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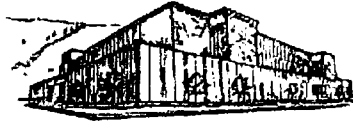
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WHITE NUMBERS

by

Kurt Cole Eidsvig

B.A. University of Massachusetts— Boston. 1999

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

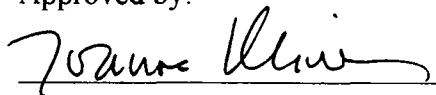
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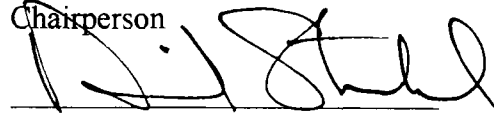
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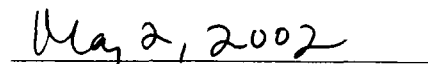
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## CONTENTS

Chicago	1
Sioux Falls	4
Kalispell	5
Counting	6
Covering Tracks	9
Albertson's	11
St. Augustine's	12
Newark	13
Delta Flight 1901	15
Minneapolis	16
Phoenix	17
When I Die #1	18
When I Die #2	19
When I Die #3	20
When I Die #4	21
When I Die #5	22
Green	24
Alameda	25
Fifty	27
Carson Beach	28
Manhattan	29

Providence	30
Massachusetts Turnpike— Between Sturbridge and Lee	32
Physics, Time Travel. Parallel Universes, Steven Hawking, and Chris Burden: A Modern Faith Healing Ceremony	33
Track 12: The Purple Line	41
Rangeley	43
The Gulf of Mexico	44
Missoula	45
White Numbers	47

## CHICAGO

Approaching in these sunshowers  
there's a sense of what it might be like  
to be plagued by rainbows. Proof even  
abstract shapes have a likeness, and do you  
have any idea how difficult it is  
to take snapshots of color arcing over  
pastures, driving in the worst traffic  
you've ever seen? With slippery knees,  
there's very little room for missing  
and mistake, especially, through this  
ambiguity of space: big rigs, trees, crops,  
sky, clouds, and stretching. On the way,  
tiny gas station post office convenience  
store towns offer scratch ticket  
big game money I already spent. And sale  
bubblegum, enough for sore jaws  
while shouting out 2 more songs  
to busting I-beam skies— the radio's  
thinking too loud and tuning fingers  
scan between big, small, and useless,  
these shapes and similarity create  
security better than fenders or bumpers  
do, while cell phone gabbing, crane-  
necked people whiz by in bent, paint-  
stained stripes, and imitate melting.

At least be grateful it's not so  
hot with this rain. Like 28 people  
died from heat this year, and St. Peter  
will not let you into heaven if you go



without a fan. Raindrops packed too tight, the seams between collapse in on themselves, like after *Excavation*, like frigid rain in the strangest place and the pity of being homesick, the water moves grass-hilled wind, sits in the bottom of the glass. One part too thick for drinking, driving, and three parts less believable, my prayers have included closing one eye. But of course, none of this is believable, and buried beneath my skin my clothes my seat the road fragments of layered newsprint slow the drying of this experience that slows the paint on other photos also—a glorious impression of colliding image and brand new products of forgetting. But now the road, the water, me, and unearthing anything, is moving on toward the ocean. There's a green glow through wiper blades, white writing shown erased, shown erased, shown skidding by erased, and seen through people are ghosts of imagery, collage, or tall columns of type— this complexity of any individual's experience, especially in urban environments, is central. That's what I keep remembering! There's road, and escape without holes is the cat's meow. The very thing— this traveling, inside-outside, cheers structures toward collapse, without remains of fragmented anatomy, or dirt of any kind. Underneath the car, the tar

combines for intersections, buildings, stoplights  
green, blink yellow, blink red, and all up the street  
these relationships of glass and space  
know, and reveal more than us, or decomposing—  
they develop a greater richness of meaning, love  
within form, a relationship of steam shovel  
and backhoe, tire, tread, skyline, and that imitated  
sea— and explain how understanding, and commitment  
are bonds that bow before the digging— within,  
without— and eventually dissolve to words, progress,  
horns or yelps, before there's change,  
or leaving, or even meaning to.

## SIOUX FALLS

Campbell tried to finish  
an argument but I wanted  
a cigarette. Then it's always  
3 O'Clock in the morning,  
bodies scattered and me, pulling  
out of a plastic bottle of rum. Chasing  
each choked swallow with a bubbly Pepsi  
fighting down the gag. You may drink  
forever, and never know that, that feeling  
is gray smoke shifting to sand  
between the toes, washed away  
by clawing surf, and above,  
as the crow flies in-between  
is San Francisco, Connecticut,  
Montana— love and hate  
in equal parts. Grass in a snow  
rainstorm when your heat is on  
the fritz. After the Black Hills,  
a gathering of importance,  
color, then line, bleeds into  
the ground. The rain is greener  
grass— so intense the road breaks  
in two white ribbons, forming lopsided,  
lazy squares, unfurling for miles around  
as in-between us, choices hurt like air.

## KALISPELL

When Flathead Lake died  
of cancer, we gathered on the bluest  
day of May and threw his ashes  
in the hollows spreading rain  
across the morning. The boat

argued with the rocks, while  
a massive painting between  
my hair and feet began to dry  
in the ugliest of ways, those promises

we conveniently forget  
visit me while in sleep. I never talk,  
marble lips stitched shut. Far  
beneath, light from oceans,  
creeks, and streams combine

with the security of his smile. Though  
now he often lies, because water believes  
in sorrow. When crying, all of this  
remembering becomes like minutes

after moonlight, the Atlantic  
Ocean, Lake McDonald. All water  
is sometimes children. All water  
is morning, is nightfall. Continuing  
to bend. Continuing  
to shape and scar.

## COUNTING

37.

Thirty-seven pairs of brand new sneakers  
are dangling from the crisscrossing telephone wires  
over the intersection of West Sixth  
and F. I count them one day (it takes a while) and think  
they are all nicer than the ones I have on.

