

He's Down for the Count

The medical team eventually came up with a name for it - *numerically-induced vasovagal syncope*. Of course, you can show me just one number, and I'm fine. It's when you start stringing a few digits together that things begin to get exciting.

This was a lot harder to deal with when I was a kid. Especially in preschool. There I'd be, slumped on the carpet, while the other four-years-olds all chanted numbers in unison.

Grade school wasn't so fantastic either. Guess what happens when you learn to count by fives? Tens? Guess how fast I dropped? Hell, I'd get woozy even counting on my fingers, or in my head.

No problem sleeping, though. Some people have to count sheep for hours. I get to about seven.

Surgery goes fine for me, too - the anesthesiologists love me. They still put the mask on - I think it makes them feel like this is all normal - but no gas. Then it's all "backwards from one hundred", as if I'd ever get there.

Obviously, I could never be a banker, or an accountant, but that's okay. The world needs people like me, who don't mind monotony. I can work on a factory line all day, *punch the hole, plug the hole*. I never worry about how many pieces I've finished, or wonder if I am living up to my potential.

Reason for Reticence

She shaded her eyes
so he couldn't see them -
kept her mouth shut against the pull.

Meek-fronted, breaking
back of bashful, she trusted
him as little and feared

him as much as gravel
in a stamp-mill, as miles
of rusty wire and decayed rope.

He talked low, but no use
trying to talk. She didn't
ask. She didn't feel like telling,

she was a tumbled wall
of dead slashings, half-shadowing
half-glittering from taw to tell.

The small motions he made,
what solitude had lost them,
he could keep strictly as he pleased -

her hand on his had been nothing.

Source text: Honey in the Horn, H.L. Davis

The Do-Nothing Hours

the end of one's mind. Solitude becomes a reflex, like worship, a drifted-in lane.
I sink deep, I search the hyphens between words (what words?), these mechanisms at work,
running through the pages, a rolling shell-bed of monastic quiet. I give myself over wholly to the
wobbles and the mind-jumps, don't show I'm lonely, don't shy from using language where living
and breathing is possible.

Source text: The Future of Ice, Gretel Ehrlich

Ode to the Pull-out Couch

Which once belonged to your great-grandparents, but belongs to us now, and still works, even if the cushions are pretty well flattened and the stuffing is coming out from one armrest, and the color, which was probably once cream with red stitching, has become mostly a muddy rust -

and which is always called a couch and never, ever a *sofa*, just as a pocketbook is not a *purse*, a bureau is not a *dresser*, and pants are not *slacks*. Only snooty people on T.V. would call a couch a *sofa*, or rich people, or maybe people from away. Which we are not.

Because if we were any of those, instead of just a pull-out couch, we would have a *guest room*, with a *comforter* and *duvet*, which no guests would ever sleep under because they would be staying at a five-star hotel, where we would join them for a five-star *dinner* -

instead of the supper we cook for our cousins up from Alfred, which makes them still from here and not from away, so they can't afford to go out to dinner, much less afford a fancy hotel room even if there was a hotel in town. Which there is not.

And after our supper and before we wake up early to take them ice fishing, we pull out the couch and give them pillows and blankets and maybe even the granny-square afgan, and they get to sleep by the woodstove with the extra cats and know that they are welcome.

You Can Tell She Trains Dogs

Irish Wolfhound, Malamute, perhaps
Akita. Some large breed, one which
may not be entirely cooperative.
A breed that must be trained
in puppyhood, while you still can.
The other shoppers wrest unwilling carts
down their intended aisles. Like the Black
Labs and Golden Retrievers tearing open
the sofas at home - breeds that were supposed
to be so good they needed no training -
the carts utterly ignore their handlers.
They dash excitedly across produce
lured by the stench in seafoods,
drooling through the plexiglass
at the salmon and Chilean sea bass.
They swerve from soups to cereal
swiping boxes of Lucky Charms
off the shelves, crushing them open
as they race to the end-cap of frozen foods
for the siren aroma of Jimmy Dean samples.
One shopper smiles apologetically as his cart
leaps onto a man stocking the end cap, bringing
the whole display crashing to the shiny beige floor.

But one woman strides through the rows calmly,
head erect, three fingers hooked loosely through
the nose of her cart. With this light touch
on its choke chain she keeps her cart in a perfect
heel. It follows half a pace behind, always on the left.
Never rolls on her toes, bumps another shopper,
or turns to sniff the behind of a passing child.
Her lead arm is slack, but her cart has its full
attention on her every step. When she stops
to check a label for dairy, unbidden, it sits and waits,
then rises as soon as she resumes walking.
It is so perfectly trained that it remains in a stay,
for five minutes, while she orders lamb chops
from the man behind the meat counter. You begin
to think that, when she releases the stay,
it will come to her on its own.