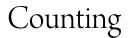
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Douglas Goetsch

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 everythingtires 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 *every*one, 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.