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Poetry Folder

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Ecstatic Syllabi: Four Poems

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I majored in mathematics as an undergraduate, completing a B.A. at a small liberal arts college in the Midwest. I didn't take up math intending to become a professor or a rocket scientist — I was drawn to math because of its elegance, its beauty, and the precision with which it expresses truth about the world.

My bachelor's degree required a wide range of study, so I also took classes in philosophy, history, physics, chemistry, painting, piano, sociology. I didn't delve into any subject in depth, then — and I still regret that my math skills aren't more robust — but this early multidisciplinary education was invaluable in that it imparted a lifelong love of relationality, metaphor, and multiple ways of expressing the truth.

After college, I traveled around the world with a backpack. I met lots of people while on the road, and everywhere I went, it was abundantly evident that the human desire for truth is universal. What I find perplexing is that while mathematics is made of provable truths, people seem to find religion far more persuasive. There's no proof of God, yet the idea is so compelling that it drives entire institutions, creates governments, even starts wars. In an effort to understand, I earned an M.Div. at seminary — where there were far more questions than answers.

It took many years, tons of reading, and a major health crisis to realize that for me, poetry is the most satisfying way of expressing the truth, so I went back to graduate school to pursue an M.F.A. Like mathematics, poetry possesses the sort of beauty that's alive in symmetries, in the petals of a flower or the angles that atoms take when they form a molecule of water. A perfect poem, like a perfect proof, is elegant, exact, a clear demonstration of truth told from deep within its own structure and syntax.

This folder contains the poetry that arose when I considered the world as a lesson, as an education in mathematics held in the light of art and the imagination.

—MARY PEELEN, San Francisco, California, USA

ALGEBRA I

Contrivance of
scribes and bridge builders

i is impeccable
when it comes to the math.

It's a bit more dodgy
metaphysically speaking,

not even real,
this weird square root

soaring unhindered in the
conceptual remove.

Extra-geometric, solipsistic,
 i invokes the complex plane.

Pythagoras made it mystical
to keep it inaccessible—

he feared its exposure
would unmake the real world.

Curse of the memoir,
start of a lie, fiction's darling,

necessary constant,
imaginary as a friend.

ALGEBRA II

Trying to outrun the problem,
I'm open to suggestion,

to opiates, my skin to scalpel edges.
I alter my velocity,

my location from a to b ,
from Paris to Grand Rapids, say,

where, caffeinated and vaguely dizzy,
I watch luggage circling on a belt.

Jetlag comes and goes, wavelike
as chronic illness

distorting the shape of the room.
The airport

is the same as O'Hare, same shops,
same worries: time and money.

I like to think I'm gaining ground,
correcting miscalculations,

until I see my new path
conforms to the same old equation,

slope—rise over run—identical
to the original at every single point.

PLANE GEOMETRY

Perfectly round and chemically green,
corn crops inscribe the plains.

In 14B, a woman is reading a mystery,
a genre popular on airplanes—

death enlarges the scope of things,
including one's sense of legroom.

Once, from a rocky lunar overlook,
astronauts saw the first earthrise,

new blue world making its elliptical pass
through a sky unbounded as fiction.

Jane Austen saw it coming all along.
Like every point in the universe,

her parlor was center of the star chart.
Even here, Miss Bennett and her sisters

define the arc of a narrative structure
in the precise shape of my flight home.

Far below, sunlit
lines of concrete bisect the desert

tracing a straight-edge all the way
to the origin.

NUMBER THEORY

Forty one apples in the tree,
red and round,

praise awaiting gravity,
wholly free of abstraction.

When it comes to the primes
and matters of religion,

I defer to Pythagoras,
his ancient cult and authority.

Deep in the rites of spring
he reveled in geometry,

the shape of the soul,
the promise of reincarnation,

form and emptiness at play
in pure recreation.

Sun-ripened, fragrant,
apples will offer up a real number,

two score and one, twin prime
fallen in a curious

distribution beautiful as conjecture
on this wild, open ground.