



Niche

issue n°

5.

POETRY

FICTION

CREATIVE
NONFICTION

ART



A close-up, artistic photograph of pink rose petals floating in water. The petals are in various stages of bloom, with some showing vibrant pink and others more faded. The water is clear, and the background is a soft, out-of-focus light pink. The overall mood is delicate and romantic.

Niche

ISSUE # 3

© *n i c h e* | M A Y 2 0 1 3
i s s u e n ° 3

DESIGN & PHOTOGRAPHY © MARIA SURAWSKA
t y p e f a c e s :
D I D O T
I D E A L S A N S
A N D R A D E P R O

table of contents

NICHE : *i s s u e* n ° 3

<i>Toujours</i>	10	.....	OTHA DAVIS III
<i>Tiny Gradations of Loss (Excerpt)</i>	12	.....	NICHOLAS GRIDER
<i>Bear Cave</i>	14	.....	NICHOLAS HATHAWAY
<i>Misplaced Virtue</i>	20	.....	OTHA DAVIS III
<i>Reliquary</i>	22	.....	CHRISTOPHER CHILTON
<i>Walk a Mile</i>	28	.....	DON KUNZ
<i>Deeper</i>	30	.....	MAGHAN LUSK
<i>The War Cannot Find Me</i>	36	.....	WILLIAM BURLESON
<i>Ascension</i>	42	.....	OTHA DAVIS III
<i>Rex Explains Sex At Sixty</i>	44	.....	JOHN GREY
<i>Hold Your Horses</i>	46	.....	JOHN HARPER
<i>de gustibus non est disputandum :: there is no disputing about tastes</i>	48	.....	DESMOND KON ZHICHENG-MINGDÉ
<i>Fertile Earth</i>	50	.....	ANNE WHITEHOUSE
<i>Killer of Birds</i>	52	.....	WILLIAM BLOME
<i>Hand-Washed Laundry</i>	54	.....	BRIAN D. MORRISON
<i>Untitled</i>	56	.....	SARAH KATHARINA KAYB
<i>Bike Life</i>	58	.....	D. WATKINS

staff

NICHE : i s s u e n ° 3

<i>managing and founding editor</i>	..... KATYA CUMMINS
<i>art director/photographer</i>	..... MARIA SURAWSKA
<i>photographer</i>	..... ROBERT HARRIS BURNS
<i>poetry editor</i>	..... KATIE CANTWELL
<i>media editor</i>	..... MATTHEW ATKINSON
<i>marketing manager</i>	..... MARY KEUTELIAN
<i>fiction editor</i>	..... ROCHELLE LIU

Niche is an online literary magazine that was designed to be limitless. It aims to provide a place where an array of voices, from experimental and conventional, pulp and literary, non-fiction and creative non-fiction, graphic mediums, artwork, and audio, can coexist.

As people with varying passions we've striven to find places where we can express and belong. We're for those who have already carved or have yet to carve their perfect niche within literary and non-literary communities.



Toujours

BY OTHA DAVIS III

(acrylic, water color)



TINY GRADAT

(Excerpt)

BY NICHOLAS GRIDER

Day something or other, today's the day, days counting higher in positive numbers, his first heavy effort hard labor of the day is forcing himself to get out of bed. The close second effort is resisting memory's stiletto, failing.

Day 1 Day 2 every day still closing the door when he goes to the bathroom or takes a shower, out of habit, out of respect. Still locking the bathroom door, unlocking it, hitch in his unnecessary voice. He apologizes to her positive days for being a scattered pile of bricks for being broken. He wants her to know he's trying his hardest.

Day -300 something she quits smoking after a TIA, transient ischemic attack, mini stroke, Day -189 (the day after her birthday) he brings her to the hospital because she has another one and they say pneumonia they say fungus they say TB they transport her to a better hospital for a better biopsy. Bronchoscopy. They wonder lymphoma but they deliver plan your funeral.

She forbids a formal funeral or memorial, she gets her wish. She gets cremated paid for by a saintly family friend who never met her, he often sends this man verbal thank you notes, gives him gifts, the gift his mother buys her son arrives on Day -2.

The gift is a memory card.

TIONS OF LOSS

He took her last picture weeks earlier her sitting in her recliner some smiling with smug plastic cheer some serious stoic lost looking away. His last portrait of her almost -2 years exactly, at her behest, for a Facebook photo she only puts up a few negative months.

After coming home from the hospital she looks at her Farmville farms, a former passion, and after tinkering for a few weeks she deletes them deletes her profile is back on Facebook -1 Month under a false name so she can see her daughter's photos of her own daughter, a girl she took care of full time for 4.5 years the new thrill joy in her medium glum hermit life.

No matter how hard he tries to cheer her up negative days months years he can't, isn't able, she says she's just waiting around to die, later curses herself for making that statement.

Day -179 they teach him how to drain her right pleura where the cancer makes the hot pink fluid build. Day -179 he doesn't know what to say, he deadpans it's been a lifelong dream of mine to drain my mother's lung the nurses laugh until crimson behind baby-blue masks. A joke instead of an outburst. A minor gift that makes somebody's day. ☘

BEAR CAVE

BY NICHOLAS HATHAWAY

CREATIVE
NONFICTION

My brother is crazy, schizophrenic, off his rocker. He is blessed by Aslan, fallen from heaven, and pestered by a woman's voice no one else hears. Depending on his behavior, his body-type fluctuates from emaciated to overweight, his hair from neat to unkempt. But he wasn't always schizophrenic. Before his car accident nine years ago, Brian was just like any other sixteen-year-old and I was his reverent little brother.

We were locomotive children who ran on Gatorade and Cheeto dust. Barreling through the house, my brother would take on the role of tour guide and friend, teaching me how to collect rings from the bottom of the pool or use our orange plastic wagon to ride down the driveway. When my brother bullied my sister, I would throw up my hands in protest and scream "No, Brian!" Even though the time we spent fighting over the computer was often longer than the time we spent enjoying our turn, my Brother and I were always closest when playing videogames.

Our days always ended in his room. Amidst the stacks of my brother's old clothing, you can no longer see the clearing where I would curl up and watch my brother play videogames. I didn't play them myself because the zombies were too scary, and my own self-reservation outweighed any benefits of hunting the half-dead. Still, I braved every pixelated ambush and cannibalization just so I could hang out with my older brother.

When I remember my brother before Aslan, I don't think of the arguments we've had or the noogies I received while growing up (and trust me, there were noogies). Instead, I picture the dull glow from his T.V. that illuminated the model airplanes he kept on his shelf, the clunky computer that groaned on as if each last rumble was its death-rattle, and, most of all, the musty old comforter I used to prop up

my head when we played past my bedtime.

After my brother's accident, we first thought he was depressed. My mother blessed his room with holy water and we went back to the old routine: playing World of Warcraft in his room, which I affectionately called "The Bear Cave." Brian would accept a new quest, wield his character's shield and sword, and charge headfirst into enemy monsters. I always admired his skill as I peered over his shoulder to watch him complete each quest, and he always admired the game. In the dim light of his bedroom, Brian was more than a depressed and confused seventeen year-old. He was Torov, the great orc hunter.

I once went into The Bear Cave for another marathon-run of Warcraft when I found him sitting on his bed, his eyes glazed over as if he were a taxidermy version of himself. I approached until I was close enough to see tears in his eyes. The tears were enough to stop me from walking, and then both of us were frozen in time, staring at each other, chilled by the breeze of the air-conditioner.

"I can't feel anything," he said. "I can't feel anything at all."

I don't know how it feels to not feel anything, but I do know what it looks like. Brian slept in his bed for days. He played during the night and had no company except the piles of old laundry stacked around his bed. The passengers who were injured in the car accident no longer spoke to him, so he turned to computer games for comfort. He only felt comfortable playing World of Warcraft, and after a while the only way I could spend time with him was to join the quest. I created an account and, in separate rooms, sat in the light of my computer screen as we escaped through our avatars Torov and Ahota.

He left high school early with his G.E.D. in hand but skipped his graduation because of anxiety. After enrolling

*“We were
locomotive
children
who
ran on
Gatorade
and Cheeto
dust”*



in a couple online courses, we thought he might turn his life around. But when the end of the term came around and all he accomplished were F's, my parents knew Brian's accident left more than just a few bruises on his forehead. We searched for treatment and found an office in Orlando that offered a quantitative EEG, which to me sounded more like a video-game related acronym than a treatment. They spread gel on his head like jam on toast and plugged him into a machine that measured his brain waves. It was like our game except that instead of playing for new gear he played for dark etches on paper and instead of using a controller he had wires coming out of his head like frizzy, plastic hair.

My mother took me out of school three days a week so we could consult the doctors, set up treatment plans, and help my brother out of this temporary rut. As it turned out, rut was too light a word for the years of "try this pill" and "maybe this will work" that followed. My brother felt hopeless, and so did we. When we were home, my mother removed my brother's doorknob, saying that it was a privilege he had lost by drinking and driving. Secretly, she snuck into our hallway at night and peered through the hole it left in the door to verify that my brother hadn't run away or killed himself due to what the doctor's called unbearable suffering. As far as I was concerned, Brian retreated to The Bear Cave and continued playing his games.

