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NUMBERS IN THE DARK

AND OTHER STORIES

ITALO CALVINO
Translated from the Italian
by Tim Parks

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ACCLAIM FOR **Italo Calvino's**

Numbers in the Dark



“The curious quirks that would shape Calvino's eccentric orbit can be described, along with the exuberant talent and sense of magic that would make that orbit a flaming one.”

—*Los Angeles Times*

“With seventeen books in print, Italo Calvino enjoys a privilege that few foreign writers ever achieve here: virtually all his works can be read in English.... Calvino's ready availability is of course a sign (and support) of his canonical status in world literature, the capacity of his fiction to be significant in many different cultures..., Tim Parks's translation is perfectly in tune with the various dialects and discourses that Calvino assimilated during his Career. By the '80s his supple Italian was tossing off polylingual arpeggios, technical jargon's, nonce words.... More than accurate and readable, [Parks's] version is inventive.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“*Numbers in the Dark* is a glorious grab bag ... with gems from every phase in Calvino's career.”

—*San Francisco Sunday Examiner & Chronicle Book Review*

“Warmly and expertly translated by Tim Parks, a gifted writer himself.”

—*Esquire*

Italo Calvino

Numbers in the Dark

Italo Calvino (1923—1985) was born in Cuba and grew up in San Remo, Italy. He was a member of the partisan movement during the German occupation of northern Italy in World War II. The novel that resulted from that experience, published in English as *The Path to the Nest of Spiders*, won widespread acclaim. His other works of fiction include *The Baron in the Trees*, *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, *Cosmicomics*, *Difficult Loves*, *If on a Winters Night a Traveler*, *Invisible Cities*, *Marcovaldo*, *Mr. Palomar*, *The Nonexistent Knight* & *The Cloven Viscount*, *Zero*, *Under the Jaguar Sun*, and *The Watcher and Other Stories*. His works of nonfiction include *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* and *The Uses of Literature*, collections of literary essays, and the anthology *Italian Folktales*.



also by **Italo Calvino**

The Baron in the Trees

Cosmicomics

Difficult Loves

Fantastical Tales

If on a Winter's Night a Traveler

Invisible Cities

Italian Folktales

Marcovaldo

Mr. Palomar

The Nonexistent Knight & the Cloven Viscount

The Road to San Giovanni

Six Memos for the Next Millennium

Under the fig tree

The Uses of Literature

The Castle of Crossed Destinies

Time and Memory

The Watcher and Other Stories

Numbers in the Dark

and Other Stories



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Preface

Italo Calvino began writing in his teens: short stories, fables, poetry and plays. The theatre was his first vocation and perhaps the one that he spent most time on. There are many surviving works from this period which have never been published. Calvino's extraordinary capacity for self-criticism and self-referential analysis soon led him to give up the theatre. In a letter to his friend Eugenio Scalfari written in 1945 he announces laconically, 'I've switched to stories.' Written in capitals and covering a whole page the news must have been important indeed.

From then on there was never a period when Calvino was not writing. He wrote every day, wherever he was and in whatever circumstances, at a table or on his knee, in planes or hotel rooms. It is not surprising therefore that he should have left such a huge amount of work, including innumerable stories and fables. In addition to those he brought together in various collections, there are many which only appeared in newspapers and magazines, while others remained unpublished.

The texts collected in this volume — unpublished and otherwise - are just some of those written between 1943 - when the author was still in his teens - and 1984.

Some pieces were initially planned as novels but later became stories, a process that was not unusual with Calvino, who reworked a number of sections from an unpublished novel, *The White Schooner*, for his *Collected Stories* of 1958.

