

J O S H B U R G E S S

Balkan geometry

Suspiciously isosceles:
a Macedonian in ragged overalls,
scythe cradled over a bony shoulder
walking the highway's edge,
unmoved by the thump and roar
of peacekeeping helicopters
overhead. Beauty is determined here
by that chance intersection.

Flying over Kumanovo, northwest-bound
to search the Mateacia monastery,
remnants of mountain steppes
drag your eyes along an invisible hypotenuse
between shelled-out hulls—
Albanian villages, devoid of symmetry and color.
Where juniper foothills meet the Kumanovo plain,
don't look for water in the creek drainage...
charity is as alien as we
in our camouflaged body armor.

One meter on either side of the road:
hardtrack fields of corn, soybeans,
hay geometries and the one spotlight patch
of sunflowers, straining upward away
from rough-handed farmers and their scythes.
From landmines buried, deep or not. From equations
too obtuse to solve.

Anzio sunrise

—January 1944

When the second wave waded shoreward
they met the backs of dead comrades tumbling
mirthless, in a broken sea. Sunlight scattered
wavetops across the ship-studded horizon.
German artillery rainbowed into bodies,
chianti-red seawater blossoming over sand
and men, a bouquet of torn sons, brothers.

Between cannon-bursts, sandpipers
landed atop the corpses,
diverting attention from their young
hidden in the dunes above, their art
not nearly so Prussian as ours.
We call it the last good war.

But green fatigues drifted
amongst bull kelp, indifferent
to cause—the Mediterranean,
a mother welcoming children home
to sun-shafted rooms beneath the surface
and the slow dance
of weightless silence.

beyond Dubrovnik

His skullcap smells of wet sheep and earth—
the odors of life before and after the bombs;
an old man pruning olive trees.

Mist breathes up from ebbing tidal flats
where the man's granddaughter nears
the water's reach—her brambled calves
sink with every step toward a resurrection

he is too weary to believe exists. He supposes
she regards this as necessary, this malpractice
of survival learned on a border they never knew
until the tanks and rifles of peace.
She pauses, waist deep, glancing back.

He feels somehow
she shouldn't, watches her toes take root
in the fertile brack of soil and sea.
The man exhales, combing a branch

which bears no fruit—only
tired bark and silver scatter
of leaves guarding groves of bones.

JOSH BURGESS received his MFA from Eastern Washington University in 2002. He is an Air Force special operations helicopter pilot currently living in Stuttgart, Germany.