



1996

## Jack and Jill

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*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.