

BY THE NUMBERS

John Bennion

Masked and gowned, Isa stood in the corner of the operating room next to his son Cael. Three surgeons stood around the operating table and laid their hands on Vedi's swollen abdomen, working to expand the constricting arteries and vessels in the placenta, the living matrix between her and her baby. *Preeclampsia*. Isa turned the word in his mind—an odd word, danger before worse danger, hypertension before convulsions and coma.

Distracting yourself with semantics, old man?—what Vedi would say to him if she were conscious, but she lay still as death. He sensed her essence—bright, energetic, and irreverent as a blue jay. Not long after Cael introduced them, she figured out that Isa's frown was habitual, the face he presented to everyone, not just her. She was a linguist, not any order of psychologist or mind coach, but she understood how to easily disarm him. “You don't have to always look like you have something tender caught in your zipper.” Somehow her smile made him feel she was laughing *with* him.

He shifted his attention to the fetus, whose psi was a furred bud (Ψ), a coal ready to flame. Isa was not a developmental prognosticator, but the child would likely be less erratic than her mother, softer than her mother's sharpness. Her father's girl. But she would not potentiate if the surgeons failed in their duties.

Cael reached his hand toward Vedi, and Isa felt *déjà vu*, time curling on itself. Forty years earlier, Isa had stood in another delivery room and had reached his arm toward his wife in the same motion, fingers

extended as if to grasp the essence of mother and child. Those decades ago, he had kept his wife but the child had slipped away.

Isa said, "It will not happen again!"

His voice thundered in the small room. One of the surgeons flinched, and the head nurse glared at Isa. Cael put his hand on Isa, pulling him back even tighter into the corner. The room was cold as a walk-in refrigerator, but the surgeons sweated as they augmented the walls of vessels and maintained the flow of blood through thousands of capillaries.

The hospital's projection numerologist sat across the room. That man had already evaluated the surgeons' professional ability, their Ψ -quotients—and was now monitoring the network of constricted arteries and vessels in the placenta. He was calculating and recalculating the numbers to predict when the danger to mother would become deadly, how long before the constricting force would overwhelm the surgeons' power to widen the channels for blood flow. His job was to tell them to take the baby *before* Vedi's kidneys failed. The PN, who had ruddy skin and sandy hair, looked at his hands spread on his knees, wouldn't look up, maybe intimidated by Isa's reputation. *Focus*, Isa nearly said to the coward. *You have one job here.*

Knowing full well he was acting unethically because he was not licensed to project obstetrical outcomes, Isa drew his focus inward, isolating his brain functions and sensing through the Ayin strip of his parietal lobule the hundreds of thousands of constricting vessels, the fractal branching of the villous trees inside the walls of the placenta, the slowing of the movement of blood cells. The sensation was of a sky of falling stars, fading to dark. He sensed again Vedi's Ψ , the infant's, and the surgeons' Ψ -energy, diffused through their synapses and muscles. The net of his cortex translated these sensations into numbers, which he fed through his parietal lobule—the energy needed versus the energy available. The results exceeded the absolute ceiling that governed psychic power—the Einstein Formula, $\Psi=mc^2$. He knew Vedi was in

danger and said in as calm a voice as he could manage, "Take the baby! Vedi doesn't have the strength to push, or the time."

The same surgeon who had flinched at Isa's previous outburst turned his head toward the hospital's PN, who shook his head. "Not yet."

Isa shouted, "Now! Take the baby, now!"

The head nurse, a short and slight man, pushed Isa out of the room and into the hallway and down to the reception area. Isa was silent but the nurse swore at him the whole way, ending with "You imperious bastard." As much as he hated being manhandled, Isa had to respect the nurse, who was only doing his duty. Isa had no such respect for the inept projection numerologist. All the pioneering work in discovering how to perceive and manipulate psi, the essential matter of intelligence, was undone when they had to rely on the precision of dull, physical machinery. It was as if the past hundred years of progress was annihilated by his ineptitude.

