

Poetry as Resistance and Recovery:  
An Examination of Violence, Trauma, and Exile in the Poetry of Iraqis and American veterans of  
the Iraq War  
by  
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*For my husband, family,  
and for those whose lives have been forever altered by war*

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## Abstract

Since the Iraq War of 2003, there has been a growing body of literature that narrates the wartime experience. Both Iraqi civilians and exiles and American veterans of the Iraq War have written these poems and stories that deal primarily with the wartime experience and its aftermath. There has been little critical work, however, that seeks to analyze the poetry or literature of these two groups in conjunction. In this thesis, I will analyze the poetry of both Iraqis and American veterans of the Iraq War in order to highlight the ways in which their poems focus on the negative consequences of war. I demonstrate that an understanding of the works that emerge from these two groups is enriched and complicated by examining the poems of these two groups in conjunction. In the poetry of these two groups, there are three important intersections that add to our understanding of the wartime experience: violence, trauma and exile.

In the first chapter I examine the ways in which the poetry of American Veterans and Iraqis depict violence as form of destruction and dehumanization in order to implicitly protest it. I examine how violence is an underlying theme that characterizes the interactions that are depicted in the poetry of Iraqis and American veterans. The negative consequences of war are demonstrated in the representations of the physical and emotional destruction wrought through the use of violence in war. I also explore the idea that the use of violence dehumanizes both the perpetrator and the victim. The victim's humanity is negated if they are killed, while the humanity of the perpetrator of violence is also negated, as they become subjects of the very force they thought they could control.

In the second chapter I focus on how trauma—the consequence of violence—is an injury that is worked through or mediated by the writing of poetry. Traumatic experiences, however, resists representation, so the poems of both American Veterans and Iraqis self-consciously explore this central paradox of trauma in their writing. Drawing on the work of Gabrielle Schwab and Judith Herman, I discuss the dialectic of trauma, which is that traumatic experiences require representation for reconciliation but inherently resist it. In this chapter, I demonstrate how the poetry of Iraqis and American veterans displays these traumatic symptoms through fragmented or “haunted” language that hints at the terrible and traumatic experiences but does not represent them fully. The poems explore how trauma fractures identity and the present the difficulties in attempting to recover and form an identity in the face of the pervasive and harmful effects of trauma.

In the third chapter on exile, I redefine exile as a psychic phenomenon that facilitates the meaning making process. I discuss exile as a psychological state because it involves willful remembering of traumatic experiences and a determined grasp on an identity that one wants to maintain. In this new era, both veterans and Iraqi exiles may integrate and assimilate and move past their traumatic experiences. Individuals in both groups, however, resist assimilating and forgetting and instead focus on these traumatic experiences in their writing in order to make meaning out of them.

My thesis explores the ways in which the writing of poetry resists the negative psychological impact of violence, serves as a vehicle for healing trauma and as a way to bear witness and give testimony to the destruction and negative consequences of the most recent Iraq War.

## CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1: VIOLENCE	16
CHAPTER 2: TRAUMA	38
CHAPTER 3: EXILE	59
CONCLUSION	73
WORKS CONSULTED	76

## INTRODUCTION

I was thirteen years old when the Iraq War began. I remember clearly the excitement and hope that my parents expressed as Saddam Hussein's government fell. Our family felt as if a weight had been lifted from our shoulders—the tyrant that had altered the course of our lives irrevocably had been removed. My family left Iraq as refugees in 1991 during the Gulf War after the Intifada—the failed uprisings in the south of Iraq. They fled from a ruthless dictator because they feared for their lives; they left their families, their community and their country because they could no longer live under an authoritarian government that stripped them of their basic human rights and dignities and because they wanted me to grow up in a country where I would not have to suffer the same. When Saddam Hussein was finally overthrown, everyone expected relief. What happened in the aftermath of Hussein's downfall, however, was complete disappointment as chaos and combat ravaged a country that had been made weak by decades of oppression.

The war is over now, at least politically in the sense that there is no formal combat between the United States and Iraq. The consequences of the war, however, linger and torment the lives of those who have been exposed to its negative consequences. The violence wrought has lasting effects on the population in Iraq where people are psychologically and physically damaged by the years of endless warfare. In an interview with Democracy Now, Al Jazeera reporter Dahr Jamail noted that cancer rates had increased from 40 documented cases per 100,000 people in 1991 to an incredible 1,600 cases per 100,000 people in 2005 (Goodman). Jamail also noted that the extensive use of depleted uranium by the United States in the city of Fallujah has resulted in a



noticeable increase in birth defects (Goodman). The negative cost of the war for the United States is also great—in terms of monetary spending and death toll. According to NPR, 4,400 troops have been killed and the combined costs of war are estimated to be two trillion dollars when accounting for future money spent on veteran care (“The Iraq War: 10 Years Later, Where Do We Stand?”).

These are only some of the most salient physical and political consequences of warfare. In a recent article, CNN reporter Arwa Damon explored the psychological impact of the war on Iraqis still living in the country was. Damon interviewed several Iraqis who described the pain they continue to endure in the aftermath of the tremendous loss and destruction of their families and communities. Damon describes the plight of mothers who have lost their children, wives who have lost their husbands, and children who have lost their parents. More than anything, she documents the psychological impact of losing stability and safety in one’s own country. “It’s as if the violence created a façade,” Damon noted, “People were so focused on staying alive they didn’t fully notice the corruption, suspicion and tribalism that had seeped into society and government. Now that attacks are down—and fewer Iraqis are killed every day—all that and more has risen to the surface.” Damon’s article portrays the enduring and pervasive impact of war on the lives of the Iraqis who have to live with its effects. The negative costs of the war for the U.S. have largely focused on how little has been accomplished in terms of stabilizing Iraq. Many stories have neglected to discuss the plight of U.S. veterans who are also haunted by combat and whose experiences in Iraq have consumed them with feelings of guilt. In the NPR story, the negative cost of war for veterans who have perpetrated violence against innocent civilians is discussed as a lasting legacy of the war (“The Iraq

War: 10 Years Later, Where Do We Stand?"). According to the story, the National Council on Disabilities says that around 40% of American veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars suffer from feelings of guilt—what NPR refers to as “invisible wounds” (“The Iraq War: 10 Years Later, Where Do We Stand?"). Additionally, in a recent article for USA Today, Gregg Zoroya reported that the rate of veteran suicides was at 22 per day, and that the risk for suicide was greatest in the first four weeks after leaving the military. Senator Bernie Sanders commented on the rate saying that "What we're seeing is an extraordinary tragedy which speaks to the horror of war and the need for us to do a much better job of assisting our soldiers and their families after they return home," (qtd. in Zoroya). The recent attention paid to this statistic demonstrates an increasing awareness of the enduring struggle to recover from psychological trauma experienced by American veterans of the Iraq War.

Paying attention and bearing witness to the testimony of those who have lived through war is a necessary component of reconciliation and of healing for both Iraqis and American veterans of the Iraq War. In the aftermath of the 2003 War in Iraq, American veterans and Iraqi exiles and civilians have produced a large body of literature that represents the experience and consequences of war. Despite the fact that individuals in both of these groups have experienced war and know firsthand what it entails, their voices have not been highlighted. Furthermore, there have been no scholarly works that examine the literature of the two groups in conjunction.

Historically, there have been few attempts by scholars to examine the literature of exiles and civilians who have suffered the consequences of wars waged by the United States. One work that aimed to do so was Renny Christopher's *The Viet Nam War / The*

*American War: Images and Representations in Euro-American and Vietnamese Exile Narratives*. In her book, Christopher provides many reasons why she believes this discourse was not happening and one of the reasons clarifies why a dialogue of this type has not been initiated. Christopher claims that opposition was created between the Vietnamese as a group and Americans as a group, which resulted in the exclusion of Vietnamese narratives from the discourse on the war. Christopher's central claim is that the representations of the individual experience of American soldiers in Viet Nam (to the exclusion of the experiences of Vietnamese American Exiles) reinforces ethnocentrism and "collapses all distinctions" between Vietnamese individuals, "leaving only one distinction: 'The World' of the West, being desirable, homey and 'good,' versus 'Vietnam,' an entity composed of country and war together where only evil resides" (5).

Although the Viet Nam war and the most recent Iraq War differ significantly, a parallel exists between the two wars in terms of how the discourse on the Iraq War has evolved such that it privileges the American soldier's experience of war and does not include the voices of Iraqis. In this thesis, however, I am not looking to make claims of a comparative nature between the two wars. Although this kind of topic would be interesting to consider, it is outside the scope of this thesis to postulate how the victims of two different wars are similar and what can be learned from that similarity.

There have been a few works of scholarly criticism that seek to analyze the poetry of American veterans from the most recent war (Broek; Bauerlein; Peebles), and even fewer articles written in English that seek to analyze the poetry of Iraqis (Cooke). In *Welcome to the Suck: Narrating the American Soldier's Experience in Iraq*, Stacey Peebles identifies the importance of the soldier's account and notes that these stories have

the power to change our national narrative because they carry an authenticity deriving from the fact that they “give us a grunt’s-eye view of the events and consequences of the conflict at hand, often in opposition to the reports from military leaders, politicians, and the media” (4). Although Peebles’s book discusses the importance of Iraqi civilians narratives in the introduction and points to correlations between the two groups, it does not provide a lengthy analysis or seek to give equal weight of analysis to Iraqi narratives in conjunction with the veterans’ stories. My thesis explores how the poetic works of Iraqi exiles and civilians as well as American veterans of the Iraq war intersect, and what these intersections teach us about the consequences and effects of war on those who have felt its impact directly.

First, it is important to provide some history and context for my choice of examining the literature of the most recent Iraq war. The most recent Iraq war involved a great number of Americans flying to Iraq to conduct war and a greater number of casualties. According to NPR, the first Iraq War, which involved technology and air strikes, had a relatively low casualty rate, and a total casualty rate—for the entire coalition—that numbered well under 1,000 (Greenblatt). The second Iraq War, which lasted much longer and involved occupation of the country, had a higher casualty rate (“The Iraq War: 10 Years Later, Where Do We Stand?”). There is also a more extensive emphasis on writing as a way to combat trauma in the aftermath of the second Iraq War. In the United States, veteran’s writing workshops have increased in popularity—the National Endowment for the Arts sponsored *Project Homecoming*, *Warrior Writers*, and the *Combat Paper Project* are all examples of this. All of these projects have sought to use writing or the production of art as a tool to combat trauma, to bear witness, and to lay

testimony to what veterans have experienced. In the wake of these projects, writing has become important as a national tool of healing in the United States.

The poems that I have chosen to analyze by Iraqis were not exclusively written during, after, or about the second Iraq war. I have not chosen to include poems by Iraqis that deal *exclusively* with the Iraq war of 2003 because although the war with Iraq appears to be a very recent occurrence, Iraqis view the war with the United States as a phenomenon that has been occurring for much longer (Simawe, “Introduction to the War Works Hard” ix). Many Iraqis blame Saddam Hussein’s rise to power on interference by the United States (“US and British Support for Hussein Regime”; Simawe, “Introduction to the War Works Hard” ix). In fact, the authoritarian government that he was able to sustain would not have been possible without support from the U.S. government (“US and British Support for Hussein Regime”). Saddam Hussein’s government saw several wars including the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), the Gulf War (1991), and the War of 2003. In the Iraqi mindset, war, with the US or otherwise, has been a continuous and haunting phenomenon. Additionally, Saddam Hussein’s government during this time was becoming increasingly harsh with political dissidents, and poets in particular had such an important role in Iraqi society that they were often commissioned to write nationalist poetry during the Iran-Iraq war (*Flowers of Flame*). Many poets who refused began to flee the country for fear of execution or retaliation.

The experiences of American veterans of the Iraq War and Iraqis (both exiles and civilians) intersect in important ways, which can be seen in their literary works. Individuals who claim each identity write poetry and, most importantly, both groups have experienced war in some way—they are either combatants or caught in the midst of

combat. Despite the fact that there has been minimal critical or real dialogue that has been conducted between the two groups, there are intersections in the experiences of Iraqis and American veterans of the Iraq War that necessitate my study of the poetry of both groups. In both groups, art exists that discusses and represents war and its impact on society and the individual. Furthermore, both groups are producing bodies of poetry that are concerned with the implications of the Iraq War on both an individual and national level.

Investigating the poetry of Iraqi exiles and civilians and American veterans of the Iraq War, I highlight how these two groups represent the experience of war and identify the ways in which their representations are similar and different. Specifically, I examine three themes that emerge from their poetry: violence, trauma, and exile. These three themes are intimately connected as I posit that violence often results in psychological trauma, and that exile, a phenomenon of difference that can occur simultaneously with trauma, can be used to make meaning out of one's experiences. I examine the intersection of these themes in the poetry of American veterans, including Bruce Lack, who allowed me to analyze some of his unpublished poems, Brian Turner, author of *Phantom Noise* and *Here, Bullet*, and Nathan Lewis, whose work has been published by both the Combat Paper Project and Warrior Writers. I also examine these themes as they appear in poems of Iraqi poets included in the anthologies *Iraqi Poetry Today* and *Flowers of Flame*, and in the books of poetry by Sinan Antoon and Dunya Mikhail.

By examining the theme of violence in the poetry of Iraqi exiles and American veterans, I explore how the two groups represent the ideological, physical, and emotional aspects of how violence was perpetrated during the Iraq War. In the first chapter of my

thesis, I examine how violence is an underlying theme that characterizes the interactions that are represented in the works of Iraqis and American veterans. By examining the works of Iraqis and American veterans in conjunction, I argue that the representations of violence subtly protest war by depicting its negative consequences. These negative consequences are demonstrated in the depictions of the physical and emotional destruction wrought through the use of violence in war. I also explore the idea that the use of violence dehumanizes both the perpetrator and the victim. The victim's humanity is negated if they are killed, while the humanity of the perpetrator of violence is also negated as they become subjects of the very force they thought they could control.

