

**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. 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 than 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.

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## **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



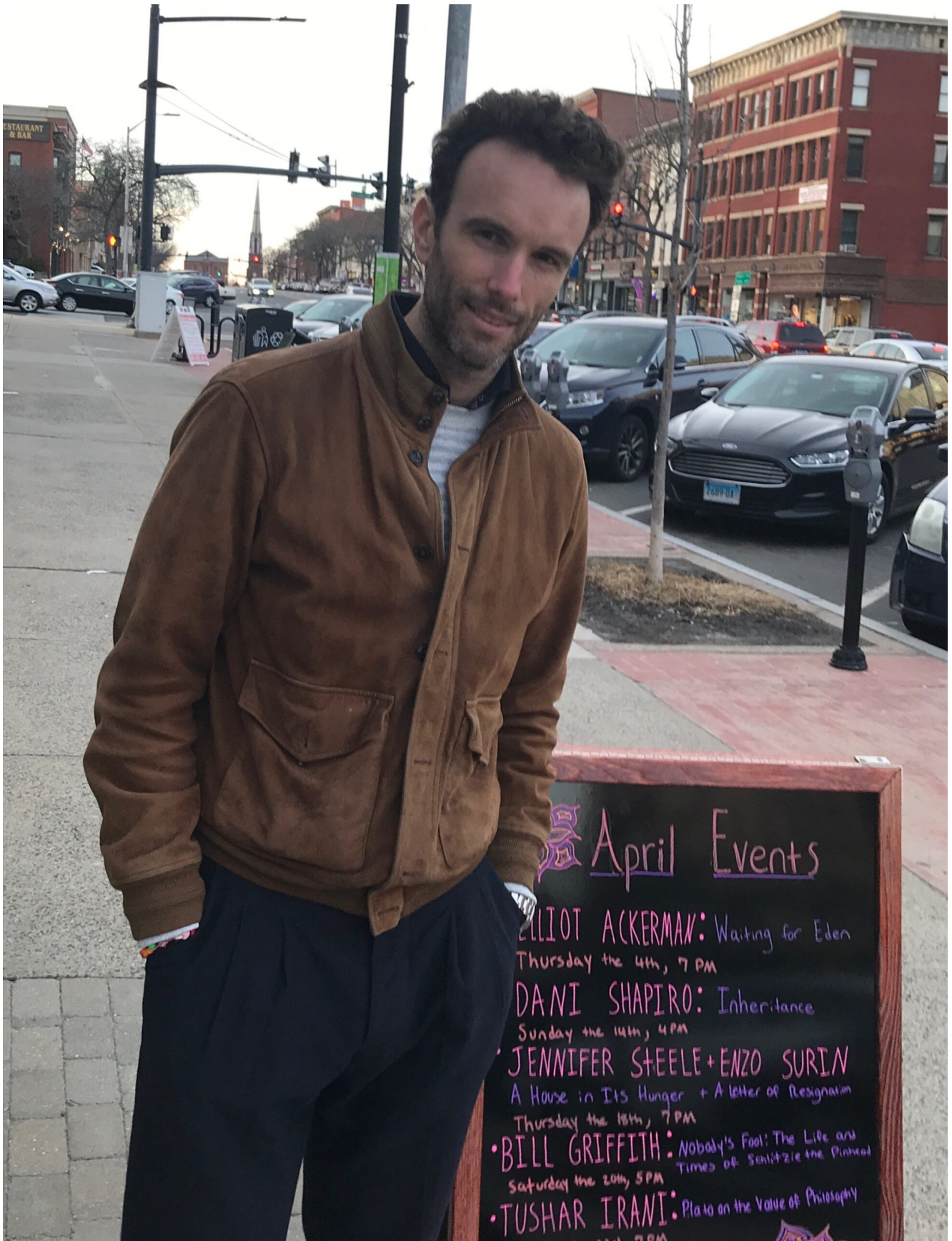
Brian Van Reet, author of *Spoils*, Austin, TX, 2016



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.



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# Happy Birthday, Afghanistan

October 08, 2019

The war in Afghanistan is now old enough to go to war in Afghanistan.

Yesterday the war in Afghanistan, first to fall under the catchall designation of the Global War on Terror (GWOT), turned 18 years old, meaning that individuals who were not yet born when it started are now old enough to deploy in it.

Growing up, 18 is one of those birthdays you look forward to so much. It means freedom, emancipation from parental

oversight. It means cigarettes and lottery tickets. It means taking part in the democratic process. It means tattoos.

The war is not much different.

