Excerpt from *Three: A Memoir*

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One to One: Chapter One

Nadine and Junior Payne crossed the state line into Sparta, North Carolina to get married in 1961. Nadine was only 15 years old, but the age of consent in Virginia was 16. Her parents wouldn't sign a paper saying they approved, so she and Junior took it upon themselves to make things happen. Nadine wasn't pregnant; they were just in love.

This was the story Nadine's daughter, Donna, told me one day after church at her house on Lovers Lane, a country road that wove from the noise of the interstate through a patchwork of alfalfa and cornfields. We were both in elementary school, but Donna was my sister's age, a year younger than me. In her family's finished basement, lined with painted cement blocks, we listened to Kiss and talked about marriage and romance. "Beth" was the only Kiss song I liked— a longhaired rocker caught between his wife and the band, a song about a girl.

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Numbers have gender; I've known this for as long as I can remember. The smallest natural number, *one*, is the patriarch of the single-digit numerals, and *two* is the matriarch. He is Jack Sprat: lean, tall, eating no fat. But his wife bulges with an ample bosom and a somewhat angular paunch, a cubist take on the female figure. *Three* is male—older, possessing wisdom of some kind, a retired leader, who keeps a tight lip. *Four* is female and bitchy, a younger sister to *three*. *Five* is also female, partnered with the male *six*, who is submissive to her orders. *Seven* is male, as are *eight* and *nine.* Of these, *eight* is the kindest.

As a child, still ignorant of important mathematics, my mind's sky was lit with constellations of stories that opened to questions: Why do we need money, and what would happen if we didn't have it? What if Adam and Eve had never noticed their nakedness? Does falling in love feel like a piano dropping on your head? Could there be a scientific reason for a bush spontaneously bursting into flame or a star appearing in the night sky to lead three wise men to the baby Jesus on Christmas Day? I rolled these questions around in my head like I was savoring a butterscotch, enjoying the flavor, wanting those moments to last. I collected data to

support various hypotheses, making mental field notes of the ways in which the people around me interpreted these mysteries or whether they considered them at all.

And then there were the relationships, like the gender of numbers and the mental maps of my physical location in association to others: my father to the north, sitting at his desk at the community college; my mother south, reading books to students in her elementary school library; my younger sister east, just down the hall, swinging her little legs underneath her school table.

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We played tag in the front yard of my house, stumbling in the dark over the fat roots of the black walnut tree. Eight of us—my sister, Lee and his siblings, Donna and hers—screamed and raced around the black-green surface of our lawn, sometimes wielding invisible light sabers inspired by images on the 15-foot movie screen we had just sat before, stock-still in the revelation of a *galaxy far, far away*. We had walked to and from the Main Street theatre with our parents. Now, in the dark, Lee's shock of white hair shined, and sometimes he stopped, still, at the margins of the yard to look for me, but I was dark and fast.

Tag was the game of choice for our set, whether we played after church or while our parents sipped coffee inside our homes, having declared that we should *go out and play*. We had not yet segregated ourselves by age or gender, and this contest was an equalizing force, especially in the dark.

Star Wars was the first PG movie I ever saw, and that night I stood at the gateway of my adolescence: marked with boys, love notes, community-center dances, sideways glances. But when we played tag in my front yard, I was only nine years old, and Lee didn't come to my house in town again until years later.

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At around two or three years old, children learn to count stairs as they go up and down, associating the progression of steps with a progression of numbers. Adults model this behavior, calling out the number, as the soles of their shoes land flat on the step above or below, a tiny hand grasped in their own. This practice is not mandated or taught; it is something our parents did with us or that we watched an adult do with a child. It is done in most cultures, languages, countries: a game to play with a pre-rational child, when we're tired at the dinosaur museum or

coaxing her downstairs for breakfast or upstairs for a bath. It is a song, a poem, an instinctive ritual.

