

C H A R L I E B O N D H U S

Shrapnel

If human remains have internal contamination due to shrapnel, then whenever possible, the shrapnel will be removed prior to shipment.

—U.S. Military manual on Mortuary Affairs

The bonesaw being dull,
the mortician must lean the full weight of his upper body
as he cuts into the sternum.

When the xiphoid process cracks
loud as an IED
the skull-gray cadaver bucks
jerking the table, nearly upsetting
the tray of stainless instruments.

Gathering breath,
he inserts the retractor,
breaks open the chest cavity like a god prying apart a black hole,
and peers into the darkness of the body.

Glinting like stars,
a ransom of shrapnel.

Bits of metal lacerate the ventricles.
Flecks of PVC have fused themselves,
thick as mucous, to bones;
lead fragments dig, like urgent fingernails.

This body is full of sharp edges
which the mortician probes
with his forceps, plucking bits of silver
from doughy beds, black with chemical burns.

Using his scalpel he scrapes melted plastic
from ribs, leaving behind shallow nicks,
an unintended signature proclaiming
that he, custodian of the dead,
has been here, in a place too intimate
even for lovers.

The radio plays muted jazz standards;
fragments of red-washed metal
fall into the basin and tinkle
on the downbeats,
as he hums along to “Blue Train,”
“In a Sentimental Mood,” “Lazy Bird.”

Like sweeping an empty house,
this is thankless work.

Once the sodden and shredded cavity has been cleared
of debris, he stitches and staples,
stretching sheets of skin back into place,
metallic sutures a crisp, even row,
rank and file from belly to sternum,
flesh folded and tucked neatly
as a blanket on a military cot.

Afghanistan Moon

Tonight I reacquaint myself with it;
the round-faced whisperer
who speaks a language
I never learned.

The first time bullets
landed inches
from my helmet,
and spat sand in my face,
I looked to heaven, seeking angels,

and instead saw the moon
with distended eyes and pursed lips
which seemed to say, *ssshhh...*

The longer I stayed, the less I saw.
Clouds formed. The earth cast
its shadow. Every night the moon waned darker.
I focused on the black spaces between stars.

While I was home,
I forgot the moon entirely,
and spent a year believing
that night was absolute.

Tonight I feel the shadows cover my shoulders.

In the next tent, the staff sergeant closes his eyes and sees red trails.

Somewhere else, a sleeping Taliban fighter sees the same.

The dead peer from among the sand dunes.

I turn my head,
and heaven's face is twisted
into a cool, white rictus
not a whisper,
but a scream.



CHARLIE BONDHUS's second poetry book, *All the Heat We Could Carry*—from which these poems are taken—won the 2013 Main Street Rag Poetry Book Award and the Publishing Triangle's 2014 Thom Gunn Award for Gay Poetry. His poetry appears or is set to appear in numerous periodicals, including *POETRY*, *The Alabama Literary Review*, *Midwest Quarterly*, and *CounterPunch*. He is the Poetry Editor at *The Good Men Project* (goodmenproject.com).