Isa waited one minute and then walked back to peer through the window in the door. The surgeons labored on, trying to buy the fetus more days, weeks, months in the womb. Isa watched Cael, who watched his wife. Two minutes later, electronic alarms went off: Vedi's blood pressure had climbed to deadly levels. The fool of a projection numerologist was still calculating, having failed to act before Vedi and the baby were in danger. One surgeon undid the skin and muscles of the mother's belly in a curved line and another lifted the child out, then the placenta, which was both bloody cause and solution.

The pediatrician laid her hands on the child's body. Isa saw her mouth and the mouths of the other doctors and nurses moving but couldn't hear their voices. Suddenly, the baby yawled, and the pediatrician smiled and held the child up for Cael to see. The three obstetricians closed the flap of Vedi's belly, knitted each layer. Then a nurse wheeled Vedi into another room. Cael followed. Finally, the surgeons and PN emerged. "You should have listened," Isa said to him. "It takes gross

incompetence to be less accurate than equipment that's been obsolete for decades.”

“You should know better,” the PN said. “You have no license to work as part of a surgical team—especially not in a maternity ward.”

“But I was right!” Isa said.

The incompetent PN had nothing to say to that.

You certainly told him, Vedi seemed to say in his head. If it wasn't for your constant intervention, I think the entire universe would give in to entropy and flush itself down a black hole. It was as if she stood next to him, laughing him back to self-proportion.

Later, Isa stared down at his new granddaughter, who could have fit in his palm. Her tiny face had Vedi's sharp nose and thin lips. The plastic shell of the incubator looked like a glass coffin, and he imagined a larger coffin with Vedi inside. He hoped that mother and child had not been significantly harmed, but the numbers suggested otherwise. Again, Isa felt his body grow tight with anger and frustration.

Isa's father, an astrophysicist in the metaphysical guild, published articles about the infinity of universes and of dimensions of those universes. He claimed that nearly everything imaginable was happening somewhere. In a different dimension of spacetime, the PN was not incompetent, and mother and child still had viable organs. In another, Vedi had never met Cael because he had been stillborn. In another, Isa's wife, Marta, never contracted ovarian cancer. In another, Isa never met Marta. And on and on, an infinity of infinities.

Seeing this pink child, Isa again felt vertigo and steadied himself with his hands on the incubator. He was possessed by the impulse to rip off his mask, open the coffin, and put his hands on his granddaughter. But he was a researcher, not a healer. His own ability was useless in saving this small child or her mother. Isa had made a career of sensing the potentials in cells for triggering excessive growth and feeding that data to bioengineers who modified the DNA along its doubled helix. The result was the final cure for cancer.

A nurse stood in the doorway, frowning. She had probably heard about the altercation in delivery. Isa nodded and took his hands off the incubator, irked. And it irked him that he was irked at the nurse, who was certainly correct about Isa's impetuous and domineering nature.

"You've tied yourself into knots again." Marta said. Her voice seemed audible, not merely in his mind. "Now you'll be irked that you're irked that you're irked. Your mind is a snake swallowing its own tail." The mask lay against his face, recycling spent breath, and he felt claustrophobic. He wished he had the Ψ -ability to shield the baby from bacteria and viruses in his own breath. "You want to be an uber-Isa," whispered Marta. Still, he didn't turn away; he had set himself as a watchman against blind entropy.

Cael entered and stood by the incubator, opposite Isa. He looked down at his new baby as if he could hold her to life with his will, but being a musician, not a healer, he couldn't. "Vedi's still asleep." His voice liquid, eyes red above the mask, Isa reached across and gripped his son's forearms.

Isa felt Cael shaking and walked around the plastic shell to hold him. Marta seemed to be there also, circling her insubstantial arms around the two of them as they bent over Cael and Vedi's child. Again she seemed to speak: *You are an imperious bastard, but I still love you.* But it wasn't really her. No voice could call across the barriers between this dimension and those that held the essences of the dead.

Her fingers seemed to circle the crown of his head, a tender motion that he had not felt since her death. He thought about the possibility of also losing both Vedi and her unnamed child. He leaned on Cael and thought about his own mother and father, still living, his sisters, Vedi's mother and father—the substance of their affection, which in theory could be redirected and combined, like the focusing of many rays of sun, to hasten the growth of the baby's kidneys and heart. But the calculus of that profound shifting of physic power was at present beyond human ability. If he or someone else had figured out Ψ -transfer, the surgeons might have succeeded in delivering his granddaughter in an

undamaged state. The power of an entire family or community could flow through the brain and hands of a single surgeon. The human race could do anything if they could combine Ψ -energy in that manner.