Then the delusions began. They were small at first. He might feel paranoid, check his closets for ghosts, or sneak out of the house to eat mushrooms from our neighbor's front yard. "A gift from H.E." he said when I found him smoking grass from our lawn, his red hair tousled and his wide eyes shining. I asked him who H.E. was, and he told me he was H.E. and I might be related to H.E. and that we were legendary and epic and all-powerful. When I wanted him to

explain what he meant, he just scribbled on a piece of paper with his gray Sharpie.

“I need to not be tuned in to everything. Stuff won’t work in me brain. I never worked.”

I guess you never really appreciate the value of a lucid mind until you lose it.

He used to hear a woman’s voice instructing him to punch holes in the wall, which I imagine sounded something like “Brian, go punch holes in that wall” because she always seemed pretty straightforward to me. When I started the seventh grade, her voice became more dangerous and confusing, leading my brother to pace frantically around the house. He paced so much that he lost 20 pounds, and he balanced these periods of manic activity by sitting in front of his computer playing World of Warcraft. He played the game everyday.

My mother’s religious preferences and his gaming legacy mixed with his schizophrenia into the delusional stew that led him to believe he was a fallen archangel on a quest for salvation. The stories from his games were conflated with the stories from his life, and time for him became as flexible and flimsy as the rubber bands he kept wrapped around his wrist. He once dreamed of wearing rubber bands and he made us stock up on them as symbols of his namesake, The Rubber Band Man.

While watching the Chronicles of Narnia at the movies, Aslan the lion popped out of the screen and blessed Brian. Vibrant and with a full mane, he graced Brian with his

majestic paw and with his commercial grip, too, seeing as we bought him the sequel for his last birthday. He was telepathic, a fallen archangel from the First Surface, the Rubber Band Man. When he wasn’t with us (and sometimes when he was) Brian would visit other worlds in the delusions of his schizophrenic brain, which I’m told makes more sense to doctors as dark lines on paper. Brian wore novelty sunglasses and liked to see the world in different shades of orange. He was manic instead of depressed, delusional instead of complacent. But at least he felt something.

Brian’s room is unoccupied now. The holes have been patched up. The paintings hung on his wall pay tribute to my mother’s eclectic religious beliefs. Three of them – Buddha, Jesus, and Shiva – mingle on the nightstand next to my brother’s bed. His room is full of contradictions, too. Piles of laundry and sewing supplies loom over the rest of the room like sentinels (if sentinels smelled like laundry detergent and incense), but at the same time it feels sterile. My brother lives in an assisted living facility now, about an hour away. As his delusions become stranger, I’ve become more and more skilled at calming him down and explaining to him why you shouldn’t tell strangers you’re an incarnation of Christ or eat random mushrooms from the side of the road. I’ll never forget how close we were as kids, but even in these memories I remind myself to see Brian for how he is today. So, yes, some things have changed. Now my brother watches me play videogames. ♠

*“I can’t feel anything” he said. “I can’t
feel anything at all.”*

Misplaced Virtue

BY OTHA DAVIS III

(acrylic, water color)



RELIQUARY

BY CHRISTOPHER CHILTON

The necklace wasn't the first thing you noticed about Barrett, not as tall as he was and not with a smile like that. He was a good-looking guy—narrow-shouldered, hair thinning a bit early, but good-looking—and that was one of the strangest things about the necklace: he didn't need to wear it to get attention. But there it was. After you took in his height, and his smile, and whatever else women notice of a man's physical composition, there it was, glittering and half-concealed by the edge of his shirt, white gold, shaped like a heart, freckled with pink diamonds. "That's quite a pendant," women would say—or some variation of the same thing, but always the word *pendant*—and he would put his hand over it, as if he had forgotten about it until just that moment, perhaps suggesting that he hadn't meant for it to be seen, and each time he would say, "Oh, it's not a *pendant*, sweetheart—it's a *necklace*." By then it was hook, line, and sinker, just about every time.

I don't mean to suggest that he slept with them. He certainly slept with *some* of them, but that's not what it was about. What it *was* about I can't say; mostly it seemed to be the pure pleasure of a woman's attention, and partly it was just a game. The fact that the game never changed was part of its appeal. It gave him the kind of satisfaction that comes from thinking you're free from the push and pull of animal psychology, your hands alone on the levers. I always had an itch to say, all right then, if it's you that's so damn special, do it without the damn necklace. But he probably could have, so I didn't say it.

Whatever his motivations, he played the game quite a bit. We were in our first few years out of college then, making real money for the first time in our lives, not knowing what to do with it other than spend it on booze, and in the bars Barrett found a nearly endless supply of girls. He preferred

new bars to old haunts and new women to familiar ones, and we were generally diffident enough to follow his lead. We followed him to rooftop cocktail bars on the Upper East Side, Brooklyn dives doubling as bowling alleys or video arcades, miserable Tribeca clubs where we watched girls paw at his pink diamond heart because we were too frightened or stupid to dance. He wanted to prove its totemic power worked on girls of all sorts, but they seemed as alike to me as any alien race might, and the dependability of this routine did nothing to change my perceptions.

First, they would ask him why he wore it. He would demur and they would talk about something else. Sometimes he would walk away, even, and come back to where the three of us were gathered, confident curiosity would prevail. "The secret," he told us once, though no one had asked, "is to seem like you don't *want* to talk about it." I still think half the secret is you have to be fairly handsome in the first place, but he wasn't wrong. None of us could have sold it. We didn't have the chops.

If he walked away, they would somehow find themselves in his path again. If the conversation wandered, somehow it always came back. It was never Barrett who brought it up again, it was always the girl who just *had* to know what the necklace was *really* about. Then he would get quiet, look off into space for a moment, and say, "You really want to know?" Then he would tell the story.

The story, though it will lose a little in my telling it, was roughly this: When Barrett left for college, he promised his girlfriend they would stay together, even though she was still in high school and he lived many hours away. For several months he worked nights in the stockroom at the Big Lots, pulling extra shifts, hoarding every last dollar to buy her that hideous barnacled eyesore as a Valentine's Day present. As

a matter of fact, I'm pretty sure he *did* work at Big Lots, but the money went toward the purchase of a mini bike that he crashed trying to do wheelies in the parking lot of an all-night Chinese restaurant. Where the necklace actually came from, I can't say, but I'd be surprised if money changed hands.

Anyway, she was supposed to meet him on the night of the 12th, which was a Friday that year, the story being calendrically exact. But the river pier where he had arranged for them to meet, though picturesque and romantically isolated, was also an ideal place for drug deals, which sometimes go catastrophically wrong, and poor Elizabeth ended up with a stray bullet lodged in her lung. Barrett pulled up, jewelry box in his lap, alongside four police cars and an ambulance, but they were already pulling the white sheet over her face, like on television when the detective is just minutes too late.

It was detailed enough to be plausible, but not so detailed as to be artificial. Things like that happen all the time, after all, life being chaotic and senseless. And I suppose people accept most of what's told to them as truth. But it was the last thing he said that always clinched it. Or rather it was the way he said it, as if he had wanted to unburden himself of the words for a long time: "After Elizabeth died, I didn't know what to do with it, so I put it on myself. And I couldn't take it off now, not after all this time." Now I wonder if, on the few occasions this story did lead to his bedroom, he fucked with the thing still knocking against his chest, or if he let those

girls reach their hands around his neck and unclasp it first, newly assured in the redemptive power of their love.

Like I said, it didn't always come to that. It rarely did, in fact. But he always got what he wanted. The look of shock, the hand on his arm, the face as much of fascination as of sympathy. Seeing that necklace, holding it between their fingers, it was like holding a splinter of the true cross. After that, everything he said was mesmerizing and they were his for as long as he wanted. It began to depress me, the way his story held people rapt, the way once he started telling it, little crowds sometimes began to form around him, crowds of men and women both. I became so tired of the sheer credulousness of human beings.

The tipping point came in a bar whose name I don't remember. I know it was very crowded, but somehow we had managed to carve enough space at the bar for all four of us to stand. It would have been unthinkable to surrender real estate like that, so we settled in for a long stay, but it made conversation between us, strung out in a line, nearly impossible. I was shut out on both sides, from the conversation between Joe and Lamar on my left, which I could not hear, and the conversation between Barrett and a girl on my right, which I could hear but not stomach. I'm not sure what she looked like—either I couldn't see or don't remember—except that she was blonde, or maybe a light brunette, and on her left shoulder she had a tattoo of a cardinal perched on a branch.

I had a little game of my own I liked to play while Barrett

played his. The rules were simple: If the girl says, “Oh my god” or “Oh my gosh,” or any other exclamation of surprise, you take a drink. If you catch her looking at the necklace instead of in his face, you take a drink. If she touches him on the arm, you take two. If she touches the necklace, you finish whatever you’re drinking and order another. On a good night, with a conscientious bartender, you can get pretty buzzed. This wasn’t that kind of night, but it didn’t leave me particularly sober either. It was an average night, a depressingly standard night.

And then the girl with the cardinal tattoo responded in a way I had never seen before, not in all the time I’d known him. She told a story of her own. I’m not sure I can tell it exactly right; it’s been such a long time now, and the bar was so loud I don’t think I heard all the details right anyway. But I can give you the basics.

This girl had worked in a luggage shop in Ohio years before. Or maybe it was Wisconsin. It was somewhere in the Midwest, at least, where she had grown up. The name of the luggage shop—and I remember this perfectly—was *Brad’s Bags*. Brad being the name of the guy who owned the luggage shop. She began dating a manager at this luggage shop, not Brad, just a night manager. Just a guy who went to business school during the day and managed this luggage shop at night.

