

Mark Levine

JACK AND JILL

He galloped through the chill.
His purse rattling with pills.
On his tongue a desolate trill.
He pried a sack of rice
from a man with yellow eyes.
His name was Jack and Jill.

He clutched a steel device
against his ribs. It saved him twice,
once from x-rays, once from vice
and a woman. The land was ill.
His name was Jack and Jill.
His was a special case.

At dawn he scrambled pell-mell
through the woods to the shadowed rill.
He was hungry. Was he real?
Was he a rhyme? Was he a trace
of purple smoke escaped from base?
He'd taken a great spill—

he swallowed rain; he had a taste
of golden fission. Oh, malaise.
Is it easy to give praise
when his name is Jack and Jill?
What is happening to the downy hill
behind him? Here's a slice

of apple for his horse. And here a hoisted pail
of sweet sawdust. And here a gilded bell
for luring angels and devils
to the consecrated rock-face.

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.