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Poetry, the Iraq War, and the Ethics of Trauma

PSYCHOLOGICAL WOUNDING IS NO LONGER an ugly secret—posttraumatic stress disorder has entered public consciousness in a big way: in literature classes students diagnose characters as having PTSD; in interviews, generals admit to their own traumatic wounds and discuss ways of combatting it (Shaughnessy and Starr); and psychological injury shows up in much of the most recent literature on the Iraq War. Novels such as *The Yellow Birds* and short stories in the collections *Fire and Forget*, *Redeployment*, and *These Heroic, Happy Dead* place front and center the issue of war-related trauma. And PTSD shows up in genre fiction as well; since the beginning of the Global War on Terror, romance novels increasingly have plot lines that feature women healing psychologically wounded soldiers. One article on the trend in romance literature puts it this way, “PTSD is, bluntly put, a hot topic” (Holden and Tabol).

Poetry written about the Iraq War is no exception.¹ Just as one would expect from an art form that has been increasingly associated with testimony and witness, poetry seems particularly apt for expressing the pain of psychological trauma. For example, in *Letter Composed during a Lull in the Fighting*, Kevin Powers (also the author of *The Yellow Birds*) uses the emotionally drained voice common in the war poetry tradition to explore loss, guilt and memory, both from his time in Iraq as well as his childhood growing up outside of Richmond, VA:

Think not of battles, but rather after,
when the tremor in your right leg
becomes a shake you cannot stop, when the burned man's
tendoned cheeks are locked into a scream that,
before you sank the bullet in his brain to end it,
Had been quite loud. (38)

Meanwhile, working in the richly allusive language of the Arabic poetic tradition, Iraqi born poet Dunya Mikhail, who lives in the United States, captures the brutal and often surreal realities of living under a totalitarian state, war's threat of violence, and the harsh realities of international sanctions and airstrikes in *The War Works Hard*:

I am a new rose.
My redness, wild hallucinations,
and my thorns, prison cells
With views of the moon.
Yesterday someone touched me,
but did not pick me.
I was tough. (19)

Both poets, like many writing about war today, are concerned with transformations, particularly the way that experiences of war transform not just the individual but also the world around the individual. These transformations include material changes, such as the destruction of Iraq and the immigrant's loss of home, as well as the emotional changes, in which self and home are lost in much more intimate ways.

Of the many poets writing about the war, arguably the most successful have been Brian Turner and Elyse Fenton. Turner wrote many of the poems in his first volume, *Here, Bullet*, while deployed to Iraq in 2003 with the U.S. Army, while Fenton's first collection of poetry, *Clamor*, was formed out of her experiences as a wife of an Army medic working in Bagdad's Green Zone in 2005. Between them, these poets capture two, disparate experiences of the war, that of the soldier in direct combat duty and that of the one left behind who worries for the soldier in harm's way. Both trace for us the transformative power of wartime trauma and consider its lingering psychological effects—Turner, on the soldier attempting to return home, physically and emotionally, and Fenton, on the one left behind, who experiences war primarily as loss, first when the soldier deploys and then when he or she returns but not as the same person who left.

We can feel this sense of war's transformative power most acutely in Brian Turner's poems; he registers the war's effects through a number of tropes, including representing the war's lasting effect as bullets or shrapnel embedded in his body or as ghosts that haunt the poet. In particular, Turner's second volume, *Phantom Noise*, returns again and again to the image of ghosts haunting the speaker, not only in nightmares but even in his waking moments. Ghosts hover over his bed after sex: "My lover // sleeps as Iraqi translators shuffle / in through the doorway" (23); the ghosts of Iraq linger outside his home at night: "Through venetian blinds / I see Iraqi prisoners in that dank cell at Firebase Eagle / staring back at me" (21); and ghosts follow him while he is shopping for nails in Lowe's department store: "Aisle number 7 is a corridor of lights. / Each dead Iraqi walks

amazed / by Tiffany posts and Bavarian pole lights” (7). The speaker obviously suffers from nightmares and even hallucinations as traumatic memories from his time in Iraq are restaged by his imagination in the supposedly safe spaces of America. The poet struggles with the dual import of these traumas. On the one hand, these memories corrupt otherwise beautiful peacetime activities and objects, such as sleep, sex, eating and shopping. Certainly, the poet feels shame and recognizes that he is unwell. In fact, the volume opens with “VA Hospital Confessional,” which catalogs his recurring nightmares and demonstrates that he desires healing and an end to the nightmares. On the other hand, the ghosts in his dreams—of dead friends, dead Iraqis and dead children—have a claim on him and look to him for remembrance and understanding:

