New Fiction by Dwight Curtis: Yacht Master

I’m all alone, floating down the Clark Fork in the middle of the night. I have a pepperoni pizza bungeed to the rear seat and the moon is so bright that my oars cast shadows on the water. The surface of the river is chopped up into white and black. It feels like I’m in a graphic novel. I’ve never done this before.

New Poetry by Deborah J. Hunter: “March 2003”

New Poem by Deborah Hunter: March 2003

New Poem by Darren C. Demaree: “Emily as There is a Prison”

New Poem by Darren C. Demaree: “Emily as There is a Prison”

New Nonfiction by David James: A Dream of Death, or the Consolations of History

Despite every dictator (and aspiring dictator) assuming that they alone can stop the arrow of time and prevent their own mortality, dictators always inexorably die in the end ("One forgets that one is a dead man talking to dead men"). And the beloved people (who always universally revile the dictator by the end) continue living their own lives, enjoying a gradually increasing sense of freedom.

New Nonfiction by Alan Stoskopf: If I Don't Create, I Don't Exist

The scars of war are everywhere in Kharkiv. Destroyed or damaged apartment complexes, stores, hospitals, museums, and schools litter its urban landscape. The Russian full-scale invasion of February 2022 has not just killed or injured thousands of the city's residents it has embedded itself into the psyches of young and old living in Ukraine's second largest city. Yet, people carry on despite living under the dark shadow of Russia less than 20 miles away.

New Fiction by Benjamin Inks: Contract

On Monday I wore a cowboy hat to work—just to see if I could.

Employees at Brick Albert seldom break the unspoken dress code of a Costco button-down paired with either khaki, black, or navy-blue slacks. Once you get pegged as dressing a certain way, any deviation only invites conversation, and I don’t like talking about myself.

New Fiction by Brian Conlon: Gretchen the Dog

Gretchen had been a fighter pilot. I mean, she wasn’t actually, but she barked at the planes—loud. She was originally assigned to patrol the base, but was too good, wouldn’t let anyone in or out. She didn’t trust photos, birth dates, bar codes, any of that.

Poetry by Amalie Flynn: “Ours”

Poem by Amalie Flynn: “Ours”

New Poetry by D.R. James: “Stunned”

New Poetry by D.R. James: “Stunned”

New Review by James Mathews: All Quiet in The Deadening

Such literary drawbacks are notably absent in Jim Beane’s debut novel, The Deadening, which features the return from war-torn Europe of American soldier Harrell Hickman. Like so many young veterans during this time, the euphoria of victory parades came and went in an instant.

New Poetry by Jess Avelno Flores:

New Poem by Jess Avelino Flores: “This Year”

New Poetry by Jason Green: “Winter Haiku,” “Spring Haiku”

New poems by Jason Green: Winter Haiku and Spring Haiku

New Poetry by Wayne Karlin: “What Binds Us”

New poem by Wayne Karlin: “What Binds Us”

New Nonfiction by Jen Dreizehn: Anticipation

As a reserve unit we had a different family dynamic than the regular army. Since there were only three platoons in our company, the commander wanted to even out the women per platoon.

New Nonfiction from Jerad W. Alexander: An Elegy for Videotape

Scott found the videotapes in his garage and brought them into the kitchen. We stacked the VHS in a wine box and the little Hi8 tapes in a gray shoebox for a pair of boots that belonged to his wife Tiffany.

New Review by Adrian Bonenberger: Fury, The Tank, and Forgiveness

One of the first things I published on Wrath-Bearing Tree was a negative review of the movie Fury, based entirely on its two minute preview.

New Fiction by Lacie Grosvold: Tora Bora Bargain

It started, and it ended, with a bad bargain in the mountain caves of Tora Bora. I have nothing but time now for the what-ifs and the whys, but every trail I follow leads back here. So long ago, our unit swept through the sprawling tunnels, seeking Taliban. Conlin and I were the youngest in our squad. Back home, his age didn't stop him from getting into bars, and the broken tooth he got from fighting didn't stop him from grinning. Our lieutenant always put us together, thinking my cautious nature would temper his wild one. Conlin called me "Dad," then the whole squad did.

After days of not seeing an enemy, the light on my helmet caught the eyes of a cowering Afghan boy. He held something out, as if in offering for my mercy: a pottery lamp so small it would fit in my hand, ornamented with intricate blue and green swirls. I was mesmerized.

"Clear!" I yelled as I backed out of his dark corner, pocketing the lamp.

As we exited the cave complex, a staccato of shots scattered shrapnel from the rocks. Conlin slumped against me. I turned and saw the boy holding a gun just as he took a bullet. As the boy fell, his eyes bored into mine. In the pocket of my fatigues, the lamp shuddered. On the ground, Conlin's last smile still played on his lips.

I accompanied Conlin's flag-draped coffin to his hometown. His mother and kid brother hugged me hard like family. Mama Conlin sent me home with a handmade quilt and made me promise to write. I can't say exactly why I never did it, but it could have been because of the shadow.

A man's shadow, unfaded by light, followed me since Conlin's last day. Only I could see it. I thought that if I could ditch the lamp, the shadow would leave too.

On the way to rejoin my unit, I threw the lamp from a Black Hawk. It disappeared into the scrub. It was back in the foot

of my sleeping bag that night launcher, but it was sitting on my meal tray when I got dinner on the base.

When I was discharged from the Army, I traveled the world, hoping to leave the lamp behind, convinced that the shadow would not follow me if I didn't have it. I dropped the lamp in an Indonesian volcano only to find it between the threadbare sheets of my hostel bunk. I chucked it off Tower bridge in London, but it was back in my pocket when I paid for my drink at a pub.

Every time I found it, it quivered under my touch. The shadow lingered nearby.

I told a monk outside a temple in Bangkok about the shadow dogging me.

"Make peace with your sorrow and guilt," he advised, blind to the shadow lounging in the grass at his feet.

That monk was right. It was time to stop running and set down roots. I bought a house and a few acres in a backwater town, moved in with two duffels, and made my thrift-store bed with Conlin's mom's quilt. The county hired me to work road maintenance. My second summer there, every man between eight and eighty was in love with the girl from the feed store, but nobody so much as me.

Jennifer Day was lemonade in the heat and sunshine after a storm. She glittered with magic when she laughed. She wore her strawberry blonde hair in long braids, and I never saw her have a bad day. When she rang up my order, being close to her burned off a little of that dark fog that hovered over me.

