



Photo Credit: A1C John Alderman

Hugh Martin: Four Poems from his forthcoming book,
The Stick Soldiers, winner of the 2012 A. Poulin, Jr. Poetry Prize, BOA Editions, Ltd

M-16A2 Assault Rifle

Some days I clean the rifle so it shines,
A cold slice of darkness in grease-stained hands.
Some days, I hate to take it outside, dust
Blowing faster, eating the morning brown.
Some days, after the warm silhouettes bow
Across the green field of the firing range,
I sit against sandbags, sweat in sunlight,
And hold that grip, the muzzle's edge resting
Across the top of my thigh. And some days,
When I've cleaned it for hours, I want only
To take it home for the space of blue wall
Above the mantel, because it'd be wrong
To shoot again, to smear and smudge with whorls,
To blemish a thing that makes the night blush.

First appeared in *Crazyhorse*.

The Stick Soldiers

To soldiers, I hope the war is fine.
-Girl Scout Troop 472

The children colored the cards,
dated from December,
with Christmas trees, piles of presents,
snowmen smiling, waving. Sara wants
a doll. Evan, a dog. Kyle promises
to pray for us.

Outside the hootch, we open mail,
hundreds of letters
from youth groups, scout troops,
classes of school children.

Kerns wants to write back,
ask for pictures
of older sisters.

We tape our favorites to the door.
In blue crayon, a stick-figure soldier poses
as he's about to toss
a black ball,
fuse burning,
at three other stick figures,
red cloth wrapped over faces,
Iraki written
across stick chests.

In Jalula, the children draw us pictures, too.

In white chalk, on concrete walls,
a box-shaped Humvee with two antennae
rising like balloons from the hatch.
A stick-soldier holds a machine-gun;
he waves at us,
us, in the Humvees.

Further down the wall, a stick-man holds
an RPG
aimed toward the Humvee,
the waving soldier's head—
what the children want for Christmas,
or what they just want.

First appeared in *American Poetry Review*.

The War Was Good, Thank You

-In the college cafeteria, a freshman girl asks,
So, how was the war?

1.

We live in small steel hooches
shaped like boxcars. We fill bags

with sand and sweat
to pile beside us. Our rifles collect dust

when we sleep. Our rifles collect dust
when we fire them.

2.

In Jalula, I stood in the turret, hands
on the Fifty. I looked over mud walls and fences

into backyards, alleyways. A man
and a woman backed from a doorway; I watched them

through dark sunglasses and the sight aperture.
They kissed, then turned—they saw me. The man smiled,

as if wanting me to keep it a secret. I didn't tell anyone.

3.

Some afternoons, I lay outside shirtless
and set ice cubes

on my closed eyelids. I let them melt.

4.

After weddings, people point rifles
to the sky, and fire,

as if wanting to put holes
through heaven.

5.

Groups send care packages. There's always so much
ChapStick, baby wipes; we pile it in boxes

or throw it to the children. I spoil myself
with ChapStick, balm my lips

even when it's not needed. Outside the wire,
I raise my chin to the sun, flex

my lips, kiss them together, not afraid
of anything, not afraid at all.

First appeared in *Mid-American Review*, March 2010, Volume XXX, Numbers 1 & 2.

Home From Iraq, Larry's Tavern

—Northfield, Ohio

Outside on the smoker's patio,
the Army vet shakes my hand
for the twentieth time, yells
about *loyalty, country, duty*.

Between gulps, he explains his shame
for missing the Storm—
a bum knee, ten-thousand
beers later, and now, another war
to miss. We finish the cans,
throw them at a wall, crack new ones.

The summer sweat sticks to his face
and in his eyes is the horror
of not going, that he'd live
all his life having to say *no*,
blaming a bum knee,
hitting it hard with a palm
to punish it.

He shakes my hand again,
grabs my shoulder,
and then seems to want to kiss me,
suck out whatever was left
since he'd wanted to taste it so badly.

First appeared in *Narrative*.