

Number Mine

The hamlet was as nameless as it was hatless, and it was extremely hatless. It was a hamlet completely without hat—though it did sometimes wear a wig. It was a nameless hatless Hamlet in a numberless world.

Nothing was happening. Upside down and inside out, left to right and back to front, nothing was happening. In fact, it was not happening so much, even the not happening was not happening. Actually, even the not happening was not happening was not happening.

But look, yonder, a man digging a ditch. A mighty ditch. A strange ditch without top. A hamlet without hat and a ditch without top.

What dust thou do, yonder man digging ditch? Dost thou dig ditch? He answers not. His ears are blind to the written word. We must wait for some other fellow to come along and ask. Ah, there he is, the other fellow. See him? He walks with a limp. Walks with a limp? The poor fellow is missing an entire leg.

"What dust thou do, yonder man digging ditch? Dust thou dig ditch, or is that nothing more than a very large hole in your boots?"

"I dig ditch. 'Tis a fine ditch. 'Tis a topless ditch."

"A finer more topless ditch I have never seen."

"Very fine."

"Most topless."

Like old fireworks on a rainy November night, their words

fizzle, splutter and wane.

"I recognise not your face," the man digging ditch finally offers.

"And my knees?"

"Like-wise, they are strange to me."

"'Tis only natural. Both my knees and my face travel incognito."

"And the rest of you?"

"The rest travels in disguise."

"As what?"

"As the private parts of a public place. But enough of my body pieces. What is the nature of that ditch?"

"'Tis the kind that makes a space for itself in the ground. 'Tis the beginning of a number mine. Some day, I hope to extract the finest of numbers from this mine."

"This mine is yours?"

"Yes. This mine is mine."

"And what know you of numbers?" The man missing leg is either surprised or suspicious or has noticed a sideways dog sitting in a tree.

"I know they begin and never end. I know they start small and grow bigger. I know they are like wild squiggles that roam the forest floor by night. I know they possess both simplicity and complexity, beauty and foulness, smell sweet with rancid stench. I know they dance and seldom trip. I know in their soul lies lies but in their heart lies sit. I know they have

great flesh ripping teeth. I know they are without hat."

"In other words, my ditch digging friend, you know nothing whatsoever about numbers."

"Exactly. I know less than nothing, for about nothing I know something, but about numbers I know not even that."

"Thou art an honest fellow."

Taking the man digging ditch by the arm, the man missing leg lifts him out and bids him lead the way to the hatless hamlet—where nothing is still not happening.

"Not a mouse stirring." The man missing leg rolls the words over in his head—well, at least in his hat—decides he likes them and wants to keep them, takes out a black book and pencils them onto a page. Meanwhile:

"Yes. 'Tis a quiet enough hamlet. And we have many cats."

As they approach the main street, which also happens to be the *only* street and is in fact not really a street at all, the man not digging ditch and the man missing leg notice a small boy and a smaller boy busy playing marbles. They laugh, they giggle, they marvel at the marbles. They gasp in pleasure. They gaze in rapture at all the pretty colours. And the boys seem to like them as well, though not quite as much.

And look, over the way, there is Mr. Pole, a tall thin fellow with a wife called May. As usual he goes from door to door, collecting gossip in a large sack with a hole in the bottom.

"Knock knock."

"Who's there?"

"Pole."

"Pole who?"

"Pole the other, it's got bells on it. I'm here to collect gossip."

The door opens and a woman of inestimable fatness appears. She is wearing something that looks like a tent—and, by the smile on her face, it seems as if a pack of Boy Scouts is camping inside.

"Goodly, Mr Pole. How art thou?" The Boy Scout lady is a happy talker who loves the sound of her own voice.

"Upon the surface, fine, but deep down inside, I find great sorrow."

"Well, try not to dig that deep," the Boy Scout lady advises. And of course, Mr. Pole smiles not. He is a perpetually petulant fellow with particular partiality for personal problems—especially other peoples. And serious too. So serious he believes tom-foolery is only for people named Tom.

"Dust thou have any empty gossip for my still empty sack?"

"As a matter of fact—"

"Fact, or merely rumour?" Mr. Pole interrupts.

"Well, rumour, as a matter of *rumour*, yes I do. Listen now, from what I've heard—and it comes from a reliable source: an acquaintance of a friend of the uncle of a woman who accidentally stepped on the toes of the man who once shook

hands with the person concerned—what's-her-name over there, you know, who has a bun in the oven."

"Who?" Mr. Pole frowns. Gossip needs names and Mr. Pole needs gossip.

