

Real Numbers

by Aaron Sommers

I.

Nine is red, porous and solemn. It smells like cinnamon, and is the first integer I fell in love with—and we never forget our firsts. What a gorgeous digit to fall for! Nine's nothing like his brother, that pasty number six.

II.

They started when I was three. An aura, a sour taste and the pull of dark matter over my eyelids. My sister slept with her mouth ajar, clutching her baby doll. She morphed into the number seven. That's all. My sister Madeline stopped being my sister and became a supple, smooth number, full of life and ether and heat.

III.

The doctors called it a seizure—but that's only part of it.

IV.

Mother knew before they did. When she was pregnant, she'd feel karate chops every time the church bells rang.

V.

Father says music inspires people but I disagree. In my case, at least. I like those chimes because they're symmetrical—like a parabola.

VI.

Five is misty, uterine and smells of blood.

VII.

In spite of the doctors, mother and father enrolled me in Ulysses Grant High School. Here, Mr. Chase mercifully eliminates any fractions and zeros from his white board.

VIII.

Fractions are unspeakably foul. A malodor of vomit and rotten egg salad. Numbers stacked up like that is a vulgar sight. I can see those quotients, but I'd rather not, because they're the plumber's crack of mathematics.

IX.

Mr. Chase is twenty-seven. He was born on the eighteenth of September. This fact makes him a good one in my book. This book of esoterism and alchemy they call a Dis-order.

X.

Zero is the only number I fear. Everything about him screams regret. He's wrinkled, tear-stained, hopeless and angry. Inside his dark maw, burnt rubber lurks with gunpowder and dead dreams.

XI.

Matt Jobin sits next to me in my Academic Support Class. He wears a T-shirt emblazoned with twenty three. Apparently this is Michael Jordan's jersey number. I don't care about Mr. Jordan, but the number three is reassuring, and thus I tolerate Matt Jobin's idiosyncrasies (stutter, bad breath, etc.)

XII.

I see every number as a family member, each one forever linked to the other.

XIII.

Three is nine's younger sister. She's cheeky, soft yellow, festooned with sunflowers and talcum powder. Three tastes sweet like taffy.

XIX.

Two is pine needles and roses. He's shaHe's shaggy and affectionate. A reliable friend—if there ever was one.

XX.

Eight is a stunning, boner of a sight. Rubenesque and symmetrical, with luscious bouquets of lavender and vanilla. She's silky—the kimono of numbers. Eight will turn infinity on his head.

XXI.

My classmate's visage is a constellation of acne. Whenever he talks to me, the vectors move and highlight the matrix of rows and columns otherwise known as Matt Jobin's Face

XXII.

I didn't memorize Pi. They said I did, but that's not accurate. I just described what I observed. It's all I can do.

XXIII.

Four is green. He's a freshly cut lawn.

XXIV.

Last month was full of dismal-dim stuff. After he reached his Tipping Point, Dad let me turn up the thermostat to ninety-two. My shadowy clouds lifted when those numbers blinked on the screen. Dad sat on the couch in his boxer shorts with a beer and watched the Red Sox. That's how he eases the pain.

XXV.

Now, at the Senior Awards Ceremony, my Polo shirt is drenched in sweat, so mother hands me another salt tablet. I'm the most seasoned student in the district.

XXVI.

One is a dangerous figure. Forever standing alone, it's neon orange, glossy, and white-hot.

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XXVI.

One is a dangerous figure. Forever standing alone, it's neon orange, glossy, and white-hot. A tang of musk, shoe polish and pencil shavings. One's razor-sharp, too. It's cut me many times. Paper cuts, gashes, the works. That's what you get for trying to hold the torch. People all over the world pine for number one because it promises a reprieve from the ordinary, but it'll just burn you in the end.

XXVII.

I am third in my class. Three out of four hundred and eighty five—a statistic that fills me with nameless dread.

XXVIII.

On our way home, mother drives precisely thirty-three miles per hour. She always manages to calm me down. Mother holds my hand and says I've come a long way. Nine years after it started, we're finally at the end of my Individualized Education Plan. We're at the end of a long road.

Or not.