

Classic Poetry Series

Billy Collins
- poems -

Publication Date:

2012

Publisher:

Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

Billy Collins(22 March 1941 -)

(born William James Collins) is an American poet, appointed as Poet Laureate of the United States from 2001 to 2003. He is a Distinguished Professor at Lehman College of the City University of New York and is the Senior Distinguished Fellow of the Winter Park Institute, Florida. Collins was recognized as a Literary Lion of the New York Public Library (1992) and selected as the New York State Poet for 2004-2006.

Early Years

Collins was born in New York City to William and Katherine Collins. Katherine Collins was a nurse who stopped working to raise the couple's only child. Mrs. Collins had the ability to recite verses on almost any subject, which she often did, and cultivated in her young son the love of words, both written and spoken. Billy Collins attended Archbishop Stepinac High School in White Plains and received a B.A. (English) from the College of the Holy Cross in 1963 and received his M.A. and Ph.D in English from the University of California, Riverside. His professors at Riverside included Victorian scholar and poet Robert Peters. In 1975 Collins founded The Mid Atlantic Review with his good friend and co-editor, Michael Shannon.

Career

Collins is a Distinguished Professor of English at Lehman College in the Bronx, where he joined the faculty in 1968 and has taught for over thirty years. Additionally, he is a founding Advisory Board member of the CUNY Institute for Irish-American Studies at Lehman College. He also has taught and served as a visiting writer at Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York as well as teaching workshops across the U.S. and in Ireland. Collins is a member of the faculty of SUNY Stony Brook Southampton College, where he teaches poetry workshops. Collins was named U.S. Poet Laureate in 2001 and held the title until 2003. Collins served as Poet Laureate for the State of New York from 2004 until 2006. Collins has been named Senior Distinguished Fellow at the Winter Park Institute in Winter Park, Florida, an affiliate of Rollins College. He is on the editorial board at The Alaska Quarterly Review, not actively involved since 2000. He is on the advisory board at the Southern Review, and is similarly named in other journals

As U.S. Poet Laureate, Collins read his poem The Names at a special joint session of the United States Congress on September 6, 2002, held to remember the

victims of the 9/11 attacks. Though, unlike their British counterparts, U.S. poets laureate are not asked or expected to write occasional poetry, Collins was asked by the Librarian of Congress to write a poem especially for that event. Collins initially refused to read "The Names" in public, though he has read it two times in public since 2002. He vows not to include it in any of his books, refusing to capitalize in any way on the 9/11 attacks. However, "The Names" was included in the The Poets Laureate Anthology, put out by the Library of Congress, for which Collins wrote the foreword. The only published version of "The Names," it contains a number of regrettable typographical errors. As Poet Laureate, Collins instituted the program Poetry 180 for high schools. Collins chose 180 poems for the program and the accompanying book, Poetry 180: A Turning Back to Poetry--one for each day of the school year. Collins edited a second anthology, 180 More Extraordinary Poems for Every Day to refresh the supply of available poems. The program is and poems are available there for no charge.

In 1997, Collins recorded *The Best Cigarette*, a collection of 34 of his poems, that would become a bestseller. In 2005, the CD was re-released under a Creative Commons license, allowing free, non-commercial distribution of the recording. He also recorded two of his poems for the audio versions of Garrison Keillor's collection *Good Poems* (2002). Collins has appeared on Keillor's radio show, *A Prairie Home Companion*, numerous times, where he gained a portion of his large following. In 2005, Collins recorded "Billy Collins Live: A Performance at the Peter Norton Symphony Space" in New York City. Collins was introduced by his friend, actor Bill Murray.

Billy Collins has been called "The most popular poet in America" by the *New York Times*. When he moved from the University of Pittsburgh Press to Random House, the advance he received shocked the poetry world — a six-figure sum for a three-book deal, virtually unheard of in poetry. The deal secured for Collins through his literary agent, Chris Calhoun of Sterling Lord Literistic, with the editor Daniel Menaker, remained the talk of the poetry world, and indeed the literary world, for quite some time.

Over the years, the U.S. magazine *Poetry* has awarded Collins several prizes in recognition of poems they publish. During the 1990s, Collins won five such prizes. The magazine also selected him as "Poet of the Year" in 1994. In 2005 Collins was the first annual recipient of its Mark Twain Prize for Humor in Poetry. He has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York Foundation for the Arts and in 1993, from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation.

Awards and honors

1986, Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts
1983, Fellowship from the New York Foundation for the Arts
1991, National Poetry Series publication prize - winner, Questions About Angels
1992, New York Public Library 'Literary Lion'
1993, Fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation
1994, Poetry Magazine - Poet of the Year
1995, Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize, Academy of American Poets - shortlist, The Art of Drowning
2001, US Poet Laureate
2002, US Poet Laureate
2004, New York State Poet Laureate
2005, Mark Twain Award for Humor in Poetry

Another Reason Why I Don'T Keep A Gun In The House

The neighbors' dog will not stop barking.
He is barking the same high, rhythmic bark
that he barks every time they leave the house.
They must switch him on on their way out.

The neighbors' dog will not stop barking.
I close all the windows in the house
and put on a Beethoven symphony full blast
but I can still hear him muffled under the music,
barking, barking, barking,

and now I can see him sitting in the orchestra,
his head raised confidently as if Beethoven
had included a part for barking dog.

When the record finally ends he is still barking,
sitting there in the oboe section barking,
his eyes fixed on the conductor who is
entreating him with his baton

while the other musicians listen in respectful
silence to the famous barking dog solo,
that endless coda that first established
Beethoven as an innovative genius.

Billy Collins

By A Swimming Pool Outside Syracuse

All afternoon I have been struggling to communicate in Italian with Roberto and Giuseppe, who have begun to resemble the two male characters in my Italian for Beginners, the ones who are always shopping or inquiring about the times of trains, and now I can hardly speak or write English.

Billy Collins

Candle Hat

In most self-portraits it is the face that dominates:
Cezanne is a pair of eyes swimming in brushstrokes,
Van Gogh stares out of a halo of swirling darkness,
Rembrant looks relieved as if he were taking a breather
from painting *The Blinding of Sampson*.

But in this one Goya stands well back from the mirror
and is seen posed in the clutter of his studio
addressing a canvas tilted back on a tall easel.

He appears to be smiling out at us as if he knew
we would be amused by the extraordinary hat on his head
which is fitted around the brim with candle holders,
a device that allowed him to work into the night.

You can only wonder what it would be like
to be wearing such a chandelier on your head
as if you were a walking dining room or concert hall.

But once you see this hat there is no need to read
any biography of Goya or to memorize his dates.

To understand Goya you only have to imagine him
lighting the candles one by one, then placing
the hat on his head, ready for a night of work.

Imagine him surprising his wife with his new invention,
the laughing like a birthday cake when she saw the glow.

Imagine him flickering through the rooms of his house
with all the shadows flying across the walls.

Imagine a lost traveler knocking on his door
one dark night in the hill country of Spain.
"Come in, " he would say, "I was just painting myself,"
as he stood in the doorway holding up the wand of a brush,
illuminated in the blaze of his famous candle hat.

Child Development

As sure as prehistoric fish grew legs
and sauntered off the beaches into forests
working up some irregular verbs for their
first conversation, so three-year-old children
enter the phase of name-calling.

Every day a new one arrives and is added
to the repertoire. You Dumb Goopyhead,
You Big Sewerface, You Poop-on-the-Floor
(a kind of Navaho ring to that one)
they yell from knee level, their little mugs
flushed with challenge.
Nothing Samuel Johnson would bother tossing out
in a pub, but then the toddlers are not trying
to devastate some fatuous Enlightenment hack.

