

Peter Molin's "Strike Through the Mask!": The Clock Strikes Twelve

My year-long run as guest-columnist for The Wrath-Bearing Tree comes to an end this month. I'm not sure if WBT founders Adrian Bonenberger and Mike Carson planned for my stint to last only twelve months, but in my mind it was always the goal. Twelve months, twelve Strike Through the Mask! columns, each with a different subject, obviously, but more personally, each with a different tone or style. My goal was variation within similarity, like a record album of yore: some songs fast, some slow, some mournful, some more upbeat, but all recognizable as the unified work of the creator.

I also welcomed the pressure of a monthly deadline. On my blog Time Now, I publish when I please. But I grew up loving the daily, weekly, and monthly columns of writers I admired in the newspapers and magazines I read—thinkers who wrote lively, interesting columns on a regular schedule. Finally, I realized I could use Strike Through the Mask! to range wider and dive deeper than I typically did in Time Now. Subjects I might not touch in Time Now, such as soldier memoirs and current events, I have explored at length in Strike Through the Mask! Most of all, I wanted to show Time Now readers a little more of the “real me”—my opinions, thoughts, and interests apart from the focus on other peoples' books and artworks in Time Now.

I couldn't have asked for better editors than Adrian and Mike. They have allowed me to write almost without suggestion or guidance, for better and for worse, and their infrequent edits and comments have always been on-point and encouraging. The war-writing community is lucky to have such thoughtful and generous leaders.

So what lies ahead? Time Now seems to have run its course, as well. I won't definitively declare it's over, but it does seem time for other writers more in-tune with the spirit of the 2020s to carry on its work. But who knows? I've read John Milas's *The Militia House* and watched *The Covenant* and I have thoughts.... Navy veteran Jillian Danback-McGhan's short-story collection *Midwatch* is on the way. A movie titled *Fremont*, about Afghan interpreters in America, and *Northern Shade*, about PTSD, are highly recommended and I look forward to watching them. Entire genres related to war-writing, such as YA and romance, lie mostly untouched, awaiting analysis....

I started Time Now in 2012 when it seemed clear that a vibrant writing-and-publishing scene centered on the work by Iraq and Afghanistan veterans was emerging. One precipitating event was the 2010 War, Literature, and the Arts conference at the United States Air Force Academy. I was fortunate to attend and it was there I first met or heard read authors such as Siobhan Fallon, Matt Gallagher, and Benjamin Busch. Another catalyst was the publication in 2012 of Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds*, David Abrams' *Fobbit*, and Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*—novels published by major houses and widely reviewed and largely celebrated. At the time, I was teaching at the United States Military Academy at West Point, where I had already sponsored a reading by Brian Turner. That had been an early-on, isolated event, however, and now I sensed a cohort of vet-writers and affiliated family members and interested authors with no formal military affiliation coalescing. I also intuited that I, an infantry veteran of Afghanistan with a PhD in English Literature, was in a position to document and promote the emerging work.

Scenes need events, outlets, and platforms to thrive. From that first 2011 WLA conference to the next one, in 2018, a number of events and publishing venues, infused by a sense of community, shared endeavor, and a do-it-yourself ethos, made being a vet-writer exciting and fulfilling. Online publishing

sites a-plenty were available, and publishers and general readers were reasonably open to vet memoir, fiction, and poetry. Seemingly every large city and college campus was hosting vet-writing workshops and the vet-writer presence at the annual Association of Writers and Writing Program conference (AWP) was robust. I regularly attended AWP between 2014 and 2018, where I hosted several panels and met and mingled with many writers in the scene. And until 2015 I had a position at the United States Military Academy at West Point that allowed me to stage events for vet writers and artists to read and perform for cadets.

That physical sense of community has largely faded, and vet-writers now rely on social media to promote, connect, and opine. That's OK, but if writers and artists now coming into print feel isolated rather than connected by the digisphere, I remind them that the cohesion of 2010-2018 was largely generated by the initiative of the participants themselves. If recreating that energy seems desirable, then the answer is to stage readings, host events, create platforms, reach out, form alliances, and keep knocking on doors. I'm not a position to help make that happen much anymore, but I love the spirit and energy when I see it.

To end here, I'll offer some photos of prominent authors in the scene I've taken over the years. Some I've already published on Time Now, but they're too good not to be given another airing. Salute to all the writers and their works!

Brian Turner, author of *Here*, *Bullet*, *Phantom Noise*, and many others, Red Bank, NJ, 2018



Siobhan Fallon, author of *You Know When the Men Are Gone* and *The Confusion of Languages*, West Point, NY, 2018



Phil Klay, author of *Redeployment* and *Missionaries*, Highland Falls, NY, 2014



Matt Gallagher, author of *Kaboom*, *Youngblood*, and *Empire City*, Camden NJ, 2016. (This picture was supposed to be taken in front of Walt Whitman's house, but what can I say? We screwed up and took the photo a few doors down from the Good Gray Poet's residence.)