Anyway, there was a little office in the back of the luggage shop. The night manager liked to stay there after the shop closed because it was quiet and warm and he could do his

business school homework with no one to bother him. Brad, who only worked during the day, knew nothing about this habit, and that’s how the night manager ended up in the office area in the middle of the night Brad set the luggage shop on fire. He hadn’t meant to hurt anyone; he just wanted the insurance money and hadn’t thought to check the office first.

But that’s not the worst part. The worst part is this: The night manager escaped but had to run across the sales floor to do it, and by the time he got out the front door he was considerably on fire. He would have survived, probably, though badly burned, if not for Brad. Either wanting to eliminate the only witness to his crime or just scared shitless by the sight of a man on fire running toward him, Brad beat the night manager to death with a metal suitcase, which is the one thing he *did* think to extract from the store before he set it on fire. All of this, she said, was part of Brad’s official confession, which is now public record in the state of Ohio or maybe Wisconsin.

I don’t need to check the public record; this story was true. I say that as someone who, for obvious reasons, is more inclined to be suspicious than most. Why did I believe it? Well, it’s strange to say, but I believed her because her story was so *unlike* Barrett’s, and the way she told it so different from the way he told his. His story was plausible; hers was preposterous, yet somehow less preposterous than the audacity required to invent it. When he told his story he tried to look as somber as possible, but she was brusque,

“The necklace wasn’t the first thing you noticed not as tall as he was and not with a smile like

artless, matter-of-fact. There were no pregnant pauses, no long looks into nowhere. There was no big show of grief. She might have been telling him about her trip to the dentist.

Poor Barrett, I don’t think he knew what to do. I remember it seemed like a long time before he could find anything to say. Finally, he asked about her tattoo, maybe thinking it was meant to commemorate her dead boyfriend in some way, and she said, “Oh, no—I just like birds.”

That floored me. Somehow, it made everything about Barrett and his necklace seem inarguably, transparently phony. It made it impossible. Imagine his story were true—who could wear a thing like that, right over their heart? Either it would be like opening a wound to fresh air, every day, and grinding one’s gash into the hard wall of living, or the grief of it would fade away and cease to matter. And which of those would be worse? No, people don’t carry signs and symbols like that. They keep them in a box and get tattoos of cardinals.

I don’t remember how their conversation ended; I was too much in my own head to notice. They didn’t go home together, I know that much, and I remember later on that night he called the girl “a real bummer.” I could have killed him for that. We went out the next night, too, and he told the story again, but he changed it this time, changed it for the first time in all the years I’d known him. This time the

story was about his girlfriend who worked in a luggage shop.

In the end, he left out the bit about the metal suitcase; it was the fire that got her. In the end he just wasn’t that audacious.

Shortly after that I started avoiding him. It meant seeing less of Joe and Lamar, but I don’t regret it. Don’t think my objections were moral ones; I’m not one to take the high ground. The reason, the best that I can explain it, is this: Imagine a country, distant and little-known, which can be found only when unsought, stumbled into, and those who step across its borders can never return. But from the tops of its mountains, through rings of fog, those who live there can call down to you and tell you a little bit of what it’s like to live on the other side of that fog. It’s an awful place and lonely, but aren’t you envious all the same, when you think of how ordinary life is down here in the valley, with its petty griefs and minor irritants, with the crippled, shrunken scale of everything? How much smaller must it all seem from up there?

And then there’s the man, boots unscuffed, clean-shaven and well-fed, who hangs an arrowhead round his neck and tells you he’s just come back from the mountaintop, where he lived as one of their tribe. It makes you want to smash his face in, to roll him up the mountain like a stone.

It sounds stupid now that I say it, but I’ve never been one with words. ▢

*d about Barrett,
that.”*

She stumbled out the front door and down the wet steps. Had she earned that misstep trying to fit into somebody else's shoes? Couldn't be the rain, she thought, always raining in Corvallis. Majoring in sociology at Oregon State University, Sally had hoped to find her way out of where the sun don't shine. Hadn't she and her dooper boyfriend, "Higher" Ed, started a revolution, dumpster diving for groceries? That's how Sally found the shoes.

Two AM Saturday behind La Pied du Cochon, Ed unloaded the green dumpster. Sally switched on her headlamp, flipped her own dumpster's sticky lid up, looked, shrieked, jumped back red handed. The lid banged.

Ed paused, “what, rats? We who sally forth against capitalist oppressors fear not!”

She bent over, retched, stood up, wiped her mouth, peeked again. "Ed! Look!"

Inside Sally's dumpster a petite blonde in a black cocktail dress, eyes wide open, a thin line of blood crusted on her throat, imitated Sleeping Beauty.

Ed grimaced, “Jesus! We both high? Having a flashback? You thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Except for the shoes, it’s me?”



“Dead on! Like looking into a mirror.”

“Ed, these are stilettos, black patent leather, Salvatore Ferragamos. Run \$500 easy. Make my sneakers look like garbage.”

“Your sneakers are garbage.”

Sally slipped the shoes off the body. “Need these for my next life. This gal’s past her expiration date.”

Back in her dorm’s basement, Sally dialed 911. “I want to report a dead girl.”

“Name?”

“I don’t know her name.”

“No, your name.”

“Don’t wanna get involved.”

“You are involved. You’re at the University?”

“Not any more.”

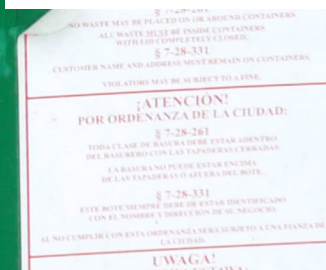
Back in her room, Sally tried on the shoes, found them a perfect fit, classy. After a long bubble bath, she put on clean PJs, slept like she were dead. Waking up at noon to a Back From The Dead track across the hall, she spent Saturday struggling through Howard Zinn’s radical A People’s History of the U.S. When the streetlights winked on turning roads to slick glass, Sally put on a black dress, the stilettos, a cloud

of imitation French perfume. She grabbed an umbrella, wobbled down the hall, stumbled out the front door and down the wet steps.

The Maître ‘d at Pied du Cochon smiled broadly, pleased to find her a table, this young lady beautifully dressed, however unsteady. Sally ordered the special. He brought her a glass of Pinot Noir complements of a graying older man in midnight black Armani.

When she mouthed thanks, the man joined her, spouting French, kissing her hand. Sally felt herself moving beyond Higher Ed. Here was a world traveler, cultured, a cut above the rest. He’d studied economics at the Sorbonne, organized student strikes, fought for health care and minimum wage. Then a law degree and wealth.

He paid Sally’s check, offered a way home, like another life walking in somebody else’s shoes. She stumbled in the parking lot. He supported her, moving steadily toward darkness, toward her dumpster. ▢



Deeper

BY MAGHAN LUSK

He holds the scalpel above the patient's naked flank and scours the landscape; the gentle, freckled slope from sternum to hip, the well of belly button; all of this, more tender, more fragile than he can fathom. The patient's body reminds him of his ex-wife's.

For years, his eye passed over her like a pair of shoes slumped in a corner. She grew wings, then horns, then silent, then dust—so was their life together. He told himself she'd asked for it; she knew that she had married a surgeon. Their children disappeared to college and rarely came home. His eye hungered for younger, healthier frontiers.

He turns a doting eye toward his intern.

"I'm preparing to make the midline incision," he says. Compared to his hands, every object in the room seems to vibrate. "From the xyphoid process to the umbilicus. One clean sweep, but take your time. They have to live with these scars for the rest of their lives."

The intern's blue eyes effervesce above her mask.

Months earlier, his wife fell ill. She suffered stomach pain, fatigue, and the wily look of a once-beloved pet left spinning circles in its cage.

"With any luck, it's cancer," he said at dinner on the day

that she laid a sheaf of white papers by his dinner plate. A few swipes of his pen and everything would be final.

"I only want alimony and the family albums. And my personal things, of course," she said. "Jack—I couldn't find that pack of Kodaks. Remember the ones? We took them on our first vacation after we married. The ones at Kiawah?"

He looked beyond the living room, the imported Cubist paintings, Eames-era furniture, and hydrangea cuttings spouting from a Finnish vase. He looked beyond to the sea-green pool fed by a natural spring, and the sliver of sunset in the crook of valley in the distance—all by her impeccable design.

"You always had exquisite taste, Dee. I'll miss it," he said.

She leaned forward and her scoop-neck blouse fell from the skin draped across her bony shoulder. There was something unnervingly vulnerable about that shoulder.

"If it's Crohn's," he continued, "you'll have a shit time coping. Grown men would rather put a bullet through their heads."

Her sigh fell on deaf ears. "I'm tired, sweetheart. I'm going to lie down."

It was cancer. During the weeks of chemo and

radiation, the sheaf of papers lay dormant on the kitchen counter. Her platelet count stabilized, then plummeted. Her oncologist decided to do exploratory surgery to see just how invasive the cancer was and determine if they should stop treatment. Indeed, it was more advanced than anyone expected.

“The capillaries are abnormally dilated,” he says as the blade sinks into the soft flesh below the breastbone. Blood snakes down the patient’s rib. “Clean that.”

A nurse leans forward and wipes the blood away.

“What was the platelet count yesterday?” he says.

