

New Review from Larry Abbott: “Corn, Coal & Yellow Ribbons” and “Midnight Cargo”



Corn, Coal & Yellow Ribbons. Poems by Kevin Basl and Nathan Lewis. Trumansburg, NY: Out of Step Press, 2021.

Midnight Cargo: Stories and Poems. Kevin Basl. Trumansburg, NY: Illuminated Press, 2023.

Corn, Coal & Yellow Ribbons is a chapbook of 11 poems, a collaboration between Kevin Basl and Nathan Lewis, who seek to answer the question “why did you join the military?” Although the question pertains to them and to their unique individual circumstances, the question also has a broader resonance.

Basl, from rural Western Pennsylvania, joined the Army in 2003, first went to Iraq as a mobile radar operator in 2005, and then was stop-lossed, returning in 2007. Lewis is from upstate New York. He joined the Army at 18 and deployed on an MLRS (Multiple Launch Rocket System) Artillery crew to Iraq in 2003, just in time for the invasion.

“Corn” and “Coal” represent not only the specifics of family background but also the regions that the poets hail from. “Yellow Ribbons,” of course, is the near ubiquitous symbol of freedom during the Iran hostage crisis and continuing to the first Gulf War

In the introduction, they try to, if not fully answer the question of “why” a young person joins the military, at least present the conditions that lead to enlistment. They take a different approach, “an oblique perspective,” to the “why”: “More often overlooked are the cultural and economic conditions that push kids toward military service, an experience that will fundamentally change them, sometimes in tragic ways.” The genesis of the book was a workshop that involved discussions with veterans from rural areas, and although the poems are written for vets they make aspects of the military experience accessible to the civilian.

The poems alternate between Basl and Lewis (except for two consecutive by Basl) and often complement each other. The poems, part reminiscence and part search for understanding about the past, use finely-tuned details to show the impact of that past on the present.

“Rust Belt Fed” by Lewis makes the connection between the socioeconomics of a hardscrabble region which “seems to grow only feed corn and soldiers” with military recruiting; ironically, the ground *is* fertile for the production of generations of soldiers. Recruiters in essence prey upon the vulnerable youth of the area who are precluded from exploring more expansive options:

The combine strips the corn from the fields,
the recruiter's van strips the youth
from our schools, churches

Like metal scrappers pulling wires and pipes
from a foreclosed home

The image suggests that the recruiting process has virtually a criminal motive, with the only purpose being to "feed" the war machine with "kids with computer skills . . . /To be made into precise cyber warriors" and "Athletic kids dense enough to be/turned into blunt weapons,"

Basl's poem "Mouth of the Abyss" echoes some of the imagery of "Rust Belt Fed." The poem begins with the destruction of a farm, "clawed away for stripping," by "Whitener Brothers Coal Incorporated." A way of life is expendable; nature and the human residents are beholden to the forces of despoilation. Coal mining destroys a way of life in the same way the recruitment process destroys the young. The mining strips the land; the military strips the young.

The speaker, a seven-year old boy, is able to watch the mining "canyon" expand, and one day goes to the "mouth of the abyss" with his father, who warns him of the potentially-fatal dangers of the crater. As the poem ends the boy wonders if it is possible "to witness man's work/and live to talk about it." The same could be said of war.

Lewis's "First Ambush Mission" and Basl's "Resume Builder" both connect a youthful event to later Army experiences. In the former, Lewis recalls the "Ragweed insurgencies, nightly raccoon attrition" that plagued his parents' corn field. He and his twin brother decide to lie in wait through the night with their shotguns:

Pulling triggers interested me more than pulling weeds

Out back in a kid-built shack called "The Fort"

Twin brother and I on an ambush mission

Raccoons standing in for guerillas

After their unsuccessful foray—one shot at "Something moving in the shadows"— they return from the fort in the morning and unload their shells on the kitchen table. As the poem ends there is a correlation between the events of the night and his military future:

My wet sneakers squeaking on linoleum—

Had my ears not been ringing

I would have heard

Desert Army Boots crunching gravel

It is as if his soldiering was preordained; he was one of the young men "stripped" from home by the "metal scrappers."

The idea of a preordained military future is echoed in Basl's ironically-titled "Resume Builder." In this poem the speaker recalls Mr. Floyd, a somewhat notable member of the community ("Lifetime member of the Hallton Rod and Gun Club./Two-time winner of the American Legion turkey raffle") and a long-time high school gym teacher. He has little tolerance for students with "zero athletic aspirations" and despises "Phish-phans, Juggalos, skaters, and scummies." The ending of the poem reveals Floyd's recognition that the military may be the only option for those with a foreclosed future:

Counselor of numbskulls when he tells them

there may be a place for you yet

faraway at basic training

Bastard prophet, when you realize, damn, how he nailed that

last one.