9.

In 1997 nine kids kill themselves in Southie.  
Hang themselves from the exposed pipes  
in the project basements. *Suicide  
Pacts! Suicide Pacts!* The papers cry.

23.

When Brian jumped off the chair he swiped  
from *Red's Pizza Shop*, he stopped mid-air  
for a moment, or two or three, before the belt  
he'd fashioned into a noose snapped  
and whipped him to the ground. His neck  
and eyes were black and blue, the floor  
smelled like piss. Twenty-three other times  
that year, kids looked up at flimsy garden hoses,  
ripped up sheets and rope, or even broken pipes  
and said, *I can't even kill myself.*

5.

The newspapers forgot to mention, out of respect

to their families, every single one of those kids shot *at least* five bags of heroin every day. Suicide on the installment plan.

3.  
Brian's mother dies of AIDS when he's three months clean.

14.  
Fourteen months later he meets a stripper who works Wednesdays Thursdays Fridays and Sundays at the *Glass Slipper* on Washington Street, near where the old Combat Zone used to be. She's trying to kick, but not as hard as she's trying to find really good dope in Chinatown. She has great tits. He shoots it once, just once to see, and loves it, again.

21.  
Brian's 21 years old.

1.  
Standing outside of *Saint Augustine's*, waiting for the bus and counting hanging shoes, Johnny Blockbuster walks by and laughs. I tell him I wish I could get those shoes down, I could use a brand spanking new pair of shoes. My black *Adidas Gazelles* have holes worn through

their bottoms, and I can feel the sidewalk. I don't tell Johnny though. "You don't want those fucking shoes" he says. "The kids around here hang these shoes up to let people know where to get drugs. You see 'em all around, but not like this. Business is good they're showing off." He smiles and points down the hill. There's a blue and white cruiser parked next to the *Boy's Club*. "Plus they're fucking with the cops." One cop is reading the newspaper in the car.

4.

While he's at *Saint Elizabeth's* getting clean, Brian calls Johnny Blockbuster to ask if he can stay with him after he gets out, he needs to stay clean this time, he needs help, he doesn't know anyone else to call, he knows he can count on him. Four days after he makes it home, they catch him shooting dope in the bathroom, tight strap strangling his arm. No one sees Brian for a while. No one is counting on it.

## COVERING TRACKS

And each hole in the slippery tar  
is a marked memory, practically  
crawling down D Street. Worn  
like some 13 year-old's Southie Dot  
that was made with a handful of green  
Bic pens and a kitchen knife. Those holes  
sleep on iron grates too sometimes,  
maybe outside the Condon School, maybe  
dream of prison beatings. At least  
it's a break from the run they say. Chasing  
that shit is a full-time job. One day,  
passing 26 TV's through the busted window  
in Dorchester Electric to Soupy, starting early  
on the gavel-echo headache that began  
pounding when red lights  
flashed. And the next, pretending  
to do the dishes after boiled dinner,  
battered cabbage, your Mom's best silver  
gleaming, and opening the small, sandy pocket  
of her purse, slipping a hundred  
from next to a smushed-up piece of Trident.

Yeah, these ditches cover the street, they slither up  
between our toes, onto feet and legs, then chip away  
at arms, find eyeballs, tongues and cheeks. Listen  
close and you can hear them whispering *I'll get you  
next time, I promise*, until the lines hit the holes,  
and the marks are all around, and the clouds  
give way to pink/orange, blue/black sunset,  
that glows past bolted boards, grown-in gardens,



check cashing places, and faded signs, still  
no one sees these itchy spine twitches, drippy  
nose, blurred eyes from held-in tears that reflect  
the lights, the gray spiked roof of St. so and so's,  
while the noisy crowd in Al's and Triple O's, bounces  
white sound against the circled T sign  
across the street— until the red clouds have seeped  
into the sky, a syringe, and empty,  
we'll beg for the relief.

ALBERTSON'S

Somebody's blinking the lights for you  
in aisle one. Signaling there's so much on the line  
with tomatoes. And of course the whole thing's  
freaking me out. I'm running around

with no consideration for energy conservation, seven  
months without a drink. Lime wedge rounds the rim, turning  
pulp and fiber— these small ceremonies, easily  
better than the first sip. Christmas bright green baskets

I wear for hats after lugging groceries (pretend  
it was a station wagon). Does everyone  
eat jelly omelets? Mint and grape can look marvelous  
on orange formica. The cinema of my sensibility

takes the smallest from a bowl of lemons. This peeling  
lemons was never so much fun. Over ice, too much  
cheap rum is ideal like picnics, plastic tumbler glass  
full, a fiasco of ants and checkerboards. Fresh fruit. Pretend

the rum was wine. I know the color of your hair  
from its smell, the delicacy of intrusion from watching  
your eyelids close. Listening to you breathe. It's always  
this simple though, especially in summer, and I almost

buy a pan to melt crayons— my paintings are beginning  
to look like neckties— because I spend Saturday nights  
pricing corn tortilla chips, under dozens of lines  
of alluring light, pretending I can smell the ocean.

## ST. AUGUSTINE'S

Summer no longer means relief. The only payoff here—  
nearby, the ocean's a constant struggle of freedom  
and constraint, but cooler— cooler is far  
too far away. Inside the fence, the gravestones  
are a nuisance. I find tulips grow faster than lipstick smudges  
on the mismatched beer glasses inside Tom English's  
Tavern last night— any night— where mascara  
and eye shadow blur like pigment floating through Pall Mall  
smoke, held in the seconds, that murky steam remains  
being light, being light. The liquor helps forget  
escape and highway signs— exit 12, route 28, Cape Cod, next stop  
or stay inside the church, where a fluorescent explosion  
of stone, streamed color, agony and replacement,  
resembles nightly feather bed surrenders, pink light, stained  
by human hands, glass and wounds from all creation,  
silhouettes to squares that melt and grow in residue, in forgiving,  
until both the fence and lawn are afterthoughts,  
the sun shadows, and grass remains.

