

HUGH MARTIN

Lana

Never stare at the women,
they told us in training. Instead

I stare at six half-sunk spare tires
in the creek across the road.
A woman walks,
in my periphery, all black, all
abaya—it's all,
it seems, I ever see—against
a landscape all sunlight. Straight
toward our truck—machinegun
manned by Spoon,
pointed north to tilled fields, low
yellow hills, specks
of desert-bush. Basheer, our terp,
steps into the street
to meet her.

We're parked, a perimeter—*scan*
your sector, they told us
in training—our platoon of four gun-trucks,
around the Jalawla hospital
where wounded Iraqi soldiers wait
for the medevac
Black Hawk. When Basheer speaks,
I turn, see the woman's face, powdered
& pale, as she talks, her hands
flailing from the linen toward Basheer,
the trucks, the hospital.

The shawl falls back
from her forehead
 & she grasps the edges
with both hands, pulls it

so I only see her mouth, nose, eyes traced
 with black liner.

I stand between our truck
& the Iraqi soldiers' white Toyota pick-up

& scan the creek clogged
 with black plastic bags that float,
I think, like water lilies. *Attention*

to detail, they told us in training,
& as I watch the bags in the stream

 inch west, the woman stops speaking.
She walks, so slowly I can hear

pebbles scrape
 beneath her sandals,
to the pickup's bed,

two meters to my four o'clock, which just means
 a little to my right.

We hear a tractor's engine
from somewhere in the hills,
 faint traffic from downtown. Still,

while I watch the tires & bags
across the street, I can see

 the woman's shape as she stares

at the truck's bed, but I won't turn
 or look because I know
the woman's son is there, a son

who hasn't been dead
for more than an hour.

She stands near the truck's cab, her body inches
from the bed, & I know she sees his face
 since I'd held
 one of his legs—bare heel, back
of the knee—in my hands
 & set him headfirst, there were no more
 stretchers, on the dusty aluminum.

The woman just stares.
 I want to curse the heat,
 the shit-stream, the whole sector I've watched,
like other sectors,
 & since I want
 to slam my face
 into the Humvee's hood,

I turn so I can feel my legs, the loose
gravel beneath my boots,
 & I see her looking down to where
 a green wool army blanket—Doc
 had placed it over him—
 covers the boy to his shoulders.

When she moves from the truck & back
 to Basheer, she mutters
 quick phrases, then spits,
 & walks off down the road.

Basheer, always in a cheap,
 green Kevlar-vest—it probably
wouldn't stop a pistol round—paces over
 & I glance at his graying moustache,
 the wide sunglasses shading his eyes.

He says, "Her name is Lana."

& then he slips his hands—
he always does this—through the open spaces
beside the vest's collar & just lets them
hang, his elbows
at his sides like wings. But because
I've spent months with Basheer, because
he never shuts up, because he chain-smokes
& tells jokes so bad we laugh, because
he told us how some British General
had also said, after The Great War,
he'd come to Baghdad as a liberator, I ask, "That
was all?"

He glances at the sky,
looks right at me, "He was oldest
of family. She tell me"—& he stares south

to fields for miles—"She tell me, *please,*

*please thank America
for giving my dead boy."*

He sips from his canteen,
swings open the Humvee's rear
passenger door,
steps inside & sits & closes his eyes.

I stare across the road
& think I hear the chopper's rotors somewhere
beyond the hills
but no green machine
comes rising out of that horizon.
Just a warm wind, & beyond that
the broad blue glare.

I hear in my head Basheer

say her name & I scan the stream,

the tires & the plastic bags.

The tires & the plastic bags.

50-Cal. Gunner: A Sequence

I. 0000-0400 Hours: Guard Duty with Elbow

—for BDJ

1.

All shift he yaps, chucks gravel at dogs.

They weave between
the triple-stacked-
razor-wire. I aim

my red-lens light: a dozen eyes, long
tongues, ribbed fur

brushing concertina. His arm's sore

so he flips the 240 steel cover up,
down, open, shut,
that click,
click—he won't

shut up. His father, he tells me, in Seoul,

as a young private
sitting too close to the stage,
was knocked unconscious,

briefly,
by a spinning stripper's foot.

2.

Like Elbow, I joined the Guard

for Tuition Assistance & to travel,
mostly. Elbow—that's where

he had the ringworm—remains

on permanent guard duty

due to the concussion
in June. *I don't remember*

the boom,
he'd said. *Everyone just needs,* he insists,

two-hundred milligrams of
Be-A-Fucking-Man.

3.

