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NOTE: Some authors put entire books on their sites, so I figure 72 pages total from 19 books aren’t over the top… But remember, there’s more where they come from!

From THE WEIRDEST IS THE SPHERE (“mathpoems”, Seven Woods Press)

A FACTOR OF TWO (dream, 1977)

For some reason I am bouncing a ball against the floor.

I notice that it seems to be getting bigger.

At first I’m not sure; then I realize it’s true: each time it bounces, it doubles in size.

I try this with other balls. I watch as our mischievous little superball turns into a volley ball. I throw a tennis ball into a field and watch with horror as it bounces into the distance but doesn’t diminish in size. I turn away, glad to know that it will eventually disappear over the horizon and I will not have to see the monster it becomes.

I roll up a slip of paper and bounce it. Sure enough, when I unroll it, it is twice as large.

I ask questions: if I pound my fist upon the table, will my arm become twice as long

or only my hand?

If I stamp my foot will it turn into a flapper?

If I bang my head against the wall, will I write twice as many poems?

Will moonlight from now on be brighter than sunlight?

Will we all drown in the next splashing rain?

I experiment with many balls, trying to determine the exact point in time when the doubling

occurs. As far as I can tell, it is at the point of contact with the floor. I resolve to make a slow

motion movie of the process.

After a while it seems almost obvious. Why, there are lots of laws of nature involving

multiplication by two. For instance, the diameter of a circle is twice the radius, your reflection in the mirror is twice as far from you as the mirror, and in order to travel any distance you must first travel half that distance.

But Omigod, the kids! They mustn’t jump.

Elle is running in one direction, Arin in another. “Jeff!” I scream, “you watch Elle, I’ll

watch Arin. Believe me, it’s really true. If they jump, they’ll double in size. Maybe even

in age. I don’t *think* it happens only when I do it.”

“No it doesn’t’, says Jeff, grinning proudly. ‘Look!’ He shows me a check with as many crease

marks as a road map and it’s as large as a page from a book. Did the amount also double? I

wonder.

I find Elle in her room. For a minute, there, I think I’m too late but then I realize she

has only put on dress-up clothes and a wig. But I discover another child for whom it is too late; his curly baby head soars above mine.

Now, don’t *you* bounce, I caution myself. When you run make sure you put one foot

down before lifting the other one up. Make sure there’s always some part of you touching the ground. Don’t lose contact with Earth for a second. In fact, walk slowly so

God doesn’t *think* you bounced.

Of course, if that should happen I can always tell Jeff to make it happen to him too.

But then we’ll both have to make sure to jump the same number of times, otherwise we’ll differ by a factor of two.

And so I casually toss another ball into the field and watch it bounce away ad infinitum,

like the reflections in two opposing mirrors.

DIARY EXCERPT, AGE 15

You know, falling in love is something like solving a polynomial equation. Everybody has his or her own polynomial and the roots of that polynomial correspond to the loves that person has. Everyone has only a finite number of loves. Some people have polynomials with negative roots, that’s when the loves live in different countries or died in childhood or something like that. Some people have polynomials with imaginary roots, that’s when the loves are born on other planets or existed billions of years ago or billions of years from now or are amoebas or insects. And there are some people, like me, who have just plain linear polynomials. These people have just one love. Or perhaps I’m one of those people who have constant polynomials. Our equations have no solutions, we have no roots, we belong nowhere, we have no one.

THIS HOUSE

Topologically, this house stands unchanged throughout the centuries.

Its walls divide it into five rooms, including the bathroom whose roll, in dreams,

becomes a scroll.

All of the rooms can be seen from the hallway.

Topologically, this house will never change.

New rooms and floors might be added but there must always be passageways.

Topologically, except the opening and shutting of doors, this house will stand forever.

Nonetheless, much can be done with this house.

It can be twisted so the front and back doors meet face to face, and turned so one sees

the front yard through the back window.

It can be whirled upside-down so the attic and cellar exchange places, or sucked inside

out so the sky fills the parlor.

The stairs can be stretched like an accordion, shrinking the attic to a star, the cellar to

a stone.

The hallway can be drawn into a snake, mouseholes into museums, wires into tunnels.

Corners can be smoothed out. Conversely, one could pull corners out of satin sheets.

Furthermore, this house can be enlarged to accommodate all ancestors and all posterity.

And this house can be mapped onto the dark side of the moon.

Much can be done with this house.

But topologically, except for the opening and shutting of doors, this house is here to stay.

From “THESE COVERS TO CRAWL UNDER” (M.A.F. Press)

THE PLIGHT OF THE SOLIPSIST

Every time she thinks of an object

That object appears in the room.

It is only a matter of seconds

Before the room resembles a junkyard.

It is only a matter of minutes

Before there is no space left for her.

THE SOLIPSIST NIGHT-WAKES

It must have been just like this long long ago

this sudden consciousness, sharpening outlines, black turning grey.

Of course there were no walls then

no furniture

but something blocked my view.

No air, no space, but something I stared into.

No rooms, no corridors, but something I roamed.

Maybe the reason I created it all

these walls, these corridors, this space, this night

maybe the reason I made it was this, just for this:

to have these covers to crawl under.

THE SOLIPSIST GETS TIRED OF IT ALL

Okay, I’ve had it – scoot.

Really?

Really.

Suddenly or gradually?

Suddenly.

As suddenly as the street light 6:30 AM when you were a kid?

Well, maybe not *that* suddenly.

THE INITIAL FALL OF THE SOLIPSIST

When more and more Oriental picture rugs turn up symmetric

when the animals run into each other or out of each other

when you leave the store and walk to a forest at the edge of town and that’s symmetric too

birds dancing towards or away from flowers axes

deer prancing headless but impaled on eight legs

when the next time you look, even in town, the cars are headed toward collision, the people

toward embrace

when the next time you turn around it’s the same in back as in front

when in fact it’s all radially symmetric

and you are the point.

THE THIRD FALL OF THE SOLIPSIST

When right angles

go out of style.

When corners slouch acute as a womb

or swoop obtuse as a field.

When, as you cross a room

the ceiling turns into

first a wall

then the floor.

When trees, poles, and T-squares

dance vaudeville.

When you swing on a swing

and try to land.

from THE TEMPER TANTRUM BOOK (WordWorker)

NOT MAD – ANGRY

Courtesy The New American Webster handy College Dictionary, and

remembering Ms. Conover, my sixth grade English teacher, who wouldn’t let

us say ain’t, okay, or mad

Not irrational

Just wrathful

Not disorderly

Just sore

Not ill-advised

Just inflamed

Not rabid

Just tempestuous

Not irresponsible

Just extremely resentful

Not mentally deranged

Just strongly displeased

No, not at all irrational, disorderly, ill-advised, rabid, irresponsible, or mentally deranged

Just a bit wrathful, a trifle sore, a little inflamed, slightly tempestuous, somewhat extremely

resentful, and sort of strongly displeased

SOMEBODY ELSE’S TEMPER TANTRUM

5:30 AM and down the street goes calling some poor tortured soul.

“You whore-mongers! You hypocrites!”

His voice bellows down the morning-night, breaking the air, breaking the sea.

And inside these blankets I smugly draw in my bones:

I never do it that bad. At least I’m not that bad.

WHY THE MASSES USE THE DOUBLE NEGATIVE

Because we mean it doubly negative.

Because when we say don’t give me none of that crap, we mean both the don’t and

the none.

We’re afraid if we say give me none of that crap, they’ll hear only the give me and not

the none of.

We’re afraid if we say don’t give me that crap, we’re afraid by the time we get to that

crap, they’ll have forgotten about the don’t.

So we say no twice.

Just in case they missed it the first time.

Just in case they missed it the second time.

Watch out or we’ll run it a third time.

TEMPER TANTRA

(1)

And God said let there be sound.

(2)

I translate my temper tantrums into poems

But they lose something in translation.

(3)

Well what choice

does the storm

have

but to be-

come the calm?

from SHE WAS BORN, SHE DIED (Centering Corp.)

KERIN YOU DESERVE

Kerin you deserve

at least you deserve

some of the things.

You gave no birth cry

so I gave you mine.

“Baby, baby,” I gave you.

“Oh, baby, baby.”

And “It’s a girl.

I gave you “It’s a girl.”

No one else gave it to you

since they all noticed you were blue.

So I gave it to you twice.

“It’s a girl. It’s a girl.”

Kerin you deserve

all of the things

Not only “Baby, baby”

and “it’s a girl”

but “I’m soooo happy.”  
Kerin you deserve

“I’m soooo happy”  
but by the time I got to

“I’m soooo happy”

I also had noticed you were blue.

So Kerin I couldn’t

give you all

but Kerin you deserve

at least you deserve

some.

INTENSIVE CARE NURSERY #2

I didn’t forget to run my fingers along her pug nose and talk to her in my lingo and call

her Arin’s nickname by mistake and give her Elle’s message which was Come

home, little sister.

I didn’t forget to take pictures of her and note the color of her eyes.

I didn’t forget to cry in front of her and beg her to get better.

But I forgot to sing her a lullaby.

And I forgot to ask if it was all right to kiss her

and if it could be arranged so I could hold her

and how much time we had left.

And I forgot to take a close look at her thumbs

to see if they’re fat and funny, like mine.

And I forgot – oh God, I forgot

to explain to her that it was my body that betrayed her

not me.

THAT YEAR

No longer do I take it for granted, that the sun will rise tomorrow morning

or sink tomorrow night.

No longer do I expect the moon to ripen every twenty-eight days.

No longer do I count on the stars to obey the laws of astronomy.

I used to think anything carrying a probability of over 50%

would happen. Now I know it has to be 99%.

I used to think I wasn’t one of those people who need tragedies to help her mature.

Now I know maturity is not the purpose of tragedies.

Now I know there are mistakes that can’t be learned from.

Now I know there are nightmares that can’t be turned into poems.

It’s a strange world I move in

where courses listed in the catalogue don’t run

where a slight rise in blood pressure means danger

where maybe means no

where probably means definitely not

where late means never

but where pregnant doesn’t mean expecting.

I inhabit a world I’m getting used to

where things insist on happening in threes

where they refuse to happen in twos or fours

where a siren down the block always gets louder

where all phone calls are from the hospital

where the bell tolls for me.

And the sun… as for the sun…

well, the only reason I feel pretty confident the sun will rise tomorrow morning

is I don’t care whether the sun rises tomorrow morning.

FUNERAL POEM #7

In the car on the way back Elle, poor daughter, bereaved older sister

voices concern that now, too late, Kerin is crying

Scratching the wood, clawing the dirt

Too late calling, too late crying,

Let me out! Let me out!

I’m not really dead. I’m not really dead.

Elle, I’m sorry, there’s truth to your concern.

Only it’s I who, too late, am crying

too late clawing, too late scratching

crying, screaming, too late calling

Let me in. Let me in.

I’m not really alive. I’m not really alive.

“THE RECENT POPULAR INTEREST IN THANATOLOGY”

They have discovered

a new stage of grief.

Midway between bargaining and depression

(actually closer to depression)

sort of a cross between denial and acceptance

they have discovered:

“a feeling of tightness in the throat”

“need to sighing”

“an empty feeling in the abdomen”

“lack of muscular power”

“sensations of somatic distress occurring in waves lasting from 20 minutes to an hour”

and “an intense subjective distress described as tension or mental pain.”

In addition, they have discovered:

“digestive symptoms”

“feelings of increased emotional distance form other people”

and “pre-occupation with images of the deceased”.

Indeed, they have discovered

a number of miscellaneous

symptoms of grief, not the least of which is

“crying”.

They have wised up.

They’re really quite smart.

They have discovered

that grieving people

are sad.

TRYING TO CONCEIVE

Whaddaya mean, Mother Nature? Nature’s no mother.

If nature were a mother, women would ovulate once a day not once a month and umbilical cords would be rigid pipes not flexible ropes that can twist and turn and do God-knows-what to the baby. And placentas wouldn’t have all those veins and be so complicated. And it would be impossible for embryos to implant anywhere but the uterus. And women wouldn’t have morning sickness when their babies were doing just fine and feel top o’ the morning when their babies were suffocating.