They are just tormenting their fellow squirts
or going after the attention of the giants
way up there with their cocktails and bad breath
talking baritone nonsense to other giants,
waiting to call them names after thanking
them for the lovely party and hearing the door close.

The mature save their hothead invective
for things: an errant hammer, tire chains,
or receding trains missed by seconds,
though they know in their adult hearts,
even as they threaten to banish Timmy to bed
for his appalling behavior,
that their bosses are Big Fatty Stupids,
their wives are Dopey Dopeheads
and that they themselves are Mr. Sillypants.

Billy Collins

Christmas Sparrow

The first thing I heard this morning
was a soft, insistent rustle,
the rapid flapping of wings
against glass as it turned out,

a small bird rioting
in the frame of a high window,
trying to hurl itself through
the enigma of transparency into the spacious light.

A noise in the throat of the cat
hunkered on the rug
told me how the bird had gotten inside,
carried in the cold night
through the flap in a basement door,
and later released from the soft clench of teeth.

Up on a chair, I trapped its pulsations
in a small towel and carried it to the door,
so weightless it seemed
to have vanished into the nest of cloth.

But outside, it burst
from my uncupped hands into its element,
dipping over the dormant garden
in a spasm of wingbeats
and disappearing over a tall row of hemlocks.

Still, for the rest of the day,
I could feel its wild thrumming
against my palms whenever I thought
about the hours the bird must have spent
pent in the shadows of that room,
hidden in the spiky branches
of our decorated tree, breathing there
among metallic angels, ceramic apples, stars of yarn,

its eyes open, like mine as I lie here tonight
picturing this rare, lucky sparrow

tucked into a holly bush now,
a light snow tumbling through the windless dark.

Billy Collins

Consolation

How agreeable it is not to be touring Italy this summer,
wandering her cities and ascending her torrid hilltowns.
How much better to cruise these local, familiar streets,
fully grasping the meaning of every roadsign and billboard
and all the sudden hand gestures of my compatriots.

There are no abbeys here, no crumbling frescoes or famous
domes and there is no need to memorize a succession
of kings or tour the dripping corners of a dungeon.
No need to stand around a sarcophagus, see Napoleon's
little bed on Elba, or view the bones of a saint under glass.

How much better to command the simple precinct of home
than be dwarfed by pillar, arch, and basilica.
Why hide my head in phrase books and wrinkled maps?
Why feed scenery into a hungry, one-eyes camera
eager to eat the world one monument at a time?

Instead of slouching in a caf e; ignorant of the word for ice,
I will head down to the coffee shop and the waitress
known as Dot. I will slide into the flow of the morning
paper, all language barriers down,
rivers of idiom running freely, eggs over easy on the way.

And after breakfast, I will not have to find someone
willing to photograph me with my arm around the owner.
I will not puzzle over the bill or record in a journal
what I had to eat and how the sun came in the window.
It is enough to climb back into the car

as if it were the great car of English itself
and sounding my loud vernacular horn, speed off
down a road that will never lead to Rome, not even Bologna.

Billy Collins

Dear Reader

Baudelaire considers you his brother, and Fielding calls out to you every few paragraphs as if to make sure you have not closed the book, and now I am summoning you up again, attentive ghost, dark silent figure standing in the doorway of these words.

Billy Collins

Embrace

You know the parlor trick.
wrap your arms around your own body
and from the back it looks like
someone is embracing you
her hands grasping your shirt
her fingernails teasing your neck
from the front it is another story
you never looked so alone
your crossed elbows and screwy grin
you could be waiting for a tailor
to fit you with a straight jacket
one that would hold you really tight.

Billy Collins

Fishing On The Susquehanna In July

I have never been fishing on the Susquehanna
or on any river for that matter
to be perfectly honest.

Not in July or any month
have I had the pleasure -- if it is a pleasure --
of fishing on the Susquehanna.

I am more likely to be found
in a quiet room like this one --
a painting of a woman on the wall,

a bowl of tangerines on the table --
trying to manufacture the sensation
of fishing on the Susquehanna.

There is little doubt
that others have been fishing
on the Susquehanna,

rowing upstream in a wooden boat,
sliding the oars under the water
then raising them to drip in the light.

But the nearest I have ever come to
fishing on the Susquehanna
was one afternoon in a museum in Philadelphia,

when I balanced a little egg of time
in front of a painting
in which that river curled around a bend

under a blue cloud-ruffled sky,
dense trees along the banks,
and a fellow with a red bandana

sitting in a small, green
flat-bottom boat
holding the thin whip of a pole.

That is something I am unlikely
ever to do, I remember
saying to myself and the person next to me.

Then I blinked and moved on
to other American scenes
of haystacks, water whitening over rocks,

even one of a brown hare
who seemed so wired with alertness
I imagined him springing right out of the frame.

Billy Collins

Flames

Smokey the Bear heads
into the autumn woods
with a red can of gasoline
and a box of wooden matches.

His ranger's hat is cocked
at a disturbing angle.

His brown fur gleams
under the high sun
as his paws, the size
of catcher's mitts,
crackle into the distance.

He is sick of dispensing
warnings to the careless,
the half-wit camper,
the dumbbell hiker.

He is going to show them
how a professional does it.

Billy Collins

For Bartleby The Scrivener

"Every time we get a big gale around here
some people just refuse to batten down."

we estimate that

ice skating into a sixty
mile an hour wind, fully exerting
the legs and swinging arms

you will be pushed backward
an inch every twenty minutes.

in a few days, depending on
the size of the lake,
the backs of your skates
will touch land.

you will then fall on your ass
and be blown into the forest.

if you gather enough speed
by flapping your arms
and keeping your skates pointed

you will catch up to other
flying people who refused to batten down.
you will exchange knowing waves
as you ride the great wind north.

Billy Collins

Forgetfulness

The name of the author is the first to go
followed obediently by the title, the plot,
the heartbreaking conclusion, the entire novel
which suddenly becomes one you have never read,
never even heard of,

as if, one by one, the memories you used to harbor
decided to retire to the southern hemisphere of the brain,
to a little fishing village where there are no phones.

Long ago you kissed the names of the nine Muses goodbye
and watched the quadratic equation pack its bag,
and even now as you memorize the order of the planets,

something else is slipping away, a state flower perhaps,
the address of an uncle, the capital of Paraguay.

Whatever it is you are struggling to remember,
it is not poised on the tip of your tongue,
not even lurking in some obscure corner of your spleen.

It has floated away down a dark mythological river
whose name begins with an L as far as you can recall,
well on your own way to oblivion where you will join those
who have even forgotten how to swim and how to ride a bicycle.

No wonder you rise in the middle of the night
to look up the date of a famous battle in a book on war.
No wonder the moon in the window seems to have drifted
out of a love poem that you used to know by heart.

Billy Collins

I Ask You

What scene would I want to be enveloped in
more than this one,
an ordinary night at the kitchen table,
floral wallpaper pressing in,
white cabinets full of glass,
the telephone silent,
a pen tilted back in my hand?

It gives me time to think
about all that is going on outside--
leaves gathering in corners,
lichen greening the high grey rocks,
while over the dunes the world sails on,
huge, ocean-going, history bubbling in its wake.

But beyond this table
there is nothing that I need,
not even a job that would allow me to row to work,
or a coffee-colored Aston Martin DB4
with cracked green leather seats.

No, it's all here,
the clear ovals of a glass of water,
a small crate of oranges, a book on Stalin,
not to mention the odd snarling fish
in a frame on the wall,
and the way these three candles--
each a different height--
are singing in perfect harmony.

