


BILLY COLLINS



TEACHES READING
AND WRITING POETRY

MASTERCLASS



INTRODUCTION: THE PLEASURE POETRY GIVES US

Meet your new instructor: Billy Collins, United States Poet Laureate (2001–2003)

Billy Collins is an American phenomenon. No poet since Robert Frost has managed to combine high critical acclaim with such broad popular appeal. His work has appeared in a variety of periodicals including *the New Yorker*, *the Paris Review*, and *the American Scholar*. He is a Guggenheim fellow and a New York Public Library Literary Lion. His last three collections of poems have broken record sales for poetry. His readings are usually standing room only—enhanced tremendously by his appearances on National Public Radio—and his audience includes people of all backgrounds and age groups. The poems themselves best explain this phenomenon. The typical Billy Collins poem opens on a clear and hospitable note but soon takes an unexpected turn; poems that begin in irony may end in a moment of lyric surprise. No wonder Billy sees his poetry as “a form of travel writing” and considers humor “a door into the serious.” It is a door that many thousands of readers have opened with amazement and delight.

Billy Collins has published twelve collections of poetry, including *Questions About Angels*, *the Art of Drowning*, *Sailing Alone Around the Room: New & Selected Poems*, *Nine Horses*, *the Trouble With Poetry and Other Poems*, *Ballistics*, *Horoscopes for the Dead*, and *Picnic, Lightning*. A collection of his haikus, *She Was Just Seventeen*, was published by Modern Haiku Press in the fall of 2006. He has also published two chapbooks, *Video Poems* and *Pokerface*. In addition, he has edited two anthologies of contemporary poetry—*Poetry 180: A Turning Back to Poetry* and *180 More: Extraordinary Poems for Every Day*—was the guest editor of *the Best American Poetry 2006*, and edited *Bright Wings: An Illustrated Anthology of Poems about Birds*, an anthology illustrated by David Allen Sibley. His book *Aimless Love: New and Selected Poems* was a *New York Times* bestseller. His most recent book of poetry is titled *The Rain in Portugal: Poems*, and is a *New York Times* bestseller.

Included among the honors Billy Collins has received are fellowships from the New York Foundation for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Guggenheim Foundation. He has also been awarded the Oscar Blumenthal Prize, the Bess Hokin Prize, the Frederick Bock Prize, and the Levinson Prize—all awarded by *Poetry* magazine. He has also received the Aiken Taylor Award in Modern American Poetry, the Hall-Kenyon Prize, the Mailer Prize, and the Peggy V. Helmerich Distinguished Author Award. In October 2004, Collins was selected as the inaugural recipient of the Poetry Foundation’s Mark Twain Poetry Award.

In June 2001, Billy Collins was appointed United States Poet Laureate a title he held until 2003. In January 2004, he was named New York State Poet Laureate, which he held until 2006. He is a former Distinguished Professor of English at Lehman College at the City University of New York. In 2016 he was elected a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He is currently a Distinguished Fellow of the Winter Park Institute at Rollins College.

**“Poetry is really the
only history we have
of the human heart.”**

A LETTER FROM BILLY

HELLO STUDENTS,

Whether you are a poet in the habit of writing poems and are now looking for a new direction, or someone who used to write poems but for some reason stopped, or someone who would like to understand poetry better and see how poems work, welcome to my MasterClass. I am talking to all of you.

Like most poets, I started writing when I was in the throes of adolescence. Poetry was a way of privately expressing the confusing welter of feelings I was experiencing. No wonder I wrote confusing poems. Poetry then was also a covert activity. I showed my poems to no one. I was too busy expressing myself to consider the possibility of having a reader. A reader would violate my privacy! It was only later that I realized the poets I admired were not merely expressing themselves; they were making something for their readers. The real pleasure of writing a poem lies in figuring out how to engage and maintain the reader's interest, and the way to do that is through form. To quote a recent book title: *All the Fun's in How You Say a Thing*. It's not what you say, but how you say it.

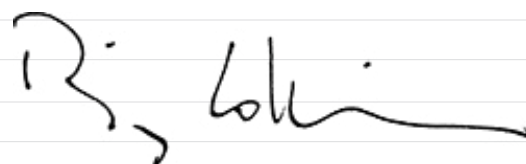
In choosing poetry, you have chosen the oldest form of verbal expression. Poetry predates prose fiction by thousands of years. At the same time, poetry is a sudden occurrence. A poem that takes up a few inches of space on a page can have the power to open readers' hearts and maybe even blow their minds. For us, the brevity of the lyric poem means that every word counts; even the spaces you leave on the page are part of what a poem delivers. Every poem has a shape.

My class will cover every aspect of poetry that I consider important, subjects ranging from how to break a line to how to create surprise in a poem. I see poetry as the highest form of human expression, but the making of a poem involves the nuts and bolts of writing strong lines and solid stanzas. Samuel Taylor Coleridge called poetry "the best words in the best order," which is a tall order in itself.

I was thrilled when I was asked to give this class. It gave me the opportunity to organize all the ideas that I've formulated while conducting poetry workshops over the years. I think of a poem as a flashlight, an instrument of discovery. I'm here to light the way for you, to show you what I've learned, and not just about rhyme and meter. I'll also teach you about using influences, understanding who you are as a poet, and inventing a persona—that is, a distinctive voice that is yours alone. I'll show you how to open your poems to a reader, a stranger who will enter your consciousness and be a visitor to your mental and emotional world.

Reading and writing poetry are both solitary pursuits, but that doesn't mean you're alone. You write in the company of all the other poets you have ever read, and here, you are in the company of me and your peers who are taking this class.

Poetry is the only full history we have of the human heart; I'm honored to help you see how poems can be written that might significantly add to that history.



In my view, poetry is not only a written activity; it's a way of seeing life and establishing a connection to the world. Poetry, perhaps even a single poem, has the ability to make us dance even if we remain in our seats, make us sing even when we're silent. It surprises us, befriends us, and takes us from our mundane realities into the outer space of the imagination and back again to the world of daily particulars in which we live.

Poetry, in this sense, is perhaps a way for readers and writers to experience a different sort of timeline: one that experiences histories not in terms of boundary disputes, inventions, truces, and wars, but through the way such events have made us feel. Poetry is a living history of the human heart: a testament to the romance, rather than linearity, of time.

In this class, I will walk you through how to see the world, and document it, as a poet. Through readings, lectures, and discussions of my and others' work, you will get both practical and philosophical advice on how to write your own history of the human heart and how to communicate this history with others. You will receive twenty lessons in various elements of the poetry and the writing process, options to dig deeper into subjects that interest you, and writing assignments that allow you to put this new knowledge into practice and create new work.