Whereas the chapter on violence focuses on how strength is wielded to cause injury and destruction, the chapter on trauma focuses on the psychological injury itself. As a result of their exposure to war and combat, both American veterans of the Iraq War and Iraqis represent traumatic moments and experiences. Drawing on the work of Gabriele Schwab and Judith Herman, I discuss the dialectic of trauma, which is that traumatic experiences require representation for reconciliation but inherently resist it. In this chapter, I demonstrate how the poetry of Iraqis and American veterans displays these traumatic symptoms through fragmented or "haunted" language that hints at the terrible and traumatic experiences but does not represent them fully. The interesting aspect of these poems, however, is that they are very aware of the traumatic condition experienced and the dialectic of trauma. The poems do not silence these traumatic experiences; they serve as a means of working through the traumatic memories so they may be reconciled.

The final intersection I explore in the poems of the Iraqis and American veterans is the theme of exile. I redefine exile as a psychological state of being separated from

how one previously defined one's identity. My definition of exile arises from a resonance in the descriptions of exile that arises in the works of both Iraqi exiles and American veterans. In the poetry of American veterans, there is the notion that they have experienced so much during combat and during their time in Iraq that they return to the United States with experiences that make it difficult to assimilate seamlessly back into their lives. Iraqis experience exile too, whether they are at home or abroad in the sense that they have been separated from an identity to which they can no longer return. For Iraqis that have not left the country, the destruction caused by the war has psychologically disabled them and had a permanent impact on their identity and memories. Iraqi exiles are also unable to return not only because they would fear for their safety in light of the instability and ineffectiveness of the current government and the sectarian violence, but also because their experience as exiles and immigrants has altered their viewpoints and their identities such that they feel they are unable to return. I discuss exile as a psychological state because it involves willful remembering of traumatic experiences and a determined grasp on an identity that one wants to maintain. In this new era, both veterans and Iraqi exiles may integrate and assimilate and move past their traumatic experiences. Individuals in both groups, however, resist assimilating and forgetting, and instead focus on these traumatic experiences in their writing in order to make meaning out of them.

I conducted my analysis of the poetry of Iraqi exiles and American exiles because I hoped to initiate a dialogue between these two groups and uncover what these individuals are saying about war and about their relationships to those who have been cast as their "enemy." I explored these questions by examining the works of Iraqi exiles



and American veterans in conjunction and then by enacting a dialogue. After completing an initial draft of my thesis, I emailed my work to both the Iraqi and American veteran poets and asked for them to respond in an interview either by phone or in person. I met in person with internationally renowned Iraqi poet Dunya Mikhail and award-winning poet and American veteran of the Iraq War Bruce Lack to discuss their work. I spoke over the phone with Iraqi exile poet and editor of the anthology of Iraqi poetry *Flowers of Flame*, Haider Al-Kabi, as well as American veteran and poet Nathan Lewis. The interviews were integral to initiating dialogue as they provided an outlet for poets to respond to critics and for American veterans to respond and read the work of Iraqi exiles and vice versa. The response from the veterans and the Iraqis was enthusiastic and in my conversations with these poets, I learned a great deal about their backgrounds, how they approached the writing of poetry as well as their thoughts on war and the consequences that it has on individuals. I used the interviews with these poets to inform my analyses and began to extensively edit my arguments based on what I had learned. I incorporated their viewpoints and their observations to provide additional voices of insight on how the war is represented and discussed.

My analysis of the works of American veterans and Iraqis focuses on their poetry for a number of reasons. Although it is possible to do this analysis with other narrative and artistic forms, poetry stands out to me as the form most useful for my analysis due to its historic role in both societies, its aesthetic and literary form, as well as its potential to be an unconventional tool for overcoming trauma. In both the United States and Iraq, poetry has a role in bringing about social change and has served as a means of resisting stereotypes and injustices.

Iraqis view poetry as a potent vehicle of resistance and, historically, poets have occupied the space of dissidents. Editor Dan Veach writes in the introduction to the anthology of Iraqi poetry *Flowers of Flame*, “Poetry is not a luxury in Iraq, but a vital part of the struggle for the nation’s future. This is poetry feared by tyrants and would-be tyrants” (vii). For Iraqis, poetry is not written with just the intention of healing or creating a cathartic experience; it is written to be a tool with an immediate and urgent social role. Thus, though Iraqi poetry can be analyzed and appreciated for its aesthetic merit, it has a cultural function that is long established in Iraq. In an introduction to a section on Iraqi poetry in the tenth issue of *Poetry International*, Saadi Simawe, who compiled the section and has also served as an editor for the important anthology *Iraqi Poetry Today*, writes that “Iraqis are proud of their suffering and their struggle to overcome it through their poetry; to them poetry is their dialectical triumph over suffering ... Iraqi people conceitedly claim that Iraq has more than two major rivers ... there is a third river, that is, poetry” (Simawe 102).

The United States, too, has a history of protest poetry. The Viet Nam War era is an example of a time when poetry was used as a tool to protest war. Most recently, Sam Hamill’s *Poets Against the War*, an anthology of poetry protesting the Iraq War, garnered attention and praise from several critics. In the introduction to this anthology, Hamill writes that by bringing together over 11,000 poets, “we have brought poetry into the American consciousness as never before, reminding our citizenry that poetry (and all the arts) indeed address social and historical subjects” (xviii). Hamill’s efforts to clarify the relevance of this anthology to our present day circumstances is striking in that his

ambitious claim that the anthology is one of a kind serves as a reminder of how this anthology emerges out of a long tradition of citizen poets protesting war efforts.

In *Behind the Lines: War Resistance Poetry on the American Homefront*, Philip Metres writes about how poetry has been used to protest war and argues that the era of the Vietnam War was important in helping guide the tradition of war resistance poetry. Noting the emergence of several anthologies of protest poetry, Metres asserts that the anthologies did more than simply arrange a multiplicity of voices in close proximity, “these anthologies announce the poetics of war resistance, confronting the limits of lyric poetry in representing a distant war, employing identificatory rhetoric and documentary evidence, mediating between poetic disinterestedness and partisan ideology, and addressing both the nation and the peace movement” (5). In this quote, Metres explores the political and literary significance of protest poetry anthologies in attempting to redefine how we think about war and the use of literature in society. Metres also notes that soldier-poets such as Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sasson, Randall Jarrell, Louis Simpson, Bruce Weigl, and Yusef Komunyakaa have been writing poetry against war for the past fifty years, and he asserts that their words have been so influential that debate has emerged surrounding the question: “do *only* soldiers have the right, or the ability, to speak about war?” (4). Metres devotes his book to arguing that although soldiers’ voices are critical in the discourse on war resistance, the voices of civilian poets who also experience the war and who have a “unique role ... in shaping and representing war resistance and the contemporary American peace movement” are equally important to analyze (5). I agree with Metres’s contention. However, the civilian poetry I will be

examining in conjunction with soldiers' poems is that of Iraqi civilians, whose poetic protests of the war have differing stakes.

In addition to the historic role that poetry has played in depicting and protesting war in both Iraq and the United States, poetry is conducive to an analysis that seeks to encourage dialogue because its form—the poetic strategies that make it aesthetically meritorious (its metaphors, veiled and layered meanings, allusions and allegories)—allow for a depiction that is as complex and rich as the experience it intends to illustrate. Jay Parini, in his book *Why Poetry Matters*, argues that poetry “assists readers subjected to violent realities by opening their minds to fresh ways of thinking” (20). According to Parini, poetry provides a way to manage external violence and havoc by serving as a source of internal “force of expression” pushing back against the harsh realities that individuals must contend with (21). Parini argues that poetry does so by employing strategies that make words—which have “slipped through time”—new again in a process of “writing over” that occurs in the context of a poem (80). Poems emerge in the context of other poems. Because poems emerge into a tradition that has a long historical legacy, they are always in conversation with other poems. Parini asserts that poems are part of a tradition of poets speaking to each other across time (90). Like scholarly practice, poems are constantly alluding to previous poems as if continuing a conversation, as opposed to being a whole contained conversation.

Additionally, creative writing has become an unconventional tool for veterans and their families to express themselves and deal with the trauma of combat. In the NEA sponsored initiative *Project Homecoming*, veterans and their relatives are invited to

participate in creative writing workshops as a means of coping with their experiences. As

Dana Gioia notes in the preface to the *Project Homecoming* book:

... the program met genuine human needs by providing people facing enormous challenges with the opportunity for reflection and clarity that the reading and writing of literature afford. Second, the program had historic importance, creating personal accounts of the war ... by individuals who would not normally be heard ... Finally, the workshops themselves had a social and cultural importance by bringing together writers and military personnel—two groups who do not customarily mix in contemporary America. (xii-xiii)

Although the focus of much of the writing has been on narratives, there have also been poems, songs, and raps written for this initiative. Project Homecoming's interesting goal of allowing writing to serve as a tool to make meaning of the experience of combat also serves to complicate and diversify our understanding of the wartime experience.

In his translated volume of poetry *The Baghdad Blues*, Sinan Antoon begins his book of poetry with a poem called "A Prism; Wet With Wars." Antoon uses the striking metaphor of a prism to begin a poem that depicts how "tyrants" have created an atmosphere where it is not possible to resist and where people are forced to be obedient. "This is the chapter of devastation," Antoon writes, "this is our oasis/ an angle where wars intersect" (3). Antoon's poem appears to depict Iraq before the fall of Saddam Hussein, how "tyrants" attempted to silence the people and only made enough room for the sounds of agreement—"applause" (3). The tyrants carried the country through years of warfare where unspeakable violence tainted the lives of everyone—the speaker observes in the poem that "people are being slaughtered" (3). The metaphor of a prism, however, highlights how the frequency of the country's involvement in warfare made it difficult to distinguish one war from another—that is why the prism is "wet with wars" and reflects an angle where these wars "intersect" (3). In my reading of Antoon's poem,

however, the “angle where wars intersect” also references how the paths of Americans and Iraqis have crossed in war and how warfare is the intersection or the point of similarity that gives us entry into the stories of those affected by it. Through this intersection we are able to see how violence, trauma and exile are represented in the works of American veterans and Iraqi civilians and we learn something about the consequences of war.

In Antoon’s poem there is a dictator that actively encourages blind obedience and the silencing of voices of dissidence. What is frightening about war is that even when its threatening posture in the form of violence has ended, it lives on in the solitude and trauma of those who have experienced it. Individuals who have been traumatized by war and violence feel as if they are powerless to express themselves and recover. Writing, through its ability to leave an enduring declaration of an individual’s experience, serves as a powerful form of resisting war’s silencing and capabilities. The poetry of Iraqis and American veterans of the Iraq War bears witness and gives testimony to the suffering caused by war and thus serve as a form of healing and reconciling psychological trauma. These conversations, dialogues, poems and narratives create a body of work that empowers its producers. It is a body of work that cannot be pushed under the rug or forgotten—it actively resists the silencing capability of war by speaking to its negative costs.

## CHAPTER ONE : VIOLENCE

Violence—what I will here define as power or strength wielded to cause injury (either physical or psychological) to the object that it is exerted upon—is often the most salient part of war. Images, descriptions, and depictions of gruesome violence in the form of bombings, mass graves, shootings, and combat come to exemplify war, serving oftentimes as a sign of the war itself. Violence and war are inextricably linked. As Elaine Scarry notes in her highly influential book on pain and its political ramifications, *The Body in Pain*, “injuring is, in fact, the central activity of war” (80). Scarry means that the purpose of war is to injure the enemy to the extent that they believe they must concede because they are either unable to withstand more injury or because they have lost all they can afford to lose. If war’s primary activity is to injure, and violence is perpetrated to cause injury, then there exists an intimate relationship between these two concepts—both seek to elicit pain and both are concerned with loss and destruction.

The link between violence and war is explored and analyzed further in Simone Weil’s essay “The Iliad or the Poem of Force.” Written in the summer of 1940, after the fall of France during WWII, the essay seeks to identify and analyze force—which serves as a synonym for violence— as it exists in Homer’s epic poem. Though she grounds her work in the analysis of an ancient text, Weil is clear about her intention to make claims about the consequences of war in general and to depict the suffering and destruction experienced by humans after they have been subjected to violence. What is most relevant from Weil’s argument in “The Iliad or the Poem of Force” is her idea that violence or force becomes external to humans and becomes a thing that all—whether they are the aggressor or the victim—become subjected to. Weil argues that force is the “true hero” of

*The Iliad*, and she defines violence as “Force employed by man, force that enslaves man, force before which man’s flesh shrinks away” (6). In these lines, Weil demonstrates a slow progression whereby violence’s definition moves from simply being a tool used by and upon humans, to an actor—in the final pronouncement, violence becomes something that man fears; it comes to exist outside man and becomes a thing so terrible it inspires fear in both perpetrators and victims. Weil argues that in *The Iliad*, “violence obliterates anybody who feels its touch. It comes to seem just as external to its employer as to its victim. And from this springs the idea of a destiny before which executioner and victim stand equally innocent, before which conquered and conqueror are brothers in the same distress” (17). For Weil, violence becomes an actor and takes on a life of its own when used by an individual and becomes the means through which both the exactor and the exacted upon are dehumanized. Because violence acts like an external force that subjugates all who come into contact with it, both its perpetrators and its victims are thus absolved of guilt and can be considered its victims. Weil writes that violence “obliterates” all who come across it, and it is this notion that violence destroys an individual—whether physically or psychically—that is important for an exploration of the poetry of both Iraqis and American veterans of the Iraq War.

Scarry’s idea that violence and war are connected and Weil’s idea that there is a blurring between victims and aggressors when violence is used serve as helpful frameworks for understanding the representations of violence in the poems of American veterans and Iraqi exiles and civilians. My discussion focuses on how violence is manifested in the poems and how the poets’ portrayals of violence implicitly protest the war. Using Weil’s ideas concerning violence as a determining and pivotal aspect of the



*The Iliad*, and Elaine Scarry's ideas about the political ramifications of pain and injury, I argue that the poems protest war by centering on destruction and by showing how violence can be psychologically and physically damaging. Furthermore, some of the poems explore the notion of violence as chaining and suggest that the use of violence can consume an individual to the point where they lose their own humanity and become a slave to the very thing they aimed to utilize. This idea that the use of violence blurs the categories of victim/aggressor to render all who are affected by war into victims serves as another means of protesting war.

