

SAM REED

from The Book of Zeros

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Zero came to the first heart and saw that she was missing
So she went inside it
The heart felt this and said what are you
But there was nothing that she was
Nothing that she wasn't

So she said I am what comes next
And she made the future and went to wait for the heart there
All she left was a glinting
At the edges of objects and air
Something taut and intending the heart could feel in it
A wind that gathered and would not blow

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Before they knew division the numbers entered each other freely
Eleven went into two as many times as they wanted
Each accepting the other like a thin sheaf of water on stone
Does light

But Sumerians craved the numbers and so calculated bodies for them
The skeletons were trapped in a reed
Who was made to speak to a tablet of mud
The bones tumbled out
One by one
Sunlight with its great knuckles was called on to set them
And their muscles were the tongues of Sumer

As if ceasing some dream or commencing it the numbers
Discovered they were not light or liquid but flesh
Six saw ten and called to him come
I remember you
But the tongues and the mud said divide
So she passed through him once before his body became locked
And ten to be enfolded in six
Had to break himself

The numbers were sundered and chafed in their numerals
Except zero
Who was then floating to the east in the snows
The reed that knew how to name her
Was the only one no one could find

Zero saw how the numbers in their solitude
Were like seas with holes in the bottom
So she made herself into a river
To divide the world and carry the answer to the seas
And when they felt her they recalled how it was
To never end

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No one goes out to buy zero fish
Though once no one went to the market and was surprised
To find there weren't zero fish

So she went to a bakery to get what she needed
Which had neither fish nor ox nor moth
Nor scent of hard passage eroding off a hide
No sand and no leaves and upon them no rain
No stars and no dark thing striding among them
Nor across us

She asked for no bread and the baker refused
What do you want it for anyway
A sort of ark she said
I need what my hands or my head
Can't hold
When she'd gone the baker looked down into his table
The flour looked up from the wood
All that night he prepared hollow loaves
Arranged on their racks they made a sound like seasons

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The verbs wanted to know how to conjugate
Themselves when nobody was doing them
So they went to ask zero
Who directed them to the rain

They found her in the dark
Feeling with her hands for something she had lost
When they asked her she didn't look up
When did anyone ever rain me
So they listened

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And they heard how rain is made of abandoned verbs
And while some among the pilgrims like *burn*
And *effloresce* were suddenly
Required elsewhere
The others conjugated themselves into water
And took up the work of rain
Which is searching for those who remember how to speak it

And a way of reminding the cedars where to grow
Who think if the rain has a birthplace
They will reach it

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On the tundra winter is convoking
The ghosts of departed quantities
Swans bears light what is certain
Their husks grow brittle and shatter into snow

And the zeros emerge like a herd of throats
Craters unslackable knots like suns
Shining backwards
Whose every orbit names them

If they are a blindness no bedrock has plumbed it
If they are a gesture it was always over
If they are a speech it is
Undecipherable

If they are a thing
She is waiting inside it
Already gone

We are her footprints

Italicized passages in the third and fifth sections, respectively, are from Alfred North Whitehead and Bishop George Berkeley.