THE PLEASURES OF POETRY

In my essay "Poetry, Pleasure, and the Hedonist Reader," I outline several pleasures of poetry, including the pleasure of dance (rhythm); the pleasure of sound (words); the pleasure of travel (using written work to transport us to different worlds); the pleasure of metaphoric connection (surprise and new perspectives); the pleasure of companionship (memorization); and others. To read more about these multisensory qualities, find the essay in the book *The Eye of the Poet: Six Views of the Art and Craft of Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

ABOUT THIS BOOK

With great help from the MasterClass team, I've created this companion book as a supplement to my class. The writing exercises herein will help you explore subjects and forms and hone skills for your work. Dedicate a notebook to this coursework. You may even be asked to bring the notebook outside during your daily activities from time to time, drawing from the world around you. These exercises are, of course, optional, but you never know when they might lead to something unless you try them. True, exercises are mostly just exercises, but I have seen many instances where an exercise has led to the writing of a strong, unexpected poem.

BILLY COLLINS

CHAPTER ASSIGNMENTS

Hop, hop, hop, hop, hop
he travels along the forest floor
over ~~the~~ ^{tree} roots, around the ferns



into the ~~stippled~~ ^{center} and look
at the ~~to~~ ^{around} ~~side~~ ^{side} ~~of~~ ^{of}
and wish I had ~~little~~ ^{little} hole
somewhere to go down. //

WORKING WITH FORM

“What you have to do in your poetry is tell a little white lie. Harmless, but it’s a lie. And the lie is that you love poetry more than you love yourself.”

WRITING EXERCISE

Go on a walk and bring your notebook. Look around and take down some observations on the external stimuli around you—a tree, a person, a neighborhood, a pool. See if you can begin a poem by using some of these external elements. Once you’ve got the poem underway, have you made a decision about what your stanzas will look like? Will you use enjambment or will you use punctuation? Do you want the poem to go slowly or faster? Do you want to use long sentences or short?

WRITING EXERCISE

Think about the stanzas as various “rooms” in the house of the poem. Imagine that the poet is taking readers through various rooms in a tour of a house. Now, read one of your own poems and look at the stanzas: in the margins of your poem, write down what each stanza or “room” is revealing.

READING EXERCISE

There are two major things poets can learn from the short stories of Anton Chekhov. One is the use of very specific detail—the particulars of experience—to keep the story anchored to external reality. So too can poets use detail to anchor a poem. The other is the use of inconclusive or “soft” endings. Chekhov does not solve problems for the characters. Similarly, the endings of poems do not need to resolve things. A soft ending—when a poem just ends in an image—can work.

Read a short story or two by Anton Chekhov, keeping an eye for those literary techniques that you can apply to your poems. “Misery” and “The Lady with the Lap Dog” are highly recommended.

WRITING EXERCISE

Write a few lines setting a scene that is easy to accept. Think about the example of snow on pine trees or a dog lying under a hammock. Establish a scene of your own. Then have your poem take a twist. Take your reader and yourself somewhere very different—spatially or thematically—from your original scene.

DISCOVERING THE SUBJECT

“There’s no chronology involved in poetry. You can go anywhere. You can be anywhere. You can fly.”

WRITING EXERCISE

Every literary age comes with its own understanding of what is the appropriate subject matter for poetry. In the Elizabethan period, the dominant subject was romantic or courtly love. In the age of the English Romantic poets, you were supposed to write about nature. Poetry advances when these rules of acceptability are violated. Think about Walt Whitman: when he should have been writing about nature, he wrote about machinery. Thom Gunn wrote a poem about Elvis Presley when pop stars were not considered appropriate for poetry. Both poets violated the literary decorum of their time.

In choosing what to write about, nothing is too trivial. Don’t censor yourself. Don’t feel that you have to be serious, or even sincere. You can be playful, even sarcastic in your poems. Think of a subject that may seem outside of today’s literary decorum and write a poem about it.

WRITING EXERCISE

Choose an object close by—whether you’re in an office or a kitchen, a park or a library—and describe it. Start with a description of this object and see what it opens up for you. Does it evoke personal memories, have cultural implications, or elicit an emotion? Write a poem that starts with this object, then leads the reader into the more personal memory.

WRITING EXERCISE

Make my hand-of-cards analogy concrete. Think of a topic. Take ten blank flash cards and on one side of each flash card, write a line about this topic. Use a mixture of emotional detail, concrete detail, and images when writing these lines. Now, put all these cards face down in front of you. Now turn five of these cards over, face-up. What kind of poem is this? What questions remain? Experiment with which five cards should be turned up in order to create a poem that is both mysterious and clear enough for the emotions to be anchored.

WRITING THE POEM

*“You can be a poet when
you’re not writing poetry.”*

WRITING EXERCISE

In the evening, write a list of twenty things you did that day. Use this form: “I did this, I did that, I washed the dishes, I ate an avocado, I read the newspaper,” etcetera. The only rule is: don’t list these things in chronological order. Review your list of twenty activities and see if any of them spark a line of poetry. Try to make use of one of these seemingly mundane (or not!) activities to write a longer poem (like me reading the word “lanyard” or Proust tasting a madeleine).

Using your own words and memories, try to imitate some of these formal features. Could any of your lines become the first line of a poem?

Once you have a direction, have a seat somewhere busy and write. This could be in the grass at a park, inside a noisy café, at a bus stop, et cetera. As you write, let certain distractions make their way into your poem. What do these distractions add? How do they surprise you?

WRITING PROCESS

“This is what poets are paid for—to look at clouds, watch chipmunks. Someone has to keep an eye on these things. And if not the poets, who else has the time for it?”

WRITING EXERCISE

My writing process consists of two main steps.

Step 1: Make a mess. I write one or two drafts in long hand, making a mess as I cross out words or entire lines. I don’t try to be tidy.

Step 2: Tidy it up. I type the poem up on a computer, tidying it as I make it into a printed object.

If this method resonates with you, write your next poem in long-hand in your notebook and feel free to make a mess with strike-throughs, asides in the margin, and the like before you type it up on a screen.

How does the typed up version look on the page? Is it thin, sprawling, even or jagged? Are you moved to make adjustments in the poem, such as shortening or lengthening lines, for the sake of giving your poem a definite shape?

READING: CONNECTING WITH POETRY

WRITING EXERCISES

Look at one of your poems—one you’ve written previously or perhaps one generated for this class—and play with elliptical language. Are there any words you might want to omit to heighten the sense of mystery? How does the omission of different words change the lines’ potential meanings?

Play with your own ambiguous meanings. Create a sentence that could be interpreted at least two ways. (Think of the word “blue”—is it indicating a color or a mood? Or consider using qualifiers like “perhaps” or “should.”) Let this sentence constitute the first few lines of a new poem, and keep playing with this concept of double interpretation throughout.

“Poets are people who can’t say one thing at a time.”