So forgive me
if I lower my head now and listen
to the short bass candle as he takes a solo
while my heart
thrums under my shirt--
frog at the edge of a pond--
and my thoughts fly off to a province
made of one enormous sky
and about a million empty branches.

Billy Collins

I Chop Some Parsley While Listening To Art Blakey's Version Of "Three Blind Mice"

And I start wondering how they came to be blind.
If it was congenital, they could be brothers and sister,
and I think of the poor mother
brooding over her sightless young triplets.

Or was it a common accident, all three caught
in a searing explosion, a firework perhaps?
If not,
if each came to his or her blindness separately,

how did they ever manage to find one another?
Would it not be difficult for a blind mouse
to locate even one fellow mouse with vision
let alone two other blind ones?

And how, in their tiny darkness,
could they possibly have run after a farmer's wife
or anyone else's wife for that matter?
Not to mention why.

Just so she could cut off their tails
with a carving knife, is the cynic's answer,
but the thought of them without eyes
and now without tails to trail through the moist grass

or slip around the corner of a baseboard
has the cynic who always lounges within me
up off his couch and at the window
trying to hide the rising softness that he feels.

By now I am on to dicing an onion
which might account for the wet stinging
in my own eyes, though Freddie Hubbard's
mournful trumpet on "Blue Moon,"

which happens to be the next cut,
cannot be said to be making matters any better.

Billy Collins

I Go Back To The House For A Book

I turn around on the gravel
and go back to the house for a book,
something to read at the doctor's office,
and while I am inside, running the finger
of inquisition along a shelf,
another me that did not bother
to go back to the house for a book
heads out on his own,
rolls down the driveway,
and swings left toward town,
a ghost in his ghost car,
another knot in the string of time,
a good three minutes ahead of me—
a spacing that will now continue
for the rest of my life.
Sometimes I think I see him
a few people in front of me on a line
or getting up from a table
to leave the restaurant just before I do,
slipping into his coat on the way out the door.
But there is no catching him,
no way to slow him down
and put us back in synch,
unless one day he decides to go back
to the house for something,
but I cannot imagine
for the life of me what that might be.
He is out there always before me,
blazing my trail, invisible scout,
hound that pulls me along,
shade I am doomed to follow,
my perfect double,
only bumped an inch into the future,
and not nearly as well-versed as I
in the love poems of Ovid—
I who went back to the house
that fateful winter morning and got the book.

Introduction To Poetry

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

Billy Collins

Invention

Tonight the moon is a cracker,
with a bite out of it
floating in the night,

and in a week or so
according to the calendar
it will probably look

like a silver football,
and nine, maybe ten days ago
it reminded me of a thin bright claw.

But eventually --
by the end of the month,
I reckon --

it will waste away
to nothing,
nothing but stars in the sky,

and I will have a few nights
to myself,
a little time to rest my jittery pen.

Billy Collins

Japan

Today I pass the time reading
a favorite haiku,
saying the few words over and over.

It feels like eating
the same small, perfect grape
again and again.

I walk through the house reciting it
and leave its letters falling
through the air of every room.

I stand by the big silence of the piano and say it.
I say it in front of a painting of the sea.
I tap out its rhythm on an empty shelf.

I listen to myself saying it,
then I say it without listening,
then I hear it without saying it.

And when the dog looks up at me,
I kneel down on the floor
and whisper it into each of his long white ears.

It's the one about the one-ton temple bell
with the moth sleeping on its surface,

and every time I say it, I feel the excruciating
pressure of the moth
on the surface of the iron bell.

When I say it at the window,
the bell is the world
and I am the moth resting there.

When I say it at the mirror,
I am the heavy bell
and the moth is life with its papery wings.

And later, when I say it to you in the dark,
you are the bell,
and I am the tongue of the bell, ringing you,

and the moth has flown
from its line
and moves like a hinge in the air above our bed.

Billy Collins

Litany

You are the bread and the knife,
The crystal goblet and the wine...
-Jacques Crickillon

You are the bread and the knife,
the crystal goblet and the wine.
You are the dew on the morning grass
and the burning wheel of the sun.
You are the white apron of the baker,
and the marsh birds suddenly in flight.

However, you are not the wind in the orchard,
the plums on the counter,
or the house of cards.
And you are certainly not the pine-scented air.
There is just no way that you are the pine-scented air.

It is possible that you are the fish under the bridge,
maybe even the pigeon on the general's head,
but you are not even close
to being the field of cornflowers at dusk.

And a quick look in the mirror will show
that you are neither the boots in the corner
nor the boat asleep in its boathouse.

It might interest you to know,
speaking of the plentiful imagery of the world,
that I am the sound of rain on the roof.

I also happen to be the shooting star,
the evening paper blowing down an alley
and the basket of chestnuts on the kitchen table.

I am also the moon in the trees
and the blind woman's tea cup.
But don't worry, I'm not the bread and the knife.
You are still the bread and the knife.
You will always be the bread and the knife,

not to mention the crystal goblet and--somehow--the wine.

Billy Collins

Madmen

They say you can jinx a poem
if you talk about it before it is done.
If you let it out too early, they warn,
your poem will fly away,
and this time they are absolutely right.

Take the night I mentioned to you
I wanted to write about the madmen,
as the newspapers so blithely call them,
who attack art, not in reviews,
but with breadknives and hammers
in the quiet museums of Prague and Amsterdam.

Actually, they are the real artists,
you said, spinning the ice in your glass.
The screwdriver is their brush.
The real vandals are the restorers,
you went on, slowly turning me upside-down,
the ones in the white doctor's smocks
who close the wound in the landscape,
and thus ruin the true art of the mad.

I watched my poem fly down to the front
of the bar and hover there
until the next customer walked in--
then I watched it fly out the open door into the night
and sail away, I could only imagine,
over the dark tenements of the city.

All I had wished to say
was that art was also short,
as a razor can teach with a slash or two,
that it only seems long compared to life,
but that night, I drove home alone
with nothing swinging in the cage of my heart
except the faint hope that I might
catch a glimpse of the thing
in the fan of my headlights,
maybe perched on a road sign or a street lamp,

poor unwritten bird, its wings folded,
staring down at me with tiny illuminated eyes.

Billy Collins

Man in Space

All you have to do is listen to the way a man
sometimes talks to his wife at a table of people
and notice how intent he is on making his point
even though her lower lip is beginning to quiver,

and you will know why the women in science
fiction movies who inhabit a planet of their own
are not pictured making a salad or reading a magazine
when the men from earth arrive in their rocket,

why they are always standing in a semicircle
with their arms folded, their bare legs set apart,
their breasts protected by hard metal disks.

Billy Collins

Man Listening To Disc

This is not bad --
ambling along 44th Street
with Sonny Rollins for company,
his music flowing through the soft calipers
of these earphones,

as if he were right beside me
on this clear day in March,
the pavement sparkling with sunlight,
pigeons fluttering off the curb,
nodding over a profusion of bread crumbs.

In fact, I would say
my delight at being suffused
with phrases from his saxophone --
some like honey, some like vinegar --
is surpassed only by my gratitude

to Tommy Potter for taking the time
to join us on this breezy afternoon
with his most unwieldy bass
and to the esteemed Arthur Taylor
who is somehow managing to navigate

this crowd with his cumbersome drums.
And I bow deeply to Thelonious Monk
for figuring out a way
to motorize -- or whatever -- his huge piano
so he could be with us today.