In Vedi's room, Cael slept with his head inside the crook of her arm. Her skin was pale, stark against hair so deep brown that at first people thought it was black. She opened her eyes and tried to smile at Isa but gave up. She whispered, "Cael said you acted like a dick."

Isa nodded.

"He said you did so in my defense and that you were right."

"They wouldn't listen."

"He said you called the PN an incompetent asshole."

"He was. And the nurse called me an imperious bastard, so it balances."

This time she did smile. "I thought you didn't believe in karma."

"Of course I don't," he said. "I believe in neurons and Ψ -energy. And in you, Vedi. You and Cael balance me, keep me steady."

"Cael is the one. He contains the best of you and the best of Marta." She closed her eyes, and he wasn't sure she saw him nod.

"When I can hold my baby," she whispered. "I'll know her name."

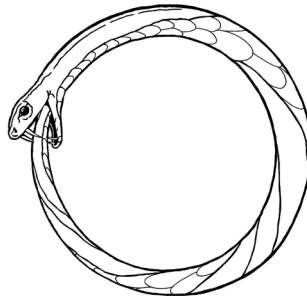
Isa considered Vedi's kidneys, the probability of their healing, ran the numbers. Shook his head. He studied her arm around Cael, Cael's cheek against her chest. The probability of their baby dying, the future memory of a tombstone between the two of them, the probability even of divorce. The projection of Vedi dying. Possibility (γ) branched, rebranched—a calculable fractal of spacetime:

$$\gamma = \frac{\text{entropy}}{\text{negentropy}}$$

Again, with Vedi, the risk of scarring. The surgeons would wait to operate; if both Vedi's kidneys started filtering properly, the medical team wouldn't need to augment muscular growth. The shape of the

word “operate” rolled in Isa’s mind. It functioned like another word he had mulled over—“work.” The doctors operated so her kidneys would work again. A mechanic worked steel and rubber so that those who couldn’t propel their own bodies would have a vehicle that operated. Conceptual action caused physical action, a tiny engine—a perfect linguistic, mathematical, and corporeal cycle. His own work was un-work. He helped to discover how cells with a potential for cancer might un-potentiate.

Sitting in the chair, watching Cael and Vedi, he dozed, woke, dozed again, dreaming of rings, the double helix of a bacteria’s single, circular chromosome, the shape of the earth’s orbit, the moon’s, the silver ring on Marta’s dead hand. Watching his son and Vedi hold each other, another kind of perfect circle, he again felt time folding back on itself, \forall swallowing its own tail:



Forty years before, he had crawled into Marta’s hospital bed, wrapped her in his arms. He told her as she woke from anesthesia that their child was stillborn. Marta’s rhythmic keening sounded across the years.

The child, whom they had named Lieba in the womb, was born dead despite his projection the night before that she would be healthy. As Marta approached her due date, she had grown more and more anxious, so he drove her out of the city into an uninhabited area, hoping to distract her with views of unconstrained plants and animals, chaotic

landscapes. But it hadn't worked. She became even more anxious as they drove farther from the city and the hospital; he had hoped to reach an area where they might see a large mammal, a bear or a carad. As a sop to her worry, he ran the numbers. His calculations predicted that the baby would be fine, but he went through them again. He told her not to worry and convinced or browbeat her into continuing deeper into the wilderness. Ever since, he had wondered what was in his head, going against her intuition. His stubbornness had always made him unable to give up on whatever it was he wanted. Now Isa saw himself clearly—a cocky, bullheaded, imperious bastard. That he was generally right didn't make him any easier to live with. This he knew.