READING EXERCISE

Read my poem “Introduction to Poetry” and take notes in the margins. Write down what memories or feelings are being evoked, what’s surprising, and what’s confusing. Now, looking at both the poem and your reactions in the margins, arrive at your own interpretation of the poem. What topics does it discuss? How does your understanding of its subject change from the beginning to the end of the work?

DISCUSSION WITH MARIE HOWE: EMILY DICKINSON

WRITING EXERCISE

Remember how Marie and I noted that Dickinson doesn't title her poems—instead, the first line serves as the title. Write a first line that could also work as a title, and write a poem under this line.

Think about the nouns Dickinson does and does not capitalize. In your own poetry, do you ever play with the capitalization of untraditional nouns? Write a poem that gives weight to unexpected words by capitalizing them.

Dickinson ends “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain” with a deliberately elusive last word and syntax: “-then-.” In this way, she keeps readers guessing and alludes to a continuation of the poem just off the page. Think of different words or short lines of syntax that might serve the same purpose in poetry, then write a poem with an ending phrase that alludes to a continuation we don't see.

“Emily Dickinson... is a poet of real delicacy and decorum. She sings her little song in the same way every time... And she doesn't know what she's going to say every time, but she always has that common meter waiting for her.”

DISCUSSION WITH MARIE HOWE: WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

“It's as if Shakespeare writes this, and then he looks around and says, ‘I wrote that?’”

WRITING EXERCISE

Write a poem of any length on whatever subject or subjects you choose (and it doesn't need to rhyme), but try to make each line in iambic pentameter. Remember, this means five iambic feet (da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM).

Write a traditional Shakespearian sonnet, using iambic pentameter and the rhyme scheme ABAB CDCD EFEF GG.

Make sure your poem has exactly 14 lines, and use the last 2 lines to make a “turn.” Remember that the turn often has the poet looking back at the previous 12 lines and making a 2-line comment on them.

SOUND PLEASURES

READING EXERCISE

Take a look at the highlighted anaphora in parts 1-3 of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.” On your own, go through parts 4-9 and highlight the anaphora (a repetition of words or phrases at the beginning of consecutive clauses) you see yourself. What other forms of repetition do you notice? What impact do these devices have?

WRITING EXERCISE

Write a poem of at least seven lines, using anaphora at least once.

Now, write a poem of over 15 lines in which you use anaphora several times, switching the words being repeated over the length of your poem. Let the development of your anaphora tell another story or add another layer of detail and depth to your poem.

WRITING EXERCISE

Carry your notebook with you as you go about your daily tasks and write down interesting things you overhear. At the end of the day, go over the snippets of conversation you wrote down and, rather than thinking about the content of the conversation, analyze *how* it was said. What have you learned about the way people speak (speech rhythm)? Incorporate this speech rhythm into a new poem.

PLAYING A VISIBLE GAME

“The purpose of this poem was to discover its own ending.”

WRITING EXERCISES

Using my “Questions About Angels,” Wallace Stevens’s “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” or Charles Simic’s “Bestiary for the Fingers of My Right Hand” as a model, write a poem whose title lets the reader in on how the poem is going to proceed by indicating what lies ahead. Then, write this poem, making sure to both deliver on the promise of the title while complicating its meaning.

“Questions About Angels” leaves its reader with a startling and surprising image: it comes in the form of an “answer” to the questions previously posited and paints an intimate portrait of an angel dancing to jazz in her stockinged feet. Write a poem and, taking a cue from “Questions About Angels,” end your poem with a specific image. Make this visual fitting for the poem but somewhat unfamiliar, balancing between expectation and surprise. Try going inside the image and fleshing it out. Make the image come to life the way I tried to make that dancing angel come to life.

TURNING A POEM

“Trust your own associations.”

WRITING EXERCISE

Try an exercise in association. Look around you—wherever you are—and identify an object or concept to be your “seed” concept. What associations come up when you think of that object? What associations stem from those associations? Do a free write detailing the concepts (objects, events, etcetera) and various associations they generate. Now, are any of these associations particularly interesting? Try to write a poem using this exercise as a prompt.

In “Wan Chu’s Wife in Bed,” Richard Jones sets us up with tender images throughout the poem, and then you find out in the end that his wife is a habitual adulterer. Try, as Jones does, to turn a poem with a shock ending.

DISCUSSION WITH MARIE HOWE “WHAT THE LIVING DO”

*“In avoiding writing poetry
by just writing a letter,
you have created an
amazing poem.”*

WRITING EXERCISE

Start a letter to someone you know, would like to know, or once knew. The rule is: assume that they won't see it. Start this letter by addressing this person directly (think “Dear X,” or “X,”). After you've written a few lines or sentences, begin breaking your letter into poetic lines and finish your epistolary poem.

“THE DEATH OF THE HAT”

*“But the hat is a keyhole,
a small aperture through
which larger things, namely
my father, can be viewed”*

WRITING EXERCISE

Try playing with diction. What are some words that, for some reason, make you laugh when reading them? (Think, for example, about fork, nose, potato, peas...) Write a poem that deliberately uses these words to create a tone.

On a sheet of paper, brainstorm a handful of words that use a similar vowel sound. Now, using this brainstorm as a guide, write a poem that utilizes assonance in one or several places (or even throughout the poem). As you read over your draft, ask yourself how these sounds add a musicality to the poem, acting as a kind of sound-glue that holds the poem together.

FINDING YOUR VOICE: INFLUENCES

“Your voice has an external source. It does not lie within in you... It lies on the shelves of the library, and the shelves of the bookstore. Your voice is in the voices of other poets.”

WRITING EXERCISE

Think of some of the poets or poems you admire. These could be poems you’ve discovered in this course or longtime favorites. Pick one of these poems and read it over and over again, noting the methods the poet uses to achieve his or her voice. Notice how the poem develops stage by stage. How does it find its way through itself? See if you can write a poem that follows a similar style of organization or path of development. This is more than an exercise; it’s a way of opening yourself to the influences of other poets. It’s a state of mind that you should cultivate in your reading of the poems of others and seeing what you can learn (i.e. steal) from them.

FINDING YOUR VOICE: CREATING A PERSONA

“The way you write, how you write, the style you write in—these are just the mannerisms of your persona.”

WRITING EXERCISE

Does your personality make its way into your poems? Think of what kind of social person you are and consider the feedback you get from others about your personality—from family, friends and others. Write a poem that is spoken in your natural speaking voice. This poem need not exhibit your best self. Try allowing the poem to be controlled by a voice other than the one that shows you off. Write a poem that lets the raggedness of your life drive the voice.

HUMOR AS A SERIOUS STRATEGY

“You cannot pretend to be funny. You’re either funny or you’re not. And if you’re not funny, people are staring at you, and they’re not laughing. You know that very quickly.”