“A little over nine million,” the intern replies.

“Let’s keep going.”

Hands reach in to wipe the blood away as he continues. He cuts through the parietal peritoneum and peels it back to

“He and the intern in the privacy of the break room in the early morning hours, her mouth like a ripe peach.”

reveal the abdominal cavity, which is brimming with blood.

The intern stands by the patient’s head, gently tilting it one direction, then another.

“Dr. Stone—purpura on the ears and eyelids.”

“Thrombocytopenia,” he says. “I was hoping we wouldn’t have to do this. Clean her up and start the transfusion.”

He sits back while the nurses suction out the cavity. Her vitals, stable. The skin around the wound is outraged.

As the last of the blood is suctioned from the cavity, he is drawn to Dee’s bedside the week before she died. The smell of vomit and mouth wash; the struggling breath of a respirator beyond the partition; and in his hands, the signed papers.

He laid them on the bedside table beside an empty pudding cup and a picture of their twin daughters in diapers,

miles smeared with spaghetti sauce. His wife's bald head, swaddled with a pink bandanna, tilted toward the window

"Kiawah," she said.

"You should get some sleep. It's eleven o'clock," he said.

"Do you remember?" She turned to him and took one of his cold hands in her own. He did not sit down.

"I need to get back to the O.R."

"We chased ghost crabs on the beach with a flash light. Don't you remember?"

"Lily sent me an email and said that she's driving down to see you after classes tomorrow," he said. "I'll go ahead and mail the papers after you sign them, okay?"

"I'm afraid, Jack."

He handed her the box of tissues from the bedside table.

"It's the medication. It drops your serotonin levels. Lay back and get some rest. Your mother should be here any minute. Your brother has a layover in Boston."

He reached out awkwardly and stroked the bandana. She held the box of tissues on her chest but didn't dry her tears.

"I try not to think about us," she said. He leaned closer. Her breath was rancid. "But I can't help it. What was all that? What did it even mean?"

"Dee," he said, "this isn't you."

Her lashless eyes were bright and scarlet-rimmed. He could barely stand to look.

"All those years of being invisible, because you gave me—what? Then I'm the one who gets cancer," she said. Her face softened and she shook her head. He tried to

take the box from her but she clutched it tighter.

“This isn’t me? How would you know, Jack? How would you possibly know?”

His mind drifted. He and the intern in the privacy of the break room in the early morning hours, her mouth like a ripe peach. Her skin, water, and him, breaking free, swimming to some other world, one without right and wrong and pain and sacrifice. He disappears inside her, though, sometimes, he can’t remember her name.

“Jack,” Dee had said, “are you listening?”

“Jack,” the intern says, “are you paying attention?”

The wound is vast and clean. It is all suddenly clear. The metastatic cancer is clumped like tiny crabs overrunning the ropes of small and large intestine, the sack of ulcerous stomach, the pale and knotty liver.

The nurses’ eyes plead with one another. The intern’s eyes are fixed and fluid. He shifts in his seat as if prepared to run.

“Close her up,” he says finally. “I can’t cut anymore.”

He rises and walks out, slipping his scrubs off, ripping the mask from his face, and the fluorescent lights are blinding. Suddenly, he is twenty years younger, lying on the white sheets of a painted iron bed. The sliding doors are open, and the waves lap the salty sand only yards from their rented condo. The sheer curtains rustle in the night breeze and a yellow slice of moon peers through the palmettos.

Dee turns to him. She is naked and glistening in the humidity. He places a warm hand on her stomach.

“I’m pregnant,” she whispers. “This is just the beginning.” α

The War Cannot F

BY WILLIAM BURLESON

Find Me

I stand in a small wicker basket hanging below an enormous white balloon floating above the green French countryside, the chaos of battle three-thousand feet below, spread before me as gaping wound running north and south. Flashes of red, clouds of dust and smoke, I am expected to observe where the shells are falling. I am the eyes of the artillery set up miles from the battle, firing blindly, counting on spotters such as myself to ensure the shells are finding their purchase, or, at least, not blowing up our own. My balloon is tethered via a cable to a spot a mile behind the French lines so that the Hun on their side of no-man's-land cannot shoot me. Windswept and cold, I look through binoculars, yelling instructions into a field telephone to a man below. Five degrees left! Two degrees right! Up six degrees! That's it! Six panzers, three o'clock!

Bullets rip through my wicker basket, wood splintering;

my hands instinctively cover my face from flying shards. The binoculars fall though what had been part of the floor and side of my basket, and I watch them spin, tumble out of sight. A bright blue Fokker tri-plane roars by at a hundred miles-per-hour chased by two of my Sopwith Camel protectors. Careless! I neglected to spot the enemy plane coming in from behind me for the kill. A real boner, I should have jumped before the plane got near; that is what we are trained to do. The hydrogen above is highly explosive and my position puts me ridiculously in peril. Time to correct my mistake, and I prepare to jump. I pull on my harness connected to the parachute in a bag hanging below, but there is no tension in the straps. I've made the jump seven times before—not a high number, many of my balloon corps colleagues have jumped twenty even thirty times—and I know the straps should have some tension,

but instead it's light as thread. I pull and pull, until the ends appear, shredded, unattached.

I yell into the phone, I've been hit! The parachute is gone! Bring me down! But no one answers, the phone, dead. I look through the gaping hole. Not only is the parachute gone, so is the cable holding me in place and the phone line that went with it. I look up to see which direction the cigar-shaped kite balloon points and thus where the wind is blowing, but I already know the answer: from the west, from the French positions to the Germans.

My fate is sealed. I will die today—minutes, maybe hours, I'm not sure, but today. There is no escape, nothing to try, no one to make my case to.

Around me the air battle boils between three Camels and the now two Fokkers who want me dead, the rattle of machine guns, brightly colored planes dodging and spinning in the three-dimensional battlefield. The second Fokker makes a pass at the balloon itself, bullets passing through the fabric envelope without obvious or at least immediate consequences. The bullets alone usually do not ignite the hydrogen, but they do create leaks and tears. The Fokker who sealed my fate sets up to make another pass, but before

he can, a Camel scores a hit, the blue tri-plane disintegrating as if papier-mâché, the pilot tumbling out into the air. No parachute opens. I feel no triumph. Nor do I feel animosity against my killer. Quite the opposite. He was one of my brothers, people of the air. If he didn't kill me, someone else will. That has been my fate since I was assigned the balloon corps; this is the nature of this war. In fact, I hold no grudge against anyone below, no matter their nationality. I'm sure they don't belong there any more than I do here.

I am not a soldier, at least not at heart. I am a philosopher, a graduate from Notre Dame. However, while Plato said "Knowledge is the food of the soul," it doesn't put dinner on the table. I am a pharmacist by training. Or, more accurately, training to be a pharmacist, apprenticing at a small apothecary in my neighborhood. When I went through draft processing in April, America had just declared war joining the side of the Brits and French. When they asked me my profession, I said "pharmacist" but the apparently deaf-in-one-year old clerk heard "farmer," guaranteeing my enlistment not in the medical corps but in the infantry. I got lucky, or I thought so at the time, by being assigned to the balloon corps. No trench foot, no lice. But it was not luck;

“Socrates said that, ‘Death may be the greatest of all human blessings.’”

anyone could see I would have made for a poor poilu. Not that the standards are high, but a farmer would have made a better choice. I am only five-foot two, and weigh no more than one-hundred-twenty pounds. In basic training, I wasn’t strong enough to drive a bayonet into a muslin dummy; one could only imagine what a failure I would be on a real Hun.

But being light is of benefit to me now, as the basket is severely weakened. I lean on the side to avoid the hole, holding onto one of the ropes connecting me to the balloon. I consider jumping, be done with it, but no, I won’t do that. Not that I am afraid to die. As an atheist, I have no soul to reconcile, no lord to sit in judgment. However, I certainly do not covet death, either. I value life, in fact, at this moment more than ever. Socrates said that, “Death may be the greatest of all human blessings.” I don’t know about that, but I’m going to find out soon enough. No, all that is left is to extend my life as long as possible. Isn’t that all any of us can do, no matter what the time left? Make the best of the time we have, however limited? The reality that in my case it is a matter of minutes, maybe an hour at the most, makes no difference. Who am I to say what the value is?

The wind is gone for me as I am moving with it across the

countryside. Before me is the front, but I prefer to look behind me, at the rolling verdant hills, lush, a patchwork of farm fields framed by hedgerows and stands of trees. “Nature is the art of God” said Dante, although, in my case, it would have to be a metaphorical god. A town in the distance—white houses with tile roofs, a church steeple—seems strangely quiet, peaceful, despite the proximity of the horror below. A town much like my own Midwestern American town. Tree-lined streets, white fences. I can see my little brother, wearing his professional baseball uniform for the first time, so proud, Mom and Pop smiling. Eighteen and off to play town ball after being the high school star, next stop the bigs, who knows. It was not to happen, though. War.

The basket is crumbling, little by little, the remaining floor sagging, pulling apart. The basket is only five by five feet, a quarter of which is already gone, so there isn’t room for more disintegration. I loop my arms around a rope in case of sudden failure and to perhaps take a little weight off the weakened structure.