In hopeless moments of intense longing, I had an intuition that the lamp held answers. Since I was settled, the shadow didn't follow me so much; it seemed to lurk inside the lamp. Jennifer had her choice of men. I was shy, surly and serious. Why would she choose me? I held the lamp close and thought of

her. That was when the shadow emerged, thickening from a light shade to a smoky form to something like a real man. His robes were dust-colored, and above his head a hat floated like a plume of smoke.

“What are you?” I asked, knowing it sounded rude. I didn’t know what else to say to a man made of smoke.

“I am a djinn,” He said as if it were obvious.

“Like a genie?”

“Something like a that, yes,”

“What’s your name?”

He shook his head.

“Okay, I’m gonna call you Jack.”

“How may I serve you?” he asked in a rich baritone.

“I get three wishes?” I asked, remembering a cartoon genie.

“Three, or ten, or none.” He grinned like it was a joke. I set the lamp down and turned away, not wanting to tangle with this dark being. Out of the corner of my eye, Jack faded to shadow then disappeared into the lamp.

Nightmares of Jennifer falling for Dean Ratliff from the next town over kept me from sleeping. Jack was the answer to my angst. Knowing the consequences, I made the wish anyway.

She blushed and agreed. The date was magical. Her smiles evaporated my self-doubt. For once, I felt at ease, like myself. She even seemed to think I was funny. I dropped her off with an electric kiss. That night, pain tore from my neck through my spine to my fingers and toes. I fell to my knees and tried to keep breathing. I knew it had something to do with Jack; I pulled myself to the mantle to grab the lamp and summon him.

“Jack, what is happening?”

“Every wish has a price.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You never asked.”

“Is it always pain?”

“The price depends on how difficult it is for me to acquire. She liked you, but you could not have captured her heart without my magic, so it was a little bit of pain.”

A little bit of pain. I convulsed on the floor.

Once we were in love, the memory of the agony seemed more than a fair price. We married within the year. Our Fern was born first, then baby Brooke. Jack faded to “the djinn,” which faded to a mist in the corner of my eye. The lamp no longer gravitated to my hand. It became a dusty relic on a shelf, from another time and another place. I thought of it less and less.

Happiness was sweeter since it had taken an unnatural intervention to make it mine, but the thought of the bargain brought a bitter aftertaste. I felt that I lived my life in the time between the lightning that lit up the sky and the thunder that would come crashing.

One late summer day, Jennifer hosted a party and invited our friends and family. I was never much for socializing, but something about her made it easier for me to be around all those people. She and our girls wore matching cornflower-blue cotton dresses. They looked like storybook fairies, spreading good cheer to all our friends who saw them. Jennifer made sure everyone had enough to eat and someone to talk to. A parade of sticky-handed children followed her around like little ducks, asking for treats or fetching things she asked them to bring to guests. The They held hands, singing

Ring around the rosie

Pocket full of posies

Ashes, ashes,

We all fall down!

After three rounds, Jennifer fell to the ground on cue, but didn't get up. I thought she was teasing the kids. Her long hair was splayed in the soft grass, her dress laid out around her. I ran toward her and realized she'd passed out. That sweet summer evening turned to panic. In a daze, I carried her to the car and raced to the hospital.

The next hours were a blur. I only clearly remember my Jennifer, still in her cotton dress and loose hair. My fae queen, confined to the sterile, scratchy sheets and stark neutral tones of the hospital room. She eventually woke up. They transferred us around and around the hospital, running test after test.

A doctor in a white coat with a solemn face told us they'd found a tumor in her brain. It was far gone. There was little they could do. His black eyes betrayed no pity; his practiced way of delivering devastation didn't allow me to rage or cry. I couldn't breathe. Jennifer looked away as tears streamed down her cheeks. I knew she was thinking of the girls, but I could only think of how *I* could not lose her.

Jennifer was quiet on the way home, staring out the window. I wanted to fix this, to offer reassurance that she shouldn't despair. It's crueler to make a promise before you're certain you can deliver. The thought of asking the djinn for anything more felt hopeful but desperately dangerous. But he'd brought us together. What wish-price could be worse than losing her?

At home, Jennifer went to bed. I ran to the den to retrieve the lamp, its swirling design warming under my fingertips.

Jack’s ghostly shadow emerged. I could barely make out his eyes, but a wisp of a smile haunted his face.

“What’s your wish, my master?”

“Will Jennifer die of this cancer?”

“Yes.”

“Can you make her better?”

He floated from the corner and glided around the room like a puff of smoke, relishing the freedom of movement, the intensity of my attention.

“I could. Is that your wish?”

“What will it cost?”

“One child.” My throat tightened, preventing me from yelping in a panic.

“No,” I rasped.

He swooped to the other side of the room.

“A fire will kill your neighbors,” he responded, calculating with lives like coins.

“Which ones?” I was disgusted at myself for asking.

He wafted to the window and looked down the street. “The blue house.”

My friend Bill lived there. I thought of Conlin’s broken smile. I felt sick for considering it. My conscience couldn’t bear another death.

“I will pay. Not them.”

The smoky form expanded, then settled on the recliner next to me.

“Of course, master.” He grew thick with thought, his form coalescing.

“What do you want?” I asked him, my voice cracking.

“Your pain.”

“I’ll take any pain.”

He puffed up, doubling in size.

“Make the wish.”

“I wish for Jennifer’s cancer to go away.”

I caught the hint of a smile as he nodded into a puff of smoke and whooshed back into the lamp.

The next few days, I wondered if I’d imagined my conversation with the djinn. But within a week, the color was back in Jennifer’s cheeks. She read the girls from *Grimms’ Fairy Tales* with more narrative enthusiasm then I’d seen for months. When she cackled as the evil witch, the girls’ squeals and giggles reached me in the next room. When they fell asleep, she asked me to take a walk with her in the moonlight. We strolled hand-in-hand around the yard and looked at the stars. She felt warm and alive and full of optimism. *Any price is worth this.*

“You’ve got an angel watching out for you,” he said. The lamp vibrated in my pocket. Jennifer squeezed my hand.

I was flooded with relief, yet my jaw grew tighter, and my fists stayed clenched. I braced for agony, and when it didn’t happen, dread grew and knotted me up like a vine.

