

GARY FINCKE

The Prophecies of Mathematics

Not even his wife wanted to listen
To Francis Galton explain that prayer made
No difference, that insurance companies
Knew the facts of longevity, and there
Was no adjustment for people who prayed
And the various buildings they lived in.
Not even, but he said it anyway—
The pious live no longer than the bad.
It's always this way with Jeremiahs.
In the prophecies of mathematics
Are equations for hours in the sun,
Alcohol in the blood, early marriage.
There, among the numbers, lies the total
Of the truth of ourselves, and I admit
I've counted the daily steps from my house
To my office through six possible routes;
I've counted the frequency of letters,
Rooting for underdogs like *b* and *k*
To outdo their predicted sums of use.

Trivial? Stupid? I estimated
The minutes, once, until the end of school,
Wrote seventy-five thousand, six hundred,
In my September notebook and followed
The lurch of each long minute on the clock
For three periods of world history,
Latin, and plane geometry until
I rejoined the classroom of common sense,
Abandoning the women who number
The knocks on a door to seven, the breaths
Before starting their cars to six, knowing
Nothing about the habits of Galton,
Who kept track of boredom by numbering
The small fidgets of a congregation,
Who counted the brush strokes as his portrait
Was painted, who evaluated place,
At last, by the beauty of its women,
Selecting London like a pageant judge,
Leaving it to us to tally the days
Till what's longed for may or may not arrive,

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Keeping calendars of Xs that end,
Each time, on the eve of possible joy
Like a merciless cliffhanger for faith.