In this chapter, I examine four poems that depict the violence of war: "Bombardment" by Haider Al-Kabi, "Tomorrow the War Will Have a Picnic" by Abdul Razak Al-Rubaiee, "The Hurt Locker" by Brian Turner, and "Escalation of Force" by Bruce Lack. These poems all depict violence of some sort, although it is manifested differently in each. The poems by the Iraqi poets focus on violence perpetrated against a mass and seek to protest the destruction that war inflicts. In the poem "Bombardment," a city is personified as a mother who is being attacked, and in "Tomorrow the War Will Have a Picnic," war itself is personified and the speaker details at length what individuals must give up to perpetuate war. The poems by American veterans of the war focus on violence from a slightly different perspective. "The Hurt Locker" by Brian Turner explores the pain that is experienced in a war zone and also blurs victim/aggressor dichotomies to explore the idea that, in a war zone, all are equally guilty and innocent in the perpetration of unimaginable violence. The poem "Escalation of Force" by Bruce Lack explores the idea of violence becoming a controlling and engrossing experience and

is about the lure of power and how the use of force in combat is both tempting and terrible in that it confronts us with our own violent capabilities.

Despite the differences in the depictions of violence, all of these poems describe the mayhem and chaos of war in a hopeless and almost defeated way. Nothing about war is glorified or made to seem heroic or worthwhile. The speakers consciously describe the cost that wartime violence has had on their lives and their countries. Ultimately, the poets use their depictions of violence and force to protest war subtly. Although there are no outright denunciations, all of the terror and destruction depicted in these poems is heightened such that it seems that, for these speakers, war is never justified.

The negative cost of war is made apparent in a poem by Haider Al-Kabi that looks at the devastation of a city during a bombing. According to Weil, “the whole of *The Iliad* lies under the shadow of the greatest calamity the human race can experience—the destruction of a city” (26). The destruction of a city is more than simply the demolishing of physical structures; it is the destruction of people and the cultures they have created within the city. Destroying a city has to do with the destruction of humanity and takes on greater significance because of its permanence. In the poem “Bombardment” by Haider Al-Kabi, translated by Sadek Mohammed, in the *Flowers of Flame* anthology, the speaker personifies a city that is being bombed and depicts the emotional and physical destruction of this bombing in order to implicitly protest it. The speaker voices collective concerns by depicting the injury done to a city and by invoking images of an innocent mother caught in the turmoil and mayhem of war. The poem begins with the image of the city sitting “quietly/ The sky, above her, is/ A hammer” (7). In this moment, the violence perpetrated against the city paralyzes her into a motionless quiet where she is unable to

do anything but observe the sky above her that looks so dangerous and damaging. The image of a “hammer” here signifies that the bombing is absolutely destructive and will leave nothing intact. After it has been pounded into the city, everything will be flattened out and destroyed.

The speaker of this poem personifies the city as a mother in order to heighten the emotional experience and in order to protest the violence of the bombardment. By describing the city as a woman who “sits quietly” before the bombardment begins and tries to “gather in her children” in order to protect them, the poem heightens the fear and fragility of the city as an innocent in order to protest the violence done to it (7-8). What is striking is that the personification materializes the plight of individuals during a bombardment into the image of a single mother. Personifying the city as mother gives her human qualities and allows the depiction to be similar in its emotional intensity to the narration of an individual experience. At the same time, however, the poem draws its strength of protest from its ability to express collective concerns. In my conversation with Iraqi exile poet Dunya Mikhail, we discussed the importance in Iraqi culture of voicing collective concerns in poetry. Mikhail explained to me that Iraqi poetry has a distinctly oral tradition that emphasizes the pleasing sound of poetry. She also noted that in Iraq, people expect poets to voice collective concerns. Mikhail said:

They even kind of criticize or blame those who don't speak about their suffering as if they have the duty to speak about their suffering. So they blame the poets who don't as if it's their duty—during the Iraq-Iran war, there were some poets that the government was depending on to mobilize people to take the side of Iraq in the war. Because the government knows how effective this is on people so they were paying money to these two, three poets that were formal poets thinking that people would be affected by these people... it tells you about the society, how much people expect from the poets. (Mikhail Personal Interview)

Mikhail's comments about how poetry has an important mobilizing effect and can persuade people to think or believe certain issues are important in that they allow the poem to be read as a voicing of collective concerns. The injury done to the body of the mother-city has political and collective ramifications; it highlights what several individuals have experienced but also demonstrates the experience of the city itself.

Giving the city the body of a mother has the effect of suggesting that the body and the state are intimately connected and that the destruction of one results in the destruction of the other. In her book, Elaine Scarry contends that the human body is always political and points to evidence that "a specific culture (is) absorbed at an early age by those dwelling within its boundaries," and that "the nation-state will without notice continue to interact on a day-to-day basis with its always embodied citizens" (111). Scarry's assertion that the human body is political because it carries a culture and because humans through the designation of "citizen" embody the state is striking in relation to Al-Kabi's poem. Although Al-Kabi's personification of the city heightens the emotional intensity by describing an individual woman's account, this experience is politically charged on a variety of levels. Al-Kabi presents the city as a body that is destroyed by bombardment. If the body and the state are intimately connected and the city is represented as a body, then it follows that this city is intimately connected to the state. The violence of the bombardment is so disturbing and volatile that it eventually overwhelms the city and destroys its capacity to provide safety for its citizens. Scarry writes that physical presence inside a country is important for political belonging. She argues, "it may be that the degree to which body and state are interwoven" is evidenced by "the fact that one's citizenship ordinarily entails physical *presence* within the boundaries of that country"

(Scarry 111). Scarry's contention is important for understanding how the loss of citizens can be detrimental to a city and state's culture. In the poem, the violence of the bombardment pushes the children away from the mother, paralyzing and stupefying her. The mother-city is so overwhelmed by the attack that she is falling apart and unable to care for her children. The speaker notes that she "cannot/ Gather in her children./" and that "They are flung like fruits/ Her branches vainly reaching out for them" (8). Just as a mother's loss of her children can be emotionally traumatizing, the loss of citizens is traumatizing to the city's cultural and political extension. If physical presence is so important for the political identity of a state, then the loss of those children can be detrimental to collective national identity.

In the poem, the violence not only physically destroys the city; it destroys the city's ability to perpetuate itself through its citizens. Scarry argues that war's goal is to injure a subset of humanity, and she claims that targets of war are "a people and its civilization ... there is a destruction of 'civilization' in its most elemental form ... there is a deconstruction not only of a particular ideology but of the primary evidence of the capacity for self-extension itself" (61). Violence does not simply cause physical damage but also a psychological and biological damage by instilling a sense of futility and hopelessness and by interrupting the basic human need to propagate and extend a culture/civilization. The violence inflicted on the city results in loss, and the ultimate injury in this poem is depicted as the city's defeated submission. The speaker notes that the city "Swirls/ Becomes dizzy/ Sinks amid signboards" (8). The violence damages both the body politic (the mother-city) and the "always embodied" citizens. When the city loses both "roots" and "children" and is unable to prevent this loss, she becomes

disoriented and “dizzy” and submits to the inevitable violence (8). The destruction caused by this bombardment is thus two-fold: to the individual who is both psychologically and physically harmed/killed in the bombardment but also to the state, which relies on its citizens for existence and perpetuation.

The speaker of the poem portrays the city as completely powerless and unable to change her fate and highlights how violence destroys the human capacity of imagining prosperity or a better future. Al-Kabi writes that the city “sits quietly,” and the speaker notes that she has “the river/ splitting her” in another line (7). Most of the poem focuses not on her activity in the face of this chaos, but rather on her passivity and her powerlessness within the violence of this occurrence. The immediacy of the violence makes it impossible for the individual to imagine a time when her life was not filled with chaos and misery. The poem’s depiction of the damage that a city is forced to sustain and the powerlessness of being ill equipped to handle these occurrences highlights that the use of violence destroys the idea that the city is invincible. It forces the inhabitants of the city to contemplate not the ways in which they may flourish, but their susceptibility to death and the ways in which they must try to avoid this end. The city and its citizens become concerned with matters of mere survival and do not contemplate anything else; they lose hope and do not attempt to resist what appears to them to be uncontrollable violence.

In the poem, the terror that is depicted appears endless and circular and takes away any sense of hope for a peaceful future. The final stanza in the poem also functions as a pause before the violence ensues once more. When the city stops to drink a cup of water, it is almost as if there has been a break in the bombing. This short break, however,

only amplifies the terror and anticipation of the bombardment that has yet to come. What is happening is almost circular, and the pause signifies that the chaos that has just passed will happen again. The poem's final lines, "She waits the sudden falling/ Of the sky" indicates that the bombing will terrorize the city again (8). These lines depict perfectly the dread, anticipation, and fear of what is to come.

Just as the poem "Bombardment" by Haider Al-Kabi explores how the violence of a bombing results in the physical, emotional, and political consequences of the destruction of a city, "Tomorrow the War Will Have a Picnic" explores the idea of war as a form of destruction of normalcy and civilization, and it examines the ways in which violence destroys the capacity to imagine prosperity and create an identity outside of war. Abdul Razak Al-Rubaiee begins his poem, which is translated by Sadek Mohammed, with the line, "Tomorrow the war will have a picnic" (16). This first line is repeated throughout the poem, juxtaposing the playfulness of a picnic and the seriousness of war. In contrast to the poem by Haider Al-Kabi where a city under bombardment is personified as a woman, in this poem, war is personified. War's body, however, is less than human—it is composed of "smoke./ Bullets and shrapnel" and has an eerie penchant for the destruction of all the distinguishing marks of humanity (18). The speaker urges the reader to avoid joy, emotion, and the pursuit of happiness, and in each stanza, the speaker advises the promotion, or at the very least, the accommodation of the war, which is so ruthless and demanding that it requires us to: "Dust off the graves/ And dig fresh ones—/ War detests the smell of rotting corpses" (16). In these lines, the speaker of the poem articulates that the war demands perpetuation. The war does not end with a few deaths; the war requires of its participants that they continue to engage until there is no

one left. War requires death to be a continuous and common occurrence; there is not a moment when death is a thing of the past. This horrific requirement is a hallmark of the disruption of normalcy and a destruction of the most significant aspects of civilization—cultivation, development, refinement, and prosperity.

Throughout the poem, Al-Rubaiee depicts war as a destructive and oppressive personality so as to highlight the feelings of fear and dread that accompany his/her presence. Although it depicts little gore or explicit physical violence, the poem explores the emotional consequences of violent warfare by depicting war as an individual fueled by pain and destruction. In one rare line that discusses the physical consequences of war, the speaker instructs the reader to “prepare your bodies for pain./ Your limbs for amputation” as these are inevitable consequences of war’s arrival (16). The speaker’s instruction serves almost as a warning to readers who may be leaning towards construing the war’s arrival as something pleasant. These lines are also important because as Elaine Scarry notes, injuries are the product and cost of war, and the act of “injuring is, in fact, the central activity of war” (80). Not only does war promote pain and injury, war has as its very goal the production of misery. Pleasantries such as “delicacy” and “laughter” directly contradict and oppose the war’s intent (19). The speaker notes that these emotionally uplifting ideas and actions are “not good for the heart/ Of the war” (16). If the “heart” of the war is the production of misery and injury, then the pleasantries that are described contradict the war because they are hallmarks of happiness and prosperity.

Throughout the poem, the speaker innocuously develops the war’s body and persona, which are revealed to be made of physical and emotional ravages and suffering. Despite the fact that the speaker describes the war as inoffensively as possible, a quiet



horror emerges out of the descriptions. In the speaker's attempt to accommodate war, the war's personality is revealed as terrifying and destructive. Elaine Scarry argues that "war is relentless in taking for its own interior content the interior content of the wounded and open human body" (81). By interior content, Scarry refers to the essence or heart of war—how the physical injury done to or by an individual comes to serve as a referent of war. Her assertion that war requires for its existence the maiming of human bodies is important to consider in the context of this poem. In one stanza, for example, the speaker notes innocently enough that "the war gets hungry now and then" (18). The descriptions of what the war consumes, however, are anything but innocent— if the war is unsatisfied with "tender bodies," it will go after "childish pranks, our innocence, our dreams—/ it will be compelled to eat the buildings./ Bodies sleeping in graves./ books, streets and biscuits. It will be forced to eat unshakable mountains./ Statues and stones—" (18). In these lines, the war eats up the possibilities of innocence and the lightheartedness of "childish pranks," which are hallmarks of youth in peaceful/stable countries. Even the dead are plagued by war's persistent presence, which may be disrupting or altering the gravesites of the deceased through some sort of violent attack. The speaker recognizes the ability of war to alter the natural landscape and mentions that even nature, which seems indomitable and "unshakable," can be devoured by war. Nothing remains undisturbed by war. In these stanzas, the war quite literally takes as its own interior content the damages of a state and its people—it consumes a city. The images of Iraq after the war come to be associated not with normal and civilized things like "books, streets and biscuits" but with the normalcy that the war has devoured and spit out as damaged—the bombed graveyards, the children who have had to renounce their youth and perpetrate violence,

and even a ravaged natural landscape (18). In this poem, war's shape comes to be made up of loss in the form of both bodily and emotional ravages.

In order to accommodate war, one must give up the capability of resisting war through one's body. The poem highlights in a list towards the end that the war comes to suppress individuals' ability to resist war by thwarting their autonomy. This is important for understanding how the poem as a whole implicitly protests war because of Iraq's history of an oral poetic tradition and the suppression of poetic freedom during times of war. The speaker closes by listing things that make life enjoyable: "delicacy./ laughter./ dancing" and then by saying that they must be abandoned for they are not "good for the health of the war" (19). Scarry argues that an individual's oral autonomy gives him a power that can be threatening to others. Although she describes the power of oral autonomy in the context of suppression of one's voice during torture, her claim that war and torture are analogous makes this claim important to consider in light of this poem.