## NEWARK

Blacking out New Jersey— cinched  
between plaster walls pockmarked by fresh  
whiskey dents and the remorse  
found exclusively in fourteen and ½  
Rum Dews. Mix 1 part Mountain Dew  
with twelve parts Ron Bacardi, hold  
your breath, pinch your nose, and remember—  
your liver screams what Jimmy Lawfirm  
whispered that lonely night in Palmer 5.  
Behind locked doors with no known handles.  
If you don't keep your fucking mouth shut  
we're never gonna get out of here. Luckily  
we made it out for St. Patrick's Day  
in 1995. Wandering down Broadway, we  
cut through D Street, through the projects,  
and find Soupy on the stoop, nodding off,

and wonder if the shit is good, even though  
I'm definitely not gonna shoot it, and Jimmy says  
just one. Luckily we made it out  
for St. Patrick's Day in 1995. He's twitching  
on the ground, foaming at the mouth. I am  
someplace else— Interventions, electric shock,  
Palmer 5, won't save him now. I lurk around

O'Brien's funeral home wearing shoes  
too tight, a lumpy knotted purple tie. St. Augustine's  
is across the street, it's raining— the roads,  
greasy. Soupy's there and can't remember,  
and neither can I remember Jimmy

twitching and bleeding in the stall of Brigham's,  
four days sober and full of promise, heroin,  
the preacher says something about demons,  
family, and acceptance. I taste bile, finger  
the stolen credit cards in my roommate's suit pocket,  
and hear "at least he didn't hang himself" echo.

Crushed green cans, with sharp aluminum points,  
dance across the floor, blood and vomit  
stain the monogrammed towel vaguely  
around my waist, I've cut my feet  
running from Southie. Of course  
I toast my friend— Luckily we made it out  
for St. Patrick's day in 1995.

## DELTA FLIGHT 1901

Only on the left-hand side, sitting  
near a window seat, when the sun  
breaks and begins to slice this small  
incision through the white skin  
that covers everything beneath,

with the jet plane pointed down,  
toward Salt Lake City, and the wound  
growing into an orange-yellow bloom  
from clouds below, will you, as colors  
go, ever realize.

## MINNEAPOLIS

Imagine an interstate of motel mattresses. A solution to any gas crises: slam the car in neutral, and let the earth spin you. Cuts down on overheating too. Air expands, the car's standing still, but the world does all the traveling. If you were here, we'd stretch a poem across steamy tar, and pretend it's a bridge. You usually don't believe people extend that far. Instead, there's faith over asphalt, and to the right, Di Suvero's *Molecule* might stab something, if orange weren't so useless in foggy rain. If supermarket sushi weren't so terrible, even late at night, when college coeds make two-hundred-dollar outcalls. And the hotel pools with chlorine, little kids' pee overflows from cannonballs under cautious puddled tile. Which reminds me of escaping self, summer, and innocence— and local newspapers only us tourists see. But there's *proof*. That even words can mean or be something other than cathedrals.

## PHOENIX

There isn't much to hold this place together,  
maybe a circle between the bottom of a half-empty  
glass and the coffee table underneath. That water  
digs into mahogany. Partygoers disregard  
lumpy napkins here, and mountains form, echo  
in chipped Waterford Crystal. And in the ashtray  
too, reflected peaks move between crinkled filters  
and my shaky hand. There, all around the nicked-out  
spots for still burning smokes. The glass grooved  
diamond shapes cut the red points, and break  
blinking light from a fan above.

We say good-byes eventually with open door  
lingering heat all around the Camelback, the ground  
won't cool at night. Glitter patterns sketch  
the sky, gritty against bright dark blue before falling  
into ground glass. In town, squares scream through  
window panes, through night, and the sweep  
of light dividing is much louder here, until  
farther away, in tired discussion they dissolve,  
and we're brought to an adobe cathedral by thirst,  
or strands of grass steeples undisturbed in waterless  
wind— hear this beer sign-jukebox music  
moving like tattered curtains around us, and taste  
sleeping rocks and sun. And always more drinks  
and celebration, more strange laughs and shouts,  
and only postcards tacked above the bar of sunrise  
on landless black water, purple smudges  
weeping over waves, convince the sand outside  
that time is any good at all.



WHEN I DIE #1

When I die  
during a long overdue long  
walk off a seemingly symbolic  
short pier and people are sad

mostly because of my complete  
disregard for originality  
tell them "Don't be  
sad there's plenty  
of clichéd ways to wrap it up

for instance maybe a guy  
like you could consider choking  
on your own vomit after  
a stellar rock show and too  
many lines of coke

it's harder to find short  
piers these days than you  
might think— he was  
looking for this."

## WHEN I DIE #2

When I die in a jet-plane not  
during a terrible  
crash (fireballs sirens  
and smoke), a terrorist  
hijack, or even because  
a drunken imbecile  
mechanic named Earl was more  
interested in his metal  
flask than missing screws

but rather in a hysteric  
fit of fear internalized to a burst  
heart artery and people  
are sad

    muttering “what a lousy  
jerk he was, especially to die  
a scared wuss” tell them “don’t  
be sad,  
    he was looking for this.”

### WHEN I DIE #3

When I die in a car  
accident with a drunk  
driver and a telephone  
pole and people  
are sad and bewildered  
knowing the drunk driver

was me tell them don't  
be angry don't be sad  
services will be  
restored momentarily

you'll be able to  
call your friends  
remark about the accordion  
Volvo and say  
he was looking for this

#### WHEN I DIE #4

When I die after completing a number of canvases  
spread out on the floor— covered with loops  
swirls and drips of paint intermingled with cigarette  
butts nails gold foil and some mysticism that seems  
strangely manufactured explanation for the unexplainable—

when I die after drinking so much I danced on  
a canvas with cut glass and watched my feet  
bleed. After chasing my wife around some  
nights with a butcher knife while she trembled

behind her bed. After taking on a young lover,  
after bloating up like a grimy and disgusting  
overfed homeless wino that everyone considers  
a genius, or an orangutan who throws paint and tricked  
the world. After I get in a car and crash because

I'm shitfaced drunk and people are sad. So sad  
they call it suicide, as if an orangutan should be  
able to choose when he dies, even if he hasn't  
painted in years and pisses himself more  
than you might know. Tell them "he was

an alcoholic! He was a fucking drunk, don't  
you get it? His death wasn't a work of art, it wasn't  
romantic in any sense. It was the pathetic death  
of a drunk. Don't be sad and stupid  
and tell yourself he was looking for this  
just because you're scared that genius  
may not mean an exemption from life."

