



MORAL INJURY, WAR & RECLAIMING THE SOUL

Discussion Series
The Military Graphic Novel



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE
Humanities

The Warrior's Path: Moral Injury, War and Reclaiming the Soul **Discussion Guide for Vet-to-Vet Group with *The White Donkey***

The discussion group series is purposefully designed to provide you the time and support to reflect on and discuss experiences with war and moral injury (of the characters or yourself should you choose to). You will have the opportunity to develop your own stories, through writing scenes or poems.

Location: Military and Veterans Resource Center (MAVRC) UW-Milwaukee Student Union, Room WG-99

Schedule: 5 discussions, 1x per week, 90 min, 30 min optional story creation
Thursdays 6-7:30pm Jan. 24-Feb. 21, 2019

Day 1: *The White Donkey* by Maximilian Uriarte, pp. 1-92, and "A Break from the Bush" by Yusef Komunyakaa Why does one join the military? What are some main differences between civilian and military life?

Theme: **Collectivism: becoming a member of the military**

Day 2: *The White Donkey* by Maximilian Uriarte, pp. 93-147, and "A Taste of Afghanistan" by Rob Densmore and "For the Missing in Action" by John Balaban. How do members of the military deal with the moral ambiguity of killing in wartime? How do they deal with not knowing who the enemy really is?

Theme: **Uncertainty and Ambiguity of War: the foreshadowing of moral injury**

Day 3: *The White Donkey* by Maximilian Uriarte, pp. 147-166 and "Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" by Randall Jarrell How do you assess the level of danger in wartime situations? What are causes of arguments with comrades? What happens to your mind after a comrade dies in combat?

Theme: **Mental Agility and the Reality of War: the onset of moral injury**

Day 4: *The White Donkey* by Maximilian Uriarte, pp.166-182 and "At Lowe's Home Improvement Center" by Brian Turner What is survivor's guilt? Why does death emphasize the need to know what one believes in or wants?

Theme: **Survivor's Guilt: the moral injury of a comrade's death**

Day 5: *The White Donkey* by Maximilian Uriarte, pp.183-167) and "Therapy" by D.A.Gray, "i should be sleep lord" by Toni Topps, "PTSD" by Chantelle Bateman Can moral injury be reconciled? Should it be?

Theme: **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Moral Injury: how to reconcile?**

Discussion One, January 24, 2019—Notes for Discussion Leaders

Pages 1-92 of *The White Donkey*

Theme: Becoming a Soldier

- reasons for joining the military;
- differences between civilian and military life;
- the effect of living with constant danger as well as boredom

6:00-6:20—Paperwork and Introductions (ask how many could stay for 20-30 minutes after). Depending on what they say, either go ahead with the Comparison/Experience Template at 7:30 or just give it out for “enrichment”—they can do whatever they want with it in the week to come.)

6:20-7:00 (White Donkey)—Leader #1—full group discussion

- Begin by asking volunteer participants to take turns reading aloud these three dialogues between Abe and Garcia:
 - pp. 6-7
 - pp. 38-39
 - pp. 48-49
 - After each dialogue, ask the following questions:
 - What does this dialogue help to reveal about the differences between the two main characters?
 - what does each character most want? why? what is standing in their way (if anything)?
 - **Personal Experience:** What, if anything, do you see of yourself in either Abe or Garcia?
 - Why did you join the military?
- Ask for six volunteers to read for whole group the section where Abe and Garcia go back to Abe’s home in Portland, Oregon (pp. 67-78—Abe, Garcia, Kirsten, Sam, Jen, friend at Pancake House) **BREAK INTO SMALL GROUPS**

7:00-7:15 — (White Donkey) Leaders #1 and #2—two small group discussions on above

- **Personal Experience:** Do you recognize anything in common with what you experienced when you went on leave?
- What did you experience as the biggest conflict between military and civilian cultures?

- Look at the following pages: (61-65, p. 92)
 - **Might these scenes set up some aspect or incident of moral injury? why do you think so? what do you think will come next?**
 - **Personal Experience: How did you live with both constant danger and constant boredom? Did you ever have a sense of what would happen next?**

7:15-7:30-- “Break from the Bush”—Leaders #1 and #2—two small group discussions

Use the handout with the poem “A Break from the Bush” as the basis for this discussion as time allows. If time runs out, suggest that participants finish reading through it and using it for an additional opportunity to reflect on their own experience.

