Dudley Stone

Count Your Children

"We waken and count out daughters" - Carolyn Kizer

First, count your children. Numbers are elemental, like open wounds.

Nothing holds you to Earth like two plus two equals four or comforts you like I before E except after C. Nothing lets you sleep better than knowing Washington could not tell a lie.

First, count your children, count the stamps of rubber boots and slush puddles in freshly mopped entryways, count the dirty socks on the carpet, the crayons scattered and hiding under the sofa.

First, count your children. Count them when they play outside, when they stay home to sulk, when they tell you about the neighbor's kid who stole their ball and the man who stole it back but isn't allowed on school property.

First, count your children. There's no need to tag or tattoo them, to chip them like rescued pets and chain them to a tree in the yard. You can't hold their hands forever, and you can have truth in your house or peace, but you can't have both.

Soon enough your children will tell you that whole numbers are for kids, that there are negative numbers, rational and irrational numbers, and Google says two plus two doesn't even equal four sometimes, that the word "atheist" disobeys the I before E

rule, and Washington couldn't tell
a lie is, in fact, a lie, and
he owned slaves as well and, and
and

Daddy's not ever coming home and Mommy's new friend is moving in, and Washington hatcheted the cherry tree because he felt like it, like the kid with the Glock, dead inside a chalk line before homeroom this morning.

So, count your children, even if nothing happens, especially if nothing happens, even if you only count to one.

Famous

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From the jungle of my couch
                                   (I am famous
                                  to my couch)
I trapped and tagged Naomi Shihab Nye's "Famous"
before releasing it into the wild.
I fumbled for a sticky
bookmark, swag from a forgotten conference

    don't let anyone tell you writers

       aren't fetishists for paper products —
but
I disremember where I last remember seeing them.
Leaving my supine pouting and unsatisfied
       (I am famous to my cushions, to my pillows,
       to the dent I leave in my mattress)
I riffle through a stack of unfinished
poems
                           (which is to say, all of them)
       arranged
      in alibi
formation to deflect friends and other strangers
who ask why I don't work
for a living.
Standing in front of the freezer
       (how did I get here? Did I finish
       the Haagen-Dasz last night? I did),
what was I trying to find again? It
had something to do with memory.
Irony, thy name is ...
       well, irony, isn't it?
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Is it the spare key that keeps falling from its perch above the storm door? I should tape it there while I'm thinking about it (I don't).

Oh, yes, and there's a pandemic spilling off the TV and the numbers tsunami from orange to red, and I think nothing can move me more today than

"The river is famous to the fish."

Grand Opening

A drum corps drums, a marching band marches, tall hats and straps, twirling batons, sponsored trombones. I'm the one holding the scissors, cartoonishly large. An enhanced blonde wears a tiara and next to nothing else.

The band is muted by the breeze, its song sailing downwind.

"I dedicate this bridge,
named after me, proposed, prosecuted by me,
a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant span
over a dark and protesting river."
The words tumble from my mouth like drunken
fireflies, flash once, and are gone. The blonde
is Miss Grocery Chain, Miss Car Dealership,
Miss Payday Lender, Miss Liquor Warehouse,
Liquor Planet, Liquor World, Miss Liquor
Galaxy. The Mayor cracks into a hot
mic, "Lick her? I hardly know her." He has
an orange jumpsuit in his future.

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cut the ribbon with the ridiculous scissors, and people start across, anxious to arrive anywhere but here. The queue waiting to cross the bridge is long. The line waiting to jump off is much, much longer.