

WHY EUCLID

The order was all wrong. There was the sequence “Euclidean City”—it would be the last section, the fourth section, yes. But what of the other three? I unpinned the drafts from the wall and started shuffling the pages about on the floor, reading, re-reading, marking—my notes formed a palimpsest over the printed text, filled margins and headings. I had Euclid down, what I would call “the muse” behind the project if I believed in muses. I saw the underlying language of geometry connecting the poems. But something was amiss—the manuscript wasn’t coming together.

When I hit a wall with a project I take a three hour nap, or play a strategy-oriented computer game where I can conquer the world, or shred old papers from notebooks and the filing cabinet. It was summer, 2003, weeks before the birth of my niece, before the blackout. I was putting together the sections of my first manuscript. I was also shredding a paper trail of old notebooks, drafts, and bill statements, piles of paper that had accumulated over the years. Moving across the country inspires this sort of cleaning house, and I had been slowly paring down the detritus since I moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan. It was July. I had been in Michigan almost a year. I was down to my last box and filing cabinet drawer.

I plugged in the shredder and pulled out a large blue binder. The cover bore a painting: a black and white homage to Madonna—writhing in silver paint—from her “Fever” video. *What is this?* I wondered, half-expecting to find a notebook filled with magazine interviews and newspaper clippings and other fan memorabilia from my teenage, Madonna-obsessed days. I opened it to discover the notes from a Classical Lit Honors course I took my senior year of high school. I paged through the four sections—Religion, Literature, Politics & Society, Mathematics & the Natural Sciences—and stumbled upon two texts. The first was a handout in the Lit section, a poem I had always loved—Edna St. Vincent Millay’s “Euclid Alone Has Looked on Beauty Bare.” *This, I thought, this here, this class was where I fell in love with that poem, a poem which would lend me one of the epigraphs to the collection: Let all who prate of beauty hold their peace.* The second text was Albert Einstein’s “Geometry and Experience” and a passage caught my eye: “...it is certain that mathematics in general, and geometry in particular, owes its beginnings to the need to discover something about the behavior of real things.”

I snatched a draft off the floor, a poem entitled “To Euclid, On the Geometry of Behavior.” There it was, the word *behavior* twice. And reading over the poem I noticed how fractured Millay’s poem was within my own. *This will be the first poem, I decided, an invocation to Euclid, a poem to kick-off the manuscript separate from any section. A preface, a prayer, an introduction.*

In the following weeks the rest of the manuscript’s sections came together and each took a cue

from this language of Geometry: “Triangulations,” “Nautical Axioms,” and “Non-Geometric Assertions.” But something was still missing—those first three sections needed a coda that also acted as bridge to the fourth section, a poem that mirrored “To Euclid...” Again I returned to the Classical Lit notebook (I had not shredded it, but found a home for it on a shelf) and found my notes on and proofs for Euclid’s 47 Propositions from his *Elements, Book I*. Re-reading his postulates and definitions it became clear to me that an abandoned draft might have new life breathed into it by writing it in the voice of Euclid. Given that little is known about Euclid of Alexandria, the blank slate of this historic figure gave me the freedom to imagine his voice while incorporating the main quote attributed to him (*there is no royal road to geometry*) and write the poem I needed to write to complete the movement of the first three sections while transitioning to the fourth. This poem—“Euclid, On the Erotic Postulate”—also lent me the title for the manuscript: *The Erotic Postulate*.

I tell this story and share these poems as a testament and a thank you to the teacher of my high school Classical Lit class—Len Perrett—on the occasion of his retirement. This class planted the seeds of my creative and intellectual pursuits that still haunt and concern me a decade later. He put texts in my hands that I still read, texts to which I return, texts I now teach to my own students. I still have the notebook from this class tucked away on a bookshelf. Some papers are worth destroying, worth the feeling of release as they separate into thin strips. Others you hold on to, especially ones like these, ones that mark the beginning of the mind’s movements, the mind set into motion, ideas launched like a thousand ships after looking in the mirror your first mentor holds.

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