In this throwaway moment, this in-between time, children become aware of a critical mathematical concept. Before they recognize the symbols for numbers or associate colors with their names, they discover—not through exposition but through experience—what mathematicians call *one-to-one correspondence*, the notion that each element of one set is mapped to a unique element of another set, with no elements left unmapped in either set. In simple terms children understand, a unique number can be associated with a unique step. The third step from the bottom cannot also be the fourth step. The tenth step cannot also be the first. And there is exactly the same number of steps as numbers needed to count them.

This concept is fundamental, yes, and also abstract, because it depends on a mathematical map. Going up stairs one by one is a different map than going down the stairs one by one. When the direction is reversed, the last step becomes the first and the first becomes the last. But our brains don't consciously untangle this inconsistency. Adults don't need to explain to children why the number associated with each step is not constant. We automatically accept that there are three components at play here: the numbers, the stairs, and the direction.

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My grandparents on Daddy's side met when Grandmother was 12 years old. Granddaddy moved into her mother's boarding house in Lynchburg when he was 19. He was brash and bold and loved the ladies. He once hung out with a young Patsy Cline at the drug store in Winchester. *She was a wild girl*, he said. Grandmother was the complete opposite, but she fell for him, hard. At that young and tender age, she told her mother, *I'm going to marry that man.* And six years later, she did.

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Even when I was in elementary school, marriage was a given, both a decision and a non-decision, the only grownup option I knew, really, surrounded by couples who married young and didn't divorce. My choice was not about status or money or even tradition. I knew I would marry because we are a one-to-one people. We pair off in the Appalachian Mountains; we map one man to one woman, exclusively, uniquely.

This was already happening to me. In the privacy of my mind and diary, I nurtured a secret romance with Lee, Donna's cousin, for some time. We did not speak, and we looked away quickly when surreptitiously catching each other's eye at school. I wrote in my denim bound diary with the clear plastic strap and cheap metal lock: *Laura + Lee = Love*. A simple equation with no proof.

I wrote in faint pencil to make my thoughts real.

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Mathematics is abstract in the same way language is abstract. We know a line may be horizontal, vertical, or slanted, but, despite its type, a line is still a line. We also know a cardinal can be a North American red bird or a leader in the Catholic Church or a number denoting a quantity or a professional baseball player in St. Louis. Distinguishing one line from all other lines and one cardinal from all other cardinals is where the work lies. Abstractions require metaphors, symbols, and emblems for us to comprehend and use them. Both language and mathematics pull abstractions down to the ground where we can wrestle with them, understand them in more concrete ways. We can literally see the connections between a cardinal (the North American bird) and a Cardinal (the priest); each is bright red. Equally, we can literally see the differences between horizontal, vertical, and sloped lines, whether graphed on a Cartesian plane or, with some explanation of the meaning behind the symbols, described as equations. The graphs of all horizontal lines look alike, though they may be positioned differently—a smidgen higher or lower, for example. The equations look alike, too: $y = n$ (where n is any real number in the universe).

A line is much different from most cardinals, because a line literally does not exist. (I say *most cardinals*, because cardinal numbers are also abstractions, like lines.) A line is a one-dimensional figure, of infinite length but absolutely no width. The closest physical representation of a line is the edge of a flat surface, where two sides meet—a table top, a brick, adjacent facets of a crystal. Even then, the representation fails because, while that edge may not have thickness, it cannot be infinitely long. At best, these are rough examples of line segments, bits of lines. The same cannot be said of a red bird, which I can hold in my hand, feel the unbending edges of its feathers, and look into its beady, black eye. Language may be more abstract than the nouns that describe things we can touch, see, taste, smell, or hear. *Love* is one such word. It remains

conceptual, impossible to universalize. And so love has been called "a red, red rose" (Robert Burns), "a battle" (James Baldwin), "acceptance of other" (Anais Nin), "that loosener of limbs" (Sappho), "our pursuit of happiness, our desire to be complete" (Plato), and "a process, delicate, violent, often terrifying to both persons involved" (Adrienne Rich).