This music is loud yet so confidential.
I cannot help feeling even more
like the center of the universe
than usual as I walk along to a rapid
little version of "The Way You Look Tonight,"

and all I can say to my fellow pedestrians,
to the woman in the white sweater,
the man in the tan raincoat and the heavy glasses,

who mistake themselves for the center of the universe --
all I can say is watch your step,

because the five of us, instruments and all,
are about to angle over
to the south side of the street
and then, in our own tightly knit way,
turn the corner at Sixth Avenue.

And if any of you are curious
about where this aggregation,
this whole battery-powered crew,
is headed, let us just say
that the real center of the universe,

the only true point of view,
is full of hope that he,
the hub of the cosmos
with his hair blown sideways,
will eventually make it all the way downtown.

Billy Collins

Marginalia

Sometimes the notes are ferocious,
skirmishes against the author
raging along the borders of every page
in tiny black script.

If I could just get my hands on you,
Kierkegaard, or Conor Cruise O'Brien,
they seem to say,
I would bolt the door and beat some logic into your head.

Other comments are more offhand, dismissive -
'Nonsense.' 'Please!' 'HA! !' -
that kind of thing.

I remember once looking up from my reading,
my thumb as a bookmark,
trying to imagine what the person must look like
why wrote 'Don't be a ninny'
alongside a paragraph in *The Life of Emily Dickinson*.

Students are more modest
needing to leave only their splayed footprints
along the shore of the page.
One scrawls 'Metaphor' next to a stanza of Eliot's.
Another notes the presence of 'Irony'
fifty times outside the paragraphs of *A Modest Proposal*.

Or they are fans who cheer from the empty bleachers,
Hands cupped around their mouths.
'Absolutely,' they shout
to Duns Scotus and James Baldwin.
'Yes.' 'Bull's-eye.' 'My man!'
Check marks, asterisks, and exclamation points
rain down along the sidelines.

And if you have managed to graduate from college
without ever having written 'Man vs. Nature'
in a margin, perhaps now
is the time to take one step forward.

We have all seized the white perimeter as our own

and reached for a pen if only to show
we did not just laze in an armchair turning pages;
we pressed a thought into the wayside,
planted an impression along the verge.

Even Irish monks in their cold scriptoria
jotted along the borders of the Gospels
brief asides about the pains of copying,
a bird signing near their window,
or the sunlight that illuminated their page-
anonymous men catching a ride into the future
on a vessel more lasting than themselves.

And you have not read Joshua Reynolds,
they say, until you have read him
enwreathed with Blake's furious scribbling.

Yet the one I think of most often,
the one that dangles from me like a locket,
was written in the copy of *Catcher in the Rye*
I borrowed from the local library
one slow, hot summer.
I was just beginning high school then,
reading books on a davenport in my parents' living room,
and I cannot tell you
how vastly my loneliness was deepened,
how poignant and amplified the world before me seemed,
when I found on one page

A few greasy looking smears
and next to them, written in soft pencil-
by a beautiful girl, I could tell,
whom I would never meet-
'Pardon the egg salad stains, but I'm in love.'

Billy Collins

Morning

Why do we bother with the rest of the day,
the swale of the afternoon,
the sudden dip into evening,

then night with his notorious perfumes,
his many-pointed stars?

This is the best—
throwing off the light covers,
feet on the cold floor,
and buzzing around the house on espresso—

maybe a splash of water on the face,
a palmful of vitamins—
but mostly buzzing around the house on espresso,

dictionary and atlas open on the rug,
the typewriter waiting for the key of the head,
a cello on the radio,

and, if necessary, the windows—
trees fifty, a hundred years old
out there,
heavy clouds on the way
and the lawn steaming like a horse
in the early morning.

Billy Collins

Neither Snow

When all of a sudden the city air filled with snow,
the distinguishable flakes
blowing sideways,
looked like krill
fleeing the maw of an advancing whale.

At least they looked that way to me
from the taxi window,
and since I happened to be sitting
that fading Sunday afternoon
in the very center of the universe,
who was in a better position
to say what looked like what,
which thing resembled some other?

Yes, it was a run of white plankton
borne down the Avenue of the Americas
in the stream of the wind,
phosphorescent against the weighty buildings.

Which made the taxi itself,
yellow and slow-moving,
a kind of undersea creature,
I thought as I wiped the fog from the glass,

and me one of its protruding eyes,
an eye on a stem
swiveling this way and that
monitoring one side of its world,
observing tons of water
tons of people
colored signs and lights
and now a wildly blowing race of snow.

Billy Collins

Night Golf

I remember the night I discovered,
lying in bed in the dark,
that a few imagined holes of golf
worked much better than a thousand sheep,

that the local links,
not the cloudy pasture with its easy fence,
was the greener path to sleep.

How soothing to stroll the shadowy fairways,
to skirt the moon-blached bunkers
and hear the night owl in the woods.

Who cared about the score
when the club swung with the ease of air
and I glided from shot to shot
over the mown and rolling ground,
alone and drowsy with my weightless bag?

Eighteen small cups punched into the

bristling grass,
eighteen flags limp on their sticks
in the silent, windless dark,

but in the bedroom with its luminous clock
and propped-open windows,
I got only as far as the seventh hole
before I drifted easily away -

the difficult seventh, 'The Tester' they called it,
where, just as on the earlier holes,
I tapped in, dreamily, for birdie.

Billy Collins

Nightclub

You are so beautiful and I am a fool
to be in love with you
is a theme that keeps coming up
in songs and poems.
There seems to be no room for variation.
I have never heard anyone sing
I am so beautiful
and you are a fool to be in love with me,
even though this notion has surely
crossed the minds of women and men alike.
You are so beautiful, too bad you are a fool
is another one you don't hear.
Or, you are a fool to consider me beautiful.
That one you will never hear, guaranteed.

For no particular reason this afternoon
I am listening to Johnny Hartman
whose dark voice can curl around
the concepts on love, beauty, and foolishness
like no one else's can.
It feels like smoke curling up from a cigarette
someone left burning on a baby grand piano
around three o'clock in the morning;
smoke that billows up into the bright lights
while out there in the darkness
some of the beautiful fools have gathered
around little tables to listen,
some with their eyes closed,
others leaning forward into the music
as if it were holding them up,
or twirling the loose ice in a glass,
slipping by degrees into a rhythmic dream.

Yes, there is all this foolish beauty,
borne beyond midnight,
that has no desire to go home,
especially now when everyone in the room
is watching the large man with the tenor sax
that hangs from his neck like a golden fish.

He moves forward to the edge of the stage
and hands the instrument down to me
and nods that I should play.
So I put the mouthpiece to my lips
and blow into it with all my living breath.
We are all so foolish,
my long bebop solo begins by saying,
so damn foolish
we have become beautiful without even knowing it.

Billy Collins

Nostalgia

Remember the 1340's? We were doing a dance called the Catapult.
You always wore brown, the color craze of the decade,
and I was draped in one of those capes that were popular,
the ones with unicorns and pomegranates in needlework.
Everyone would pause for beer and onions in the afternoon,
and at night we would play a game called "Find the Cow."
Everything was hand-lettered then, not like today.

Where has the summer of 1572 gone? Brocade and sonnet
marathons were the rage. We used to dress up in the flags
of rival baronies and conquer one another in cold rooms of stone.
Out on the dance floor we were all doing the Struggle
while your sister practiced the Daphne all alone in her room.
We borrowed the jargon of farriers for our slang.
These days language seems transparent a badly broken code.

The 1790's will never come again. Childhood was big.
People would take walks to the very tops of hills
and write down what they saw in their journals without speaking.
Our collars were high and our hats were extremely soft.
We would surprise each other with alphabets made of twigs.
It was a wonderful time to be alive, or even dead.

