

Douglas Goetsch

COUNTING

I'd walk close to buildings counting
bricks, run my finger in the grout
till it grew hot and numb. Bricks
in a row, rows on a floor, multiply
floors, buildings, blocks in the city.
I knew there were numbers for everything—
tires piled in mountains at the dump,
cars on the interstate to Maine,
pine needles blanketing the shoulder of the road,
bubbles in my white summer spit.
I dreamed of counting the galaxies
of freckles on Laura MacNally,
touching each one—*she loves me*,
she loves me not—right on up her leg,
my pulse beating away at the sea
wall of my skin, my breath
inhaling *odd*, exhaling *even*.

To know certain numbers
would be like standing next to God,
Who I figured must not be a jealous God
but a *counting* God, too busy
to stop for war or famine.
I'd go out under the night sky
to search for Him up there:
God counting, next to Orion
drawing his bow. I'd seen
an orthodox Jew on the subway
reading the Book of Numbers,
bobbing into his palms
with fury and precision
as he mouthed them, a single

drop of spittle at the center
of his lip catching the other lip
and stretching like silk thread.
At night I dreamed a constant stream
of numbers shooting past my eyes so fast
all I could do was mouth them as they
came. I'd wake up reading the red
flesh of my lids, my tongue
flapping like ticker tape.

I come from a family of counters;
my brother had 41 cavities in 20 teeth
and he told everyone he met;
Grandpa figured his compound
daily interest in the den, at dusk,
the lights turned off, the ice
crackling in his bourbon; my father
hunched over his desk working
overtime for the insurance company,
using numbers to predict
when men were going to die.

When I saw the tenth digit added
to the giant odometer in Times Square
tracking world population, I wondered
what it would take for those wheels
to stop and reverse. What monsoon
or earthquake could fill graves faster
than babies wriggled out of wombs?
Those vast cemeteries in Queens—
white tablets lined up like dominoes
running over hills in perfect rows—
which was higher, the number
of the living or the dead? Was it
true, what a teacher had said:
get everyone in China to stand on a bucket,
jump at exactly the same time

and it'd knock us out of orbit?
You wouldn't need *everyone*,
just enough, the right number,
and if you knew that number
you could point to a skinny
copper-colored kid and say
You're the one, you can send us flying.