Freedom is certainly at the forefront of its goals. 18 years ago it began its existence as Operation Enduring Freedom and it continues (since 2015) as Operation Freedom's Sentinel. At this point there have probably been more cigarettes smoked by US troops than rounds fired. Notably absent from this new longest war is the draft lottery, a staple of the previous longest conflict, The Vietnam War.

As for the democratic process, Afghanistan has gotten it, or a version of it, since the US removal of the Taliban in 2001, having held three parliamentary elections and just completed their fourth presidential election (though the results are still unknown, partly due to ongoing violence, low turn-out, and the usual allegations of corruption).

And tattoos? Well, tattoos are just ink filled scars, and 18 years of war have left plenty of those.

I don't much remember my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. I'm sure it was rather unremarkable, taking place during midterms of my senior year in high school, the year we got new US history textbooks that included the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks.

It wasn't until two months later that I got my first tattoo, and I didn't move out of my parents' house until five months later. I wouldn't enlist until two months after my 19<sup>th</sup> birthday, and with full-scale ground wars now in two countries, it was clear that I'd be deploying, especially having joined the infantry.



I received my orders to deploy to Afghanistan on October 2, 2005, just before the war turned four. By this age, much of the country's attention was turned to its younger sibling, the War in Iraq. I went to war just after my 20<sup>th</sup> birthday.

When I got home in 2006, people constantly asked me what it was like in Iraq. They still do. This was the beginning of the realization that my war would be forgotten, but I never imagined it would reach this scale.

Over the past 18 years, less than half of one percent of this country's population has served in the military. An even smaller percentage has deployed, and of that group even fewer saw combat. The nature of the war in Afghanistan, like the official operational name, has changed. But war is war and US troops are still dying.

According to [DOD's most recent report](#) (October 7, 2019), there have been 1,893 US troops killed in action in Afghanistan since the start of the conflict. 60 of those have come under the banner of Operation Freedom's Sentinel, which allegedly marked the end of combat operations in the country. There have

been another 405 “non-hostile” deaths, and another 20,582 wounded in action. This is to say nothing of the US contractors or Afghan and allied forces KIA and WIA, or the veterans who have died since returning from the war, be it from complications to war injuries or from suicide.

Or the Afghan civilians whose freedom we are supposed to be sentinels of.

Questions I’m consistently faced with as a veteran of Afghanistan include: Was it worth it? Would you do it again? Should we leave? Did we win? How do we win?

The question of worth is a difficult one for me. Can we say anything is worth the number of lives that have been lost? More to the point, can we really make that judgment while we’re still in the thick of it?

Personally, yes, I would again answer my nation’s call and attempt to protect those whose position demands protection. Was it worth the injuries, physical and moral? Again, it’s hard to say in the thick of it, but when I hear that a combat outpost my team opened was closed just a few years later, or that a city we helped clear of the Taliban has fallen back under their control, it’s harder to say.

Should we leave? Absolutely. The challenge is *how* we leave. And I don’t have the answer. When the Soviets left in 1989 (after just 9 years of war), they did so under a cloud of atrocities committed. In some cases they just up and left, leaving behind equipment, mortars and tanks that I would patrol past 17 years later. They left a physical and political mess behind them. We can’t do the same. For the sake of the people of Afghanistan and the US troops who served there, we mustn’t. The feeling of futility, that our actions and sacrifices were entirely inconsequential, is one of the contributing factors to the rise of suicide among veterans.

The last question is the crux of it all. What can we call

winning? Does the fact that the OEF designation ended mean that we secured enduring freedom? Is it only enduring because we are still there as its sentinel? One of the reasons this question is so hard to answer is a lack of missional clarity from 18 years ago.

The Taliban was removed from power. That was not the end of the war. Osama bin Laden was killed. The war went on. The Afghan people democratically elected a second president. Still we were there. We declared an end to combat operations. US troops are still dying in combat.

But if my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday was unremarkable, the Afghan war's is even more so. Especially when considered in the context of national discourse. There was no Facebook reminder that October 7<sup>th</sup> was OEF's birthday. There was no corresponding fundraiser.

Rather, the occasion was largely marked by attention being paid to yet another younger sibling: Syria. Headlines, television news, and online platforms were dominated by the administration's latest GWOT decision to remove troops from a younger war. And it is unsurprising.

While withdrawing troops from Afghanistan has been given lip service in debates over the past few election cycles, nothing of substance has been done. During the confirmation for Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, not a single question was asked about Afghanistan. It took two hours for the incoming Secretary of the Army to be asked a question about Afghanistan during his confirmation.

President Trump didn't even mention Afghanistan on its war's birthday. The closest he came was tweeting, "I was elected on getting out of these ridiculous endless wars..." But this was clearly in response to criticism of the Syria decision.

No mention of the war that was voted most likely to be

endless.