But that day decades ago, he had not been right. He had made a bad projection. Marta had become so anxious that he turned around. She hadn't felt the baby move for some time, but they were still hours from the hospital. When they finally arrived, the nurse couldn't find a heartbeat, so she brought in the PN and the obstetrician. Finally, the fallible machine recorded something, a faint thrum, either an echo of the mother's heartbeat or the fetus's faltering pump. After that, they parted Marta's womb and took the baby cesarean. A nurse elevated their fetus out of the bloody confusion of Marta's opened abdomen, and the pediatric doctor worked on the small body. Isa had stood in the doorway in mask and gown, believing that if he watched the process, the blind forces in the universe would not take his and Marta's child.

When he saw the baby's pink skin, he asked, "She's alive?"

The nurse shook her head. "She's pink from aided respiration. Not alive."

He watched as Lieba turned blue, oxygen fading from her tissues. Later a nurse brought in the small, cold child, wrapped in a blanket, and Isa had held that weight, handed the bundle to Marta, and watched her weep over the scruff of dark hair. Cold blue baby. The PN and obstetrician consulted and judged that the umbilical cord had wrapped around her neck when she dropped, getting ready to be born. As he watched, Isa reworked the formulas and discovered his sophomoric error—failing

to double a derivative, not the slope of the rate of flow of blood but the slope of a slope.

The PN somehow found out that Isa was of his guild. “What did you sense?”

Isa said, “Nothing. I sensed nothing.” Mortified, he couldn’t lift his eyes to see what he knew was pity on the face of the official PN.

Marta wept in bed every night for a year about their lost child. “Lost” was Marta’s word; she felt Lieba wandered somewhere in a different dimension of this universe or an infinite number of other universes, gone to a place Marta couldn’t follow.

Isa had complained to his father. “Marta needs to know where the child’s soul has gone. It might comfort her.” Isa couldn’t say, *I didn’t pay attention*. If they hadn’t been so far from the hospital when Marta’s good sense made her anxious, they might have saved the child. He had read the numbers, or misread the numbers, but had ignored the physical signs. Typical.

His father, his hair unkempt, white flames, had searched his son’s face before speaking. “I can offer no comfort. The child might be anywhere. Parallel dimensions differentiate from each other by something as slight as the death of a butterfly, the dropping of a single scale from its wing, or even less. The survival of a species through a mutation in a thumb or a brain. In another universe Einstein might have not existed, or she might have discovered something other than the formula for psychic intelligence. A whole universe might distinguish itself by an alternative word for this ‘psi’ or it might be represented by something other than the letter ‘Ψ’. In which of the infinity of these possible alternate dimensions might your child be?” He spoke louder, with force. “There is no physics that can find the child. The universe is just too big.”

He peered into Isa’s face. “Worse, if Marta tried to follow. If she somehow succeeded in entering another dimension, she’d displace Ψ and physical mass, creating waves and backwaves of disruption. In that

chaotic state, the memory of the interloper could be erased, identity could dissolve.” His father put one hand on his shoulder. “Do you think she’ll try something desperate?”

“I don’t know.”

“Worry about that. Not about your error in math. Estimating Ψ -potentials is tricky.” His father paused. “You are not fully trained in projection numerology and not at all in obstetrical work. You simply made a mistake.”

At that moment Isa determined he would never make another mistake like that one, and his focus had served him well in his own research and career. Now, standing above his granddaughter’s incubator, his success curing cancer seemed merely ironic. He would gladly trade that achievement for the life of this child.

When Isa and Marta’s next child was born, he also had to be taken cesarean because the muscles in Marta’s abdomen would have split apart at the effort of pushing the baby out her birth canal. Again, Isa stood nearby, watching the surgeon divide Marta’s skin and muscle. He felt time coil back on itself, and he wondered whether he would again be forced to watch a pink baby turn blue. But this child, a son, kicked and squalled. Same scruff of hair, same thick legs as Lieba. But alive. They named him Cael, a Celtic name that meant both “victorious people” and “slender,” and the boy grew into an adult and married Vedi.

Isa loved his son, that miracle lifted out of parted muscle and pooling blood, but he came to love equally his daughter-in-law, the woman Cael met at college. Vedi teased Isa when Cael couldn’t budge him. Teased when even Marta occasionally gave up on influencing her husband. Marta had believed his inflexible sense of entitlement started in childhood when he was the first son, with three younger sisters. He was the prince to his mother, tyrant to his sisters. Marta had said, “They crowned you king. It’s a good thing you’re basically a good man, or you’d be unbearable *all* the time.”