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Yellow buses dropped us off before the bell signaled we could go to our lockers, so we crammed into the high school lobby on the first day. Adolescent conversations and shrieks echoed from cinderblocks, and I tried to make myself small, occupying the space of one, newly polished floor tile. I was no longer one of the youngest, having passed through eighth grade the previous year. Two days earlier, I had chosen my clothing carefully and practiced curling my hair into wings that framed my face. I was pretty but too introspective to be popular, and when an upper-class football player turned to check me out, I blushed a deep red.

Right away, he noticed my sudden development, his eyes focusing on my chest approvingly. "I see what you did this summer!" he announced loudly. It was true: over the span of only a few months, I had grown out of the bras my mother had selected for me from the girls' department at Leggett's on Main Street, and by August, I shopped by myself in the women's lingerie section, charging purchases to my parents' account. I was both proud and humiliated at his exclamation. I didn't want the attention, but my body promised relationships with boys, one of whom could become my husband.

That year I dated several boys, holding their hands in the halls and attending school dances. They always made the first move, checked me out through friends. Our Sadie Hawkins Dance was a gimmick; the boys held the power of the question, and my answer was almost always *yes*. *Yes* to dates and dances and *going together*. My upperclassmen boyfriends always broke up with me, usually because they were ready to move on to the next girl, someone their age, someone more mature.

But that year I acclimated to my new body, which garnered attention. I wanted life-long love; none of these boys was the one.

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We teenagers were spring birds, loudly and subtly announcing our availability and later our one-to-one partnerships. Tradition and movies taught us that girls are demure, waiting, sending barely noticeable messages of our interest, our need. Even in the neon colors of 1980s fashions and hair teased tall and sprayed in place like feathers, we girls ducked our heads when a boy looked our way. Still, we knew our power. We flipped our hair and glossed our lips so they looked pink and wet. The boys strutted and performed for us, perhaps without knowing, their hormones generating a script they followed clumsily, overacting and hogging the stage with soliloquies. These performances repeated throughout the day, and the halls of our schools were thick with expectation and wanting.

The fall of our sophomore year, everyone noticed Lee, bulked up from lifting free weights on the side porch of his house after he and his daddy finished milking at night. His hair was white-blonde, his skin pink-red after a summer of baling hay. There he was, strutting down the hall in his maroon and gray football jersey, number 89 blazed across his chest. There he was, openly flirting with Jill Harper Wilkens, who was a cheerleader and an honor student. There he was, asking her to the homecoming dance.

I had no date. I was tired of my role, of standing by the sidelines, waiting for a boy I liked to notice me. I was tired of dating whoever came along, whoever took an interest in me. At 15, I was ready to settle down like Nadine and Junior had, and Lee seemed like the perfect candidate. I wanted to say what my Grandmother did: *I'm going to marry that boy*. I did say it in my head. I promised to remember to tell my own grandchildren about our meeting story, about the years of silence and secret romance, and of the years we would spend making up for that silence.

There, before me, was a challenge. As far as I could tell, Jill Harper wasn't worthy of Lee. She'd leave our little town behind for some place far away where she could live in a brand-new house and never have to smell cow manure or pull boots on over her expensive leather flats purchased from the high-end shoe store on Main Street. Lee needed a girl who was not afraid to get dirty. He needed a full partner, someone who wanted to stay home, no matter what, who would be happy on the farm, who wouldn't miss being a social butterfly (because she never was), the center of attention in a new house, in a nice section of town.

I had dated older boys, pressed my hips against theirs to feel their physical reaction. I had slow danced and kissed and stuffed notes into locker vents. I had leaned up against a boyfriend in the hallway, tucked my head into the hollow of his shoulder. In some clear way, I knew what

would work with Lee. I could breach the silence we had built between ourselves over years without saying a word, without waiting for him to make the first move.

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In Euclidean geometry, answers are valid in only one, small, tightly defined zone—the plane. (Parallel lines are no longer parallel when placed on a sphere.) These carefully drawn boundaries were comforting, and I approached my learning with renewed vigor, discovering ancient truths through deductive proof. Geometry was both a vessel and an invitation to explore outside the margins, allowing my mind to wander without shame.

