

John Thampi (JT) talks to Niall Munro (NM)

Niall Munro Well thank you so much John for taking the time to chat to me about this. I want to start if you wouldn't mind by just introducing us to your own personal military experience and say a bit about who you are - what you are - as a writer.

John Thampi Sure. I was an army officer. I was in the military police corps. I was an army captain. I was deployed to Iraq [for] roughly about two years, a little bit less, and then to Afghanistan, and then I left the service in 2012. After which, I wasn't interested in talking about the service or anything to do with being reminded of it but I had a chance to join the NYU writers group and when I did I discovered that I did enjoy writing poetry. And funnily enough I had been writing when I was in college and earlier and it brought it all back. It was a period of the military I'd suppressed and now it had all returned. Now I'm able to channel what I went through into writing.

NM You're currently writing I think reflections on your day job, but also maybe with the background of your military service as well?

JT Yes, so right now I'm attempting to put together a chapbook. I haven't decided if it's going to be completely focused on my prior service, or if it's going to be including what I do currently as well. You know, it'll be something similar to railroad poems or previously I did look at putting together a military pamphlet or chapbook called 'Formation', just the idea that you don't come off fully formed but it's an evolution and a process.

NM So when you came out of the military how did people react? Did you talk to people about it? You said you didn't really say anything about it to begin with but did people ask you?

JT Immediate family members are familiar with it or rather they're familiar with the fact that you're not there and I think the missing presence is what they're aware of and what stories you bring back or none at all. Anyone else outside of it... In fact the greatest conversations that I've had is over interviews, funnily enough, trying to get the next job and convince the person over the table that my experiences were translatable, and I could supervise and I could do these things. In fact, I'd done so much more but I'm able to do what you're asking me to do. So that conversation usually happens at a business environment funnily enough.

NM It is interesting. One of the things we have been thinking about I guess is the nuance that people don't get about talking to people or not talking to people about military experience. And I'm wondering why you think that is not happening in the U.S. There is no sense of nuance. There's a black and white version or a basic version of what somebody's done in the military.

JT Because most people you deal with are civilians and aren't familiar with the military and don't have a background in it so it's hard for them to relate. So you either have to play the victim or the hero - truthfully, you do - I'd far better prefer to be the hero, so I do things subtly like listing my award. They don't know the difference between whether it's a heroic award or if it's just for service but I still list it, and maybe I'm complicit in this whole process as well, but

if you don't in some ways define yourself, unless you're willing to fit the mould initially you're never able to break out of it. So right now I'm trying to fit into the mould.

NM Do you see yourself breaking out of the mould at some point?

JT I think that's what's happening with the writing, with poetry, with this whole process that I'm going through right now. Even being here, I'm definitely breaking out of the mould and I look forward to what it becomes.

NM How is poetry going to help you with that?

JT So initially when I wrote I wrote still as something that's cathartic, something that I can really put down into words what I was going through and what I went through, but now that I realize - even at my workplace - I think I'm speaking for, I hate to say 'we', but I am speaking for the 'we', we as the legion or we as a people. So I think I am in some ways giving a voice to people who wouldn't otherwise ever put pen to paper.

NM Is that coming through the crafts? Is that coming through the words you're using, the way you're constructing the poetry, how you're setting the poems in a pamphlet or chapbook next to each other to create some kind of context?

JT Sure, I think the content would drive it first and foremost, the subject matter, what you're covering, and as I'm discovering that it's not just words on a page. How you put it together, that's going to also be critical. What I'm also incorporating even now is my own cultural background and saying as we were discussing the idea of a Russian poem not translatable, and I said am I allowed to do this now? Can I go back into my pop back and pull a language from that I haven't used in years, that I don't fully understand. I think that's happening.

NM That's really interesting, so in a way poetry gives you permission to do things that you wouldn't ordinarily do.

JT No, not at all.

NM Well I wish you all the very best with it. Thanks so much for having a chat with me.