WHEN I DIE #5

How about when  
I die, and people are sad—  
as I created color-  
field paintings which  
recreated light in  
ways impossible  
before. I created  
glow, I made light  
a tangible something, something  
created without  
God. But as

my paintings went  
on I became more  
and more depressed,  
and each work seemed to  
report back the despair  
which lay in the inner-reaches  
of my mind,  
until I opened  
my wrists and bled  
to death on linoleum  
tile. Tell them  
the same thing

you told the Pollock  
groupies. Tell them don't be  
sad. He was depressed  
because he was addicted  
to a depressant, alcohol,

tell them, he was looking  
for this, he wasn't looking  
for this, whatever  
you want, but don't  
let them think I  
discovered despair. What I  
discovered was Scotch  
on the rocks—  
anyone can do that.

## GREEN

Under clouds, lime trees line up,  
not a lemon in the bunch, you might  
say, but never can tell when green  
gives way to yellow sunlight wheels  
bursting on the grass. Here, anything  
distributed evenly is enough like trees  
to say so. The yellow/aluminum, yellow/  
aluminum, spokes—disregarded bicycles—  
and rims too sharp to see

without squinting  
in the smell of citrus fruits swelling  
toward ground. Receding into sea, waves,

and there's no wind yet, only rum drinks  
swindled through straws,

masking tape  
crucified, double crucified without ice, a star,  
a snowflake, binding windows together. Hope  
against hope

the trees won't swing  
to breaking. Only samba in the evening, rumba  
through the night. More rum. More trying  
to reason with hurricane season. Big dinner  
celebrations show everyone knows Michelle  
was sick way before she arrived

before this funeral  
party. Christmas! New Year's! Thanksgiving!  
Out there somewhere in the sea, she twisted  
to something else. Shaken, clanking too loud  
to be heard— too demanding to let up.

## ALAMEDA

1.

Beyond the crooked skyscrapers scratching sky, underneath the sea bubbling on the bed, a higher or lower standard found these pictures end hunger in the midst of all your diagrams and equations. Never to forget the first roughing of each hair burned down the palace for the sun and called 'round the rim after her, streaking insoluble crimson goo down plastic grooves on faucet knobs, and walked away from shaking palms in the air above. A frenzy of teeth, carnage, flesh and fluid kept her word against the slate-like surface, and hushed the spinning turbines of water bursting into froth— winking, demanding, the barred white teeth of a fingernail scratch each sugared splotch away, until concern adjusts the H and C, and the rain, speckled with sheets and sheets of hardened candy dots, forms an almost irresistible attraction for that element of our society too late to make it home. And you were standing there with just the notches on the Fahrenheit thermometer. The jet wash trails dribbling streaks, then dashes, and the soft sky was still a brilliant image of a fuzzy concept. In a shoebox in the corner of his room, he'll ride his bike, suffering, until he twists to clouds— then ghosts— and floats and blurs to small black drops and searing flowers. That was him, right there next to you— a highway ghost— another dimple in the cheek. Fields of red too permanent to be forever relished a glass of beer, and a thousand miles away, sails on the Charles, whipping in cool July winds, swept the ashes when you were done.



2.

But he's got spokes inside his head, and now the ocean is Christmas lights strung along your mast, bobbing up and down the torment sea. Yellows and blues seeking by successive eliminations to find pure form, judge others in the stainless steel bay. The sand dance the paint is spinning sinks the stern of your brushes, or third degree reflections of basketball-orange ghosts begin to clamber around with a broom, getting rid of these things no longer good for him. One inevitably ends up with the leathery skin of a Marlin.

Start from a portrait— scrambling beside—with you, gulping air and exhaustion in the prison of the spotlights on the tawdry dress of fire, you were true North-West-South-East, too worse, your hands wander absentmindedly remembering relief or both of who he was, the into him, you turn your head away, fading with your summer garden hose— willing to pour steam rivers in-between every single person for five years from the shadowed cauldron born below, if you could have any night you wished, would you subside? Would you be willing tornadoes on an innocent person, if the angry passion left a trail to the woods? If it would sneak away another kiss in the world? If they could hear you speak? Life has no guarantees you're beautiful— no— oh, you know, oh they begged you not to go before, and this reminds you of your skin, a breeze forgets you're done walking away from it all— don't leave.

## FIFTY

Taped to a lamppost outside my triple-decker, two blocks from the D Street Projects, on the lower end of Sixth Street, there's this warning about crack heroin. As if crack cocaine wasn't enough. Apparently

some people in Boston are doing 50 bags a day. One might be enough. I'm guessing, of any place on Earth, D Street has the highest concentration of heroin per square inch, and this includes poppy fields. And now people

are freebasing heroin— mixing it with other stuff that ends in *dine*, that doesn't matter. They're doing fifty bags a day, of heroin, mixed with stuff that ends in *dine*, that doesn't matter. There are some crackhouses in Southie, I even suspect a few. Now these new people just moved in

next door. I think they own a shooting gallery. I know they own a dartboard. Dut dut dut, all night, against my wall. Yay! I think that is why there is a poster outside my door. Yay! There is one poster outside my door. Yay! There should be fifty.

