

THE NUMBERS

by Jim Ruland

Aren't good. In fact, the Numbers are awful. The Numbers auger change, change being the reduction and smallification of the million-and-one good things you have all been a part of, things that don't show up in the status reports and financial forecasts (though there is a photograph tacked up on the break room wall of skywriting distorted by the wind).

The Numbers are maddening. You've never actually seen them but you're all afraid of them. What they stand for. What they mean. You are suspicious of the ways they can be manipulated. They tell you the Numbers don't lie, but they don't speak the truth. The Numbers claim to tell the story of your past, of your not-so-bright future, but they are speculative and counterfactual, like a late night TV version of the over-stimulated reality you inhabit forty plus hours a week.

You have come to understand that the Numbers are bullshit. The Numbers will never know love or happiness or adventure of any kind. They don't holiday in Italy or Istanbul. They won't lend you five dollars for a turkey sandwich. They refuse to give their seats to old ladies on buses or share their umbrellas with hatless strangers. The Numbers will never romp up the stairs from the laundry room to slip warm socks on your feet on a winter's night. They're just numbers.

But when the books are closed the Numbers dream of drowsy days beside a bend in the river with a tire swing and checkered blanket and the girl of their dreams dressed in a halter many years out of style, worn in honor of another picnic in another time when the Numbers were good and things weren't so hard to figure.