And if Nature were a mother it wouldn’t be survival of the fittest, it would be survival of the sweetest.

So whaddaya mean, Mother Nature, Nature’s no mother. If nature were a mother, there would be no “accidents of Nature”. If Nature were a mother, nature would be perfect.

ACCEPTANCE STANZAS

(1)

I’ve accepted.

It’s not a dream.

It’s not a thought.

It’s not a joke.

It happened.

WHAT happened?

I can’t say it.

(2)

I’ve accepted.

That’s supposed to be good, psychologically.

I’ve accepted.

I won’t be getting a phone call from the hospital saying it was all a mistake.

I won’t wake up in the middle of tonight and find my big belly intact, the light of my life

still inside, flashing.

We are not waiting in terror, waiting in hope, we already know.

I liked it better when I didn’t accept it.

from THE SITTING-DOWN HUG (-- the first in the “well spouse poetry trilogy” -- The Liberal Press)

THE DIAGNOSIS

It’s like those college physics lab experiments

where there’s no adventure

you know what’ll happen

or those multiple choice tests

where they’re all correct

but one is more correct

or when, to motivate, the teacher begins What Is Beauty?

and there are many answers

but he’s got a specific one in mind.

In this square room

the sound of an ocean

there are many answers

one is the one

and we already know what it is.

HOMEOPATHY HELPS HIM DENY

1978 – 1983

Blurred vision

tingly fingertips

the illness moves downward

into the earth.

Like cures like.

The malady is the cure.

It only *seems*

to be getting worse.

There are only symptoms.

No diseases.

Certainly no diseases

with names.

BALLAD WITH NO COMMENT

Never love an unhappy man.

He’ll milk you for all that he can.

He’ll blame it on you

and the children, too.

O, never love an unhappy man.

Yeah, never love an unhappy man.

‘Slike burying’ your head in the san’.

He’s never in the mood

for Chinese food

surely not Moo Goo Gai Pan.

O, never love an unhappy man.

All he wants is wheatgerm and bran.

You’ll be runnin’ the juicer

‘til the grey goose is gooser

and the gander’s run off with the gan’.

O, never love an unhappy man.

He’ll shorten your poor life span.

He’ll have ya tryin’

‘til you’re old and dyin’.

Yep, it all goes along with his plan.

“O, why so pale and wan?

Fond lover,” you’re an unhappy man.

Put some chic in your cheek

and some gin in your chin

and some honey in your hiney and your han’.

Now, I’m not one for taboos.

You can love whomever you choose.

Your sister, your brother, your father, your mother.

You can be a bigamist, trigamist, quigamist.

Goergy, Porgy, have an orgy.

But there is one thing that I would ban.

Yeah, I’ll put you in the can

and I’ll try you in the pan

and I’ll wrap you in Saran

run you over with the van

stick your fingers in the fan

no matter if you live in San

Fran—

or Milan

or Kashan

or Afgan—

istan

or in any nook and cran’

in all the lan’

no matter if his name is Dan

stan

or Charlie Chan

or Paul Gauguin

or Claude Daquin

or Duran

Duran

you’d better understand

there’s nothing more blan

since time began

‘fore your great great gran’

than

an

unhappy man.

THE REVOLT OF THE OBJECTS

Today the hot water faucet won’t turn off.

The Maytag repairman has been roused from hibernation.

And the second-floor toilet is turned inside out.

I guess disability is contagious.

Or maybe our machines just know what suckers we are.

Or else they’re related to his parents’ machines.

In particular, the trike is a distant cousin of that red Lancer.

Yup, wheelchair can get flats.

And so can the spares.

Also, wheelchairs can get mere suspicious inner rumblings.

And they do.

They sure do.

SOCIAL WORKER

She: I Understand.

Me: No you don’t. If you did you’d cry. Or scream. Or do something.

She: Why don’t *you* cry, scream, or do something.

Me: I don’t understand, either.

IN THE DAY

I stare at his head

and the turning wheels.

I wonder what they’re turning

envelope to address

book to order

jacket across the room

button his shirt

massage his neck

bananas, carrot juice, figs.

I wish he didn’t have a head.

I wish he had a head without wheels.

I wish he had wheels that didn’t turn.

Those wheels make me nervous.

I wonder what they’re turning.

I wonder what they’re twisting.

I don’t want him to think.

I don’t want him to want.

I stare at his head

and am afraid.

THE AFTERMATH OF THE LYING-DOWN HUG

is neither lying-down

sitting-down

nor standing up

its heart is in my stomach

and beats twice my beat

on the ultrasound it’s very active

we’ve seen its profile

down to the pug nose

yes, we planned it

yes, we want it

and we’re constantly giving it

the tumbling-around hug.

THE LABOR SUPPORT

He needed food.

He needed drink.

He needed rest.

And he tried the baby’s oxygen.

And just outside the big room

where they bustled about painting

my belly yellow, and wrapping everything

in sea-green

and giving me a drink equally green

and a mask positively chartreuse

and assuring me the heartbeat was back up

just outside, on the way to the bathroom

he fainted off the trike.

I awoke with dreams

of saying I can’t.

THE MOMENT

I stopped sleeping the moment I heard him.

He stopped crying the moment he heard me.

And he was seven pounds even

or rather seven pounds odd

and fair without being pale.

And he was the first to sport a big nose

the first to nurse right away

and the first to whom I whispered

no less than what I wished.

And he had the Devin look

the Devin smell

and a binder held me together.

And I wouldn’t have changed time

or place

with anybody, ever

and I was so glad

there wasn’t nothing.

And I could.

I GET SICK

“He gets sick, you nurse him. You get sick, he gets sick…” spoken at one of the

early (second wave) feminist conferences

I toss and turn – they think I’m asleep.

I sniffle and cough – they know I’m up.

I pour myself a drink – they think I’m better.

I get sick – he’s already sick.

I don’t get sick – he’s already sick.

He was sick first.

He’ll be sick last.

Can’t he leave the middle

to me?

from EPSILON COUNTRY (the second in the “well spouse poetry trilogy” -- Center for Thanatology Research)

BAD EVENING

He shakes, I rattle, the whole house rolls.

If the phone rings we tremble. If it doesn’t we brood.

In a thin voice “Mar? Couldja pull me back up a little?”

Then “Couldja give me four niacin?”  
Next “Couldja give me six niacin”  
Finally “This new niacin doesn’t give a flush. Tomorrow could we call that company in Florida and order ten bottle of the old niacin?’  
And tomorrow “Didja use Sprint?”

Two old people, helpless, alone.

Only something’s wrong.

We’re not old.

PROGRESSIVE

He can still push buttons

Still pull levers

can stretch

shrink

cross his legs

with his hands.

He can still use a soup spoon

aa thick-handled knife

And a fork

with sharp prongs

and a mug

with a straw.

In the family bed

he can still be tickled

still be wriggled

still be giggled.

He can still write epsilons and deltas

but big

and still sign checks

different each time.

He can still tell tasteless jokes

and be told tasteless jokes.

And can still ride up elevators

to take in the view.

DREAM THAT 14 ANGELS ARE ASSURING ME IT’S OKAY TO SLEEP

Yes, they whisper. Yes, they stroke.

Not only is your baby not crying

And not only is your nine-year-old not nightmare-ing

But your husband is not spasming.

Moreover, he’s at least five minutes away from a jar

And ten minutes away from a bedpan.

“Mar,” he won’t call, “couldja take the top blanket off my chest?”  
“Mar” – not for half an hour – “couldja put the bottom blanket on my feet?”

“Mar” – another hour, for sure – “couldja move my right leg back and my left leg forward.”

Furthermore, “Mar” – dawn, earliest --   
is that the doorbell?”

Sleep, they hum.

Sleep, they chant.

At your own risk

Sleep.

THE CITIZEN

I spend so much life

in Epsilon Country.

So-called accessibles

those L-shaped vestibules

each arm less wide, less long

than the new trike.

And then inside, the zigzag, the maze.

Space space everywhere, but not an inch to enter.

And then transfer time, the wedge shape

between his upper arm and his chest.

And then, of course, the bathroom.

Splatted against its walls, pressed into its corners

squirming, squinting, towering, adjusting

like Alice in Wonderland wearing her house.

And, later, the toilet seat

forced, my hand, into the part-elliptic part-spherical totally-non-Euclidean

steamy mini-triangle

between it and his behind.

Yes, Epsilon is my land. Epsilon is my sea.

Epsilon-blood flows in my veins.

I am a boundary. I am an edge.

I am Epsilon Woman. I know epsilon well.

THE MISFORTUNE COOKIE

Help! I’m being held prisoner at 2203 Spruce Street.

Help! I’m being beaten by a jar

raped by a bedpan.

Help! I’m a love slave.

Help! I’m a hate slave.

It’s 3:00 Am and I’m chained to the bed

and from the typewriter.

I mean it, help.

If you’re reading this (and you are), you actually can help.

One person, one family

Cannot do this alone.

Remember my address

(Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19103)

and help.

Seriously: Help.

LOVE POEM

You are my you.

I need a you.

Someone to say

yoo-hoo to.

Someone to sit with

when the day is through.

Could I be a me

without a you?

There are plenty of he’s

plenty of she’s

and plenty of bits

of it’s like nits.

But only one you.

That will do.

A big old shoe.

And I don’t need two.

You are my you.

mein Sie und mein du.

What will I do

without a you?

MY DISABILITY

If he can have chronic progressive M.S., I can have chronic progressive tantrums.

If he can have incurable M.S., I can have incurable tantrums.

At least I can eat cooked food.

At least I can wear long sleeves.

At least I can go outside in the summer.

At least I can last the night.

At least I have remissions.

Or maybe I don’t.

At least I don’t need home health aides.

Or maybe I do.

A MAGICIAN IN THE FAMILY

If one rabbit can become two

Ii three rabbits can become a hat

if a penny can become a quarter

if milk poured from a pitcher doesn’t fall

if the flipper over card just happens to be the one you were thinking of

if six feet of rainbow can emerge from his mouth

then maybe his dad can up and stand up

or seem to.

That would be okay, too

if he just seemed to.

NIGHT RESPIRATOR (“FOR HOME USE”)

Every night when we turn it on it at first doesn’t want to.

All four of its lights let out a wail, a long wail, and it won’t be placated, not that easily.

We pet it but it starts up again and yet again.

And then when it gives up that red wailing, it tries gagging

grumbling, or it pulls a put-upon

it pouts, it trudges, it makes quite obvious that particular dry rhythm.

And so our dropping off is full of this three-way hard to place sound

not metal, not wood, not paper, not rubber

and not clogged, not squeezed, not resting, not even undulating.

But it is, in the end, a breathing, the breathing of one of us

or maybe the breathing of a mother or grandmother

yes, maybe a womb or at least a train ride.

And so the sleep it finally allows us is the best ever, the deepest, the most natural.

And so we are buoyed, wafted, sustained.

We haven’t slept like this since we were children.

Yes, it gives us the sleep we are supposed to have

whether it wants to or not.

From COUNTING TO ZERO: POEMS ON

REPEATED MISCARRIAGE (Center for Thanatology Research)

WOMEN WHO HAVE LOST BABIES

Women who have lost babies are not crazy.

We do not ride the town like Paul Revere.

Out hair does not flame like Lady Godiva’s.

Women who have lost babies are not crazy.

We are only said, very very sad.

Only in our dreams do we count to infinity by one-halves.

Only in our nightmares do we count, on our thumbs, from minus-infinity to plus-infinity

by epsilons.

And in our houses we might rock empty cradles but down the streets we do not push

empty carriages.

Into our bathtubs and mattresses we might drip milk but into the grass we drip only

tears.

We are forest creatures but not hungers.

We are animals but not killers.

In fact, women who have lost babies are mothers.

And we do steal glances into other carriages

and we do avoid or court other babies.

But women who have lost babies are not thieves.

We are not out to steal your child.

LITTLE THINGS

“Marion always loved little things.”

