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Philip Fried

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POETRY FOLDER

Poems from the Series At the Dimensional Border

Philip Fried

phfried@gmail.com

This poetry folder includes nineteen poems from the series At the Dimensional Border about the border between the second and third dimensions, on geometry and the human condition.

The series At the Dimensional Border was inspired, in part, by my memory of reading Edwin Abbott’s Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions as a teenager. That novella, first published in 1884, depicts a two-dimensional world that satirizes Victorian culture. In writing the poems that follow, I was aware of some satirical elements (for example, “The 2D screen mediates between” and “Far Above the Cave of the Everyday”) and allusions to the ways in which our rationality sometimes enables us to ignore the many “faceless” others “we need not explain” (“The stick-figure philosopher was racking”). It is relevant, however, that I began writing this series during the worst of the COVID-19 epidemic, and the poems can therefore be understood as a response to the loss of dimension, a kind of flattening out that many were feeling at that time. Key to my response was an attempt to reconstruct a world in these new stripped-down conditions, taking Euclid’s Elements as a metaphorical guide. The 2-D stick figures and geometrical items seemed to emanate an inherent lack and longing, as did the 13-line poems without a set rhyme scheme that were not-quite-sonnets.
The stick-figure philosopher was racking his flat-as-a-pancake brain, assailing the inconceivable gap between the 3-D hand that creates-and-erases and life on a paper-thin plane, with rectangular dwellings in a strictly horizontal land, whose business advances along lawful lines. In pursuing a conclusion, a QED, he couldn’t escape the vision of apocalypse in the geometric world—bodiless points by the billions on the move in a mass migration upending hereness and thereness—and muttered to himself this axiom/prayer:

*the faceless are the foundation we need not explain.*

In our battle to be rational, we posit, based on three points, a plane, and say it extends—not knowing whether the universe is finite or infinite—indefinitely. Heady with the notions the brain entertains, the liberties it takes. The brain with our lightweight priceless belongings suitable for starting a home, a world packed in the suitcase of our cranium.

As far and farther than the eye can see, the plane extends, with no transcendence or end, and the crafty stick-figure Odysseus who long ago set off to battle foes in a fabulous Ilium . . . will he ever arrive at the war, or home?
Circular head bowed, your pliant spine an arc,
you approach the borderline of the two-dimensional
world as a suppliant ...

_to be scrutinized_

by the faces of polygons, which can bind a solid
object

At the checkpoint, a long line and a ritual
Stop, turn around. Please hold onto the railing
going down ...

emptying of pockets
signifies an assent to losing dimension.
Then,

_a cross-section is defined as the face_
you get when ...

you recite a litany
in response to a stick figure's inquisition
and are handed back to yourself stamped and
flattened on a page of your passport.

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The stick-figure soldier with stick submachine gun shooting
lethal lines across the plane of a page
frozen in a never-ending battle will never
remember he was drawn by the hand of a child
who penciled him in as indispensable and
disposable — a fragment of the adult
he wasn't or one of a platoon of saviors
whose fate he could play with? If I, looking now
at that child, could draw an imaginary line
from me to him and down to that infantryman,
the scarring graphite might fade to a ceasefire,
the paper re-embracing the bitter traces
back into the white weave of genesis.

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Each night in his rectangular bed, he imagines a third dimension a smidgeon above his head. Sometimes it takes the form of an Elysium somewhere in limbo where geometer-priests locked in a trance of logic stroll the meadows and greet one another nodding \textit{QED}. Or he'll profess his faith in the Hand that descends with transcendental digits to create or erase. An entity made of lines, he'll strive with two stick arms to lift himself from the white bed, by a millimeter until, exhausted, he'll fail, and then will intone this bedtime prayer: \textit{pyramid, prism, cylinder, cube, and cone.}

\begin{itemize}
\item
\end{itemize}

From Pointland, the abyss of no dimension, they yearn upward to the 2-D plane where stick figures, flattened out of legend and history, labor in the proof and proposition industry, their world swept clean, by definition, of gods and goddesses. They, in turn, while lugging polygons to QEDs, dream of 3-D mythologies.

Given: a self-defined titan who cannot find the celestial spheres destined, he feels it is written, to rest on his linear shoulders . . . Then: the quest across this height-less expanse for his own myth and task, to bear the full weight of the spinning heavens.

\begin{itemize}
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\end{itemize}
His old man had him memorize definitions
like spells that would keep him safe in his risky flight
through the geometric world — *A point is that
which has no part. A boundary is an extremity
of anything.* — and these are the mental wings
he fastened along with the wings of feathers and wax,
while burning with unspoken questions, how that which is nothing
could hold up everything, including himself,
and what could be on the farther side of the boundary
at the known world’s end. And at this moment, in flight,
the sun speaks to his passion, but rationally:
*A slight upward motion will enable
you to see all the worlds that I can see.*

The 2-D screen mediates between
the 3-D worlds on either side of it,
fusing the viewer with the viewed on a height-less
plane of longing peppered with pixels. *A surface
is an entity with length and width only.*
But the definition fails to indicate
how figures from “the other side,” almost
like those who have died, accommodate their former
bulk to flattened images that slide
this way and that, inviting us as shoddy
gods to dazzle in this leveled world
by means of avatars. Some even aver
that replay is our surest immortality.
Far above the Cave of the Everyday
with its stumbling myopia and misperception,
high in the realm of forms reside the Platonic
comic books that tell the exceptional tales
of America to gods who happen by:
perils on the Great Planes where superheroes
of every stripe — Wolverine, Batman — commingle
with cowboys, cattle-men, the tribes’ departing footsteps
forever under pixelated blue skies,
spread after spread of our tinted innocence,
unfettered by frames imposed by homesteader types
and where seldom is heard, over BOOM! and HURRAY!, a discouraging
word — skies are clear of word-balloons all day.