I am very fond of the period between 1815 and 1821.
Europe trembled while we sat still for our portraits.
And I would love to return to 1901 if only for a moment,
time enough to wind up a music box and do a few dance steps,
or shoot me back to 1922 or 1941, or at least let me
recapture the serenity of last month when we picked
berries and glided through afternoons in a canoe.

Even this morning would be an improvement over the present.
I was in the garden then, surrounded by the hum of bees
and the Latin names of flowers, watching the early light
flash off the slanted windows of the greenhouse
and silver the limbs on the rows of dark hemlocks.

As usual, I was thinking about the moments of the past,
letting my memory rush over them like water

rushing over the stones on the bottom of a stream.
I was even thinking a little about the future, that place
where people are doing a dance we cannot imagine,
a dance whose name we can only guess.

Billy Collins

On Turning Ten

The whole idea of it makes me feel
like I'm coming down with something,
something worse than any stomach ache
or the headaches I get from reading in bad light--
a kind of measles of the spirit,
a mumps of the psyche,
a disfiguring chicken pox of the soul.

You tell me it is too early to be looking back,
but that is because you have forgotten
the perfect simplicity of being one
and the beautiful complexity introduced by two.
But I can lie on my bed and remember every digit.
At four I was an Arabian wizard.
I could make myself invisible
by drinking a glass of milk a certain way.
At seven I was a soldier, at nine a prince.

But now I am mostly at the window
watching the late afternoon light.
Back then it never fell so solemnly
against the side of my tree house,
and my bicycle never leaned against the garage
as it does today,
all the dark blue speed drained out of it.

This is the beginning of sadness, I say to myself,
as I walk through the universe in my sneakers.
It is time to say good-bye to my imaginary friends,
time to turn the first big number.

It seems only yesterday I used to believe
there was nothing under my skin but light.
If you cut me I could shine.
But now when I fall upon the sidewalks of life,
I skin my knees. I bleed.

Billy Collins

Pinup

The murkiness of the local garage is not so dense that you cannot make out the calendar of pinup drawings on the wall above a bench of tools. Your ears are ringing with the sound of the mechanic hammering on your exhaust pipe, and as you look closer you notice that this month's is not the one pushing the lawn mower, wearing a straw hat and very short blue shorts, her shirt tied in a knot just below her breasts. Nor is it the one in the admiral's cap, bending forward, resting her hands on a wharf piling, glancing over the tiny anchors on her shoulders. No, this is March, the month of great winds, so appropriately it is the one walking her dog along a city sidewalk on a very blustery day. One hand is busy keeping her hat down on her head and the other is grasping the little dog's leash, so of course there is no hand left to push down her dress which is billowing up around her waist exposing her long stockinged legs and yes the secret apparatus of her garter belt. Needless to say, in the confusion of wind and excited dog the leash has wrapped itself around her ankles several times giving her a rather bridled and helpless appearance which is added to by the impossibly high heels she is teetering on. You would like to come to her rescue, gather up the little dog in your arms, untangle the leash, lead her to safety, and receive her bottomless gratitude, but the mechanic is calling you over to look at something under your car. It seems that he has run into a problem and the job is going to cost more than he had said and take much longer than he had thought. Well, it can't be helped, you hear yourself say as you return to your place by the workbench, knowing that as soon as the hammering resumes you will slowly lift the bottom of the calendar

just enough to reveal a glimpse of what
the future holds in store: ah,
the red polka dot umbrella of April and her
upturned palm extended coyly into the rain.

Billy Collins

Reading An Anthology Of Chinese Poems Of The Sung Dynasty, I Pause To Admire The Length And Clarity Of Their Titles

It seems these poets have nothing
up their ample sleeves
they turn over so many cards so early,
telling us before the first line
whether it is wet or dry,
night or day, the season the man is standing in,
even how much he has had to drink.

Maybe it is autumn and he is looking at a sparrow.
Maybe it is snowing on a town with a beautiful name.

"Viewing Peonies at the Temple of Good Fortune
on a Cloudy Afternoon" is one of Sun Tung Po's.
"Dipping Water from the River and Simmering Tea"
is another one, or just
"On a Boat, Awake at Night."

And Lu Yu takes the simple rice cake with
"In a Boat on a Summer Evening
I Heard the Cry of a Waterbird.
It Was Very Sad and Seemed To Be Saying
My Woman Is Cruel--Moved, I Wrote This Poem."

There is no iron turnstile to push against here
as with headings like "Vortex on a String,"
"The Horn of Neurosis," or whatever.
No confusingly inscribed welcome mat to puzzle over.

Instead, "I Walk Out on a Summer Morning
to the Sound of Birds and a Waterfall"
is a beaded curtain brushing over my shoulders.

And "Ten Days of Spring Rain Have Kept Me Indoors"
is a servant who shows me into the room
where a poet with a thin beard
is sitting on a mat with a jug of wine

whispering something about clouds and cold wind,
about sickness and the loss of friends.

How easy he has made it for me to enter here,
to sit down in a corner,
cross my legs like his, and listen.

Billy Collins

Shoveling Snow With Buddha

In the usual iconography of the temple or the local Wok
you would never see him doing such a thing,
tossing the dry snow over a mountain
of his bare, round shoulder,
his hair tied in a knot,
a model of concentration.

Sitting is more his speed, if that is the word
for what he does, or does not do.

Even the season is wrong for him.
In all his manifestations, is it not warm or slightly humid?
Is this not implied by his serene expression,
that smile so wide it wraps itself around the waist of the universe?

But here we are, working our way down the driveway,
one shovelful at a time.
We toss the light powder into the clear air.
We feel the cold mist on our faces.
And with every heave we disappear
and become lost to each other
in these sudden clouds of our own making,
these fountain-bursts of snow.

This is so much better than a sermon in church,
I say out loud, but Buddha keeps on shoveling.
This is the true religion, the religion of snow,
and sunlight and winter geese barking in the sky,
I say, but he is too busy to hear me.

He has thrown himself into shoveling snow
as if it were the purpose of existence,
as if the sign of a perfect life were a clear driveway
you could back the car down easily
and drive off into the vanities of the world
with a broken heater fan and a song on the radio.

All morning long we work side by side,
me with my commentary

and he inside his generous pocket of silence,
until the hour is nearly noon
and the snow is piled high all around us;
then, I hear him speak.

After this, he asks,
can we go inside and play cards?

Certainly, I reply, and I will heat some milk
and bring cups of hot chocolate to the table
while you shuffle the deck.
and our boots stand dripping by the door.

Aaah, says the Buddha, lifting his eyes
and leaning for a moment on his shovel
before he drives the thin blade again
deep into the glittering white snow.

Billy Collins

Silence

There is the sudden silence of the crowd
above a player not moving on the field,
and the silence of the orchid.

The silence of the falling vase
before it strikes the floor,
the silence of the belt when it is not striking the child.

The stillness of the cup and the water in it,
the silence of the moon
and the quiet of the day far from the roar of the sun.

The silence when I hold you to my chest,
the silence of the window above us,
and the silence when you rise and turn away.

And there is the silence of this morning
which I have broken with my pen,
a silence that had piled up all night

like snow falling in the darkness of the house—
the silence before I wrote a word
and the poorer silence now.

Billy Collins

Snow Day

Today we woke up to a revolution of snow,
its white flag waving over everything,
the landscape vanished,
not a single mouse to punctuate the blankness,
and beyond these windows

the government buildings smothered,
schools and libraries buried, the post office lost
under the noiseless drift,
the paths of trains softly blocked,
the world fallen under this falling.

In a while I will put on some boots
and step out like someone walking in water,
and the dog will porpoise through the drifts,
and I will shake a laden branch,
sending a cold shower down on us both.