Scarry writes:

Through his ability to project words and sounds out into his environment, a human being inhabits, humanizes, and makes his own a space much larger than that occupied by his body alone. This space, always contracted under repressive regimes, is in torture almost wholly eliminated. The "it" in "Get it out of him" refers not just to a piece of information but to the capacity for speech itself. (49)

In these lines, Scarry theorizes that individuals hold more power and influence than their physical bodies occupy. The fact that humans, through "words and sounds," are able to inhabit and humanize space—to imbue a location with human qualities, to make a location important for culture—is astounding to consider, and it parallels a similar claim from Weil (9). The laughter and dancing mentioned in Al-Rubaiee's poem are aspects of the human body that give us power through our ability to alter our surroundings. As

Scarry indicates above, torture is not only intended to extract information but to halt the ability to speak itself. In the poem analyzed above, “Bombardment” by Haider Al-Kabi, we see the same phenomenon of oral autonomy suppressed by violence. The poem’s second to last stanza echoes this idea when the speaker writes that “The city takes a cup/ Of water/ To swallow her words” (8). The city suppresses her own ability to speak, to utter words that might protest or draw attention to the injustice of violence. In the poem, the capacity for speech itself is destroyed in the city. Nonetheless, the poem itself utters and describes the injustice of what the city cannot name. Towards the end of “Tomorrow the War Will Have a Picnic,” the speaker seems to protest what war has been doing all along. Whereas the speaker seems on the surface to be advising us in the matters of the perpetuation of war, its ironic and accommodating tone may actually be asking us to see that we have it in our hands to end war.

By depicting a terrible place of hurt that is anything but normal and by exploring how the use of violence can make a place devoid of humanity, Brian Turner’s poem “The Hurt Locker” implicitly protests war and serves as a sort of exploration of the aftermath of what the two poems above describe. The speaker describes how difficult it is to comprehend how much horror and pain there is in combat. The poem’s title, “The Hurt Locker,” colloquially refers to a place where there is a lot of pain (“What is a 'hurt locker'?”). The war zone the speaker describes is a place of “hurt” and of the “wounded” (11). “Believe it when you see it,” the speaker says in the second stanza, for there is an unbelievable quality to hurt that must be seen to be believed, experienced to be understood (11). What is terrifying in these moments of violence is that there are no limits, no boundaries to this pain, or to who participates. The speaker appears to be

shocked to recount the violence that ordinary people commit. Unlike the previous two poems, which feature accounts of a disruption of normalcy, the speaker in this poem explores how combat in a war-torn country can make the place seem devoid of any humanity. If read alone, this poem offers clues about the conditions that soldiers must withstand to survive war. When read in conjunction with Al-Kabi and Al-Rubaiee's poems, the poem gives a sense of how war alters its victims; the poem can be read as the aftermath of the bombardment or picnic described in the earlier poems. Reading the poems in conjunction makes evident the destruction of normalcy and the dehumanization that occur in war.

The speaker in "The Hurt Locker" highlights war's destruction of a culture by describing the desolation, loneliness, and "hurt" that are the sole byproducts of the violence that war perpetrates. The speaker writes that "there is nothing but hurt here," and it is as if the use of violence has destroyed all humanity and has bound all who remain into a sort of unfulfilled relationship whereby they must perpetually commit violence to remain in existence (11). Violence in this poem is haunting because it has a lure that transforms even the innocent into "rough men." The use of the word "hunting" in the present tense in the line "Open the hurt locker and learn/ how rough men come hunting for souls" suggests this binding, cyclical, and perpetual injury that must be committed (11). The poem highlights a tremendous loss of humanity and mirrors the poem "Tomorrow the War Will Have a Picnic" in its implicit admonition of war. In the poem, three episodes of violence are recounted and committed by specific actors. Each of these encounters is vague about who is hurt. The most striking episode is the first encounter when a "twelve year old rolls a grenade into the room." On the one hand, it is as if the

speaker is noting the violence that was perpetrated by a young boy and how there is a lack of innocence in this situation. On the other hand, it is as if the soldier is noting how there is a lack of innocence because of the circumstances of combat that surround the child. If even a twelve-year-old boy resorts to violence, things must be dire in this place of hurt. This line resonates with the line in Al-Rubaiee's poem about how "we have to come out from our/ Skins and our milk names to meet" war (19). This line speaks to the idea of children being forced to lose their innocence and being deprived of a normal childhood in times of war. There is also a sense of disbelief as to how war can leave a place so barren and so desolate—so lacking in any joy or anything meaningful other than pain. War leaves nothing but "hurt" in its stead. It leaves no one innocent or intact, either physically or psychologically, and it takes all the good that is left and transforms it into vulgarities like the "*fucks and goddamns/ and Jesus Christs of the wounded*" (11). This poem, which seeks to depict the war as the opposite of anything delicate, can be read as a response to "Tomorrow the War Will Have a Picnic" because of how it highlights the innocence that is lost, the vulgarity that is heightened, and all the hurt that is left when one has to accommodate war. Whereas "Tomorrow the War Will Have a Picnic" serves as a warning and a means of suggesting what sort of violence war can wreak on an individual, a culture, and a state, "The Hurt Locker" depicts how a place ravaged by violence feels and how a state that was once prosperous and filled with civility and humanity comes to be simply a place of hurt and injury.

The poem is vague in its accounts of violence, and this vagueness contributes to a blurring of the victim/aggressor boundaries. The victim/aggressor labels become sufficiently blurred such that we are unable to tell who is doing the hurting. Both Weil

and Scarry discuss how the victim and the aggressor labels fail to describe what is going on in war. Whereas for Weil, both the victim and the aggressor become subjects of an external force, Scarry argues that war is a “form of torture that leaves the prisoner untouched by the torturer but that requires prisoners to maim one another” (61). If one considers ideologues and war profiteers to be the torturers who decide which wars should be fought and where, then the American soldiers and Iraqi civilians can be seen as the prisoners who are required to “maim one another.” This perspective on war is both practical and applicable to this poem where everyone participates in this violence and “hurt” making, and where no labels of “insurgent” or “injured soldier” are impressed upon the “bled out slumping ... of the wounded” or the “sniper” or the “rough men” (11). It is as if the speaker in this poem makes no value judgments about and does not label who is committing the hurting because he realizes this notion of equal guilt or equal innocence. On the one hand, all of the men “hunting for souls” are rough and guilty of creating this place of hurt (11). On the other hand, all of these men—whether they are soldiers or Iraqis—have been made rough through the use of, or through being subjected to, violence. In a phone interview with poet Nathan Lewis, an American veteran of the Iraq war, we discussed how during the Viet Nam War, the Viet Cong fought against the American soldiers but distinguished between them and the people who had declared and perpetuated the war. Lewis said that in a visit to Vietnam, he was able to hear stories of how American soldiers who deserted during the war would not be turned into prisoners of war but would instead be won over to the side of the Vietnamese and would fight alongside them. Lewis noted: “It was really, really interesting for me to see the awareness of the Vietnamese at the time because even though the Americans were doing terrible

things, they still do a distinction between the war profiteers (the politicians, Nixon, Johnson, all the people that were perpetrating the war) and the people that were being asked to fight it. I think that's the same thing with the Iraq war." Lewis's quote highlights how both soldiers and civilians see an equivalence between themselves as victims or pawns in political games and highlights how victim/aggressor boundaries can be interpreted as blurred in the poem by Turner.

Through its depiction of a place where everyone is subjected to an unbelievable "hurt," Turner's poem as a whole appears to echo the idea that soldiers and civilians are prisoners who are required to fight the political battles of war profiteers. "The Hurt Locker" explores how the pain that the use of violence results in serves as an equalizer between opposite fronts and how violence destroys normalcy and civilization and leaves only pain.

Whereas Turner's poem only begins to hint at the idea that the use of violence transforms the perpetrator into a victim, the poem by Bruce Lack, "Escalation of Force," explores this concept in greater detail to represent the negative cost of war. Lack's exploration of the consequences and implications of soldiers using violence in combat implicitly protests war by highlighting how the use of violence negates the humanity of the victim and the perpetrator. In her essay, Weil writes about the unusual consequences of violence for the perpetrator. She argues that "at all times, the human spirit is shown as modified by its relations with force, as swept away, blinded by the very force it imagined it could handle, as deformed by the weight of the force it submits to" (Weil 6). Weil writes about a situation where the use of violence subverts the user to make him a victim controlled by the very violence that he sought to control. In the representations of combat

in Lack's poem, the consequences of perpetrating violence are not physical, but rather, psychological. The poem depicts how the use of power can have a negative effect on an individual by ensnaring the user in its hold. The poem recounts a situation whereby a marine has an encounter with an Iraqi whom he believes may be responsible for a fire that has killed a few nameless men who may be civilians or soldiers. In the moment that the poem recounts, the marine has the power to end the man's life and is so caught up in trying to ascertain the man's guilt that he becomes controlled, for a brief moment, by the violence he sought to use in a controlled and just manner.

The beginning of the poem highlights and explores how the use of violence is overpowering and how it results in the loss of the perpetrator's humanity. The poem's first few lines feature a tone that is tainted by guilt – the speaker begins by noting how combat and the use of violence in war have the unintended effect of transforming the soldier into an aggressor. The speaker begs us to “Understand that I was not born mean/ I was made mean.” If war is a terrorizing personality as described in “Tomorrow the War Will Have a Picnic,” then this terror is spread through violence. The first few lines of the poem “Escalation of Force” appear to suggest that by participating in combat and war, we are changed and become complicit in the perpetuation of war. The speaker demonstrates how there is an attempt to make violence bureaucratic and regulated by following protocol and having “rules for violence.” At the same time, however, the speaker is honest about a strange desire he is filled with to punish the Iraqi. In the last four stanzas, the speaker describes how violence takes control of him and he looks for clues in order to ascertain the Iraqi's guilt. The speaker recounts how he “wanted the hint of anything—sterno, gasoline, paint thinner or maybe oil./ I wanted it enough to imagine it.” The



speaker notes that he was consumed by violence—that he was past the point of merely following the “rules for violence.” He was so consumed with a desire for retaliation that he could imagine himself unconsciously subverting the rules and then justifying it.

The speaker’s account, however, highlights that he both feels guilt for this occurrence and has realized how the use of violence undermined his own humanity. The idea that is presented in this first stanza is that the soldier should feel no remorse, no guilt in the perpetration of violence—that he should “do it with a smile.” The remainder of the poem, however, demonstrates how remorse comes back and becomes a driving factor in the speaker’s realization that he was possessed by the use of violence. Upon realizing that he has been made less human through his use of force, he notes that he “wanted to go home, / before I became any more the devil” and any less human through the use of violence. In my interview with Dunya Mikhail in January 2013, we discussed how she perceived the differences between veterans and Iraqis. In the conversation, Mikhail discussed a poem that she wrote that explores how both killer and killed lose their humanity. Mikhail noted that the veteran is writing from a place of guilt:

The soldier is coming from that guilt they feel. The other one is the feeling of anger or bitterness at oneself. They killed someone and in my poem I say, they are equal, the killer and the killed, they are both dead. The killed has lost his life and the killer has lost his humanity. It achieves equality between killer and killed- they are both dead. In my poem, I am talking about the killer full stop. These [writers] are not killers full stop, its comma, where they realize and write and do things after. It’s not the same as the one in [my] poem. They have guilt and this guilt saves them from death. It saves their humanity—that realization of what has happened. They are writers, not only witnesses, they are poets. (Mikhail Personal Interview).

In this quote, Mikhail discusses how the use of violence to kill an individual takes away the humanity of both the victim and the perpetrator. What is also interesting in Mikhail’s

comments is that writing provides an outlet for redemption because of the ability to reflect and make meaning out of one's experiences.

The idea that meaning-making and contemplation of one's use of violence is necessary for reclaiming one's humanity is especially relevant and salient in the last few stanzas of Lack's "Escalation of Force," where guilt becomes an important idea for reclaiming what the use of violence takes away. If the humanity of both the exactor and victim of violence is taken away, then the idea of guilt becomes important for reclaiming the humanity of both parties. The guilt that the speaker of the poem feels about this moment is evident in his recounting the moment in a poem. It is also evident in the way that he describes the encounter and presumes the Iraqi's innocence. The second stanza begins with the descriptions of the horror and violence of "men burned down in seconds." Despite the fact that the speaker suspects that the Iraqi man was responsible, the speaker does a lot of work in the poem to establish the Iraqi's innocence, or at the very least, cast doubt about his guilt. The speaker writes about how the cause of the fire that resulted in the death of several men was a "makeshift" cloth that was thrown over the wall of a tent. The speaker notes with uncertainty that the makeshift cloth could have been "soaked, years ago, in kerosene/ to keep the goddamn flies away." What he implies but does not say, however, is that the cloth could have also been soaked in kerosene purposefully with the intent of killing the men in the tent. The speaker attempts to assume the Iraqi's innocence, but it is this assumption that complicates and blurs the distinction between victim and aggressor later in the poem when the speaker's actions in this moment are described. The work that the speaker does on behalf of the Iraqi in describing this

moment exhibits an “exertion of the powers of generosity” that Simone Weil mentions in her essay. Weil writes:

To respect life in somebody else when you have had to castrate yourself of all yearning for it demands a truly heart-breaking exertion of the powers of generosity ... lacking this generosity, the conquering soldier is like a scourge of nature. Possessed by war, he, like the slave, becomes a thing, though his manner of doing so is different—over him too, words are as powerless as over matter itself. (21-22)

In this quote, Weil writes about how soldiers have to renounce their desire for a normal life in order to fight and survive the mental strain of combat, and she notes how this renunciation can often drive a soldier into the arms of violence. Soldiers become “like a scourge of nature” because they are possessed by violence and war and become indifferent to the words or pleas of others. To a soldier possessed by violence, others are no longer human; s/he has lost the capacity to perceive people. By granting the Iraqi the possibility of innocence in the poem, the speaker recognizes the Iraqi’s humanity and the fact that he is a person. The speaker thus absolves himself of his previous wrong of being caught up in violence.

