

# WHALE DAY

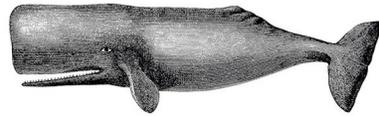
*And Other Poems*



BILLY  
COLLINS

*New York Times* bestselling author of *THE RAIN IN PORTUGAL*

# Whale Day



AND OTHER POEMS

*Billy Collins*



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“No one has a right to say that no water babies exist till they have seen no water babies existing, which is quite a different thing, mind, from not seeing water babies.”

—CHARLES KINGSLEY

# Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Epigraph](#)

## [The Function of Poetry](#)

### [One](#)

[Walking My Seventy-Five-Year-Old Dog](#)

[Contemporary Americans](#)

[Paris in May](#)

[And It's Raining Outside, Which Always Adds](#)

[Life Expectancy](#)

[Sleeping on My Side](#)

[The Floors of Bonnard](#)

[Down on the Farm](#)

[Imperial Garden](#)

[Mice](#)

[Prospect](#)

[Evening Wind](#)

[Whiskers](#)

[Walking Under the Trees](#)

[Whale Day](#)

### [Two](#)

[The Wild Barnacle](#)

[Objectivity](#)

Banana School

Identity

Arizona

Irish Spider

Listening to Hank Mobley Around 11 O'Clock After a Long Fun  
Boozy Dinner, the Four of Us, at Captain Pig's, Our Favorite  
Restaurant in Town

The Card Players

Vivace!

A Terrible Beauty

Duck Blind

She's Gone

Downpour

Three

Safe Travels

Hawaii

The Emperor of Ice Cubes

I Am Not Italian

The Symphony Orchestra of San Miguel de Allende

Dublin

Cremation

Lakeside Cottage: Ontario

The Convergence of My Parents

Dreaming of the Middle Ages

The Yellow Wood

My Funeral

The Pregnant Man

Architecture at 3:30 A.M.

The Garland

[Four](#)

[Me First](#)

[A Sight](#)

[Air Sax](#)

[English Roses](#)

[On the Deaths of Friends](#)

[Cupid](#)

[Talking to Myself](#)

[Ireland Floating on a Map of the World](#)

[The Flash Card](#)

[Anniversary](#)

[Early People](#)

[My Father's Office, John Street, New York City, 1953](#)

[April 21st](#)

[Massage](#)

[Hotel Rex](#)

[Going for a Walk as the Drugs Kick In](#)

[\*Dedication\*](#)

[\*Acknowledgments\*](#)

[\*By Billy Collins\*](#)

[\*About the Author\*](#)

## *The Function of Poetry*

I woke up early on a Tuesday,  
made a pot of coffee for myself,  
then drove down to the village,  
stopping at the post office  
then the bank where I cashed a little check  
from a magazine, and when I got home  
I read some of the newspaper  
starting with the science section  
and had another cup of coffee and a bowl of cereal.

Pretty soon, it was lunchtime.  
I wasn't at all hungry  
but I paused for a moment  
to look out the big kitchen window,  
and that's when I realized  
that the function of poetry is to remind me  
that there is much more to life  
than what I am usually doing  
when I'm not reading or writing poetry.

One



## *Walking My Seventy-Five-Year-Old Dog*

She's painfully slow,  
so I often have to stop and wait  
while she examines some roadside weeds  
as if she were reading the biography of a famous dog.

And she's not a pretty sight anymore,  
dragging one of her hind legs,  
her coat too matted to brush or comb,  
and a snout white as a marshmallow.

We usually walk down a disused road  
that runs along the edge of a lake,  
whose surface trembles in a high wind  
and is slow to ice over as the months grow cold.

We don't walk very far before  
she sits down on her worn haunches  
and looks up at me with her rheumy eyes.  
Then it's time to carry her back to the car.

Just thinking about the honesty in her eyes,  
I realize I should tell you  
she's not really seventy-five. She's fourteen.  
I guess I was trying to appeal to your sense  
of the bizarre, the curiosities of the sideshow.  
I mean who really cares about another person's dog?