Proofs, theorems, postulates, and definitions: these merged language (which made sense to me) with mathematics (which felt foreign). Language won out, and finally—since I had first taught myself to read—I was good at something, naturally, almost effortlessly. My brain was like a primed racehorse at the gates, lathered and puffing and ready to put rippling muscles into use. In two columns, I unlocked replicating puzzles, proving two angles were congruent or two triangles were similar or two lines were parallel. Each fact—definition, postulate, theorem—was hung on a little hook inside my head, like a broom or a garden spade, waiting to be pressed into service and then placed back for the next time.

Euclidean geometry is tidy, a paradoxically infinite space with clear boundaries, like the mountains that simultaneously lifted me to the sky and sheltered me. Thinking abstractly, guided by the laws of logic and rhetoric, I grappled with a new truism: what I saw—mathematically and otherwise—was only a fraction of what existed. I found inverses and contradictions, representations of truth without the need for hard measures. A whole world crackled and popped outside of my Virginia mountains, and mathematics could inspire more questions than answers. While working within the confines of Euclid's structure, I could ask, *what if?* What if geometry's rules were tested in four dimensions instead of three? What if algebra existed outside of the Cartesian plane? These rhetorical questions were soothing; if mathematics weren't absolute, perhaps I wasn't either. Even so, I was soothed by the structure, the rules.

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In English class, I sat behind Lee, the front edge of my desk bumping against the seat back of his. I was not tall, but it didn't take much for me to slink my hips low in my seat so my knees

rested against the open space at the back of his desk, against the pockets of his Levi's. I felt a tingle of danger the first time I did this. He noticed, of that I'm sure, because after a couple of seconds, the back of his neck went scarlet, and he shifted so my knees lost contact. I held my breath and waited. Soon he shifted again, so we made contact again. I pressed a degree harder, sliding along the ambiguity of the motion. Lee must have known what I was doing—he must have wondered if I was doing this on purpose. We didn't speak. He didn't whip around to shout: *What the hell?* He didn't tell the teacher I was touching him inappropriately. But the back of his neck turned cardinal red. I believed he was worried I'd embarrass him further. I stayed quiet to earn his trust. I was building on our secrecy, the language of silence we had trusted for years.

For several days, I continued this practice, but unpredictably. Only machines—not humans—are capable of reproducing real randomness, but I did my best, straightening my back at the beginning of class one day and slumping into my seat the next. Lee was also unpredictable, sitting from time to time so I could not reach him. Over time, though, we developed an anticipated pattern.

Cats brush up against the furniture when they wish to be petted, or they bump their heads against their human's hand, shoulder or head. This was what Lee did. Coming into class, with his eyes lowered so they couldn't meet mine, he slid into his desk and straightened his spine. Like other animal species, he was showing his ass. And I took the cue.

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The principle of one-to-oneness is the foundation of counting. Simply reciting the numbers from one to nine is not counting because these names are merely emblems of an abstract concept. The name or symbol of the number is not what matters, but the meaning behind it. The word or symbol is only a signal, a moniker that helps us readily notice *seven* is different from *eight*. This may seem so obvious it's not worth saying, but it's a way of organizing an idea so esoteric it took thousands of years for humans to develop. Yet, children grasp the concept relatively easily, as if their brains were developed to assign one idea to exactly one thing they can see or touch.

At this same young age, children learn the properties of relationships, which are not always one-to-one. A child might have two parents, whom they are expected to love equally (not one-to-one), but they may notice their parents and their friends' parents have one-to-one correspondences with each other: one husband and one wife, not three husbands and one wife.

And in these examples, the rules may narrow further: one husband and one wife, not one wife and one wife. Eventually, these observations begin to form the answers to important questions: Whom can we love? Whom can we marry?