Hassan Blasim, author of *The Corpse Exhibition* and others, West Point, NY, 2014



Elyse Fenton, author of *Clamor*, Dodge Poetry Festival, Newark,

NJ, 2014



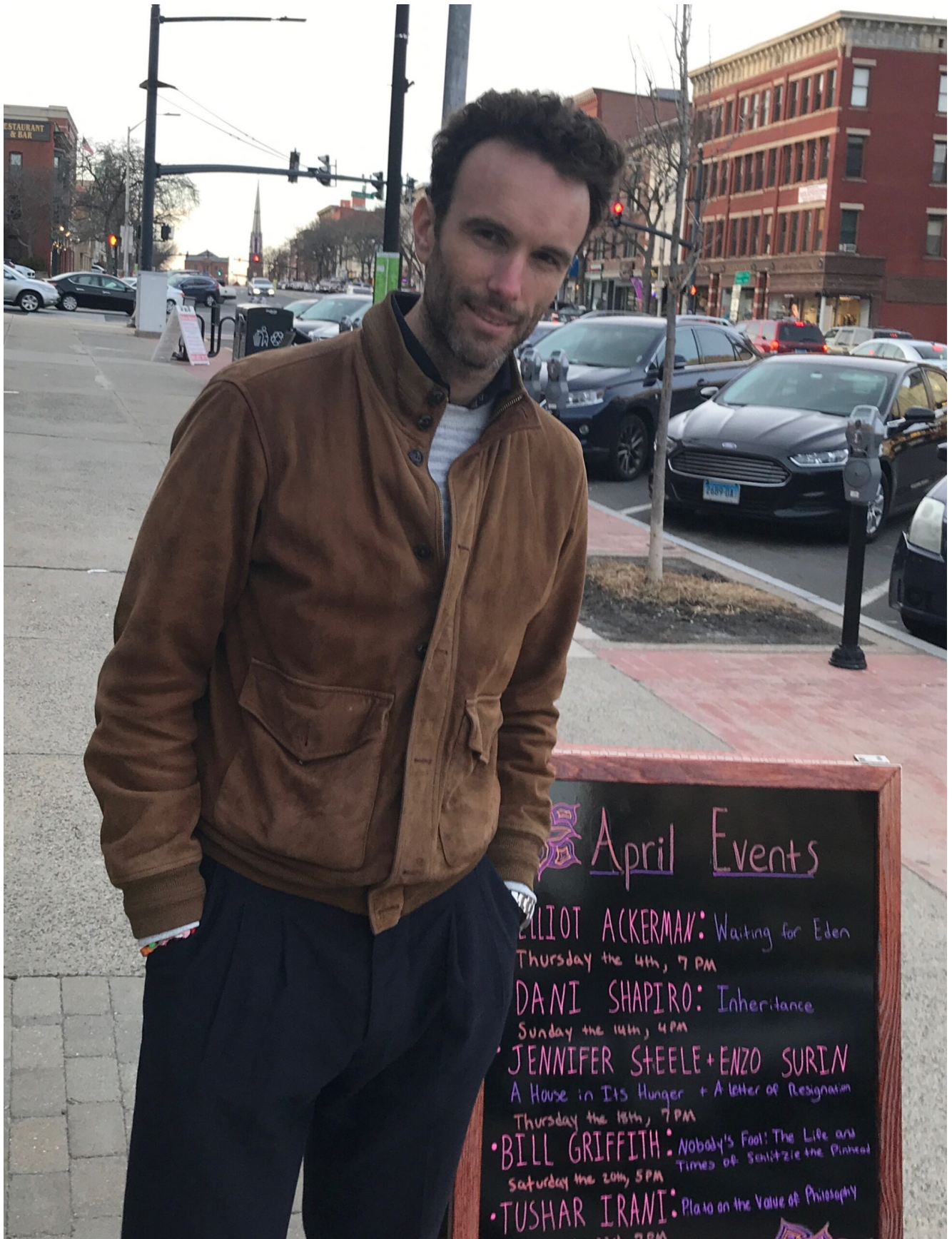
Brian Van Reet, author of *Spoils*, Austin, TX, 2016



John Renehan, author of *The Valley*, Arlington, VA, 2018



Elliot Ackerman, author of *Green on Blue*, *Dark at the Crossing*, and many others, Middletown, CT, 2019



Adrian Bonenberger, author of *Afghan Memoir* and *The Disappointed Soldier*, Branford, CT, 2021



Brian Castner, author of *The Long Walk* and *Disappointment River*, among others, New York, NY, 2020



Playwright Jay Moad and fiction author Jesse Goolsby, New York, NY, 2017. Moad and Goolsby were two of the driving forces behind the United States Air Force Academy's War,

Literature, and the Arts journal and conferences.



Roy Scranton and Jacob Seigel, Brooklyn, NY, 2018. Scranton is the author of *War Porn* and Seigel is the author of the short-story "Smile There Are IEDs Everywhere," from the seminal vet-writing anthology *Fire and Forget* edited by Scranton and Matt Gallagher.



Jennifer Orth-Veillon and Benjamin Busch, New Haven, CT, 2018. Orth-Veillon edited the anthology of writing about World War I *Beyond The Limits of Their Longing* that features a who's-who of vet and vet-adjacent writers. Busch is the author of the memoir *Dust to Dust*, as well as a poet, actor, filmmaker, photographer and illustrator.