But for now I am a willing prisoner in this house,
a sympathizer with the anarchic cause of snow.
I will make a pot of tea
and listen to the plastic radio on the counter,
as glad as anyone to hear the news

that the Kiddie Corner School is closed,
the Ding-Dong School, closed,
the All Aboard Children's School, closed,
the Hi-Ho Nursery School, closed,
along with - some will be delighted to hear -

the Toadstool School, the Little School,
Little Sparrows Nursery School,
Little Stars Pre-School, Peas-and-Carrots Day School,
the Tom Thumb Child Center, all closed,
and - clap your hands - the Peanuts Play School.

So this is where the children hide all day,
These are the nests where they letter and draw,
where they put on their bright miniature jackets,

all darting and climbing and sliding,
all but the few girls whispering by the fence.

And now I am listening hard
in the grandiose silence of the snow,
trying to hear what those three girls are plotting,
what riot is afoot,
which small queen is about to be brought down.

Billy Collins

Some Days

Some days I put the people in their places at the table,
bend their legs at the knees,
if they come with that feature,
and fix them into the tiny wooden chairs.

All afternoon they face one another,
the man in the brown suit,
the woman in the blue dress,
perfectly motionless, perfectly behaved.

But other days, I am the one
who is lifted up by the ribs,
then lowered into the dining room of a dollhouse
to sit with the others at the long table.

Very funny,
but how would you like it
if you never knew from one day to the next
if you were going to spend it

striding around like a vivid god,
your shoulders in the clouds,
or sitting down there amidst the wallpaper,
staring straight ahead with your little plastic face?

Billy Collins

Study In Orange And White

I knew that James Whistler was part of the Paris scene,
but I was still surprised when I found the painting
of his mother at the Musée d'Orsay
among all the colored dots and mobile brushstrokes
of the French Impressionists.

And I was surprised to notice
after a few minutes of benign staring,
how that woman, stark in profile
and fixed forever in her chair,
began to resemble my own ancient mother
who was now fixed forever in the stars, the air, the earth.

You can understand why he titled the painting
"Arrangement in Gray and Black"
instead of what everyone naturally calls it,
but afterward, as I walked along the river bank,
I imagined how it might have broken
the woman's heart to be demoted from mother
to a mere composition, a study in colorlessness.

As the summer couples leaned into each other
along the quay and the wide, low-slung boats
full of spectators slid up and down the Seine
between the carved stone bridges
and their watery reflections,
I thought: how ridiculous, how off-base.

It would be like Botticelli calling "The Birth of Venus"
"Composition in Blue, Ochre, Green, and Pink,"
or the other way around
like Rothko titling one of his sandwiches of color
"Fishing Boats Leaving Falmouth Harbor at Dawn."

Or, as I scanned the menu at the cafe
where I now had come to rest,
it would be like painting something laughable,
like a chef turning on a spit
over a blazing fire in front of an audience of ducks

and calling it "Study in Orange and White."

But by that time, a waiter had appeared
with my glass of Pernod and a clear pitcher of water,
and I sat there thinking of nothing
but the women and men passing by--
mothers and sons walking their small fragile dogs--
and about myself,
a kind of composition in blue and khaki,
and, now that I had poured
some water into the glass, milky-green.

Billy Collins

Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes

First, her tippet made of tulle,
easily lifted off her shoulders and laid
on the back of a wooden chair.

And her bonnet,
the bow undone with a light forward pull.

Then the long white dress, a more
complicated matter with mother-of-pearl
buttons down the back,
so tiny and numerous that it takes forever
before my hands can part the fabric,
like a swimmer's dividing water,
and slip inside.

You will want to know
that she was standing
by an open window in an upstairs bedroom,
motionless, a little wide-eyed,
looking out at the orchard below,
the white dress puddled at her feet
on the wide-board, hardwood floor.

The complexity of women's undergarments
in nineteenth-century America
is not to be waved off,
and I proceeded like a polar explorer
through clips, clasps, and moorings,
catches, straps, and whalebone stays,
sailing toward the iceberg of her nakedness.

Later, I wrote in a notebook
it was like riding a swan into the night,
but, of course, I cannot tell you everything -
the way she closed her eyes to the orchard,
how her hair tumbled free of its pins,
how there were sudden dashes
whenever we spoke.

What I can tell you is
it was terribly quiet in Amherst
that Sabbath afternoon,
nothing but a carriage passing the house,
a fly buzzing in a windowpane.

So I could plainly hear her inhale
when I undid the very top
hook-and-eye fastener of her corset

and I could hear her sigh when finally it was unloosed,
the way some readers sigh when they realize
that Hope has feathers,
that reason is a plank,
that life is a loaded gun
that looks right at you with a yellow eye.□

Billy Collins

The Art Of Drowning

I wonder how it all got started, this business
about seeing your life flash before your eyes
while you drown, as if panic, or the act of submergence,
could startle time into such compression, crushing
decades in the vice of your desperate, final seconds.

After falling off a steamship or being swept away
in a rush of floodwaters, wouldn't you hope
for a more leisurely review, an invisible hand
turning the pages of an album of photographs-
you up on a pony or blowing out candles in a conic hat.

How about a short animated film, a slide presentation?
Your life expressed in an essay, or in one model photograph?
Wouldn't any form be better than this sudden flash?
Your whole existence going off in your face
in an eyebrow-singeing explosion of biography-
nothing like the three large volumes you envisioned.

Survivors would have us believe in a brilliance
here, some bolt of truth forking across the water,
an ultimate Light before all the lights go out,
dawning on you with all its megalithic tonnage.
But if something does flash before your eyes
as you go under, it will probably be a fish,

a quick blur of curved silver darting away,
having nothing to do with your life or your death.
The tide will take you, or the lake will accept it all
as you sink toward the weedy disarray of the bottom,
leaving behind what you have already forgotten,
the surface, now overrun with the high travel of clouds.

Billy Collins

The Best Cigarette

There are many that I miss
having sent my last one out a car window
sparking along the road one night, years ago.

The heralded one, of course:
after sex, the two glowing tips
now the lights of a single ship;
at the end of a long dinner
with more wine to come
and a smoke ring coasting into the chandelier;
or on a white beach,
holding one with fingers still wet from a swim.

How bittersweet these punctuations
of flame and gesture;
but the best were on those mornings
when I would have a little something going
in the typewriter,
the sun bright in the windows,
maybe some Berlioz on in the background.
I would go into the kitchen for coffee
and on the way back to the page,
curled in its roller,
I would light one up and feel
its dry rush mix with the dark taste of coffee.

Then I would be my own locomotive,
trailing behind me as I returned to work
little puffs of smoke,
indicators of progress,
signs of industry and thought,
the signal that told the nineteenth century
it was moving forward.
That was the best cigarette,
when I would steam into the study
full of vaporous hope
and stand there,
the big headlamp of my face
pointed down at all the words in parallel lines.

Billy Collins

The Death of Allegory

I am wondering what became of all those tall abstractions
that used to pose, robed and statuesque, in paintings
and parade about on the pages of the Renaissance
displaying their capital letters like license plates.

Truth cantering on a powerful horse,
Chastity, eyes downcast, fluttering with veils.
Each one was marble come to life, a thought in a coat,
Courtesy bowing with one hand always extended,

Villainy sharpening an instrument behind a wall,
Reason with her crown and Constancy alert behind a helm.
They are all retired now, consigned to a Florida for tropes.
Justice is there standing by an open refrigerator.

Valor lies in bed listening to the rain.
Even Death has nothing to do but mend his cloak and hood,
and all their props are locked away in a warehouse,
hourglasses, globes, blindfolds and shackles.