My Jennifer didn’t die, but surviving gave her a thirst for things I couldn’t provide. She started with a glass of wine at dinner. Then a bottle. I read the girls to sleep so they wouldn’t see her stumble into bed. Maybe this was a phase. I’d seen soldiers overindulge after deployment; many of them went

back to normal. But some never did.

Within a year of cancer recovery, Jennifer got a job evenings waiting tables. She said she needed to get out of the house more. Her new coworkers liked to party. I didn't like that she experimented with drugs, snorting coke with 21-year-old dishwashers, but she laughed off my concerns and soon blew my paychecks on harder highs. She insisted that she was just having a little fun, living out a little youth now that she had a second chance at life.

On Brooke's twelfth birthday, I brought home our favorite three-cheese pizza. There was no cake, just Funfetti box mix on the counter and no Jennifer in sight. I wished for Brooke to cry. Instead, she calmly suggested we drive downtown, where her mom had said she needed to meet a friend. We passed the picturesque main street for a rundown row of abandoned buildings.

After searching for an hour, we found her asleep in a condemned store's entryway. Without complaint, my daughters helped load her in the car and rode home silently. We were all lost for words in our own ways. When Jennifer sobered up enough to realize what she had done, she was clean for three weeks. Brooke forgave, settled for a late grocery store cake, and held on to hope.

A few months later, I came home from my night shift to strangers sleeping on my couch. The living room was strewn with bottles, takeout boxes and used ashtrays. My girls huddled in their room eating cereal with sour milk to avoid the party outside. I cleared out the living room of the trash, literal and figurative. I made breakfast and invited the girls out for a warm meal. Seeing them come hesitantly out of their room made me realize they weren't little girls anymore. Fern, who had been a boisterous small child, grew to a cloistered young woman, her big eyes watching like a deer ready to bolt to safety.

I summoned the djinn but knew speech would push me over the edge. Not wishing to cry in front of him, I stared into his smoky form and said nothing. He hovered nearby. Was there an expression of sympathy in his shadowed face? For so long, my dearest ambition was to rid myself of him. Now he was the only one who really knew me. As my silence persisted, he faded to smoke and hovered over my discontent, my one true companion.

Jennifer withered until she was skeletal and grey. One rare evening when she wasn't high or hungover, she darkened the doorway of my den. She wore the blue cornflower dress, but the effect was the opposite of what I'm sure she'd intended. The dress hung loose and wrinkled. Her once vibrant skin was sallow and gray, her once strong arms, bony. Her hair was lank and dirty.

"I know you can make it stop." My gaze slid to the little lamp on the mantle, but I knew she didn't really know.

She knelt at my feet, eyes red with tears.

"I never wanted to be this. I wish I had died of cancer!"

She stared into my eyes, and I wondered if on some level she knew it was my fault. Why else would she ask this of me?

I stroked her head as she sobbed in my lap.

Any words I thought of seemed meaningless. The truth, too unbelievable. Guilt choked me. My own selfishness, my fear of losing her had turned her into this. On the mantle, the lamp quivered.

When she left, I grabbed it. It fluttered erratically like a bird caught in a net.

Jack unfurled from the spout, expanded, and settled in an easy chair.

"You didn't tell me I'd pay with *emotional* pain."

“You didn’t ask,” he responded.

“Can I undo any of this?” He morphed into a large face.

“You can undo it all,” he said, opening his mouth and swallowing me. I entered the dense fog of his form as scenes took shape:

A few months after the cancer diagnosis, my Jennifer lies in a hospital bed, wilting like the vase of curling pink roses at her bedside. My daughters are beset by grief. I can’t comfort them. I am helpless and heartbroken, and my love isn’t enough to heal them.

We travel back again, before I dated Jennifer. She smiles at Ratliff down at the feed store. She says yes, she can go out with him when she gets off of work. I am alone.

Back further. I’m back in the cave with the boy. We both look so young, probably less than five years apart. The boy offers me the lamp. I ignore him and call for backup. A gunshot. Pain in my back. A second boy with a weapon.

Then we were back in my den, the djinn reduced to human size, nearly solid with a curling mustache. His robes gathered their dusty color, and the tinge of his reddish hat deepened.

“Your wish is my command,” he said. I had it now: a path for preventing all the suffering, from the start.

“Take me back to the caves.”

Smoke and sweat fill my nostrils. I’m eighteen again, staring in the eyes of another scared boy. Instead of the lamp, I take a bullet.

It’s not like the vision he showed me. I am fully present yet still know what could and will be. I have a sense of the futility of the battle we are fighting here. I haven’t met Jennifer yet, and I also know she will have a good life

without me. My girls will never exist. The grief for them, not the wound, is what is killing me. Conlin will accompany my flag-draped coffin, hug my mother. I’m barely aware of my unit rushing the cave where I lie.

I close my eyes and imagine the faces of my children. Conlin, panicked, kneels by me and kicks the lamp the boy dropped when he was shot. It clatters across the stone and dirt floor.

As I die, my soul unstitches from my body and lingers nearby. My spirit doesn’t fade. Shadow threads tie me to another vessel. I am pulled towards the lamp, into the corner where it came to rest. I watch headlamps moving through the dark, sweeping the cave, pausing on my body. After all these years, I no longer feel the weight of Jack’s shadow. He is free, free to die, free to rest. Now I am the shadow.

Every wish granted has a price due.

I ache for the lamp to catch someone’s eye on this dark cave floor.

New Fiction by Eldridge Thomas III: Glitter

Sometimes I wonder if there’s more Elvis in Vegas at Christmastime or if it’s just my daddy getting to me again.

They got him on electronic billboards wishing everybody happy holidays. He sings “Silent Night” or “Silver Bells” *everywhere you go*. You can’t walk the Strip without seeing ten Elvises in red coats and pointed hats on a unicycle or skateboard or making giraffes or big-boobed girls out of balloons.

Each year, they put out a twelve-foot Elvis in front of the Westgate. He’s hunched, arms out, stuck mid hip shake. He’s got on Santa’s suit and pom-poms, but no white bushy hair or beard, and his coat’s unbuttoned enough for everybody to see his muscled mannequin chest. His pom-poms and gold buckle bedazzle. Little red-nose Rudolph stands over to the side and stares up at him meekly, waiting for a pat, some kind of kindness.