Dolly Dimples

toy teacups

half-inch houses of oaktag and scotch tape

miniature playing card from bubblegum machines

sparrows

ladybugs

Mexican jumping beans

(the real kind, brown and round

or the pretend kind, shaped like Good-and-Plenty’s)

goldenrod

lily of the valley

pieces of dried leaves

gold safety pins

dimes

tie-tacks

baby-dress buttons

air-mail stamps

pillboxes

pinky nails bitten down

and, later, elite type

the figures on Obadah rugs

mathematical proofs with lots of epsilons and deltas

and human being, in their first clinging weeks.

“Little things mean a lot”

to other little things.

JANUARY 1984

So tired am I that I want there to be just one of everything. One God. One love. One mind. One body. One sonata, one note in that sonata, one vibration in that note. One instant of time, one point of space. “Why not nothing?” asks Sartre. If not nothing, why not at least only one?

EXISTENTIAL JOY TURNED EXISTENTIAL DISGUST

Why not nothing? asks the sky.

But the stars persist

piercing

picking

The Night of a Thousand Cuts.

Why not nothing? asks the wind.

But the vacuums it blows

are quickly filled

not to mention what happens behind its back.

Why not nothing? asks the ceiling.

But the overhead light clings

like a wart

like a child

like the last thick drop.

Why not nothing? asks the floor.

But the rug presses hard.

It spares no square.

“More stones, more stones,”

gasps the floor.

Why not nothing? Asks the mirror.

But half the world smashes in.

Like a mouth it swallows.

Like a throat it gags.

Like a stomach it sickens and churns.

Why not nothing? asks the iridescent digital clock.

But the numbers keep coming

higher and higher

and they even have the nerve

to become morning.

Why not nothing? asks the teenager

and the mirror quietly shrugs.

But the pimples rape them both

worse that magician’s knives

waorse than the stars to the sky.

Why not the trivial solution? Asks the heat equation.

Because the trivial solution is too cold.

If not mu equals zero, why not at least mu-prime equals zero?

Yeah, why can’t mu stay put?

Why not nothing? asked the womb.

It was just a little thing

such a little thing

but that was too much, too.

Why not nothing? asks the bathroom.

Why can’t white stay white?

Why not nothing? asks the writer.

What’s to write? It drips, that’s all.

It all just drips, sips and sops.

Why not just write nothing?

Why not nothing? you ask.

It’ll tell you.

Because nothing drips, too.

4:00 AM

All is unmoving

except the woman’s two eyes

which have suddenly opened

first upon the corner

then upon the edge.

“The properties of an object are determined

“by the other matter in the universe.”

But no other matter in this vast dark

has anything to do with these quiet eyes.

You can tell by the way they have opened

that the woman already remembers.

It has been almost two weeks

and she is home now

but it is still like this

Still like this.

THE LAST AMENDMENT

“The unlucky constitute an oppressed class” – diary excerpt

It should be the law of the land

that “acts of God”

be compensated for by acts of human beings.

In particular, the government.

I’m not talking mere socialism –

“To each according to her needs” –

or affirmative action –

“The rich get poorer, the poor get richer.”

I’m talking Robin Hood, I’m talking details.

For a start, anyone newly sick, bereaved, or unlucky in love should immediately be

offered, on a gold platter

a new hat.

This should be followed by a free dinner for two (or one) at Le Bec Fin followed, next evening, by same at Thai Royal Barge.

That’s right -- no sick, bereaved, or unlucky should even have to cook a meal, wash a shirt, submit a poem, choose between the best and the cheapest, or get up in the morning.

And the sick, bereaved, and unlucky should, each separately, every June, be honored

At a testimonial dinner.

And then, at the end, when it becomes all too obvious that none of these goodies helps

it should be the law of the land

that they keep trying.

THE FIVE STAGES

Denial makes me guilty.

Anger makes me mad.

Bargaining makes me nervous.

Depression makes me sad.

Acceptance makes me depressed.

I feel like a jerk.

I keep trying them all

And none of them work.

From CROSSING THE EQUAL SIGN (poetry about the experience of math -- Plain View Press)

Points were blinking.

Lines were beckoning.

How was I to know?  
What could I have done?

I heard some voices.

I had some time.

There was a tenderness.

There was a weeping.

How was I to know

the points would not point?  
How was I to know

the lines would not line up?

I could think about those twittery lines

while brushing my teeth

or washing the floor.

So why do I want to just stand here

preferably sit here

maybe even curl in a crooked ball?

Why do I bend?  
Why do I roll?

Why do I need to identify

my head with my knees?

I am not crying.

I am only thinking.

So why do I need

to be so small?

points were blinking.

Lines were flirting.

Spaces were trampolines.

I could have consulted the Math Reviews.

I could have leafed through a graph theory text.

I could, that is, have notified the authorities.

But I’m a do-it-yourself-er.

I’m a rugged individualist.

I’m a learner and a lover.

I’m a very foolish heart.

Someone wrote a book called *The Joy of Math.*

Maybe I’ll write a book called *The Pathos of Math.*

For through the night I swivel

between intuition and calculation

between examples and counter-examples

between the problem itself and what it has led to.

I find special cases with no determining vertices.

I find special cases with only determining vertices.

I weave in and out.

I rock to and fro.

I am the wanderer

with a lemma in every port.

I feel so sorry for the insides of things.

I imagine them sweating and cramping.

I hear them trying to flex.

I know from Complex Analysis that sometimes outsides determine the insides.

And I think maybe the insides are tired of being determined.

And most things are inside.

Most things are encased.

I am afraid most things are alive.

I would like to go around rescuing all the insides.

I would like to dig into everything and pull the insides outside.

But there si not enough outside to go around.

If I can’t rescue them, maybe I can put them out of their misery.

I know I can’t shoot them.

But I can try to squash them.

Or I can go around injecting poison into them.

But what kind of poison works

for this form of life?

There is a sibling rivalry

between this conjecture and its negation

and I, poor mother

throw up my hands.

“Anything, anything

“whatever you decide.

:Just please

“hurry up

“and make up your minds.”

I am no workaholic.

But I’m collecting points and lines.

Not like stamps.

No, I wouldn’t trade them.

I simply have to have them.

I need a group portrait

all of them smiling.

I have to have a hand

with these beauties as fingers.

I have to hold a vase

with these cuties as flowers.

I should contact a colleague.

I should go online.

But – don’t you see? – I have to do this alone.

I am based in reality.

But God created these lambies

set them out to green-pasture

and maketh me

to lie down.

What is this business of things existing?

What is this business of people existing?  
What is this business of math existing?

When I get that far gone I imagine a piece of paper with math written on it.

I imagine cutting out the math

Cutting around all the numbers and symbols.

I imagine the cut-out math and I imagine the stencil.

The paper is very white.

The math is also white.

Maybe I even imagine cutting out the math without it having been written.

It’s a kind of transitive law when

in a house of growing children

two people who pet the same cat are petting each other.

Especially if one of them is holding the cat.

Especially if both of them are holding the cat.

And if Devin gets under the blanket with Mirage

and lets only their heads stick out

and smiles up in that way

if the pug of Devin’s nose is close to that spot between Mirage’s ears

and if I grab hold of it all

and kiss it all…

well Devin also knows

and Mirage also knows

that something is necessary

something is sufficient

and something else is scared.

(Dream about trying to unload a gun)

Mechanics never was my forte.

I’m a *theoretical* mathematician.

I try this compartment, that, but nothing clicks open, nothing even shifts.

Finally I hear a muffled sound.

But they drop out slowly, tantalizingly, and not far enough away.

And maybe I left one in by mistake.

I keep shaking, jiggling.

They’re like salt from the shaker or glass on the floor from a broken bowl.

I’m scared enough to keep jiggling, to stay in that little room.

And I stay scared until…

well, until nothing. I’m still scared.

(Portrait of the Mathematician as a Young Woman)

Addition is commutative.

Multiplication is commutative.

How come exponentiation isn’t commutative?

Or: Exponentiation isn’t commutative.

How come addition and multiplication are commutative?

What a quest, for a sixteen-year-old girl.

What a journey, for a seventeen-year-old adult.

What kind of hormones were those?  
What kind of raging was that?

I save used lemmas.

No matter how silly.

Just like I saved my old diary.

I was fourteen and outgrew it.

But I would not divorce it.

I would not banish it.

I certainly would not kill it.

Instead I put a sign on it.

“Never throw this away.

“Never throw this away.”

(The Successful Stutter)

One day I suddenly just-couldn’t ask whether this train stopped at Willow Grove.

But I stayed in the middle of the just-couldn’t.

I watched the guy watch the just-couldn’t.

And the just-couldn’t lasted awhile.

And he and I just-listened

just-waited.

I wasn’t exactly relishing.

I was even turning away.

But he, I, and the word

formed a little triangle.

The way the first three fingers of a hand

can bunch and then huddle.

The kind of triangle formed by refugees in a storm.

Namely, not three sides meeting in three points

but thee lines emanating from one point.

In other words, not a triangle at all

but a three-pointed star.

Someone just told me that Mozart was thirty-four when he died.

I had thought he was thirty-seven.

So now I lie awake, then sit and wander awake

counting again

subtracting again

grieving for those three years.

If you ask “Why math?”

I’ll say “same as science fiction”.

Same fuss. Same fury.

Same stretching over the universe.

And not only infinity.

But each and every count.

Especially the single digits.

Each, separate, a pearl.

Each, separate, a face.

A rose, a bod. An insect, a cell.

Also, each a question mark

in some language.

(Math on the bus)

The only available seat is half a seat

because the woman on my right needs the other half.

Actually, the man on my left also needs the other half.

Still, using the calc text as a table, I manage to get settled working

And the woman on my right shouts out a monologue for all to hear:

‘I FINISHED WITH THAT CALCULUS A LONG TIME AGO. I’M NOT DOIN’ NO MORE O’ THAT CALCULUIS. MY DAUGHTER WENT TO COLLEGE AND I HAD TO HELP HER WITH THAT CALCULUS. I’M NOT DOIN’ NO MORE SINES. I’M NOT DOIN’ NO MORE COSINES. NO MORE O’ THAT CALCULUS. NO SIR, NO WAY.”

A block before my stop I put away my papers and look up.

The woman smiles at me and asks, “Did you give up?”

I smile back. “As a matte of fact, I did.”

I think I’ve solved the problem.

But I still lie in a ball.

What I wait for is time.

It has to pass the two-day test.

And it might not.

Well, Kerin didn’t.

Kerin was merely born by me.

She did not get

to stay by me.

So I lie here and curl.

I lie here and wait.

Not for a phone call.

Not for an ambulance call.

Only for my own mind

to think too much.

Eureka!

Pretty Eureka!

Pretty Eureka with sugar on top!

I have read the signs.

I have broken the code.

I collected my lemmas from every port and brought them on board.

I brought them to my country.

I see the scene. I see the act.

I have not solved the cosmos but I have solved this house.

Most of infinity is still unsolved but I have this picture.

I have this brain.

from SURVIVING THE ALPHABET (Huge Pathetic Force Press)

THE POET AND HER TWO YEAR OLD

My write too, he says

And he won’t settle for a page torn from her pad

But insists on writing the same word

Insists on writing the same letter

And now pushes his pencil under her pen.

He wants to write the same poem.

DAUGHTER OF CULTURE

Down all the long white hallways

and around all the slippery corners

and behind the layers of not-completely-transparent glass

and under the perfectly folded blankets

I lay weeping and screaming O Mother

while you propped yourself up in bed to converse with the learned doctor –

not about me, Mother. Not about the meaning of baby me

but about the meaning of Balzac, Kafka, and Henry James.

In the home you brought me to my pictures go tacked onto bulletin boards

or dripped dry and wet on cellar walls

while Chagall floated over the kitchen table

and van Gogh, three feet by four, meditated over the well-dusted piano.

You hushed my improvising and smiled resigned at my sonatinas

and whenever I arrived home, whatever I arrived home from

Beethoven from your instruments greeted me on the porch stairs long before you did.

Twenty years later my poems flutter in your bottom drawers or suffocate in photograph albums

while Emily Dickenson poses on the front bookcase

Pablo Neruda rests thick and soft by your bedside

and Virginia Woolf stares into your bedroom, surrounded by wide mat and gold frame.

