

DALE RITTERBUSCH

A Mathematical Geography

If there is a proper beginning for this perhaps it was math class, algebra or geometry, it doesn't matter, he was good at both. There was a mystery solved in the answer to any difficult problem. Sometimes he had forgotten a particular method, something studied months before, and its loss prevented the solution; in a moment of acute recovery he recalled the necessary principle, like a memory from early childhood, and the answer was there on the page a moment later. There was precision in the satisfaction of wonder. Later, but six months in, he waited in Kuwait and on an evening when everything was squared away, he looked across the border into the sands of Iraq and knew in a visceral sense that this was it—something deterministic, expansive as all history, lay ahead, and he could feel it, the geometry of this world in all the axioms and postulates he knew, blood-born as the landscape curved with Euclidean regularity. There was reason in the looming punch to his gut, but he had always known something, someday, would be unsolvable: a swirl of sand rose like an apparition calling, then disappeared in the latent glow of the sun.

Three years and two tours later he enrolled in college algebra, took a course in solid geometry confident he'd recover what was left behind, like battlefield detritus, souvenirs and scrap to be dug up years later when the landscape shifted a compass point or two, circumference purely referential and definitely not fixed. Time to move on he had said. But the quizzes proved harder than before—not the first or second problem, but those that came after, his mind focused on splattered points

of light, the flash of a door bashed in, the cries and the cowering, defiance in their powerless eyes. Even the relative silence of the classroom annoyed him and prevented any transference of the equation to any recognizable system of symbolic logic. Lost in X's and Y's, nothing made sense. What he knew one moment was lost in the next. At night his wife said he wasn't the same as before. He dozed off fitful, edgy, as if unprepared for his next exam. He felt pulled in multiple directions, unable, even helpless, to resist, drawn as if by wind or water flowing through a disquieting sphere towards a belief as powerful and true as some mathematical proof arising from some barely sentient terrain, a belief that somehow a system based on an orderly construct consistent with his experience—mathematics and his tours meshed and unified—would become visible in the insistent recalling of figures appearing and reappearing in the swirling sand; apparitions or not they were there like fractals or winding numbers or multiple infinities on a plane where all lines always intersect. In this non-Euclidean geography this was a given, an axiom with all the truth and sanctity of an explosive charge, a souvenir chunk of C-4 he always fingered in his pocket when only the irrational made sense.



A frequent contributor to **WLA**, **Dale Ritterbusch** is the author of two collections of poetry, *Lessons Learned* and *Far From the Temple of Heaven*.