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POETRY FOLDER



Select Poems from Sizes Only Slightly Distinct and from Truth and Beauty

Marion D. Cohen

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Throughout most of my life my two serious interests have been mathematics and poetry, and I was a serious math-poet before I was a serious poet! Beginning with my adolescent diary, I wrote poetically about mathematics. In a previous article for *JHM* (“The Night I Almost Didn’t Grow Up”¹) I described what mathematics meant to me in my teenage years.

Mathematics has continued to mean a lot to me. I have expressed this in many ways, in particular through my math-poetry. My first book, *The Weirdest Is the Sphere*, published in 1979 by Seven Woods Press, consisted entirely of math-poems, as did a more recent book, *Crossing the Equal Sign*. In general many of my poems are informed in some way by mathematics, in particular those in *Sizes Only Slightly Distinct*, a chapbook of parables, some of which appear in this Folder. Others in the Folder are from a forthcoming chapbook, *Truth and Beauty*.

–MARION DEUTSCH COHEN (mathwoman12@gmail.com), Pennsylvania, USA.

¹Cohen, M. D., “The Night I Almost Didn’t Grow Up,” *Journal of Humanistic Mathematics*, Volume 2 Issue 2 (July 2012), pages 109–113. Available at: <http://scholarship.claremont.edu/jhm/vol2/iss2/9>.

Poems from “Sizes Only Slightly Distinct” (Green Fuse Press, 2014)

THE WOMAN MATHEMATICIAN #2

Instead of killing all the sines and cosines but itself, sine n -naught kills only itself, puffs everything else up forever. And instead of the Dirac delta being zero everywhere but zero, it's zero only at zero. Also, the two-dimensional delta is like the sky at night, only one star.

Everything becomes dark and tall, the ground the bottom of a giant hole; it's time to fill the hole up. The entire bottom is up, like the tall grass and sunflowers of her childhood.

Plants grow fast, the forest dense, a -sub- n 's and b -sub- n 's plaguing the board. The erasers are gone. There is no other Riemann sheet, everything just gets squashed. The a -sub- n 's and b -sub- n 's leave the board, unperturbed as Escher animals exiting the canvas. They flit about the room and no a -sub- n can find itself. The air buzzes with c -sub- n 's, d -sub- n 's, n -sub- n 's, and the students are growing restless.

“Get rid of them,” they demand, “and get rid of them quick.” But it's no use. They have begun. She tries multiplying. She tries integrating. But they breed. They breed but good. They breed for blood. There is no room left.

[Previously appeared in IKON.]

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.

DREAM OF GRUESOME CATEGORY THEORY

Her thesis advisor says "It looks as though you're got something here."
But the arrows are too long.
Moreover, two are the same
and the other two are inclusion maps, mere fancy identities.
Anyway, the entire diagram is warped.
Arrows crooked, objects bulging, as though the paper had been crumpled.
Her advisor is in denial about all this
which would be okay, if the entire thesis committee were also in denial.
She watches the little x 's and y 's crawling around
not like frightened insects but like sick and dying insects.
Yes indeed, she's "got something". Some kind of disease.

Poems from the forthcoming chapbook “Truth and Beauty”

This is also the title of a course that I developed and teach at Arcadia University in Glenside PA, TRUTH AND BEAUTY: MATHEMATICS IN LITERATURE. In this course we read and discuss short fiction and poetry that connect to math in various ways, and we thus connect, not only mathematics with literature, but both with human experiences and emotions. Our class conversations involve much sharing, and the poems in the chapbook, scheduled to be published in December 2016 by WordTech Communications, describe some of this sharing, and hopefully extend the sharing with others outside our classroom.

FURTHER UNUSUAL FEARS

Nessa used to be afraid of her room at night. Especially the corners and I remember the expression on her face when she said that last.

A concave corner is the opposite of a black hole, too small for anything to go into but large enough for things to come out of. It's a wide open Pandora's box.

And nothing balances on a convex corner, anything unlucky enough to touch a convex corner swivels in outer space. There are no laws of probability for that object. Like a skater on frictionless ice it's stuck in random wobbling and it hasn't the option to fall.

“SOMETIMES I THINK I'D RATHER COUNT IN THIS WORLD THAN SING IN THE NEXT.”

(quote from the story “An Old Arithmetician” by Mary E. Wilkins)

The Old Arithmetician counted leaves on trees. I count colors in a print fabric and scallops on a decorative dish. But our all-time class favorite is stairs. Not stars but stairs. Mostly stairs going up, not down, and some of us count other things that don't need to be counted.

But we need to count them, we need to distinguish each from the one preceding and the ones following. We need to ensure that they're not all the same.

“CAN ABSOLUTE POWERS CONTROL ABSOLUTE TRUTH?”

question about the story “The Devil and Simon Flag” 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.”

And Elena across the room called out to Nick, “I know what you mean.”

“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 an opinionated liquid intruding in his life. Just by observing him you can see that soul, beware of it.