

A Life of Equations Shifting to a Life of Words

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POETRY FOLDER



A Life of Equations Shifting to a Life of Words

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I was tricked into poetry by receiving “honorable mention” in a student poetry contest at Princeton. Over the years, that must have worked on my subconscious and kept the flame alive while I devoted myself, in turn, to electrical engineering, operations research, and statistics.

As my technical life diminishes, my writing life increases. I became emeritus in 2013 but continue with my research interests, giving guest lectures and serving on dissertation committees. Meanwhile, I continue in a commercial role as research director of my software company, having fun devising new statistical algorithms. What’s new since 2017 is that I have been writing, first a memoir of my time in the Intelligence Community, then poetry and flash fiction.

The poems appearing in this poetry folder were my first to be accepted for publication. Others have since appeared in “Sheila-Na-Gig” and “typishly.” As befits a statistician, I keep score of my “success” rate, which as of this date stands at 5 pieces accepted and 1,105 rejected (obviously, many are submitted multiple times to multiple literary journals), with many more walking toward the gallows. At least with publication in technical journals, one receives constructive (?) reviews and the opportunity to revise and resubmit. In the poetry game, poems are given pink slips and told to hit the bricks.

One of the missions I have assigned to my poetry is to expose to ‘regular’ people the inner life of the mathematical person. The poems in this poetry folder develop three themes. “Formulations” pokes a bit of fun at the bloated (and in this case almost musical) titles that can grow from our research; more seriously, it documents the change in self-definition that flows from recognizing the inevitable drift away from high-intensity math as we age. “Least Lower Bound” is a bit of an exaggeration of the way we can develop the habit of translating important life events into the sometimes stilted and overelaborate language we use in our technical work. It also illustrates how deeply we can come to use that language to translate the world to ourselves. “Academic Inquiry” is the first of several poems I have written about the massive role that teaching has played in my life. If this poem were a wine, a reviewer might say it combines “notes of yearning, pride, and challenge with a finish of wry resignation”.

FORMULATIONS

Formulations
for the
 nonbifurcated
 hop-constrained
 multicommodity
 capacitated
 fixed-charge
 network design problem
are not top of mind
when making breakfast.
But they may cross your mind
when brushing your teeth,
As do their fellows.

Until they notice
your fading interest.
And then,
with moderate sorrow,
one by one,
they skulk back
to their technical journals,
and lie in wait
for a young and eager brain to haunt.

So it comes to pass
that one quietly significant day
all you are doing
when brushing your teeth
is brushing your teeth.
And it doesn't bother you
that you're doing that
with no math in mind,
no appreciation for an equation,
no thought to its use.

And you are not the same man.

Babacar Thiongane, Jean-François Cordeau, and Bernard Gendron, "Formulations for the nonbifurcated hop-constrained multicommodity capacitated fixed-charge network design problem", *Computers & Operations Research*, Volume **53** (January 2015), pages 1–8.

LEAST LOWER BOUND

Walking from headstone to headstone.
Some hold blanks indicating
A life not yet complete,
Still exposed to one random event.

2016 has just expired.
So now the least lower bound
Is 2017
And only Someone knows if
The least lower bound
Equals the least upper bound.

There have been moments
When getting the least lower
To equal the least upper
Would have been
An analytical triumph.

But not in this case
When it would be an unheard signal
That, more than ever,
Every day counts.
As if that were not already obvious
To the least casual observer.

ACADEMIC INQUIRY

Have you heard
Of my life
As I live it
And thought it
Boring?

Have you imagined
My place
In this world
And thought it
Useless?

Have you judged
My training
For my life
And thought it
Wasted?

Have you weighed
My obsession
And found it
Light as air?

If so,
Then I have to
Challenge you
And ask...

Have you looked
Into the eyes
Of a student
And seen
The desire?

Have you looked
Into the face

Of a student
And seen
The effort?

Have you looked
Into the mind
Of a student
And seen
The understanding?

Have you looked
Into the future
Of a student
And seen
The potential?

If so,
You are as
Foolish as I.
And I must ask...

Have you not known
A class
That no one
Wants to take?

Have you not known
A class
That no one
Understands?

Have you not known
A class
That no one
Links to money?

If so,

You are as
Bruised as I.
And yet
I must ask...

Don't you dig
Preparing
So tenderly
That first day
Of class?

Don't you dig
The one or two
Who listen hard
And walk away
Wise and ready?

Aren't you sad
When it's over
And the questions
Are always
The same:

Will all this be
On the test?
What can I do
To make up
For my sins?

And can think
Of nothing better
To answer than
It's too late
For both of us?