Ode to Numbers

Pablo Neruda
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Oh, the thirst to know
how many!
The hunger
to know
how many
stars in the sky!

We spent
our childhood counting
stones and plants, fingers and
toes, grains of sand, and teeth,
our youth we passed counting
petals and comets’ tails.
We counted
colors, years,
lives, and kisses;
in the country,
oxen; by the sea,
the waves. Ships
became proliferating ciphers.

Numbers multiplied.
The cities
were thousands, millions,
wheat hundreds
of units that held
within them smaller numbers,
smaller than a single grain.
Time became a number.
Light was numbered
and no matter how it raced with sound
its velocity was 37.
Numbers surrounded us.
When we closed the door
at night, exhausted,
an 800 slipped
beneath the door
and crept with us into bed,
and in our dreams
4000s and 77s
pounded at our foreheads
with hammers and tongs.
5s
added to 5s
until they sank into the sea or madness,
until the sun greeted us with its zero
and we went running
to the office,
to the workshop,
to the factory,
to begin again the infinite
I of each new day.

We had time, as men,
for our thirst slowly
to be sated,
the ancestral desire
to give things a number,
to add them up,
to reduce them
to powder,
wastelands of numbers.
We
papered the world
with numbers and names,
but
things survived,
they fled
from numbers,
grew mad in their quantities,
evaporated,
leaving
an odor or a memory,
leaving the numbers empty.

That's why
for you
I want things.
Let numbers
go to jail,
let them march
in perfect columns
procreating
until they give the sum
total of infinity.
For you I want only
for the numbers
along the road
to protect you
and for you to protect them.
May the weekly figure of your salary
expand until it spans your chest.
And from the 2 of you, embraced,
your body and that of your beloved,
may pairs of children’s eyes be born
that will count again
the ancient stars
and countless
heads of grain
that will cover a transformed earth.

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