1996

Jack and Jill

Mark Levine

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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.