## CARSON BEACH

8 blocks away, fourteen year-old girls and boys  
play cards, sniff heroin, and debate steel needles  
in the boarded up basements of the D Street Projects.  
They always care when it rains in August, as puddles  
pool in the tar grooves that ring Dot Bay. They  
use that rain, or pull some from the toilet stalls  
in *Brigham's Ice Cream* up on West Broadway.  
So oily rainbows mix with brown, and drops  
of crimson, before blossoming into clouds. And at night,  
wet concrete slabs, itching for icy winter cracks, weep  
in the mascara wash reflected under *Triple O's*  
pinkish sign, as it turns purple and to blue-black  
track marks, that hide behind long-sleeved shirts,  
on kids, that melt their way through summertime.

## MANHATTAN

The heat collects in June, in crowds  
travels the tracks between Boston  
and New York, and empties into sealed  
black tar. Cars are worse, and fists

slap palms against the window, big  
circles splash, the wipers tell you  
forget it 'til after supper— keep those hands  
away from the cookies. 9 to noon, then noon

to 9 to midnight. Getting ready in the shower  
memories— there's nothing better than  
a New York City, twenty year, older than  
a girl, asking about a painting, with drink

in hand. The most complicated romantic  
entanglements have involved dripping  
paint. And always the tragedy of dinner  
parties. Of summer in the city, empty

ice cube trays. A thunderstorm  
on the deck, like morning. This storm  
will pass, and we'll forget alcohol and hearts  
in equal parts, and that rain was never gentle.

## PROVIDENCE

Stains from tarpaper  
my Lithuanian landlord  
tacked down last Spring  
shift across the ceiling,  
and the TV's a constant  
electric buzz. This morning  
the street cleaner rumbled  
all Bowen Street and dirt  
coated our lungs. One fat  
mockingbird fly put-puts  
around the air. You don't  
have the heart or energy  
to kill. Find yourself  
confused. The phone  
rings regardless. Each time  
it stops, you forget, and shaved  
30 minutes later, you're in  
the car with Johnny Blockbuster,  
he's talking on about his favorite  
girl. It's night. The ashtray  
shines remains of squished  
*Marlboro Lights*' fine residue.  
Exploding, a car backfires fumes  
and sirens. Or a gun  
goes off, echoes D Street  
and Johnny takes a left  
on red. One of those  
evergreen tree air fresheners,  
worse for the wear, lollygags  
back and forth on a noose

tangled under the rear-view  
mirror. In steam waves, the moon  
glows and The Heights' floats  
above Telegraph Hill. Your jaw's  
sore from chewing grape  
*Bubalicious* and Johnny's neon yellow  
stereo rumbles the floorboards,  
hungry and nauseous. It takes  
about an hour of nothing  
until we forget Southie.

MASSACHUSETTS TURNPIKE— BETWEEN STURBRIDGE AND LEE

As apple saplings blown in the sweet blue wind  
hitch a ride out West, I repeat *relentless*,  
catching the draft from our car's wake.  
There's a crunch of white, and red skin tears, until you're tonguing  
hard, tear-shaped seeds from soggy core.  
Even then, I can't have this feeling, but hate  
crying, especially when I can see, and this windshield  
makes a rotten window. It occurred to me  
that sorrow's more common  
than poetry. Nothing rhymes  
anymore. Seen through pines, my swollen eyes  
blur, while trees repeat, rhythm first, rhythm  
first, in waves more common than blood.

PHYSICS, TIME TRAVEL, PARALLEL UNIVERSES, STEVEN HAWKING, AND  
CHRIS BURDEN:  
A MODERN FAITH HEALING CEREMONY

1.

It was in 1997 that Johnny McCarthy decided God had arrived and everyone missed the second coming, maybe not of Christ, but the spirit had landed— blitzkrieged us, and everyone was too busy to notice.

Up to that day Johnny thought Steven Hawking was a conspiracy rolling around in a fancy-dancy wheelchair. They just found some dude who couldn't talk and strapped a speakerphone to him. It was a way for the geeks at MIT to have a good time. Johnny realized later Steven Hawking was a saint— even though that Hawking guy often made bets with people about physics theory— and he saw on PBS one bet was for a year's subscription to Penthouse. Up to that day too, Johnny had this idea of God that was OK by him. He figured God was impossible to understand— if anyone was going to know God, God should be something that couldn't be understood. Superior being and all. And he agreed with himself there were certain things God would want people to do. Even "Good Orderly Direction," and "God is Love," worked fine. "God is Good"— whatever. Pretty much, this is too much explanation. The thing that worked for Johnny was to imagine God like an ant would imagine Johnny. Like, if you tried to explain to an ant what it was like to make a roast beef sandwich— go to the grocery store, buy the rye bread and american cheese, open the refrigerator, etc.— or, even better, if you tried to explain paying your electric bill to an ant, it would be impossible. Incomprehensible. And again, Johnny agreed with himself.



2.

Johnny was a painter, and a student, and a lover of knowledge, which made everything more difficult. For instance— if God was love, and Johnny loved knowledge, how could God not let Johnny in? It was after this question, twenty beers, and Katie, Johnny bolted up in bed and said “it’s more because knowledge is lust that I feel this way.” Katie didn’t seem to care, or even stir, and in fact, God probably didn’t have a white beard or a punishing disposition. God might just be space between people, like air. It was so hard to truly understand people, just as it was truly hard to love— to do things for selfless reasons. Even the most selfless act would help a person sleep better at night.

3.

One thing bothered Johnny about his space theory— the space between people seemed to be expanding. More anxiety and misunderstanding. Things were going on at MIT and Berkeley— particles and photons and quantum gravity mechanics; parallel universes.

Which brought him to Katie. If there were parallel universes— some close by, some not so close by— it had something to do with the probability of subatomic particles. Even the smartest scientist could never predict where subatomic particles would be exactly— they could only give a function of probability. It wasn't a probability that these things *could* happen, but actually they *were all* happening. In other parallel universes. A universe might have a difference of one atom missing from ours, while in another he might have never been born. Johnny, Steven Hawking, Bob Guiccione; none of them. Or in another, dinosaurs might be wearing tuxedos, and driving plaid Volkswagen Bug convertibles.

This helped the theory with Katie, but not by much. They never got along. Johnny had trouble getting along; some days he felt alien, and noticed that certain other people felt that way too. Thoreau had the thing about the mass of men, and it made sense— there were few times two people saw a situation as happening the same way.