"What's-her-name. Yon' lass. Daughter of the old witch."

"Which witch?"

"Yon witch. Mrs. Hoopington by any other name. You know. A bun in the oven!"

"Which daughter of the witch?"

"Which which?"

"Which which of the witch. Exactly." Mr. Poles frustration becomes a tangible thing, twisty and greatly knobled.

"Thou knowest, the blonde lass."

"They are all blonde."

"Oh, yes. Well, with blue eyes."

"They all have blue. . . ."

"Oh, yes. Well, with flat feet."

"They all have. . . ."

"And the ears."

"They all. . . ."

"The buckled knee caps."

"They. . . ."

"The wrinkled tiddle-taddles."

". . . ."

"Ophelia . You know who I mean. Ophelia Hoopington"

"Yes, what about her?"

"Well, she's got a bun in the oven."

"Ophelia Hoopington has a bun in the oven?!" See the smile? Mr. Pole is a happy fellow. Gossip has the name and Mr. Pole has the gossip.

The man not digging ditch and the man missing leg continue past Mr. Pole and the Boy Scout lady. Again, the hatless hamlet falls quiet. Actually, it trips and tumbles quiet, but only Mrs. Proper notices the difference. Mrs. Proper is the upright lady over there, wiping the dust from the rosebush in her front garden.

"Good day Mrs. Proper," the man not digging ditch begins. "Dust thou dust?"

"I dust."

"Splendid."

"And how goes it with the ditch digging. Hast thou discovered numbers?" See the smirk she wears? And a good thing too, you say, for she is otherwise naked.

"Almost," the man not digging ditch mumbles, resuming the walk.

"She questions your quest?" the man missing leg asks.

"They have no faith," the man not digging ditch gestures recklessly at the world. "They believe not in the existence of numbers, saying they are like the shadows of a cloudy day."

In silence, the man not digging ditch and the man missing leg continue on their way.

As you see, in the stead of doors, the humble homes dangle

wooden bead curtains over entrances. Hear the gentle click and clack of bead bustling in the breeze? No? I make too much noise with weighty words that tumble like lead feathers? So be it. Listen in squared silence.



What a jolly sound those beady beads make. They punctuate the silence like misplaced commas, upside down question marks, elongated colons and other such scratchings.

"This is where I live," the man not digging ditch finally announces. "Come inside and enjoy some humble hospitality."

Inside the house, flocks of flies buzz about the place, walking up wall and along ceiling—without the use of a safety net.

"You live with flies?" The man missing leg curls his upper lip in disgust.

"I do. The bead curtain is perfect for keeping them all in."

"So I see. And what think you of cleanliness?"

"I think greatly of it. 'Tis a rare custom of mine."

"Rare indeed! And a custom more honour'd in the breach than the observance." Again, the man missing leg mulls over his own words, takes out his blackest book and scrawls them upon a page.

"I notice you make selective use of that spectacularly black book."

"I do. 'Tis a record of words I find too fleeting for their

own good."

"And a fine record too, I'm sure. Very catchy."

"Most melodious does sound your praise."

"'Tis because I was singing it to a merry tune. But where are my manners? Oh yes, now I remember: I leant them to a needy neighbour. Can I offer you refreshment. Food? Drink? A warm shower to wash away the stench?"

"The stench is your own."

"I do beg your pudding. 'Twas a silly mistake. Come, warm yourself by the fire."

"There is no fire."

"My error is custard upon the pudding. Eat and be merry."

Look, the man missing leg sits himself down at the kitchen table. I see you are amazed by his ingenuity: there are, after all, no chairs. There is, however, a large map on the table top, which is almost as good as a chair, unless you want to sit on it.

"What use do you make of this map?"

"Ah, the map. It shows the country about the hamlet. Look," the man not digging ditch points, "you are here. See the red blob with the arrow? The blob is you. The arrow is my pointing finger, pointing at you. I use this map in my number mine digging. I keep track of the places I dig in."

"What is this number madness?"

"Numbers are not mad."

"I referred not to the numbers but—"

"Then your meaning is a wild beast that avoids capture like a house without roof."

"You should avoid mixing your metaphors," the man missing leg advises.

"You should listen more closely: t'was a metaphor tied to a simile, like a dog bound to a well planted post."

"Your intelligence begins to show itself."

"Thank you," the man not digging ditch smiles.

"Unfortunately, it shows itself to be a fool."

"Thank you," he smiles away.

"Now, take heed. What would you answer if I told you your number mines are all in vain?"