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I don't know who made the first move, who brought our English-class flirtation into the open, but our pseudo-private performance became public when we sophomores gathered at an empty warehouse to paint the traditional homecoming sign, a gigantic length of fabric emblazoned with a spirit-inducing motto to hang on the side of the school building. The cavernous room was dark and gloomy. A bright, white sheet of cotton stretched 15 feet or so, reflecting the dim, autumn light from dusty windows so it illuminated the floor. Someone had used black paint to write *Undefeated We Will Be in Homecoming '8*3 in block letters from top to bottom, and we each signed our names in maroon paint. Lee signed *The Hef 89*, his football number plus the nickname he gave himself (short for *heifer*, which made no sense, because a heifer is a virgin cow, a female).

Most of us were covered in oil-based paint, donated by one of the local hardware stores. The room pulsed with excitement, school spirit, and sexuality; the vibrations were nearly manifest. Lee loaded a brush with burgundy paint and pressed it into my forehead. We stared into each other's eyes, maybe for the first time ever. His were a bright blue, not watery but lit up like a summer sky. I could barely see his blonde eyebrows and eyelashes in the shadows, but a bit of white stubble speckled his chin, glowing in the muted light from broken warehouse windows against skin reddened by weather and eagerness. We were opposites: my eyes brown with gold flecks, my hair mousey, my skin olive. At that moment, an electrical current connected us, from my forehead through the bristles and handle of the paintbrush and into his fist. He couldn't have let go if he tried.

The painting party wound down, and we each headed home. I walked across town to my house; Lee's mother picked him up for the drive out to the country. Soap and water wouldn't remove the paint from my hair and skin, so Daddy dipped me over the basement sink to pour turpentine on my head. The smell stung my nose and eyes, but the silky oil felt good on my skin and scalp. *How on earth did you manage to get paint in your ears?* Daddy asked.

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We are a one-to-one people in the Appalachian Mountains, seeking romantic partnerships (one man and one woman) fueled by desire and practicalities. In marriage, we join an existing family, one with generations-long traditions and mores that might be similar to our own or different. But beyond the initial spark of love, marriage must be sustained with reason and a levelheaded commitment to the labor required for a marriage to work. One-to-one is a special relationship reserved for romantic partnerships, but it is not static. Each set, each person is subject to external and internal influences that threaten the map. Like everything in Appalachia—weather, terrain, social strata—marriage is both an ordinary expectation and something that cannot be taken for granted.

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Lee and I began *going together* a week later.

   We called this *love*.

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At their cores, mathematics and language require a questioning of the obvious. Two things can be the same but look different, and then nuance appears in the definitions, the descriptions of uniformity and differences, pushing our inherently organized minds to categorize the things we can and cannot see. We tuck away the minor and major similarities of the various types of *cardinal* and *love* so we can make identifications, so we'll know them when we see them. But in this exercise, we may cut corners or make compromises because most abstractions and even many tangibles cannot be classified with precision. Words cannot fully express meaning, because *cardinal* can describe many more than one, precise thing. When these imprecisions fail us, we are faced with critical and difficult questions: What assumptions are we making? How can we pull ourselves from what we believe to be true so we can find real truth?

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What I thought of as my fate with Lee began as a conscious choice, the initial attempt at solving a mathematical equation: Laura $+ x =$ Love. By chance, we grew up in the same geographical area, were the same age, race, religion, socioeconomic status. We were also both seeking love. I

could not know him completely, but I knew enough to feel safe, to feel that whatever compromise I made—because one-to-oneness is always a compromise and the plane restricts our movement—was worth what I gave up. (I didn't know yet what I was giving up.)

I was attracted to Lee, yes: broad-shouldered, white-blonde, blue-eyed; quietly intelligent, introverted, funny. I was attracted to his farm where milk, the most basic component of survival, the most elemental aspect of reproducing females, is a commodity, a way of life. I felt secure in knowing he would inherit the farm from his father, Leland, who built it from scratch, one black-and-white Holstein cow at a time. I liked how the hard muscles of his chest rose and fell under my cheek. I liked being identified as one of a couple. I wanted to be the happy, in-love pair that could skip the rituals of courtship and fall into monogamy effortlessly and without question. I wanted an arrangement born of choice that would become fated romance and partnership and love that would extend no farther than the edge of our mountains, never answering the question: *what if?*

Chapter Two

Momma and Daddy attended the same high school just at the north opening of the Shenandoah Valley where the wide, almost-mythical river cut through the west edge of town. But they weren't sweethearts until just after graduation, when Daddy finally noticed Momma and screwed up his courage to ask her out. She said yes even though she was dating another boy at the time. Teenagers played the field in the early 1960s.

