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.

***

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 Patricia Hastings: “Dad”

New Poem from Patricia Hastings: Dad