way I could approach it.

PH: Speaking of writing something other than poetry, I suppose the big news is that you've recently got a contract to write your memoir about the Iraq War. The working title is *My Life as a Foreign Country*.

BT: I'm in the *field* of the memoir but it's really not about me. I guess I'm close to the speaker and I'm there throughout most of the book but there's a dead version of myself—Sergeant Turner—and he's one of the characters. A lot of the other characters are people from my family, so it's not *just* about the Iraq War. It's about warzones and the aftereffects of war throughout the generations in my family. There are also some meditations on the history of war because, when you look for one layer, you realize there are so many layers that come before it.

PH: Rather than straight up nonfiction, where you're trying to recall what's in the past, it sounds like you're blending fiction and nonfiction in this book. You're helping the reader to understand a larger truth.

BT: I'd agree.

PH: There are a lot of excellent war memoirs out there from previous wars. I'm thinking specifically of Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That* (1929) and Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (1973). I'm always curious about memory and revisiting the past. How are you thinking about framing your war story?

BT: Basically what's happening in this memoir is that it's mirroring my life experience more. As: right now we're here but we went for coffee earlier and then at some point later today I might think about my time in Iraq, or I'll think of my wife, so there's this cycling of thought. In the book there will also be a cycling, circular, kind of motion where it feels like the main speaker is sitting in the middle of the room and all of these fragments and pieces of his life are broken up and swirling around him. And he looks at them one at a time as they swirl around him. Maybe he grabs one for a little while and lets it go back into the swirl. So there might be a piece about 1958 and then it goes to Iraq and then it flips back—mostly it's tied together through images—so there might be a specific motion. For example, there's a portion of the book called "A Trauma Junkie's Delight." In that, the primary motion is a falling motion so it starts with a bomb, an atomic bomb, one that didn't have the fissionable material in it, that falls over an American family in 1958. Then it might move to mortars falling on one of my bases in Iraq. I'll study the mortar in its flight as it falls down upon me and others. I keep following these motions and I follow my brother as he falls spiraling downward in his life. It's this idea of looking at trauma *before* it happens, right *when* it happens, and right *after* it happens. It breaks up the chronology entirely.

PH: Which is how our minds work.

BT: Exactly. There's another bit called "John Wayne Saturdays" and it's about manliness and manhood. What does it mean to be tough? The overall difficulty for me in this project is that there are all these swirling patterns of time and people and cycling, so there's still hopefully an arc within each section, but then I have to have these sections do the same thing. That is, they need to cycle with each other so there's a larger arc being developed over the course of the whole book. The further difficulty is that I've embedded a novella within the chapters. There's a "dead Sergeant Turner" story, in Iraq, as he continues his life as a ghost.

PH: That must be strange writing about a dead version of yourself. Do you find it strangely liberating because it allows you to engage the war differently?

BT: I do. I think it's part of the process because soldiers bring the war home with them but also, in a way, part of us is still over there. Part of us continues living there but how can I get to *that*? This might be one way to access that part of me that's still there. I'm struggling with it because in the Sergeant Turner portion he's mostly interacting with Iraqi people. How connected am I to that space where I once was? I don't speak Arabic—I know a few words and phrases, but I'm very limited in my ability to speak with Iraqi people who don't already speak English—I feel conflicted in what I'm doing but it still feels like the right move, like what I *have* to do. This is one of my failures as a human being and I'm not as developed in that knowledge so it's something I want to study. How is it that I could go to war and know so little about them? That character is a way I can investigate myself and my failings.

PH: A few years ago you were working on a novel called *The Explosion Museum*. That's a wonderful title, and I enjoyed reading an early draft, but it seems like you've shelved the project for the time being.

BT: Well, see, that's the thing. Initially, in that novel, there was a character named Henderson but it was really a displaced version of myself which, now, I've smashed into the memoir I'm writing. The dead Sergeant Turner we've been talking about is *that* character—Henderson—but I'm just using parts that were more lyrical. For example, in the very first section when he finds out that he's dead,

he learns that he has to go down every morning with the rest of the vast assembly of the dead and they all bathe in the Tigris together.