The explosions from mortars and artillery grow louder. I pass over the French lines into no-man’s-land, stretching from horizon to horizon. Now probably fifteen hundred feet

off the ground, I am going down, the holes taking their toll. I feel cold to my marrow. No longer green and sage, the land around me is in scarred in various shades of gray: light gray earth, dark gray trunks of burned trees, medium gray smoke from fire, and light gray smoke from the gas. Accenting the otherwise colorless field below are flashes of red explosions. I cannot yet see the red of the blood spilt between the trenches. Dust and smoke increasingly obscure the sun; what had been a bright blue day is now brown, hazy. Below, I see a straight line through no-man's-land, what appears to be a short stone wall; yes, this must have been a pasture, horses, perhaps. I can imagine a lush green paddock with wild grape vines crawling over the wall, maybe trees. There are no trees now, no grape vines, no horses.

I hear a sound as if Hades has opened its doors to the screams of the damned. To my right, thousands of French boys jump over the top, running into the gray landscape, getting maybe twenty or thirty feet before dropping on top of those who came before. Some get as far as the stone wall where they huddle three, four, five or more deep, but it's a false hope, and the artillery and machine guns find them soon enough. Quickly tens, hundreds, thousands are now dead or dying from ripped open bodies, smashed organs, severed arteries or the choking gray mist of chlorine gas. Funny—up in my balloon at three-thousand feet, the war was abstract even though it was splayed out in front of me. Now that I am getting closer and closer, the artillery, the guns, mines, are for the first time all too real. Had I thought myself a mere spectator?

I am well within range of German rifles. I release my bowels—something one spends an entire lifetime trying not to do when dressed is now completely irrelevant. No one fires. They are focused on the charging poilu; I am no threat to them. A curiosity, I am sure, but not a threat.

I smell the battle, the acrid odor of gun powder and ozone. Still, now that they are quite finite, all my breaths are sweet. I remember lying with a French prostitute I had hired for the night in Paris on my last leave. “An artist has no home in Europe except in Paris,” said Friedrich Nietzsche, and she surely was an artist. After she had taken my virginity, she slept next to me, and, even though it was quite dark and I was quite drunk, I remember watching her chest rise and fall, amazed at the wonder of it all.

The basket finally gives in and cracks in half. Holding onto the rope, I swing above the tattered remains of wicker, trying unsuccessfully to find somewhere to place my feet, the broken wood swinging away each time my foot makes contact. The jute cuts into my hands. The balloon is losing shape, and fabric blows and whips around me. The ground is getting closer fast, but I am still high enough to see the German lines ahead of me, boys behind the parapet, guns all pointing ahead. I hear hundreds yelling behind me, what remains of the push. I can't believe anyone has made it this far. I enter a cloud of smoke prepared for my next breath to be my last, but the smoke is from simple fire, not chlorine gas. It reminds me of camping with my family in an island in the river when I was ten. The camp fire seemed to follow

me no matter where I sat. My parents, my little brother, and I fishing, singing songs. A happy time. In the dark next to the fire I laughed at my pop's attempts at scary stories, although they seemed to work on my brother.

Below me the ground is littered with bodies. I hear the screams now, see the French boys jerk and drop in rows, as the machine gun sweeps from right to left, left to right. My younger brother willingly joined and went off to war to—in the words of President Wilson—make the world safe for democracy. The Frenchman Ernest Renan said a half-century ago, that “The greatest men of a nation are those it puts to death.” I remember getting a letter in May from Pop telling me their son, my brother, had died in the Battle of Cantigny. Indeed. The greatest men.

I see heads turn skyward as the huge, barely inflated white fabric slowly falls from the sky with its cargo of one man holding onto a rope kicking in the air. I am grateful for my diminutive frame, and remember how, despite my stature, I could do more chin-ups than any other boy in school. The earth approaches, and judging from the pace of my descent, it occurs to me for the first time that I might just make it to the ground in one piece. What happens then is anybody's bet. For now, no one shoots at me, and I am grateful, if puzzled, why not. I am low enough to see their faces. Both the French and the Germans stare in wonder as I descend between them.

I touch down, as gentle as can be, and suddenly, strangely, inexplicably, I am standing on the ground. Still

a bit of hydrogen left, the fabric of the balloon billows around me as if I were walking in a cumulus cloud. All I see is the gray ash of the battlefield at my feet and the undulating fabric making up my private world of white. I remember hiding under the covers with my brother; I must have been no more than five, he then three, laughing, our father pretending he couldn't find us. The sound of battle, so loud moments ago from above, are muted, muffled, removed from my reality. But I know my world is an illusion; the battle all too real. At any moment I am sure to be shot or have the remains of the balloon hit a mine or be hit by a shell and burn. But I find peace, if only for a moment, in pretending the war cannot find me. ▢

Ascension

BY OTHA DAVIS III

(acrylic, water color)



Rex Explains Sex At Sixty

BY JOHN GREY

*It's no longer
a long, sustained moaned exhale
like air being released
from a balloon
but a series of short, sharp grunts,
like axe blows on cold firewood.*

*And forget about
that lying on top of each other
as if we barely touch,
as if a thin lining of air called love
softens the cushion
between bone and flesh, flesh and bone.
Now every pound of body
is felt, upward and downward,
like steel-plates squeezed together,
flattening pleasure into pain.*

*But, the thing is, he adds,
if you don't do it,
then the last time you did it
is the last time you ever do.
He says it seriously, solemn,
like he wouldn't want that
on his conscience*

Hold Your Horses

BY JOHN HARPER

*where behind the shoddy shelter of a window,
i've been sincerely screaming
for peace and quiet;*

*but it's been a supreme
misinformation demonstration;*

*i don't wince
at the reality of this;
i'm the one
who's been holding up
the umbrella
to nothing but sunshine;*

*and so, the end of the story
goes like this—flim flam bam bam;
it's fun to say aloud;
flim flam bam bam;
a sham is my shame
i've made too big—*

de gustibus non est disputandum ::



there is no disputing about tastes

BY DESMOND KON ZHICHENG-MINGDÉ

College seems so long ago. That was when Gigi and her lover met, in a class. It was an economics class, and neither of them liked the idea of walking through life thinking in net liquid assets or working capital. Their collective financial position was the bag of textbooks from last semester they were dropping off at the used bookstore. They had an inventory of two typewriters, a duffel and a suitcase, and clothes cramped into a small closet. A teacup that his Nana had left him, which he packed carefully every time he was required to move statewide. Gigi has a bowl of glass marbles. This was her grandmother's. The bowl sat on a glass shelf in a teak cabinet with glass windows. The key to the cabinet had long been lost, so as a child, Gigi could ever only look at the marbles, never get to touch or hold them, to roll them in the palm of her hand. Just before her grandmother died, she instructed Gigi to take a hand vise to smash in the windows of the cabinet. The bowl and marbles were hers if she wanted. A family friend offered to drop them off at the market, and split what they'd get with Gigi. But Gigi turned away, and said, "That's not the kind of yield these are made for." Gifts aren't goods, that much Gigi learnt in Foundations of Economics, even as she gave her professor a tin of Christmas cookies when he had to stay in for the holidays that year.

Fertile Earth

BY ANNE WHITEHOUSE

I.

*In the corner of the garden
we found the perfect spot
for the damask rose “Celsiana,”
but when we dug, we hit a boulder.
I said, “Let’s plant somewhere else.”
“No,” she disagreed, “we’ll find a way.”*

*For two hours we dug around it,
but couldn’t get it to budge.
With a plank, we made a lever.
The two of us stood on one end
and bounced up and down
and finally felt it dislodge.*

*It took two planks and the two of us
working all day to dig it out:
there, at last, unearthed,
a rock the size of a coffee table.
Two women, one aging and one old--
we gaped in awe of what we’d done.*

II.

*With patience, forbearance, and a stubborn will,
almost any obstacle can be made to yield.*

*She taught me to trust myself to find a way;
she taught me to look for it close at hand.*

*In the rock's place grows the sturdy rose,
whose soft pink blooms and golden stamens
delight our summers.*

*The rock remained, too big to take away;
transplanted ferns now shelter in its shade.*

III.

*All afternoon before the rain,
I clipped the dead hostas' withered stems
and raked out piles of dead leaves from the beds.*

*Wet and chill, as if a cloud had sunk to earth,
in the strangely muffled air of November,
I listened to the chirp of a hawk circling overhead.*

*My body bent to my labors; my mind wandered free.
Make room! More room!*

KILLER OF BIRDS


BY WILLIAM BLOME

The early morning train to Syracuse leaves Albany from a station well nigh covered by ginkgo trees. They filter the sunlight, as your hand-held fan will scatter the densest air of the year when you flick your wrist repeatedly in early August.

Movement on a Metroliner is never entirely in just the essential direction of your destination; there's always that bucking back and forth, that barely-perceived hesitation, that ninety-nine percent certainty, which, for most people, passes easily for belief in the journey.

I completely believe you killed all the wrens In Albany; that you carefully poisoned hunks of suet and placed them everywhere you went in the city; and that you special-ordered one-and-a-quarter inch firecrackers, and, like a wicked lamplighter, you leaned your ladder against walls and trees, climbed up, and popped a burning fuse into every little birdhouse.

Now, I long realized I wasn't any great bargain in men. Oh, understanding, easy to talk to, seemingly engaging to the point of real sincerity—these pluses were more than offset by negatives, which, if they didn't leap out like lizards, sure came in time, I think, to seem anaconda-like to my several wives and countless children.