Not long after Cael’s marriage, when Isa and his son had argued about something Isa couldn’t remember, Vedi had said with a serious

face, “Do you know that the penis of a blue whale is one foot thick and ten feet long?” Isa had stopped midsentence and turned to Marta, but she had no sympathy. She just laughed with her daughter-in-law.

He could have resented the girl, but she smiled, took his arm, asked him about his work. Through the years she became their peacemaker, Isa-bender. Her rough, irreverent language and her disarming smile that was as pleasant as a rising moon. When she and Cael visited, if Isa insisted on which restaurant, which movie, which conversation, she might say, “Do you know that male goats piss on their own heads?” Or she might sing, “Gruff, gruff, gruff, gruff, billy goat gruff” to the tune of the opening bars of the *1814 Overture*. Or she might repeat the word “scrotum” in different tones—an opera singer, an auctioneer, a robot, or a speaker of Indian, Arabic, Egyptian, Eurlandic, or Hebrew, the languages she knew.

He had never been able to successfully respond to the girl’s bawdy inanities. If he sputtered words or numbers back, trying to argue his point, she sang, in an astonishingly accurate imitation of his voice, “Nothing really matters. Nothing really matters to me.”

“People matter,” he told her.

She smiled like the Mona Lisa, like she had won again.

It got to where all Vedi had to do was arch one eyebrow, and Isa knew that Cael or Marta had reached their limit. Or she’d ask him, “How can an agnostic nihilist be so pompous?” She always unstrung his inflexible volition. Because he knew the shape of his own Ψ (the numbers never lie), he knew his own arrogance and became patient with and eventually pleased by her teasing. What she did by giving him another option for behavior was to make him gradually into a better person, luring him to follow one set of projections over another.

Also, Isa loved the girl because she was good for Cael, whose sensitivity and reclusiveness blossomed into empathy and wisdom. With Vedi, Cael was more himself; and he and Isa weren’t alone in being improved through her influence. Often Marta spoke of Vedi as a blessing to the whole family.

Eventually, Vedi was the one who comforted him when Marta developed ovarian cancer and the cells multiplied faster than the surgeons could retard their growth. Faster than the square of the square of the exponent. Isa felt injured by his wife's sudden departure—from diagnosis to death in one month. He was angry at the screening pathologist, at himself, at Marta. He vowed again to unravel cancer, which gave his career even more impetus. He began to rage less and felt merely loss, as if a wall he had been leaning against unawares for decades had given way. Had the Ψ -material that made up her identity simply dissipated as she slipped into another dimension? If so, then Marta was triply lost: lost to him and lost to herself, her essence perhaps rejoining the unorganized intelligence of the universe. This thought was unbearable, inoperable.

Years before Marta's death, during the first year after the loss of their child, she had said that she felt unafraid of death and that suicide seemed easy or inevitable, a heartbeat away. At the time he had watched her, fearful that she would follow Lieba. After Marta's death from cancer, he felt the same way she had; following her into another realm would have been as easy as walking through a doorway. Instead of doing that, he intensified his efforts to cure what had killed her. And Vedi had helped him process his sorrow by repeating memories of Marta until tears came for both of them. Gradually his sorrow drained enough that he could engage again with life.

That evening, Cael and Vedi's baby died. Her tiny kidneys and heart had disintegrated faster than the pediatric surgeons could mend their cells. He had watched from the viewing room, had seen the beads of sweat run down the surgeons' faces. As the baby turned from pink to blue, her essence must have felt like sand or water sifting through their fingers. Isa sensed not only the sublimation of her tiny Ψ -mass, but also the slow grind of the wheel of spacetime, increasing in entropy as it turned, turned again. How had the poet put it? "Tighter and tighter in the encircling spyre, the time-snake crushes its victim."