WRITING EXERCISE

Notice in Ruth Schwartz’s “The Swan at Edgewater Park” how she uses humor in a strategic way. About half way in, she makes a deliberate joke at the expense of “Clevelanders,” who point and exclaim, “Look at that big duck!” The line occurs deliberately just as the poem switches from the swan (its provisional subject) to Lorie (its discovered or true subject). The laugh line relaxes us and thus makes us more surprised by the serious turn the poem takes as it details the grim scene that is Lorie’s life. This is an excellent example of a poet using humor with serious intent. Warning: if you are not naturally funny as a person in your life, don’t try to be funny in your poems.

STUDENT DISCUSSION:
 “MY (MUSLIM) FATHER SEIZES THE THING ON
 MY NIGHTSTAND” BY SARAH IQBAL

“Sometimes you want to do something beautiful justice and you have to wait for the right form to present itself.”

—SARAH IQBAL

READING EXERCISE

One of the notable things about Sarah’s reading was the way her speech reflected the physical spacing of the poem. Read one of your poems out loud, and mark where the rhythms change. Where should you slow down? Where should you pause? Where should your pacing gain momentum? Practice an oral reading.

WRITING EXERCISE

“My (Muslim) Father Seizes the Thing on my Nightstand” uses space to create suspense, putting the reader on the same level of knowing and not knowing as the speaker. Write a poem that describes one large action and uses spacing as a way to force the reader to pause, creating tension and suspense as the action of your poem progresses.

STUDENT DISCUSSION:
 “THE CRASH” BY PAUL EPLAND

WRITING EXERCISE

Try learning from Paul Epland’s poem “The Crash” by describing a disturbing occurrence with an uninvolved, distant voice—that of a neutral observer. Remember that the point of poetry is to make the reader feel something, not for you, the poet, to get emotional.

The best way to do this is to write “cold.” If you are doing the feeling, the reader will pull back because all the emotional work has been done by you. An example of “cold,” is the false, seemingly throw away final line in Schwartz’s swan poem. “That’s the kind of swan this is.” The line suggests Lorie’s only purpose in the poem is to make us better understand the swan, but, of course, we know the poem’s true subject is the woman’s plight with the asthmatic kid.

DISCUSSION WITH MARIE HOWE— WRITING POETRY

*“You’re not playing
secretary to your thoughts
and feelings by just
writing them down...
the act of composition is
an experience.”*

WRITING EXERCISE

Take Marie’s advice and do a free write. In your notebook, give yourself 10 minutes to simply write whatever comes to mind, not letting your pen or pencil leave the page, and not revising. After ten minutes has passed, review what you wrote. How does the subject and tone change from the beginning to end? Is there anything you might want to lift for a new poem?

Write a haiku. Let the subject take on any topic you want but limit yourself strictly to the haiku form: three lines with the first line having five syllables, the second containing seven syllables, and the last containing five. How did this exercise make you revise your language?

READING EXERCISE

Read one of your poems aloud at least ten times to yourself. As you read, mark your paper, noting where you stumble over your words.

Now, read that poem aloud to another person. (Try to give the dog a break this time, and find a trusted confidant.) Mark your poem where you stumble. Do these areas differ from where you stumbled when reading aloud to yourself?

WRITING EXERCISE

Examine the poem you just read out loud, noting where you made your marks for fluency. Now, make revisions based on these marks. Consider editing for diction, pacing, and clarity. Even consider cutting the nonessential lines and phrases.

A POET'S JOURNEY

“You don’t have to be a child prodigy, you can be a middle-aged prodigy.”

READING (AND SUBMITTING) EXERCISE

Go through your own work and come up with a handful (even just one or two) of poems that you think set the standard for the quality of your work. Now, submit three or four poems to one of the literary journals you respect, or others that you can find listed in the helpful trade magazine for writers *Poets & Writers*. Try not to let your nerves get ahead of you—forge ahead and submit. Now, if you get accepted, congratulations! If you get rejected, you should feel energized to write more. To move forward as a writer, rejection should move you to write more poems.

READING LIST

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Elk River Falls

Billy Collins

is where the Elk River falls
from a rocky and considerable height,
turning pale with trepidation at the lip
(it seemed from where I stood below)
before it is unbuckled from itself
and plummets, shredded, through the air
into the shadows of a frigid pool,
so calm around the edges, a place
for water to recover from the shock
of falling apart and coming back together
before it picks up its song again,
goes sliding around the massive rocks
and past some islands overgrown with weeds
then flattens out, and slips around a bend,
and continues on its winding course,
according to this camper's guide,
then joins the Clearwater at its northern fork,
which must in time find the sea
where this and every other stream
mistakes the monster for itself,
sings its name one final time
then feels the sudden sting of salt.

To a Locomotive in Winter

Walt Whitman

Thee for my recitative,
Thee in the driving storm even as now, the snow, the winter-day
declining,
Thee in thy panoply, thy measur'd dual throbbing and thy beat
convulsive,
Thy black cylindric body, golden brass, and silvery steel,
Thy ponderous side-bars, parallel and connecting rods, gyrating,
shuttling at thy sides,
Thy metrical, now swelling pant and roar, now tapering in the
distance,
Thy great protruding head-light fix'd in front,
Thy long, pale, floating vapor-pennants, tinged with delicate
purple,
The dense and murky clouds out-belching from thy smoke-stack,
Thy knitted frame, thy springs and valves, the tremulous twinkle
of thy wheels,
Thy train of cars behind, obedient, merrily following,
Through gale or calm, now swift, now slack, yet steadily careering;
Type of the modern—emblem of motion and power—pulse of
the continent,
For once come serve the Muse and merge in verse, even as here
I see thee,
With storm and buffeting gusts of wind and falling snow,
By day thy warning ringing bell to sound its notes,
By night thy silent signal lamps to swing.

Fierce-throated beauty!
Roll through my chant with all thy lawless music, thy swinging
lamps at night,
Thy madly-whistled laughter, echoing, rumbling like an earth-
quake, rousing all,
Law of thyself complete, thine own track firmly holding,
(No sweetness debonair of tearful harp or glib piano thine,)
Thy trills of shrieks by rocks and hills return'd,
Launch'd o'er the prairies wide, across the lakes,
To the free skies unpent and glad and strong.

The Lanyard

Billy Collins

The other day as I was ricocheting slowly
off the pale 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 face-clothes on my forehead,
and 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.

APPEARS IN CHAPTER 5

Grand Central

Billy Collins

The city orbits around eight million
centers of the universe

and turns around the golden clock
at the still point of this place.

Lift up your eyes from the moving hive
and you will see time circling

under a vault of stars and know
just when and where you are.

The Road Not Taken

Robert Frost

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

To Brooklyn Bridge

Hart Crane

How many dawns, chill from his rippling rest
The seagull's wings shall dip and pivot him,
Shedding white rings of tumult, building high
Over the chained bay waters Liberty—

Then, with inviolate curve, forsake our eyes
As apparitional as sails that cross
Some page of figures to be filed away;
—Till elevators drop us from our day . . .

