

# Dictatorship of the countable

*Catherine Burke*

Born with unfathomable capacities to survive and thrive  
Soon, you begin to count.  
Measured by your age and stage  
Scheduled to meet this or that target or test.

You quickly learn the numbers that define you  
There is one choice and two possibilities.  
You are found to be either in credit or debit  
And you pocket what's given.

And just as you were beginning to count  
You are surrounded with tales of lost-learning  
Of fallings-behind, of catchings-up,  
Of gaps, and absences with ever more numbers  
Calculating your losses over a lifetime.

Your curiosity limps on  
Tarnished by the countless measurements and miscalculations  
That deepen your dependency on anyone but yourself  
That reassure no one, least of all you  
Defined by your failure to keep up.

**Catherine Burke** is Emerita Professor of the History of Education at the University of Cambridge. She has written extensively about many aspects of progressive education in the 20th century, including school-building design and children's experience of education. The title of this, her first published poem, comes from *If You Should Fail: a Book of Solace* by Joe Moran, published last year by Viking.

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