Poems and Prompts:

A Break from the Bush by Yusef Komunyakaa*

The South China Sea
drives in another herd.
The volleyball's a punching bag:
Clem's already lost a tooth
& Johnny's left eye is swollen shut.
Frozen airlifted steaks burn
on a wire grill, & miles away
machine guns can be heard.
Pretending we're somewhere else,
we play harder.
Lee Otis, the point man,
high on Buddha grass,
buries himself up to his neck
in sand. "Can you see me now?
In this spot they gonna build
a Hilton. Invest in Paradise.
Bang, bozos! You're dead."
Frenchie's cassette player
unravels Hendrix's "Purple Haze."
Snake, 17, from Daytona,
sits at the water's edge,
the ash on his cigarette
pointing to the ground
like a crooked finger. CJ,
who in three days will trip
a fragmentation mine,
runs after the ball
into the whitecaps,
laughing

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*After graduating from Bogalusa's Central High School in 1965, Komunyakaa enlisted in the United States Army to begin a tour of duty in Vietnam. As a correspondent for and later editor of the military newspaper, The Southern Cross, Komunyakaa mastered a journalistic style that he would use later to write poems about his time in war. He was awarded the Bronze Star for his work with the paper.

After leaving the army in the early 1970s, Komunyakaa enrolled at the University of Colorado, receiving a B.A. in 1975. While at Colorado, he discovered his nascent abilities as a poet in a creative writing workshop. The workshop, notes the author, was the first chance he had to write for himself. Even though he had long been an avid reader of poetry and a lover of literature, his attempts to write creatively--mainly short stories--had been unsuccessful.

Inspired by his newfound love and talent, Komunyakaa went on to earn an M.A. from Colorado State University in 1978. Meanwhile, he continued to practice his art, self-publishing two limited editions, Dedications and Other Darkhorses (1977) and Lost in the Bonewheel Factory (1979).

He left Colorado State to earn an M.F.A. from the University of California at Irvine in 1980. That same year, he joined the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center, a closely knit community of artists geared toward encouraging the self-conscious, individualistic writer. Being in residence at the work center, the author felt, gave him an opportunity to develop his own voice. There he gained a deeper understanding of himself as a writer and as a human being, an acute awareness that he strives to express in his poetry. Komunyakaa says this of a poet's quest--a search fulfilled for him by his unique workshop experience: "a sort of unearthing has to take place; sometimes one has to remove layers of facades and superficialities. The writer has to get down to the guts of the thing and rediscover the basic timbre of his or her existence."

Fourteen years after leaving Vietnam, Komunyakaa began recording his war experiences in verse. The two collections that specifically chronicle those experiences, Toys in a Field (1987) and Dien Cai Dau (1988), place him among the most notable of the soldier-poets. The latter volume made the 1988 Young Adults/American Library Association "Best Books for Young Adults" list. Several of the poems have been translated into a number of languages, and, in 1989, many were included in W. D. Ehrharts's anthology, Unaccustomed Mercy: Soldier-Poets of the Vietnam War.

Points to Ponder; Reflect on/Share Your Own Experience

- Read the poem aloud.
- Who is the narrator of the poem? How do you know?
- Where does the action of the poem take place? How do you know?
- Do you think the poem captures the clash between normal/civilian life and military/war life in the same way as in *The White Donkey* or not?
- There are six other people described briefly in the poem.
 - Clem/Johnny/Lee Otis/Frenchie/Snake/CJ

Which one is most like you or Abe (in *The White Donkey*) and why?

- **Look at these words and phrases in the poem handout:**

herd, punching bag, swollen, airlifted, machine guns, bang, bozos! you're dead, unravels, ash, crooked, fragmentation

Together or individually, what might they suggest about moral injury?

- Read aloud the **last five or six lines** of the poem—**How do they make you feel?**

Prompts for the start of possible individual writing:

- **Three things you would tell people “back home” that they need to know about soldiers in combat**
- **Three pictures or images to describe your own “breaks” from active combat during your service**
- **Three things you might say to any medals you received as a result of your service.**

Discussion Two, January 31, 2019—Notes for Discussion Leaders

Pages 93-147 of *The White Donkey*

Theme: Coping with Uncertainty and Ambiguity

- the moral/religious ambiguity of killing in wartime;
- not knowing who the enemy really is;
- the foreshadowing of moral injury

6:00-6:15—Whole Group—Co-leaders:

Field questions or comments about the discussion/poem handout from last time:

Spend no more than fifteen minutes; if no one suggests anything, go with first two bullet points if not already covered in last week's discussion:

- **How might the scenes on pp. 61-5, p. 92) be setting up some aspect or incident of moral injury?**
- **What did flashbacks show about Abe's character as well as conflict between military and civilian cultures?**

6:20-7:00 (White Donkey)—Leaders #1 and #2—small group discussions (pp. 93-147)

- Note that this section covers a time period of months—point out times marked before scenes on pages 112, 122, 144.
 - **What to you were the most significant scenes in this section that might suggest the onset of a moral injury?**

LET PARTICIPANTS CHOOSE SCENES—YOU MAY HAVE TIME FOR ONLY TWO OR THREE (**see suggested scenes below***). Give time to read over the scene/read it aloud:

- **What do we learn about the characters in the one you chose?**
- **How might it relate to the theme of “ambiguity and uncertainty”?**

*Suggested scenes:

- **aftermath of Abe's shooting at car (130-35)***
- **Garcia on killing (canteen)—135-6***
- **Iraqi policeman (144-7)***
- checkpoint scene (96-9)
- donkey (99-100), 106
- fired on by sniper (117)
- checkpoint and donkey (124-7)
- animal on road, woman's eyes—137-8

Personal Experience:

- When did you ever experience a feeling of uncertainty about right and wrong when in the service?
- How did you cope with feelings of ambiguity about what you were doing?
- Were your feelings different from those of any of your colleagues?
- Do you agree with the statement about decisions on p. 130?

7:00-7:30-- "A Taste of Afghanistan," "For the Missing in Action," and connections to WD so far:
Leaders #1 and #2—small group discussions

Use the handout with the poems "A Taste of Afghanistan" and "For the Missing in Action" as the basis for this discussion as time allows. If time runs out, suggest that participants finish reading through it and using it for an additional opportunity to reflect on their own experience.

Poems and Prompts:

A Taste of Afghanistan by Rob Denmore (2009)

City sand has its own taste
Not the country's dust,
But darker.
It's stronger—bitter parts
Under infantry foot.
Under 500 years going and coming.
Kipling's finest up and over—
Through the pass,
Through the places where soldiers stood
In stolid white snow.
Cemeteries in the pass where Alexander's own
Fell on the square rocks.
Paved with smoothed over river rock,
This open grave—white, bare.

Kabul sand polishes everyone's edges.
Tajiks sharp on the cusp
And Northern Alliance coming down
Hard in the fray.
They all want each other's throats.
Their wives lost in the fight—
Save for pointed heels and
Gold banged over fine red henna.

Eastern sand and southern sand,
Pakistan sand crooked as broken teeth,
Herati sand pure and rising to the top.
Nothing mixes and there is no space in between.
If God loved this place he doesn't now.
If He breathed in the brass bullet casings
And the diesel air and spiteful prayers.
A place for lust and dirty children
And the things night can hide.

What things grown men can hide—
In the dark corners of their own children's rooms.
In the big shadows of a capital with no master and no disciple.
No scope for all things to come together
The sand and the dust and the dirt that makes things grow—
When it is left alone.
But we've put our fingers in it
And the stirring and stamping won't leave
Much for the growing.
Dust bowls and cyclone air will take the rest.
Every village is filled with it now—
Dust from our bombs and inside our APCs.
Dirt scrubbed from our rifle actions
And ground into our sweaty palms lie Mississippi silt.

And still nothing grows.
I've taken a knee in seventeen villages--
On street corners and broken down roundabouts,
On highways and in shattered homes.
On helo pads and plywood chapel steps,
On the backs of dead men—
And screaming vile women.

They will, all of them, bend or break—
It is either them or me.
It's either winning or losing
And putting in its place
What does not belong,
Sand of a different taste and hue
That cannot tell me it is sorry.

Rob Densmore first went to Afghanistan in 2004 with the US Navy. He returned in 2007 as a freelance journalist particularly concerned about the effects of the turmoil on people. He then did a masters degree in London in War and Psychiatry returning in 2008 to conduct research on mental health in private security contractors. His stories, interviews, and poems deal mostly with the content and historical perspective of these trips but "with the human element in mind." He is a theological advocate for veterans, civilians, and those of various faith whose traditions are persecuted for their beliefs.