The poem explores the maddening and inevitable pull of violence and how its effect on both the perpetrator and victim is altering and dehumanizing. Just as “The Hurt Locker” and “Bombardment” depict moments and places of unspeakable and unavoidable terror and violence, so too does the poem “Escalation of Force.” The speaker in Lack’s poem describes the moment that he puts his hands on the Iraqi and shakes him. The speaker writes that he “wanted something back,” and this line suggests that the speaker’s humanity was negated, if only for a moment, by the violence he sought to use. Yet the speaker also recognizes his desire to reclaim what the use of violence has taken away from him. The poem ends ambiguously, however, with the speaker grinding “intent into

[the Iraqi's] bones." The speaker lets the Iraqi walk away only after the Iraqi has "pissed himself." This poem ends on the note of the Iraqi's humiliation—he has lost control of his bodily functions in a moment of complete fear and powerlessness. Despite the speaker's realization of his turning into a "devil," he cannot stop or control what has already taken over in the frenzy of the moment of combat and danger.

The poems I have analyzed in this chapter implicitly protest war through depictions of violence as destruction and through the representations of violence as dehumanizing for both the perpetrator and the victim. In the last poem, poetry becomes a means of coming to terms with violence and reclaiming the humanity of both individuals subjected to war. In "The Iliad or the Poem of Force," Weil writes, "Where there is no room for reflection, there is none either for justice or prudence. Hence we see men in arms behaving harshly and madly. We see their sword bury itself in the breast of a disarmed enemy who is in the very act of pleading at their knees" (13-14). Although Weil is referring to soldiers in *The Iliad*, her claim that war offers no room for reflection is important for understanding the depictions of violence in the poems analyzed above. All of these poems offer "reflections" that implicitly protest the violence of war and serve as a means of countering the silencing and dehumanizing effects of violence that they describe. The poems serve as a way to bear witness and give testimony to the damage of violence. Not only is violence damaging in the moment it is perpetrated, but violence has far-reaching effects that can linger long after the threat of death has been removed. Poetry, writing, and art become means of dealing with trauma: the guilt and memories of violence that haunt soldiers, exiles, and civilians.

## CHAPTER TWO : TRAUMA

If the definition of violence is force wielded to cause injury, then trauma is most clearly identified as the injury made by violence. An examination of trauma entails an assessment of the aftermath and consequences of violence. According to Judith Herman, author of *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence*, the “conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma” (1). The dialectic of trauma that Herman refers to is one where the violence that has been perpetrated is so terrible that it resists representation—one must experience it to fully understand it—and yet this very same traumatic experience requires testimony and witnesses. Herman’s contention is that the feelings of powerlessness that traumatized individuals experience emerge from close encounters with violence that render the victim helpless, she writes that “psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless” (33). In her book, Herman seeks to identify commonalities among victims of violence who suffer from psychological harm in order to chart the natural responses to trauma, and to discuss the stages of recovery. Although Herman’s objective is to highlight commonalities among individuals who have had encounters with violence (both combat veterans and victims of domestic violence), her findings provide a framework for identifying symptoms of trauma and commonalities in the works of both Iraqi exiles and civilians and American veterans of the Iraq war.

Gabriele Schwab, in “Writing against Memory and Forgetting,” also discusses the dialectic of trauma that Herman proposes where trauma both requires representation and also resists it. In her article, Schwab outlines a theoretical framework for understanding traumatic narratives that highlights the irresolvable paradox of narrating traumatic

experiences that resist representation but at the same time call for “telling and witnessing” in order to heal the very same trauma (102). Schwab’s central claim is that writing should be analyzed beyond its superficial narrative by locating silences or “haunted” words that hint at but are unable to fully relay the complete horror or violence of the injury (104). Schwab argues that haunted language “uses a gap inside speech to point to silenced history. Haunted language refers to what is unspeakable through ellipsis, indirection and detour, or fragmentation and deformation” (108). Her contention is that despite the fact that the language used does not reveal the trauma directly, it is a characteristic of traumatized people to leave clues of what has happened in their language.

I argue that the traumatic experiences depicted in the poems of the Iraqis and American veterans are best understood within a theoretical framework that emphasizes hidden meaning or the ways in which the works attempt, but fail, to fully relate the violence of the experiences individually. This framework enables us to understand the scope and horror of the violence that was perpetrated and the consequences of violence, both physical and psychic. This framework is also important because it helps us to understand how violence, once it has been carried out, exists outside both the perpetrator and the victim and continues to be at work in the writings of traumatized people. Poems about trauma or that feature traumatic writing are different from poems about violence or exile in that these poems are distanced from the moment of violence and meditative on the effect of trauma on memory and identity. These poems try to reconcile and work through the traumatic experience. They don’t serve as a protest; they merely try to work through the process of representing the unspeakable memories. Trauma, however,

inherently resists representation, so the tension between what is being said and what is meant, between reality and memory, is present in all of the poems.

In this chapter, I explore how the poetry of both Iraqis and American veterans represent the struggle to define one's identity and recover from traumatic experiences that haunt the speakers through memories. Iraqi poet Munthir Abdul-Hur's poem "We Are Not Dead" explores how traumatic experiences fragment identity and instill a sense of futility in trying to rebuild one's sense of self. The poem presents a sense of powerlessness to overcome trauma and portrays how the speakers are haunted and overcome by the destruction wrought by war in their lives. In American veteran Brian Turner's "At Lowe's Home Improvement Store," the idea that trauma so great it resists conventional representation is explored through fragmentation and combination of two realities. This juxtaposition of the speaker's traumatic memories with his present reality appears to be the only way to depict the horror that the speaker has experienced and the difficulty he has in overcoming the trauma. Thus the poem serves as a reminder of what the speaker has gone through and also as a reminder of the ghosts that the speaker nurses and must carry around. In the poem "The Confusion of Bright Things," by American veteran Bruce Lack, an ordinary encounter with a bee that has entered his home serves as a means of exploring how the traumatic experience of combat constantly reinforces the perception of speaker's identity as an aggressor. Whereas Lack's poem describes an interaction with a bee, Dunya Mikhail's poem "Buzz" describes a buzzing noise that the speaker hears as she leaves her country. The poem explores how traumatic experiences threaten and come to define the speaker's identity, even as she leaves them behind. The poem also meditates on how the experience of trauma resists representation and how

writing can be a way to contain and give what is unrepresentable a shape. The idea that the speakers of these poems are haunted by what has happened and are struggling to make meaning of their experiences is present in the poems of both Iraqis and American veterans. Nonetheless, in depicting the symptoms of traumatic experiences, the poems serve as a vehicle for poets to work through and relive traumatic moments so they may be reconciled.

In the anthology of Iraqi poetry *Flowers of Flame*, Munthir Abdul-Hur's haunting yet abstract poem "We Are Not Dead," translated by Sadek Mohammed, appears to elucidate the post-war condition of Iraqis in a country ravaged by war. The poem's speakers use the plural voice to discuss the plight of the living, the survivors who continue to live with the consequences of violence. Al-Hur's poem seems to be at once both a cry for acknowledgement—a way to tell the world that though the war is over, they continue to exist, continue to suffer its consequences—and at the same time a testimony to their present condition of suffering and trauma. The poem is purposefully abstract on several levels. It speaks to collective trauma and suffering rather than dealing with individual cases but also uses very abstract metaphors to discuss those collective concerns. On both levels of abstraction, the poem hints at the trauma but does not delve deeper into descriptions of it. The poem presents its case in a fragmentary way, piecing together several grievances in an attempt to highlight how the traumatic experience continues to exist, how the loss suffered is both personal and collective, and how the violence has fragmented or destroyed both individual and collective identities.

Al-Hur's poem seeks to represent the condition of individuals who have survived violence but must suffer through the trauma of loss and destruction that has been wrought



in their lives. The speakers of the poem describe the action of “carrying the coffins of our days” as a way to represent both the collective loss of time and of the injury done to a country that has been caught in a violent struggle for years (36). The line also serves as a means of expressing how the violence perpetrated during a war can have a lingering, destructive effect that perpetuates suffering and disrupts both the ability to make meaning and the ability to perceive hope. In the poem, the speakers note that “Our delights are cellars/ And our time is ash” (36). The line “our delights are cellars” describes how happiness has been hidden in basements—away from bombings and the violence of combat, but also hidden and locked away where they can not be reached easily. The “delights” are not visible to anyone and are difficult to access. The line “our time is ash” is a bleak way of saying that the speakers’ time is consumed with what has been incinerated, charred and dead. The speakers may be demonstrating that their time has been wasted and consumed with death during the war. These lines indicate that the preoccupation with death is so great that either all beauty has been objectively destroyed, or the faculties for appreciating it have been subdued or damaged.

Abdul-Hur’s poem presents a discouraging and bleak view of how trauma haunts a collective and discourages hope for recovery. The paradox of this poem is that these speakers use words that are filled with optimism for recovery and indicate that the collective is resisting and fighting the injustices but that these descriptions are always curtailed by descriptions of the bleakness and oppression of reality. The poem explores the powerlessness and futility that the survivors of violence often suffer through by detailing the rights that are still guaranteed to them. The speaker writes in the second stanza, “We are not dead./ We still have the tearful embrace/ Of sacrifice/” (36). The

“tearful embrace/of sacrifice” asks the reader to acknowledge the speakers’ humanity and their presence as the living, but the lines serve as a means of testifying to their suffering and the burden they must bear as survivors. Those who live are guaranteed the right to embrace others, but this embrace is always tinged with grief and sacrifice, as loss is inherent in being alive. Living through trauma is painful and entails sacrifice; whereas death entails no sacrifice, no suffering, and no pain. For the speakers of this poem, living in a country ravaged by war is a burden they are forced to shoulder, and the language used highlights the sense of powerlessness that the speakers feel. “Under a spider’s tent,” Abdul-Hur writes, “We still have the right/ To conquer the city with kisses” (36). The use of the words “right/ To conquer” appear to be hopeful and filled with resistance, but these lines are crammed in between two images that curtail the possibility in these lines. These lines are prefaced by the predatory “spider’s nest” that looms above and presents the threat of death. Even the “right to conquer” which seems like a domineering and inevitable promise is revealed to be more ineffectual—the speakers’ only weapons are kisses. In the midst of violence, the idea of conquering a city with “kisses” seems improbable. The speakers also describe their lifetime as “withered leaves/ That launched an attack on the sun/ And fell in flames.” In these lines, the speakers describe the fragility of their lives as “withered leaves” that do not realize their weakness when compared with the strength of an unassailable sun. This second metaphor reaffirms the earlier metaphor’s sense that the collective is battling blindly and fruitlessly against an unassailable, unstoppable force. These two representations of life convey a sense of futility. In the first account, living has the consequence of sacrifice. In the second

instance, the blind rage that motivates and prompts an “attack on the sun” results in the withering away of hope and autonomy (36).

The idea that the speakers’ sense of identity is fragmented and left shattered is explored through the image of the withered leaves that are destroyed after an encounter with the sun. The speaker ends the poem with the line, “The fire now licks at our names./ Sewn together with splinters” (36). These last lines demonstrate the extent of the damage, the injury done to the speakers. Despite the speakers’ attempts to rebuild their identities and to resist destruction by sewing their names together, they are consumed by a force that lays waste to their efforts. The speaker explores the futility of reconstructing their identity by noting how the fire that “licks” at the speakers’ “names”—which are meant to symbolize identities— appears to be adding to the injury (36). In these lines, it appears as if the identity of the traumatized speaker is reconstructed and made of loss. The “names” are held together in the most fragile and makeshift way—“with splinters” (36). The imagery of the names pieced together with these flimsy particles of wood is significant in that the splinters are meant to be repairing their names (their identities) but are also a danger to this identity—they are piercing the identity that they are piecing together. In the poem, the speaker defines their identities by the trauma that they have experienced. This action, however, may be painful and damaging in and of itself.

Whereas the poem “We Are Not Dead” explores a fragmentation of identity, Brian Turner’s “At Lowe’s Home Improvement Center,” from the volume of poetry *Phantom Noise* uses a fragmented form to depict the speaker’s traumatic experiences. The speaker in the poem discusses a moment at a home improvement store when an ordinary occurrence—his dropping a box of nails in aisle 16—brings back a swarm of

memories of combat from his time in Iraq. This seemingly innocuous occurrence brings back to the fore a series of traumatic experiences. Although the speaker describes the occurrence concretely and without abstraction, there is a tension between the language used and how the memory is juxtaposed with reality. By framing these terrible memories as a recollection brought on at a home improvement store, Turner heightens and makes evident how events of this emotional magnitude haunt an individual long after they have passed. Throughout the poem, Turner explores the level of emotional and psychological discord by making the setting of this occurrence ambiguous until the end. The speaker in this poem is explicit about the occurrences that haunt him in this poem; he exposes us to the hidden, veiled trauma that resists representation. There is still, however, disjointedness between the instances the poet relates and the tone with which they are described. There is a sort of unreality about these recollections—the speaker is unsure of whether he is in the traumatic moment or in a Lowe’s, and there is a sort of slipperiness of temporal and spatial reality that characterizes the depiction of this traumatic memory.