I think of cinemas, panoramic sleights
With multitudes bent toward some flashing scene
Never disclosed, but hastened to again,
Foretold to other eyes on the same screen;

And Thee, across the harbor, silver-paced
As though the sun took step of thee, yet left
Some motion ever unspent in thy stride,—
Implicitly thy freedom staying thee!

Out of some subway scuttle, cell or loft
A bedlamite speeds to thy parapets,
Tilting there momentarily, shrill shirt ballooning,
A jest falls from the speechless caravan.

Down Wall, from girder into street noon leaks,
A rip-tooth of the sky's acetylene;
All afternoon the cloud-flown derricks turn . . .
Thy cables breathe the North Atlantic still.

And obscure as that heaven of the Jews,
Thy guerdon . . . Accolade thou dost bestow
Of anonymity time cannot raise:
Vibrant reprieve and pardon thou dost show.

O harp and altar, of the fury fused,
(How could mere toil align thy choiring strings!)
Terrific threshold of the prophet's pledge,
Prayer of pariah, and the lover's cry,—

Again the traffic lights that skim thy swift
Unfractioned idiom, immaculate sigh of stars,
Beading thy path—condense eternity:
And we have seen night lifted in thine arms.

Under thy shadow by the piers I waited;
Only in darkness is thy shadow clear.
The City's fiery parcels all undone,
Already snow submerges an iron year . . .

O Sleepless as the river under thee,
Vaulting the sea, the prairies' dreaming sod,
Unto us lowliest sometime sweep, descend
And of the curvship lend a myth to God.

Introduction to Poetry

Billy Collins

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.

I felt a Funeral, in My Brain

Emily Dickinson

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading - treading - till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through -

And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum -
Kept beating - beating - till I thought
My mind was going numb -

And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space - began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race,
Wrecked, solitary, here -

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down -
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing - then -

Sonnet 73

William Shakespeare

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west,
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.
In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the death-bed whereon it must expire,
Consum'd with that which it was nourish'd by.
This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

Crossing Brooklyn Ferry

Walt Whitman

I

FLOOD-TIDE below me! I see you face to face!
Clouds of the west—sun there half an hour high—I see you
also face to face.

Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes, how
curious you are to me!
On the ferry-boats the hundreds and hundreds that cross, return-
ing home, are more curious to me than you suppose,
And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence are
more to me, and more in my meditations, than you might
suppose.

2

The impalpable sustenance of me from all things, at all hours of
the day,
The simple, compact, well-join'd scheme, myself disintegrated,
every one disintegrated yet part of the scheme,
The similitudes of the past and those of the future,
The glories strung like beads on my smallest sights and hearings,
on the walk in the street and the passage over the river,
The current rushing so swiftly and swimming with me far away,
The others that are to follow me, the ties between me and them,
The certainty of others, the life, love, sight, hearing of others.

Others will enter the gates of the ferry and cross from shore to
shore,

Others will watch the run of the flood-tide,
Others will see the shipping of Manhattan north and west, and
the heights of Brooklyn to the south and east,
Others will see the islands large and small;
Fifty years hence, others will see them as they cross, the sun half
an hour high,
A hundred years hence, or ever so many hundred years hence,
others will see them,
Will enjoy the sunset, the pouring-in of the flood-tide, the falling-
back to the sea of the ebb-tide.

3

It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not,
I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so
many generations hence,
Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,
Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd,
Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the
bright flow, I was refresh'd,
Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift
current, I stood yet was hurried,
Just as you look on the numberless masts of ships and the thick-
stemm'd pipes of steamboats, I look'd.

I too many and many a time cross'd the river of old,
Watched the Twelfth-month sea-gulls, saw them high in the air
floating with motionless wings, oscillating their bodies,
Saw how the glistening yellow lit up parts of their bodies and left
the rest in strong shadow,
Saw the slow-wheeling circles and the gradual edging toward the
south,
Saw the reflection of the summer sky in the water,
Had my eyes dazzled by the shimmering track of beams,
Look'd at the fine centrifugal spokes of light round the shape of
my head in the sunlit water,
Look'd on the haze on the hills southward and south-westward,
Look'd on the vapor as it flew in fleeces tinged with violet,
Look'd toward the lower bay to notice the vessels arriving,
Saw their approach, saw aboard those that were near me,
Saw the white sails of schooners and sloops, saw the ships at anchor,
The sailors at work in the rigging or out astride the spars,
The round masts, the swinging motion of the hulls, the slender
serpentine pennants,
The large and small steamers in motion, the pilots in their pilot-
houses,

The white wake left by the passage, the quick tremulous whirl of
the wheels,
The flags of all nations, the falling of them at sunset,
The scallop-edged waves in the twilight, the ladled cups, the
frolicsome crests and glistening,
The stretch afar growing dimmer and dimmer, the gray walls of
the granite storehouses by the docks,
On the river the shadowy group, the big steam-tug closely flank'd
on each side by the barges, the hay-boat, the belated
lighter,
On the neighboring shore the fires from the foundry chimneys
burning high and glaringly into the night,
Casting, their flicker of black contrasted with wild red and yellow
light, over the tops of houses, and down into the clefts of
streets.

4

These and all else were to me the same as they are to you,
I loved well those cities, loved well the stately and rapid river,
The men and women I saw were all near to me,
Others the same—others who look back on me because I look'd
forward to them,
(The time will come, though I stop here to-day and to-night.)

5

What is it then between us?
What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?

Whatever it is, it avails not—distance avails not, and place avails
not,
I too lived, Brooklyn of ample hills was mine,
I too walk'd the streets of Manhattan island, and bathed in the
waters around it,
I too felt the curious abrupt questionings stir within me,
In the day among crowds of people sometimes they came upon me,
In my walks home late at night or as I lay in my bed they came
upon me,
I too had been struck from the float forever held in solution,
I too had receiv'd identity by my body,
That I was I knew was of my body, and what I should be I knew
I should be of my body.

6

It is not upon you alone the dark patches fall,
The dark threw its patches down upon me also,

The best I had done seem'd to me blank and suspicious,
My great thoughts as I supposed them, were they not in reality
meagre?
Nor is it you alone who know what it is to be evil,
I am he who knew what it was to be evil,
I too knitted the old knot of contrariety,
Blabb'd, blush'd, resented, lied, stole, grudg'd,
Had guile, anger, lust, hot wishes I dared not speak,
Was wayward, vain, greedy, shallow, sly, cowardly, malignant,
The wolf, the snake, the hog, not wanting in me,
The cheating look, the frivolous word, the adulterous wish, not
wanting,
Refusals, hates, postponements, meanness, laziness, none of these
wanting,
Was one with the rest, the days and haps of the rest,
Was call'd by my nighest name by clear loud voices of young men
as they saw me approaching or passing,
Felt their arms on my neck as I stood, or the negligent leaning of
their flesh against me as I sat,
Saw many I loved in the street or ferry-boat or public assembly,
yet never told them a word,
Lived the same life with the rest, the same old laughing, gnawing,
sleeping,
Play'd the part that still looks back on the actor or actress,
The same old role, the role that is what we make it, as great as we
like,
Or as small as we like, or both great and small.

