

Cavorting with War

BRIAN TURNER DRAGS THE GOD OF WAR from his high places and lays him in naked truth before the eyes of his readers. His treatment of his fellow soldiers is circumspect and counterpointed with a profound interest and affection for the people against whom they are fighting. And the god hiding in the shadows between them is brought to light. A warrior's respect resides alongside deep anger, not at people but at War, tempered by hindsight, poetic perspective, and acceptance of brute reality. The lens through which Turner's poetry sees the world is one, at once rosy, macabre, despairing, and hopeful.

"What Every Soldier Should Know" paints this picture in two-toned strokes, the colors of what is *expected* bleeding into what *exists* further staining the world of what *ought to be*.

If you hear gunfire on a Thursday afternoon,
It could be for a wedding, or it could be for you.

Alongside the violence of the sounds in the air is this severed meaning, a celebration for new lives joined warring with murderous intent. They exist together, as lovers in embrace, the death around it all and the life within.

Always enter a home with your right foot;
The left is for cemeteries and unclean places.

Respect is paramount. Their homes are being invaded, the invasion undercut only by a willingness to enter in the manner they see as acceptable. The whole of human experience is one, but we insist on compartmentalizing into regions and people groups to keep us from hating each other, killing each other. It doesn't seem to be working. Homes, cemeteries, respect—these are universal commonalities.

O-guf! Tera armeek is rarely useful.

It means *Stop! Or I'll shoot.*

Sabah el kbair is effective.

It means *Good Morning.*

The threat of physical violence, what one often sees as real power, is impotent in the face of basic human kindness. It is not enough to kill a man, to reduce his nation to ash, to install a new regime and provide infrastructure—you must also befriend his son. Without befriending his son, there is no future. This is the task America has taken on, and soldiers ought to know.

Inshallah means *Allah be willing.*

Listen well when it is spoken.

Listen. When's the last time you sat down and listened to a position not your own, a will not your own? How can a soldier exist without listening? Do not merely hear it, but "listen well." Here is a phrase of gravitas, to which meaning is ascribed. Like the gunfire it is both for the joyous and the corrupt.

You will hear the RPG coming for you.

Not so the roadside bomb.

Your sense of hearing, it must be acute to the dangers of the battlefield, young soldier, but that will not be enough. Listen well, discern between the sounds and intonations of man and machinery, and maybe, just maybe BOOM.

There are bombs under overpasses,

In trashpiles, in bricks, in cars.

There are shopping carts with clothes soaked

In foogas, a sticky gel of homemade napalm.

Parachute bombs and artillery shells
Sewn into the carcasses of dead farm animals.

There is no separation between the world at war and the domestic. Americans, and young soldiers, have this sense of a distant battlefield, far from the day-to-day, divorced from this reality, fought on desert dunes devoid of life. No. War is life. Life is War. From the mundane to the murderous, all existence begs at the altar of War. Separation is a lie. War is sewn into the fabric of life, its madness and violence a parasite thriving on carcasses; of animals, of people, of buildings, of civilizations, of dreams and honor and valor.

Graffiti sprayed on the overpasses:
I will kell you, American.

Language is broken in the conflict, yet drawn close in learning just enough English to make a threat, like “*O-gyfl! Tera armeek*” a phrase devoid of the context of one of the most ancient languages alive today. Language too is slain, War sewn at its seams with shattered words that cannot escape their cages, yet somehow reach between the bars and touch their fellow inmates’ fingertips before their recollected hatred slaps the hand away.

Men wearing vests rigged with explosives
Walk up, raise their arms, and say *Inshallah*.

A consummation of the marriage between war and language, the moment punctuated by a vow, blessing, curse, and invocation all. *Allah be willing*. The blast wave chases the sound waves of that word through sundering streets and bodies, down corridors of men and women and children and soldiers and ghosts who hear the sounds as one.

There are men who earn eighty dollars
To attack you, five thousand to kill.

Small children who will play with you,

Old men with their talk, women who offer chai—

and any one of them
may dance over your body tomorrow.

And would we not dance over theirs, were it our yard, our home, our cemeteries they trespassed upon before the explosion? What if we saw them armed and walking our streets every day, their tanks crushing the bones of the dog that used to be tied up in the yard, the sound of engines whirring overhead, the faceless drones a constant horror in the skies? Damn right we'd dance, because they killed my father but never thought to make of me a friend. Every soldier should know what Turner has made me know. I'd dance, and hate myself for it. I'd dance with all my might; love, hate, and desire stitched to the feet of War, to my feet, puppet-strings making me prance as I kick up that red dust that stains everything burnt brown—the color of dried blood.

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