Everything else I've said is true,  
except the part about her being fourteen.

I mean she's old, but not that old,  
and it's not polite to divulge the true age of a lady.

## *Contemporary Americans*

I was trying to make my way  
across a busy street in San Francisco,  
while carrying the new anthology of poetry  
I'd been flipping through earlier that morning—  
with my pot of tea and two pieces of cinnamon toast—  
in which I was wedged between James Tate and Bob Dylan  
because the poets were arranged old to young, according to age.

I had to avoid a couple of cars,  
cross over two sets of trolley tracks,  
and dodge a guy with a ski cap on a bicycle  
in order to get across the street and enter  
one of the city's many hospitable parks  
with their hedges, benches, and shade trees  
and often girls on a blanket, a juggler, an old man doing tai-chi.

And that's where I lay down on the soft grass,  
closed my eyes, and after a little while  
began to picture the three of us lined up in a row  
according to the editor's wishes,  
sliding out of our mothers in order, one after the other,  
then ending up pressed together on a shelf  
in a corner bookstore, yodeling away in the dark.

## *Paris in May*

A teddy bear in a store window,  
three housepainters  
waiting to cross a boulevard,  
a woman in a café, her red nails  
on a man's nape while she smokes—  
what are we to make of all this?

In the church of Saint-Sulpice,  
the Virgin holds her baby to her chest  
as she stands on the round earth,  
appearing to be unaware  
of the serpent she is crushing with one foot.  
Outside, four stone lions guard a fountain.

Is this a puzzle I am meant to solve  
before the evening bells ring again—  
here a man wearing a newspaper hat,  
there a child alone on a flowery balcony?  
An outdoor table on Rue Cassette  
seemed a good enough place to sort things out.  
And sure enough,  
after two milky-green glasses of Pernod,  
the crowd flowed around me like a breeze,  
and I found a link between my notebook  
and the soft Parisian sky,

both being almost the same pale shade of blue.

## *And It's Raining Outside, Which Always Adds*

About a month ago, I bought a small transistor radio in a junk shop run by a man as tall as a grandfather clock, a pink plastic one from the nineteen fifties, which plays only love songs from the past, as if the radio had a memory and a melancholy disposition.

I like to turn the little bezel with my thumb so the volume is down so low, the songs sound as if they're coming from another room in a boardinghouse in a run-down part of town. Then I lie down and lock my hands behind my head.

Tonight, "They Say It's Spring" is making all the boarders in the boardinghouse sad, but that's the way it is with every song, whether it's "April in Paris" or "Autumn in New York," which were both written by the same guy,

but the boarders are too unhappy to care about that, the men sitting on the edges of their beds, and the women looking out the only window at the rain where a taxicab as yellow as forsythia is turning a corner to God knows where and God knows who, and God knows why "You Go to My Head" is playing now, bringing down all the poor souls in the boardinghouse,

which vanished when I heard someone speak and opened my eyes.

## *Life Expectancy*

On the morning of a birthday that ended in a zero,  
I was looking out at the garden  
when it occurred to me that the robin  
on her worm-hunt in the dewy grass  
had a good chance of outliving me,  
as did the worm itself for that matter  
if he managed to keep his worm-head down.

It was not always like this.  
For decades, I could assume  
that I would be around longer  
than the squirrel dashing up a tree  
or the nightly raccoons in the garbage,  
longer than the barred owl on a branch,  
the ibis, the chicken, and the horse,

longer than four deer in a clearing  
and every creature in the zoo  
except the elephant and the tortoise,  
whose cages I would hurry past.  
It was just then in my calculations  
that the cat padded noiselessly into the room,  
and it seemed reasonable,  
given her bright eyes and glossy coat,  
to picture her at my funeral,

dressed all in black, as usual,  
which would nicely set off her red collar,  
some of the mourners might pause in their grieving to notice,  
as she found a place next to a labradoodle  
in a section of the church reserved for their kind.