Throughout the poem, a tension exists between representations of the traumatic memory and the speaker’s present reality, highlighting how trauma becomes invasive. Describing how the traumatic memory haunts him and comes alive in an unexpected and unfortunate way, the speaker notes his location, “aisle 16,” when he accidentally “bust a 50 pound box of double-headed nails/ open” (5). The nails then proceed to fall to the floor in a cascade that reminds him of “firing pins/ from M-4s and M-16s” (5). At first, this may seem like probable clumsiness on the speaker’s behalf. However, the word “bust” implies intentionality and the manner in which it is described appears to imply that the speaker used a great amount of force to open the box (5). It is as if the speaker is

attempting to intentionally revisit these memories in an attempt to make sense of his present reality. In my conversation with veteran poet Bruce Lack, we discussed how traumatic memories are invasive, and Lack noted in his early days of being home it was difficult to avoid thinking about the traumatic memories. Lack said, “its like how when your tongue returns to your sore tooth over and over again, your mind will just do it and do it and do it... Maybe your mind does it intentionally so you learn how to wall that off so you learn how to avoid things that bring that back to you” (Lack Personal Interview). Lack’s comments aid the interpretation of these lines as a sort of intentional revisiting of this memory. The busting open of this box of nails is reminiscent less of the ordinary reality of a Lowe’s home improvement store and more of a box of artillery ready to be used for military purposes—such that when they are spent, as the speaker notes, “hundreds of bandages will not be enough” (5). This line refers not only to the bloodshed that must have occurred in the actual battlegrounds in Iraq, but also to the emotional turmoil and trauma that will prevail and that cannot simply be bandaged up. Herman argues in *Trauma and Recovery* that a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder is intrusion; in this symptom, “it is as if time stops at the moment of trauma” (37). It is this symptom that appears to be manifested in this poem, as according to Herman:

The traumatic moment becomes encoded in an abnormal form of memory, which breaks spontaneously into consciousness, both as flashbacks during waking states and as traumatic nightmares during sleep. Small, seemingly insignificant reminders can also evoke these memories, which often return with all the vividness and emotional force of the original event. Thus, even normally safe environments may come to feel dangerous; for the survivor can never be assured that she will not encounter some reminder of trauma. (Herman 37)

Turner’s poem appears to exemplify this symptom of trauma through its disjointed montage of reality and memory. Memories of Iraq almost “spontaneously” emerge in the

most commonplace of places. A small reminder—the busting open of a box of nails—evokes a vivid and emotionally forceful event. Despite its clarity of imagery and detailed descriptions, Turner’s poem highlights his traumatic memory through its fragmentation and piecing together of two different worlds.

The juxtaposition of the menial reality of a home improvement store with the drama of a combat scene highlights the speaker’s struggle to find meaning in ordinary things. This poem explores the idea that civilian issues no longer seem to matter and in fact seem frivolous compared with the combat and chaos that surrounds the speaker. Although the entire poem depicts how the traumatic memory invades and takes over a trip to a Lowe’s such that the speaker can no longer distinguish whether they are in combat or back in their present reality, the poem’s exploration of consumer culture points to the idea that the trauma of combat overwhelms the capacity to appreciate or be concerned with aspects of life that those who do not suffer from trauma would find important. In my interview with Bruce Lack, he mentioned the importance of combat experiences and how in the wake of these experiences everything else seems insignificant. Lack noted that the traumatic impact of combat is so great that upon returning to civilian life, the most difficult thing for a veteran is “learning to ascribe importance to civilian things” (Lack Personal Interview). According to Lack, “if the stakes aren’t life and death, which they were before, if they aren’t high anymore ... then your reaction is very muted; it’s kind of numb” (Lack Personal Interview). Lack’s observations highlight how the speaker exhibits a sense of exasperation with civilian matters. In the poem, the lines “what difference does it make if I choose/ tumbled travertine tile” highlight this sense of disinterestedness (7). The speaker also notes at one

point that despite the chaos that is ensuing around him, the people carry on, they stand and “reach/ for their wallets” (6). Turner’s trauma is psychological and he is haunted by memories that make the excesses of choice and consumerism seem frivolous when compared with the haunting realities of “wounded Iraqis with IVs” and images of his colleague, Sergeant Rampley, “carrying someone’s blown-off arm cradled like an infant” (6).

The poem’s use of language is very direct and concrete, and although it does not exhibit haunted language in the way that Gabrielle Schwab imagined it “through indirection, elision,” the poem manages to create the sensation that the author is unable to represent or contain the full extent of the trauma due to the limitations of language (108). Turner describes combat as confusing and surreal, and this sense of unreality is exhibited through the fragmentation of the traumatic memory and its juxtaposition with reality, such that the entire occurrence appears to be a traumatic memory and not a violent encounter grounded in the reality of a home improvement store. In the middle of the poem, the speaker notes self-consciously that: “Mower blades are just mower blades/ and the Troy-Bilt Self-Propelled Mower doesn’t resemble/ a Blackhawk or an Apache” (6). In these lines, the speaker notes that a lawn mower at the home improvement store doesn’t resemble a helicopter even though his viewing of it makes him recall his time in Iraq. Pointing out his own delusion, the speaker explores his traumatic experiences by making evident that the combination of these two realities is in his mind. Furthermore, throughout the poem, the unreality is exacerbated by the speaker’s inability or unwillingness to participate in the action. The ghosts of the speaker’s mind actively move about, guiding him and instructing him and taking part in the action, but the poem

portrays him as an almost reluctant participant. Throughout the poem, the speaker's colleagues—Bosch and Sgt. Rampley—ask the speaker to hold onto something that needs to be cared for and then proceed to leave him with it as they pursue combat. In the first instance, the speaker is asked to take care of a little boy. In the second instance, he is given a severed arm, and both Bosch and Rampley leave him for combat. In the final stanza, the speaker, once again, is a silent participant. He simply sits there as the Iraqi boy beside him dips his finger into paint and writes “T. for Tourniquet” on his forehead (7). The speaker is aware of his chaos surrounding him but can do nothing more than observe as an unwilling participant. The surreal mood of the poem contributes to the idea that the speaker's ability to voice what is real and what is imagined is impaired in this moment.

By depicting the ghosts of combat that haunt him in this invasive memory, the speaker makes evident in the final two stanzas that he is alone in creating these imaginings and that what is happening is fully in his mind. The ghosts of combat that the speaker brings with him into Lowe's expand and take up so much space that the entire store is left with evidence of the horror he has had to witness and take part in. Fixating on aisle seven, the speaker notes in the last stanza, “Each dead Iraqi walks amazed by Tiffany posts and Bavarian pole lights” (7). This chilling image highlights how the ghosts that appear to haunt a Lowes have been brought home by the speaker and in actuality haunt him. The speaker appears to be drawing attention to the fact that the traumatic experiences recounted in the poem are actually a part of him; they have become ghosts that he brings and carries with him.



The idea that the traumatic experience comes to be internalized and haunts the speaker in everyday situations is also expressed in the poem “The Confusion of Bright Things,” by Bruce Lack, which portrays an ordinary household interaction with a bee that he accidentally kills in an attempt to remove it from his home and grant it freedom. This almost monotonous event takes on an immense significance for the speaker, who despite his best intentions, is reminded of and forced to confront a version of himself that is a source of tremendous guilt. Although the first stanza’s language is simple and unadorned, it is filled with symbolism as a small action takes on greater and greater meaning. In this poem, the killing of a bee takes on a whole new level of importance. The bee itself may be intended to symbolize Iraqis and the use of a bee is important in that it highlights how the speaker may perceive this insect as a threat. Bees are threatening because they may sting an individual and harm them, however, they are much smaller than humans and when dealt with individually are, in actuality, very fragile. For the speaker of the poem, killing the bee comes to remind him of his identity as a marine and a killer and becomes a way to work through the traumatic experience of combat and of being an aggressor. The poem serves as a way to discuss how identity and memory are altered by violent encounters and how the experience of trauma comes to haunt individuals even in the most everyday tasks.

One of the most startling and effective aspects of the poem is its careful construction of an episode that appears innocent and superficial at first but gains significance which each line that follows. The poem appears to be about something unrelated to war and trauma and the experience of combat, until the last stanza, when the guilt of killing the bee serves as a “reminder” of the speaker’s identity as a killer. This

last stanza of the poem draws attention to the traumatic experiences that the speaker is working through and attempting to reconcile. In the beginning of the poem, the speaker intends to find a peaceful way to deal with the bee that has entered his home. He attempts to trap the bee in a cup by a wall and then slide a piece of paper underneath to trap the bee briefly until he can be released outside. Though the beginning of the poem describes the process of capturing and killing the bee and appears to be descriptive yet free from any lateral meaning, the last stanza reveals that the encounter discussed in the beginning is not really about killing a bee but about the complex relationship that the speaker had with carrying out his mission in Iraq. After the last stanza, lines like “I wanted so much/ for it to work./ the pacifistic glass-and-paper/ transport” can be understood as depictions of the speaker’s struggle to come to terms with what he has had to do and how his actions, though they were in line with what had to be done, haunt him. In the last lines, the guilt that the speaker feels presents a complex meditation on how his intentions do not align with his actions and how his time in the military has come to define how he perceives his identity. At its surface, the language of the poem discusses a bee. The last lines, however, provide clues for deciphering a tension that has existed below the surface of the poem all along: the traumatic experience that the speaker was unable to voice throughout.

The speaker’s previous traumatic experiences in the military as a marine emerge during this violent encounter to reinforce his perception of himself as an aggressor. An understanding of the poem as an allegory of the relationship between Iraqis and American soldiers helps to show how the victim/aggressor relationship haunts the speaker and makes him feel guilty. The speaker writes that he has the best intentions and

believes that the process of trapping the bee in order to release him will prevent the bee from harming himself. As the speaker notes, the bee was “striving” so hard to escape “he would break the window or himself.” In this struggle, however, both the soldier and the bee are victimized. The speaker’s inability to execute his well-intentioned plans to trap and then release the bee makes him feel culpable. The soldier becomes a victim of his conscience and the Iraqi (or the bee) is killed when the soldier miscalculates. As the speaker notes, he “pulled too firm/ too fast, trapped the bee hard/ by a wall he could not see or understand.” The bee may represent the Iraqi people whose country was destroyed when the United States invaded Iraq and removed Saddam Hussein from power. The speaker may believe that the military’s actions “trapped” the Iraqi people “by a wall” they could not “see or understand.” The wall, in this instance, may have been democracy—a form of helping that was filled with good intentions but ultimately failed. The poem becomes the speaker’s way of working through his perception of himself as an aggressor and highlights his unresolved feelings about committing violence. The speaker feels an immense amount of guilt, one that he describes as a “long, deep strobe” immediately after the bee has been “ripped ... cleanly in half.” His guilt is described as a “strobe”—a reverberation of a feeling that he remembers well. This wave of guilt brings a sense of frustration and hopelessness as the speaker narrates how he is haunted by his identity as aggressor—“a reminder” he tells us, “I don’t need.”

In her article, Schwab draws on Aimé Césaire and Ashis Nandy’s work to introduce the concept of isomorphic oppressions, which are: “about the fact that histories of violence create psychic deformations not only in the victims but also in the perpetrators” (101). In Lack’s poem, the struggle between the speaker and the bee, which

can be read as a commentary on the interaction between a soldier and Iraqis in combat, resonates with this idea that the speaker who perpetrates the violence in this poem suffers from it. The violent yet accidental act that destroys the bee reminds the speaker of his identity as an aggressor and allows us to read the poem as reminiscent of the U.S. military invasion of Iraq. With isomorphic oppressions, violent histories, if they are not worked through and reconciled, repeat across time in similar ways (101). The poem as a whole can be read as a form of repetition of violence that will continue until the traumatic experience has been reconciled within the individual who has perpetrated it.

Just as Bruce Lack's poem takes on more significance as a representation of trauma after its final stanzas, the traumatic experience recounted in Dunya Mikhail's Poem "Buzz," which describes a plane ride in which the speaker struggles to quell a noise in one of her ears, is revealed after careful analysis of the final lines. Mikhail's poem appears to describe the moments of relief from an encounter of violence, the moments when the speaker has finally been released from actual physical or emotional threats of violence. Although the traumatic experience is over, the speaker in this poem still suffers from the consequences of what has happened. The buzz in this poem haunts her and forces her to confront the ways in which she is altered by the circumstances that have passed. In our conversation, Mikhail discussed how the poem "Buzz" describes her journey out of Iraq and into the United States. Mikhail joked that often, the poem "Buzz" is overlooked by both herself and critics as a poem about exile, whereas her poem called "I was in a Hurry" is often discussed as the first poem written about her exile. According to Mikhail, "Buzz" was technically her first poem about exile because it describes her plane ride to the United States. My initial instinct was to discuss "Buzz" as a poem of

exile. However, Mikhail's comments about having written "Buzz" before she stepped onto U.S. soil elucidated the fact that "Buzz" is actually a poem of transition, a demarcation, a breaking away point that illuminates how writing is useful for understanding how individuals cope with, and write about, traumatic memories.

The poem as a whole focuses on a noise that the speaker hears on a plane as it takes off, which comes to serve as a referent for her trauma. The speaker is unable to stop this noise. It follows her and haunts her, serving as a signpost or physical embodiment of guilt and powerlessness. The buzz itself is un-relentless, and though it is issued forth from one of her ears, it comes to take over her senses and is so separate from her, so autonomous and overpowering, that she considers "tossing one of my ears,/ from the window" (25). The "annoying buzz that abrades" the speaker is depicted almost like an unshakeable sensation of guilt that she feels at having left her country, at having survived an oppressive totalitarian government. The buzz also symbolizes the speaker's sense of powerlessness—she cannot locate or stop the buzz that abrades her and even considers tossing part of her self—her ear—so that she may be free of it. Although the buzz appears to be innocent at first—after all, it is only a noise—the descriptions of it smelling "like gunpowder" (25) remind the reader that it is not simply an innocuous noise but a sort of referent for the memory of the violence. The buzz represents all that she has left behind and the psychic wound/injury that the speaker will continue to nurse even after the threat of danger has passed.