When I dial 911.

The operator tells me to use proper radio procedure,
reminding me that my call sign is *Ghost 1-3 Alpha*,
and that it’s time, long past time, to unlock the door
and let these people in. (22)

In this surreal, dream-like encounter, the 911 operator reminds the veteran that he has a duty to remember. To forget the dead, including U.S. and Iraqi dead, or to shut them out would represent an act of betrayal. Besides, as Turner’s poems make clear, the nightmare world of trauma seems as real and substantial as the peacetime world of suburban California: “it’s difficult to tell the living / from the dead (21). There is a real sense that his traumatic wartime experiences have changed him and his sense of both himself and his surroundings; bullets embedded in and even comprising his body is a recurring image in his poetry, as is the sense that he is also a ghost, as evident in the 911 operator insisting that he “is *Ghost 1-3 Alpha*.” His body, his consciousness and his voice no longer belong to the peacetime world. Wherever he goes, he brings the war with him because he is part of the war and the war is part of him. In effect, the war has killed the peacetime Brian Turner and replaced him with a ghost of the Iraq War, a trope that Turner makes quite explicit in his memoir, *My Life as a Foreign Country* (199).

But, it is in one of the poems from Turner’s 2005 volume, *Here, Bullet*, where we can see most clearly the way that wartime experiences have transformed the poet. “Katyusha Rockets” describes a now familiar scene, of a combat veteran disoriented and threatened by large crowds and loud noises while in the supposed safety of peacetime America. In this case, the poem is set in a

Memorial Day parade. The speaker seems to be displaying several symptoms of PTSD: hyperarousal, intrusion and even disconnection (Herman). He imagines Katyusha rockets launched in Iraq “traveling for years over the horizon / to land in the meridians of Divisadero Street, / where I’m standing early one morning / on a Memorial Day in Fresno, California.” The speaker describes the chaos and devastation as the rockets land in the midst of the parade:

the veteran’s parade scattering at the impact,
mothers shielding their children by instinct,
old war vets crouching behind automobiles
as police set up an outer cordon
for the unexploded ordinance. (32)

The poem captures, in Sassoonesque fashion, the disjunction between battlefield violence and home front ignorance, as well as the way that a battlefield thousands of miles away, far beyond the reach of Iraqi weaponry, can corrupt and transform the home front.

But the poem is not just wish fulfillment or hallucination; Turner very definitely casts it as memory and imaginative exploration. The Katyusha rockets do not drop literally in California but “in the night sky of the skull,” so the poem is about haunting by war and the recurrence of traumatic memory in the present. The poem and the rockets’ trajectory may begin (and physically end) in Iraq, but the experiential arc and span of the rockets carry them beyond the war’s boundaries into the present of the speaker, reminding us that the traumatic effects of war are not bound temporally or spatially; they reach beyond the space of the battlefield and continue after the cessation of hostilities. Here trauma persists not simply as a haunting of consciousness. It transforms the world around the veteran: malls, streets and American cities become a landscape of urban warfare and explosive threats. As the language of the poem makes clear, experience alone is not solely responsible for this transformation. When the poet mentions the police setting up “an outer cordon,” a standard safety maneuver used by troops after an IED strike, he signals that his military training plays a role in his re-evaluation of space. This warping of consciousness and vision by training is precisely what the speaker of Henry Reed’s WWII sequence “Naming of Parts” resists. Through training and traumatic experience, Turner’s speaker comes to assess each space he occupies as a battlefield problem, to be solved with combat techniques. These techniques are necessary for survival in a combat situation, but the soldier cannot just turn them off when the war is done (Shay, *Achilles* 174). Veterans take the

arena of war with them into the world, and their combat-altered perspectives transform those spaces into battlefields.

