1996

Numbers

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.4623

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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.