The poem self-consciously describes the disruption of language that the buzz results in as a way to represent how trauma resists representation and disrupts the ability to communicate. When the speaker complains that the "buzz smells like gunpowder/ and

trips the pretty words,” the gunpowder can be read as the aftermath of the violent encounter, which “trips” and stops the pretty words (25). The buzz seems to work against the words, halting them and very briefly taking away from the grace and beauty of their presentation. In the end, the buzz acts like an invasive traumatic memory that overwhelms the speaker and halts her ability to communicate with others and to represent what she has been through in a meaningful way. The feeling of powerlessness against the invasive traumatic memory is exacerbated when the speaker notes that “the stewardess doesn’t know/ why I block my ear with my hand/ and puff out images of smoke” (25). In these lines, the speaker is literally unable to communicate what has happened. What comes out of her mouth are images of smoke—words that are at odds with the grim and terrifying reality they aim to reveal. The “images of smoke” describe both the discord between representation and reality—how describing trauma means almost nothing to someone who has not experienced it—and the dialectic of trauma whereby representation is required for healing but the traumatic moment resists representation (25). At the same time, the line describing the speaker cupping her ear to block the buzz suggests that she is attempting to stop the traumatic memory from expanding and from being released; she is attempting to contain the trauma. Schwab writes that “the very act of writing is always already a form of containment” (116). The poem “Buzz” itself serves as an attempt to contain and to give a shape to the speaker’s trauma—an injury that she not yet certain of the extent of damage that it will have on her. The speaker uses her hand (without which writing would not be possible) to give trauma a locatable and contained shape.

The last four lines of the poem serve as a sort of entry point into understanding and interpreting the poem, they serve as the suggestion that “conceal[s] and yet retain[s] a

revealing trace” (Schwab 108). The line “images of smoke” takes on a greater significance and new meaning in the wake of the last four lines of the poem. When Mikhail writes, “ I don’t remember what I wanted to say./ I don’t want to say/ what I remember” (25) the entire poem comes to be understood as a depiction of the moments after escaping a traumatic experience. It is a self-conscious meditation on how language fails to fully depict the traumatic experience. These lines beg to be noticed, but they also hold back. The poem encrypts the traumatic memory and hints at it, confusing us because we long to know more about what the speaker won’t discuss when in reality the speaker is trying to tell us that we wouldn’t or couldn’t understand it even if she told us. The poem hides the trauma and makes motions towards the hidden and unrepresentable truth but ultimately dwells not on the trauma but the issue of its unrepresentability. The speaker focuses on the struggle to contain what is so volatile and terrible and what sows so much turmoil that it resists containment.

The poem self-consciously locates and describes how the traumatic moment alters identity and how the memory of it comes to define the individual. Mikhail writes in the poem “I don’t know why/ the memories grow/ while I shrink,” (25) outlining how the speaker’s memories slowly take over. This line demonstrates how her identity is fragmented as she leaves the traumatic moment—the situation that causes the injury—and enters the stage of memory—the haunting that fragments her identity and causes her to feel as if she has shrunk, as if she is less of herself. This line also represents the fragmentation of her identity by narrating the experience from a different vantage point. It is as if the speaker is watching herself leave her home, watching herself disappear into nothing. In light of this line, an earlier line gains significance. In the earlier line, the

tension between who the speaker was and who she has become is explored through the focus on the buzzing ear, whose presence, sound, and smell assaults the delicate ear spewing “pretty words” and silences it (25). Schwab argues that in the attempt to relate stories of traumatic experiences “words could be split into what they said and what they did not say” (97). Mikhail’s poem capitalizes on this tension between the said and unsaid to deflect from her exploration of representing the traumatic memory. The poem ends on Herman’s idea of “dissociation” or “double think” whereby traumatized individuals “simultaneously call attention to the existence of an unspeakable secret and deflect attention from it” (1). This central dialectic of trauma threatens meaning making if the trauma is not explored and reconciled. The poem offers no consolation or concluding remarks as to the buzz. It simply depicts the tension of representing and relating the irresolvable and troubling traumatic memory.

In this chapter, my exploration of trauma in the writings of Iraqis and American veterans of the Iraq War resulted in varying accounts and representations of how traumatic experiences affect individuals. In many of the poems, memories of trauma haunt the speakers and overcome their ability to recover and build an identity that is not tainted by the traumatic experience. The poems deliberate over how trauma fragments one’s identity and memory and renders an individual powerless to change their fate. The ability of traumatic experiences to reinforce one’s perception of oneself as an aggressor or victim is explored in one of the poems. In some of the poems, the extent of the trauma is only revealed towards the end of the poem, when a few lines reveal how the speaker is haunted by a traumatic experience that resists representation.



All of the poems in this chapter, however, are meditations on the consequences of violence and the effects of trauma. Despite the fact that they explore traumatic symptoms and the consequences of violence, simply working through and documenting and representing these experiences entails a sort of meaning-making that is characteristic of a state of exile. Writing requires authors to consider different perspectives and to make meaning out of experience. For Iraqis and American veterans, this meaning making process is often concerned with traumatic memories of the war. In a sense, all poems, whether they are about violence or trauma are written from a state of exile.

### CHAPTER THREE : EXILE

To live in exile is to live in a state of nostalgia, a state of unfulfilled desire for a past, for a home that cannot be reclaimed. Exile is also a state of being that is necessarily in between—one can neither go back to what one desires nor integrate into one’s present moment. In his important essay “Reflections on Exile,” the influential critic and author of *Orientalism*, Edward Said, argues that exile is “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted” (173). Emphasizing how difficult exile is to overcome, Said argues that literature’s attempts to portray it as heroic simplify the experience and do not account for the struggle. Although Said’s account of exile is geographically based, it provides a helpful framework for understanding psychic exile, which works in similar ways in that the individuals who experience it feel as if they are unable to return or be reconciled with an identity that they once had. The idea of psychic exile takes the geographical-based idea of home and makes it into a state of mind. It is not that one cannot physically return home—it is that they do not feel at home.

In my thesis, I expand the definition of exile to include the idea of a sort of psychic/emotional condition whereby an individual feels alienated and isolated from their home because of the circumstances that they have encountered. More than just a status, exile is also a sort of identity that an individual assumes and must come to terms with. This expanded definition of exile allows us to consider how the poems of Iraqis (both exiles and civilians) and American veterans intersect in their depictions of alienation and isolation. In an interview with Robin Young of National Public Radio (NPR), Brian Turner explains that he is “starting to believe it is not really possible to come home

completely. I'm not sure other soldiers would agree, but there is a feeling we live in two countries and I have to find some way for those two to co-exist" (Young). In this interview, Turner discusses the difficulty he encounters in leaving behind his experiences in Iraq. Even though the war is over, he is still very much connected to what he experienced in Iraq and feels compelled to reconcile the two worlds that he is caught between. Exiles bring back the weight of experiences that they have had to grapple with in their new surroundings and must reconcile their new worldview, which is altered by leaving, with the circumstances of their present reality.

In this chapter, the experience of exile is represented in varied ways in the poems of Iraqis and American veterans of the Iraq War. The poem "Doors" by Iraqi exile poet Adnan Al Sayegh, explores the idea that exile is a psychological state of being that separates an individual from their identity. The idea that agency and power over oneself distinguish the experience of exile from the experience of trauma and that exile is a state of being that is actively chosen is explored in the poem "Croaking" by Abdul-Kareem Kasid. In the poem "Turntables" by American veteran of the Iraq War Nathan Lewis, identifying as an exile gives him a new perspective that allows him to protest the war by exploring what the war would have been like had it taken place in the United States. Finally, in an article for *The New Yorker*, Dexter Filkins writes about an Iraq war veteran who recently sought out the Iraqi family that he had hurt during his time in Iraq. In this story, what differentiates exile from trauma is that exile entails a journey of meaning making that facilitates dialogue and allows exiles to use their new identity to depict the negative costs of war.

In the poem “Doors” by Adnan Al-Sayegh, translated by Soheil Najm, in the anthology *Flowers of Flame*, the speaker describes a state of separation or solitude that highlights the idea of psychological exile and the struggle to be reunited with an aspect of one’s identity that cannot be reclaimed. The poem’s speaker writes about the experience of exile as the experience of being separated from oneself. This sense of alienation from one’s own identity is depicted through the image of a series of un-ending doors separating the speaker from himself. Each door encountered resembles the speaker, who is filled with hope for reconciliation and reunion with himself but is continually disappointed to find that his journey continues. This poem serves as an eloquent and haunting exploration of psychic exile and describes the frustrating and emotional struggle to return to a state of being that can never be reclaimed.

Although the poem highlights the sense of bitterness and dashed hope that the speaker feels each time he opens a door only to see “nothing but another door” (76), it does not communicate a sense of futility about this endeavor. First, the doors that the speaker writes about are ambiguously described—they are shaped like him and provide him with enough hope that he continues to open them: “I open it/ I don’t see myself, but a door/ Shaped like me” (76). Doors are also traditionally transitional spaces that carry the possibility of new opportunities. The speaker’s continuous knocking and opening of the doors shows how there is a sense of agency and an exertion of power to pursue these opportunities further. Though he fruitlessly chases door after door, there is a sense that the speaker seems to have some control. Although the speaker encounters great difficulty in attempting to be reconciled with himself, he continues his attempts. Exile is depicted as a struggle (a difficult journey of meaning-making) and when the speaker asks in

frustration about “how many doors” will continue to separate him from himself, he suggests that he will continue to struggle. The effort, however futile, is a choice undertaken by the author. In my conversation with Iraqi exile poet and editor of *Flowers of Flame*, Haider Al-Kabi, we discussed how exile made him feel as if he had been shattered and fragmented and separated from himself. Al-Kabi noted, “When I came to the United States I was already 40. I belonged to Iraq, culturally, in my mindset, my memories, my education.” (Al-Kabi Personal Interview). Even though Al-Kabi did his best to assimilate, his struggles are similar to what is described in this poem of feeling separated from oneself. Al-Kabi was able to build a life for himself in the United States, but he chose to retain his status as an exile even though it may have been easier to assimilate and forget about the war in Iraq.

Whereas trauma is a condition characterized by a sense of powerlessness (Herman 33), exile is characterized by a sort of determined attachment to an identity that may be easier to forget or shed. Furthermore, trauma is a condition that halts or represses meaning-making faculties but exile provides the opportunity to make meaning of one’s condition. Trauma and exile may be conditions that are experienced concurrently. A victim of trauma may not necessarily be an exile, but an exile, by nature, has experienced some form of trauma—even if it is only the trauma of losing one’s home or being exiled from oneself. After a violent encounter, a traumatized individual may never return to who they were before and must form a new identity as part of the process of recovery (Herman 202). According to Judith Herman, survivors are no longer controlled by the traumatic experience, they have possession of themselves and use this agency to construct their identity, they “[draw] upon those aspects of [themselves] that [they] most

[value] from the time before the trauma, from the experience of trauma itself, and from the period of recovery” (202). They may also at that point—the moments after violence—begin to feel like exiles. For a traumatized person, forming an identity is integral to the healing process, whether the traumatized person chooses to create an identity that allows them to move past thinking about the trauma or to create an identity that gives them authority to speak out is part of what makes them an exile. An exile harnesses the pain of the trauma and chooses to speak out on issues related to their suffering.

The label of exile may be eventually shed or forgotten; the key idea is that the individual is able to choose if and when they will no longer be an exile. In a phone conversation with me, Nathan Lewis noted that his time in the military gave him a new perspective and resulted in his interest in activism and poetry. Despite the fact that he found his activism and writing fulfilling, Lewis noted that it could be emotionally draining and that one day he would like to move on: “maybe someday I’ll get the war down maybe ... put away the veteran hat for a while. You’ll never be able to fully shed it but maybe stop focusing on it as an identity and stop focusing on that experience” (Lewis Personal Interview). In the case of trauma, some measure of forgetting is necessary in order to integrate and feel hopeful in living life. According to Schwab, forgetting or silencing traumatic memories is sometimes conducive to survival because, “some histories, collective and personal, are so violent we would not be able to live our daily lives if we did not at least temporarily silence them” (100). Exile is political because it involves willful remembering of the trauma. Exile has a political connotation in the modern era because unlike in previous times when an exile would be condemned to being an outsider forever, exiles today have the opportunity to integrate or assimilate into most

societies and forget their ties to their country of origin. To be an exile, one must hold on to the traumatic experience of loss in order to make a political statement. As Edward Said notes, exiles “[clutch] difference like a weapon to be used with stiffened will, the exile jealously insists on his or her right to refuse to belong” (182). Said contends that exiles hold on to or “clutch” exile like a “weapon” that they are unwilling to let go of because they feel that their very existence is threatened. According to Said, exiles actively “insist” on not belonging and his use of the word “jealously” highlights this need to reclaim some power over one’s own fate. Even geographically exiled individuals must decide whether they will remain psychically exiled. If they do not wish to be exiles any longer, then they become expatriates or integrate and take on a new identity as citizens of another country. Similarly, a veteran may integrate and choose to identify as a civilian once more, or they may hold onto their identity in order to make a social, cultural, or political statement.

Abdul-Kareem Kasid’s one page poem “Croaking” explores the idea of exile as an identity that one must struggle to hold onto. Translated by Sadek Mohamed in *Flowers of Flame*, the poem describes the speaker’s frustration with being an exile: “I cannot stand exile anymore/ And it cannot stand me” (66). The speaker in Kasid’s poem names the source of his discomfort, and in a few words, articulates the condition of exile. The speaker cannot stand to live away from his home and his country. At the same moment he is also unwilling to forget or move on to become anything other than an exile from Iraq. In this poem, exile is personified—it becomes a person or a thing that the speaker cannot tolerate or accept. The speaker wishes to rid himself of exile, “to lose it like I have lost my homeland,” but unlike his homeland, exile is not a place or person or thing; it is a

status—a state of being with which he chooses to identify (66). For the speaker, losing his status as an exile would also mean losing an identity that he treasures.

Through his fear that he might lose himself, the speaker represents the agency and will entailed in retaining the identity of an exile. The speaker fears that if he loses his status as an exile in this new setting by integrating, rather than going back home and ceasing to be an exile, that “I will lose myself as well” (66). The hunger to return home and to feel at home characterizes the struggle of exile. However, what the speaker fears more than anything is that the loss of exile shall mean the loss of his connection to his homeland, which is a defining aspect of his identity. If the speaker is an Iraqi exile, then he is still, at the very least, an Iraqi. If he loses the status of “exile” and gains a new identity as a citizen or resident of another land, then he is separated not only physically but also psychically from his homeland—and thus loses himself by becoming someone else (66).