Other pieces in this present volume came in response to specific requests: 'Glaciation', for example might never have been written if a Japanese distillery producing, amongst other things, a whisky which is extremely successful in the Far East, had not decided to celebrate their fiftieth anniversary by commissioning stories from some well-known European writers. There was only one condition: that an alcoholic drink of some kind should be mentioned in the text. 'Glaciation' first appeared in Japanese before being published in Italian. Another story with a curious history is 'The Burning of the Abominable House'. There had been a somewhat vague request from IBM: how far was it possible to write a story using the computer? This was in 1973 in Paris when it wasn't easy to gain access to data processing equipment. Undaunted, Calvino gave the project a great deal of his time, carrying out all the operations the computer was supposed to do himself. The story was finally published in the Italian edition of *Playboy*, Calvino didn't really feel this was a problem, though he had originally planned for it to be published in *Oulipo* as an example of *ars combinatona* and a challenge to his own mathematical abilities.

As far as the stories that open this collection are concerned, almost all previously unpublished and very short - Calvino referred to them as *raccontini*, little stories - it may be useful to know that in a note found amongst his juvenilia and dated 1943, he wrote: One

writes fables in periods of oppression. When a man cannot give clear form to his thinking, he expresses it in fables. These little stories correspond to a young man's political and social experiences during the death throes of Fascism.' When the times were right, he added — with the end of the war and Fascism, that is — the fable would no longer be necessary and the writer would be able to move on to other things. But the tides and dates of many of the pieces in this collection and of other works not included here suggest that despite these youthful reflections, Calvino did in fact continue to write fables for many years thereafter.

Also included in this volume are one or two pieces, such as 'The Call of the Water,' which, while neither stories nor fables in the strict sense of those words, are now very difficult to find elsewhere and definitely worth the reader's attention.

In other cases, texts that may seem unconnected to the main body of his work are part of projects that Calvino had clearly developed in his mind but did not have time to finish.

Esther Calvino

Fables and Stones

1943-1958



The Man Who Shouted Teresa

I stepped off the pavement, walked backwards a few paces looking up, and, from the middle of the street, brought my hands to my mouth to make a megaphone and shouted towards the top stories of the block: Teresa!

My shadow took fright at the moon and huddled between my feet.

Someone walked by. Again I shouted: Teresa!' The man came up to me and said: If you don't shout louder she won't hear you. Let's both try. So: count to three, on three we shout together.' And he said: One, two, three.' And we both yelled, Tereeesaaa!

A small group of friends passing by on their way back from the theatre or the cafe saw us calling out. They said: 'Come on, we'll give you a shout too.' And they joined us in the middle of the street and the first man said one two three and then everybody together shouted, Te-reee-saaa!

Somebody else came by and joined us; a quarter of an hour later there were a whole bunch of us, twenty almost. And every now and then somebody new came along.

Organizing ourselves to give a good shout, all at the same time, wasn't easy. There was always someone who began before three or who went on too long, but in the end we were managing something fairly efficient. We agreed that the Te' should be shouted low and long, the 're' high and long, the 'sa' low and short. It sounded great. Just a squabble every now and then when someone was out.

We were beginning to get it right, when somebody, who, if his voice was anything to go by, must have had a very freckly face, asked: 'But are you sure she's at home?'

'No,' I said.

'That's bad,' another said. 'Forgotten your key, have you?'

'Actually,' I said, I have my key.'

'So,' they asked, 'why don't you go on up?'

Oh, but I don't live here,' I answered. I live on the other side of town.'

'Well then, excuse my curiosity,' the one with the freckly voice asked carefully, 'but who does live here?'

I really wouldn't know,' I said.

People were a bit upset about this.

‘So could you please explain,’ somebody with a very toothy voice asked, ‘why you are standing down here calling out Teresa?’

‘As far as I’m concerned,’ I said, ‘we can call another name, or try somewhere else. It’s no big deal.’

The others were a bit annoyed.

‘I hope you weren’t playing a trick on us?’ the freckly one asked suspiciously.

‘What?’ I said, resentfully, and I turned to the others for confirmation of my good faith. The others said nothing, indicating they hadn’t picked up the insinuation.

There was a moment’s embarrassment.