Two months passed, then two more, but Vedi was inconsolable. Isa worried that she wouldn't make it through the first year, after which Marta's sorrow had become manageable. Cael said Vedi wept every night, asking, "What if her soul is alone in a deep, lightless dimension?" When Cael tried to contradict that idea, she became angry. "You don't know. All I know is that I can't find out where she's gone. She's lost." A precise echo of Marta's anguish.

Isa knew his father had in the past year done experiments with tracing Ψ -material as it entered another dimension, so Isa went again to him. His father was bowed so low, his spine so curved, that when he walked, his head was nearly at waist level. They sat, and Isa described the cycles of sorrow he had experienced. The old man looked at the floor, then slowly lifted his head. "I entangled quanta in the brains of two different mice," he rasped. "Then I killed one mouse and used the living mouse to track Ψ -material of the dead mouse through six dimensions. The living mouse became more and more disoriented and then lost all brain function. I must assume that the same had happened to the dead mouse—intelligence scrambled into chaos, identity lost. I'm sorry, but what you want is still impossible."

Isa thought about the array of dimensions folded like napkins or tulip petals—each a mutation of the next. Or perhaps they were like the feathers of a peacock, waves of the ocean, notes in a symphony. The swirling waves of barley heads in a grain field, a murmuration of starlings. All turning on a Word, turning and turning. All those universes unknowable because a visitor's former identity couldn't survive entering another dimension.

Isa wanted to comfort Vedi, as she had comforted him, but she wouldn't see him. She told Cael, and Cael relayed her words to Isa: "He'll try to make me feel something different. I'm not ready, not yet."

Isa gave her two weeks and then entered their house without asking permission. She turned her back to him as she lay on the couch. He started speaking in a low voice, "Those incompetent assholes. Those bastards. Those cockheads. Damn them. Those eunuchs." He paused.

She turned her head toward him. “Go on.”

So he swore all the way from “fuck” to “zag.” Then he described what she, Vedi, had done for him, Marta, and Cael, turning them toward joy. He then described the universe for her—the beauty of the numbers when spacetime bent around a gravity well. He told her that inside a cluster of massive stars and inside the simplest atom, spacetime might take any form: a spiral, a Möbius band, a globe, a Klein bottle, or a shape in a geometry foreign to those they could imagine. Then he told her jokes about projection numerology, jokes only funny to others of his profession. “Why did the armadillo cross the road?” Pause. Pause. Pause. Vedi looked up at him, shaking her head. “He was weary of three-dimensional math and wanted to try making calculations with just two-dimensions.” When she just stared at him, he said, “I knew that joke would fall flat.”

At last she smiled, wonderful reward! “That’s the dumbest joke I’ve ever heard.”

But she didn’t smile again. Indeed, each time he drove to see her, she was less responsive, her face like a wall. Cael said that she ate almost nothing, less than a finch. Vedi’s therapist noted that her mood scores lowered a few points each session, so Isa and Cael hired the best psychoneurologist in their city. The specialist found Vedi’s mind a tangle of darkness. When Isa ran the numbers himself, he had to use theoretical calculus to make sense of them. Not a good sign.

“Postpartum depression,” the neurologist said. “Worst case I’ve ever seen.” Vedi’s weight went from forty-five kilos to thirty-six to thirty-one. “We should have given our baby a name,” she rasped in Cael’s ear.

Then, four months after the infant’s death, Vedi staggered out of bed and asked for a chocolate milkshake. She sat at the kitchen table, smiling at Isa when he came to visit. “I finally understand your joke.”

“What joke?”

“Why the armadillo crossed the road.”

“And?”

“The armadillo crossed the road and the armadillo didn’t cross the road. Both happened, just like with Schrödinger’s rabbit.” Then she laughed for the first time since her child died.

Isa looked at Cael and both of them frowned.

Isa read the numbers, still tangled even though VEDI seemed much better. She sat at the kitchen table drinking fruit smoothies—fig, raspberry, mango, beeberry—and staring at the wall, her smile fixed. She listened as Cael or Isa spoke to her, but she didn’t say much. Cael consulted the neurologist, who said that because she was eating again, she might heal emotionally. For the first time in months, Isa had hope. He kept his mind on the numbers, waiting for her to come back to herself. After another week, she started walking, first around the block their house sat on. Then down the street to the food dispensary and back. To the edge of the foothills and back. Color returned to her face. One day she sat and talked to both of them, about the baby, about Marta, their memories.