7

Closer yet I approach you,
What thought you have of me now, I had as much of you—I laid
in my stores in advance,
I consider'd long and seriously of you before you were born.

Who was to know what should come home to me?
Who knows but I am enjoying this?
Who knows, for all the distance, but I am as good as looking at
you now, for all you cannot see me?

8

Ah, what can ever be more stately and admirable to me than mast-
hemm'd Manhattan?
River and sunset and scallop-edg'd waves of flood-tide?
The sea-gulls oscillating their bodies, the hay-boat in the twilight,
and the belated lighter?

What gods can exceed these that clasp me by the hand, and with
voices I love call me promptly and loudly by my nighest
name as I approach?
What is more subtle than this which ties me to the woman or man
that looks in my face?
Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you?

We understand then do we not?
What I promis'd without mentioning it, have you not accepted?
What the study could not teach—what the preaching could not
accomplish is accomplish'd, is it not?

9

Flow on, river! flow with the flood-tide, and ebb with the ebb-
tide!
Frolic on, crested and scallop-edg'd waves!
Gorgeous clouds of the sunset! drench with your splendor me, or
the men and women generations after me!
Cross from shore to shore, countless crowds of passengers!
Stand up, tall masts of Mannahatta! stand up, beautiful hills of
Brooklyn!
Throb, baffled and curious brain! throw out questions and answers!
Suspend here and everywhere, eternal float of solution!
Gaze, loving and thirsting eyes, in the house or street or public
assembly!
Sound out, voices of young men! loudly and musically call me by
my nighest name!
Live, old life! play the part that looks back on the actor or actress!
Play the old role, the role that is great or small according as one
makes it!
Consider, you who peruse me, whether I may not in unknown
ways be looking upon you;
Be firm, rail over the river, to support those who lean idly, yet
haste with the hastening current;
Fly on, sea-birds! fly sideways, or wheel in large circles high in
the air;
Receive the summer sky, you water, and faithfully hold it till all
downcast eyes have time to take it from you!
Diverge, fine spokes of light, from the shape of my head, or any
one's head, in the sunlit water!
Come on, ships from the lower bay! pass up or down, white-sail'd
schooners, sloops, lighters!
Flaunt away, flags of all nations! be duly lower'd at sunset!
Burn high your fires, foundry chimneys! cast black shadows at
nightfall! cast red and yellow light over the tops of the
houses!

Appearances, now or henceforth, indicate what you are,
You necessary film, continue to envelop the soul,
About my body for me, and your body for you, be hung out
divinest aromas,
Thrive, cities—bring your freight, bring your shows, ample and
sufficient rivers,
Expand, being than which none else is perhaps more spiritual,
Keep your places, objects than which none else is more lasting.

You have waited, you always wait, you dumb, beautiful ministers,
We receive you with free sense at last, and are insatiate hence-
forward,
Not you any more shall be able to foil us, or withhold yourselves
from us,
We use you, and do not cast you aside—we plant you perma-
nently within us,
We fathom you not—we love you—there is perfection in you also,
You furnish your parts toward eternity,
Great or small, you furnish your parts toward the soul.

Those Winter Sundays

Robert Hayden

Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?

Questions About Angels

Billy Collins

Of all the questions you might want to ask
about angels, the only one you ever hear
is how many can dance on the head of a pin.

No curiosity about how they pass the eternal time
besides circling the Throne chanting in Latin
or delivering a crust of bread to a hermit on earth
or guiding a boy and girl across a rickety wooden bridge.

Do they fly through God's body and come out singing?
Do they swing like children from the hinges
of the spirit world saying their names backwards and forwards?
Do they sit alone in little gardens changing colors?

What about their sleeping habits, the fabric of their robes,
their diet of unfiltered divine light?
What goes on inside their luminous heads? Is there a wall
these tall presences can look over and see hell?

If an angel fell off a cloud, would he leave a hole
in a river and would the hole float along endlessly
filled with the silent letters of every angelic word?

If an angel delivered the mail, would he arrive
in a blinding rush of wings or would he just assume
the appearance of the regular mailman and
whistle up the driveway reading the postcards?

No, the medieval theologians control the court.
The only question you ever hear is about
the little dance floor on the head of a pin
where halos are meant to converge and drift invisibly.

It is designed to make us think in millions,
billions, to make us run out of numbers and collapse
into infinity, but perhaps the answer is simply one:
one female angel dancing alone in her stocking feet,
a small jazz combo working in the background.

She sways like a branch in the wind, her beautiful
eyes closed, and the tall thin bassist leans over
to glance at his watch because she has been dancing
forever, and now it is very late, even for musicians.

Baloney

Louis Jenkins

There's a young couple in the parking lot, kissing. Not just kissing, they look as though they might eat each other up, kissing, nibbling, biting, mouths wide open, play fighting like young dogs, wrapped around each other like snakes. I remember that, sort of, that hunger, that passionate intensity. And I get a kind of nostalgic craving for it, in the way that I get a craving, occasionally, for the food of my childhood. Baloney on white bread, for instance: one slice of white bread with mustard or Miracle Whip or ketchup-not ketchup, one has to draw the line somewhere-and one slice of baloney. It had a nice symmetry to it, the circle of baloney on the rectangle of bread. Then you folded the bread and baloney in the middle and took a bite out of the very center of the folded side. When you unfolded the sandwich you had a hole, a circle in the center of the bread and baloney frame, a window, a porthole from which you could get a new view of the world.

Wan Chu's Wife in Bed

Richard Jones

Wan Chu, my adoring husband,
has returned from another trip
selling trinkets in the provinces.
He pulls off his lavender shirt
as I lay naked in our bed,
waiting for him. He tells me
I am the only woman he'll ever love.
He may wander from one side of China
to the other, but his heart
will always stay with me.
His face glows in the lamplight
with the sincerity of a boy
when I lower the satin sheet
to let him see my breasts.
Outside, it begins to rain
on the cherry trees
he planted with our son,
and when he enters me with a sigh,
the storm begins in earnest,
shaking our little house.
Afterward, I stroke his back
until he falls asleep.
I'd love to stay awake all night
listening to the rain,
but I should sleep, too.
Tomorrow Wan Chu will be
a hundred miles away
and I will be awake all night
in the arms of Wang Chen,
the tailor from Ming Pao,
the tiny village downriver.