## *Sleeping on My Side*

Every night, no matter where I am  
when I lie down, I turn  
my back on half the world.

At home, it's the east I ignore,  
with its theaters and silverware,  
as I face the adventurous west.

But when I'm out on the road  
in some hotel's room 213 or 402  
I could be pointed anywhere,

yet I hardly care as long as you  
are there facing the other way  
so we are defended in all degrees

and my left ear is pressing down  
as if listening for hoofbeats in the ground.

## *The Floors of Bonnard*

Surely the slanted tables are responsible  
for all the shattered crockery,  
the puddles of wine, and the clumps of butter  
that must end up on the rarely seen floors  
in the colorful paintings of Pierre Bonnard.

Tilting the table forward in the direction  
of the viewer is one way  
to make more visible the red-orange tablecloth

and all the objects resting on it:  
the plates and saucers, the creamer,  
wineglasses, vases, and delicate teacups.

But what about the poor wife of Bonnard?  
Why is she never glimpsed  
amidst all the colorful fabrics,  
reds, pale blues, and vermillion dots,  
bearing her broom, her dustpan, and her putrid mop?

## *Down on the Farm*

Whenever the conversation turns to the subject  
of Tennessee Fainting goats,  
the question that always comes up is why.  
Are they so squeamish that they faint  
like Victorian ladies whenever the farmer  
uses language unbecoming a gentleman?

Or is it catching, one goat fainting  
because he sees another one fainting,  
but that still leaves open the question  
of what makes the first goat faint.  
Does the memory of having keeled  
over one morning make one keel over again?

Are they in love? Or is it all just too much?  
No one seems to know for sure  
but it's something to think about  
when I'm trying to get to sleep at night  
or when I'm looking out a window  
at the barn and the fenced-in pastures beyond.  
To see a goat stiffen before pitching over on its side  
with a thump is truly unnerving,  
but when he rises in a minute or two, as if from the dead,  
and goes back to munching with his head down  
in the sweet grass on these hillsides,

then everything seems okay again, just like before.

## *Imperial Garden*

It was at the end of dinner,  
the two of us in a red booth  
maintaining our silence,  
when I decided to compose a message  
for the fortune cookie you were soon to receive.

*Avoid mulishness when choosing  
a position on the great board game of life*

was my mean-spirited contribution  
to the treasury of Confucian wisdom.

But while we waited for the cookies,  
the slices of oranges,  
and the inescapable pot of watery tea,  
I realized that by *mulishness*  
I meant your refusal to let me  
have my own way every time I wanted it.

I watched you looking off to the side—  
your mass of dark hair,  
your profile softened by lamplight—  
and then I made up a fortune for myself.

*He who acts like a jerk  
on an island of his own creation*

*will have only the horizon for a friend.*

I seemed to be getting worse at this,  
I thought, as the cookies arrived at the table  
along with the orange slices  
and a teapot painted with tigers  
menacingly peering out from the undergrowth.

The restaurant was quiet then.  
The waiter returned to looking out at the street,  
a zither whimpered in the background,

and we turned to our cookies,  
cracking the brittle shells,  
then rolling into little balls  
the tiny scrolls of our destinies  
before dropping them, unread, into our cups of tea—  
a little good-luck thing we'd been doing ever since we met.

## *Mice*

I was normally alone in my childhood,  
a condition that gave me time  
to observe the activities of the many mice  
that had infested our house  
one winter night when the house  
next door burned to a crisp.

They all ran across the snow-  
covered lawn to find places  
to hide in their new home;  
then later they discovered the kitchen,  
which was like Columbus discovering  
America, because the kitchen was already there.

I became their only spectator  
like someone alone in a movie house.  
I could even tell some of them apart,  
but I resisted giving them names,  
afraid they would all disappear  
if our house happened to burst into flames.  
O, anonymous companions,  
appearing in a hole in the wall,  
always scurrying out of my reach,  
so many hours I would watch  
your comings and goings,

before someone called me down to dinner;

you were the beginning of cinema for me  
and one of the reasons

I am the way I am this morning—  
an elderly child with a tummy  
full of oatmeal and a mouse on my shoulder,  
standing on its hind legs, whispering in my ear.

