

CHUCK RYBAK

Purple Heart

He had saved the bullet.
It rolled inside the purple box that held
the purple heart. When he shook it
near his ear, the bullet rattled,
the lead husk of a red-hot insect.
Being so young, I thought bullets had wings,
but when my grandfather opened
the velvet box, it was dark and bent,
stubbed like the butts that sat in the ashtray.
He said the transparent wings had melted away
when it flew into his leg. *Where?* I asked.
He would say, *Germany* and laugh,
knowing I wished to see the scar.
The purple heart had brought him home,
the three-inch scar the only thing
that kept him and his tank out of Berlin.
By then his lungs bled in secret
and my dad once joked, *if you don't quit soon
with the smokes, we'll have to put a cigarette
butt in with that bullet.* When he couldn't
live at home any longer, the purple heart
sat by his hospital bed. He told me
he was wounded, just like in the war.
When my grandfather died my father wept
and chain-smoked on the road to the service.

Hidden in my palm was a cigarette butt
I hoped would be hot enough to burn. I shook
my fist by my ear and listened for the rattle.
I blamed my hands for the silence.

CHUCK RYBAK grew up in Buffalo, New York, and earned his PhD in literature and creative writing from the University of Cincinnati in 2003. His poems have been published or are forthcoming in: *The Fourth River*, *The Ledge*, *Pebble Lake Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and elsewhere. He lives in Oneida, Wisconsin with his wife, fiction writer Rebecca Meacham, and their daughter, Gwendolyn. His first chapbook, *Nickel and Dime My Way Through*, won Wind's Quentin R. Howard prize. His second chapbook, *Liketown*, was released by Pudding House Publications. His full-length collection, *Tongue and Groove*, was published in 2007 by Main Street Rag. Chuck is a Professor of English for the University of Wisconsin Colleges-Washington County.