

HUGH MARTIN

Raid

A dozen thin dogs bark
and follow as we walk
the paths of the village.

Derron wants to shoot, holds his muzzle
inches from a wet nose.
I swing at one with the shovel—it jumps back,
circles our squad.

Sheikh Sharif greets us like guests,
offers chai, shakes hands.
Face covered with green cloth,
the informant points to the layers of compost, straw.

Wolfe swings the metal detector;
I dig, open the ground, toss dirt
with orange peels,
blackened tomatoes. Sergeant Kenson
stabs a shovel straight
to the split earth,
feels for steel crates.

After an hour, our necks stain from sunlight.
The dogs pace in the dust.

The Sheikh smiles,
holds his infant son,
says, mister, nothing,
nods to the upturned ground.
He kisses the child, hums a song.

When LT wants to leave, I give the ground
some final stabs, kick the dirt
over upturned dirt, then stand
in the never-dead sun,
and all that's left:
a deep hole of nothing,
the dogs circling with dry tongues.

Responding to an Explosion in Qarah Tappah

A boy's father builds IED's in a dark corner of the family's courtyard. One night, the eleven year-old explores his father's work: he curls a det cord in small hands, rubs the smooth body of the blue mortar, feels a cold firing pin, gazes at the array of cellular phones. He touches something the wrong way, a round explodes, the boy is spread all over the courtyard. Second platoon hears the explosion; they drive toward the sound. When the father comes home, he is blindfolded, hands zip-tied behind his back, and taken away. We drive through the empty hills, the ground so hard, so stale, it crunches under our tires as if made of sun-dried bones. We have come to assess what is left: the remaining shells, the pieces of phone, the coils of wire. We don't speak to anyone, not even each other. As we walk through the courtyard, behind three old women in black abayas, we see two small girls in flowing, flowery dresses, the hems swaying against their feet. The girls cry softly, moderately, like sorrow was something they were trying for the first time.



HUGH MARTIN is a veteran of the Iraq war and a graduate of Muskingum University. His chapbook, *So, How Was the War?* (Kent State UP, 2010) was published by the Wick Poetry Center and his first book, *The Stick Soldiers*, won the 2012 Poulin Book Prize from BOA Editions and will be released in March 2013. Martin completed his MFA at Arizona State and is currently a Stegner Fellow at Stanford University.