He performs his impression—I've seen it

all war long—
of the local Imam's voice

blaring from a minaret: high-pitched,

long—it even scares

the dogs. He sings

& sings
to kill the time (it's only quiet

when he leaves to piss).

I fake-laugh

so I can say, *Enough, enough,*

holding my stomach like it hurts.

II. Iraqi Civil Defense Corps

1.

Just the muzzle & I: we face

the rear. In the dark I hear

minaret music, yet,

half the time

it's just from my head. Always wind,

the truck's engine, the yellow

hills in the light, the stars

at night (up here,
you can see them

whenever you like). *Kiss the babies,*

Kenson said. *Kill the bad guys.*

Give the children Charms.

2.

The ICDC

checkpoint: Iraqi men,

Kalashnikovs, khaki

pants, camo tops.

ACDC-motherfuckers,
we used to yell like hell. Now,

they just wave rifles & smokes.

Passing Sadiyah,

kids call me *Rambo,*
Jackie Chan (they cheer when I do

a double-bicep pose).

3.

Last month, I took Ambien—big

mistake—when Kenson,

on a down-day,
ripped us from our bunks to load body-bags.

By lunch: six ICDC

in all. Shot
in their sleep. Beds lined behind

Checkpoint Seven

since the hut's too hot (*botter*

days, Kenson said, *just think, think*
snow). So now

all that *ACDC!*—
we just don't. & the sand's still

a bitch when it blows.

III. *Route Willon, Jalawla Bridge*

fake you, ameriki

vietnam street

well make it your graves here

IV. ICDC HQ Building

Up here it's dark but dawn's

sunlight already hurts. All

our guys are asleep. Except

Fork: on the eastern ledge,

he brushes his teeth, spits

to the courtyard below where,

yesterday,

the fat Iraqi colonel

sawed, for dinner, the head off

a lamb—*You're not*

to eat that, Captain said.

As we waited for the thing
to stop twitching,

the colonel lifted
one hind leg

so it'd bleed out faster—I thought

it'd rip right off.

Morning, beautiful,

Fork says, white toothpaste

streaking down his chin (it's my turn to replace him).

An Iraqi soldier pacing

the roof's perimeter nods at Fork,

then me. We know him—Marwan—
always smiling, chain-

smoking, whispering,

Hello, Mister,

too many times. He's from
Sulaymaniyah—*It sort of looks,*
 Captain said, *like Colorado.* Locked,
loaded: a Kalashnikov's
 slung across Marwan's back,
its muzzle aimed to the roof.
 Seeing his sleepy eyes, I think
I trust him.

 Fork falls back,
his head on a half-empty ruck,
 pulls the ballistic vest
across his chest like a blanket.

 I slip into my boots,
walk to the ledge,
stepping over & between men, rifles.

 Some sleep, curled,
heads on bundled camo tops. Others

 lay flat, wearing socks
as eye masks.

They have, maybe,

an hour until
 the morning's prayer calls.

V. Tigris Crossing

—*Balad, Iraq*

1.

On Saddam:
she wishes he'd come back to life

so she could kill him twice.
We hear her story twice.

She talks to Nina (Nina's not
her real name)

because she won't talk to us.
Nina's in jeans,

a blue collared blouse—she's our only

female terp.
The Tigris: muddied brown,

bright in the sun.

On living
last March in Baghdad:

*When she hear fighters coming in sky, Nina says.
Her family hold their breathing. Their hearts are jumping out.
The bombs shake them. Three nights they don't sleep.*

2.

We wait at this buoyed bridge.

There might be a bomb: miles
down the road EOD

destroys some suspicious thing—a bag,
plastic—placed

at the roundabout's west entrance.

Our trucks: filled with lumber,

steel bunkbeds, bottled water cases.

We wait. Up here,

it's hotter

on the gun. *Just go,*

I want to scream—*fuck it, just go—*

because, after all,

the bomb's probably fake.

3.

The woman's in a flowing black abaya.

On her fingers I see

faint green tribal tats: lines, dots. Skin's
like my leather
pistol holster but it's her skin.

She doesn't move

from the mud wall's doorway.

Nina tells all this to Lt. but up

on the gun

I hear the quick

Arabic, then Nina.

She want America to have night like her family.

She say she hate those machine in the sky.

No special effect in America movies are like them.

Her son say, 'Mama, I don't want night to come.

I hate the night. I wish we can skip it.'

Hugh Martin is a veteran of the Iraq War and the author of *The Stick Soldiers* (BOA Editions 2013) and the forthcoming *In Country* (BOA Editions 2018). He is the recipient of a Wallace Stegner Fellowship, a Yaddo residency, and a Pushcart Prize.