But I never systematically slew the tiny songbirds of northern New York, and I doubt anything in me (or missing in me) could induce such savagery in the hundreds of women who know me. I'll go further, in fact, and lodge the claim that my exemplary conduct and fine lower body were lighthouse-near-the-rocks to any woman who ever had thoughts of flight and slaughter.

Syracuse first appears out the club car window when the train is in the middle of a long, left-leaning arc. High-rise towers seem built atop pine trees and an interstate. But tonight I'll be downtown and motionless at a long linoleum runway; watching stripper after stripper squat and shudder in the music. And I'm not ever going back to Albany and to you, you killer of birds.



Hand-washed laundry

BY BRIAN D. MORRISON

*She said hey she was washing the clothes
again but no one had worn them
& he told her so & she melted he melted
her face as buoyant as the other side
of a bottle of water through his eyes all
water bottle babies the two of them
abandoned in the treelimb daze of beginning
spring no snows no cold gusts so wide awake
dreaming the floor painted in pitter-patter
& small sneaker giggling all this and still
they cleaned the small clothes for hands
never held but washing was all they could do
for the soap that wasn't cleansing*

BY SARAH KATHARINA KAYß





BIKE LIFE

BY D. WATKINS

There was no Internet in the mid nineties— just magazines. Exclusive Nikes in unthinkable color ways came from Eastbay, specialty hoodies graced the back of The Source, and every bike rider walked around with a rolled up copy of Motocross hanging out of his back pocket.

Stacks of crumpled Motocross magazines lined my room— pages folded, images ripped out and circles drawn around the dopest bikes in the world. I always thought I had pro potential as a rider, but I was desperately in need of an upgrade. So I mangled every dirt bike magazine I owned in search of the perfect bike.

I was riding a PW50 Fat Cat at the time. It was blue, white, and slow. My favorite uncle Gee copped me the bike on my ninth birthday and we had two amazing years. I learned to wheelie on it, impressed some girls, never had any mechanical problems, and met the “12 O’clock Boyz”— the crew I ended up riding with.

Lil Net the baddest dude in the city and a general in the 12 O’clock Boyz had witnessed me slicing up Madison Street in between cars and never stopping at stop signs, for cops, or at red lights one day.

“Damn shorty you a nut wit it!” yelled Net after he caught up with me by Broadway. “Aint you Dev lil brova?”

Yeah I replied as I leaned on my bike and tried to act like I didn’t know how important his contributions to ghetto dirt bike riding were. Skinny kids like me rode because we saw him posing statue like on moving bikes and causing cop cars to crash into each other.

“Shorty what you like eight or some shit?” said Net.

“Naw I’m eleven and a half,” I replied.

“Damn. You can ride with us when you get a bigga bike, we like 40 deep, all 80’s and up. No small bikes in the 12 O’clock Boyz nigga, you feel me?” said Nat as he kick started his CR250.

Nat was rat-faced with shoulder-length dreadlocks and couldn’t have weighed over 90 pounds soaking wet. I could probably handle a 250 if he could. I watched in awe as his bike breathed a mountain lion roar before he peeled off. The block shook along with my soul and from that moment on I knew that I wasn’t really riding unless I was a 12 O’clock boy.

*

Three weeks after my invite and I was still obsessing over finding the perfect bike. I narrowed my decision down to three and weighed the pros and cons in my composition book.

1. KX70- Lime green one of a kind once featured in Motocross as being unique because it was the only 70 in existence. Too small.

2. DS80- Yellow and blue, cheap but good reviews and a sick warranty. Too generic.

3. CR80- Scrape blood red, in Motocross every month, popular on the streets and driven by pros. Girls like red.

The CR 80 was a no brainer, but I really stressed over my decision before choosing it. I called the Honda ad in the magazine at 6 am, 7 am, and every hour until I got through around noon. The lady on the other end of the phone was sweet and sounded like Betty White. Betty White and I sat on the phone and customized my bike— red with red piping— before she read me my \$3,500 total and asked for my credit card.

I didn’t have a credit card, I knew my dad didn’t have one, uncle Gee didn’t have a real identity let alone a credit card, and she said that I couldn’t mail cash. I knew I was too young to wire the money from the time I tried to buy porn so I thought my mom could probably help.

She was partying with some friends on the 4th floor— apartment 4C, like she did everyday. 4C jammed from

Sunday to Sunday holidays included. On the way down to the party apartment I saw my little brother Deion hanging in the stairwell chalk ashy, barefoot, and eating peeled paint chips straight off of the wall. I slapped his hands and threw him in a chokehold.

“Deion for millionth fucking time. You can’t eat fucking paint chips. I’ll buy you real chips, Utz barbeque.”

“Dey taste so sweet doe”, he cried while desperately reaching for another chip.

“Sweet fuckin poison! Don’t touch’em again!”

I kept him in the headlock and brought him with me. 4C rocked like an Onyx concert. Everybody inside of the apartment had tinnitus; so regular knocking wouldn’t get you in. Deion and I beat on the door like housing police for five or six minutes— Krueger Man answered.

“What na the fuck ya’ll bastards want”

Krueger Man is identical to Freddy Krueger, complexion, striped sweater and all. Deion looked him in his eyes, screamed and then blasted up the hallway as always.

“I need to holla at my mova real quick man”

“She busy shorty. Come back later” said Krueger as he started to shut the door.

“Man fuck you, move!” I replied as I stuck my arm in the crack and pushed my way in. He let out an ugly snicker as I squeezed by and scoured the dark apartment. 4C reeked of ape shit. I tripped over empty liquor bottles and stepped on old food and soiled clothes as I peered in every room. I saw the mailman fucking the long-faced-daycare-provider from the 2nd floor backwards. He was tearing her ass up too, I wanted ask her if she was okay. Instead I stopped and gave him two thumbs up— he shot them back at me, but still, no mom.

An ancient song “Solid as a Rock” blasted out of the speakers on repeat. She wasn’t in the kitchen with the faded

needle poppers or around any of the voodoo dancing living room dwellers and then it hit me. The bathroom. Jean loves the bathroom. I pushed threw the crowd of partiers and approached a cracked door. I stuck my head in and saw my mother sitting on the edge of the tub, nose pressed against the sink, white powder smeared across the peak of her brown upper lip.

“Damn, I guess you busy huh?” I said.

“Hol up. Boy school closed? Where Deion is eatin chips? Wait.” She replied.

I said fuck it to myself. I couldn’t believe my mother was snorting with these losers but I blocked out what I saw and went down to 3B to buy Deion some Utz and penny candy— hopefully that’ll taste better than the lead paint. 3B was closed so I had to fuck with the Koreans in Old Town Mall.

*

My brother Devin and bunch of other Nike shirts were standing in the project lobby like always. “Lil Bro what’s wrong” said Devin as I exited the stairwell. I couldn’t hide my feelings from him if I tried.

“I wanna new bike but I need a credit card,” I said. I wasn’t ready to tell him what I just saw my mom doing. Dev and I had the same father but different mothers. My mom Jean raised him as her own.

“I know a doctor with one, I got you. Naw hol up, you don’t need no credit card boy, I’ll take you up Pete’s Cycle on Harford Rd. You can cash them out. What’s wrong with the PW though?”

“Nothing. I just wanna step it up. I’m a give the PW to cousin Tug,” I said. My brother got a page and stepped off toward the pay phone. He asked if I had the money to buy a new bike before he returned the beep and I said yeah. A CR80 was only \$3500, and I had over \$6000 saved up from

“She wasn’t in the kitchen with the faded needle poppers or around any of the voodoo dancing living room dwellers and then it hit me.”

the 1 dollar bills that he gave me. Devin along with my father Reds and Uncle Gee were some of the biggest crack dealers in east Baltimore.

Dev and I rode up to Pete’s Cycle the next day. They didn’t have a red CR80 in stock, which was cool because I wanted customized features anyway. We designed a red bike with red piping and a white #7 on the side, which was my favorite number and tatted on the back of most of my basketball jerseys. I also bought a helmet that I knew I would never wear. I carried it around to let the girls know I had a new bike, but it eventually became a dresser decoration or a change bowl.

Three weeks of calling Pete’s Cycle, harassing the shipping company and I was still waiting for my bike. My mother said that she wanted to talk to me about what I saw. I told her that I didn’t rat her out to my father.

“I don’t give a fuck if you tell Reds or not. I’m tryin tell you what’s goin on with me!” she replied with lipstick on her chin.

“I don’t care, just feed Deion somethin other than fuckin paint chips and sign for my bike if it come. Bye Jean.”

“Dwight! Get the...” she yelled as I slammed the door. I did any and everything to avoid her— I even went back to

school. I hadn’t been in over a month. I saw my friend Taja at the metal detectors by the front door. He covered his cheeks like that Home Alone kid and said “What the fuck? Are you lost?”

I laughed on my way to third period. Middle schools in the projects smell like boiled urine, used condoms and teen pregnancy. The history teacher Mr. Ratch who looked like Mr. Spacelee from Spacelee’s Sprockets paraded around the room for an hour or so praising Thomas Jefferson. I couldn’t believe a month had gone by since my last school visit and he was still on Thomas fucking Jefferson. Ratch had a history of putting me out for my harsh Jefferson criticism.

1) The first time I got ejected came from me asking him why should black students study a white slave owner? We would have been in chains under his rule so fuck that?