Monday

Billy Collins

The birds are in their trees,
the toast is in the toaster,
and the poets are at their windows.

They are at their windows
in every section of the tangerine of earth-
the Chinese poets looking up at the moon,
the American poets gazing out
at the pink and blue ribbons of sunrise.

The clerks are at their desks,
the miners are down in their mines,
and the poets are looking out their windows
maybe with a cigarette, a cup of tea,
and maybe a flannel shirt or bathrobe is involved.

The proofreaders are playing the ping-pong
game of proofreading,
glancing back and forth from page to page,
the chefs are dicing celery and potatoes,
and the poets are at their windows
because it is their job for which
they are paid nothing every Friday afternoon.

Which window it hardly seems to matter
though many have a favorite,
for there is always something to see-
a bird grasping a thin branch,
the headlight of a taxi rounding a corner,
those two boys in wool caps angling across the street.

The fishermen bob in their boats,
the linemen climb their round poles,
the barbers wait by their mirrors and chairs,
and the poets continue to stare
at the cracked birdbath or a limb knocked down by the wind.

By now, it should go without saying
that what the oven is to the baker
and the berry-stained blouse to the dry cleaner,
so the window is to the poet.

Just think-
before the invention of the window,
the poets would have had to put on a jacket
and a winter hat to go outside
or remain indoors with only a wall to stare at.

And when I say a wall,
I do not mean a wall with striped wallpaper
and a sketch of a cow in a frame.

I mean a cold wall of fieldstones,
the wall of the medieval sonnet,
the original woman's heart of stone,
the stone caught in the throat of her poet-lover.

8 Count

Charles Bukowski

from my bed
I watch
3 birds
on a telephone
wire.

one flies
off.
then
another.

one is left,
then
it too
is gone.

my typewriter is
tombstone
still.

and I am
reduced to bird
watching.

just thought I'd
let you
know,
fucker.

What the Living Do

Marie Howe

Johnny, the kitchen sink has been clogged for days, some
utensil probably fell down there.

And the Drano won't work but smells dangerous, and the
crusty dishes have piled up

waiting for the plumber I still haven't called. This is the
everyday we spoke of.

It's winter again: the sky's a deep, headstrong blue, and the
sunlight pours through

the open living-room windows because the heat's on too high in
here and I can't turn it off.

For weeks now, driving, or dropping a bag of groceries in the
street, the bag breaking,

I've been thinking: This is what the living do. And yesterday,
hurrying along those
wobbly bricks in the Cambridge sidewalk, spilling my coffee
down my wrist and sleeve,

I thought it again, and again later, when buying a hairbrush:
This is it.

Parking. Slamming the car door shut in the cold. What you
called that yearning.

What you finally gave up. We want the spring to come and the
winter to pass. We want
whoever to call or not call, a letter, a kiss—we want more and
more and then more of it.

But there are moments, walking, when I catch a glimpse of
myself in the window glass,
say, the window of the corner video store, and I'm gripped by a
cherishing so deep

for my own blowing hair, chapped face, and unbuttoned coat
that I'm speechless:

I am living. I remember you.

The Death of the Hat

Billy Collins

Once every man wore a hat.

In the ashen newsreels,
the avenues of cities
are broad rivers flowing with hats.

The ballparks swelled
with thousands of strawhats,
brims and bands,
rows of men smoking
and cheering in shirtsleeves.

Hats were the law.
They went without saying.
You noticed a man without a hat in a crowd.

You bought them from Adams or Dobbs
who branded your initials in gold
on the inside band.

Trolleys crisscrossed the city.
Steamships sailed in and out of the harbor.
Men with hats gathered on the docks.

There was a person to block your hat
and a hatcheck girl to mind it
while you had a drink
or ate a steak with peas and a baked potato.
In your office stood a hat rack.

The day the war was declared
everyone in the street was wearing a hat
and they were wearing hats
when a ship loaded with men sank in the icy sea.

My father wore one to work every day
and returned home
carrying the evening paper,
the winter chill radiating from his overcoat.

But today we go bareheaded
into the winter streets,
stand hatless on frozen platforms.

Today the mailboxes on the roadside
and the spruce trees behind the house
wear cold white hats of snow.

Mice scurry from the stone walls at night
in their thin fur hats
to eat the birdseed that has spilled.

And now my father, after a life of work,
wears a hat of earth,
and on top of that,
A lighter one of cloud and sky—a hat of wind.

The Mower

Philip Larkin

The mower stalled, twice; kneeling, I found
A hedgehog jammed up against the blades,
Killed. It had been in the long grass.

I had seen it before, and even fed it, once.
Now I had mauled its unobtrusive world
Unmendably. Burial was no help:

Next morning I got up and it did not.
The first day after a death, the new absence
Is always the same; we should be careful

Of each other, we should be kind
While there is still time.

This Lime-tree Bower my Prison

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Well, they are gone, and here must I remain,
This lime-tree bower my prison! I have lost
Beauties and feelings, such as would have been
Most sweet to my remembrance even when age
Had dimm'd mine eyes to blindness! They, meanwhile,
Friends, whom I never more may meet again,
On springy heath, along the hill-top edge,
Wander in gladness, and wind down, perchance,
To that still roaring dell, of which I told;
The roaring dell, o'erwooded, narrow, deep,
And only speckled by the mid-day sun;
Where its slim trunk the ash from rock to rock
Flings arching like a bridge;—that branchless ash,
Unsun'd and damp, whose few poor yellow leaves
Ne'er tremble in the gale, yet tremble still,
Fann'd by the water-fall! and there my friends
Behold the dark green file of long lank weeds,
That all at once (a most fantastic sight!)
Still nod and drip beneath the dripping edge
Of the blue clay-stone.

Now, my friends emerge
Beneath the wide wide Heaven—and view again
The many-steepled tract magnificent
Of hilly fields and meadows, and the sea,
With some fair bark, perhaps, whose sails light up
The slip of smooth clear blue betwixt two Isles
Of purple shadow! Yes! they wander on
In gladness all; but thou, methinks, most glad,
My gentle-hearted Charles! for thou hast pined
And hunger'd after Nature, many a year,
In the great City pent, winning thy way
With sad yet patient soul, through evil and pain
And strange calamity! Ah! slowly sink
Behind the western ridge, thou glorious Sun!

Shine in the slant beams of the sinking orb,
Ye purple heath-flowers! richlier burn, ye clouds!
Live in the yellow light, ye distant groves!
And kindle, thou blue Ocean! So my friend
Struck with deep joy may stand, as I have stood,
Silent with swimming sense; yea, gazing round
On the wide landscape, gaze till all doth seem
Less gross than bodily; and of such hues
As veil the Almighty Spirit, when yet he makes
Spirits perceive his presence.

