

The Men Who Forgot Math and Poetry

by Steve Ersinghaus

The mathematician said, "I've forgotten all my math. It's the worse thing I can think of to say."

The poet said, "And me, I've forgotten all my poems. It's almost like a nightmare."

The mathematician and the poet went for drinks with money they'd taken from a man who wept in an abandoned room and who gave them his money freely.

The mathematician ordered a beer. The poet ordered a beer, too. "I think that would be good," the poet said.

"Months ago," the mathematician said, "a man came to me and said, 'You're the mathematician. You're the one who took all our programs and synthesized them all into a number that no one can read, a complex number impossible to untangle.' I didn't know what he was talking about, couldn't remember any numbers or their relationships. He grew violent and said, 'Nothing works anymore. The computers have all stopped working and they're waiting for your number to tell them what to do. You must do something.'"

"I ran from him. This man made no sense, and he'd already pressed bruises into my shoulders. I came here to hide, where there are no numerical relations, not that I would recognize them."

"That's an incredible story," the poet said, drinking his beer. "I, on the other hand, know what poetry is: it's the possessing of one word after the next. However, I possess no sequences of words. When I

put one word beside another word I forget what I'm doing and instead I end up drawing shapes and when I show these shapes to people they look at me and say, 'Where's the poem you promised me?' And so I fled and came here to hide where there are no poets, no words to possess, at least none that I can tell."

"One day," the mathematician said, "they took me to a warehouse. They put electrodes on my head and fed electricity into my brain to extract the knowledge they claimed I possessed. I only remember the pain and the fear in their eyes."

"Like you," the poet said, "I was taken. They took me to a river. They put me on a raft. They tied a rope to the raft, which prevented it from falling over a waterfall. Then they put a candle under the rope and told me, 'Write a poem before the flame eats through the rope and only then will we save you.' Luckily, I survived, though a few ribs, I think, are cracked."

"They treat us like shit," the mathematician said. "They think they can just take us and electrocute us and drown us."

"They do," the poet said, miserably.

They drank their beer. The last sip was still icy cold. They ordered two more.

"The worst thing about it is, I know I'm a mathematician. But I have no math in me."

The poet agreed. "That's like me. I have no sequences of words to possess. But I know I once had them, which is both frustrating and liberating."

The mathematician and the poet heard approaching sirens. They heard outside the bar a wild screeching of tires. They heard a

sudden bullhorn: "We know you're in there, a mathematician and a poet. We want that number; we want that poem. Come out or we'll blow the place up."

The poet turned to the shaking barkeeper, who was watching the door with tear-filled eyes, and said, "You better get out of here. Because we're not leaving."

The mathematician said, "Tell them we're drinking beer. Tell them that the mathematician and the poet said that they can go to hell."

"Or just run away," the poet said. "Just run. But I warn you, if you run away, they will catch you. Farewell."