## *Prospect*

I'm high up  
on a kitchen chair  
so I can reach

a clear glass vase  
to put some flowers in  
and just to have a look around.

From up here everything  
is an aerial drawing  
of a kitchen, with the sink, the stove,

and the tall refrigerator  
conveying a plummeting sensation  
as if all their vertical lines ended in hell.

Yes, I'm getting a slightly different  
sense of things from up here  
but that's really about it. In fact,

I wouldn't recommend this to anyone.  
Chances are you will feel silly  
standing on a chair in the kitchen  
once you finished whatever  
it was you climbed up there to do—

a far cry from the originality

of Petrarch, grandfather of the sonnet,  
who is thought to be  
the first person in known history

to ascend a mountain  
to the very top  
just for the sake of the view.

## *Evening Wind*

is the title of one of Edward Hopper's  
pen-and-ink drawings,  
which I spent some time looking at  
in a gallery on the far west side of town.

Hopper could have called it  
*Totally Naked Woman Crawling  
on All Fours into an Unmade Bed*  
for she does occupy the foreground fully,

so it was only later that I noticed  
the curtains behind her being lifted  
by what must be an evening wind.  
Then I noticed that the woman appears

to be looking at those curtains,  
her face hidden by the dark curtain of her hair.  
Or is she looking through the curtains  
at the jagged outline of the city buildings,

topped with water tanks in silhouette?  
It was not until I closed my eyes and imagined  
her gradually falling asleep  
after sliding naked under the covers  
that I could envision the evening wind,  
not just the wind as revealed by the curtains,

but the invisible wind itself blowing  
through the room of this ingeniously titled drawing.

## *Whiskers*

I'm in a large brown armchair  
sipping an espresso from a tiny cup,  
and with the other hand  
I'm stroking the whiskers on my face,  
the ones that grew while I was asleep,  
a night's worth of whiskers  
and proof of my continuing existence.

Samuel Johnson refuted the position  
of the great philosopher  
Bishop (George) Berkeley  
on the existence of material objects  
by kicking him in the head,  
if my historical memory serves,  
but all I need is a face full of whiskers.

The whiskers of Dr. Johnson (1709–1784)  
are no more, likewise the Bishop's (1685–1753),  
but mine keep lengthening  
night and day every day and night,  
one amazing millimeter at a time,  
and no brutal assault on a clergyman  
is needed to prove the daily surprise of my being.

## *Walking Under the Trees*

I'm walking under the trees  
walking in and out of their shadows  
walking step by step under the trees  
so the leaves on their lowest branches  
graze my bare head  
as I walk slowly under the trees  
so close to me they could have  
their arms around my shoulders,  
walking under the guardian trees.

I'm walking under the trees  
plucking a leaf  
and putting it in my pocket  
so I won't forget walking  
under the cloak of these trees  
thinking of nothing else  
but the trees and me walking  
under all their leaves and branches  
walking all morning under the trees.

## *Whale Day*

Today I was awakened by strong coffee  
and the awareness that the earth is busy with whales  
even though we can't see any  
unless we have embarked on a whale watch,  
which would be disappointing if we still couldn't see any.

I can see the steam rising from my yellow cup,  
the usual furniture scattered about,  
and even some early light filtering through the palms.

Meanwhile, thousands of whales are cruising  
along at various speeds under the seas,

crisscrossing one another, slaloming in and out  
of the Gulf Stream, some with their calves  
traveling alongside—such big blunt heads they have!

So is it too much to ask that one day a year  
be set aside for keeping in mind  
while we step onto a bus, consume a ham sandwich,  
or stoop to pick up a coin from a sidewalk  
the multitude of these mammoth creatures  
coasting between the continents,  
some for the fun of it, others purposeful in their journeys,

all concealed under the sea, unless somewhere  
one breaks the surface  
with an astonishing upheaval of water  
and all the people in yellow slickers  
rush to one side of the boat to point and shout  
and wonder how to tell their friends about the day they saw a whale?