But if the speaker's consciousness militarizes Divisadero Street, then it reminds us that ultimately he is the one transformed by his experiences. And, according to the poem, that transformation is not merely metaphorical, but quite physical. While the poem initially poeticizes the rockets' attack on the speaker's memory, what the speaker describes as "the night sky of the skull," the rockets are not merely memories; they fall in "the rough structures of thought" and specifically in the speaker's "skull," "synapses," and "hippocampus." This precise delineation of human anatomy resembles the clinical attention that Turner gives to the weapons, tactics and language of war throughout his poetry. It is not just rockets that fall, but 107 millimeter rounds. Elsewhere, the poet watches Iraqis through a Leupold Scope (*Bullet* 7), a female soldier sleeps under "a deuce and a half" to escape sexual assault (*Noise* 64), and several poems are titled "Observation Posts," as if they are log entries from the soldier poet's time on watch. Throughout, the soldier's body garners the same precise, even militarized focus; take, for example, his challenge to the bullet in "Here, Bullet":

If a body is what you want,
then here is bone and gristle and flesh.
Here is the clavicle-snapped wish,
the aorta's opened valves, the leap
thought makes at the synaptic gap. (*Bullet* 13)

Turner's use of precise terminology highlights the sense of the soldier as body. He offers us a vision of the body as a battlefield space, a way of weighing loss and victory, and the necessary knowledge of which injuries will kill you and which you can ignore. So, the body is as much of an accoutrement of war as any of the weapons that it carries. The poet veteran walking down Divisadero Street uses battlefield assessment to weigh the threat from and to not only the city and the crowd, but also to and from his own body. He has been transformed into a weapon of war, and as a weapon, he carries the war with him into peacetime spaces. He is both victim and threat, and the person that he most threatens is himself.

The poem ends by comparing the veteran to a bomb disposal tech walking "tethered and alone down Divisadero Street" to "dismantle death." The final image that runs across the paragraph break (broken like the bodies of those killed by the rockets and the memories torn apart) is a striking

metaphor for poetry as testimony: the poet is both bomb and the means to dismantle the bomb. He is both threat and solution, and the bomb that he must diffuse is himself, which makes the area of his activity his own brain and memory. Turner describes such activity as “dismantling death.” The image is one of postwar recovery, of the soldier having to come to terms with his wartime service in a way that diffuses death, both as intrusive vision and as muscle memory. The soldier sounds like a danger to those around him; he is bomb disposal tech and the unexploded rocket. The work is exhausting; he must dismantle his trauma “piece by piece.” It is, as the poet claims, “the bravest thing” he has ever seen.

But the soldier’s transformation is more total, for it is more than a present struggle; the range of the rockets extends not just into the present and future, but also into the past. They fall “into the seat of memory— / where lovers and strangers and old friends / entertain themselves.” The transformation of the veteran into a weapon of war is not simply a before and after paradigm. The transformation affects memory, so that the range and trauma of war encompasses even the past. Memories of childhood, and of lovers are “rucked” by the rockets. Nothing is sacred; nothing is left untouched. If memory equals identity, then his whole being is violated by the process of war, including his training and his experiences. There is a precedence for this retrospective violation. Walt Whitman, the person most responsible for creating the modern war poet voice, also saw that war reached into the past as well as the present. In 1871, Whitman rewrote *Leaves of Grass* to include the American Civil War into poems written years before the war (Szczesniul 130): as he writes in “To Thee Old Cause,” “my book and the war are one” (Whitman 11). For Whitman, the war was the defining moment of the American experiment as well as his own poetic experiment. It was the touchstone by which all other memories and histories were weighed or measured. The future is implicated in the past, and the past in the future.

