White numbers

Kurt Cole Eidsvig

The University of Montana

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WHITE NUMBERS

by

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presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

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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.
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,
buttered 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 \( \frac{1}{2} \) 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.
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.
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 leathered 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.
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.
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.
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.
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 tuxedoes, 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.
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.
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.
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.
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.
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
get 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.