

Two Poems

Liam Corley

Not Now that Strength

Yellow trucks the color of sand trickle down a defile,
staggered by good doctrine on the intervals of a mile.
The convoy rallies at a point just beyond the village
where scouts survey their six and twelve all along a ridge.
No blast disrupts the flow of bodies and machines. What failed
to happen to us then left holes no decoration quelled.

Corky has the gut we said he would when he falls in
behind Thoreau who's filling out another dumb petition.
Kendall pressed his BDUs into haut couture;
Marisol stamps her muddy boots till there's no manure.
I see Allen slip off a tie before he answers up.
The Major sounds off loud, and then he spits into a cup.
Shannon says she hasn't missed the eyes she always sensed;
I remain the one who pees whenever chance presents.

Two ghosts appear to be unchanged: Perez, who killed himself
on checking in at Bliss, and Jones, who lasted long enough

to drive the truck he bought at Arif Jan. Though Walsh can't wait
to get back out on point, cautious children infiltrate
our perimeter with bottles full of substances
we no more suspect. We let them mob their armored aunts,
uncles, moms, and dads who duck behind the yellow doors
for hurried hugs and news before they turn them back to chores.

Like Ulysses's unnamed crew in Alfred's honored lie,
we know that kings and heroes all return alone or die.
Uneasy on the printed sheets, we toss beneath our shield
and grind the gears of yellow trucks until we yield, we yield.

Why the Cop Let Me Go

First thing he asks after "Do you know how fast
you were going?" is, "Military tags? You in the Navy?"
Anyone who knows, knows I am
by a decal beneath the windshield sticker. That's why
I sit straight when civilians make a scene, avoid argument
for its own sake, and make no statements
indicating anger or regret.

Turns out his brother is deployed. Navy. Kabul.
A few questions later, I figure where he's at: "I was
there last summer. Not a tidy place when
the south wind blows." The south wind always blows, like it blows
today on the eastern side of the Sierra Nevadas, lifting
the dried-out bed of Mono Lake and sending it to rest
in eyes that squint along a Mojave Desert road
not far from where the Afghan scenes of *Iron Man*
were shot. Stalling, I inquire, "How often do you write?"

More talk. He wonders what his brother needs,
what hazards on his roads are like. I sugar-
coat it some. No point in making him upset. "The base

is only bad when suicides assault. Then everyone's
on lock-down for a month. Armor all the time. No loitering
on breaks. Send him good smokes, something he can trade
with ANA for a taste of homemade aush and na'an." He grunts
and walks through dust to his idling car.

My wife is boiling at my side. "Oh, my God, you're getting off,"
she says as he comes back, my license
in his hand. "I can't believe you're getting off."

Now he tells me going slow will keep me safe:
"These county roads are zoned for only 50,
no matter how the hardball looks." Gives me back
my paperwork, sends me on my way.

"He'll be OK," I reply. "He'll come back safe.
Just like me." After the cop pulls out, I sit and breathe
some long seconds, eyes in line with streaks
undulating on the tarmacked road ahead,
wife saying something I don't understand
about what a lucky bastard I am.

Liam Corley returned to poetry as a way of understanding the world after his deployment to Afghanistan in 2008-2009. He teaches American literature at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, and his work on literature and war can be found in *Badlands*, *Chautauqua*, *College English*, *First Things*, and *The Wrath-Bearing Tree*. He lives in Riverside, CA, with his wife and four children.