

Schoolboy's Encounter with Faith

By Shaun Johnston, see shaunjohnston.org. 2013.

I was frightened. Trapped in a corner by the square root of minus one and gibbering with terror I could only repeat, "You don't exist—you don't exist!" "Prove it," roared the monster, beating me again with its root sign. Somehow I found a last spark of resistance. "Express yourself in cream doughnuts and I'll give in"—either way I couldn't lose. It was pitiful to watch the beast. At once he became a pathetic sight and I watched him disappear in a puff of blue smoke.

Triumphant, yet with the regret of a boxing champion who beats his opponent by twisting his arm, I turned to the monster's keeper to continue the fight. He broke in first. "i exists just as a number," he said. "It doesn't have to stand for anything." "A number's no good," I replied, "unless it means something." He paused, flushed angrily for a moment, then sighed and brought a matchbox out of his pocket, opened it and shook a few minus numbers from it onto his hand. "And that's another thing," I broke in, "they don't exist either."

He became angry again. "Now look here," he said, "everbody accepts minus numbers." "Well, I don't," I said. "You can't posses minus anything, only less of something you've already got. A minus number can't exist by itself." He tried to break in, but I continued. "You keep on doing things like this. How about two equals 10 multiplied by itself one point four one four two times? How about that? How can you multiply something by itself a fraction of a times?" He gave me the empty glassy stare he usually reserves for empy glasses, but said nothing. "Explain that." I said, "you're sharp," and he is, "you're sharp. I'm warning you, I'm not taking these monsters of yours any more. One day I'm going to ask straight out what a numbers is. So watch out!"

That was a mistake. I shouldn't have threatened him. In a trice he had called i up again. There I was, pinned to the wall with its minus sign sticking in my gullet. "Call him off," I yelled. "You call him off," said his keeper. I was prepared to try anything. "How," I cried. The keeper's face swam before me, twisted into an exultant leer, and I heard him say, "Multiply him by himself—and put him in this matchbox."