COMMENTARY BY KRISTIN G. KELLY

"This Is a Language Made of Blood": Speaking of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Strip Malls

America's recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been psychically merciless, for where there is no corroborating or widespread public witness, there is, according to Jonathan Shay, author of both *Achilles in Vietnam* and *Odysseus in America*, no "communalization of the trauma" and no healing. In addition, the highly commercialized, Facebooked, cable-channeled, wired-up nature of 21st century American life serves to deepen the trauma of the returning soldier by busily obscuring the sacrifice and sharp grief that characterize all wars.

Sebastian Junger, great friend of the late photojournalist Tim Hetherington, with whom he traveled to Afghanistan to produce the 2010 film *Restrepo*, concluded that he understood the price of war only after Tim died in Misrata in 2011 while covering the Libyan uprising. Junger admitted that the truth of war is actually expressed best by a Texas vet he and Tim met as a result of their work on *Restrepo*. This Vietnam vet had praised their film work for pushing civilians closer to an understanding of the sacrifices of war, but the vet said that neither filmmaker could yet cross the line into the reality of combat.

Then, in a condolence letter expressing sympathy for Junger's loss of Tim to a bleed-out from mortar shrapnel, the Texas vet mentioned that now Junger had credibility: he had successfully crossed the line between almost understanding what war is and suffering from the core reality of war. On camera in the 2013 HBO

documentary tribute to Tim Hetherington's life entitled *Which Way Is the Front Line from Here?* Junger acknowledges the pain of his new understanding following Hetherington's bleed-out on Tripoli Street: "The core reality of war isn't that you might get killed out there—that's obvious—the core truth about war is that you're guaranteed to lose your brothers." Americans often resist this truth, a truth that should not be characterized as "callous," Junger says, because the truth cannot be callous: "it's just the truth."

The truth of being a citizen of contemporary America is that we are all just a little too busy and too numb to sacrifice our days of overwork, instant streaming, status-liking, and following; we fear slowing down to grieve properly the tremendous losses of young men and women who sacrifice body *and* mind. We fear their narratives of nightmares and moral failures, both for what they tell us about the true nature of war and for what they tell us about ourselves, those who may have enjoyed the theater of shock and awe but would prefer now not to look at pools of blood and bone on busy Baghdad streets because we might be able to see our own names in them.

So we, consciously, or not, decide not to listen to war trauma narratives. When soldiers construct trauma narratives, they are accessing the strength of language and structure and taking back some of the power from unspeakable pain. But when they are ready to talk and write today, there is no audience. We have all left the room.

We invite other trauma narratives—fictional or not—into the living room. It's not that we are averse to them. But we have wearied of one narrative arc in particular, the one in which a young man or woman returns to the United States after vicious urban combat in Iraq and/or multiple IED attacks in Afghanistan and doesn't feel particularly well going back to the grind in Boston, New York, New Orleans, Atlanta. Quiet desperation and suicidal ideation can't crack our veneer of pretend plastic patriotism, and major depression doesn't make good t.v. We'll hang the flag, but we just can't hold someone's hand for years. We will let them smoke it out, drink it out, drug it out because we really don't like feeling sad.

So it should not be surprising that a soldier's witness to the trauma of the Iraq War, such as the poetry of Brian Turner, is trauma borne in isolation. Our soldier-poets of Iraq and Afghanistan offer vivid witness to an American culture that yawns through an obligatory *New York Times* update on yesterday's car-bombing in Baghdad and the latest green on blue attack at Kandahar Air Field.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, blood flows as from a cheap garden hose; our soldiers bleed out. The survivors come home and suffer from PTSD, post-traumatic

stress disorder, as they have in all wars in only slightly varying rates. According to an October 2013 search of the National Center for PTSD (maintained by the Department of Veterans Affairs), the disorder occurs

- In about 11-20% of Veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars (Operations Iraqi and Enduring Freedom), or in 11-20 Veterans out of 100.
- In as many as 10% of Gulf War (Desert Storm) Veterans, or in 10 Veterans out of 100.
- In about 30% of Vietnam Veterans, or about 30 out of 100 Vietnam Veterans.