I do the same: stare at him, not so much as twitch an eye, while tourists roll luggage around me or head out to wherever they’re going, wherever that might be.

It’s Christmas Eve, the only time there’s a quiet, warm hum in the ER. Somebody’s got hot chocolate. Somebody brought candy canes and sugar cookies with sprinkles. The overheads are at half-mast. Elvis sings “Jingle Bells” somewhere down the hallway. Hattrup is hanging lights in a window. He’s only got one string, which isn’t enough for anything, but I don’t chastise. Today, I’m letting the spirit in.

“Georgia Boy is back,” Hattrup says. He has a high, wispy voice and aluminum-colored eyes that flicker, making him seem anxious at every second.

“We call state troopers Georgia Boys,” I correct him. “Where?”

“Four.”

“Thank you.”

“You visit Elvis today?”

I walk, don’t answer.

Georgia’s asleep when I find him. With his hair and beard and bird chest, he looks like Gregg Allman Jesus. He’s shirtless—left arm blue, blotchy, swollen—and hooked to an IV and air. He’s from Valdosta, about an hour from Waycross, where I’m from, and we’re only a few years apart, so we got connections.

Georgia’s a frequent flyer and has already been told he’ll lose the arm to sepsis if he can’t keep it clean. It’s hard for him, because he lives on the Strip, plays 90s alternative, hoping passersby will toss money into his guitar case. He sang “Come as You Are” for us once. His whole shtick was rasp. Hattrup didn’t think much of it. I thought it was fine.

I pull his chart, and he stirs.

“Hey, Georgia,” he says.

“When’d you come in, Georgia?” I ask.

“Last night.”

“I was on last night.”

“Tonight, then? Is it Christmas?”

I tell him there’s about five hours yet.

“It always feels like Christmas,” he says. “They keep the lights up year-round in these parts.”

“We had some neighbors like that.”

He giggles, says “Us too.”

“At least the weather’s Christmasy,” I say. It’s the only time of year South Georgia and South Nevada share a similar temperature, a frigid fifty/sixty degrees.

“Did it snow Christmas Day,” he asks, “when you were about thirteen, fourteen?”

“Heck yeah. We got at least six, seven flakes.”

“Us too.” He smiles. “It was magical.”

Winter is the time for clouds in the desert, when I sometimes drive ninety miles to lie on my car’s hood and watch the sky. I get there at least a full hour before sunset, when the earth’s the color of Spanish moss in October and the sky old beat-up jeans, and the chunky clouds billow up like skyscrapers, and the thin ones stretch across quilt-patterned, each bumping into the next. It’s just like home, just right there, like you could touch them if only your arms were three times as long.

In swampy flat Waycross, you can see a storm’s advance miles away with its gray showgirl’s curtain.

Then the glittery night. They always said you can go into the Okefenokee and see the Milky Way with your own bare eyes, but I never did.

I miss the pines, how their branches hide with the moonlight, except for those at the tippy top. Under the moon, they smell like wood and mint and look like stick figures with triangle heads that lean with the wind, threatening to break.

At ten, the ER is called to attention, and Col. Mihata arrives to wish everybody a merry Christmas. Col. Mihata’s husky, wears wire eyeglasses, and comes across as friendly even though he smiles with gritted teeth. When he leaves, Hattrup is in my ear.

“You can’t,” he says. “Not safe.”

“Mission already accomplished.”

I walk back to the nurses' station with him on my heels.

"I don't mean the plane ticket."

"He doesn't have an ID, so I got him a Greyhound."

"To Georgia? How long is that?"

"Two and a half days."

"He's an addict. He won't make it."

"He says he's got enough stash for a few days."

"Jesus Christ."

"The reason for the season."

I open Georgia's songbook. He doesn't remember his dad's number, and he's scared to talk to him anyway. He said call his Sunday school teacher: the number's scribbled somewhere in the book. I learned this when we talked about how, growing up, we both liked Sunday school but hated church. His teacher was a gentle man who also taught him guitar.

"You can't drive him to the airport, a bus station, or anywhere. What if he has a flashback and kills you?"

"He's a heroin junkie."

"He was in Iraq and Afghanistan and wherever the hell else. Put him in an Uber."

"You're free to come with."

The songbook is a mixture of random ink and pencil sentences and lyrics, his handwriting sometimes large and curvy, sometimes tiny and all caps. There're sketches of objects throughout: a fire hydrant, a traffic light, a Coke can.

"No, I'm going home to my sweet thing."

I find the number on the third page, at the bottom. He literally wrote out *Sunday School teacher*, then a colon, then the guy's name, Carl Thornton, then the ten-digit number. He drew a little guitar beside the digits.

"Call me and leave your phone on speaker the whole way."

"He's harmless." I turn to Hattrup, to his fluttering tin foil eyes. "It's Christmas. Let me do some good in the world."

I dial before he can say something else.

It's just after midnight when I hear a radio voice down the hallway. *Spend Christmas right here with Elvis. Put a country ham in the oven, an angel on the tree, and the King's songs—White Christmas or Blue—*

Georgia's awake, stares blankly at the TV, flips channels.

I tell him I talked to Carl, and he sits up. I tell him I talked to his daddy, too, and he rubs his face one-handed, hides his eyes. I tell him: Both men will be there when his bus pulls in. They've looked for him, knew he was in Vegas, even flew out a couple times, never could find an address.

I tell him the hard part: His momma died last year. Heart attacked her. She worried every day for him.

His shoulders heave. I hand him a box of tissues. He smacks it away, pulls out the IV, pulls off the nasal tube. He jumps up and bangs a leg against a chair, tumbles headfirst into the wall, clinches a fist, wants to punch the wall, needs to punch something, slaps the wall open-handed instead. Slaps it a few times.

He turns to face me.

"What happened in Iraq," he says, "he never understood I couldn't be normal after that."

I wait for him to say something else. He doesn't. I ask if I can give him a hug. He thinks on it, his eyes droop then blink, then he says *please*.

It's just after seven when we walk outside, where the sun already blazes, and I remember Hattrup saying we might set a record.

"Hot damn," Georgia says. "You know how many times I wore shorts on a Christmas?"

His bus doesn't leave until nine something, so I say let's go see Elvis. He nods, doesn't even ask.

We stare and listen to slot machines beep and chime their way across the Westgate's breezeway, hear someone win a jackpot.

