

*Here, Bullet.* By Brian Turner. Alice James Books, 2005.  
71 pp., \$14.95 paperback.

At a time when many poets are gestated by the Internet and processed and packaged in MFA programs (if they get that far), most would kill for the terrible authenticity of Brian Turner's *Here, Bullet*. I mention this because the book itself throws it in your face: the cover is a Photoshopped image of an armed soldier standing in a brown desert. The back informs you that after taking his MFA from the University of Oregon, Turner served seven years in the army, particularly in Iraq with the 3rd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division, and before that in Bosnia...you get the idea. Rising like a prophet from the desert is a man *who's been there and really knows*, as opposed to the CNN war poets. We want him to judge our support or opposition. It's really unfair to a poet or any soldier. So the honest question, after the hype and the hopes (and Turner's reading of his poems on *The News Hour* with Jim Lehrer) is "Is he any good?"

The bottom line is he's so-so. He's over fond of words like "blood" (present in the majority of poems), "sand," and "eucalyptus," which might be expected in a book of poems about a desert war, but Turner can find nothing to do with them but the obvious. He also grasps for the transcendent with poeticisms like "the veil of the unknown." Turner's worst poems read like embedded reporting with line breaks (which are almost always after a comma or grammatical unit): patrols, car bombs, dead bodies, cute Iraqi kids who could be dancing over your grave tomorrow, wounded soldiers. In the titular poem the speaker invites a bullet to enter him because, "here is where the world ends, every time." One hopes the majority of our soldiers do not so sensually yearn for death: "If a body is what you want,/ then here is bone and gristle and flesh."

On the other hand, Turner's poems have their moments of genuine surprise and insight, something you cannot get from Anderson Cooper. In "Eulogy", written to twenty-four year old "PFC B. Miller," we are made to expect another car bombing but instead watch as "Private Miller pulls the trigger/to take brass and fire into his mouth:" and joins the "low hush there is down in the eucalyptus shade." "Where the Telemetries End" is an unexpected and tender love poem. "Autopsy" sees a surgeon lift out a dead man's heart and imagine the man's love and his failings. In "Dreams from the Malaria Pills (Barefoot)" the medieval Arabic historian Ibn Khaldun tells a dying Iraqi of the pieces of shrapnel in his body that

*These are to be made into daggers,  
precious gifts, the souvenirs of death.*

*You carry the pearls of war within you, bombs  
Swallowed whole and saved for later.  
Give them to your children. Give them to your love.*

Bombs, Turner says, wound generations and give birth to bombs. In "R&R" the speaker dreams (a too-frequent ploy of Turner's for inserting imagery into the daily record of

blood) of birds “that carry/ all my bullets into the barrel of the sun.” In perhaps the best poem in the book, “Tigris River Blues,” Turner recounts in stark, note-perfect imagery a hellish nighttime patrol. What does Turner think of the Iraq War? It is, as we already knew, a sad hell.

On the whole, the book is of considerable journalistic interest. If you want to know what it’s like to be a soldier in Iraq, *Here, Bullet* is a pleasant way to learn about an unpleasant subject. Several of the poems are of interest as poems. The authenticity of Turner’s voice is unquestionable. But generally his poems suffer from a lack of poetics and a surplus of recording, however well-observed. Too many of the poems are forgettable. A soldier’s true story just isn’t enough. Turner has undeniable talent, and I look forward to the verses he writes now that his part in this seemingly endless war is over.

Grade: C+