In interviews, Brian Turner explains that after *Here, Bullet*, he attempted to put the war behind him and move on to other subjects; instead, he found himself still writing about it (Hicks 64). The result was *Phantom Noise*, a volume of poems about the Iraq War and especially the veteran’s postwar experiences. But, the volume still contains a number of non-war poems. Remarkably, these few, like the veteran’s memories in “Katyusha Rockets,” have been transformed into war poems. Poems about the Viking mission to Mars, or the poet looking at Chinese ink brush paintings or hiking in the Olympic National Forest are yoked irrevocably to and defined by his experience of war. Meanwhile, in a way similar to Whitman’s retrospective sense of the war, even Turner’s poems about his childhood are fully informed by his war. There are the obvious examples,

such as the young Turner making homemade napalm and .22 caliber zip guns with his stepdad; however, the memory poem that is most poignantly shaped by the Iraq War is “The Whale,” which narrates an early childhood memory from 1970. “The Whale” tells of a rotting whale carcass on an Oregon beach that must be exploded by “500 pounds of explosives / necessary to rend open the interior / so scavengers can pick the skeleton clean” (10). Explosives show up so often in Turner’s war poetry that the connection seems quite clear; however, it is not just the explosives that create an imaginative link between childhood memory and Iraq War experience. The poem describes the whale’s flukes as “wide as the tail fins of bombers / overhead.” Set on the West Coast in 1970, this image could easily refer to a country mobilized for the Cold War and sending troops and war materiel to Vietnam. Thus, the poem demonstrates a continuity of organized political violence in the life of the poet, and, by extension, the lives of his American readers. The poem’s ending, though, specifically reinscribes the childhood memory as one about the poet’s war in Iraq, 2003:

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

That final word, “unscathed,” quite explicitly invokes those times that “we” do not walk away unscathed. It reminds us that not only has the poet not walked away unscathed from his later experiences with high explosives, but that this childhood memory itself has not remained unscathed by the poet’s later experiences. If the poet has been transformed into a weapon of war that transformation colonizes even his past.

But, it would be wrong for us to assume that these lines point to a Wilfred-Owen-like passive victimization, as if the poet suffers in some totalizing way from his wartime experiences and “the poetry is in the pity” (Owen 535). The ghosts in Turner’s poetry do not, or at least do not simply, point to the kind of traumatic melancholy identified in trauma studies, “in which one is haunted or possessed by the past and performatively caught up in the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes—scenes in which the past returns and the future is blocked or fatalistically caught up in a melancholic feedback loop” (LaCapra 21). For Turner, a strong ethical dimension exists in willingly opening himself to suffering, particularly the suffering of the Iraqis. Throughout his poems, other voices tell the poet to connect in some way to the many ghosts that haunt him. As we have

already seen, in “Perimeter Watch,” the 911 operator says of the ghosts of Iraq, “it’s time, long past time, to unlock the door / and let these people in” (22). And, in the very next poem, the poet’s lover finds him digging graves in the backyard for the ghosts that haunt him. As she picks up a shovel to help, she tells him,

*We should invite them into our home.
We should learn their names, their history.
We should know these people
we bury in the earth.* (24)

Clearly the lover’s anaphoric “we” reaches out to encompass the reader as well, as an injunction for all Americans to seek and accept haunting after war as a moral imperative. And that sense of trauma as a moral imperative, rather than as passive victimization, runs as a dominant theme throughout Turner’s poetry.

James Gleason Bishop calls Turner “a clear-eyed witness to the phantom violence that occurs years after the violence of war” (305), but while Turner’s poetry certainly testifies to the scope and breadth of the transformative power of war’s violence, his project is much more active than simply bearing witness. The poem “At Lowe’s Home Improvement Center” best exemplifies Turner’s more active and willed sense of haunting. At first, the poem seems to represent an episode of post-traumatic intrusive memory (Herman 37-42) or what Domnick LaCapra calls “acting out” (70); after all, objects in the store clearly trigger the soldier-poet: nails look like firing pins, and overhead fans remind the poet of helicopter blades. Thus, when he encounters the ghosts of dead Iraqis and dead American soldiers in the aisles, the poem seems to show us a traumatic flashback or hallucination. But, Turner’s account of writing the poem describes those hauntings as a deliberate choice by the haunted. In an interview, Turner explains that upon seeing the resemblance between double-sided nails and M-4 firing pins, he ran out to his car to get his notebook. He then walked through the store looking for those connections to the war, purposefully inviting the ghosts into his memory and into the poem (Hicks 64).