For the Missing in Action by John Balaban (1990)

Hazed with harvest dust and heat
the air swam with flying husks
as men whacked rice sheaves into bins
and all across the sunstruck fields
red flags hung from bamboo poles.
Beyond the last treeline on the horizon
beyond the coconut palms and eucalyptus
out in the moon zone puckered by bombs
the dead earth where no one ventures,
the boys found it, foolish boys
riding their buffaloes in craterlands
where at night bombs thump and ghosts howl.
A green patch on the raw earth.
An now they've led the farmers here,
the kerchiefed women in baggy pants,
the men with sickles and flails, children
herding ducks with switches—all
staring from a crater berm; silent.
In that dead place the weeds had formed a man
where someone died and fertilized the earth, with flesh
and blood, with tears, with longing for loved ones.
No scrap remained; not even a buckle
survived the monsoons, just a green creature,
a viny man, supine, with posies for eyes,
butterflies for buttons, a lily for a tongue.
Now when huddled asleep together
the farmers hear a rustly footfall
as the leaf-man rises and stumbles to them.

As a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War, Balaban traveled to Vietnam with the International Volunteer Services to teach at Can Tho University. He was injured during the Tet Offensive and evacuated, only to return to serve on the Committee of Responsibility's group to Save War-Burned and War-Injured Children until 1969. In 1971, he received a grant from the NEH to return to Vietnam to record oral poetry known as ca dao.

Points to Ponder: Reflect on/ Share Your Own Experience

- Have someone read the poems aloud. Have the group choose one of the poems to discuss together.
- What are some of the strongest words or images in the poem?—write down on whiteboard if available. Together, **what feelings does the poem give you?**
“A Taste”: **bitter, cemeteries, open grave, wives lost, crooked as broken teeth, spiteful prayers, lust, dirty children, cyclone, bombs, rifle, sweaty, broken down, shattered, dead men, vile women.**
“For the Missing”: **whacked, puckered by bombs, dead earth, bombs thump, ghosts howl, sickles and flails, dead place, someone died, tears, stumbles.**
- Where does the poem take place? **did you ever feel that the land you were fighting in was itself dead or alive?**
“A Taste”: Different places in Afghanistan. How does the changing land/sand become a character? How would you describe the different kinds of sand as characters?
why can't anything good grow? (4th stanza)
“For the Missing”: Probably Vietnam. How does the land become a character? does the poem talk about renewal or death?
- What parts of the poems might relate to *The White Donkey*?
“A Taste”: **Kill or be killed (last stanza).**
“For the Missing”: ??
- What does either poem and the WD passage with the Iraqi policeman (pp. 144-47) suggest about soldiers being in a foreign land with so much history they can't relate to? What effects does this have on a soldier? **What effect did it have on you?**

Prompts for the start of your own poem or piece of writing

- **If the land where I fought could speak, it would say.....**
- **An “omen” or feeling I experienced before something good or bad happened where I fought was....**
- **I believe that it is/is not possible for renewal to happen (in the soldier or in the land) after a war because.....**

Discussion Three, February 7, 2019—Notes for Discussion Leaders

Pages 147-166 of *The White Donkey*

Theme: Mental Agility and the Reality of War: Onset of Moral Injury

- assessing danger in wartime situations;
- the cause of arguments/fights with comrades;
- the beginning of moral injury: one's mental state when a friend dies in war

6:00-6:15—Whole Group—Co-leaders:

Field questions or comments about the poem handout/writing opportunities from last time:

Spend no more than fifteen minutes; if no one suggests anything, go on to below.

6:15-7:00 (White Donkey)— Leaders #1 and #2—small group discussions (pp. 147-166)

- Review pp. 110-111. What is special about the MRAP which they are to drive? Is there an assumption of safety for everyone in it?
- In pp. 148-151, Abe is made Vehicle Commander for the day, he is accosted by local children, and he is endangered by “friendly fire”—what effect do all of these things seem to have upon him?
 - have you ever experienced extreme danger in a war situation in which you thought you were relatively safe? describe the effect on your mental state
- Have two volunteers read the argument scene with Garcia/Abe (pp. 152-3)
 - Does the scene show any change in the relationship between the two? If so, what do you think might be causing the change?
 - what was the worst fight you ever had with a comrade? what do you think caused it?
- Read the scene on pp. 154-155. Why are the men singing?
 - Do you think this scene implies that the men were somehow responsible for what happens next with the IED? why or why not? what combination of circumstances do you think caused Garcia's death?
 - did you ever experience the death of a friend in war? who/what did you think was to blame?
- Review individually pp. 156-166
 - How well do you think these pages capture the experience of an attack?
 - What do you think the White Donkey represents?
 - During your experience in the military, have you ever had an experience of anything “unreal” like the white donkey?