They courted throughout college, Momma finishing up her teaching degree in three years instead of four so they could marry as soon as possible. Daddy hitchhiked up and down I-81 between Virginia Tech and James Madison College to see her on the weekends. Her college had strict rules, but somehow they found moments of solitude and romance. They attended ring dances: her in a hooped ball gown and him in his Air Force ROTC uniform. She left her engagement ring on the rim of a sink in the bathroom during a Virginia Tech football game, but it was there when she raced back to find it. After marriage, they settled in Blacksburg, living for the first time in the Appalachian Mountains where they would ultimately raise a family. Momma worked as a librarian at Floyd County High School, and Daddy finished his undergraduate and

graduate degrees in engineering. By all accounts, including the half-dozen boxes of daily letters they wrote to each other while apart, they were in love, ready to spend the rest of their lives together.

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Immanual Kant asserts that the sublime is limitless. Love is also without limits, at least potentially. This is not to say love must progress infinitely, but love is not a limited resource. When you are in love, you do not use that love up on one person or in one period of time, requiring a recharge like a battery or a good night's sleep. Love seeps beyond the person, even, to encompass place and thoughts and dreams, because it is frequently these things that make the person lovable. Love may not survive difficulties, separations, betrayal—but it can. Love may or may not require reciprocation: a parent can love a teenager despite her cold shoulder, her angry stare; secret love can endure in only the heart or mind of the lover, remaining invisible to the person being loved. The love itself does not determine this sustainability; it is the people involved who push through conflicts or retreat because the difficulties are too great. After infidelities or physical abuse, love may linger. Yet after sustained small slights, it may fall apart like a letter folded and unfolded too many times. Love is a noun and a verb, a thing (a concept, an emotion) and an action (the doing of the feeling, the force applied). In *I love you*, love is like an arrow connecting *I* with *you* in an action that can be neither physically witnessed by itself (no actual arrow is shot from Cupid's bow) nor measured by science. In this way, love is not different from *blue* or *tall*; the reality of it depends on the perspective of the *I*.

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It wasn't just Lee I loved.

The milking parlor was my favorite part of the farm. It smelled sweetly of shit and feed, and from our vantage point standing on the sunken floor, eye level to the milking, all we could see were udders and hindquarters, tails twitching aimlessly or nervously. The parlor had no leggy, velvet-upholstered chairs or spindly side tables adorned with lace doilies. Its floor was not covered with a silk rug. I appreciated this irony. A home's parlor is traditionally women's domain. A milking parlor is designed for female bodies that are doing the work of female mammals, work that requires durable materials: concrete, steel, and rubber valves.

Inside, the air was warm and sweetly smelly and loud with sucking sounds and given over to ritual. In my first evenings there, I was cutting into a generational waltz, but joining the two dancers instead of replacing one. The three of us—Leland, Lee, and I—were initially awkward, but we found our rhythm. We learned to watch one another, to sense another's presence on the margins of peripheral vision, and we discovered a graceful movement. Milking became ceremony.

When the swooshing of the milkers ceased and the cows were back in the barn or wandering up the hill to graze under moonlight, I could hear the calves bellowing for their mommas, for milk. While Lee and his father sprayed down the floor and walls and disinfected the milkers, I gathered calf bottles, filled them with warm milk from a valve in the pipe just before it reached the silver refrigerated tank, and screwed fat rubber nipples on top. Walking the 100 yards to the calf hutches, I could hear their calls get louder and more urgent; I could see their elongated, black-and-white trapezoid faces with pink noses hanging over the gates of their hutches. They tilted their heads back to bray, the lumps in their throats bobbing down and then up with the effort. I could feed two at a time, one bottle in each hand, while the other one or two calves cried for us to hurry, cried for their turn.