‘Look,’ someone said good-naturedly, ‘why don’t we call Teresa one last time, then we’ll go home.’

So we did it again. ‘One two three Teresa!’ but it didn’t come out very well. Then people headed off home, some one way, some the other.

I’d already turned into the square, when I thought I heard a voice still calling: ‘Tee-reee-saP

Someone must have stayed on to shout. Someone stubborn.

The Flash

It happened one day, at a crossroads, in the middle of a crowd, people coming and going.

I stopped, blinked: I understood nothing. Nothing, nothing about anything: I didn't understand the reasons for things or for people, it was all senseless, absurd. And I started to laugh.

What I found strange at the time was that I'd never realized before. That up until then I had accepted everything: traffic lights, cars, posters, uniforms, monuments, things completely detached from any sense of the world, accepted them as if there were some necessity, some chain of cause and effect that bound them together.

Then the laugh died in my throat, I blushed, ashamed. I waved to get people's attention and 'Stop a second!' I shouted, 'there's something wrong! Everything's wrong! We're doing the absurdest things! This can't be the right way! Where will it end?'

People stopped around me, sized me up, curious. I stood there in the middle of them, waving my arms, desperate to explain myself, to have them share the flash of insight that had suddenly enlightened me: and I said nothing. I said nothing because the moment I'd raised my arms and opened my mouth, my great revelation had been as it were swallowed up again and the words had come out any old how, on impulse.

'So?' people asked, 'what do you mean? Everything's in its place. All is as it should be. Everything is a result of something else. Everything fits in with everything else. We can't see anything absurd or wrong!'

And I stood there, lost, because as I saw it now everything had fallen into place again and everything seemed natural, traffic lights, monuments, uniforms, towerblocks, tramlines, beggars, processions; yet this didn't calm me down, it tormented me.

'I'm sorry,' I answered. 'Perhaps it was me that was wrong. It seemed that way. But everything's fine. I'm sorry,' and I made off amid their angry glares.

Yet, even now, every time (often) that I find I don't understand something, then, instinctively, I'm filled with the hope that perhaps this will be my moment again, perhaps once again I shall understand nothing, I shall grasp that other knowledge, found and lost in an instant.

Making Do

There was a town where everything was forbidden.

Now, since the only thing that wasn't forbidden was the game tip-cat, the town's subjects used to assemble on meadows behind the town and spend the day there playing tip-cat.

And as the laws forbidding things had been introduced one at a time and always with good reason, no one found any cause for complaint or had any trouble getting used to them.

Years passed. One day the constables saw that there was no longer any reason why everything should be forbidden and they sent messengers to inform their subjects that they could do whatever they wanted.

The messengers went to those places where the subjects were wont to assemble.

'Hear ye, hear ye,' they announced, 'nothing is forbidden any more.'

The people went on playing tip-cat.

'Understand?' the messengers insisted. 'You are free to do what you want.'

'Good,' replied the subjects. 'We're playing tip-cat.'

The messengers busily reminded them of the many wonderful and useful occupations they had once engaged in and could now engage in once again. But the subjects wouldn't listen and just went on playing, stroke after stroke, without even stopping for a breather.

Seeing that their efforts were in vain, the messengers went to tell the constables.

'Easy the constables said. 'Let's forbid the game of tipcat.'

That was when the people rebelled and killed the lot of them.

Then without wasting time, they got back to playing tip-cat.

Dry River

Well, I was back in the dry river again. For some time I had been residing in a country that wasn't my own where, rather than gradually becoming more familiar, things increasingly appeared to be veiled by unsuspected differences: in their shapes, in their colours and in their reciprocal harmonies. The hills surrounding me now were unlike those I had learnt to know, with delicately rounded declivities, and the fields too and the vineyards followed those soft declivities and the steep terraces likewise, trailing off into gentle slopes. The colours were all new, like the hues of an unknown rainbow. The trees, few and far between, were as if suspended, like small clouds, and almost transparent.