7:00-7:30-- "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" and connections to WD so far:
Leaders #1 and #2—small group discussions

Use the handout with the poem "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" as the basis for this discussion as time allows. If time runs out, suggest that participants finish reading through it and using it for an additional opportunity to reflect on their own experience.

Poems and Prompts:

The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner by Randall Jarrell (1945)

From my mother's sleep I fell into the State,
And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.
Six miles from earth, loosed from the dream of life,
I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.
When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.

In 1942 Jarrell entered the Army Air Force, but because of his age failed to qualify as a flyer and instead became a training navigator in Tucson, Arizona. During his nearly four years of service he wrote many poems about the army and the war, accumulating the bulk of his next two books, Little Friend, Little Friend (1945) and Losses (1948).

About this poem, Jarrell provided the following explanatory note:

"A ball turret was a Plexiglas sphere set into the belly of a B-17 or B-24, and inhabited by two .50 caliber machine guns and one man, a short small man. When this gunner tracked with his machine guns a fighter attacking his bomber from below, he revolved with the turret; hunched upside-down in his little sphere, he looked like the fetus in the womb. The fighters which attacked him were armed with cannon firing explosive shells. The hose was a steam hose."

The poet Hayden Carruth wrote that World War II left a dark psychological imprint on Jarrell's poetry: "Under the shock of war his mannerisms fell away. He began to write with stark, compressed lucidity."

Points to Ponder; Reflect on/Share Your Own Experience

- Have someone read the poem aloud—it's short so have a couple of different people read it.
- What are some of the strongest words or images in the poem? Examples (write on board if possible): hunched, wet fur froze, black flak, nightmare fighters, I died. Together, **what feelings do these words and images give you? How do images of birth and death exist together in this short poem?**
- Who is the narrator? **To whom do you think this narrator might be speaking? Is there any sense in which the dead actually speak? Do you think there is a value in giving them a voice? Why or why not?**
- Garcia in WD was also a turret gunner. How similar or different were the ways his death was depicted and the way this poem's gunner's death was depicted? **Note the difference in aircraft and tank gunner placement. Both were extremely vulnerable—why? Note difference in point of view: Abe's vs. the dead man in the poem. What difference does this make? Could this poem have been spoken by Garcia? Can you explain why you feel this way?**

Prompts for the start of your own poem or piece of writing:

- **An image for the first time I experienced a moral injury in the military might be.....**
- **If one of my dead comrades could speak, s/he might say.....**
- **A fight I had with one of my comrades was about.....**

Discussion Four, February 14, 2019—Notes for Discussion Leaders

Pages 166-182 of *The White Donkey*

Theme: Survivor's Guilt: The Moral Injury of a Comrade's Death

- feeling guilty because of a comrade's death;
- the insufficiency of resources to deal with such guilt;
- moral injury brings to the fore not knowing what one believes in or wants.

6:00-6:15—Whole Group—Co-leaders:

Field questions or comments about the poem handout/writing opportunities from last time:

Spend no more than fifteen minutes; if no one suggests anything, go on to below.

6:15-7:15 (White Donkey)— Leaders #1 and #2—small group discussions (pp. 166-182)

- Have volunteers read aloud scene with Corp. Albrecht, pp. 168-9.
 - What do you think Albrecht is feeling? Abe?
 - **Personal Experience: Can you identify with either man at this point? Explain**
- Look at the funeral scene on pp. 170-171.
 - What is the purpose of such a ritual?
 - Even though no words are spoken, what can you tell about the feelings of the men?
- Page 173—Abe takes Albrecht's advice to call home.
 - What happens and why?
 - **Have you ever tried to explain some event over the phone to people back home? How did it go?**
- Have volunteers read the scene on pages 173-178.
 - What do you make of the corporal's relenting in allowing Abe to return to duty?
 - What was the statement by 2nd Lt. Ding that set Abe off?
 - Do you think Abe's loss of rank was just?
 - **Have you ever known anyone who was sent back to active duty too soon after a moral injury?**
- Have two volunteers read the scene between Abe and the Chaplain (Joe), pp. 179-182.
 - What do you think of the chaplain's approach to Abe?
 - What do you think Abe needs at this point? is that currently available in the military?

- What, if any, services were you offered after you had experienced a survivor's guilt/moral injury in the military? When were you offered them? Did you take advantage of them? Why or why not?