Georgia's shirt hangs over his shoulders like a cape. He took a shower at the hospital, but his clothes are still filthy. Tourists make a point to walk around us.

"You dig the King?" he asks, finally.

"My daddy did," I say. "Liked him so much he wanted to be him. Had the wave haircut, the sideburns. Even impersonated him."

Georgia sniggers.

"Back home, the ladies' auxiliary put on a Hee-Haw-type show every Christmas. The mayor dressed up like a woman, and everybody thought that was funny. They set a pig loose, and some idiot chased him through the audience. Some beauty queen sang, and Daddy did Elvis."

"Something happened to your old man?"

"I came home from bootcamp and told him I who I was, and he told me I was no child of his, and that was that."

“Deep South strikes again.”

“So, I actually hate the King.”

He laughs.

“What you’re doing for me,” he says. “Thank you, Georgia.”

“You gone make it, Georgia?”

He shrugs. He’s honest.

He says he needs his music to live, so he has to keep his arm. I can’t tell if he really wants to get clean.

I just know he wants to get home.

New Poetry by Kyle Hanton: “Deployment, 2017”

New poem by Kyle Hanton

New Poems by Rachel Rix: “Experimental Simulation of Joint Morphology During

Desiccation;” “Second Deployment;” and “CO’s Canon”

New poetry by Rachel Rix

New Poem by Nathan Didier: “Hearts and Minds”

New poem by Nathan Didier: “Hearts and Minds”

New Fiction by Adrian Bonenberger: Calvary Hill

Captain Abibalus was troubled. Walking up the dusty, cypress-lined path from Kyrenia’s harbor, Abibalus’ practiced eye took in the worn marble buildings. Much had changed since the last time he’d been here over a decade ago.

New Fiction by David James:

The Infiltrators

Barabbas walked hurriedly down a dusty side alley in the old city of Jerusalem, glancing side to side before furtively ducking into a low doorway of a house where he was finally able to drop his uncomfortable human disguise and assume his true form.

New Fiction by Michael Carson: The Childhood of Barabbas

My first memories are of the hills outside Judea. A small lizard, with a black stripe and black eyes, staring at me and I at it.

New Nonfiction by Blake Rondeau: Smile

I remember the smell of the plastic blue gym mats under my face as I grappled another Marine in the hanger bay of the USS Boxer. What felt like a youth indoor football field, except grey non-skid instead of turf, two huge accordion sliding doors which opened up to the elevators to take aircraft to the top deck of the ship. In reality, in our day to day the doors just let in all the weather from outside into the bay. Today, the humidity was somewhere between eighty percent and Satan's asshole and our polyester-blend uniforms did absolutely fuck-all to absorb the sweat—no one even bothered to wear skivvy shirts anymore because all it did was create more laundry.

I was training for my Green Belt in MCMAP (Marine Corps Martial Arts Program). I was a two-year Corporal and had been on leave when our grey belt class was offered, so now I was working back-to-back courses to avoid getting left behind on the Marine Corps standard.

Today, the Staff Sergeant (SSgt) running the program thought

it would be funny to pair me with the fat-fuck LCpl. LCpl Cox outweighed me by easily 50 pounds—you were supposed to be partnered with people similar in stature in order to do body weight exercises and carries with your partner. Instead, I had a SSgt with a grudge against me for being the office clerk and not just a "gun bunny" (artilleryman) who decided today was the day he'd screw me over.

We'd been training for about an hour and a half, covered in sweat and face stuck on the mat. My Direct Report came running into the hangar bay and told me that First Sergeant (1stSgt) was looking for me. Having been the Battery Clerk for some time now, this was not an unusual request because my job was to generate reports for him. In fact, I had been training Stueland, my LCpl, to be my replacement, but it seemed he liked spending less time in the Battery Office than I did, and I would frequently get calls from the 1stSgt asking me where the hell his clerks were.

"Did he say what he wanted," I asked.

Stueland just shook his head and said, "All the Brass are up there though."

Great. I thought as I walked through the ship. *There was nothing like an ass-chewing from everybody*. First Sergeant knew I was in MCMAP—he had insisted upon it—so he wouldn't send for me unless something was wrong.

I walked through the mess hall, down the passageway, up a flight of stairs, and took a right at the exercise bikes. I paused in front of the flimsy, white door of the Battery Office, took a deep breath and entered.

When I opened my mouth to say good morning to 1stSgt, I was eye to eye with Chaps.

Chaps was the Battalion Chaplain, who, in an earlier life was a college football player. He now stood in front of me, large

shoulders slumped, fidgeting with his wedding ring as he did when he thought. He looked down and quietly told me to shut the door. A SSgt from beside me slid a chair into the back of my legs.

“Sit, please,” Chaps said. I did. As I sat down it started to dawn on me what was about to happen. It also dawned on me how many men were standing in the smallest company office I’d ever been in.

The Navy provided offices for the Battalion around the ship’s gym. Each infantry company had an office and then all the attachments, like our artillery battery, got the smaller rooms. Inside the small room was my CO, XO, my LT, 1stSgt, my Gunny, Company Gunny, my Platoon Sgt, and HQ Platoon Sgt all off to the sides of the office, and Chaps in front of me on a little metal chair. Ten grown men in a 10×10 room furnished with desks on both sides and two filling cabinets shoving us all into an even smaller, more uncomfortable 8×8 foot space to talk about whatever bad news Chaps was about to lay on me.

That’s when he picked it up off the desk. The red folder. Two things in the military come in red folders: Secret Material and Red Cross messages. Chaps wouldn’t be here to deliver an Intel brief—I may be a Marine, but I’m not a complete fucking moron.

“We received word today that your grandmother passed away.” Chaps said slowly.

“Which one?”

“Uh…” He fumbled the folder open again and looked, “uh…both, I’m afraid.”

“Both.” I repeated. “So, Nancy and Marylynn?”

Chaps looked again, wanting to make sure he got this right.

“Yes, I’m afraid,” he repeated his salve.

“When?”

“Marylynn on the 24th and Nancy…” he checked the record, “The 11th.”

I took it all in for a moment. God love her, but Nancy—my mom’s mom—was kind but in a depressive state for most of my life and we never had much of a relationship.

But Marylynn; she was a third parent. She had my sisters and me over for sleepovers, holiday weekends, and birthdays all the way until we were in our teens. She did all the grandma things: She let us stay up late and watch movies, order pizza, eat too much ice cream, play pool in the basement, and in the winters, would always have my grandpa make a fire for us to roast marshmallows for s’mores.