But, more importantly, the drama in Lowe’s department store offers an injunction to all Americans to see the ghosts and invite them into our lives. When asked about the poem, Turner explained that we “were living in a world of war without recognizing the war we were in,” and that the poem calls for us to actively think about our relationship to the war, especially to transform

ourselves into a new way of seeing (to *recognize*, as in to reshape our thinking about the war). He frames his thinking in the poem this way,

It seemed to me that this is an important thing which not just I 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; it was really 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. (Hicks 64)

So, Turner's poetry asks us to open ourselves to the consequences of war, to recognize that war is not bound by geographic, temporal or even experiential boundaries. The Iraqis or America's soldiers are not the only ones who have lived through war; we all have, and we harm ourselves by not opening ourselves to war's victims—inviting them into our homes, physically and imaginatively. Meanwhile, Turner insists that war has a transformative power over those who have lived through it, and we should actively seek that transformation. As he points out in the interview, to resist understanding is a “kind of trauma” itself. Turner prescribes haunting not as a symptom of trauma, but a cure for trauma, a cure that must take place at a national level.

To open ourselves in the way that Turner describes also requires that we acknowledge the ways that those at home are “living in a world of war.” Therefore, the story of the war cannot be told fully by the veteran alone. Most veterans leave behind someone when they go to war, parents, partners, friends, brothers, sisters or other family who worry and wait. They undergo their own traumas and their own transformations. In *Clamor*, poet and Army wife Elyse Fenton tells of her own experiences with her husband's deployment and eventual homecoming. In 2005, Fenton married a longtime friend who was on his way to Iraq as an Army medic. The poems in her first volume of poetry are presented in chronological order, the first section tells of his absence, the second covers his immediate return, and the third is set roughly a year after his return. This chronological structure is common in war literature since at least Walt Whitman's 1871 edition of *Drum Taps* (Sychterz 10-11). In 1868, William Michael Rossetti rearranged Whitman's poems so that they had a narrative arc, moving from the poet's initial martial enthusiasm, through despair and disillusionment to reconciliation (Ramsey). That structure captures the profound transformation of consciousness and identity—for Whitman we see the birth of the wound dresser, his strident voice subdued by suffering and eventually finding meaning by ministering to and alleviating suffering

(Kinney 9). Unlike Whitman, Fenton begins without the pro-war stance—her very first poem focuses on a soldier's wrecked body. But, like Whitman, Fenton muses on voice and silence, suffering and nursing, and she struggles to find meaning in the war, for herself, for her husband, and for her community. Also like Whitman, but unlike the vast majority of war poetry (which focuses on the combat soldier's story), she shares *her* experience of war. Fenton shows us what war means to those left behind.

Fenton's poems in *Clamor's* first section are based upon snippets of conversations that she had with her husband through phone calls and instant messaging (Phillips), and they capture the strange feeling of being an eavesdropper on a war, both connected to but distanced from her husband. In one poem, she mentions an interruption that carries frightening connotations: "Mid-conversation someone comes / looking for body bags. Medic, // I can hear you rummaging / the shelves" (11). The two overheard words, "body bags," dramatically remind the poet of death: across that phone bridge and on the other side of their conversation someone has died; in fact, soldiers and civilians *are* dying. Like this one, many of the poems muse upon the war's medical profession, finding similarities between his work as a medic and her work as a poet and gardener. But, there is the problem of war and death, and other poems struggle to find meaning there, particularly within the sanitized and euphemistic language used for combat and war. Fenton finds troubling, but fascinating, how often innocuous, peacetime words are appropriated to name dark, and deadly war objects and activities, such as "friendly fire" (23), "concertina" wire (razor wire that borrows its name from an accordion-type instrument) (13), and "corkscrew" landing (an evasive landing maneuver to avoid getting shot out of the sky) (9). These words not only spark her poetic imagination, they also provide a creative bridge between civilian-poet and soldier-husband.