7:15-7:30—"At Lowe's Home Improvement Center" and connections to WD so far:
Leaders #1 and #2—small group discussions

Use the handout with the poem "At Lowe's Home Improvement Center" as the basis for this discussion as time allows. If time runs out, suggest that participants finish reading through it and using it for an additional opportunity to reflect on their own experience.

Poem and Prompts: Class Four

At Lowe's Home Improvement Center by Brian Turner (2010)

Standing in aisle 16, the hammer and anchor aisle,
I bust a 50 pound box of double-headed nails
open by accident, their oily bright shanks
and diamond points like firing pins
from M-4s and M-16s.

In a steady stream

they pour onto the tile floor, constant as shells
falling south of Baghdad last night, where Bosch
kneeled under the chain guns of helicopters
stationed above, their tracer-fire a synaptic geometry
of light.

At dawn, when the shelling stops,
hundreds of bandages will not be enough.

...

Bosch walks down aisle 16 now, in full combat gear,
improbably, worn out from fatigue, a rifle
slung at his side, his left hand guiding
a ten-year-old boy who sees what war is
and will never clear it from his head.

*Here, Bosch says, Take care of him.
I'm going back in for more.*

...

Sheets of plywood drop with the airy breath
of mortars the moment they crack open
in shrapnel. Mower blades are just mower blades
and the Troy-Bilt Self-Propelled Mower doesn't resemble

a Blackhawk or an Apache. In fact, no one seems to notice the casualty collection center Doc High marks out in ceiling fans, aisle 15. Wounded Iraqis with IVs sit propped against boxes as 92 sample Paradiso fans hover in a slow revolution of blades.

The forklift driver over-adjusts, swinging the tines until they slice open gallons and gallons of paint, Sienna Dust and Lemon Sorbet and Ship's Harbor Blue pooling in the aisle where Sgt. Rampley walks through—carrying someone's blown-off arm cradled like an infant, handing it to me, saying, *Hold this, Turner, we might find who it belongs to.*

...

Cash registers open and slide shut with a sound of machine guns being charged. Dead soldiers are laid out at the registers, on the black conveyor belts, and people in line still reach for their wallets. Should I stand at the magazine rack, reading *Landscaping with Stone* or *The Complete Home Improvement Repair Book*? What difference does it make if I choose tumbled travertine tile, Botticino marble, or Black Absolute granite. Outside, palm trees line the asphalt boulevards, restaurants cool their patrons who will enjoy fireworks exploding over Bass Lake in July

...

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

The Iraqi boy beside me
reaches down to slide his fingertip in Retro Colonial Blue,
an interior latex, before writing
T, for Tourniquet, on my forehead.

from Phantom Noise (Alice James Books, 2010). Brian Turner is the author of the poetry collections Phantom Noise (Alice James Books, 2010), which was shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot Prize, and Here, Bullet (Alice James Books, 2005), as well as the memoir My Life as a Foreign Country (W. W. Norton, 2014). A veteran of the US Army, Turner is known for his writing about the Iraq War. He is the recipient of numerous honors, including fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Lannan Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. He directs the MFA program at Sierra Nevada College and lives in Orlando, Florida.

Points to Ponder; Reflect on/ Share Your Own Experience

- Have someone read the poem aloud. Then ask another person also to read it
- Go back and underline the parts of the poem that refer to scenes and experiences in Iraq. Notice the things at the “Lowe’s Home Improvement” store that trigger these memories. **What do you feel as a reader as the whole poem goes back and forth between places and times?**
- In the flashback sequences, what is usually the narrator’s (Turner’s) role? How does this role of helper/savior change in the last four lines of the poem? **How does Turner signal in the poem that he has had a moral injury?**
- Abe hasn’t returned to civilian life yet, but he is already showing some signs of moral injury. **Do you see any connection between what Abe experiences immediately after the death of Garcia and what Turner describes in this poem? Explain.**

Prompts for the start of your own poem or piece of writing:

- **In my flashbacks or dreams of a wartime experience, I usually see/hear.....**
- **One of the things the military might have done to help my mental state while in the service was.....**
- **The boy in Turner’s poem writes a “T” for “tourniquet” on Turner’s head, suggesting that this is what he needs to survive. If you could write something on your forehead to indicate what you need, it would be.....**

Discussion Five, February 21, 2019—Notes for Discussion Leaders

Pages 183-267 of *The White Donkey*

Theme: PTSD and Moral Injury

- how the military screens for PTSD
- worst things civilians say to returning veterans
- are PTSD and Moral Injury different?

6:00-6:15—Whole Group—Co-leaders: Field questions or comments about the poem handout/writing opportunities from last time:

Spend no more than fifteen minutes; if no one suggests anything, go on to below.