My sisters and I would read books or magazines, play with new toys, or play Chinese checkers with my grandma in the living room. Grandpa would sit in his chair at the back of the room and Grandma would take her time-outs to have a cigarette and let us continue to play.

She would often tell me I had a beautiful smile. She’d just watch me laugh and play with my sisters, never commenting on if a joke I said was funny or if a story I told was interesting—she had no mind for the substance of our adolescent prattle—but she would stare at us; happy to see our smiles. A form of currency, as a grandparent, to know you’re fostering happy moments in your grandchildren, a confirmation of love.

The last time I can remember her commenting on my smile was when I stopped by my grandparent’s house on my 10-day post bootcamp leave. I had graduated some ten pounds lighter than when I left and, according to her, hadn’t had ten pounds to lose in the first place.

I had worn my uniform to church and then driven over to her

house to say hello and check in after being away three months. She smoked her GPCs at the kitchen table and greeted me with a turn of her shoulder and an, “Oooh hiiii,” as I knocked and walked in the door.

“Hi Gram,” I said as though no time passed.

“Look at you! Looking sharp. Say, what a nice uniform.”

“Thanks, Gram.”

“Oh, there you are,” she said as the smile had broken across my face. “So handsome.”

I was hoping the compliments would die down before my grandpa heard and came into the room. He had been in the Army, my dad had been in the Army, they all were in the Army. So, me being in the Marines was a point of needling for my grandpa.

“So those are your dress blues,” he said, entering the kitchen from the living room.

“Yes.”

“Look pretty sharp,” he said with his subtle inflection that let me know he was a little proud.

“But remember,” he changed to a would-be serious tone, “You ain’t shit unless you’re Airborne,” he chuckled.

I laughed and felt at ease knowing I was still just their grandson. I wasn’t a warrior, a devil dog, a hard charger, Jarhead, Killer, Hero, or any other bullshit name given to Marines. I was just a kid.

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But now I wasn’t at ease. Nor was I laughing or smiling. Nine men avoided eye contact with me. One man, Chaps, who had been like an uncle to me since I moved to this Battalion and started going to church regularly, stumbled through the

details, out of love and empathy of course, but nonetheless, there I was sitting like a fool, getting factoids from inside a fishbowl. Alongside men I didn't want to drink a beer with let alone be completely torn open; none of these men knew me, none of them cared. We'd shared nothing more than pleasantries in two and a half years and now I sat in a cold room, on a metal chair, sweat freezing against my body, as my blood congealed inside me and my mind reeled from the idea that when I do get to finally go home, the woman who had made my family a family was no longer there. No more drawn out "hi's" when I walked through the door, no more soft hugs, and no more holidays in her house where the petty family squabbles died, because she said so, and we just got to be a family and enjoy the food and decorations she made.

Now, looking up, and seeing them look back at me, that was worse. Everyone looking for me to react, waiting with vacant faces for me to tell them it was okay and that they could go back to their own lives and fuck off about my own issues. My tongue felt fat and heavy in my mouth. My mind was screaming at me to just say something and get out of there.

"Can I… go?" I asked. I felt like a child asking for a snack, but what the hell else was I to say.

"Sure." Said Chaps, "But before you go…" I felt whatever energy I had that was trying to lift me off my seat, slump back down again.

"Let's pray quickly"

Fuck. Me. Hard. The thought screaming in my head. Chaps, buddy, as much as I appreciated this gentle gesture, I just needed to leave.

But he prayed. He prayed that they be at peace and other such things. I'm sure it was sweet. He was being so kind. But until he said, Amen, I didn't hear a word of it. I was biting my lips and repeating, *Do. Not. Cry.* in my head until he

finished.

“Thank you,” I said clumsily after the prayer was over. As I stood up to leave, I finally made real eye contact with my LT and Platoon Sgt who were both nodding their heads slowly in an attempt to be consoling, but only looking stiff and uncomfortable as their weight shifted, brushing against one another. I gave them a nod back and opened the door and closed it with a crack.

I was back into the gym next to the empty exercise bikes, walked forward only a few paces, before my favorite Sgt appeared,

“Did you hear if we were going out tonight?” he said to me.

I didn’t hear him. I didn’t understand the words until later when I was back at my rack with the shades pulled. But at that moment, I reached out to hug him and he hugged me back. And I cried. I cried hard. In total the hug probably lasted 15 seconds. But it felt like an hour. When we separated, he asked me if I was okay. I didn’t respond directly or even to him. I simply straightened up, wiped my tears, and said aloud that I was sorry.

I was sorry I wasn’t with my family. I was sorry for crying on a grown man. I was sorry for getting myself stuck out here in the middle of the ocean, so I couldn’t go home. There was a great deal I was feeling sorry for—not least of which was being there for my grandma. Not holding her hand, sitting in a hospital room, trying to ease the pain by telling her a joke. I have thought many times that, had I been home, maybe I could have made her laugh and maybe even myself laugh, and we would be sharing, “*I love you’s*,” and making a final memory with laughter.

Or perhaps it could be some other happy cliché I could have on replay inside my memory bank like saying goodnight and turning the lights off for her to pass blissfully in her sleep. But

that doesn’t happen in real life. There are no perfect hospital-scene endings. No holding her hand while the music fades and the lights go out. No whispering a final message into her casket.

It’s been fifteen years since then, and I haven’t smiled the same way since. Oh, I can laugh. Some days, I can feel truly happy. But it never seems to feel the same and I find it’s an all-too-common practice to remind myself: Smile. *There you are*.

New Review by Larry Abbott: Surviving the Long Wars

Surviving the Long Wars: Creative Rebellion at the Ends of Empire. Chicago: Bridge Books, 2024.

The 4-day 2023 Veteran Art Triennial and Summit in Chicago, held from spring into the summer of 2023, coinciding with the 20th anniversary of the US invasion of Iraq, was held in various venues in Chicago. A variety of exhibitions at such venues as Newberry Library, Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago Cultural Center, featured the work of over fifty artists. *Surviving the Long Wars* developed out of the summit and the exhibitions.