Then I became aware of the air, of how it became concrete as I looked, how it filled my hands as I thrust them into it. And I saw a self that couldn't be reconciled with the world around, rugged and stony as I was inside and with gashes of colour of a vividness that was almost dark, like shouts or laughter. And however hard I tried to put words between myself and the world, I couldn't find any that were suitable to clothe things anew; because all my words were hard and freshly hewn: and saying them was like laying down so many stones.

Again, if some drowsy memory were to form in my mind, it would be of things learnt, not experienced: fantasy landscapes perhaps, seen in the backdrop of old paintings, or perhaps the words of old poets improperly understood.

In this fluid atmosphere I lived, as it were, swimming and felt my rough edges gradually smoothed and myself dissolved, absorbed into it.

But to find myself again, all I had to do was go down to the old dry river.

What prompted me - it was summer - was a desire for water, a religious desire, for ritual perhaps. Climbing down through the vineyards that evening, I prepared myself for a sacred bath and the word water, already synonymous with happiness for me, expanded in my mind like the name now of a goddess, now of a lover.

The temple I found on the valley bottom behind a pale bank of shrubs. It was a great river of white stones, full of silence.

The only remaining trace of water was a stream trickling almost stealthily, to one side. Sometimes the scantness of the flow between big rocks blocking

the way and banks of reeds, took me back among well-known streams and conjured memories of narrower harsher valleys.

It was this: and perhaps too the feel of the stones beneath my feet — the time-worn stones of the valley bottom, their backs encrusted with a veil of congealed waterweed - or the being forced to move in jumps, from one rock to another, or perhaps it was just a noise the pebbles made, slithering down the slope.

The fact is that the gap between myself and this land narrowed and composed itself: a sort of brotherhood, a metaphysical kinship bound me to those broken stones, fecund only of shy but tremendously stubborn lichens. And in the old dry river I recognized one of my fathers, ancient, naked.

So, we went along the dry river. He who walked beside me was a companion in fortune, a native of these places, the darkness of whose skin and shaggy hair falling thickly down his back together with the plumpness of the lips and the flat nose, conferred upon him a grotesque appearance as of a tribal leader, Congolese perhaps, or perhaps from the South Seas. This fellow had a proud strapping look about him which showed both in his face, albeit bespectacled, and likewise in his gait, impeded though it was by the clumsy slovenly state of the impromptu bathers we were. Despite being chaste as a quaker in his life, his conversation upon meeting him was like a satyr's. His accent was as breathy and steamy as any I had ever been given to understand: he spoke with his mouth eternally open or full of air, emitting, in a constant and sulphurous outburst, hurricanes of extraordinary insults.

Thus we two climbed up the dry river looking for somewhere where the trickle broadened and we might wash our bodies, filthy and tired as they were.

Now, as we walked along the great womb, it turned in a loop and the background took on a new richness of detail. On high white rocks, an adventure for the eye, sat two, three, perhaps four young ladies in their bathing costumes. Red and yellow costumes - blue too most likely, but this I don't remember: my eyes were in need only of red and yellow — and bathing caps, as though on a fashionable beach.

It was like a cock's crow.

A green thread of water ran nearby and came up to their heels; they crouched down in it to bathe.

We stopped, torn between the pleasure of the sight, the pangs of regret it aroused, and the shame at our now ugly and oafish selves. Then we went on towards them while they considered us without interest and we hazarded a remark or two, trying them out the way you do, the wittiest and the most banal we could manage. My sulphurous companion joined in the game without enthusiasm but with a sort of timid reserve.

In any event, a short while later, tired of the meal we were making of it and the lack of response, we set off walking again, giving free rein to more

pleasant exchanges. And the memory, still present to the mind's eye, not so much of their bodies as of their red and yellow costumes was sufficient consolation.

Sometimes a branch of the stream, never deep, would widen to cover the whole river bed; and we, the banks being high and impossible to climb, would cross with our feet in the water. We were wearing light shoes, of canvas and rubber, and the water streamed through them: and when we were back on the dry ground our feet squelched inside at every step, wheezing and splashing.

