

UO Creative Writing Program

Brian Turner Talks About His Amy Lowell Traveling Poetry Fellowship

2009—2010

The Amy Lowell Fellowship gave me the opportunity to place my sails into the wind. I began the year with only a rough itinerary—the rest I made up as the year progressed. A conversation in northern Vietnam led to an invitation to stay in a shoreline bungalow in Donaghadee, just outside of Belfast, Northern Ireland. A similar moment in Portugal led to a trip to Morocco. I traveled to places I never thought I'd see in my lifetime. All of it made possible by Amy Lowell—whose vision and generosity have extended nearly a century beyond her death.

My wife and I traveled together for the first half of the year. (She was on a half-year sabbatical.) Initially, we stayed in Portsmouth, England. We'd write until three or four in the morning, sleep in until noon, and then go on long, random afternoon drives through the English countryside. Castles, Roman ruins, the wild landscape of Dart Moor—it's a landscape that welcomes nostalgia. From England, we flew to Zurich, Switzerland. (Branded a heretic for preaching his religious views back in the 1600's, one of my ancestors was beheaded along the shores of Lake Zurich. I was able to meet a distant relative in the nearby town of Hertzl.)

We took a train south to visit friends in Bologna, taking in short trips to Florence and Venice before heading to Rome, a city that overwhelmed me with its history and art. From there, we flew to Athens. The city was roiling under the surface and it didn't surprise us at all when economic riots hit the streets after we'd left. We spent an amazing week on the island of Serifos, staying in a friend's place in the high mountain village of Chora (where it's said Perseus buried Medusa's severed head). Our next stop—Istanbul. An incredible city. We only had eight days there—I hope to come back in the future and travel throughout Turkey, if possible.

Istanbul was followed by a month in Thailand. We rented an apartment in Bangkok (right where the riots were held only a few months later). We explored the ancient city of Ayutthaya and did some physically demanding trekking out of the northern city of Chiang Mai. It was a country of great extremes, I thought, with superstructure high-rises and incredible poverty existing side by side.

At this point, my wife had to return to the States. I shared a long-distance taxi with a Polish documentary film maker and we drove from Bangkok to Siem Reap, Cambodia. I loved Cambodia. I spent much of my time in the north, exploring temple complexes and traveling with Cambodians I'd met. I struggled to make sense of history and the modern day in Phnom Penh, to the south, where a visit to Tuol Sleng (S-21) and the Killing Fields left me sick with a fever for several days. It is a wounded country. A country of survivors and ghosts.

I flew to Hanoi from P.P.... Fascinating. I explored as much of northern Vietnam as I could in about one month's time. It's another country that deserves much, much more time. While near the Chinese border, I rented a motorbike and spent about one week simply driving through the mountains for hours at a time. I quickly learned that villages surrounding the tourist towns cater to tourists in roughly a 5-to-8 kilometer circum-



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ference. Once outside of that tourist zone, the trinket selling stopped and everyday life began.

From here, I flew to Portugal. Lisbon, Porto, Tomar, Evora... My wife joined me here for a week and we drove to the bottom of Spain (where we took a ferry through the Pillars of Hercules and visited Morocco). We'd gone from Fado music in the Alfama district of Lisbon to the polyrhythmic music of Tangier—all of it phenomenal.

We retraced our steps and I flew to Belfast (while she returned home). I was able to write a great deal during my time in Northern Ireland. I also formed new friendships here and learned more about the political landscape (a recurring theme in every place I visited during the Amy Lowell year).

The last stage of the trip was a sweeping tour through the Balkans. I'd been a NATO peacekeeper in Bosnia-Herzegovina almost exactly ten years prior to this current visit. The itinerary: Dubrovnik, Croatia—Mostar—Sarajevo—Gradacac—Brcko—Belgrade—Kostolac—Pristina, Kosovo—Lake Ohrid and Struga, Macedonia—Tirana, Albania. This trip alone, I believe, could fill a lifetime of thought. It brought back memories and filled in so (very) many gaps in my knowledge and understanding.

This skeletal outline of my year-long travel reads more like the table of contents to a strange travelogue. I will be spending the rest of my life unraveling and reliving the moments I experienced during the Amy Lowell Fellowship. For decade after decade, Amy Lowell has sent poets out into the larger community of nations. Her remarkable legacy is a living one. I hope to share the insights I've gleaned from this year abroad and to encourage other writers and artists to follow Amy Lowell's lead.

The world continually surprises me.