"I would say the vein has yet to be discovered. I would say you know not the difference between a number and a tall twisty thing with blue spots."

"The difference is the blue spots."

"Drat! You know more than you tell. My hopes are dashed."

"Take heed. I am a persecuted philosopher who can never return to his native hamlet. I roam about from place to place. I wander endlessly wondering endlessly what fate is mine. To be or not to be, that is the question."

"But what's the bloody *answer*?"

There he goes again. Look, the man missing leg takes out his black book and makes more scritch-scratching. Finally, he looks up.

"Take heed: not long ago I discovered the true secret of

numbers. I have discovered their one and only infinite source."

"How? Where? Why? When? Who? What? If?"

"Yes."

"Show me. I beg. I borrow. I. . . ."

Placing the pencil on the table top, the man missing leg returns his black book to his pocket,

"Are you sure you would know? There are dangers beyond your wildest imaginings. Frightful dangers that can make ice scream."

"Show me."

The man missing leg picks up his pencil, uncertainly. See the way his hand shakes? See the way in nipples throb?

"Here is the source of all numbers."

He leans over, glances briefly at the map and marks an X. By some strange planetary alignment, twist of fate, will of god, or sheer perversity of an unknown author, the flock of flies suddenly realises its collective hunger and swoops down upon the man missing leg. They go, naturally enough, for the jugular. Blood begins to spurt. The man not digging ditch swooshes them away, but it is too late: his new friend, his dear companion, his bosom buddy, his beloved chum, his cherished comrade, his confident confidant, lies dead on the floor. But never mind about *him*! What about the X? What about the number mine? Yes there it is. X marks the spot. Just outside the hamlet. Tossing the corpse into the street, the

man not digging ditch, brandishing his shovel and map, rushes to the place where X marks the spot. Watch him shovel. Watch him dig. The man digging ditch dreams of the numbers that soon will be his. What ever they are, what ever they do, they will be his. All his.

Bedraggled, the man not digging ditch is homeward bound. Through the whispering darkness he makes his solitary way. Observe the dejection: the sagging shoulders, the heavy chest, the stooping neck, the limp wrist, the dangling doodle. The ditch digging was futile. He is no nearer to numbers than a pig to a palace.

Can we watch as he returns day after day, digging his empty ditch ever deeper? Can we watch such abortive labour? No, it would take far too long and be far too dull. But look, what's that? Someone is coming. Someone who walketh with a limp. A limp? The poor fellow is missing an entire leg.

"So, you return, damnedest of tricksters." Notice the harshness of tone. The days of useless digging have taken their toll on his spirits. The man digging ditch is not a happy camper, and would be better inside the Boy Scout lady's tent with all the other Boy Scouts.

"You return, damnedest of tricksters," he repeats, which is very nice of him, for long narrative interludes often hamper the smooth flow of dialogue, and force the reader to check back and see what the eventual answer is actually answering.

"You return, damnedest of tricksters," he says once again.

Service, indeed, beyond our expectations.

"Thou art as sharp—"

"As I am blunt?"

"Exactly."

"I mince not my words, for it serves lnoy ot kaem het thurt
niot siel."

"But why do you continue this foolish mining in this foolish
place."

"Foolish I am, yes, to trust in *you*." The man digging ditch
takes out the map and waves it at the man missing leg like a
declaration of war. "Look, here, X marks the spot. This is the
very place you said; where endless number would be found. Why,
look," he points to the ditch, "'tis nothing more than a hole
in the ground. I deserve an apology. Nay, I insist upon it!"

"I'm sorry, but I never apologise."

The man missing leg walks up to the ditch and peers down.
See the look he wears?

"'Tis deep in the extreme." He is trying to placate his
friend, offering praise of the depth and subterranean nature
of the ditch.

"Extremely," he smiles his smile.

"A ditch so deep, why 'tis rather dangerous when you think
about it."

"'Tis dangerous even when you don't," he says proudly. "But
why did you deceive me? Why did you say numbers were here to
be found?"

"I'm afraid you misunderstood." The man missing leg motions the man not digging ditch to join him on the grass for some friendly rolling and wrestling and some rollicking frolicking. Afterwards, the man missing leg begins anew.

"Take heed, the X marked on your map is, actually, in no way, shape or form, actually an X—apart from its way, shape and form."

"So what is it then?"

"'Tis the source of all numbers."

"So what is it then?"

"'Tis what I like to call the mark of multiplication."

"So what is it then?"