A delight
Comes sudden on my heart, and I am glad
As I myself were there! Nor in this bower,
This little lime-tree bower, have I not mark'd
Much that has sooth'd me. Pale beneath the blaze
Hung the transparent foliage; and I watch'd
Some broad and sunny leaf, and lov'd to see
The shadow of the leaf and stem above
Dappling its sunshine! And that walnut-tree
Was richly ting'd, and a deep radiance lay
Full on the ancient ivy, which usurps
Those fronting elms, and now, with blackest mass
Makes their dark branches gleam a lighter hue
Through the late twilight: and though now the bat
Wheels silent by, and not a swallow twitters,
Yet still the solitary humble-bee
Sings in the bean-flower! Henceforth I shall know
That Nature ne'er deserts the wise and pure;
No plot so narrow, be but Nature there,
No waste so vacant, but may well employ
Each faculty of sense, and keep the heart
Awake to Love and Beauty! and sometimes
'Tis well to be bereft of promis'd good,
That we may lift the soul, and contemplate
With lively joy the joys we cannot share.
My gentle-hearted Charles! when the last rook
Beat its straight path along the dusky air
Homewards, I blest it! deeming its black wing
(Now a dim speck, now vanishing in light)
Had cross'd the mighty Orb's dilated glory,
While thou stood'st gazing; or, when all was still,
Flew creaking o'er thy head, and had a charm
For thee, my gentle-hearted Charles, to whom
No sound is dissonant which tells of Life.

The Swan at Edgewood Park

Ruth L. Schwartz

Isn't one of your prissy richpeoples' swans
Wouldn't be at home on some pristine pond
Chooses the whole stinking shoreline, candy wrappers, condoms
in its tidal fringe
Prefers to curve its muscular, slightly grubby neck
into the body of a Great Lake,
Swilling whatever it is swans swill,
Chardonnay of algae with bouquet of crud,
While Clevelanders walk by saying Look
at that big duck!
Beauty isn't the point here; of course
the swan is beautiful,
But not like Lorie at 16, when
Everything was possible—no
More like Lorie at 27
Smoking away her days off in her dirty kitchen,
Her kid with asthma watching TV,
The boyfriend who doesn't know yet she's gonna
Leave him, washing his car out back—and
He's a runty little guy, and drinks too much, and
It's not his kid anyway, but he loves her, he
Really does, he loves them both—
That's the kind of swan this is.

The Wild Swans at Coole

William Butler Yeats

The trees are in their autumn beauty,
The woodland paths are dry,
Under the October twilight the water
Mirrors a still sky;
Upon the brimming water among the stones
Are nine-and-fifty swans.

The nineteenth autumn has come upon me
Since I first made my count;
I saw, before I had well finished,
All suddenly mount
And scatter wheeling in great broken rings
Upon their clamorous wings.

I have looked upon those brilliant creatures,
And now my heart is sore.
All's changed since I, hearing at twilight,
The first time on this shore,
The bell-beat of their wings above my head,
Trode with a lighter tread.

Unwearied still, lover by lover,
They paddle in the cold
Companionable streams or climb the air;
Their hearts have not grown old;
Passion or conquest, wander where they will,
Attend upon them still.

But now they drift on the still water,
Mysterious, beautiful;
Among what rushes will they build,
By what lake's edge or pool
Delight men's eyes when I awake some day
To find they have flown away?

The Crash

Paul Epland

In a moment it was over-
the astounding silent thrash of metal
replaced by the bludgeoned motor,
clicking down in circles.

It seems the little green sedan was unaware of the tree.
A comet stopped in verdant careen,
it sent a shower of fresh dirt into the air
as the turf rose up to accommodate its tilting.
Everywhere was covered with earthworms and glass.

And I just sat, letting the oily white
mayonnaise drip from my spinach and tomato
sandwich, my body stuck to a bench
planted in that ringing soil.
Suddenly, it had always been there:
the smoldering thing with its creased aluminum
pricking the air, its roof folded inwards
and squinting.

No, never mind. Not like an eye;
flinching-like a loose fist because it's closed.
They didn't want to see the shape it took,
its chasse thrust out over narrow
unbending hips, now disallowed their turn.
"Best to dance while Rome burns," he said,
"since it must burn."

The figure, a man wrenched from the heap,
was hardly a specter in the black smoke.
It flew away, flew away—
the firemen held up
a thin white sheet and it became a shadow play.

I moved into the space that opened then,
as the stretcher slid into the unlit ambulance.
The air was uncreated. A door swung open into clear.

They'd have dragged me onto the pavement
by my shoulders and starched shirt,
my light having gone out already.
The construction men would wear yellow vests,
lean on their trucks parked in the wet August grass,
and as my heart jumped itself dead they would
spit brown juices to the hot cement.

At home my book is still lying open by the window,
where the pale afternoon light comes in to churn up the dust.
The cat doesn't seem to care, and no one
says a word; A door slams somewhere.

To His Mistress Going to Bed

John Donne

Come, Madam, come, all rest my powers defy,
Until I labour, I in labour lie.
The foe oft-times having the foe in sight,
Is tir'd with standing though he never fight.
Off with that girdle, like heaven's Zone glistering,
But a far fairer world encompassing.
Unpin that spangled breastplate which you wear,
That th'eyes of busy fools may be stopped there.
Unlace yourself, for that harmonious chime,
Tells me from you, that now it is bed time.
Off with that happy busk, which I envy,
That still can be, and still can stand so nigh.
Your gown going off, such beauteous state reveals,
As when from flowery meads th'hill's shadow steals.
Off with that wiry Coronet and shew
The hairy Diadem which on you doth grow:
Now off with those shoes, and then safely tread
In this love's hallow'd temple, this soft bed.
In such white robes, heaven's Angels used to be
Received by men; Thou Angel bringst with thee
A heaven like Mahomet's Paradise; and though
Ill spirits walk in white, we easily know,
By this these Angels from an evil sprite,
Those set our hairs, but these our flesh upright.
Licence my roving hands, and let them go,
Before, behind, between, above, below.
O my America! my new-found-land,
My kingdom, safeliest when with one man mann'd,
My Mine of precious stones, My Empirie,
How blest am I in this discovering thee!
To enter in these bonds, is to be free;
Then where my hand is set, my seal shall be.

Full nakedness! All joys are due to thee,
As souls unbodied, bodies uncloth'd must be,
To taste whole joys. Gems which you women use
Are like Atlanta's balls, cast in men's views,
That when a fool's eye lighteth on a Gem,
His earthly soul may covet theirs, not them.
Like pictures, or like books' gay coverings made
For lay-men, are all women thus array'd;
Themselves are mystic books, which only we
(Whom their imputed grace will dignify)
Must see reveal'd. Then since that I may know;
As liberally, as to a Midwife, shew
Thy self: cast all, yea, this white linen hence,
There is no penance due to innocence.
To teach thee, I am naked first; why then
What needst thou have more covering than a man.

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