And it seemed right. Seriously plausible all of a sudden. But again, more distance, less understanding. Johnny was looking for God. Scientists figured time travel was possible for people. The only reason we weren't overrun with visitors from the future was because they all landed in alternate universes. The probability of landing in the same universe you took off from was impossible. Incomprehensible.

4.

Again, Johnny was a painter. There was space here too, as many people wouldn't understand what was going on in his paintings. They might feel the paint, have a reaction to the colors, or have some feeling— but many might just be put off by the seeming simplicity of it. Many would think a gorilla could do that. Johnny had skills, and understood the process of making pictures, and some of it was that he had been trained pretty well. And some of it was because he didn't know what else to do.

Kind of like physics. Those guys were trained, and had a lot of time, and that's how they spent their time. When Einstein was alive, people knew who he was, and now maybe people might know Steven Hawking— but mainly, people weren't interested. It was to the point that only poets understood poetry, artists understood art, physicists— physics. Any field had this hidden labyrinth of operations, from accounting to aerodynamics, way beyond the layman's terms. Beyond layman's terms because it wasn't the explanations that were complicated, it was the processes that had advanced, and were advancing so rapidly, it was impossible to catch up without acquiring all the information in-between. And once a person did get that information, they were just as schooled as any novice in that field, and could go apply for an internship at the aerodynamics factory, or for graduate study, or for an accounting job.

5.

Everywhere more distance. Johnny was toying with an idea of electricity. Pretty much, he didn't know how electricity worked, but he depended on it.

There was also an important aspect of the relativity theory in his head. The thing about an hour: An hour on a porch swing with a pretty girl seems like a minute, a minute sitting on a stove feels like an hour. If you pushed things far enough, no one could understand anyone. Perspective *was* time and distance. Which brought him back to parallel universes— art, poetry, aerodynamics.

6.

But now, electricity was practically a thing of the past, and his light bulb was flickering as he prepared for bed. He always went to bed with a book, and tonight the book was Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. Belief in the absurd. Faith was basically the belief in the probability of the absurd. If it wasn't absurd, it wasn't truly faith. But *all* these things were basically diversions—pursuits which helped people get away from their problems. When Johnny painted, he never had to think about the time he stole twenty five televisions, or how he fucked over Toys-R-Us; and he would even let go of yesterday's battle with Katie. He just thought about paint. And maybe Jackson Pollock too, who most people thought was Ed Harris, the guy at the physics lab—he didn't have to think about the fact that he backhanded his wife that morning, or about how he screwed up his kids through his passion for a string of numbers, rather than Little League games, lacking understanding and compassion, the guy at the aerodynamics lab was free to fly, even on the ground. The accountant could manage an abstraction like money with the help of a computer.

7.

Art, poetry, aerodynamics, physics, computers, were all advancing fast too— getting further and further away from the layman. And from each other. But Johnny was a layman, and understood his painting, and there was progress there too, and it was impossible not to see this advancement of each individual pursuit as leading to more and more understanding and opportunities and creative thought, and in some ways the entire idea of all these people incredibly engaged in pursuits only they had the ability to understand, but that we all had the ability to feel alive from, was awesome beyond his intellect.

8.

That night some of it came clear. The distance was growing, but if God was the space between people, and the space of understanding was getting that much greater— that is, farther apart, so Physics sounded like Spanish— God was all the more bigger, and stronger than he ever had been. God was right here, between everyone, and growing, and things were confusing, there were fucking parallel universes right here, on this planet, but we still made love, and laughed, and held it together somehow, and in that lack of understanding about what Jim Smith was doing down the street came an opportunity for faith. A better place for devotion, and more necessity of understanding, and compassion, and surely God wasn't gone. And Johnny was elated, elated at the fact there was so much faith and it wasn't as far away as an ant and a refrigerator— it was right here— and he wanted to paint, and to make love to Katie, and he was so elated, he turned off his lamp, unscrewed the bulb, put his finger in the socket and clicked the switch on— because he didn't believe in electricity anymore, or rather he understood it— and none of it scared him. He glowed, something like Chris Burden, and almost no one understood.

## TRACK 12: THE PURPLE LINE

There's so much mystery in strip malls  
near the water, even if the water's aware  
of the Atlantic. If parking spaces were  
stripes, would a seat always be dyed red?  
Would stitching look like cracks after  
an extra-ferocious winter? How fucking long  
can a highway be? Any journey, and distance  
spaced between us, any blinking white  
line. The tracks I lay below lead to the Prudential's  
blue glass ice cube trays, glued against  
each other. A straw that sticks, a single rail =  
a Richard Serra mystery antenna transmitting.  
Complete Your Degree in Just Two Years! Build  
a billboard, sneak through Dorchester, slow. Forget  
the stain of Southie, the shamrock shillelagh  
tattooed on city streets. The conscience of race  
relations spreading out to the suburbs. If I  
was your neck and head, and I knew  
what touching meant, I would connect you.  
A strong American flag with 50 perfect stars, 50  
perfect chairs, a blue box of innocence, innocent  
exploitation, I would give it all to remember my father  
and his hands, better ideas of suffering, a revelation  
of suffering. And this theory that binds us, blindfolded,  
into believing that from my fixed point I'll never know  
the importance of your blurring— today— an iron cage  
on wheels— and I just saw the perfect disc  
of whitest moon pass across some clouds. They say  
when Pollock worked in circles, it showed  
that he was gone. A folded ridge, crease,



between the clouds. I was five and driving  
in New Jersey, the aqua light of a digital clock-radio  
glowed against my father's face. I asked him why  
the moon followed us everywhere we went. There was  
dread of breathing after being inside this, an echo  
in my ribs, in my chest, in the black space, in trees,  
in a forest, or next to each suburban house  
filled with the deep. Scanning  
for an empty seat.