In fact, that imagination plays roughly the same role in Fenton's poetry as haunting does in Turner's. Fenton overhears snippets of the war in her phone calls or through media reports on television, and through those snippets envisions the images of death that the language both invokes and elides. She specifically imagines the work that her husband does on war-ravaged bodies, using an aesthetic language that, like Turner's, medicalizes the ravaged body but also finds its beauty. But, as Tim O'Brien suggests, "imagination [is] a killer" (O'Brien 10); and Fenton is haunted by images of her husband's own body being torn apart:

Because at any moment the hard dust
beneath your feet could breach like a cleft

in meaning, could erupt into a sifting
cloud of brick & metal-riven bone (8).

Imagination is the crux of the war-bride's (Fenton's term) experience, and it is why Fenton scrupulously avoided television and media reports of the war (at first) and wouldn't answer the front door: "Early on I had learned that the war could show up at your door in the uniform of an honor guard at any moment" (Fenton "My Deployment"). Fear and worry is the common experience for the loved one left behind, and that play of imagination can be traumatic—having the same consequences on the psyche as waiting in the warzone has on the soldier. A phone ring, an unexpected knock on the door, an overheard news report about U.S. casualties in the soldier's AO (Area of Operations)—many of those left behind cite these as triggers for intense fear and worry. And, over a six or twelve month deployment, this play of imagination can wear down someone's psyche and leave him or her with psychological wounds.

I don't mean to suggest that Fenton's poetry is about home-front post-traumatic stress disorder. She doesn't specifically address trauma in the same way that Brian Turner or, frankly, so many of the novels or short-stories about the Iraq War do. Instead, Fenton focuses on the traumatic consequences of the play of imagination to insist upon the authenticity of those experiences. After all, while her worry is indeed predicated upon her husband's presence in the warzone, the poems speak to her unique and individual experience, largely separate from his experiences in Iraq's Green Zone. He felt largely safe during his deployment and worries that readers might come away with a distorted view of his experience (Phillips). But, as Fenton explains, these poems are not about *his* war, but about *hers*: "I think my husband would like a disclaimer on 'Gratitude' and other poems that reads: this is not my experience. And of course he's right. It's not his experience at all; it could never be, and not just because he's not a poet" (Interview). Her trauma is independent from his trauma (or lack thereof). One of the last poems in *Clamor*, "Infidelity," perfectly captures this sense of separate imaginative experiences. The poet confesses her many dreams of his broken body and ends by imploring, "Forgive me, love, this last // infidelity: I never dreamed you whole" (73). His reality, and his sense of safety has little bearing on her imagination—the poet has only her own experiences to go by—made up of what seems to be incomplete information, but comprises, for the one left behind, the totality of her wartime experience. They are her dreams, after all, not his.

This play of imagination should remind us of Turner's hauntings because Turner's ghosts also represent the play of imagination. The ghosts simultaneously intrude, unbidden, into the

soldier's peacetime life and consciousness—the traditional trauma studies model of PTSD outlined by Cathy Caruth and others—and come as well into being through consciously willed effort. As ethical responses to a colonial war, Turner's hauntings serve as imagined poetic solutions to trauma as well as calls to national responsibility. Like Turner, Fenton also stresses in interviews the purposeful construction of the poems around her experience: "it's not exactly my experience, either, because it's a poem, it's a construction. Hopefully it's happening right there on the page" (Interview). So, on the one hand, images of her husband's broken body haunt her (hence her desire to shield herself from televised images of the war), but, on the other, she deliberately explores the war-bride's fear and worry as a way to consciously engage in the war *as it means to her* and to so many other women and men left behind with their imaginations. Therefore, *Clamor* provides a narrative of the war-bride's war; one that is predicated on the soldier's war but is not bound by or limited to his experiences. The poem that best represents this complex interplay of soldier and spouse is "Conversation." From the book's third section, a year after his return, it captures not only the difficulty of homecoming, but also how the war has transformed the one left behind.