2) Another time Ratch explained how the separation of church and state made America the most beautiful place in the world— credit Thomas Jefferson. I said “Ratch I’m curious, how do you talk so much with Jefferson’s dick in your mouth?”

3) The last time I showed up to class smelling like a pound of chronic. I think Ratch got high off of the contact he

caught from my clothes. He sent me to the office where they just sent me home.

I wasn't going to say anything to Ratch that day. I sat dormant in the back of the class as he talked about the great Jefferson and how George Washington never told a lie. I wanted to get out of the towers and school was a nice escape— and sometimes you could even learn something. Ratch had started the second portion of his lesson when I felt a buzz on my waist. Dev paged me 911, so I left school and ran back over to our building. Brand new red CR 80, chromed up, with red piping waited for me in the lobby— my watch said 12 o'clock.

*

Everybody in the lobby applauded me as I ripped the plastic off the bike. The mailman shot me two thumbs up and I sent them back at him. Euphoria was the feeling, but the ultimate test was ahead. I still had to ride this thing and be better than great so I pushed it over to the Amoco on Fayette Street. I told the Arab to give me \$2.00 on pump #5 and he replied "Nice bike buddy, niceeee".

I said thanks, walked over to the bike, and started filling it up. A cold pistol poked the back of my head.

"Don't turn around shorty or I'm a blow ya shit off," said a raspy voice.

"Come on yo I just got..."

"Shut the fuck up, and put the cap on— den run. If you turn around I'm a put hole in your head I'm tellin you."

I followed his directions to a tee. Long enough to see him exploding up Central Avenue on my bike. He was lighter than me with a white tee shirt on. I couldn't really see what he looked like. The Arab ran out from behind of the bulletproof glass and signaled for me to come back.

"Buddy I call police," he said.

I ignored him and ran back into my building, up every flight of stairs looking for my brother Dev.

"Devin!" I yelled repeatedly.

"Boy what the fuck is wrong you?" said my father who just entered the stairwell from the 7th floor.

I stopped to taste air, "A dude stole my... my... they got the new bike".

The veins in my dad's forehead swelled as his complexion changed from yellow to burgundy.

"We gonna get it back, you saw who did it?" said Reds.

"I know my fuckin bike," I answered. I followed Reds to our apartment and watched him grab two guns— the black 45 he kept under the kitchen sink and the Mack 11 bound by Adidas shoelaces that strapped around his shoulder like Rambo. We saw Dev in lobby on the way out and told him what happened. He called shotgun and hopped in the front seat.

We piled up in Red's black MPV van and rode around east Baltimore for hours looking for the culprit. Reds always used the MPV for jobs like this because he could fit a few bodies in the back and they had bunch of side compartments that could be used for hiding weapons and such. My father and brother argued about anything, everything, and nothing the entire time from the best jeweler to Magic or Jordan— never ending in resolution.

After awhile I only thought about my mom and wondered if she was okay or if she was going to die. She looked grey that morning and her lips were chapped, just like a dead person.

*

Up Ashland and past Milton Avenue, down boarded up blocks of two-story row homes and through the park by Lake Clifton— still no bike. My dad rode back down and around Jefferson Street and we saw my Uncle Gee in the middle of a dice game.

“Gee come here man” said my dad through the cracked window.

Gee walked over and peeped in the van, “Fuck ya’ll havin a family reunion” he said when he noticed us all.

“Naw” said Dev. “Somebody robbed Lil Dwight for his bike”.

“Oh so basically I’m killin somthin tonight? Okay move over lemme in.” I slid over to the left and made space for my favorite uncle.

Everybody loved Gee. He was equally flashy and explosive. I used to call him the alphabet boy because he drove a CL or a SL made by MB, stayed draped in YSL, GG, or LV and always packed an AK, HK, or a SK while being investigated by the FBI and DEA.

“Dam Lil D, you let somebody rob you?” said Gee. “I hope he wearing a fitted cap cuz Im’a put a nice big hole in that bitch, unless it say Orioles, then I’ll just hit his face up nice.”

“Not on purpose Gee” I said as I slumped in the chair and started to doze off. We rode around for hours and nothing. Dev wanted to get back on his block because it was nearing shift change and we probably weren’t going to find the bike.

My dad drove over the Edrman Avenue Bridge overlooking Bocek Park and made a right up Madison. We cruised past every sub shop, junkie, and dealer on that side of east Baltimore. I cracked the window for fresh air and gazed at block after block of hopelessness.

“Stop the car, I see my bike! Stop!”

My dad pulled over and switched off his headlights. Uncle Gee reached for the handle and pulled it but the child lock was on.

“Reds lemme out come on,” said Gee.

“Hol up Gee lets see what’s out dere.” Reds replied.

My dad went on to say that he didn’t want to kill the kid; he just wanted to make him wish he was dead. Dev sat

quietly, twirling the barrel on his revolver and waiting for his mission. The two kids sat there, gazing at my bike while drinking a forty of OE and sharing a blunt. Uncle Gee looked at me and said, “Damn shorty, you let that Danny Glover lookin ass nigga take your bike? Fuck that Reds I’m about kill Danny Glover, open the door!”

“Yo wait. Let Dev go around the block and get the bike back, we gonna snatch them up after that. Lil Dwight you stay in the car and take notes young boy.”

Dev snuck around the block assassin like and kneeled on the corner. They didn’t spot him in his hood camo— a black Barkley tee and black jeans. The two kids laughed and joked probably about me before the darker Danny Glover looking kid took a bullet in his left shin. I saw his milky white bone rip through the back of his calf. He screamed as Dev grabbed the other kid by his neck before he had a chance to run and placed the hot barrel in his mouth, torching his lip in the process— you could smell his flesh cook.

“Told you Gee my son is nice as shit, these niggas out here can’t fuck with shorty,” screamed my dad as he laughed and exited the car. Gee and I hopped out behind him. Gee asked which one took the bike and I pointed to the light skinned kid that Dev had jacked up. The other laid there bleeding, holding his shin. My dad pulled his dick out and pissed on him.

“We aint takin you for this ride you lil bitch, you lucky,” said Reds as he aimed his urine toward the kids open wound.

Gee told Dev to throw the other kid in the van and take my bike home so that he can get back to his strip. Dev tossed him in, gave me a hug, said that he loved me, and that we can go out for Red Lobster tomorrow before riding off on my bike. Everyone rode my bike except me.

*

We hopped in the van and headed down Orleans Street.

The kid was sweating to death before Gee even laid a hand on him.

“I swear to JESUS I ain’t touch your peoples bike Gee, please lord don’t kill me, pleaseeeee” cried the light skinned kid in the back seat. I wasn’t 100% sure if he was the one who stole my bike, but that was my bike— red with red piping, #7 on the side.

My dad cut on “Life’s a Bitch and then you die” by Nas and cranked it on the highest level. The kid heard the music and cried louder. “Shut the fuck up bitch!” yelled Gee as he slipped off one of his brown Super Timbs, just like the one’s Pac wore in Juice. “Fuck you gonna make him suck you toe”, my dad said, as we turned up RT 40 east. Gee laughed and gave me his pistol. “Point this at him Lil and if he look at you, buck’em,” he said. I wrapped my preteen finger around the steel trigger.

“Havin a gun at pointed at your face don’t feel too good huh?” I said with a small chuckle. Gee took the hard front of the boot and started beating screams out of the kids face. He beat’em unconscious to conscious to unconscious again— after ten minutes of constant blows the kid had too much blood in his mouth to yell. His white tee was maroon now, a little darker than his blue jeans that were now maroon as well.

I saw a sign that said Harford County. My dad kept going another twenty minutes or so until we reached a playground. He pulled over and Gee dragged the body out of the car. Gee

then striped the kid ass-naked and slammed his body like a domino. He asked for the pistol, but my dad intercepted.

“No Gee let him live. He ain’t stealing no more, this is my message to people who steal from my son.”

“A soft message, you gettin soft Reds,” replied Gee as we walked over to the van and rode home. I thought about talking to my mom about her snorting on the trip back. She probably had a good reason. She is my mother. I do care— I guess.

*

They dropped me off in front of our building and continued up Fayette Street. I stripped down to my underwear and threw the bloody clothes into the dumpster behind my building. No one said anything about me walking through the lobby in my boxers because they figured that I had probably just done something foul. I saw Deion sleeping in the stairwell as I walked up— a big patch on the wall was over his head; he must have eaten a gallon of lead paint chips. I picked him up and carried him to our place.

My mom dressed in an electric blue mini skirt walked right past us and hopped on the elevator as we entered the apartment around 1:30 am— she didn’t even look at us. I guess she was late for her party. My pride wouldn’t let me call her name out. I tucked Deion in and washed off the coke plate she had on the table. Dev left my bike in the living room.

I grabbed a rag and started wiping it down— fuck everything else; I’m a 12 o’clock boy. Dev lost his mom, and he’s okay so I’ll be okay when I lose mine. ▢

contributors

P O E T R Y

JOHN HARPER went to MFA poetry school, and some of his poems have been published by literary journals like *Diagram*, *Mid-American Poetry Review*, *Cutbank*, *Spinning Jenny* and *Zoland Poetry*. The main point is he's in Reading, PA, finally, finally growing up, wishing less and less if it doesn't have much to do with what's present.