Even if you called them back, there are no places left
for them to go, no Garden of Mirth or Bower of Bliss.
The Valley of Forgiveness is lined with condominiums
and chain saws are howling in the Forest of Despair.

Here on the table near the window is a vase of peonies
and next to it black binoculars and a money clip,
exactly the kind of thing we now prefer,
objects that sit quietly on a line in lower case,

themselves and nothing more, a wheelbarrow,
an empty mailbox, a razor blade resting in a glass ashtray.
As for the others, the great ideas on horseback
and the long-haired virtues in embroidered gowns,

it looks as though they have traveled down
that road you see on the final page of storybooks,
the one that winds up a green hillside and disappears
into an unseen valley where everyone must be fast asleep.

Billy Collins

The First Dream

The Wind is ghosting around the house tonight
and as I lean against the door of sleep
I begin to think about the first person to dream,
how quiet he must have seemed the next morning

as the others stood around the fire
draped in the skins of animals
talking to each other only in vowels,
for this was long before the invention of consonants.

He might have gone off by himself to sit
on a rock and look into the mist of a lake
as he tried to tell himself what had happened,
how he had gone somewhere without going,

how he had put his arms around the neck
of a beast that the others could touch
only after they had killed it with stones,
how he felt its breath on his bare neck.

Then again, the first dream could have come
to a woman, though she would behave,
I suppose, much the same way,
moving off by herself to be alone near water,

except that the curve of her young shoulders
and the tilt of her downcast head
would make her appear to be terribly alone,
and if you were there to notice this,

you might have gone down as the first person
to ever fall in love with the sadness of another.

Billy Collins

The First Night

Before I opened you, Jiménez,
it never occurred to me that day and night
would continue to circle each other in the ring of death,

but now you have me wondering
if there will also be a sun and a moon
and will the dead gather to watch them rise and set

then repair, each soul alone,
to some ghastly equivalent of a bed.
Or will the first night be the only night,

a darkness for which we have no other name?
How feeble our vocabulary in the face of death,
How impossible to write it down.

This is where language will stop,
the horse we have ridden all our lives
rearing up at the edge of a dizzying cliff.

The word that was in the beginning
and the word that was made flesh—
those and all the other words will cease.

Even now, reading you on this trellised porch,
how can I describe a sun that will shine after death?
But it is enough to frighten me

into paying more attention to the world's day-moon,
to sunlight bright on water
or fragmented in a grove of trees,

and to look more closely here at these small leaves,
these sentinel thorns,
whose employment it is to guard the rose.

Billy Collins

The Iron Bridge

I am standing on a disused iron bridge
that was erected in 1902,
according to the iron plaque bolted into a beam,
the year my mother turned one.
Imagine--a mother in her infancy,
and she was a Canadian infant at that,
one of the great infants of the province of Ontario.

But here I am leaning on the rusted railing
looking at the water below,
which is flat and reflective this morning,
sky-blue and streaked with high clouds,
and the more I look at the water,
which is like a talking picture,
the more I think of 1902
when workmen in shirts and caps
riveted this iron bridge together
across a thin channel joining two lakes
where wildflowers blow along the shore now
and pairs of swans float in the leafy coves.

1902--my mother was so tiny
she could have fit into one of those oval
baskets for holding apples,
which her mother could have lined with a soft cloth
and placed on the kitchen table
so she could keep an eye on infant Katherine
while she scrubbed potatoes or shelled a bag of peas,

the way I am keeping an eye on that cormorant
who just broke the glassy surface
and is moving away from me and the iron bridge,
swiveling his curious head,
slipping out to where the sun rakes the water
and filters through the trees that crowd the shore.

And now he dives,
disappears below the surface,
and while I wait for him to pop up,

I picture him flying underwater with his strange wings,

as I picture you, my tiny mother,
who disappeared last year,
flying somewhere with your strange wings,
your wide eyes, and your heavy wet dress,
kicking deeper down into a lake
with no end or name, some boundless province of water.

Billy Collins

The Lanyard

The other day as I was ricocheting slowly
off the blue walls of this room
bouncing from typewriter to piano
from bookshelf to an envelope lying on the floor,
I found myself in the 'L' section of the dictionary
where my eyes fell upon the word, Lanyard.
No cookie nibbled by a French novelist
could send one more suddenly into the past.
A past where I sat at a workbench
at a camp by a deep Adirondack lake
learning how to braid thin plastic strips into a lanyard.
A gift for my mother.
I had never seen anyone use a lanyard.
Or wear one, if that's what you did with them.
But that did not keep me from crossing strand over strand
again and again until I had made a boxy, red and white lanyard for my mother.
She gave me life and milk from her breasts,
and I gave her a lanyard
She nursed me in many a sick room,
lifted teaspoons of medicine to my lips,
set cold facecloths on my forehead
then led me out into the airy light
and taught me to walk and swim and I in turn presented her with a lanyard.
'Here are thousands of meals' she said,
'and here is clothing and a good education.'
'And here is your lanyard,' I replied,
'which I made with a little help from a counselor.'
'Here is a breathing body and a beating heart,
strong legs, bones and teeth and two clear eyes to read the world.' she
whispered.
'And here,' I said, 'is the lanyard I made at camp.'
'And here,' I wish to say to her now,
'is a smaller gift. Not the archaic truth,
that you can never repay your mother,
but the rueful admission that when she took the two-toned lanyard from my
hands,
I was as sure as a boy could be
that this useless worthless thing I wove out of boredom
would be enough to make us even.'

Billy Collins

The Names

Yesterday, I lay awake in the palm of the night.

A soft rain stole in, unhelped by any breeze,

And when I saw the silver glaze on the windows,

I started with A, with Ackerman, as it happened,

Then Baxter and Calabro,

Davis and Eberling, names falling into place

As droplets fell through the dark.

Names printed on the ceiling of the night.

Names slipping around a watery bend.

Twenty-six willows on the banks of a stream.

In the morning, I walked out barefoot

Among thousands of flowers

Heavy with dew like the eyes of tears,

And each had a name --

Fiori inscribed on a yellow petal

Then Gonzalez and Han, Ishikawa and Jenkins.

Names written in the air

And stitched into the cloth of the day.

A name under a photograph taped to a mailbox.

Monogram on a torn shirt,

I see you spelled out on storefront windows
And on the bright unfurled awnings of this city.
I say the syllables as I turn a corner --
Kelly and Lee,
Medina, Nardella, and O'Connor.
When I peer into the woods,
I see a thick tangle where letters are hidden
As in a puzzle concocted for children.
Parker and Quigley in the twigs of an ash,
Rizzo, Schubert, Torres, and Upton,
Secrets in the boughs of an ancient maple.
Names written in the pale sky.
Names rising in the updraft amid buildings.
Names silent in stone
Or cried out behind a door.
Names blown over the earth and out to sea.
In the evening -- weakening light, the last swallows.
A boy on a lake lifts his oars.
A woman by a window puts a match to a candle,
And the names are outlined on the rose clouds --
Vanacore and Wallace,

(let X stand, if it can, for the ones unfound)

Then Young and Ziminsky, the final jolt of Z.

Names etched on the head of a pin.

One name spanning a bridge, another undergoing a tunnel.

A blue name needled into the skin.

Names of citizens, workers, mothers and fathers,

The bright-eyed daughter, the quick son.

Alphabet of names in a green field.

Names in the small tracks of birds.

Names lifted from a hat

Or balanced on the tip of the tongue.

Names wheeled into the dim warehouse of memory.

So many names, there is barely room on the walls of the heart.

*This poem is dedicated to the victims of September 11 and to their survivors.