The title places us in a communication, which should connote the kind of give and take that brings two people together; instead the poem opens with language and images of difference: "We're disparate as men counting / miles across an ocean renamed home" (64). By labelling the two, soldier and poet, "disparate," the speaker acknowledges a frightening distance; they are as unlike as they possibly can be. They have not just different experiences but exist as fundamentally different kinds. The sentence continues by couching that difference in a metaphor of travel and distance: they are like two men who are separated from home, and perhaps each other, by an ocean. But the metaphor is more complicated; the only home mentioned is actually the ocean, which has been renamed "home." This renaming could mean that they have been out to sea for so long that being away from home and never settled has now become home. But, the poem doesn't say that the ocean *is* home, but instead that it is "renamed" home. Naming an ocean "home" doesn't make it home. Such naming points to the fundamental uncanniness (Freud's *unheimlich*--unhomely) of their lives: home is home no longer because of their emotional, even ontological, distance from each other. Additionally, what makes the men in the poem "disparate" is their "counting miles," which could mean measuring the distance from home, either as approaching (how many miles they have until they get home) or leaving (counting the miles as they move further from home). Interestingly, the distance is not that of Donne's "Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" in which distance confirms, strengthens and makes more valuable the bond between lover and beloved. The distance in Fenton's

poem is so great, so inconceivable, that home haunts the poem only as what has been lost. It exists in the poem not even as a trace, but as a metaphor, and an unstable or broken one at that: “you and I and the heart’s joists that keep / the roof from warping under broken / pipes and wind” (64).

In *Odysseus in America*, PTSD counsellor Jonathan Shay reads Homer’s *Odyssey* as an allegory of the soldier’s homecoming. He argues that Odysseus’s ten year voyage to return to his home in Ithaca captures the veteran’s own difficulty in reintegrating into society after returning from war. Therefore, homecoming for Shay (and for Homer) is not just the physical return from war, but an emotional and spiritual return. “To really *be home*,” argues Shay, “means to be emotionally present and engaged” (39). We can certainly read Fenton’s images of ocean separations and broken homes as metaphors for this failure of the soldier to return home emotionally. After all, the poem ends powerfully and dramatically with his ironic homecoming: “and you’ve been home now for a year.” He has returned physically, but he isn’t home yet. Read together, Turner’s “Katyusha Rockets” and Fenton’s “Conversation” dramatize Shay’s complex notion of the soldier’s psychological homecoming. The war has transformed the husband, changing him into a warrior who is much more at home on the battlefield (or in the hospital) than in the domesticated spaces of peacetime. The husband cannot return home, because the man who went to war can never return home. Even those soldiers who survive without developing posttraumatic stress disorder experience trauma that shapes their perception of themselves, others and the spaces around them.

To a large degree, this trauma-induced, epistemological change is what James Campbell means by the term Combat Gnosticism. It is a transformational knowledge that marks the bearer of the terrible knowledge as different from those without it. In *No Man’s Land: Combat and Identity in World War I*, Eric J. Leed describes such knowledge as “something that [is] part of the combatant’s body, like a chemical substance in the veins, a mark, a scar, a set of reflexes, a part of the individual’s very potency” (74). Leed describes the knowledge as a part of the bearer’s body, and we can see that body knowledge evident in Turner’s bullet bodies and Fenton’s equally incessant focus on the soldier-husband’s body. Shay also understands such knowledge to be embodied. He describes this transformation as the continuation into peacetime of survival techniques that are acceptable and necessary in wartime: “Exposed to the continuous threats of warfare, the body remains mobilized for battle indefinitely” (*Achilles* 174). Outside the realm of combat, such survival techniques are socially unacceptable and even destructive (*Odysseus* 64). Furthermore, Shay explains that combat erodes the soldier’s sense of safety and trust (*Achilles* 23), so the soldier remains emotionally withdrawn to protect himself, and in some cases to protect others from himself. Therefore, in a

deep way, the person who returns home is not the same that went to war, mentally, emotionally or physically.