PH: This again disrupts a chronological and realistic approach to your retelling of the war.

BT: We're creatures of multiple time zones because the past, the present, and the future—and the possible future—they all co-mingle. I think it would limit too much on the experience if I tried to create a chronology. It's comforting for some people to be able to watch cause and effect but, for me, there was a disruption of narrative. Like, in Iraq, I kept asking myself: "Why am I here? What good is this?" These are questions that have continued to this day so I think the style matches the experience I've had.

PH: You mentioned how your company went into one of Saddam's palaces and how it was rigged to cause all of these booby traps. Can you relive that moment again?

BT: In some places like that it was common for them to plant hand grenades behind Saddam's portraits and they were rigged to go off because they knew we'd be taking them down. But anyway, the Brigade Colonel had headquarters in this former palace and there was a pool in the bottom of it. It was dry when we got there, but it was hot and people wanted to cool down, and it seemed like a great idea because you're *safe* there. It was impermeable to shelling. So we filled the pool up with water and one of our battalion scouts jumped in—naturally, as you would—but they should have tested the water because the electrical lines had been cut or something, basically rendering it lethal. It killed him.

PH: It was rigged? Booby-trapped?

BT: Unless it was an accident, but it seems obvious that somebody had . . . Booby-traps weren't really a major part of *my* experience in Iraq. They were more oblique attacks like road side bombs, a sniper maybe, mortars, rockets, that kind of thing.

PH: But you know, I'm aware that booby-traps *are* a part of your daily life now. You're going along, doing your thing in the world, when suddenly this memory

pops up and you're immediately back in the war. There's this unwanted intrusion into the calm. These memories are like booby-traps.

BT: I wonder if that's good or bad though? Maybe it's good that I've continued to be aware of it? Maybe we need these booby-traps to go off so that we think about how many have died?

PH: What do you miss about being a soldier?

BT: I miss the humor. There was a lot of gallows humor. Some of the training exercises we did were fascinating. The camaraderie in the workplace was something I've not experienced before or after. And also, a lot of people complain about "political correctness" and they feel like they have to walk on eggshells in order not to offend people, and in general I think that's a good thing. It's good to avoid being blunt and rude and mean to people. It's good to honor where they're coming from. But, at the same time, in equal measure, in the military I found that it was a free-for-all. You just said what was on your mind. It seemed like the conversational forum was more open to a blunt kind of honesty that was really refreshing. People just said what came to their heads and, once it was out there, you had to deal with it. Everybody had to get a tough skin and you had to stand in your own shoes. In some ways, that made it a stronger community.

PH: When I first interviewed you back in 2008, I asked this question: "What do you think we've learned from the Iraq War?" Now that four years have passed I want to ask that question again. What have we learned or—if you'd like to twist the question a bit—what have *you* learned?

BT: I've learned that Carl Sandburg was right.

PH: "I am the grass. Let me work."

BT: "What place is this?" Ask a child ten years from now, when you teach your writing classes ten years from now, ask them about the war in Iraq. I'm talking about the *second* time we fought Iraq because we fought them twice. Ask them if they remember the First Gulf War. Do they remember the chemical weapons program or Donald Rumsfeld? They might know their mother or father fought

in Iraq but maybe their parents don't talk about the war very much. It will be interesting to see at that moment if the grass has fully grown over or not.

PATRICK HICKS is the author of five poetry collections, most recently *Finding the Gossamer* (2008) and *This London* (2010)—he is also the editor of *A Harvest of Words* (2010), which was funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. He has been nominated several times for the Pushcart Prize, he was recently a finalist for the High Plains Book Award, and he is the recipient of a number of grants, including one from the Bush Artist Foundation to support work on his first novel, which is about Auschwitz. He is the Writer-in-Residence at Augustana College and his next collection, *Adoptable*, is due out in 2014 with Salmon Poetry.