Mother O Mother, someday I wear:

I will get my poems between hard covers.

I will get introductions for my poems.

I will get reviews for my poems

so that you will put me on your walls and shelves

so that you will put me where you eat and sleep

so that if ever I do crawl back into your womb

if ever you do get to give birth to me again

you will pack *me* in your suitcase and keep *me* by your bedside

so this time you and your learned doctor

will watch and discuss *me.*

EARLY ADOLESCENCE

Not only did I believe

I prayed with my hands in the praying position

leaving, however, a space between the two thumbs

so God could get in there

and pressing together the two pinkies

so God couldn’t get out.

THE ULTIMATE ACCEPTANCE LETTER

Dear Marion

Your poems really Moved us.

In addition, they Convince us.

And made us Realize.

Have no fear. We will see to it that there will be no more wars, politics, religion, racism, sexism, hetero-sexism, ageism, rape, capital punishment, nationalities, money, schools, one-chance situations, or rejection letters.

Your poems have saved us.

Please send more.

By more we mean most.

By most we mean all.

We accept them for every future issue of every magazine.

We admire you.

We love you.

Please tell us what to do next.

As sincerely, as possible,

The Publishers.

P.S. Enclosed please find every future issue of every magazine.

MY MOTHER’S TEMPER TANTRUM

It’d’ve been nice if she’d had one.

Instead of the un-hm’s.

Instead of the uh-huh’s.

Come to think of it, maybe she did.

Maybe, long ago, at some dinner table or over some banister

she had one every evening.

Maybe she was as good at it as I am.

And maybe one day, after hundreds and thousands of them

she suddenly got tired.

Maybe one day she sadly decided to switch to the silent treatment

realizing the noisy treatment

wasn’t doing any good.

MY MOTHER-IN-LAW’S TEMPER TANTRUM

“Gee, this is fun. I never

“realized how great this could

“be. Why didn’t I

“try it before? Now I

“know what you see in it,

“Marion, and I think I’ll do it more

“often from now on.”

THE PARABLE OF THE EVIL WOMAN

Sometimes the evil plans involved pretending to be good.

And sometimes pretending to be good involves pretending to love.

And sometimes, during such pretend-loving, the evil woman pauses.

“Gee,” she thinks, “this is kinda nice.

“I sorta wish I could REALLY love.

“Sorta wish I could really be good.

“Sorta wish I could be real.”

FALLING IN LOVE

Like any learner I am slow.

No matter how long before I say something

there is a pause before it is true.

Like any learner I am afraid.

Points are blinking, lines are shimmering

and I cannot yet touch.

Like any learner I am stupid.

Like any learner I am ignorant.

Like any mathematician I have to sleep on it.

Go through my days, my weeks on it.

I cannot be given.

I must first prove.

Like any neighborhood this is not a point.

It’s bigger than epsilon

bigger than delta

bigger, even, than one.

PLANTS DIE SLOWLY

Plants have to die by starvation and thirst.

It takes days and weeks.

They get drier and drier.

If we need to kill a plant we have to torture.

Bullet in the heart or guillotine to the neck are not options.

And we can’t lethally inject because plants don’t sleep.

Can we electrocute plants?

Can we crush plants?  
I don’t know.

ON WRITING MY DIARY ON THE WORD PROCESSOR

It’s a vertical diary

as vertical as a billboard.

I do not bend down.

Kids and cats don’t get to it.

And I don’t doodle in the margin.

Also, when I gain the second draft

I lose the first.

That is, it’s a word processor but it doesn’t process all the words.

And at the end of today’s entry I almost made a mistake and typed out “Thanks. Have a nice day.”  
It wasn’t an email but for a second there

I thought it was.

from CHRONIC PROGRESSIVE (the third in the “well spouse poetry trilogy” -- Plain View Press)

BACH MAGNIFICAT

These infested pages, armies of eighth notes, bearing and thrusting those long thick spears, not one rest, not one truce. “Take short breaths at the commas,” she says.

Little mini-gasps, half-unit dreams at the commas in the text

And there are indeed commas, there are commas aplenty, the text is peaceful, the text is kind.

But maybe I’ll make a mistake and breathe out instead of in

Maybe I’ll breathe all the way out, or breathe in but too far, irretrievable, or retrieve too much, too much too soon.

Even done just right these epsilon breaths don’t feel like breaths, don’t feel like anything, my lungs are rigid, my lungs are numb. I’m not suffocating, I don’t need air but I want air, I want it bad, want to feel the air, want to feel it go in.

Like Jeff at night, a close July night, he’d wake up and try to feel himself breathe but the air’d be lukewarm, too warm to feel, he’d be getting it, I’d see his chest getting it but he couldn’t feel it, couldn’t know it, couldn’t collect it and from sleep he’d mumble and grope, from sleep he’d panic but good.

And like now, on the respirator, he definitely gets the air, he has to get the air but, like the kids say, he doesn’t do it, he doesn’t feel himself doing it, he gets done, gets breathed.

The kids don’t like that, fifteen breaths per minute no matter what, page after page of four-second breaths

not one eighth-note, not one rest.

END STAGE

He lies stiff.

Not dead but stiff.

Chronically, progressively, incurably stiff.

Range of motion on his left arm takes a minute.

Range of motion on his right arm takes five minutes.

“Bend me forward.” “move my legs apart.” “Scratch the right side of my nose.”

There is no point is saying please.

He is not yet bed-ridden.

Only chair-ridden.

But he’s in bed right now.

And it’s not bedtime.

Paralyzed means stiff.

Paralyzed means locked.

Paralyzed means we

can’t move him, either.

THRIFT STORE PARADISE

These arms and legs

are only clothes.

They have no head.

They have no toes.

No mouth to feed.

No teeth to brush.

No motions to range.

No spasm to hush.

Nose won’t itch.

Mouth won’t spit.

Crotch won’t pee.

Butt won’t shit.

These clothes are so clean.

These clothes are so light.

And they don’t wake up

all hours of the night.

So face your partners

bow and smile

and promenade them

down the aisle.

Yes, face your partners

and a do-si-do’s.

For they’re only clothes.

Only clothes.

TEMPER TANTRUM FOR THAT TAXI DRIVER

If God does everything, why doesn’t he come down here and do this? Yeah, why doesn’t God do toilet and why doesn’t God do nights and I know God can create a stone so heavy he can’t lift it but why doesn’t he lift Jeff from that mattress? Let him get his butt down here and wipe this butt, let him get off his ass and rub bedsore medicine into this ass. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, let God brush those back teeth, let him scratch just under that right eye. Also, God created arms, God created throats, let him range those arms, let him suction that throat. In general, God, get your shit down here and finish what you started.

WRITING AS A DISABILITY

If he can have chronic progressive incurable M.S., I can have chronic progressive

incurable books.

Every time he needs another jar, I need another book.

Every time he needs a bedpan I need two new books.

And when he needs scratched

the top left part of the inside of his right nostril

or when something is caught between the two gold teeth bottom left back

or when the home health aide doesn’t show

I need exacerbating books.

And when he calls “Mar

I need a book signing.

“Dr. Marion Deutsche Cohen,” I sign

or just plain “Marion”, or maybe “Mar” in quotes.

In other words, it’s not the books I need but the author.

Or the name of the author.

My chronic, progressive, incurable

exacerbating name.

GOOFING OFF AS A DISABILITY

for those who say “You need a break every once in a while.”

If he can have chronic progressive J.S., I can have chronic progressive breaks.

If he can have daily M.S., I can have daily breaks.

If he can have hourly M.S., I can have hourly breaks.

I need my breaks compounded continuously.

When he has M.S. every once in a while, I’ll take a break every once in a while.

The day he stops having M.S., that’s when I’ll stop taking breaks

give or take a few years.

THE MISFORTUNE COOKIE #2

sequel to “The Misfortune Cookie” in Epsilon Country

Help! I’m being held prisoner at 2600 Belmost Avenue.

Help, I’m being beaten by a blow tube

molested by a feeding tube

raped by a suction tube

kidnapped by three wheelchairs in the hallway.

Help, I’m an

ambivalence slave.

It’s Sunday again and I’m chained to this death

and from my life.

A whole family of professionals

cannot do this together.

I’m not really a prisoner any more.

But help, I have to keep reporting for parole.

ALONE

When I leave the house in the morning cats can’t lock me out, cats can’t even

follow me into the vestibule.

Cats can only stay behind the glass y-z plane

as I move further into the rain.

When I come home and ring the bell cats inside can’t run to let me in, cats can

only bounce around the first octant

buzz, shiver, sizzle, shriek

as I fumble inside my purse so bleak.

And if I fall asleep reading cats can only lie down beside me

sleeping with me in too much glare

in the lonely king-sized unit square.

ONLINE PERSONAL ADS AS A DISABILITY

If he can have chronic progressive M.S., I can have chronic progressive online

personal ads.

If he can have exacerbating unremitting incurable M.S., I can have exacerbating

unremitting incurable personal ads.

Every time he needs another nose wipe, I put in another personal ad.

Every time he needs another suction tube, I put in two personal ads.

At least I do them myself.

At least I don’t ask for his help.

HURT

The boys in grammar school didn’t think of me that way.

The boys in high school didn’t think of me that way.

Jeff no longer thinks of me that way.

But I *am* that way.

I am *so* that way.

I am, alas

so very much that way.

THE IMPOSTER

My life is evil.

It is pretending to be me.

It gets into my conversation, my CV, and my back account.

It can do this because it occupies the same space and time as I do

and because it is believed by most that you are what you live.

But my life is not me and I can prove it.

My life is indecisive and I am not.

My life is aging quickly and I am not.

My life has unresolved baggage and I do not.

My life is kidnapping me.

My life is suffocating me.

I must rescue myself

from my life.

CONVERSATION WITH THE MIRROR

Look.

Do not be ashamed to look.

What has been done to us

Is not the same as what has been done *by* us.

My moving lips are not mocking you.

Your moving lips are not mocking me.

Do you remember, back in the 50s

Our mother said, never be embarrassed unless you did something wrong.

I know, I know, we are embarrassed anyway, but still, still

let us hold our heads high.

Let us stick together.

Let us look at each other.

Look.

MURPHY’S LAWS OF PROBABILITY, 2001

1) Whatever can’t go wrong will.

2) Whatever is least likely to happen to anybody else is most likely to happen to me.

3) The Law of Conservation of Opportunity: The more possibilities I find and cultivate, the least likely each is to occur.

4) The Flip-side of Affirmative Action: God hinders those who help themselves.

5) “To each according to her needs”

and you don’t have many needs.

6) “From each according to her capabilities”

and you have many capabilities.

7) “God never gives you more than you can handle”

and you’re very good at handling.

8) The cluster of zeroes would have ended

just after you game up.

MY NEW LOVE IN THE EARLY MORNING

He stirs (not spasms)

all by himself.

He turns over

all by himself.

He puts his arms around me

all by himself.

ON GETTING ENGAGED THE DAY AFTER MY HUSBAND DIES

October 13, 2003

If the Good Lord disapproved of opposite extremes, he wouldn’t keep making them

happen.

He wouldn’t make bad mail arrive on Saturday.

He wouldn’t make people die on their birthdays.

And he wouldn’t make a woman, nine months pregnant, give death instead of birth.

If he can dish it out, he can take it.

And you should see the ring. It’s so pretty.

LOVE POEM FOR A NEW LOVE

O will you be my you?

Can I look deep into

your eyes – I mean your pu-

pils, all the way down to

your brain, the heart of you?

And can I stay awhile?  
Perhaps not near but far?  
And can I know securely

the you I think you are?

Jeff used to be my you.

But now I want you to.

Yes, can the you be you?  
Can I be your you, too?

And when you say I do

will you mean I or you?  
I can’t be my own you.

And so I need you to.

Tonight I can’t help thinking

what the Nazis used to do

and so I need my you.

And that means I need you.

I can’t stop being me

and so I need a you.

O please remain my you.

Don’t pull a switcheroo.

DREAM THAT JON ACQUIRES A WHELLCHAIR

Some stranger gives it to him.

And he’s happy to accept it.

Immediately he sits down and asks to be wheeled around.