The poem highlights the speaker’s determination to remain an exile and the sort of power that an exile can assert in retaining this identity. In the last two ambiguous lines, the speaker notes that when he loses himself and forgoes his identity as an exile, he “shall stand erect like a hungry crow/ And paint the whole world with my croaking” (66). The exiled speaker depicts himself as a hungry scavenger with no home—croaking—issuing an annoying and unpleasant sound that calls attention to himself. These lines signal the speaker’s desire to protest his exile with “croaking” and to resist falling into silence and being ignored (66). He refuses to lose himself through assimilating or belonging to his new location, to borrow the words of Edward Said, he holds on to difference “jealously.”



Exiles cling to their difference because it provides them with the ability to see and promote a new perspective, often one that emphasizes the negative costs of war and violence. Exiles harness the pain and the difficulty of trauma to seek or create meaning. In the article “Speaking the Language of Exile,” Richard L. Ashley and R.B.J. Walker discuss the idea that the struggles that exiles experience are tools for their dissidence that allow them to generate new perspectives and “new, often distinct ... but always dissident ways of thinking” (263). Ashley and Walker contend that “ambiguity, uncertainty, and the ceaseless questioning of identity—these are resources of the exiles” (263). The very things that make exile painful—uncertainty of identity, an inability or refusal to occupy a definitive state within cultural or social surroundings—are the tools for creating meaning and observing new perspectives. Drawing on Julia Kristeva and Michel Foucault, Ashley and Walker argue that these resources make possible dissidence or “the politicizing work of thought” (263). They provide a space where it is possible to think independently and where, “the limits authored from one or another sovereign standpoint can be questioned and transgressed, hitherto closed off cultural connections can be explored, and new cultural resources can be cultivated thereby” (Ashley and Walker 263). What is made available through the social and cultural alienation of psychological exile is the ability to question and think freely.

Although Said discouraged labeling exile as a positive state of being, since loss is inherent in uprootedness, he suggests that exile can function as a positive force whereby an individual who has lost a particular land can begin to claim all lands and define his/her identity with respect to the international world (186). Said contends that perceiving the entire world as strange provides an individual with added perspective; he writes: “Most

people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions” (186). As Abdullah Al-Dabbagh, author of “The Poetics of Exile and Identity” notes, Said’s positive perspective on exile is something that generations of poets have shared: “Feeling at home, so to speak, in the universe as a whole, after having been exiled from one’s native town, or country, is an experience that extends from ... medieval times to the multicultural writers of our own globalist era” (6). This notion that one must accept the painful experience of exile is, according to Al-Dabbagh, necessary as the “journey that it entails, of new spaces, new discoveries and new perspectives, is precisely what the poet needs to trigger his creativity. Exile becomes the perfect setting for the defamiliarization necessary to initiate the artistic process” (6). The defamiliarization that occurs in exile stimulates the poet to consider new perspectives in writing.

American veteran of the Iraq War, Nathan Lewis, feels exiled by his experiences as a soldier in Iraq and he uses the perspective gained through his time in the military to protest war in his poetry. In the poem “Turntables” in the Warrior Writers anthology *After Action Review*, the speaker describes what the war with Iraq would have looked like had it taken place on American soil and uses events and images from the actual war to imagine and depict an alternate reality. The poem’s use of actual events to highlight what war would have looked like highlights the idea voiced by Edward Said that “For an exile, habits of life, expression, or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment” (186). Said’s idea that an exile always compares events across two environments and that a new perspective is generated through this process illuminates how Lewis’s poem seeks to provide a new perspective

on the war by showing what the cost of war is when it is waged in one's own country. In the poem, the speaker humanizes Iraqis and de-mystifies Iraqi culture by imagining that their reactions to a war waged abroad would be similar to the US's experience of the Iraq War.

The poem as a whole offers a protest of war that claims authority because of its author's status as a veteran. Lewis was exposed to combat, and this exposure gives him a different perspective on war. In the poem, he attempts to humanize and make concrete the consequences of war for Iraqis. One of the speaker's most startling observations about what war would look like if it were carried out on American soil is: "Iraq soldiers would take re-enlistment oaths under the St. Louis arch, in the shadow of the Washington Monument. Two hundred thousand protestors march down Haifa Street demanding an end to the war. Iraqi veterans return to mosques, classrooms and Parliament to speak about the murder and destruction. The war crimes" (11). In these lines, Lewis takes events that happened in reality—soldiers taking re-enlistment oaths in Iraq, protestors of the Iraq war in cities across the United States, and American Veterans warning the public about the negative costs of war in Churches, classrooms and congress—and switches their location. These lines humanize the Iraqis whose country has been wrought by devastation. What Lewis's poem also suggests is that Iraqi's are unable to protest and discuss "the murder and destruction. The war crimes" because they are so preoccupied with trying to survive. Lewis's status as an exile propels and catalyzes his protest of the war through poetry. His effort to make evident the "unjust sting of occupation" clarifies how his exile makes it possible to see a new perspective (11). In my phone interview with Lewis, we discussed how his time in the military was the catalyst for his writing and

activism. Lewis said, “The war made me a writer. I wanted to write to try to make sense of the experience and use it as a tool for activism. I want people to be forced to think about it and interact with it, and create a dialogue” (Lewis Personal Interview). For Lewis, writing and activism became a way to cope with trauma and to make meaning of his experiences.

The meaning-making process that exiles often seek out is highlighted in the recent article for *The New Yorker* “Atonement: A Troubled Iraq veteran Seeks Out the Family he Harmed.” In this article, author Dexter Filkins writes about the extraordinary friendship that emerges between an Iraq War veteran and the Iraqi immigrant family that he had harmed years earlier during his service. The story highlights the veteran Lu Lobello’s journey to make meaning out of the haunting experiences of combat. Filkins begins the story by explaining Lobello’s struggle to re-integrate into his life after his return to the United States. Lobello was haunted by his work in Iraq and, more specifically, by an encounter with the Kachadoorian family—of whom three members were killed by Lobello’s company on April 16, 2003. It was during this encounter that Lobello came face to face with a reality of the war so grotesque and so damaging that he was unable to forget what he had done and what he had been a part of. The image that haunts Lobello in “a grocery store, in a parking lot” is the image of a “blood-soaked Iraqi infant,” held by his mother, who was killed in the firing he participated in with his company during a moment when they believed their lives were at risk (Filkins 92). Lobello says that he wanted to speak with the Kachadoorian family he had harmed not to issue “an apology for my actions. I just want to show them that I recognize the sacrifice that they put up. They gave up far more in that couple of hours than any one of us did.

Whether or not one of the marines got shot that day, none of us lost our father, none of us lost our two brothers” (qtd. in Filkins 98). Lobello explains that looking for the family of his victims was not simply about locating them physically but about how “it allowed me to give meaning to this experience that all of us had shared and none of us understood” (qtd. in Filkins 98). For Lobello, the search for finding the Kachadoorian family was a public journey of meaning-making—Lobello set up a Facebook page in his search for the Kachadoorians. Lobello did not want to move on and forget. In order to find peace, he felt the need to make meaning out of his experiences by conversing with the family that he hurt during the war.

What is important about Lobello’s story is that his exile began when he left the military, and it was an exile rooted in the loss of friends and a community that absolved him of his culpability. Lobello’s involvement in the military gave him access to such a community, a group of individuals who could understand what he had been through. “No one who hasn’t been in a war can understand what it’s like,” Lobello explains, “For men, it’s like childbirth. We have no idea” (qtd. in Filkins 97). In a conversation with veteran Bruce Lack, we discussed his experience of coming back from his service and the sense of isolation that arose from being separated from his colleagues and platoon mates. According to Lack, the process of coming home was difficult because “you lose your safety net, you lose all the people that you could have talked to about it ... when you yourself get out, you lose them all at once.” Just like Lu Lobello, Lack felt as if he had been separated from the only individuals who could understand what he had been through. Lobello’s exile was rooted in his separation from the military, and this alienation made him feel as if he had to take matters into his own hands and “figure things out on

his own” (Filkins 97). In the article, Filkins noted that Lobello defined himself by his involvement in the marines and that his separation from that made him feel exiled from the “main source of his identity” (97). Lobello’s separation from the military spurred his search for the Kachadoorian family and allowed him to gain a different perspective on his original encounter with the family. After speaking with the Kachadoorian family, Lobello felt like there was “a kind of equivalence between him and his victims” and that “of all the people in the world, no one else could better understand what happened” (Filkins 102). The Kachadoorian family also embraced Lobello, and this embrace paradoxically seems to relate the fact that both the Kachadoorians and Lobello are exiles. Both are unable and unwilling to forget what has happened, how their lives have been irrevocably tainted by war. The Kachadoorian family forgave Lobello but reminded him that they could not forget their loss: “We forgive you, but don’t think we forget our dears” (qtd. in Filkins 103). Lobello and the Kachadoorian’s unwillingness to forget highlights how their exile brought them together in their desire to make meaning out of this traumatic experience.

We learned in the previous chapter that trauma is the aftermath of violence. Exile, however, as it has been described and portrayed by Iraqi exiles and civilian poets as well as American veterans of the Iraq War, seems to be a simultaneous condition that differs from trauma in many important and fundamental ways. Trauma, as a condition, highlights an individual’s sense of powerlessness and weakness (Herman 33). Exile, however, is an identity that one assumes to resist the disenfranchising power of the traumatic experience. In this chapter, the poetry and stories that I examine depict exile as a psychic rather than geographic state of being that separates an individual from a

previous identity. Exiles also choose to hold onto their difference as it affords them an additional perspective that is authoritative because of their experiences. Exile is a painful, difficult, and uncomfortable state characterized by a sense of profound loss and longing for what cannot be reclaimed. Nonetheless, writing as an exile affords agency and reclamation of self-power. The state of exile negates the powerlessness of trauma and serves as a way to protest war and highlight its negative consequences by giving testimony to the sufferer's sacrifices.

## CONCLUSION

As I examined Dexter Filkin's article "Atonement" for my chapter on exile, I found it difficult to restrain my analysis to only the aspects that dealt with exile. By detailing veteran Lu Lobello's story and allowing us to understand and get to know what he has experienced, Filkins also takes us through this veteran's process of recovery from a traumatic experience. This journey of recovery highlights and explores all three of the themes that I have examined in this thesis. Lobello's experience highlights the terrible consequences of violence for both himself and the Kachadoorian family whom he hurt during a moment of uncertainty, confusion, and chaos in the early days of the Iraq War after the fall of Saddam Hussein. One particularly important quote by Lobello in the article notes that it was difficult to stop firing once they had begun. Lobello's comments discuss how violence takes over and negates the perpetrator's humanity. According to Filkins, Lobello discussed the firing that injured and killed members of the Kachadoorian family and said, "A lot of times, I think what happened was, somebody would realize, Fuck, dude, we're not shooting the right people. But it was like the beast was already going. You can't say hold on, stop, wait—no way. No way..." (99). Lobello's comments about being unable to stop or halt the shooting once he had begun illustrate my argument about how violence takes over and negates the humanity of both the aggressor and his/her victims. Lobello also experienced severe post-traumatic stress symptoms that impaired his ability to stay in the military. According to Filkins, Lobello was demoted, stripped of his rank, and eventually discharged from the marines (97). The symptoms of his trauma took over his life and he suffered in multiple ways. At the same time, Lobello was also feeling exiled and isolated from anyone who could understand what he was going



through. It was this state, however, that became the impetus for his search for the Kachadoorians (97). His search turned into a journey that would allow him to make meaning out of his traumatic experiences and to be reconciled with the Kachadoorian family who he needed to make amends with.

My analysis of the themes of violence, trauma, and exile in the poetry that comes out of the Iraq War is the first attempt to engage Iraqi and American veteran poets in a dialogue about the consequences and effects of war. I hope that it will not be the last. There is still much work to be done in analyzing fiction and non-fiction narratives as well as film. I believe that much can be learned from the process of putting into conversation two groups who are perceived as opposites. Additionally, dialogue between the two groups—whether it is written or spoken—is important both for literary criticism but also for reconciling and dealing with the collective traumatic impact of the Iraq War. In an important section of her article on writing and traumatic memories, Schwab draws on the work of Aimé Césaire and Ashis Nandy to discuss “the dialectics of isomorphic oppression” or how violence persists and continues to play an active role in the ways both victims and perpetrators of violence remember and write about trauma. Recalling Simone Weil’s argument about violence and its negative consequences for both victims and aggressors, this important idea posits that the perpetrators of violence turn into what they try to “destroy in the other” (Schwab 101). Isomorphic oppressions are a system whereby the consequences of violence are internalized in the perpetrator, and if they are not worked through and responsibility for the history of violence is not acknowledged, the mentality that contributed to the initial perpetration of violence will continue in a “terrific boomerang effect” where violence is perpetrated unknowingly once more (Schwab 101).

In order to avoid the “boomerang effect” of isomorphic oppressions, one must represent the unrepresentable and reveal what has been purposefully hidden in representations of trauma. If this is not done, then these silenced traumatic histories will be passed on.

In an interview with NPR, Lobello discussed the importance of telling stories that highlight the negative costs of war. Lobello stressed that it is important to pay attention to the perspective of Iraqi civilians who have suffered from the war. According to Lobello, the focus on the American perspective and heroism of soldiers tends to miss the other part of war that victimizes the innocent. Lobello noted that telling the stories of civilians is important because, “you will always have innocent civilians killed” (Gross). Lobello hoped that the telling of these stories would prompt people to “think twice the next time we decide to go somewhere and have these battles, or maybe at least we'll come up with some programs to take better care of these people that are caught in the crossfire” (Gross).

Although it is naive of me to think that writing and dialogue can put a stop to all wars and forms of violence, I do believe that it is important to make these efforts. Even if it is impossible to end wars, it is important to struggle and make attempts to reach out to others and educate them about the costs of war. Poetry, and indeed all literature cannot fix the bleak facts of war. They do, however, bear witness to the consequences of this violence, and show how the effects of war endure for those who have lived through it. The Iraq War may be over politically but for the individuals who have suffered and been sacrificed, the struggle to recover has only just begun.

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