It grew dark. The white shingle came alive with black spots that leapt: tadpoles.

They must have only just sprouted legs, tiny and tailed as they were, and it was as if they hadn't yet come to terms with this new facility which kept sending them flying up in the air. There was one on every stone, but not for long, since the one would jump and another would take his place. And because their jumps were simultaneous and because while pressing on along the great river one saw nothing but the swarming of that amphibious multitude, advancing like a boundless army, I was struck by a sense of awe, almost as if this black and white symphony, this cartoon sad as a Chinese drawing, were fearfully conjuring the idea of the infinite.

We stopped by a pool of water that seemed to offer sufficient space for us to immerse our entire bodies; even to swim a stroke or two. I went in barefoot, bareskinned: the water was weedy and putrid from the slow decay of river plants. The bottom was slimy and swampy: when you touched it, it sent turbid clouds up to the surface.

But it was water; and it was good.

My companion went down into the water with his shoes and stockings, leaving his spectacles on the bank. Then, not fully aware of the religious aspect of the ceremony, he started soaping himself.

Thus we embarked on that joyful treat washing is when it is rare and hard to come by. The pool, which we could scarcely both fit in, bubbled over with foam and roaring, as though we were elephants bathing.

On the riverbanks there were willows and shrubs and houses with waterwheels; and so unreal were they, in contrast to the concreteness of this water and these stones, that with the grey of evening filtering through they took on the air of a faded arras.

My companion was washing his feet, now, in strange manner: without taking off his shoes but soaping the stockings and shoes on his feet.

Then we dried ourselves and dressed. When I picked up a sock a tadpole jumped out.

Laid on the bank, my companion's glasses must have been thoroughly splashed. And — as he put them on — so gay must the muddle of that world have seemed to him, coloured as it was by the last gleams of the sunset, seen

through a pair of wet lenses, that he started to laugh, and to laugh, without letting up and when I asked him why he said: 'It's such a hell of a mess!'

And, neat and tidy now, a warm weariness in our bones to replace the dull tiredness of earlier on, we said farewell to our new river friend and set off along a little track that followed the bank, reasoning upon our own affairs and upon when we would return, and keeping our ears open, alert to the distant sounding of a bugle.

Conscience

Came a war and a guy called Luigi asked if he could go, as a volunteer.

Everyone was full of praise. Luigi went to the place where they were handing out the rifles, took one and said: 'Now I'm going to go and kill a guy called Alberto.'

They asked him who Alberto was.

'An enemy,' he answered, 'an enemy of mine.'

They explained to him that he was supposed to be killing enemies of a certain type, not whoever he felt like.

'So?' said Luigi. 'You think I'm dumb? This Alberto is precisely that type, one of them. When I heard you were going to war against that lot, I thought: I'll go too, that way I can kill Alberto. That's why I came. I know that Alberto: he's a crook. He betrayed me, for next to nothing he made me make a fool of myself with a woman. It's an old story. If you don't believe me, I'll tell you the whole thing.'

They said fine, it was okay.

'Right then,' said Luigi, 'tell me where Alberto is and I'll go there and I'll fight.'

They said they didn't know.

'Doesn't matter,' Luigi said. 'I'll find someone to tell me. Sooner or later I'll catch up with him.'

They said he couldn't do that, he had to go and fight where they sent him, and kill whoever happened to be there. They didn't know anything about this Alberto.

'You see,' Luigi insisted, 'I really will have to tell you the story. Because that guy is a real crook and you're doing the right thing going to fight against him.'

But the others didn't want to know.

Luigi couldn't see reason: 'Sorry, it may be all the same to you if I kill one enemy or another, but I'd be upset if I killed someone who had nothing to do with Alberto.'

The others lost their patience. One of them gave him a good talking to and explained what war was all about and how you couldn't go and kill the