And then he slumps, body and head, sporting that expression-less expression.

“Jon,” I command, “get outa that wheelchair this instant.”

But he doesn’t.

from PARABLES FOR A RAINY DAY (Green Fuse Press)

PARABLE OF THE ME

“I dreamt I wrote me on my forehead…” Jonathan Borofsky

Someone writes me on her forehead, struts around like that.

Soon someone else pull off the me, sticks it on her own forehead.

Then yet someone else grabs the me, then yet another.

Before long they’re all fighting, pulling and tugging at the one me.

So God reaches down and lifts it up

puts it on its forehead, that’s that.

Oh clear night we all look up

See the me like sky-writing, sometimes brighter.

And sometimes big, sometimes small.

Sometimes even the forehead.

On clearer nights we twitter and jump

like Mexican beans in a jar.

PARABLE OF THE YOU

Eight year old Bret writes “you” on a slip of paper and, laughing, tapes it

to my back.

Someone writes you, sticks it on someone else’s back. “Cooties!”

That someone else reaches behind, picks off the you, finds another unsuspecting back.

“Hey, what’s green, three inches long, six antenna, 97 legs? I don’t know but it’s

crawling along your back.”

The new you yanks it off, quickly passes it along.

Just like somebody has to be it, somebody has to be you.

I won’t, you won’t, he, she, or it won’t.

God, in fact, prints up a plague of you’s

rains them down on everyone’s backs

and some of us get two.

THE STATE OF THE UNION

She has cleaned out her house, no more furniture, no more books, only the bare geometry. She has also called a meeting of all the man throughout her life. The purpose of the meeting is to tell them how sad she is. “I’ve had so many losses and I’m grieving them all.” The men stand around in their separate squares. They look sad too. And they shrug. Henry as though to say he can’t help being five foot six, Joe as though to say he can’t help being seventy-two. And Stu can’t help having Alzheimer’s and Jeff can’t help having M.S. Alan can’t help it that he wants only an occasional liaison when he comes into town and Richard can’t help it that he truly is interested in only himself. The house is so still. There is nothing here to move. She has sold her furniture, sold her books, but has not sold her house. She is planning to live out her life in the empty paralyzed house.

FUTURISTIC HIGH-TECH MOTHERHOOD

When a mother of an infant wants to go out, she leaves the baby sleeping in its crib with a monitor, wirelessly connected to a small plastic card which the mother carries in her wallet. She goes about her errands and when, back home in the crib, the baby wakes up hungry, the card starts beeping and the mother out shopping simply dives into her purse, brings out a small feeding device, and plugs it into the card. The food then gets transmitted to the actual baby.

The baby happily eats and soon goes back to sleep. All is well. Only one thing: people on the street can’t stop to admire the baby, and of course they don’t stop to admire the card.

Or maybe they do.

AFTER HOURS

In New York City lives an old woman in a wheelchair who, every midnight and on ‘til 3:00 AM, hangs out in the various schoolyards. She’s poor but educated and she loves education. She’s just there, available, to teach anybody who happens to come along and want to be taught. All the teenagers and young men go to her, they who would otherwise be out doing drugs or nothing. Nobody mugs her, they love and respect her, little kids too. Parents of kids who don’t want to go to regular school take them to her non-regular school. She does this every night in as many schoolyards as she can.

Meanwhile back in Philly… well, you know how the buses run pretty late but not all night, so there’s this young man who, after hours, climbs aboard one of the buses, Septa leaves the key for him, they’re happy he’s doing this, he drives that bus around for those who have to get to work at 4:00 AM or who just like riding the bus at night. He’s got a full bus and as he drives he talks, tells us about the New York woman who runs the outdoor night school for those who don’t like indoor day schools.

She’s a distant cousin of his and there are other distant cousins in other cities. It’s a chain they’re running, a human chain.

JUDGMENT DAY

We’re not all alone.

There are other planets with reasonably intelligent life.

We communicate, we visit, we intermarry.

Soon we construct one giant planet and live on it together.

And *then* we’re all alone.

from SIZES ONLY SLIGHTLY DISTINCT (Green Fuse Press)

ASKING THE CATS

3:00 AM, lights out, she asks the cats to please take a look at what she’s written.

“So, Mirage, whaddaya think? Does that poem work for you?”

Mirage doesn’t have to answer.

All Mirage has to do is not walk away.

WEIRD CONSUMER OFFERINGS

(1) Weird Clothing Store

It contains a single rack and the clothes are all the same. Moreover, in order to make a purchase, you have to first go to the back room to register. There are five large wobbly letters to identify. They want to make sure you’re not a computer. Because they’re about to convert to online. But why only one rack? Because the others are already online.

(2) Weird Hotel

No registration desk, no concierge, only a lobby with people walking around. Some of them work there, some don’t. No one is wearing a uniform and no one answers when you call out. Maybe, if you step outside, walk a block in some direction, then go back and try again, they will have gotten their act together. But don’t count on it.

(3) Weird Shoe Store

If you want to know your shoe size, you won’t find any metal sliding board. Instead, there’s a complex medical procedure involving needles and ultra-modern equipment. When they’re through they say “We’ll have the results for you next week.” But you need new shoes now.

DREAM ABOUT SIZES ONLY SLIGHTLY DISTINCT

She’s standing in front of her Differential Equations class. “Today,” she announces. “I’m going to give you a break. Instead of Fröbenious series I’m going to tell you about a dream I had last night. It was a dream about squares.”  
  
On the board she draws five small squares, of sizes only slightly distinct. Then she turns around and continues talking. “I don’t remember anything else about that dream. Just, several small squares of sizes only slightly distinct.”

She faces the board again and draws a few more squares. Then she faces the class. “You don’t have to take notes on this and you won’t be tested on it. You don’t have to even be here in the first place.”

Indeed, several students have already left but more are staying. Some are even in front seats, staring intently, first at her, then at those little squares, of sizes only slightly distinct.

THE DEAD BOOK

It’s not dead, it’s sick. Chronically sick. Paralyzed.

It doesn’t read itself. It doesn’t promote itself.

She feeds it, dresses it, puts it to bed at night.

She does range of motion on it. Everything twenty times.

It’s had its arrival and that’s that. They sit in the house and stare at each other.

She shouldn’t be left alone with it but she is.

TRUE, FIRST PERSON

A smiling woman rides the buses of Philadelphia, knitting bag in tow. What she knits are flower bracelets, and she gives them to people, anybody who wants one. They’re genuine wool, all different bright colors with darkish green leaves and stems. I call them my peace flowers, she says. Does she spend all day doing this? If so and if every city had somebody like her, would everybody be for peace, nobody for war? I like the way there’s no writing on the flowers, and the way she doesn’t hand out flyers or pamphlets. I don’t dress in that style but I asked for a peace flower, too.

GRUESOME TASK FOR THE VEGETARIAN

There’s red of it. There’s white of it. There’s dark of it. There’s light of it.

She stands there over the sinkful, separating it from its bones. There are also assorted dried flowers and she has been told to make an arrangement into a humongous steel bowl. The bowl won’t fit in he fridge and trash day isn’t ‘til Monday. And no matter how many bones she picks off, it takes up as much space as before. Moreover, there’s a glaring hard lamp, and these bones make no shadows.

SEXISM AT THE PEARLY GATES

A man and a woman stand waiting by the podium. The man is handed a small pamphlet, A Guide to Being Dead. Then someone begins to give him the tour. The woman is left standing. “Hey,” she calls out. “What about me? I’m dead too.”

from LIGHTS I HAVE LOVED (Red Dashboard Press)

“FOR A LONG TIME”

“For a long time I used to go to bed early…” Proust, Swann’s Way

For a long time I didn’t know about reading. When my mother sat on that special chair on the right, I thought she was looking at pictures and using them to make up the story, or maybe just making up the story and that thing she held was some ritualistic object, something like a candle though it flickered in a bigger way.

For a long time I didn’t know there were words in that thing, I thought words could only be spoken, things in the air that flew then disappeared, we had to say them again and again.

For a long time I didn’t know about reading so I didn’t yearn to know how to read, didn’t know reading was something to know how to do, there was only bedtime and my mother’s stories and that flickering thing she held

instead of me.

THERE

Whenever, at night, anything was there, there and changing, I had to keep looking at it. I mean until dawn. And whenever, on the bushes or sidewalk, dried dead leaves were there, I had to crush them. And now, when points are blinking, lines shimmering, on or off the page, something gets highlighted but not enough. I have to highlight better.

Mount Everest, though. I don’t have to climb it. Because by there I mean close. By there I mean here.

EARLIEST MEMORY

not yet two

(1) The Persistent Allover Light

Why was the crib in the middle of the room?  
How many were putting me in for my nap?  
And why weren’t they turning off the light?

“But it already IS off,” they answered.

“Off, off,” I repeated.

“But it IS off.”

What was this persistent allover light?  
Where was the only switch that could turn it off?

Was it down the cellar or up in the sky?

“Off, off,” I said once again.

Please

turn it off.

(2) What Happened Next

Something was raised a notch

and I emerged. I was born.

I couldn’t get unborn.

The light had been there all along.

And it wasn’t the kind of light that could disappear.

It was its own origin.

It came with the air.

Finally I stopped asking my adults to turn it off.

Very tired from waking up, I must have finally slept.

A CURIOUS LIGHT

In the bedroom at night, ‘way up on the left wall, there is a curious light. It’s a large vertical rectangle with a hole. One night I kept looking at it. I knew what caused the hole: the large lamp just at the window. But I didn’t know what caused the light, what made it go on and off, regularly, I counted, 29 seconds on, 39 seconds off. So no, not a passing car, and not a parked car. Nothing from the church across the street.

I stood up and went to the window. I traced it to the traffic light. As it flicked, green vs. yellow vs. red, so did the light on my wall.

Red doesn’t make that light. Yellow doesn’t make that light. Only very bright green. But it doesn’t end up green. Not on the wall. It ends up regular, the color of colorless light. Thing is, I’ve slept in this room over thirty years. I often wake up and see that light. Always assumed it usually wasn’t there.

Now I kind of love that light. One of the things I love is, I’ve gotten to know it. Another thing I love is, I know I don’t have to look at it. As I fall asleep I can keep my eyes closed. If I wake up I love to lie there and wonder whether, when I open my eyes, it will be there. If it’s there, for how much longer? If not there, will it be almost there? Which of those 39 seconds is it?

BUCK TOOTH LIBERATION

The buck tooth catches the light and throws it back as though it were kisses.

The buck tooth receives its public and returns the compliment with little soap bubbles.

And besides, there’s a smile

a smile such as cannot be found on mouths containing straight teeth, boring teeth, teeth

which look like all one tooth.

Especially when the buck teeth are two in number and meet convexly at the top center of

mouth which need not be open.

No, the buck tooth mouth need not be open

in order to sport that smile.

And the buck tooth face need not show its eyes, nor its stars

in order to possess that twinkle.

THREE VARIATIONS ON THE THEME OF VISITNG MY TODDLER SELF

(1)

She looks beautiful and I love her. “Little Marion,” I say, “you’re beautiful and I love you.” She lets me hold her. Neither of us is frightened. But our mother doesn’t like it. She tries to hurry me away. “Don’t worry,” I say. “I just want to tell her everything’s going to be okay.” But our mother is not reassured. When I get back home my children’s future selves are visiting them. I don’t much like it but I don’t hurry them away. In particular, I let them say everything’s going to be okay.

(2)

“I can prove it,” I exclaim. “I can prove I’m big Marion” She’s on the living room rug with paper, crayons, and chubby plastic scissors. And she’s listening.

“You do this a lot, right?” I say. “You love to draw and cut and paste.” “Right,” she answers.

“And as you make the things you make, you chant ‘cut a scissors with a scissors’, right?” She nods.

“And as you’re doing that it seems to you that the earth is not only flat but infinite. It divides the universe into two parts. And it’s sort of a given that, although our parents are atheists and although we’re atheists, there’s a kind of God up there, in the upper half of the universe. And once upon a time that God liked you best so he gave you… well, you call it ‘feelings’; I call it consciousness.” “Go on,” she says.