BRIAN D. MORRISON is an Instructor of English at the University of Alabama, where he earned his MFA in poetry in 2010. He is also a former administrator/editor of *Slash Pine Press* and a former intern of *Mid-American Review*. Some recent publications include *Verse Daily*, *Copper Nickel*, and *Paper Nautilus*. Kites are the neatest things.

ANNE WHITEHOUSE is a poet and fiction writer living in New York City. She is the author of several poetry collections: *The Surveyor's Hand*, *Blessings and Curses*, *Bear in Mind*, *One Sunday Morning*, and *The Refrain*. Her novel, *Fall Love*, is available as a free ebook through Feedbooks and Smashwords and is currently being translated into Spanish. Her short stories were recently published in *Being Human: Call of the Wild*. www.annewhitehouse.com.

DESMOND KON ZHICHENG-MINGDÉ is the author of *I Didn't Know Mani Was A Conceptualist*, forthcoming in 2013. He has also edited more than ten books and co-produced three audio books, several pro bono for non-profit organizations. Trained in publishing at Stanford, with a theology masters (world religions) from Harvard and fine arts masters (creative writing) from Notre Dame, he is the recipient of the PEN American Center Shorts Prize, Swale Life Poetry Prize, Cyclamens & Swords Poetry Prize, Stepping Stones Nigeria Poetry Prize, and Little Red Tree Publishing Poetry Prize, among other awards. Desmond is an interdisciplinary artist, also working in clay. His commemorative pieces are housed in museums and private collections in India, the Netherlands, the UK and the US.

contributors

A R T

OTHA DAVIS III While music has played the driving force in his business career, Otha “Vakseen” Davis III’s passion for the arts has served as his key to sanity in the fast paced entertainment industry. Drawing inspiration from women, emotions, music and the African American experience, his mixed medium acrylic, oil and water color paintings on canvas have been sold to collectors and art enthusiasts throughout Los Angeles and the Southeast region of the U.S. While he’s only been on the art scene since January 2012, Otha has had a month and a half solo exhibition at the Emerging Art Scene Gallery in Atlanta; and showcased his art at Los Angeles’ Noho Art Gallery, Norbertellen Gallery, Stay Gallery, Larabee Sound Studios, The Key Club, Media Temple Studios, The Alexandria Hotel, M. Bird Salon and The Holding Co. Studios, amongst others. His art has also been featured in over 12 literary art magazines.

SARAH KATHARINA KAY 1985 in Koblenz (Germany), studied Comparative Religion and Modern History in Germany and Britain. Since autumn 2012 she’s a PhD candidate at King’s College’s War Studies Department in London. Her poetry, essays, and artwork have appeared in literary magazines, journals and anthologies in the United Kingdom, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Canada, New Zealand and the United States. Sarah edits the bilingual magazine *PostPoetry*, A Literary Magazine and lives in Camden Town in London.

D E S I G N

MARIA SURAWSKA is a graphic designer and photographer who wears glasses and has brown hair. She lives with a little white cat in Chicago, IL.

contributors

C R E A T I V E N O N F I C T I O N

NICHOLAS GRIDER received a dual MFA in writing and art from CalArts and his work has been published in or is forthcoming from *Conjunctions*, *Caktetrain*, *Drunken Boat*, *Hobart*, and many other publications. He also edits the small literary and art magazines Public Access and Public Display at <http://publicaccessjournal.wordpress.com>.

NICHOLAS HATHAWAY attends Palm Harbor University High School, where he is Editor-in-Chief of his school's literary magazine, *The Tempest*. Raised in Florida, he was encouraged to read mainly by his mother who used to pad his vocab lists in elementary school. His work has been recognized by the Alliance for Young Artists and Writers with a Gold Key award.

D. WATKINS is an author, filmmaker and native Baltimorean who graduated with honors from Johns Hopkins University. He has participated in writing workshops in multiple countries throughout the Americas, Europe and Africa. Watkins teaches at a number of colleges in Baltimore and conducts workshops on social justice at the Baltimore Freedom School. Watkins also appears as a guest host monthly on FOXO WOLB1010 AM.

contributors

F I C T I O N

WILLIAM E BURLESON'S writing career has drifted in many different directions, from columnist to academia. In fiction, his short stories have appeared in several literary magazines, most recently *Parable Press*. Burleson is now querying agents for his first novel, *Venice Café*, a story about a skid-row district in 1979. His one-act, *Manfinders.com*, was a past winner of the Metropolitan State University play writing contest. In non-fiction, Burleson is the author of *Bi America* (Haworth Press, 2005). He resides in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where he is a member of the Loft Literary Center and works in the field of communications. For more, visit www.williamburleson.com

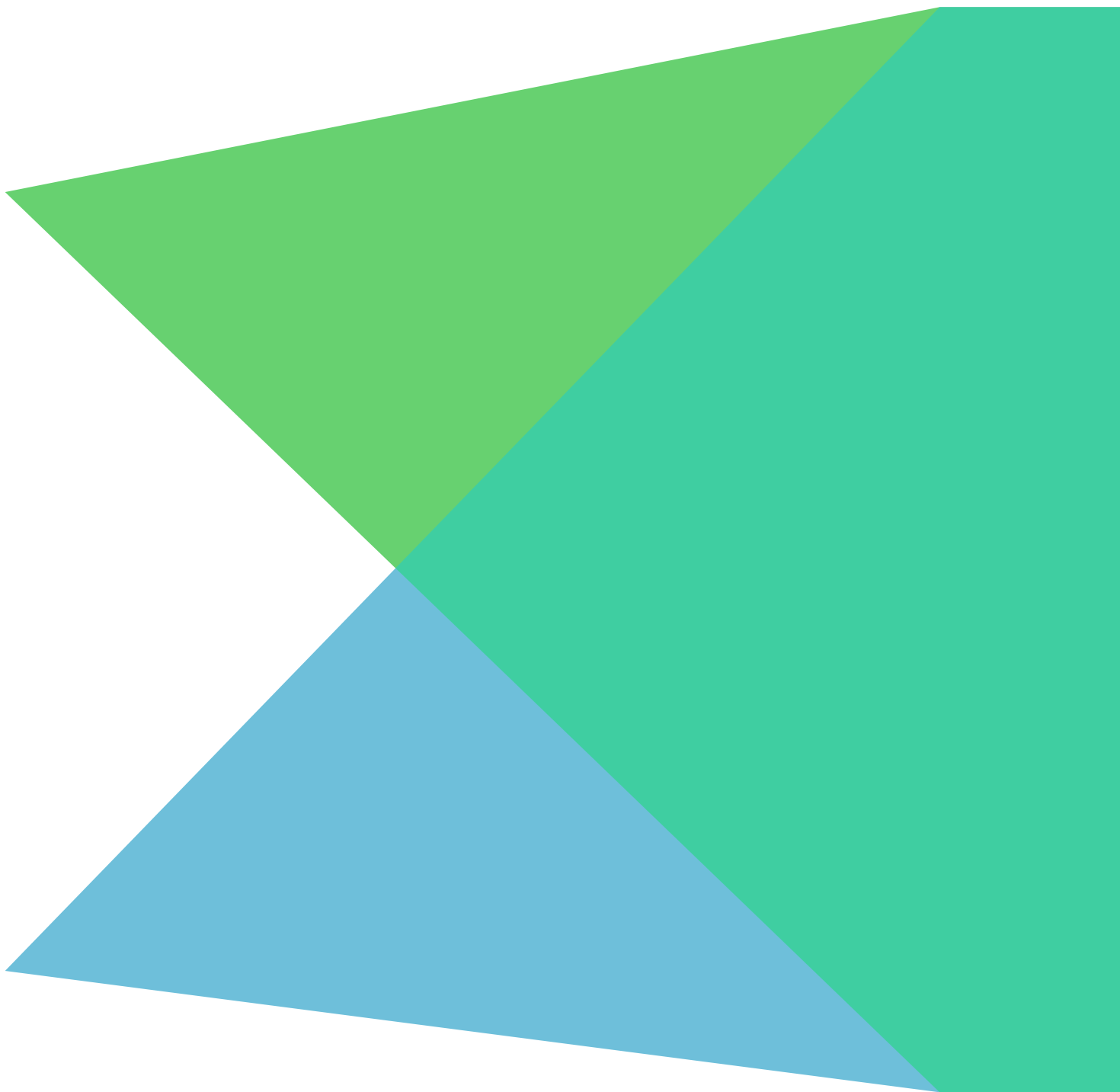
DON KUNZ taught literature, creative writing, and film studies at the University of Rhode Island for 36 years. His essays, poems, and short stories have appeared in over sixty literary journals. Don has retired to Bend, Oregon, where he writes fiction and poetry, volunteers, studies Spanish, and is learning to play the Native American Flute.

MAGHAN LUSK is a graduate of the MFA Creative Writing program at Queens University of Charlotte. She has published fiction and poetry in *Glossolalia* and *Quick Lucks* magazines, among others. She lives in Chicago.

CHRISTOPHER CHILTON lives in Brooklyn and teaches high school English in Queens, New York.

© *n i c h e* | 2 0 1 3
i s s u e n ° 3

ALL RIGHTS REMAIN WITH THE ARTISTS. NO PORTION OF THE MAGAZINE OR
DESIGN CAN BE REPRODUCED OR TRANSMITTED WITHOUT WRITTEN PERMISSION
FROM THE EDITORS OR INDIVIDUAL ARTISTS.



Niche