6:15-7:15 (*White Donkey*)— Leaders #1 and #2—small group discussions (pp. 183-167)

- Note Health Assessment—screen for PTSD and the talk about PTSD
 - Why do you think Abe responded as he did to both?
- Note scenes with his friends (193-194) and his sister Kirsten (191, 206, 240).
 - What don't they understand? what might they have done differently?
 - Look at the scene with his girlfriend Jen (198-200). Why does he treat her so roughly? What does she need to realize?
 - Personal experience: What were your interactions like with friends/relatives when you returned to the States?
- Page 239—Note all the words written over his face in the mirror.
 - Which of these words did you identify with most when you returned to civilian life? Why?
- Note his nightmares—pp. 204-5, 207.
 - What do you make of these dreams?
 - what might the coyote represent? the donkey?
 - why might the donkey appear upside down on all the left-hand pages from pp. 220-236?
- At the end, the donkey leads Abe to Garcia's grave.
 - Why do you think Abe asks the donkey what it wants from him?
 - Why do you think Abe changes his mind about killing himself?
 - What do you think Abe means when he says that he finally figured out what he was looking for..."and it was you"?
 - Did Abe reconcile his moral injury?

- Personal Experience: Is it possible to reconcile moral injury? How have you been able to? What are the benefits and risks of reconciliation?

7:15-7:45: group wrap-up/feedback session and evaluations

Poems and Prompts: Class Five

i should be sleep lord by Toni Topps (ca. 2014)

i should be sleep lord
i should be sleep
i should be sleep lord
i should be sleep
Am I sleep

I hate when night falls
when the sun sets
at dusk i want to retreat and duck

dark skies bring
sorrow screeching sounds
uneasy whispers
from past and present playlist of screaming and crying
panting and loud tears hitting pillows
clutching fist and gritting teeth
as eyelids take dramatic slow blinks

mind re-playing hurtful clips of your life and disappointment tones from bystanders' mouths

what if chill bumps could remember his not so fatherly touch
and hair follicles stood on the back of your neck every time the wind blows like silent alarm
system directing you to utilize previously put in place emergency exit plans

what if every time it became dark outside
you were warped back into time
when nobody believed you when you said "No"
and mothers took up for sons who punched women in the mouth for being silent, silently
showing her how to survive years of this

i'm tired of having a goodnight sleep
i rather be awake, so take comfort in the blaring television
the lights on downstairs
the smell of folger's coffee percolating
and my ride or die chic, keeping me alive chic
controlling the remote, holding my eyelids up
woo'ing me with every touch

Insomnia, I should be sleep lord
shadows and voices playing hide and seek with my eyes and ears

burning eyes, heavy lids, quick long blink
but only coldness felt on my skin
so, i jump startled to see the clock is at 4 am, might as well
start the re-runs on demand again,
players back to 1st position

I should be sleep

Topps began writing poetry after attending an open mic in 2002 following her return from deployment. She was struck by the idea of telling stories without anyone in the audience knowing whether it was based on fact or fantasy. The anonymity appealed to her. "I was like, 'Wow, I can tell what I'm going through and nobody can judge me,'" Topps said of her first open mic. "They don't know if this is fictional, and I'm like, 'This is amazing.' So I start writing poetry, and I say it saved my life."

*Despite her discovery, Topps struggled for years with her transition to civilian life, mental health crises and domestic abuse. In 2014, Topps came across **Warrior Writers**, a veterans' nonprofit that fosters healing through artistic expression and storytelling. She eventually became a workshop facilitator. "I had stopped writing," Topps said. "I didn't want to be creative, I didn't want to exist. So Warrior Writers pulled that out of me and gave me my voice back." Topps' poem "i should be sleep lord" explores the restless nights she spent reliving her trauma.*

PTSD by Chantelle Bateman (ca. 2005)

sadness is the color of my eyes, my heart,
the same shade as distance
and some kind of Miles Davis on repeat.
It's the sound I don't want anyone to hear
creeping out of my pillows in the morning
before the coffee and cigarettes begin—
an avatar, when I'd rather just be myself.

my anxiety smells like whatever it is
that makes mean dogs bare their teeth.
it sound like trees falling, like doors slamming,
like a pin drop,
and sometimes, like my mother checking on me again.
it feels like nothing.

anger is the color I paint the town with—
blood shot, and sparkling with tiny salt crystals
louder than the sirens they play when I hit the deck,
bitter sweet and never offered cookies.
I'm just a pile of tears needing
to punch you.