“And you feel like a sort of Christ, a second God, having to live among all the other non-Gods. And… well, it’s not good because he leaves you down here. He doesn’t ever come to see you and you’re all alone.”

Is she crying? I’m not sure. But I comfort her. “Don’t worry. Later you realize that’s not how it is. You’re not all alone. I’m not all alone.”

I’m sitting there next to her. I pick up the scissors and make her a paper scissors so she can ‘cut a scissors with a scissors’. I take her in my arms and rock with her.

We are all alone together.

(3) “Everything’s going to be *more* than okay,” I tell her. “Just wait’ll you see what you’re going to do with your life.”

I’m all excited at the prospect of telling her. Our parents are there and I’m excited about telling them too. “You get a Ph.D.,” I continue, “in math, of all things. And you write books and they get published. You give presentations. You’re on radio, TV. And you fall in love, three times, and ah! just wait’ll you experience that. You think it’s great in the closet at night, after the bedtime story, with the chess pieces, especially the bishop? Just wait’ll you experience real adult stuff. And also, perhaps best of all, you have babies. You get a total of 521 months’ pregnancy, 152 months’ lactation, and birth, you give birth. Just you wait, you’re going to love it. You will love it, you did love it.”

In one sub-variation Little Marion says ”Huh? Well, I’ll take your word for it.” In another she says “And do I get to teach graduate courses? Do I get tenure? How many math papers do I publish? Also, do my books get reviewed by the New York Times?”

In yet another she has fallen asleep. She has already become tired.

DREAMS ABOUT TORTURE

It’s always things that would not really hurt.

There’s rawness but no blood

moans but no screams.

And definitely no marks, never anything gross.

And when I’m the one being tortured, I’m also the one doing the torturing.

I’m at the controls in some way.

And if the dream turns lucid, I approach everybody in sight and begin to mold their faces.

I stretch, I shrink, I permute.

But I don’t torture.

Once in such a dream I said “I know you aren’t real. So I can torture you if I want to.

But I don’t want to.

“Besides, maybe you *are* real.”

Yes, I’m still afraid it will hurt them

more than it hurts me.

I CAN WRAP MY MIND AROUND INFINITIES

Maybe not all at the same time.

But each one, any one.

I don’t go there, I just *am* there.

All the way out there, like Einstein riding a beam of light.

I can be there, and only there, and I love it.

True, I have lost the others, even the finites, even zero.

But there I can be, perched, swaying, like on the first spring day.

Any which one

one of my choosing

as far as I please

one at a time.

DEEP MATHEMATICS

“What kind of poison works / for this form of life…” from Crossing the Equal Sign

Here I go again, rescuing the insides

or trying to.

Not all the irrationals between zero and epsilon.

Not all the functions which are everywhere continuous but nowhere differentiable.

Not all the true statements that are crying out for new axioms.

But this narrow tunnel

where no one has been.

No microscope can detect these cells.

No telescope can reach these stars.

No one else can mercy-kill these insides.

And neither can I.

There is no poison  
“or this form of life”

but there is anesthesia

and I can inject it

again and again.

TEACHING OBSERVATION

“You spent twenty minutes telling them how wonderful it all is.”

I’m sorry.

It is wonderful how we can get around both the vertical line rule and the horizontal line rule

how the curve can flower, spiral, and cross itself again and again

how we can now make any pretty picture we want.

Yes, it is all very wonderful but okay, I promise, I won’t ever again waste so much time.

And thank you for letting me in on the big secret, how to get through the syllabus:

By not telling them how wonderful it all is.

from CLOSER TO DYING (WordTech Editions)

SIXTY-FIVE

This is the age I want to be always, free rides everywhere, six-dollar movies, book just released, book forthcoming, book in progress, brand new marriage, nice new marriage, and still running into people who didn’t know. And lots of firsts, first summer teaching, first course-developing, first math-collaborating, and no lasts, not yet.

I want to remain forever sixty-five, it’s a good age, hair still naturally sun-brown, legs still running across streets and along sidewalks, body still enjoyable in at least two ways.

I’m the youngest senior, just like at one Bret was the teeniest toddler. I don’t want to turn sixty-six, the next youngest senior, the end of the beginning, the beginning of the end.

RITZ FILMS FOR TWO

This scene is about a kiss.

It might be a silly kiss, a breakup kiss, a prostitute kiss, an abusive kiss

a kiss between two people who maybe should not be kissing.

But we should be kissing.

So we are.

THE DETERIORATION OF THE THEOREM

“Suppose star is a binary operation on Z-plus which satisfies the properties of

Theorem 10.”

“Suppose m equals 1 and n minus 1 is prime.”

“Suppose further that x-sub-r star I equals x-sub-s star j.”

Suppose, suppose.

Like if only, if only.

If only we had one more if, we might be able to get to the then.

Suppose, suppose.

It’s the bargaining stage of grief.

At this rate we’ll never reach acceptance.

IN SEARCH OF CURIOUS LIGHTS

It’s an insomnia night so I decide to spend it looking for a new curious light. I’ve already checked the ceiling, already checked the walls, I’m too lazy to check the floor. There’s that tiny intermittent fire alarm light and the bright-red dot from one of our machines. But I already know about them. They’re not new.

But now I’m checking out the window. And there something is, just under the second floor of the church across the street. Flickering like a dull flame, not quite circular, not quite square. At first it’s continuous but then it blinks off and then it blinks on. I can’t find any pattern.

I’ll just keep staring at this new curious light. I won’t get up to investigate. I’ll save that for another insomnia night.

Eventually, though, there will have to be a last curious light, like a last child or last love, or the largest root of a polynomial. I might have to live my oldest age without any new curious light. I might have to do my deathbed without a curious light to help me die.

A GRAVE

A grave once opened for me.

It was so big, so wide, an entire small house.

And she whom they were lowering was twenty inches

six pounds, fourteen ounces, small enough

to have fit inside me.

There was plenty of room.

I could have jumped in.

I could, like Aida, have sneaked in.

Instead I stared

like when I was little

into that tall tall inkwell.

As long as it existed

as long as it was a hole

as long as they were lowering

I stared in.

I held out my arms

and cried tears that covered me

tears that chapped me

tears that dried me.

I stared in

then I stared out

then I lumbered away.

THE HEART

I haven’t the heart to tell you about the newly uncovered modern-day backwoods

abortion clinic.

You’ll lie awake nights wishing there was nothing instead of something.

I’ll just say the women were poor, sometimes immigrants

who probably didn’t know what else was available

and that it went on for decades

and more were killed than that doctor is being prosecuted for.

I won’t say what the instruments were.

You’ll superimpose them upon any physical pain you happen to be in.

You’ll have to add it to the collection of horrors you already know about.

I haven’t the heart.

The newspaper with that article was lying on the kitchen table

and I wish somebody who loves me had been around at the time

somebody who hadn’t the heart to let me read it.

I would still know about it but not as much.

DON’T KISS WITH YOUR EYES OPEN

When you kiss with your eyes open his nose comes ‘way up front

and his eyes get one-dimensional.

His whole face is convex as a fish.

And you can’t see that cute fuzzy beard

And the tenderness in his cheeks.

And where’s his mouth, for Chrissake?  
Yeah, where’s his mouth?

INCEST

I was too young to know about dildos but not too young to dream that my mother somehow procured one. It was slimy as a salamander and attached to her by some wire. As I lay naked in bed she ran it along my stomach, saying in a kind of exasperated tone, “It’s about time you learned about sex.”

I was too young to agree.

Not too young to disagree.

READING IN A DREAM

Someone told me that you can’t read in a dream because the part of your brain

that reads isn’t in the part of your brain that dreams.

My brain is special.

It can read in a dream.

Well, *this* dream. Well, *these* words.

Well, it can *dream* it’s reading in a dream.

Well, at *this* angle.

Well, at *this* distance.

And there’s music.

One drawn-out augmented fourth

the kind they have in horror movies.

Still, look! I’m reading in a dream.

My special brain

is reading in a dream.

DREAM OF GREEN, INTERRUPTED

It’s a wide green hill, pistachio green, sunlit green, and not very steep, easy to wander. Trip along this green, leisurely, carelessly, but don’t yet dare look down.

For the green is not solid. There are gaps in this green, patches of non-green like gaps in aging hair. These gaps aren’t dirt, they’re glass. Look down through this glass, there’s an underneath hill, three feet under, or maybe six, just as pistachio but not as sunlit.

There are no gaps on the underneath hill. It’s uninterrupted green. It’s an almost-copy of this hill you’re climbing. Maybe it’s this hill’s coffin. Or maybe it’s this hill’s brain.

from TRUTH AND BEAUTY (WordTech)

“WHAT DO YOU THINK YOUR SOUL IS SHAPED LIKE?”

homework question inspired by the poem “She Considers the Dimensions of Her

Soul” by Young Smith

Isaiah’s is a pyramid. His life path starts out narrow, works towards the point at the top. Yvonne’s is a star. It’s bright and unique and every time her life changes it develops a corner. But the corners are not like a square. Nancy’s is also a star but not always a good star. Her star pokes and prods and its points are sharp and hungry. And Kava thinks about auras and colors rather than shapes. And Ben, his hobby is hunting, his soul is shaped like a shotgun. Forgive his politics, he’s not 21 yet and he loves his girlfriend and baby godson, guns to him represent empowerment and protection.

At first Carol thought her soul might be some complicated interesting shape like a pentagon or crescent moon or snowflake or fractal, but then she decided her soul wasn’t jagged or piercing. Hers is a bioluminescent amorphous thing that lives in a semiotic relationship with her physical being, it would never injure her or make her sad.

But Lenny’s might. Though it’s a liquid, it’s an opinionated liquid intruding in his life. Just by observing him you can see that soul, beware of it.

PROOF THEORY

class conversation about the story “Young Archimedes” by Aldous Huxley

Uma thought she had me, I saw that gleam as she raised her hand and opened her mouth. “Well, if children aren’t interested in proving things, how come they’re always asking why?”

I thought hard and fast and came up with three. One, children don’t want details. If they ask why is the sky blue, they don’t mind a little nitrogen but they’re not asking for a chemistry lesson. Two, finding out why isn’t the same thing as proving, and proving doesn’t always tell why. Three, kids don’t always want to know, they just want to be told yes, as in “well, I can’t explain why you can’t have ice cream right now so okay, yes you can.”

Like when my third baby died, and the students all know about that, I tried to prove that she couldn’t possibly have died, I said things like “But I ate so healthily”, “I already had two successful pregnancies”. “Prove it, God, how did you do it, how could it POSSIBLY have been done?”

It couldn’t have happened and therefore it didn’t.

“CAN ABSOLUTE POWERS CONTROL ABSOLUTE TRUTH?”

question about the story “The Devil and Simon Flagg” by Arthur Porges

Only the very religious students said yes, absolutely, God or Jesus can do anything, in fact God or Jesus decides what the absolute truths are. But most students said no, and Nick said if he asked God to make 2 + 2 equal 5 and God said yes, he’d be watching, waiting, tapping his fingers, listening for the change. First he’d give it a minute. Then he’d give it five minutes. Then maybe ten. Finally he’d say to God, “Well?” And God would have to answer, “I didn’t say when.”

“IF YOU LIKE, TALK ABOUT ANY FEAR YOU HAVE HAD THAT YOU THINK NOBODY ELSE HAS.”

homework question inspired by Rita Dove’s poem, “Flashcards”

Fiona’s afraid of needles and objects moving on their own. Tammy’s afraid of balloons, Vaughn’s afraid of the down escalator, Linda used to be scared of the wind but only when it came through car windows. Kelsey isn’t comfortable with shopping mall Santas, even people she knows dressed as Santa give her the heebie-jeebies. Natalie feels powerless when she sees men in professional dress shoes, Uma’s creeped out by stuffed animals in museums, their eyes make them look like they could still be alive. Kara doesn’t like anything loud, certain paths in the woods, also the hallway from her parents’ room to the bathroom. Lorinda was intimidated by the block schedule at her new school, every time it changed she was afraid she’d go to the previous semester’s classrooms by mistake. Diana used to not quite trust books that don’t have a cover, she thought that meant the book was meant for adults. Ora’s scared of insects, failure, and the grotesquely over-sized mouths of the kids in the Honeycomb commercials. Flora was nervous about vacuuming when the house was empty, someone could creep up behind her and she wouldn’t be able to hear him. Hannah’s afraid of the ocean. Lorelle’s afraid of all her dreams so she’s afraid to fall asleep. Kasey doesn’t like birthday cakes with lit candles, that and subways and the movies. Steve’s mom used to have to phone his friend’s house for him, in case his friend didn’t answer but the parents did. About a third of the class checks behind the shower curtain before closing the bathroom door. And at least half the class is afraid of math.