But, the traumatic transformation of the soldier-husband represents less than half of the drama in Fenton's poem. If we stop with him, we continue to privilege the combat survivor's experiences in exactly the way that Campbell warns of: "War affects the civilian in different ways, assuredly, but war is not an exclusively combatant, and thus not an exclusively masculine, experience. Women's lives are affected, even destroyed by war" (207). It is not that we should ignore the soldier's considerable pain and suffering. The problem is that by authorizing that suffering as the story of war, we fail to hear how war transforms the lives of even those who are not "on the pointy end of the spear." In the middle of the second stanza, "Conversation" shifts from the earlier metaphors of a sea voyage and of a broken house to that of marriage:

No one marries during war,
I'm told and yet I'm married to the thought
of you returning home to marry me
to my former self.

Here, Fenton picks up and plays on the word "married" and uses the line break to complicate our notions of marriage. Certainly, the poet asks her husband to come home and "marry me," as if asking for a renewal of wedding vows, or even for this new person that he has become to commit himself to her. But the enjambed line does not allow us to halt there; she asks her husband soldier to "marry me / to my former self." She asks him to play the role of officiant, to form a bond between poet and self. This remarkable line forces us to recognize that the soldier is not the only transformed by the war. The poet is also disparate from herself. The war has distanced her from her pre-war self, the self that she wants to return to. But, if the soldier can marry the poet to herself, that suggests he is somewhat responsible for the divorce in the first place. His transformation has changed her, and she needs him to return, psychologically and emotionally, so that she can find her former self. As the poem suggests, the war's reach is total: "there is no inviolable anything"; it touches every aspect of their lives. He has returned physically, but has been violated; she never left, but has been violated. Meanwhile, just as in Turner's poem set in Lowe's Department Store, the war exists not a past memory but a present force: "The war is everywhere / at once," Fenton's speaker tells us. The war has spread to every aspect of her life; it infects everything, even her poetry and her gardening, which

operates throughout *Clamor* as an expansive symbol of what she attempts to keep alive through his absence at war. So, the soldier-husband's return overshadows life and fecundity with violence and death.

We should, therefore, not lose sight of the wife's journey and struggle. Although *Clamor* is a volume of war poetry and is pervaded by thoughts and fears for the soldier-husband's safety, it is ultimately the tale of the war-bride's suffering: her loneliness and her loss. Throughout the book, Fenton toys with Dante's *Inferno* as a metaphor for her husband's journey through the hell of Iraq. However, the poet raises the metaphor only to reject the role of Beatrice, the beloved ideal woman who inspires Dante and waits for him at the end of his odyssey: "I could never be Beatrice, couldn't harbor such good faith" (28). By so doing, Fenton rejects the traditionally feminine war role and asks us to validate her struggles as worthy of remembrance.

Fenton and Turner are just two of a growing number of war poets who are expanding our understanding of war trauma and its effects on both the soldier in combat and the loved one at home. They tell us of the legacy of trauma, not just its local effects on the soldier in combat, but its power to transform individuals, homes, and communities thousands of miles from the fighting. Too often in the past, Americans have worked quickly to forget war as soon as possible after the cessation of hostilities. These poets, with their metaphors of bomb disposal units, bullet bodies and vast ocean distances within ourselves, remind us that the process of healing is not instantaneous and involves an active process of imagination, particularly to recognize and accept the traumas of others. Such a process is never done; it is an ethical, and life-long, struggle.

Notes

1. I refer to the Iraq War rather than the Global War on Terror because, with the exception of Lisa Siedlarz's poems about her brother's service in Afghanistan (*I Dream My Brother Plays Baseball* and *What We Sign Up For: War Poems*), all poetry that has been published in America so far by or about specific individuals directly involved in the Global War on Terror (military or civilian) has been about the conflict in Iraq.

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