Starting from a point, a line, a plane,
one can build a geometric land
of sober logic and solidity
a nation of intimate circles and public squares
where citizens assume what is axiomatic:
A point $x_2$ establishes a line,
$x_3$ a plane, so a point’s foundational,
but then one day the multidimensional hand
falls victim to the infection, imagination,
beginning to think too long on points and
pointlessness. Believes this world is pervaded
by untold bodiless masses, a substratum
of nothing on which everything is raised.
Before me floats an image, man or shade.
We cannot know his legendary head
Looking into the heart of light, the silence.
Landscapes, seascapes, where have I been led?
Only an avenue, dark, nameless, without end
Leaves the world to darkness and to me
Where, living or dying I am still alone.
To be or not to be: that is the question.
I cannot see what flowers are at my feet;
Oh lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud.
Harmonious bells below, raising the dead:
Do you wish to rise? Begin by descending
Downward to darkness on extended wings.

[a cento or collage poem, composed of lines from other poems]

God who with solid geometry fabricated
Euclid in His own image will prove His love
for him, in the afterlife, by letting him ride
with the navigator in a B-17
Flying Fortress. Ghost with a flowing beard
he’s thrilled at first, ensconced in a narrow compartment
cluttered with wires, dials, and machine gun,
as his crewmate, a distant modern heir to logic’s
ancient testament, plots the course to the target
city using geometry and computes
the point of no return. Suddenly Euclid,
like Abraham, begins to bargain with God:
“But what if there are 50 good men or … 10? …”
A lot of gossip went into brewing a world. The whispers seeped out of nowhere, even before the faintest hint of existence: Did you hear? — this disembodied question in the abyss — answered by a susurrus of eager What? Who? How? No! The sense of a neighborhood and back-fence revelations pre-existed subatomic particles: Common notions furtively exchanged, sotto voce — psst! The whole will be greater than the part. Weird! I don’t believe it! — improbable inflation hurtling at warp speed, the word on the street: If equal is added to equal, the whole . . .

What if creation weren’t creation ex nihilo but the Handyman’s renovation of the void while clad in relevant workwear — overalls, safety goggles, heavy gloves — and equipped with spirit level, super-glue, etc. What if His powerful work-light were pre-solar and his greasy rags, the ur-model for terrain? What if his measuring tape and the void were coeval? He chooses point, line, and plane from his toolkit, poises the WIP on a point’s abyss, in a nod to the pre-primeval emptiness, but revamps his empty idea of heart so it beats for the meeting of parallel lines in an ultimate tryst.
A copy of Euclid’s *Elements* lying open
on a plane at the beginning or end of the world,
its pages riffled by the innumerate wind
busy rehearsing and breezily unlearning
dances and gestures, the pirouetting, jitter-
bugging, fake-hands-upraised-in-astonishment wind.

A page with parallel lines reveals a love
story half-hidden in a proof; another
flipped page and the definition of point, dimension-
less entity, implicates the bodiless
improbable ones that are the basis of all,
which ends or begins with a self-scouring book
and the wind’s almost human crouch and roll.

Which came first, the haplessly fractured lines
of fate or the straight line traveling on forever
and how did lines learn to conspire at corners, acute
or obtuse, and to domesticate space in shapes?
Why did the point surrender its abyss
to become a dot, a conventional locater?
And who agreed to all this, in what convocation?

— The straight line was interrupted when God
said let there be refraction and saw it was good
that light and energy waves were passing obliquely
between two mediums like air and water. —

But does the apparent deflection of the stick
disclose the fracture through which pain can enter?
I’m scanning a memory of myself at six: hunched over a page my graphite is scarring with loops and lines as I form my name, my 2-D identity, I am a boy made of point, line, and plane and now, a man, supine and absolutely still — inside the cylindrical womb of this hi-tech MRI scanner, sentenced to a term of 15 endless minutes in a cocoon of clatter, a hullabaloo — recalling a time of rapt silence, while this galumphing machine is signing its name with pictures of my spine writing with big magnetic hands that align and re-align infinitesimal particles.

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Place your finger on the point where the pain begins, then show how it shoots along the line of a nerve.

I’m nervous your procedure will be too clinical for something as intimate as an uninvited but insistent guest and as all-enveloping as a small universe.

Clinical, precisely! We have to pinpoint pain’s origin and trace the neural path of its propagation by superimposing graphs, planes with ruled axes, on the unruly body.

But what if a cure is realized not from the outside in but from the inside out, with words, a story, a diary that begins, "Dear Spine ..."?
The train is leaving and I am falling asleep
or waking, or the train may be arriving
at the border between the 2-D and 3-D worlds.
Will I be escorted off the train by the customs
police? I did not plan for these worlds to meet
at the border of waking and sleep. I’m riding this life-
line to a hypothetical terminus
that underlies every axiom in the book
regardless of angle or polygonal shape.
Should I take myself as a final proposition
and what, if anything, is beyond proof?
Is this where the mind must part from its gorgeous creations,
where the body alights but the line continues on? ...