Every time anyone announced a fear, at least two others would laugh and call out “me too”, the idea had been to name unique or unusual fears but it seems those are pretty hard to come by. For every X there exists at least three people who are afraid of X. And maybe there are people who are afraid of all X, not a theory of everything but fear of everything. Everything is something for someone to be afraid of.

“A WORLD WITHOUT MATH”

For his term paper Quincy writes a story about a kid who hates math class. Fractions, exponents, the evil Ms. Reese with disheveled hair the same color as her chalk. And she calls on him every time he lays his head on the desk. One night just before falling asleep this kid thinks about how as soon as he wakes up he’ll have a whole day of math. Why does math exist? Without math his life would be perfect. No stress, no embarrassment, just fun and relaxation, that would be the life.

The next morning he wakes up to a blank alarm clock. Then he begins to do sit-ups and can’t tell when to stop. Then the school bus stop is vacant and after he’s run to school his classmates tell him there’s no math class today, they don’t know why. He begins to worry. “Did I wish math away?”

The day continues with no dates in history class and at home he can’t find measuring cups to make his favorite mac and cheese. And then – horror of horrors – his Xbox doesn’t work. Finally he breaks down and says the magic words. “If only I would have just relaxed and studied math a little more. I would rather have geometry, algebra, and calculus than have a day without math. A life without math is worthless.”

And the magic words bring math back. “Math is back!” he shouts. “I love math!” He can’t wait to go to math class the next day. And I write on Quincy’s paper, along with an A and broadly grinning face: math existing and having to go to math class are two different things.

THE LIVES OF YOUNG PEOPLE

conversation during seatwork

Nicky has parent problems, Melanie has boyfriend problems, practically everybody has end-of-semester problems and end-of-college-years problems. Oy, I say, it’s so hard to be young. I’m so glad I’m old and don’t have those kinds of problems, things are so much more settled when you’re old. Hang in there, guys, only 50 more years and you’ll be old, too.

“WHAT ARE SOME THINGS WE KNOW A LOT ABOUT BUT STILL SEEM MYSTERIOUS?”

final exam question based on my poem, “The Mystery of the Known”

Dora says clouds. Nevin and Lorie say the ocean. I say the moon, also math. Ned and Kimmy say love. Brenda says all emotions. Klara says nature. Lili says space. Lamont says our loved ones. Yvonne says ourselves. Elizabeth says books. Clarissa says the brain. George says understanding. Alan says consciousness and existence. Flora and Barry say almost everything we know. What if, Barry continues, everything we’ve proven so far is just a big coincidence and everything we know is completely wrong?

Not just mysterious, I continue, but wrong.

**From NEW HEIGHTS IN NON-STRUCTURE (dancing girl press)**

THE VERTICAL NUMBER LINE

Yesterday Devin counted to 60 all by himself but today he wants help, today we sit and hold him as we fill in 12, 14, and 20 after 19, today he says he doesn’t know how to count, he’s afraid, today, of going too high, afraid of that tower, afraid of that top, today he has vertigo, keeps looking down and seeing 1 and it’s tiny, too tiny to get back to. And he’s afraid of going too thin. This is not a tower but a pole, a straw, he’s peering down the straw, can’t even *see* 1. So no 60 today, thank you, and no 14, maybe not even his age which is 2, it’s a nothing sort of day, a day for counting from zero to zero and back with lots of company, lots of help.

THE MATHEMATICIAN’S CHILD

Devin at 5 acquires letters the way I acquired numbers

And functions

And distributions

And differential forms.

Namely, each has to be played with awhile.

A has to be A-man, with a triangle face and no arms.

H has to be a chair, the front view of one of those big ones.

And E is a mother, with three nipples, three parts of me.

He writes a textbook about each one, the way I did about each theorem, adorning it with

examples and drawings.

A’s have to stand atop other A’s, or swing upsidedown from O’s.

The top tippy-tops of one M have to become the tippy-bottoms of another M.

It has to grow and grow until it becomes a hive.

And now he wants super-E’s, E’s with four horizontal lines

And super-B’s, with six semi-circles strung on that pole.

We get into it together, he claims, I re-claim, it gets more and more important.

We make a super-alphabet, each letter becomes an equivalence class, the way

each number is an equivalence class.

Letters can be super-shapes. Letters can be math.

Letters can be learned but not forgotten.

ON CHILDHOOD CREATIVY

“It was my idea to copy it.” – Elle at 6

I specifically got Devin at 4 more than one type of stickers, specifically brought out all

the non-stickers – buttons, crayons, little round reinforcements, specifically didn’t

hand him paper.

But ‘soon as we got home he asked for paper and ‘soon as he got paper he got sticking

and ‘soon as he got started he got finished, all the stickers happily and efficiently

peeled off the sticker paper and stamped, with a proud fist, onto the regular paper.

Then he held it up, the eight-and-a-half by eleven filled to the capillaries with every last

sticker. I guess that time stickers were enough, just-plain stickers and just-plain

sticking, unmixed media. The simplest collage.

It was his idea to get the stickers, his idea to stick the stickers, his idea, his Stueck, and

that, I guess, was enough.

ETIQUETTE

When I was little I was afraid to say hello. My parents taught me please, thank you, you’re welcome, hello, and good-bye and I said them all except for hello. Hello seemed too sudden, too much of a commitment, maybe like being born. And who was supposed to say hello first? Also, suppose the person was on the other side of the street? How loudly do you have to shout hello? And how far do we have to be from somebody in order to get away with not saying hello?

I once read about an autistic child who said “please don’t say hello”. Yeah, *he* didn’t say hello either.

DON’T READ TO YOUR CHILDREN

Of not necessarily. Or not all the time. And not instead of just-plain holding them. When a parent reads to a kid, her voice is different from her regular voice. It’s more distant, more monotone, or maybe less. It sounds as though she weren’t speaking to the kid, as though she’s speaking to someone else. And suppose she’s speaking in the voice of one of the characters in the story, and suppose that character is evil?

Singing to a kid, same thing. Devin used to say “Don’t’ sing”. A singing voice is a different pitch. Maybe it sounds like it’s coming from another direction or another dimension. When I read to Devin, was I dividing my attention between him and the story?

Teaching, too. A teaching voice is different, different pitch, different speed. Does a teacher teach children or subjects? Which does she love more? The teacher/child/subject-matter triangle is not to be taken lightly. Maybe we should teach only when we don’t know we’re teaching, we think we’re merely talking, merely telling. We think we’re doing what we usually do.

**From THE PROJECT OF BEING ALIVE (New Plains Press)**

BEFORE THE DENTIST

age 8

The dentist said I had great teeth so how come he had to keep checking up on them? And how come he kept filling cavities? And how come Rozzy didn’t have to go? Was it because she was four years younger or were her teeth greater than mine?

Okay, I thought, if I have great teeth I might as well play with them, and that meant poke, from the inside out, especially the top front right. Maybe before the dentist I hadn’t realized I even had teeth so now I was discovering a goldmine.

And I mined, all right, I sure did mine and this is a just-so story about that slightly-buck tooth. I mined and mined it until it became totally mine.

JUNIOR PHILOSOPHER

When I was eleven I thought so much about space, time, and existence that I called myself Junior Philosopher. I still liked dolls and not boys and my mother still washed my hair in the tub and picked out my clothes but I was a Junior Philosopher.

One night Faygie, my sister, and I had a sleepover. Rozzy and Faygie were laughing but I was too busy thinking about space, time, and existence. They kept cracking jokes I didn’t get. “I’m having serious thoughts” was my excuse. “I’m a Junior Philosopher.”

“Who-ha,” they retorted. “She’s big deal Junior Philosopher.” And all night long and into morning they kept intoning “Junior Philosopher, Junior Philosopher”. It was another joke I didn’t get except I knew it was on me.

SOMEONE ELSE’S CURIOUS LIGHT

When she was little, Elizabeth told me, she used to stare at a recurrent night-flickering that she called her angel.

I know that angel. It was near the top of the wall to the right of her bed. It was a light with a shape, just asymmetric enough and not too bright, something like the Christmas tree on my vintage reindeer sweater.

I don’t think Elizabeth loved her angel. I didn’t love my childhood curious lights either, or not during my childhood. It takes maturity to love a curious light. It takes maturity to not have to stare at a curious light

to just exist with it side by side, two quivering existences side by side.

PHILOSOPHY 101

I’d thought philosophers were Tortured Souls, I’d thought they cried when they thought their philosophy, and I’d thought they thought their philosophy all alone. I hadn’t known philosophy was something to take true/false tests in or write term papers on or get a B in or discuss while brandishing cigarettes. And I hadn’t known other philosophers had thought the same things I’d thought, I’d thought at least *I* was alone.

TWELFTH BIRTHDAY PARTY

It was a huge success. At least the other kids thought so. Someone had brought records. Not Bach and Beethoven like my parents’ but other records, strange records. Someone else was running the phonograph and the kids were all dancing the jitterbug which I could never learn. I wasn’t even a teenager yet and the birthday party I’d been so excited about had turned into something non birthday party. I’d known for at least a year that I wouldn’t always be a child but I’d thought I’d have at least a couple more birthday parties.

THE LONG HAUL

We’re all pretty conscientious.

We finish what we started.

A long time ago we all began the project of being alive.

And we didn’t abandon that project.

We kept eating.

We were never too lazy to eat.

We kept walking and talking.

We walk and/or talk for a living.

Some of us follow through better than others.

Some, in the morning, widen our eyes sooner.

Others keep them narrow for a while.

But we’re all survivors

of the night and the morning.

We knew ourselves when

and, after all these years

we know ourselves now.

**From THE DISCONTINUITY AT THE WAISTLINE: MY #METOO POEMS (Rhythm and Bones Press)**

THIRTEEN ON THE BUS

1956

(1)

A man sat to my left and told me I was the only one who understood him. Soon he asked to hold my hand and I let him. A woman passenger walked over and whispered to me, “change your seat” and I didn’t. That evening my father told me the superintendent of schools’ daughter had been killed by such a man.

But I really believed that man was telling me his deepest thoughts. I really believed his deepest thoughts were deep. I really believed he could see, by my facial expression, that here, finally, was someone who understood those deep thoughts. I really believed there was something special about me this man could detect.

And why couldn’t anyone else?

(2)

Another man started talking to me and he made it come up, would I marry a black man? I answered yes and the man thought that meant I’d go off with him

even though he wasn’t black.

(3)

I made friends with a woman a lot older than me but younger than I am now. She was nice, asked what school I went to, talked about her family and her job. I had a good time.

TEENAGE WEEKEND

Who arranged this I had no idea but there I suddenly was, the only girl in the car, somebody had decided that those two boys, probably named Pete and Mike, would get me to the dance while Seena and Diane went with the rest of the group. And somebody had put me in the middle of that front seat between those two very fat very loud boys. I hadn’t yet had a date nor talked very much to boys. Pete and Mike did all the talking, over and around and through me, the kind of stuff boys talked about, weird stuff, scary stuff, stuff I didn’t know much about except to shake in the dress my mother had picked out. There was nothing else to listen to and nowhere else to look. Would we ever get to that dance and what to do when we did, how would I get back home or to school on Monday? Is that what weekends would be like from now on, going back and forth between crowded car rides and crowded dance floors? Those boys didn’t rape me but something did.

A PAGE OF FIRST HUSBAND-TO-BE POEMS

1. He Didn’t Wait Long Enough.

We were on our third date, one of the very-late 50’s drive-ins, and he started to kiss me, different from a good-night kiss. I liked him but turned my head. “I just broke up with someone I couldn’t stand to kiss so my natural tendency…” something like that.