"Let me explain. First look at this." He takes his trusty pencil and pencils a cross upon the crumpled map. "We'll begin with this. 'Tis rather more simple than the mark of multiplication, but is also the source of endless numbers—though rather less endless than the other. The X is *really* endless. This is just endless."

"There?!" cries the man, studying the placement of the cross on the map. "I should dig for number there?"

"No. 'Tis not the place but the thing itself that counts. Think of your map as an empty page." The man missing leg reaches into a pocket and brings out some strange squiggles.

"What are they?"

"These, my friend, are numbers."

Needless to say. . . .

"*Real* numbers? Actual number? Put them in your mouth and chew on them numbers?"

"Put them in your mouth and chew on them, swallow them and shit them out numbers. Look," he holds one up, "this is the number six. Look, this is the number nine. Now we will use the cross. I call it the mark of addition. Look at both the numbers. Both together, I have two numbers. So, all together, in addition, I have three numbers. I have the two numbers added to the number two that they are together. And now, look at them both and look at what they are together and I have four numbers."

"This is some kind of weird black magic sorcery hocus-pocus. This is conjuring jiggery-pockery enchantment. This is slight of hand, foot and elbow. This is spellbinding and all illusion. Just what the hell *is* this?"

"Me thinks you were never told that brevity is the soul of wit." Oh, oh, there he goes again, taking out his little black book and scribbling down another fancy pants epigram. "Now," he continues, "for the fun part. Using this mark of multiplication, we can multiply our numbers faster than you can say one two three."

"Can I try?" the man not digging ditch asks hesitantly.

"You wish to multiply?"

"I wish to say, 'one, two three.'"

"Go ahead."

"Are you sure? I might prove beyond my ken."

"Go ahead."

"One . . . two . . . and three! May the gods bow in wonderment! I did it. Now they are mine. I own them. They are mine, all mine. Show me that mark of constipation."

"Multiplication. 'Tis easy. We take this number six." He takes it. "Now, imagine if we have six all over again. Twice. Two times six. Six is multiplied twice. Get it? Now look, we have a new number. I call it twelve."

"This really is the devil's doing. Blacker magic I have never seen. I fear it means evil." The man not digging ditch is beginning to understand what endless numbers really means, and it gives him the shivers. See how he shakes.

"There is nothing either good nor bad, but thinking makes it so," the man missing leg explains, removing his blacker than black book and writing in those fleeting words that they might not fleet.

"My god!!!! What happened? What weirdness now? What wretched saucy sorcery do you spin now?!" The man not digging ditch, as you observe, is clearly unnerved by something he has seen.

"What, what and what again?" The man missing leg is dumbfounded.

"Your leg! 'Tis gone. 'Tis suddenly vanished. Only one remains."

"I don't like to talk about it," the man missing leg mumbles shyly.

Before making their way back to the hatless hamlet, the man missing leg makes a hasty decision.

"I've made a hasty decision," he says.

"What, without the use of a safety net?"

"A safety net joke has already been used," the man missing leg offers a mild admonishment—without the use of a safety net. "Never repeat yourself, 'tis the second rule of comedy."

"And the first?"

"Never repeat yourself."

"A fine first rule."

"The finest. And now, my decision. Follow and behold."

They walk to the edge of the ditch. They peer down into the inky blackness of its depths.

"This number mine is your number mine."

"The mine is mine."

"Remember the second rule."

"It reminds me of the first."

"Good. Now, this, your mine, will indeed be the source of endless numbers. X really *will* mark the spot."

"I knew it."

"Watch."

The man missing leg removes a handful of numbers from his pocket. The man not digging ditch watches as he drops them, one by two, two by three, into the mine. Some he recognises, some are entirely new. Now, with all the numbers tumbled in, the man missing leg tosses in eleven marks of multiplication and eight marks of addition.

"Take heed, you hear the slight groaning from within the ditch?"

"I hear it, but what is it?" The man not digging ditch is perplexed.

"The numbers and the marks are fornicating like everybody's business. They will add to one another and multiply. Look, the ditch already begins to fill."

The numbers begin to creep out of the dark black hole, blink their virgin eyes at the bright daylight world and drift away like twisted gossamer thread upon the wind.

"Soon they will fill the world," the man not digging ditch imagines.

"Soon they will *rule* the world," the man missing leg proclaims. "Like some usurping impostor king, their tyranny will be infamous." And then, turning away from the man not digging ditch, the man missing leg, pulling out his black book, commits a soliloquy—in bread daylight!

"And then it started, like a guilty thing upon a fearful summons."