Every once in a while, we collectively sigh at the suicide rate of active duty soldiers and veterans (1 active duty soldier and 22 veterans commit suicide every day, this day). The labor of grief is long; the American attention span is notoriously short.

In addition, contemporary American society encourages our soldiers to heal by enthusiastic consumerism, thoroughly rejoining our community of commercial busyness as a mark of robust health, though the current lack of available jobs for veterans makes the price tags on the shelf even more surreal, and capitalism does not always take into account the prolonged nature of grief.

When veterans do venture out to the shopping center, they may roam the long aisles in nightmare, the packed shelves of colorfully packaged boxes and jars triggering intense flashbacks. In Brian Turner's "At Lowe's Home Improvement Center," part of his 2010 poetry collection entitled *Phantom Noise*, the speaker busts open "a 50-pound box of double-headed nails" (line 2) by accident, and this occurrence in aisle 16 of the ubiquitous big box store is all it takes to bring back the fight in Baghdad. The "steady stream" (line 6) of nails is "constant as shells / falling south of Baghdad last night," (lines 7-8) an indication that the speaker has been pulled from Lowe's back into the blood and fury of Iraq. Then the speaker flatly concedes that "At dawn, when the shelling stops, / hundreds of bandages will not be enough" (12-13).

Thus, the suffering of the veteran occurs, for the most part, in isolation. Few civilians know how it feels to hear

> Sheets of plywood drop with an airy breath
> of mortars the moment they crack open
> in shrapnel. Mower blades are just mower blades
> and the Troy-Bilt Self-Propelled Mower doesn't resemble
> a Blackhawk or an Apache. In fact, no one seems to notice
> the casualty collection center Doc High marks out

in ceiling fans, aisle 15. Wounded Iraqis with IVs
sit propped against boxes as 92 sample Paradiso fans
hover in a slow revolution of blades. (21-29)

There is, of course, a forklift driver at this Lowe's Home Improvement Center as well, someone who drives a powerful machine through the aisles, full of the potential for sudden violence. This forklift driver is also, unfortunately, sloppy. Readers do not know for sure if he is simply careless or otherwise challenged: "The forklift driver over-adjusts, swinging the tines / until they slice open gallons and gallons of paint, / Sienna Dust and Lemon Sorbet and Ship's Harbor Blue / pooling in the aisle where Sgt. Rampley walks through—" (30-33). The forklift driver is doing a lot of damage, and once he starts slicing open the cans and the colorful paint/blood starts pooling out, the shopper/reader recognizes the high cost of all the blood-letting and wonders whether the forklift driver, Bush-Cheney-Rumsfeld, tried hard to correct the machinery once it was dialed in with such murderous accuracy. Who knows exactly the culpability of the forklift driver? Readers know only that in the middle of the slick mess, Sgt. Rampley appears "carrying someone's blown-off arm cradled like an infant / handing it to me, saying, "*Hold this, Turner*, / *we might find who it belongs to*" (34-36).

Also disturbing to the speaker carrying a wayward limb is the ceaseless machine-gun sound of cash registers opening and shutting, the insistent cacophony of commerce. Combat veterans register the deep perversity of ringing up customers at the same stations where

Dead soldiers are laid out at the registers,
on the black conveyor belts,
and people in line still reach
for their wallets. (39-42)

Reaching for the credit and debit card will always be easier than articulating a solution to a war that drags on without a clear mission and takes the lives of nineteen-year-olds along with it.