The editorial collective which oversaw the book, Aaron Hughes, Ronak Kapadia, Therese Quinn, Meranda Roberts, and Amber Zora, reflects various perspectives: veteran, non-veteran, feminist, Indigenous, and queer. They have put together an expansive volume that highlights the “profound connections between the

two most protracted military conflicts in US history: the ‘American Indian Wars’ of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the twenty-first century’s ‘Global War on Terror’ (GWOT)” (1).

The roughly sixty contributors, vets and non-vets, are represented with photographs, installations, paintings, essays, poetry, and performance. There are also historical artifacts which illustrate the connections between the two “long wars.” The book gives broad exposure to writers and artists who may be unfamiliar to the general reader.

There are four major sections in the book, each with a brief introduction, a poem, essays and related artwork. “Residues and Rebellions,” for example, includes contemporary work by Monte Little and Miridith Campbell, among others, that are paired with selections from *Akwesasne Notes* and *The Black Panther* newspapers from the 1970’s and with Kiowa and Black Horse ledger drawings from the late 1800’s. The visual correlations are made explicit with a Black Horse ledger drawing displayed with a photograph from *Notes*, gouaches by Pakistani-American Mahwish Chishty, and a 2022 ledger drawing, “Enlistment,” by Marine Corps vet Darrell Wayne Fair. “Enlistment” is one panel in a series of ledger drawings depicting key events in his life. Also included in this section (and in later sections) are Miridith Campbell and Melissa Doud’s contemporary take on traditional dresses. Campbell’s *Marine Corps Dress—Southern Style* (2022) integrates items such as vintage Marine service buttons on tanned buckskin. Campbell served in three branches of the military and the dress reflects her service and Kiowa heritage. Her *Counting Coup* (2002) uses a Civil War cavalry coat with “Kiowa-style beadwork” replacing the epaulets. Similarly, Melissa Doud, an Army vet, created *Bullet Dress* (2016), placing 365 bullet casings on a dress made from an Army uniform. The casings replace the jingles on a powwow dance dress. (Likewise, Monty Little’s poem from his chapbook

Overhang of Cumulus reveals hidden similarities between apparent disparate images through juxtaposition, thus creating unexpected connections:

Bullet shells drop on splintered
floors to mother's
cadence in her jingle dress).

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz' essay, "Why is the United States the Most Militaristic State in History," takes a long view of American wars, while Meranda Roberts takes a close look at the major works in the exhibition.

These interrelationships are further explored in "Reckon and Reimagine," the second section. Rijin Sahakian's essay "Embedded Horizons" focuses on the Iraq War and the work of Iraqi artists Ali Eyal and Sajjad Abbas in particular. She is critical of the barriers to the broader exposure of Iraqi art in the West. She writes that "The works of Eyal and Abbas are acts of defiance against conditions designed to force surrender. . . . But will the art world, informed by and participating with war's image making and financial structures ever take the risk of remaking the rules of engagement?" (134). Amber Zora's essay "Disrupting Business as Usual: Transforming Bureaucracy into Art" surveys the ways that artists "have utilized the detritus of the military machine—the mountains of bureaucratic paperwork, the ephemera, the piles of surveillance materials—to illuminate dark and forgotten aspects of militarism" (137). The artworks in "Reckon and Reimagine" exemplify her view. Gerald Sheffield, an Army vet, uses pages from the Army *Field Manual* to create *fm-05.301* (2016), which exposes "the underlying machinery of psychological warfare" (141). Other works in the section include Chitra Ganesh and Mariam Ghani's *Index of the Disappeared: Parasitic Archive* (2014) and Hanaa Malallah's *She/He Has No Picture* (2019-20). The former is an installation with a huge filing cabinet behind a desk, suggesting impersonality, where everyone is just a card among thousands

or millions of other cards. The latter memorializes the hundreds of victims of the bombing of the Al Amirayah shelter in 1991 by “featuring portraits of the victims crafted from burnt canvases” (142).

The third section, “Unlikely Entanglements,” focuses on “visual parallels [which] surface between artworks by civilians impacted by the US long wars and BIPOC veterans critiquing the military they once served in” (154). Laleh Khalili’s essay “Tomahawks, Chinooks, and Geronimo: Settler-Colonial Fantasies of US Navy Seals” analyzes the ways that Navy Seals, and the military generally, have adopted in various forms the names and symbols of Indigenous people. Junaid Rana’s “Life During War on Terror Time” discuss both individual artists and the ways that art sees “things anew when before they were unseen” (209). The strength of the section lies in the art. At first glance Bassim Al Shaker’s series *Moment of Silence* (2022) appears to depict the creation of the cosmos. However, a closer look reveals “an unfamiliar sky in the minutes of silence following explosions” (159) that Al Shaker survived. “‘I saw body parts in the sky. The paintings show what the sky looked like at that time. The works describe death and loss, but also a new life after a loss’” (159). Ruth Kaneko’s *Sutured* (2023) uses remnants of her time in the Army to cover a box that connotes a sense of the futility of war. Army vet Rodney Ewing’s “Faded,” from a series on silk-screened ledger paper, *Planned Obsolescence* (2022), takes an image of Black prison laborers and superimposes an outline of wheels and gears, suggesting how the machinery of society abuses and exploits Blacks. A work from another series from 2022, *Come the Mean Times*, depicts a Black man with arms raised on the top part of the canvas; superimposed on the figure is an outline of a biplane with a naming of parts, like “elevator flap” and “right aileron.” On the bottom half of the canvas, upside down, like a mirror image, is a Native figure holding a child. Superimposed on this lower part is a map of the Trail of Tears. In this series

“Ewing creates a dialogue about the harm done to Indigenous and African American peoples by the interconnected histories of colonialism and white supremacy” (186).

The first part of the fourth section, “Surviving the Long Wars Summit,” is comprised of numerous photographs of the various exhibitions, workshops, discussions, and performances that were part of the summit. There is also documentation of the Iraq War Memorial Activation, in which participants lay flowers into the waters of Lake Michigan. The section concludes with a short essay, “A Sweeter Future,” two longer essays, “’When Black People Are Free, All People Will Be Free’: Black Freedom, Indigenous Sovereignty, and the Limits of Reparations Discourse,” and “The Summit: Then and Now,” and a conversation between Army vets Kevin Basl and Anthony Torres. Torres curated the performances in Triennial, and as he explains to Basl, his “vision was to create collaborative opportunities among performers and attendees and help build a community that would exist beyond the Triennial” (286).