Billy Collins

The Only Day In Existence

The early sun is so pale and shadowy,
I could be looking up at a ghost
in the shape of a window,
a tall, rectangular spirit
looking down at me in bed,
about to demand that I avenge
the murder of my father.
But the morning light is only the first line
in the play of this day--
the only day in existence--
the opening chord of its long song,
or think of what is permeating
the thin bedroom curtains

as the beginning of a lecture
I will listen to until it is dark,
a curious student in a V-neck sweater,
angled into the wooden chair of his life,
ready with notebook and a chewed-up pencil,
quiet as a goldfish in winter,
serious as a compass at sea,
eager to absorb whatever lesson
this damp, overcast Tuesday
has to teach me,
here in the spacious classroom of the world
with its long walls of glass,
its heavy, low-hung ceiling.

Billy Collins

Thesaurus

It could be the name of a prehistoric beast
that roamed the Paleozoic earth, rising up
on its hind legs to show off its large vocabulary,
or some lover in a myth who is metamorphosed into a book.

It means treasury, but it is just a place
where words congregate with their relatives,
a big park where hundreds of family reunions
are always being held,
house, home, abode, dwelling, lodgings, and digs,
all sharing the same picnic basket and thermos;
hairy, hirsute, woolly, furry, fleecy, and shaggy
all running a sack race or throwing horseshoes,
inert, static, motionless, fixed and immobile
standing and kneeling in rows for a group photograph.

Here father is next to sire and brother close
to sibling, separated only by fine shades of meaning.
And every group has its odd cousin, the one
who traveled the farthest to be here:
astereognosis, polydipsia, or some eleven
syllable, unpronounceable substitute for the word tool.
Even their own relatives have to squint at their name tags.

I can see my own copy up on a high shelf.
I rarely open it, because I know there is no
such thing as a synonym and because I get nervous
around people who always assemble with their own kind,
forming clubs and nailing signs to closed front doors
while others huddle alone in the dark streets.

I would rather see words out on their own, away
from their families and the warehouse of Roget,
wandering the world where they sometimes fall
in love with a completely different word.
Surely, you have seen pairs of them standing forever
next to each other on the same line inside a poem,
a small chapel where weddings like these,
between perfect strangers, can take place.

Billy Collins

Today

If ever there were a spring day so perfect, so uplifted by a warm intermittent breeze

Billy Collins

Tomes

There is a section in my library for death
and another for Irish history,
a few shelves for the poetry of China and Japan,
and in the center a row of imperturbable reference books,
the ones you can turn to anytime,
when the night is going wrong
or when the day is full of empty promise.

I have nothing against
the thin monograph, the odd query,
a note on the identity of Chekhov's dentist,
but what I prefer on days like these
is to get up from the couch,
pull down *The History of the World*,
and hold in my hands a book
containing nearly everything
and weighing no more than a sack of potatoes,
eleven pounds, I discovered one day when I placed it
on the black, iron scale
my mother used to keep in her kitchen,
the device on which she would place
a certain amount of flour,
a certain amount of fish.

Open flat on my lap
under a halo of lamplight,
a book like this always has a way
of soothing the nerves,
quieting the riotous surf of information
that foams around my waist
even though it never mentions
the silent labors of the poor,
the daydreams of grocers and tailors,
or the faces of men and women alone in single rooms-

even though it never mentions my mother,
now that I think of her again,
who only last year rolled off the edge of the earth
in her electric bed,

in her smooth pink nightgown
the bones of her fingers interlocked,
her sunken eyes staring upward
beyond all knowledge,
beyond the tiny figures of history,
some in uniform, some not,
marching onto the pages of this incredibly heavy book.

Billy Collins

Walking Across The Atlantic

I wait for the holiday crowd to clear the beach
before stepping onto the first wave.

Soon I am walking across the Atlantic
thinking about Spain,
checking for whales, waterspouts.
I feel the water holding up my shifting weight.
Tonight I will sleep on its rocking surface.

But for now I try to imagine what
this must look like to the fish below,
the bottoms of my feet appearing, disappearing.

Billy Collins

Workshop

I might as well begin by saying how much I like the title.
It gets me right away because I'm in a workshop now
so immediately the poem has my attention,
like the Ancient Mariner grabbing me by the sleeve.

And I like the first couple of stanzas,
the way they establish this mode of self-pointing
that runs through the whole poem
and tells us that words are food thrown down
on the ground for other words to eat.
I can almost taste the tail of the snake
in its own mouth,
if you know what I mean.

But what I'm not sure about is the voice,
which sounds in places very casual, very blue jeans,
but other times seems standoffish,
professorial in the worst sense of the word
like the poem is blowing pipe smoke in my face.
But maybe that's just what it wants to do.

What I did find engaging were the middle stanzas,
especially the fourth one.

I like the image of clouds flying like lozenges
which gives me a very clear picture.
And I really like how this drawbridge operator
just appears out of the blue
with his feet up on the iron railing
and his fishing pole jigging—I like jigging—
a hook in the slow industrial canal below.
I love slow industrial canal below. All those I's.

Maybe it's just me,
but the next stanza is where I start to have a problem.
I mean how can the evening bump into the stars?
And what's an obbligato of snow?
Also, I roam the decaffeinated streets.
At that point I'm lost. I need help.

The other thing that throws me off,
and maybe this is just me,
is the way the scene keeps shifting around.
First, we're in this big aerodrome
and the speaker is inspecting a row of dirigibles,
which makes me think this could be a dream.
Then he takes us into his garden,
the part with the dahlias and the coiling hose,
though that's nice, the coiling hose,
but then I'm not sure where we're supposed to be.
The rain and the mint green light,
that makes it feel outdoors, but what about this wallpaper?
Or is it a kind of indoor cemetery?
There's something about death going on here.

In fact, I start to wonder if what we have here
is really two poems, or three, or four,
or possibly none.

But then there's that last stanza, my favorite.
This is where the poem wins me back,
especially the lines spoken in the voice of the mouse.
I mean we've all seen these images in cartoons before,
but I still love the details he uses
when he's describing where he lives.
The perfect little arch of an entrance in the baseboard,
the bed made out of a curled-back sardine can,
the spool of thread for a table.
I start thinking about how hard the mouse had to work
night after night collecting all these things
while the people in the house were fast asleep,
and that gives me a very strong feeling,
a very powerful sense of something.
But I don't know if anyone else was feeling that.
Maybe that was just me.
Maybe that's just the way I read it.

Billy Collins

Writing In The Afterlife

I imagined the atmosphere would be clear,
shot with pristine light,
not this sulphurous haze,
the air ionized as before a thunderstorm.

Many have pictured a river here,
but no one mentioned all the boats,
their benches crowded with naked passengers,
each bent over a writing tablet.

I knew I would not always be a child
with a model train and a model tunnel,
and I knew I would not live forever,
jumping all day through the hoop of myself.

I had heard about the journey to the other side
and the clink of the final coin
in the leather purse of the man holding the oar,
but how could anyone have guessed

that as soon as we arrived
we would be asked to describe this place
and to include as much detail as possible—
not just the water, he insists,

rather the oily, fathomless, rat-happy water,
not simply the shackles, but the rusty,
iron, ankle-shredding shackles—
and that our next assignment would be

to jot down, off the tops of our heads,
our thoughts and feelings about being dead,
not really an assignment,
the man rotating the oar keeps telling us—

think of it more as an exercise, he groans,
think of writing as a process,
a never-ending, infernal process,
and now the boats have become jammed together,

bow against stern, stern locked to bow,
and not a thing is moving, only our diligent pens.

Billy Collins