Back in the hatless hamlet, everything is happening. Everything is happening so much, even the happening is happening. Nay, even the happening is happening is happening.

Look, the two boys are fighting over their marbles.

"You've got more than me."

"You've got more than me." What their argument lacks in variety, it makes up in brevity.

"A most welcoming hamlet," the man missing leg wryly remarks.

"And thou art welcome to it."

Further down the bustling street they see Mr. Pole and the Boy Scout lady. The happy talker looks downhearted, as if she has realised her anatomical composition is 90% words and 10% water.

"Ah, Mr. Pole," she begins flatly, her words, robbed of pleasure, becoming mere necessity. "I have some new gossip for your empty sack. 'Tis about what's her name, with the bun in the oven—"

"First of all, I no longer answer to Mr. Pole. My name is changed. Second of all, I no longer collect gossip. This empty sack is another empty sack."

"It has the same hole."

"Same hole, different sack."

"Well, what's your name and what do you collect?"

"My new name is Mr. Poll."

"A definite improvement," the Boy Scout lady humours him.

"And I now collect information, which I then turn into statistics. For example, I have calculated that nine of ten people do ficky-facky two point four five times every three weeks with one or more partners of the opposite persuasion, not counting bank holidays when twice as much ficky takes place, but only half as much facky."

"How uninteresting."

"So, have you any *information*. Information, mind, not

gossip."

"I have. I have some information about what's her name with the bun in the oven."

"Who?"

"You know, the witches daughter. Mrs. Hoopington's Ophelia ."

"I need numbers, not names. Statistics need numbers. Which daughter is she?"

"You know, the fourth daughter."

"Ah, yes." See the glee in his eye? The twinkle of the number peeping statistician?

"What about her?"

"Well, apparently, and it comes from a good source: the second cousin of the half brother of the two hundred pound friend of the third man the person concerned met on the second Friday of the quarter moon." As you can see, Mr. Poll's ecstasy is supreme. Either he is about to have an orgasm, or he has a flock of geese in his underwear. "Apparently she didn't have a bun in the oven after all."

"No?"

"No. Twas just a cake."

"What kind?"

"Fruit and nut. Well, the fruit and nut kind without the nuts."

"The fruit and nut kind without the nuts? Why not simply call it a fruit cake?"

"Because it was the fruit and nut kind without the fruit as well."

"Oh."

The man missing leg and the man not digging ditch walk on, through the riotous street filled with talking and doing and grabbing.

"Where are we going?" the man missing leg asks.

"Remember I spoke of a needy neighbour to whom I leant my manners?"

"Yes."

"Anon, I over heard news the fellow has run away, never to come back."

They reach the run-a-way's house, and look, a mob is gathered in the garden.

"I don't believe my only eye," a one eyed fellow begins. "He has gone and taken things not his own."

"He took my conscience," says one.

"And he still has my heart," cries a woman.

"And he has my esteem."

"I thought him as honest as the day is long," calls another.

"He *is*. Unfortunately, 'tis mid-winter and the sun goes down at 3:30."

"A new lesson we all must learn," the man missing leg says.

"Attend the one legged fellow," the one eyed man calls. "He says there's a lesson to be learned."

And it must be a good one, look, there he is, already searching in his pocket for that blackest of books.

"What lesson?" calls an impatient voice.

"Neither a borrower nor a lender be."

And now look. As the man missing leg and the man not digging ditch walk back down the street, people are tearing down the bead curtains and replacing them with tripled lock reinforced oak doors. What a hammering. But look more closely. The man missing leg seems flustered.

"What's wrong?" the man not digging ditch asks.

"My book, the blackest of black books: 'tis lost."

"Stolen?"

"Lost. Never mind, someone somewhere someday no doubt will find it, and perhaps make use of it."

And there is Mrs. Proper, the cleaning lady. She looks unusually cheerful, don't you think?

"I've just been out beating the carpet," she smiles to the man not digging ditch.

"Beating the carpet? What was the final score?"

"3-2."

The two friends walk on.

"By the way, what was it like being dead?" The man not digging ditch asks, more to make conversation than anything else.

"There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy." No scribble.

"I have no philosophy."

"'Tis precisely my point. But just a minute, it *is* true. I *was* dead."

The man missing leg grows pale in the face.

"Don't worry about it. Some of my best friends have

been dead."

"But the numbers . . . the numbers . . . they change .
. . ."

Goodness, look how he tumbles to the ground, robbed of
life.

"My god, it looks like people only live once," the man
not digging ditch realises with horror.