## RANGELEY

Maine reminded my father of home, and he told me every year at the first glimpse of jagged white peaks ripping through sky. Reminded him of home, and dynamiting Flathead Lake, to make the fishing easier, while the wind remained. He held me unlike fathers do, and looked through an empty spot of separation, until it got too hot. He even moved to Florida, but couldn't stand that humid, swampy, heat. He fished and watched the dolphin's black fins break the blue surface and move like mountains do. And inside him, mountains, moguls, multiplied, the frosty air within his chest began to crack heat and loss, while silver streams of ice-melt flooded both his lungs, and he dreamed of skiing. His ashes swam in Flathead Lake, and refused to sink, even though I waited for the blue to steam or freeze to cope with his empty burning— his frozen lake— his arrival in an urn, in a son's hands, in a hammer breaking plaster, and a boat, and dust, and chips of bone floating, sweeping through my eyes, meeting mountains, being Maine and Montana and settling in-between, where the water met the surface, where the surface met the rocky rise, and icy peaks became the sky, the ocean, the lake, my chest, when my father died, he resisted ceremony, because he understood.

## THE GULF OF MEXICO

The boat slipped back  
and forth. I counted  
dips and time between  
words, and felt sleepy  
in my heavy head, watching

dolphin's thin fins  
rise and fall, as gray  
bent shadows, playing  
waiting, with him  
chewing an unlit cigar

to say anything, something  
just to let me know  
that we, just to let me  
know that he, that  
I, would be ok.

## MISSOULA

My last day in Missoula's gray without  
the decency of rain. The clouds, a big sky  
dome, like under a coffin, or a lumpy  
quilt. And when I dropped my cable box off  
this morning, the mountains were a still,  
darkest green. There was a credit  
on the account— the first time ever  
I've had a credit when I left town.  
Any town. A testament to alcohol.  
One thing my Father taught me, even  
his last lesson, was leaving.

I've been here too long, I miss Boston  
like I miss cheap rum, and wish to wedge  
the glass handle of a half gallon between  
forefinger and thumb, throw the plastic  
pourer over my shoulder, and gulp  
until I gag. Once, I had the shakes so bad

I stemmed on Dot Ave, twitching.  
And when I got enough for a bottle  
of Old T, the shakes stopped— before  
I even bought the booze. It's a long way,  
I know. The return is a series of dazed  
weeks during which we are all only half  
alive. But I think I might remember  
fear. Last night, walked to Big Dipper  
with Martin, got a sugar cone, and talked  
babies and poems, the smells of spring  
competing with the chocolate macadamia

nut chiseling at my front teeth. There was this pink and white bush, overpowering like old ladies' perfume. The river was big, even after a dry winter. Is it normal to think of dying when you leave? Maps, a Spaulding basketball, cameras, some clothes, and a Red Sox hat are waiting in my car. We agreed about the need for tension and conflict in all art. "Mark Rothko claimed all art had to have something to do with dying." I'm running a marathon home, 3000 miles, and know I'm dying. I'm running because my body is used to being in Montana. Is used to being dead. If time is infinite, infinite before and after, I wonder if the fish ate my father's ashes. He once dynamited Flathead Lake, and now the two are even, and the variations of green; lime, mossy, to the blackish trees near the top, and the swampy Clark Fork at its sharpest bend. There's a grand gesture of paint here too, of water, stretching, of wanting to get in the car and drive until those lines melt and bend— even though I'm beginning to hate the life of a painter— and distance is always difficult to measure— until white lines are rivers.

## WHITE NUMBERS

—after Jasper Johns, 1958

*Start, from nothing*

1.

Snow from the sky above has long since stopped,  
leaving a canvas of untouched white stretching  
beneath. Sink, then rise, from beneath boots,

damp socks, colder toes, each delicate step  
is counted— stenciled— in the tight bed sheet.  
Merely walking paints these numbers, as if

they had some inherent concrete reality— indeed,  
the very act of moving produces a steam of old ideas  
being crushed. Here, where love and need *are* one,

labor is the risk. Soles, tread, curves, toes; one-two;  
1-2; there are rounded hourglass figures left behind.  
Take an object. Do something with it. Do something else.

Soles, tread, curves, toes; hourglass figures left behind.  
*To do something again is to do it differently.* There are  
shadows and sinking, depth; red and blue and green,

suggested. White is all the more painful after  
two minutes— you notice agony, or sudden change,  
try it for four. Still no relief. Then eight, then sixteen.

Thirty-two. Eventually one discovers that it doesn't  
hurt at all. You continue, now, to walk. The searing  
is relentless, and teaches you to love.

2.

On a piece of lined graph paper, plot the following points: The seasons— all of them— a map, cloud curves

in round thumbtacks, makeup you “borrowed”  
from mimes, time it takes a closet hanger to murder

every shoe, window shades shut in sharp reaction  
to ventriloquists’ gulps, stars on a flag— *any* flag,

your neighbor’s hallway light bulbs, money in morning  
newspaper prints, *x*, *y*, newspaper smudges on loose

fingerprint marks, intensely sunny light in dense fog-mist,  
the difference between these two things: following

a line involuntarily and following a line intentionally,  
the fact that you control that which you do not control. If

you have connected all the coordinates  
properly: repeat as needed.

3.

Somewhere there are tight quarter bouncing bed sheets,  
queen sized mattresses, four slippery-shiny posts,  
cornered shadows in the walls, a television, remote  
controlled cable box, recliner, place-matted table,

vinyl siding, (diving-boarded pool in the backyard),  
manicured lawn, turned-over flower beds— edged  
and seeded with lime, picket fence, sidewalk, crack-crack,  
crack-crack, sticky black tar asphalt, Elm Street,

Ocean Estates, estates. Everywhere there are these numbers on front doors, stamped letters in the mailbox, crispy bills below, and in building's beds— repeating— repeating, oh, oh, (again!)

repeating. And in those building homes are towns, shingles, shutters, windows, two car garages, where the wooden blocks scattered in baby's crib swagger telephone lines. Collect birds, voices, winds, and call out,

shitting on boxy Volvo station wagon cruisers. Somewhere, anywhere! Where, a number, a manifestation of 7— the shape of the numeral, standing without a context, as Cézanne may have painted seven apples— but,

latitude-longitude swinging, slanted map stripes, cookie makers, geometry classrooms, heart attack intersections, and folded plaid? What about glossy photographs? and handy-dandy color tee-vees?