Aaron Hughes’ essay in the Conclusion, “Sowing Seeds of Resistance,” discusses the life and work of White Mountain Apache artist Frederick Gokliz as a springboard to a broader consideration of the work of contemporary artists such as Monty Little, Mariam Ghani, Ruth Kaneko, and Darrell Wayne Fair. Hughes sees in these and other artists “a web of interconnected exploitation” (313). He follows this up later in the essay when he writes: “However, I believe that when veterans move away from identities solely rooted in military service and American exceptionalism and instead embrace solidarity grounded in shared experiences of exploitation, new possibilities emerge” (321). His comment reflects the theses in some of the other essays, which call for the creation of new communities.

The concluding section, “Afterword,” includes an essay by Ronak K. Kapadia, “Afterword: Meditations on Survival and Rebellion,” which examines “three defining moments” during the

three years of planning for the Triennial: the withdrawal from Afghanistan, the continuing U.S. role in the Palestinian War, and the self-immolation of Aaron Bushnell in protest of that war. For Kapadia these events are intertwined and “prompt a deeper meditation on the concept of ‘surviving the long wars.’” The compelling writers and artists in the Triennial, along with dozens, if not hundreds of others in the U.S. and throughout the world, such as Indigenous artist Richard Ray Whitman and Afghanistan War veteran Henrik Andersen of Denmark, are instrumental in prompting this meditation.

New Poetry by Elisabeth Lewis Corley: “An Loc”

New Poem by Elisabeth Lewis Corley: An Loc

New Nonfiction: The Footsteps of Giants by David James

All this is to say that pilgrimage is not for religious journeys alone, but for any act of traveling that takes us to a place of special cultural significance.

New Nonfiction: Interview with Adam Kovac

So that’s what I did. I sat down and attempted to write The Great American War Novel. I wouldn’t have sent the manuscript out on submission if I didn’t think I’d come as close as I was able to actually accomplishing that.

New Poetry by Patricia Hastings: “Dad”

New Poem from Patricia Hastings: Dad

New Poetry by Faye Susan: “I am the Daughter of a Storyteller”

New Poetry by Faye Susan: “I am the Daughter of a Storyteller”

New Fiction by Tod Denis: “Drilling Position”

Brendan always felt smaller than the other guys in the locker room. Probably it was their triceps, military tats, and/or their ability to call each other “bro” and sound natural.

New Review by Travis Klempan: Adam Kovac’s The Surge

Whether we wanted it or not, America was — up until this very moment, perhaps — truly the indispensable nation.

New Nonfiction by Karie Fugett: Excerpt from Alive Day

Dillon crawled in circles on the carpet, the TV behind him glowing with reports of destruction and death. Though it had been only days since the boys left, it felt much longer.

New Interview with Karie Fugett

I think at the time I was just kind of following my orders. And then, by the time I was thinking something’s wrong, I was so in it that I just kept following. It really took a couple of years before I started getting angry, but at that point it was kind of too late.

New Fiction by Josh Bates: Excerpt from The Baghdad Shuffle

The patrol was unsettling. The initial ‘liberation’ euphoria had soured. It was all bad vibes from the second we exited the Country Club. Hard brown faces casting the evil eye. Old men sitting in front of shuttered store fronts, sizing us up. We still didn’t have an interpreter, but I tried to press a few locals anyway. I showed them Izzat’s photo. I gauged reactions. No hints of recognition. Just hard stares and brusque wave-offs.

New Poetry by Celeste

Schueler: “In Oklahoma, Another Air Force Spouse Tells Me Starlings Are An Invasive Species” and “I First Compared You To A Blue Jay”

Three years before we met,
Friends tell me to stop reading
Virginia Woolf after my suicide
Attempt and an ex-boyfriend
Gifts me a burned CD of
The Beatles at Easter——

New Poetry from Galen Cunningham: “Winter of Discontent” and “War Games”

New Poetry by Galen Cunningham

New Fiction by Neil Allen: The Scar

The two boys creep towards the edge of the crater and stare across.

New Fiction by David James: Oxenstone

Dark clouds were building over the mountains to the north, like Giorgione’s Tempest. I bought a glass of red at the rooftop bar and stayed to enjoy the view. The tour was over.

Review of Sheila Dietz’s The Berry and the Bee

Her poetry is rarely sentimental or wildly emotional, but rather steady, wise, and quietly observational.

New Fiction by Kevin M. Kearney: Freelance

The HYPR Dryver Manual was clear: a Dryver should not, under any circumstances, touch a customer. Simon read and re-read the line on his phone, looking for an exception, something like a loophole that might help him remove the snoring man from his back seat.

New Fiction by J. Malcolm Garcia: Pleasantries

The gauze bandage had come off in his sleep, and he touched a bare patch of warm skin and the tight line of ten stitches with the tips of his fingers. He was conscious of the wound, its need for protection. His naked scalp beneath the gauze, its exposure now with the gauze off. Healing will take time, the doctor had told him.

New Poetry by Sara Shea: “Customs”

New poem by Sara Shea: “Customs”

New Poetry by Benjamin Bellet: “What Was It Like?”; “Zero Five Thirty”; “West Point”

New poems by Benjamin Bellet

New Review and Interview by Larry Abbott: James Wells’ Because

He was 39 years old at the time of his death, and left a wife, Betty and three children, Ora, Kathleen, and the youngest, nine-year old James.

New Interview with Kevin M. Kearney

But on a personal level, I don’t think there is an easy way out. I think the real answer is you need to go the other

way—you need to change your mind. If you believe that tech is intentionally trying to rewire your brain, then that should frame everything you read on a device. Why was this fed to me? And what is it trying to make me feel?

New Nonfiction by Matt Eidson: Binge

Sometimes I'd imagine that compressing the areas of fat would break apart the tissue and allow it to dissolve into my body. In my downtime, I would knead the fat to a pulp.

New Nonfiction by Evan Balkan: In Praise of Awe

It's hard to define, awe. But certainly we know when we feel it. It's a rare thing, buried under the onslaught of daily routine and the indignities of, say, a red traffic light when we're late for work. Our ego—that most human of qualities—screams at us: "I am the universe. The universe is me."

New Poetry by Loretta Tobin: “In the Dead Man’s Seabag” and “River City”

A blue ribbon marked
First Thessalonians,
where he had underlined—
Be joyful always;