As American citizens with good intentions but a startling lack of follow through, we leave our soldiers with an unlikely option: pick out a softcover title from the rack at the register and try a do-it-yourself home improvement project for your underemployment, your wrecked relationships, your self-medication, your nightmares. Turner's speaker writes, "Should I stand at the magazine rack,

/ reading *Landscaping with Stone* or *The Complete / Home Improvement Repair Book*?" (42-45). At least *Landscaping with Stone* might yield memorials to those lost to the Global Wars on Terror. Perhaps our veterans might like to undertake the cure for a decade of carnage with a pricey home improvement encyclopedia found at the checkout since soldiers are generally consummate do-it-yourselfers, the handymen and women of our democracy in the Global Wars on Terror. But combat veterans probably cannot help but wonder what difference it makes anyway whether they choose "tumbled travertine tile, Botticino marble, / or Black Absolute granite" (47-48). They wonder because they know that thousands of square feet of home improvement materials are useless to build a home front educated about the cost in blood and spirit of endless wars. The veterans who contemplate the home improvement titles at the register remember the shiny black granite of the Vietnam Veterans memorial in Washington, D.C., the darkly reflective material that bears the names of well over 58, 000 soldiers whose lives were cut short in southeast Asia.

Turner's "Lowe's" speaker then, in the closing stanzas of the poem, cultivates the numbness that most vets know well. After the flashback apocalypse in the aisles, he notices that palm trees line the boulevards in his warm-weather gem of a U.S. city, and restaurants refresh their outdoor patrons with cool spray because--let's face it: no one wants to be reminded of the desert.

One last trial awaits the Lowe's wanderer, our speaker. This combat veteran is drawn to the light, and as a result readers too are drawn into the light where

> Each dead Iraqi walks amazed
> By Tiffany posts and Bavarian pole lights.
> Motion-activated incandescents switch on
> as they pass by, reverent sentinels of light,
> Fleur De Lis and Luminaire Mural Exterieur
> welcoming them to Lowe's Home Improvement Center,
> aisle number 7, where I stand in mute shock,
> someone's arm cradled in my own. (53-60)

In the end, the ghosts of dead Iraqis walk *in the light* even if the light is sporadic, activated only by motion. Thus, Brian Turner reminds readers (as he did in "Illumination Rounds") that we must know these people we bury in the earth.

The American people remain reliable purveyors of light even if it comes in overcomplicated forms such as "Tiffany posts and Bavarian pole lights" (54). Americans have consciences, they are fairly "reverent sentinels," (54) and they may

suddenly remember (although collective forgetting followed Vietnam) that the life-saving medicine they must offer comes in the form of listening to the trauma narratives of war and then mopping up the fiasco of bloodletting in retro colonial blue.

Politicians planning for the micro-short-term hope that the emergency tourniquet of vague Veterans Administration programs will staunch the blood flow throughout the next generation's transition to the home front, but any good surgeon knows that a tourniquet is a short-term fix. America still fears the hard work necessary to save our soldiers. Ignoring the crisis of young men and women facing sleeplessness, agitation, nightmares, and depression allows a whole generation of warriors to rot.

Brian Turner, in his interview with the editors of *Blood Orange Review* in 2009, outlines the responsibilities Americans have to returning veterans:

> *For the health of our large and complicated tribe, America, we must not bury the living among us. Ignoring the walking wounded who return from war, marked and altered by what we cannot see (as well as those whose physical wounds are evident)—this is not the answer. Ignoring them only helps the next generation gain an inheritance they would be healthier without. How do I say this? We, as a nation, are like a small pond. If the water is troubled for one, it is troubled for all—whether we are aware of it, or not. And if we are not aware of this dynamic, what does that say about us as well, as a nation, as a people? How great are a people who can wage a war and care little, if any, for those they wage it against? How great are a people who can wage a war and care little, if any, for those who wage it for us?*

No civilian can step over the line between home front innocence and combat experience. The closest civilians can get is to stand at the line, wait, and listen for when and if we are needed. While we are waiting, we can read the poetry of Brian Turner, Gerardo Mena, and the prose and poetry of Kevin Powers. We can pick up David Finkel's *Thank You for Your Service*, and we can reread Edward Tick's *War and the Soul*. We can raise consciousness, raise the bar on our research, raise our hands to volunteer, and unapologetically raise our voices. We can vote. We can stop expecting soldiers to heal from deep trauma on our schedule. We can bring the issue of combat trauma into the light and commit our hearts and resources to veterans and their families for the next long decades.

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