Although Floyd, whose own life is mundane, is an object of ridicule to the students, he is also that “bastard prophet” who knows that his students’ lives will basically go in one direction.

Overall, the 11 poems in the book show a side of the military that is far from the heroic ideal. The authors note that the “book’s cover was handmade from pulped U.S. military uniforms” (with the cover image by Christopher Wolf of a tank plowing through a cornfield), showing that as swords can be made into plowshares uniforms can be made into art.

Each author’s post-military life has shown that commitment to the arts. Basl holds a Master of Fine Arts in fiction writing from Temple University. He has worked with Warrior Writers and Frontline Arts to conduct art workshops and is an accomplished paper-maker and musician. He was featured in Talia Lugacy’s 2021 film *This Is Not a War Story*. He has written numerous essays and articles about various aspects of the veteran experience. Lewis, Like Basl, has conducted writing and papermaking workshops for veterans since 2009. His artwork has been shown in many galleries across the country, including the Brooklyn Museum. He appeared in the film *The Green Zone* (2010) and *This Is Not a War Story*. He is one of the founders of Out of Step Press. The name of the press is an ironic twist on the precision of military marching along with a connotation of non-conformity

Midnight Cargo is a collection of three stories and eighteen poems, many of which derive from specific events during Basl’s deployment. Although trained to be a radar operator (14J) Basl was re-classed, at various times, as a cavalry scout, security escort driver, laborer guard, and, less excitingly, deliverer of trash to a burn pit. The book’s title references another one of his jobs in Iraq, that of the nighttime loading of the remains of deceased service members onto C-130 cargo

planes. The poem "Sacrifice" is most closely aligned with the meaning of the book's title. He describes the loading of "those long metal boxes" for the final journey home. However, the loading and imminent departure is unsettling, as the reality of death breaks through the impersonality of the task. The plane itself is like a coffin, "exhibiting the skeletal hull/wires and nets/vining the walls -"; it is "an inglorious vessel," lacking the solemnity that the occasion requires,

set to carry home

the cold weight

of a friend's absence

the cold weight

of a mother's depression

housed in a coffin

wrapped in a flag.

The loading of the bodies occurs at night, which reflects the secretive nature of the event, as if there can be no acknowledgement of death.

The first poem in the book, "The Red Keffiyeh," and the following story, "Occupations," pivot on the object and symbol of the keffiyeh. In the poem, the keffiyeh was a gift from a boy in Iraq whom the speaker became close to, and which now represents the memories of his tour, especially his interactions with Iraqi civilian workers at Camp Anaconda. The keffiyeh "now lives in an unfinished hardwood case," unopened for years "till last night." As he tries on the scarf he notices that the "checkered fabric had frayed," analogous to the fraying of his memories of Iraq. There is a sense of loss and regret in the poem's final lines:

[I] gazed in the mirror at my weary face

and, still gazing, went on to consider sadly

its beauty and how old the boy would now be . . .

“Occupations,” which can be seen as a companion work to the poem, details the narrator’s interactions with Iraqi laborers employed for “hooch fortification.” The story is told in third-person, but focuses on a Sergeant Adams, who develops a relationship with a boy, the teen-age Gabir, whose brother and father were laborers. As section 2 of the story opens, Adams asks Gabir to buy him a keffiyeh for his wife’s birthday. His wife is a musician and he feels that she could wear the keffiyeh while she played cello and sang: “The perfect gift. Their marriage might survive this deployment after all.” He gives Gabir money for the purchase. Gabir agrees, but in the ensuing days is elusive about the scarf, and one day Gabir and his family fail to appear at the camp. Two weeks later, though, a new laborer shows up at the camp and gives Adams the keffiyeh. Adams attempts to get information on Gabir and his family from some Iraqi workers but they are reticent to offer any specifics, only saying that the family “went north.” He gives the men a message of thanks to Gabir, but the men are noncommittal. As the story ends Adams, still deployed, receives a photo of his wife wearing the scarf. However, after he returns home, he “never saw her wear it—on stage or anywhere.” And a year later, after they divorce, “he found the keffiyeh buried in a box of clothes and jewelry she returned to him.”

Both the poem and the story are linked through the keffiyeh; the story also illustrates that what is meaningful to one person is simply a disposable object to someone else.

