

Poems, by Marion Cohen

Marion Cohen's poems have appeared in *The Mathematical Intelligencer* and *The American Mathematical Monthly*, among other places.

(1)

Another math professor I know does nature photography.
She says she likes to pretend she doesn't know what's in front and what's
behind
or what's a reflection and what isn't
or what are the objects, what are the spaces.
She says she likes to look at things
as though she doesn't know what they are.

(2)

When you need more than you prove, it's a nightmare.
But when you prove more than you need, it's unnerving.
You don't need more
than one revelation.
You don't need more
than one excuse.

(3)

A mathematician should never watch action films.
She has already swum without water, run without roads, flown without sky
has already known too many directions
has already been reduced to a point.
She has had enough of thinking hard
enough of hoping that thinking will save her.

(4)

After a while making a proof is like making a calculation.
There are certain things you automatically do.
You move with closed eyes, clenched eyes, inward eyes, no eyes.
You move, very soon, with no brain.
After a while crossing the implication sign is like crossing the equal sign.
After a while a proof is collapsed to a point.

(5)

Remember Eureka?
Well, what's Greek for "I lost it"?
Did Archimedes ever hit the streets with THAT word?

Did he shriek it? Bellow it?
Did the sounds waves increase with distance and with time?

Or did he sob and tremble it?
Bay it at the moon?

And his bathrobe -- did he pull and tear at it
as though it were a straitjacket?
Did he weep into it?
Clutch a corner and crumple?

And then, eventually, did he pick up again
into the next street
under the next sky
muttering that one Greek word?

(6)
Eureka!
Pretty Eureka!
Pretty Eureka with sugar on top?
I have read the signals.
I have broken the code.
I have figured out which lines to pluck.
I collected my lemmas from every port and brought them on board; I brought
them
 to my country.
I see the scene. I see the act. I have not solved the cosmos but I have
solved
 this house.
All of infinity is still unsolved but I have this picture, I have this brain.

(7)
I am not ready or willing
to let anything else reveal to me
that I am one of many
and that there are too many.
I can't, that is, quite hear
the music of the spheres.

I am able to listen only
to the hissing of the points
the humming of the lines
the throbbing of the planes.

Only math can make me say it.
Only math can make me think it.

Only math may lead me
into that good night.

FEAR OF EVERYTHING

I stare at each object.
It is a one.
It is that which contains the empty set.

In particular, it is that which contains.
It has to contain, whether it's a container or not.

And maybe, today, it has to contain MORE than the empty set.
Maybe it has to contain a full set.

And now I stare at the empty set.
It, too, has to contain.

DREAM OF THE DRAGGING OF INERTIAL FRAMES

I discover that objects can't move without pulling what's next to them.
So when a train starts up, so does part of the road.
Everything is like gum.
Everything is like muscles.
These muscles work very hard.

A road can't be independent of the train.
A train can't be independent of the road.
I can't be moving and not Jeff.
Jeff can't be paralyzed and not me.

I can't do range-of-motion on him
while he does range-of-stillness on me.

LIFE WITH FEWER TRIANGLES

Before third grade the base of a triangle had to be directly below its
opposite corner. If the corner was too far to the left or right, the shape wasn't a
triangle. So I lived many years without certain triangles. Later I realized
that even if the corner did go off to a side I could still use a different
edge as the base. Yes, I lived years before discovering the rest of the
triangles. Years before I, like those lopsided late-blooming triangles, flipped into
place.

ALONG THE WAY

We begin with an equation and we do everything we need to solve it, and not
only is the equation equivalent to the solution at the end, it's equivalent to
everything along the way. The important things are the equation at the

beginning and the solution at the end but what of the unimportant things?

What of these mini-lemmas
which are there when you need them
and when you don't need them
stay out of the way?