The next morning, she told them she wanted to walk up the canyon behind their house. By lunchtime she hadn’t come back. The police found her at the bottom of a cliff. They said she hadn’t just stepped off. She was far enough from the base of the cliff that she must have sprinted into the air. She had waited until she was strong enough to leap toward the barrier between life and death.

After two find and rescue officers put the white body bag in the back of an ambulance, Isa sat on a huge boulder near the bottom of the cliff and held Cael. Together they rocked forward and back; Cael made an animal sound that Isa thought would never end. Isa watched the ambulance drive away, flashing lights now turned off. While Isa held his son, he tried to project the numbers backward, something he had learned in his first numerology class was as illogical as dividing by zero. Still, he cast his mind on alternative pasts, believing that in some other universe each past was possible. If he had walked up the canyon

with her or gotten Cael to walk with her. If the neurologist had seen the warning signs. If Isa had paid more attention to the numbers. If Marta had lived and had talked Vedi through the depression. Any of these and an unlimited number of other events could have prevented Vedi from concluding that she had to potentiate her existence into another dimension.

Finally, after a paramedic calmed Cael's brain and body, he stopped keening, and Isa drove him home and put him to bed. The paramedic had done good work, and Cael fell directly to sleep.

Isa turned his mind to the future. Possibility seemed unhinged. Time branched infinitesimally and rapidly, and he felt the rushing sound of alternative universes passing. All of them curled into diverging parabolic curves; one path veered left, one right, one farther right, a blossoming of lines of time, like the streams of smoke behind fireworks. The strand remaining to him, the strand in which he was forced to have his being, seemed unbearable—bleak, dark, lonely.

Isa lay on the couch, half forgetting Vedi's death each time he dozed but remembering the horror anew each time he jerked awake. He imagined or dreamed that Marta walked through the room and looked at his face, walked on. He did the math, desperate now: the physical mass of Vedi's body plus the mass of her stillborn infant as their spiritual essences slipped sideways into other dimensions. The derivative of a derivative of the motion of her Ψ -mass, here and then lost, sinking toward oblivion. The bright numbers here, darker numbers there, the equations of her absence, spacetime bent by the gravity of her passing. He believed that Vedi had purposefully gone after her child. But without knowing anything about probability, how would she know where she might find her baby? Would Marta help, or was she also lost?

Isa didn't know what to tell Cael. Nothing would help except having Vedi alive again, and that was impossible, Isa's father said so. Nothing

Isa did could save his son, and Cael's projected sorrow at the loss of *all* his loved ones weighed less than Isa's desire to follow them. Finally, Isa just wrote a note: "I've gone to find Vedi and the child. I will bring them back to you."

As he closed his eyes again, he again sensed the strands of space-time coursing past, his body a hand thrust into a stream of water, a spiral of harp strings plucked at a central point. He added a dimension and sensed another; they streamed parallel to each other. He heard animal moaning at the base of the cliff, imagined Vedi falling forever without hitting the ground, her never jumping, a sleeping infant opening her eyes, Marta's ironic smile as she sat up from her sickbed, which was not her deathbed. All the universes with minute differences. He was not a surgeon or a mother growing a fetus, he only sensed Ψ and did projection math. But the numbers shaped themselves, formulae turning on edge like a conceptual razor, and he felt the muscles of spacetime separate faster than he was ready. As the traces of Marta and Lieba, Vedi and her unnamed child faded, Isa forced himself through headfirst, terrified that no one's hands might be there to bear him up.

JOHN BENNION {johnsergebennion@gmail.com} has published a collection of short fiction, *Breeding Leah and other Stories* (Signature Books, 1991), and five novels: *Falling Toward Heaven* (Signature Books, 2000), *An Unarmed Woman* (Signature Books, 2019), *Ezekiel's Third Wife* (Roundfire Books, 2019), *Spin* (BCC Press, 2022), and *Ruth at the End of the Earth* (BCC Press, 2023). He has retired from teaching creative writing in the English Department at Brigham Young University.