Two poems that use the cleave structure are “Art Therapy” and “The Agency’s Mark.” The lines can be read down the left column, the right column, or across, giving a sense of three poems. The juxtapositions are similar to stream of consciousness, with new meanings revealed depending on how the

lines are combined by the reader. "Art Therapy" was inspired by George Bush's *Portraits of Courage* paintings, and a note explains the Right to Heal Initiative that the poem also references. The left column alludes to Bush's paintings, while the right column begins:

Cops march into position
protestors in pepper spray goggles
unfurling a hand-painted banner

We Demand the Right to Heal!

Similarly, "The Agency's Mark" interweaves two parallel experiences. The left-hand column limns a painting by Haeq Fasan entitled *Horse Dance*, while the right-hand column critiques the CIA's secret funding of art that would "counter the Soviet's promotion/of 'socialist realism'—" by providing money and venues for art that would reflect American values. In a note to the poem Basl cites an article from *Newsweek* in 2017: "The CIA weaponized art as a form of 'benevolent propaganda,' intending to show the world that capitalism, not communism, produced better—and more—work."

Another poem with an interesting structure is "God Mode." The lines are relatively short, separated by backslashes and white space, giving a sense of a computer or machine spitting out phrases. There is also the suggestion of an omniscient, impersonal armed drone operator watching his dehumanized potential victims on a screen: "your body of pixels/ is the target of my wrath/ your heat/is a death signature/ your name/ is irrelevant/ . . ." War becomes a computer game, albeit with human lives at stake.

Where "God Mode" shows the impersonal aspect of war conducted from a cubicle, "Rules of Engagement" focuses more on the individual in a situation where violence saturates one's daily existence; the potential, and almost need, for violent

readiness is everywhere. The phrase “‘Deadly force authorized,’” visible in every camp, becomes part of “your foretold madness. . . . Your rifle will become a phantom limb.” The poem ends, though, with a question apparently addressing his fellow soldiers, positing that the individual has lost agency and any sense of choice:

You ought to question, hero, before the rounds go flying

Whose hand really does the authorizing?

The ramifications of this “foretold madness” takes a chilling turn in the poem “Terror,” which describes the psychic dislocation engendered by “Deadly force authorized.” The terror becomes what is internalized *from* this environment:

Someone you think you know

Free falls through darkness . . .

In the greasy smoke

a mirror to greet him

fractured

opaque

two eyes not his own:

the violence he has sown

now feeds on his days.

The story “The Bugler” has echoes of the black humor and absurdism of, among others, Joseph Heller, Tim O’Brien, and David Abrams. The story concerns Specialist Jenkins who, although unable to play the bugle, is called upon to be the bugler to play “Taps” at a funeral ceremony for a World War II veteran. Jenkins is issued “a special bugle . . . ‘It has a little speaker inside’ . . . You push a button and “Taps”

plays.'” Much of the story then concerns the bumbling attempts at a rehearsal for the ceremony. On the day of the funeral the preacher gives the standard encomiums about the deceased, the 21-gun salute was “coordinated and crisp.” After the volley Jenkins takes center stage, raises the bugle to his lips, presses the button, and a “tinny, nasally . . . lifeless” “Taps” issues forth. He is “embarrassed for the family . . . sad and embarrassed for himself.” The widow, however, to Jenkins’ chagrin, praises his playing. As the story ends, Dave, a Vietnam vet, apparently an acquaintance of the deceased, asks to see the bugle. He removes the speaker and plays a few notes. He hands the instrument back to Jenkins and urges him to play. Surprisingly, after a feeble attempt, Jenkins does blow a “satisfying” note. As the story ends, Dave calls an elderly couple (who had a wreath with a yellow ribbon attached) over “to come see what the noise was about, to come learn the truth for themselves.”

What is the “truth” to be learned? Is it that the ceremony was part sham? Is it that belief, expressed by the preacher and the yellow ribbon, is hollow? Or that belief is more important than truth? There is a note of irresolution about what constitutes the “truth.”

The work in *Midnight Cargo* was inspired by a range of subjects, from the writer’s memories, experiences and observations of war broadly defined and his time in Iraq, to his return to the States and feelings of discord, to post-war endeavors like making paper from cut up uniforms, to cultural events, like the 2023 Rose Procession in Chicago. Overall, through this prismatic lens, Basl emerges, as he writes in the poem “Presence,” as “the person who is here now.”

For further background:

Outofsteppress.com

Kevinbasl.com

Illuminatedpress.org