He listened. He understood. And he stayed still, for about five minutes. Then he started kissing me again. I wanted to keep dating him so I kissed him back, different from a good night kiss. But I didn’t want to. It was a few more dates before I wanted to. Just not yet. Not yet.

1. His Hands

My mother said “he could put them on your face.”

But he’d been putting them on my face for months and now he wanted to put them

someplace lower, if I didn’t let him he wouldn’t know where to put them, that’s

what he said and I told my mother and she had that suggestion.

Yes, he could just keep putting them on my face. And running them through my hair. Sigh.

1. Seduction Culture 1960

He told me his fraternity brothers always talked about what they did to women, how many virgins they broke, one guy said he told this girl he loved her and would she marry him? and after he broke her she excitedly said “ooo, I’m gonna go call my mother and tell her I’m engaged, she’ll be so happy” and he answered “don’t bother”, he bragged about that

and my first husband-to-be was afraid if he told me he loved me, if he said those three mini-words, it would seem like he was just trying to get me to let him break me so he didn’t, not for close to a year and when you’re in not quite requited love a year is a long time.

A BIG DEAL

(1) My mother said You know, once a boy gets excited, you can’t backtrack, it’s a big deal, you have to keep going, otherwise he’ll be in pain.

So I was careful not to get my first husband-to-be excited. But he got excited anyway. First it was We’re gonna *hafta* go below the neck, then We’re gonna *hafta* go below the waistline, soon We’re gonna *hafta* go below the public bone.

And seventeen years later after our third baby died, I’m sorry but you’re gonna *hafta* make me cum. It was one week-post-partum, ***I*** wasn’t gonna cum and there was nothing to make me pregnant again, not yet. I wasn’t as good at saying no as I am now and I cried the whole time, maybe he did too.

And I spent a lot of our life together hoping he wouldn’t get excited when I wasn’t.

(2) Is it true? I asked my second husband. Does it really cause the man pain if he starts and doesn’t continue? Nah! he answered.

And a friend of mine asked her male friend the same thing and he also answered Nah.

I asked my second husband what he thinks a man should do if he starts and isn’t permitted to continue and he said Just do something else.

I guess my first husband didn’t want to do something else.

CELEB PSYCHOLOGIST

Dr. Albert Ellis gave a talk at my college on “premarital relations”, very controversial at the time. “Why buy a pair of shoes without trying them on?” he said.

I thought that was ugly. I wouldn’t want to be tried on. Moreover, I had bought shoes that didn’t fit. I’d thought they were pretty and they were half-price.

Maybe just keep in my closet, for decoration. Or out of my closet. Or they’d fit later.

Mostly, if you love them they fit in some way.

TEMPER TANTRUMS AT HOME

It’s different when a man does it.

A man doesn’t rave on and on.

A man simply starts and stops.

A man just goes at it, doesn’t go at it *again.*

A man doesn’t pause, he ends.

And, you can be sure, not with a whimper.

When a man does it it’s scolding, not pleading.

When a man does it he’s a beast, not a bird.

It’s different when a man does it.

A man doesn’t stomp his foot and if he did, it would ram through the floor.

A man doesn’t throw pots and pangs; a man throws chairs, tables, rooms.

A man doesn’t hit the ceiling; he raises the roof, dislodges the sky.

His are not the ravings of the powerless.

His are the ravings of the powerful.

It’s different when a man does it.

When a man says this is the last straw, you’d better make ready to gulp.

When a man screams hell, you’d better start saying your prayers.

When a man cries shit, you’d better fun for the potty.

When a man yells fuck, you’d better start yelling rape.

SEX FOR ONE

I am in front of myself with horny-ness.

What I really want is him

and he is downstairs.

Even if I call him he will not do what I’m doing.

He will not spread his fingers in the correct way.

He will not know where my spaces are tonight.

I will have to explain that I like a cloth

between the touched and the touching.

I will have to tell him when to remove the cloth.

If I leap from me to him

if I translate my self to his self

something will be lost in translation.

Oh, he’ll know that I’m a fractal

but he will not know

my precise shape.

**From THE FUSS AND THE FURY (Alien Buddha Press)**

THE FURY OF INFANCY

Finding himself here he might as well stare

at two-inch outlines of one-inch shapes

or try not to stare at all.

Finding himself here he might as well turn

his floating head towards anything red

anything white, anything bright, anything here or there.

Finding himself here he might as well dangle

feet into squares, circles, spirals

reach out his arms for voices, hums.

Finding himself hearing

he might as well listen.

Finding himself seeing

he might as well look.

Finding himself here he might as well stay here.

Finding himself here he might as well.

THE THEORY OF THE POST-PARTUM FETISH

A baby comes out smeared

with that wet sticky stuff

smelling even stranger

than seaweed or sex.

The mother, too, gets slimed

with something

something

yes, something has radiated

and stopped on her skin.

They wash it off the baby

as much as they can

and keep telling the mother

to go take a shower.

But the film persists

dense, solid.

The film insists

oily, dry.

It sticks to the skin of others

which explains why, when she touches, she lingers

and why, when she touches the baby, she lingers more.

It takes up space, possesses weight

and clings to the dust and air

THREE WEEKS

That there is more than one face.

That there is more than one room.

That you can’t see what you hug.

That, given two objects, they probably don’t touch.

That, in fact, most objects

are far from one another.

All this he learns

shock by shock

and after each learning

he needs to eat.

That’s what you do when you’re a mother.

Absorb the shocks

one by one.

SIBLING FURIES

(1)

Poor Elle, all she wants to do is walk along Chestnut Street with Beebee in

the Snugli.

She can’t concentrate on her homework, and her boyfriend doesn’t get as

excited as she does about walking around with Beebee.

Poor Elle, everything about her boyfriend makes her feel like crying, especially

the way whiskers grow out under his chin.

She’d like to bypass high school, college, travel, and just get down to

business with her own Beebee.

In the morning she tiptoes into our room and stares down, Beebee’s teeny head

atop my arm, nightgown open in the front, drifting like a veil.

Poor Elle, she’s got the baby blues.

(2)

Arin sniffs the back of Beebee’s hair, murmuring “that little baby smell”.

On the way up to his room he pokes his head into ours because “this whole

room smells like Beebee.”

And yesterday, sniffing Beebee’s hair, “Mom, why’dja hafta wash it? Now

it just smells like Ivory soap.”

“You look so different, Mom,” he continues. “I’ve never seen you like this

before. You’re glowing.”

He sees, smells, fully knows

what he will never have.

(3)

On my left a Binky

shows off his charms.

My right contains a Biddy

arm across my lap.

He doesn’t stare at me.

He stares in.

Shoulders hunched.

Head cocked.

One thumb on Binky’s pinky.

The other in his own mouth.

UN-BONDING

The first day I said I’m soooo happy.

The second day I said I’m sooo happy.

Until the day I said I’m not *that* happy.

And another day I said he’s not *that* cute.

And it’s true, sometimes he’s lovelier than others.

Which means other times he’s less lovely than some.

In the family bed

I have dreams

where he isn’t.

Yes, sometimes I’m with him

sometimes I’m not.

Which is it? -- make up my mind.

Two flights up my other children

carry him around.

I don’t know which is sadder

when he cries or when he laughs.

I SING HIM SAD SONGS

“What shall we do with the drunken sailor?”

”Where are you going / little one, little one? Where are you going / my

precious, my own?”

And I hum the tune from that dream.

Yes, sad soft songs

some slow, some fast.

And then I get happy.

Thrust him up, exaggerated motion, quick lingo.

“How’dja get all the way up there?”

No longer sad but still soft.

Something about questions to babies.

Something, I know not what.

Except that we really are

asking them something.

THREE-MONTH POST-PARTUM FETISH

They should re-admit the mothers, with the babies, into the hospital.

They should serve them meals

straighten their beds

restrict visiting hours.

The insurance should cover it.

There should be a lounge to socialize in

a vase of large roses

fridge stocked with neat little juices.

Every morning they should take temperatures

bring iron pills

press bellies

ask questions.

You should not have to dream that

wrapped in a single cloak

the two of you sneak in

and check each room.

And when a kind nurse asks

“What do you need?”

you should not have to say

“I forget”.

SOME POLITICS OF MOTHERHOOD AT LAST

(1) The Message We Get:

We start out proud

flaunting belly, pram, blood and sweat.

And when street curbs don’t lower for us

red lights don’t turn green for us

(but green lights turn red against us)

when double-doors don’t open

but double thank-you’s are expected --

we struggle proud, we struggle joy.

And we flaunt the struggle, we love to flaunt.

Yes, when we go bump in the day we *say* “I’m sorry”

but mean “I’m proud.”

(2) They make us wait in line even if the baby’s crying.

Make us fold the stroller even if the baby’s sleeping.

And make us take our babies out in the cold.

Make our babies wear bulky snowsuits.

Yes, it’s pretty bulky business.

But we continue proud.

We continue joy.

We continue.

(3) A Frustration:

The rhythm of maternity has been disturbed

by older children, or downright adults.

And it’s not for *them* to decide

when my baby sleeps

or rather, when my baby wakes up.

And I didn’t put him to bed because I was tired.

I put him to bed because *he* was tired.

And he’s tired, still

will be tired for awhile

because sleep is unlike china

once broken can’t be mended

not so fast.

They have interfered with nature

intercepted our hormones

interrupted the cycle.

And it’s none of their business.

I don’t take this personally.

I take this politically.

What gives them the right?

What gives them the right?

THIS ONE

If I breastfeed this one

even longer

past toddler-hood, past childhood

safely to another woman’s breast

if I keep this one in our bed

stand up, stand over

not blink all night long

‘til he makes his own family, his own family-bed

also not blink all day --

if I home-school this one

be his letters, his numbers

be enough of an earth mother

to be his earth

then maybe the second mind

won’t sneak up on this one

won’t seize the first mind

won’t erase the first mind

won’t turn the terrible two’s

into the terrible five’s

into the third mind

into the fourth and fifth.

WHERE I’LL GO

“When a life is over / the one you were living for / where do you go? ...” Anne Sexton

I’ll take a job.

I’ll join a choral group.

I’ll write children’s books.

I’ll make children’s records.

And I’ll have grandchildren

those big bugs.

Like a divorced father I’ll court them.

I’ll do more math

that first great-love.

I’ll re-discover the joys of the suffering-scientist.

I’ll stalk the thrift-stores.

I’ll collect baby clothes.

I’ll read the Devin-poems

tearfully, weekly.

“I’ll work nights.”

”I’ll dance in the city.”

”I’ll wear red for a burning.”

White for a freezing.

“And there’ll be no scream

“from the lady in” black

no scream at all

from the Phantom of the Labor Room

and the figure at the desk

that weeping mathematician

dribbling out epsilons and deltas and squiggles.

No scream whatever

from number-woman

no scream from the Slave

of the Long Proof.

No scream, no prayer

from Marion Deutsche.

I’ll hold a kitten

or a Cabbage Patch doll.

I’ll sit every night

and pat my womb.

I’ll masturbate my nipples.

I’ll go to bed

lie down and play-hospital

all by myself.

To think that I once looked so totally different.

To think I will one day look even more different.

Yes, I say, but my size will remain.

And color. And shape. My approximate shape.

But texture, condition…

Scant guarantee.

And my voice, surely

not first soprano.

But hair, my hair

may I keep my long hair?  
Wraith, true

dried-up seaweed

grape-stems trying to pass through the disposal

but may I keep that hair

and may I keep it long?  
And my womb, my womb

my well-used womb

I can’t get cancer of the hair, may I also not get cancer of the womb?  
And hormones, may I keep some hormones?  
So even if I don’t keep my mind

I can keep at least something.

So at least, when I read over my baby-poems

I’ll understand some of them.

And so what I babble

if not that dewdrop mouth

if not that rosewater skin

at least the fuss and the fury

Yes, so what I babble

if not politically correct

will be personally correct

so at least I’ll babble

the correct fuss and fury

the tenderness

the necessary

and sufficient things.