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The Free Numbers

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The Free Numbers

Jessica Greenbaum¹

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Some people lose their teeth, their keys
again, their balance, or the hope of undisturbed sleep
but as for me, for now, I'm losing my grip
on numbers, so we arrive in a rush to the theater
to find the lobby empty—I got the date wrong
again, or we missed the first hour. The numbers
have gotten wily, and nothing's fixed! Digits
of a street address dissolve on impact, and forget
keeping track of the seven for phone calls
(except for the chiseled-in of childhood; I could ring
Danny this minute if only he still lived).
But to go the superstitious route for a moment—
I admit I've never thanked the ten integers
that tether me to parties, (all the) doctors' appointments
farmers' market hours, and departure gates.
We have so many destinations! At so many times!
Do we even have anything else?
It's not odd that even the numbers avenge their unpaid years—
wages add up (thanks to them)! I think of the decades
they appeared at the flick of a mental request
like indentured butlers whenever rung
the escorts to make sure I arrived
or chaperones to ensure I caught the 5:01 to return.
Perhaps they were yoked—feudal serfs to my fiefdom of recall—
but I would have paid all I owed
were there currency besides this price of aging.
In my defense, numbers never *cared for me* terribly
except in algebra, a land where we played fairly and with calm gratification.
I shall sing a song to algebra!
But tonight, walking across town to salvage the misspent time
going to the theater on the wrong night
I see they did their job and now rejoice as free agents
giddy and fickle as fleeing ghosts I run after
by looking again and again at the same piece of paper.

¹JG's recent book *Spilled and Gone* was named a Best Book of Poetry in *The Boston Globe* in 2021.