First published in Apiary magazine. Bateman writes: "I am a mother, writer, and mixed medium visual artist After returning home from Iraq in 2005 and battling years of undiagnosed post-traumatic stress, I met other veterans who were using art as a tool for healing and direct action. Now, as a creative activist, facilitator, and community organizer I work to support processes of transformative justice and healing. I am a member of the Warrior Writers ..., a volunteer organizer with Iraq Veterans Against the War, ...of FAAN (Fostering Activism and Alternatives Now). I am also a 2013 Leeway Foundation Art & Change Grant recipient, and ... have been published in two Warrior Writers books, After Action Review and Warrior Writers Fourth Anthology, featured in the film, Out of Step, and exhibited at the National Veterans Art Museum in Chicago." <http://www.warriorwriters.org/artists/chantelle.html>

Therapy by D.A. Gray, ca. 2011

Her hands beat muscle
with the tenderness of a mallet.

Tendons, on the table, connect
each corner of the present world—

lats curl, hamstrings spasm, calves flex
and one foot howls itself into a crescent.

My jaw aches with the strain
of clamping down on a word

Stop
before it squirms up from the lungs
and out, abrades like the sand that filled
a leather boot after the blast
and returned empty, labeled *effects*.

Images

Stop
in freeze frame at the hospital bed,

where Reeves—my suitemate—
gets divorce papers while his stump
hangs in a sling.

Some days,
I remember his empty house.
In my mind he's hopping on his

prosthetic leg for show, telling me,
'The house's echo is a phantom
pain of its own.'

I choke on the words
and times like these I try to

Stop

the footmarches through foreign cities
whose names I cannot read, or the Sunday drive
over pressure plates, that leave family waiting
for answers to unheard questions.

Back on the table, a thumb—my wife's—
works with care beside the zippered scar
of my foot. I turn and to my relief
it is there.

Pain connects us.

D.A. Gray's poetry collection, Contested Terrain, was recently released by FutureCycle Press. His previous collection, Overwatch, was published by Grey Sparrow Press, 2011. His work has appeared in The Sewanee Review, Appalachian Heritage, The Good Men Project, Still: The Journal and War, Literature and the Arts among many other journals. Gray holds an MFA from The Sewanee School of Letters and an MS from Texas A&M-Central Texas. Retired soldier and veteran, the author writes and lives in Central Texas.

Points to Ponder: Reflect on/ Share Your Own Experience

- If you are in class, read each poem silently along with the rest of your group. Then decide as a group which poem you'd like to focus on. Have someone read that poem aloud. Then ask another person also to read it.

Possible questions for each poem:

“Therapy”

- ✓ Read the poem aloud.
- ✓ What do you feel at the repeated word “Stop”? Does it always mean the same thing?
- ✓ Who is giving the therapy to the narrator?
- ✓ What do you think “the house’s echo is a phantom/pain of its own” refers to?
- ✓ What do you think the last line refers to? Who is “us”?
- ✓ Do you see any connection between this narrator’s experience and Abe’s? If so, what?

“i should be sleep lord”

- ✓ Read the poem aloud.
- ✓ What is the effect of almost no capitals or punctuation?
- ✓ Why do you think she would rather be awake despite the title?
- ✓ Which lines contain the strongest emotions for you? What emotions are they?
- ✓ Do you think this poem is about a moral injury? How so?
- ✓ Do you think women’s moral injuries are as well-publicized as those of men? Why or why not?
- ✓ **(for both this and the next poem) Note the few sections in *The White Donkey* where women are portrayed. What few adjectives would describe them? See pp. 77, 126-7, 137, 199.**

“PTSD”

- ✓ Bateman structures her poem around her three central emotions: sadness, anxiety, and anger. What sounds and colors does she associate with each?
- ✓ What effect does the last two-line sentence have on you?
- ✓ Do you think this poem is about a moral injury? How so?
- ✓ Do you think women’s moral injuries are as well-publicized as those of men?

Prompts for the start of your own poem or piece of writing:

- **Write a short piece based on three words that might help heal a moral injury.....**
- **If you consider yourself a victim of a moral injury, list several of your symptoms alongside what has helped or might help to heal them?**
- **Garcia’s example as a man seems to have been what Abe was “looking for” all along. Did you meet anyone in the service who represented to you an “ideal” of manhood or womanhood? If so, write a short description of that person doing something that you remember as being a good example.**