

He is rinsing his stained surface  
with heavy water and a drill.

## NUMBERS

I like numbers. I like to keep track of things  
by giving them a number, and I like to collect  
and itemize things and people and to know the size  
of my collections. And at night when my bad conscience  
keeps me awake, I open the drawers and start counting.

I've had twenty-three hundred lovers, and all but five or  
six are now dead. Nine thousand people work at my refinery  
in the desert and together they earn less in a year than I do  
in four days. A painting I once bought on the black  
market for four hundred dollars is now worth thirty-four million.  
My dog dropped a litter and three pups survived.  
I gave one to a boy on the street and drowned the others  
in a storm sewer. Tomorrow is my birthday and I am  
expecting a dark chocolate cake with hundreds of candles  
and a swimming pool full of trembling guests.

Only two numbers have the magical power to summon:  
seventeen and twenty-seven. These are the two numbers  
between which a full and terrifying life may be led.  
Other numbers move us simply on their own merits.  
Take, for instance, a number trailed by a thin string of zeros—

very sad. Someone, I can't remember who,  
told me there are many more people now  
alive, in 1996, than have died in all prior human history.  
Has this always been the case?

There's been a lot of talk about "One God."  
But I've never seen one of anything.