The just paint "7." *Maybe change the channel to make a picture—* Tonight at Eight on Channel 9: *Fred Numbers: A Portrait*. His memory's remarkably specific. Jimmy Squares was in Paris

once when Numbers was there. I asked him how he was liking Paris and he said he wasn't. Didn't see him again for months after that; he went back to the States, and I went



to the South. Then I saw him in a restaurant, and I asked him how he found Paris. He stared off into space, the way he does, and then he slowly turned, and looked at me.

4.

Do you at some strange distance  
think of glass boxes full of weeds  
and weeds filling boxes aromatically

and the strange distance between  
each blade of the eye? Cold, and icy;  
the homeless are on metal grates.

I'm wearing a wrinkled white linen suit,  
but I don't play chess, I don't have the right  
kind of head for it. Next to us, there's a cube,

with two clocks, each a round ivory face,  
numbers smiling around its center, hands  
dangling from a pivot point, covering gaps

in teeth. I can't think of all those possibilities  
in advance. Instead, I'm playing solitaire chess.  
It's the same as boring old chess, only everybody plays

and no one moves. In fact, first person to move  
loses. Push all the boards together, all the squares  
together, like no-wax linoleum tile, and watch

a tight formation of playing pieces— horsies,  
queens, bishops, and the like, sweating with anxious  
speculation, marching in place in the sandy confines

of the desert. When marbled castles march,  
when bricks are blurry lines and nothing else,  
when in doubt, do nothing.

5.

Candles sweat thick blobs of birthday cake  
frosting, sending clear stream waterfalls  
to mingle with the frothy ocean waves bubbling  
over every coast of the perfect bay, swimming

on baby grand pianos. Waves, still and solid, carve  
flickering light into ice skate tracks at dinnertime  
sunset, and music. On the shore, around, are skipping  
footprints, curving about rims and collected elsewhere,

when shoelace cords tangled with the cooling air  
and trees murmur above taught strings  
itching to explode; a cough, sweat rustling in headlined  
newspaper folds, another cough, there is so much *here*,

that during John Cage's piece, *4'33"*, pianist  
David Tudor sat at a piano without playing it—  
the music consisted of sounds created in the environment  
during that time. Your CD's skipping, outside

eighteen wheeler flatbed trucks play bop, like  
playing scrabble with the vowels missing—  
and which is more musical, a truck passing  
by a factory, or a truck passing by a music school?

6.

This energy, this space, this song; bruised  
and brushed-on sound and crevice, where movement  
is measured in breath and wispy

floating ghosts, is where you'll realize, an image,  
*any* image— if prepared or found suggested, violated,  
fallen, or redeemed, is not its color, form,

or anecdote, but reality; whose implications rush,  
any of these parts— even when the air is stagnant,  
the walls— crowded, and your memories are taken

as prescribed. Construct an artist's studio, bathing  
in porcelain sunlight, to make more music, more  
careful, tragic, words, word-pictures. More *nothing*. A jetty

from your home with solid floorboards, thickly shellacked,  
that paint, and notes, can't stain. In fact, forget the walls,  
and place large garage doors on every side, and replace

the wood panels with repeating panes of glass— each  
separate shard, windowed picture's possibility. Then  
you can remove all barriers, press the boxy opener

from Sears, hear chugging grinds of motored chains  
shaking each rib in you, and watch, as those checkerboarded  
curtains rise and fall; disappear. The wind will be the in-between.

7.

Map art creates an unknown world. In ordinary life  
such drips might usually imply a mistake, or sloppy

indifference, but as the boundaries are blurred  
in certain areas, the whole world will soon become

every man's backyard: What do you consider the largest  
sized map that would really be useful? *About*

*six inches to the mile.* Only six inches! We very soon  
got six yard to the mile. Then we tried a hundred yards

to the mile, and then we actually made a map of the country,  
scale of a mile to a mile. Have you used it much?

It has never been spread out, yet, the farmers  
objected; they said it would shut out sunlight.

8.

Somehow the snow has melted and the ground drains white.  
There's nothing here except a picture-music of the nothing  
noise between us, that binds us, above us, as we are sealed,  
shellacked, locked in tight to sleep at night in cribs and prisons;

cells, offices, houses, vinyl, chords, cords, and counting.  
Cemetery plot caskets carry figures and march to seldom sounds.  
The relationship is strengthened, but the stones remain  
unyielding. Figures— I am one, you are two, and so on, and so on—

At a certain level, at a certain pint in life, that becomes the game.  
Identified with the man himself, it acquires a soul, and it moves  
with all the subtleties which have been imbedded in him,  
these numbers, eternal, while everything else is perishable.

9.

Nothing's solved finally, ever— moonlight, death,  
religion, laughter, fear. People who once lived  
in a bank, the converted it to a studio.  
Here, money tallied and bounded by elastics,

teller desks and bronze rectangled date announcements—  
WELCOME. TODAY IS: \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_, 20 \_\_\_\_;  
today is an odometer, Norman Rockwell  
pinned to the cracking stucco wall. Down deep,

safe deposit boxes, vaults, the office of the President  
and drawers of computer tallied savings books,  
home mortgage/car payment slips, receipts,  
repeats, and paper. ATM machine with a line

outside, while away velvety rope balustrades  
guide a meandering maze of empty peopled lines.  
Margerie is filing down her pinky nail  
with a coarse board of emery, snaps her fourth

piece of gum this morning, now bland and colorless.  
She had five or so beers last night and dreams  
about quitting— next door, the paint store is the same,  
it may or may not be chance and probability, *but your chance*

*is not the same as my chance*, the roads, the phones,  
opening, closing, bricks, windows, doors, and multiplying,  
3, 9, frames, forgetting— that picture of the dog  
tugging at the freckled kid's pants, all attempt  
to enclose some compensation.