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Like love, mathematics is also sublime. What if I told you mathematics exists without human intervention, a river under the surface of our physical world? What if I said it was invented by long-dead men and women, like a language or a tool, to describe the physical and metaphysical world? The difference lies in *being* and *doing*, the noun and the verb. If mathematics exists like planets and atoms and fire, then Euclid discovered plane geometry. If mathematics is a language or tool, he created the system we learn in school. Take the middle road, like Kant walking the tracks between Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnitz and David Hume. In this way, mathematics has always existed, even before sentient beings could investigate it or describe it, but those early philosophers developed the means to create the mathematics tool. Again we have the noun and the verb: Mathematics is both a thing (a hammer) and an action (to hammer). As an amalgam of ideas, it feels like something to conquer by understanding. But in use, math is simply a language, a machine. Because of its abstractions, mathematics requires a leap of faith, faith in ourselves, in logic, in the fact that if we fail—if we do not comprehend or if we come to the wrong

conclusion, the wrong answer—we will still exist. And look at this: we also take a leap of faith in love. Love happens to us, but in order to expand into its potential limitlessness, we must do something with it: nurture love, pay attention to it. And if we fail in love—if love fails us—we will still exist.

Love and mathematics are too expansive to fully comprehend, requiring some manner of trust to be ignited and sustained. This may be an unexpected assertion about math, but think of the surprise of recognition when a computation or theorem suddenly—sometimes fleetingly—makes sense. Archimedes ran naked through the streets, shouting *Eureka!* after unexpectedly discovering the principle of dispersion during a bath. Both love and mathematics can be analyzed and dissected but are best enjoyed with the gut, by finding a rhythm. Looking too closely at either can rustle the edges of their realities, can dim our glimpse of each. A distance is required to appreciate each, but that distance should not be too deep, too wide. Ignoring the particulars risks overlooking something vital. Focusing only on the details is like seeing Monet's brush strokes but not his garden of water lilies, but if you stand too far away, you cannot make out the subtle shades of green, purple, and blue.

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Momma grew up in town, like me, but Daddy was the last of his lineage to be raised in the country. Granddaddy, my daddy's father, was one of eleven children, several of whom died in birth or childhood. His family had a farm because they had land, not because this was their vocation. When he was a boy, the family grew prodigious quantities of vegetables in wide and long gardens and made applesauce from the fruit of trees in their back yards and rendered hog fat down to lard in enormous kettles set on open fires in the field behind their house. Those same kettles were scrubbed clean and filled with apples, sugar, and water for applebutter boiling. The men went to jobs at the silk mill during the day and cared for a handful of livestock in the evenings and on weekends. They fed their family and a few neighbors with what they could eke out from the land. On her wedding night, Grandmother, a girl from town, lay awake in Granddaddy's parents' house, listening to the hogs grunt and huff as the sun came up.

When his daddy, Silas, decided to give up farming, he split the land between his children, each getting a small slice, an acre or two, not enough to farm but enough for a cracker-box house with an asphalt driveway and a big summer garden, space for Granddaddy and Grandmother to

raise two boys, along with a couple of dogs, cats and a softly spotted baby deer that lost its mother somewhere in the woods behind the house. When we were little, my sister, Melissa, and I spent parts of summers there, eating canned, pink applesauce made from tiny, hard apples that sprouted from the two trees in the backyard just before the woods began. We picked cucumbers from their garden so Grandmother could make sliced sweet pickles. We ran through the sprinkler and dried off on the hot concrete sidewalk leading to the kitchen door. One August, my parents got us up in the middle of the night so we could lie on our backs in the grass and count shooting stars, dozens of them in a rare meteor shower. In those days, my grandparents' road was still a route number, and the lights from town were too dim to reach the backyard. Both in the valley with my grandparents and at home in the mountains, where Momma and Daddy settled us, life was outside as much as indoors, and though we bought milk and eggs and bacon from the Mick-or-Mack grocery, we stored hand-picked green beans and tomatoes in the basement, suspended in their juices inside glass jars—summer sweetness preserved year-round.