Two



## *The Wild Barnacle*

*Do not speak, wild barnacle, passing over this mountain...*

—PATRICK PEARSE

In a lullaby by the Irish poet Patrick Pearse,  
a woman of the mountain begins  
singing her baby to sleep  
by asking Mary to kiss her baby's mouth  
and Christ to touch its cheek,  
then she gets busy quieting the world around her.

All the grey mice must be still  
as well as the moths fluttering  
at the cottage window lit by the child's golden head.

Then, amazing to me—  
one summer night when I first read the poem—  
she orders a barnacle, of all things,  
not to speak as it passes over a mountain.  
To me, a barnacle came with a shell,  
lived underwater, and stayed put  
after silently affixing itself to a rock,  
but here in the hands of a poet,  
the small creature is miraculously  
endowed with the powers of speech and flight.

I could see it now on a mountaintop,  
its black shell shiny with salt water,  
no more than two inches tall,  
but dancing and riotous with joy and rage,  
shouting the anthem of the barnacle,  
loud enough to wake up  
every baby in Connemara and beyond.

But, of course, it is the barnacle goose  
that Pearse had in mind, I later found out,  
common in the west of Ireland  
and quite capable of flight with a honk  
that could possibly alarm a sleeping baby.

For a moment, I had my own wild barnacle,  
but the barnacle goose is fact,  
and so is the fact that Patrick Pearse,  
known as the schoolmaster,  
was the one who proclaimed the independence of Ireland  
from the steps of the General Post Office,  
and for his troubles he was stood up  
with fourteen other insurrectionists—  
save Connolly who was seated  
due to a recently shattered ankle—

yes, was stood up against the fact of a wall,  
in a courtyard of Kilmainham Gaol, Dublin,  
and executed by a British firing squad  
in his final May in the terrible, beautiful year of 1916.

## *Objectivity*

Call it a compulsion, but every time  
I give someone a new poem to look at,

I feel compelled to hide somewhere  
and read that poem  
as if I were that other person.

Pretending to be someone else  
brings a new sense of objectivity,  
revealing the poem's many flaws,  
and suddenly makes me aware  
of the pointlessness of having written it  
and the sheer vanity of the entire enterprise.

Sometimes,  
such a clarification may occur  
without the help of another person,

but then I don't experience the relief  
that comes from no longer  
being me, if only for the time  
it takes to read a poem on a single page.  
Then I'm George, or Art, or even Suzannah,  
none of whom wrote that poem;  
thus I am able to read it

as if for the first time,  
as if I'd never written it,

as if no one had ever written it for that matter,  
as if I were not acquainted  
with anyone named George, Art, or Suzannah.

Now there is no poem, and no more me,  
yet here I am, swaying  
in the hammock of my nonexistence.

But after only a few ticks of this,  
I'm back in the room where I write  
and back on my old schedule—  
the tartan cover lifted from the grindstone,  
boot on the foot treadle,  
nose lowering to the task.

## *Banana School*

The day I learned that monkeys  
as well as chimps, baboons, and gorillas  
all peel their bananas from the other end  
and use the end we peel from as a handle,  
I immediately made the switch.

I wasted no time in passing this wisdom on  
to family, friends, and even strangers  
as I am now passing it on to you—  
a tip from the top, the banana scoop,  
the inside primate lowdown.

I promise: once you try it  
you will never go back except  
to regret the long error of your ways.

And if you do not believe me,  
swing by the local zoo some afternoon  
with a banana in your pocket  
and try peeling it in front of the cage  
of an orangutan or capuchin monkey,  
and as you begin, notice  
how the monkeys stop what they're doing,  
if they are doing anything at all,  
to nod their brotherly approval through the bars.

Better still, try it out on the big silverback gorilla.  
See if you can get his dark eyes to brighten a bit  
as the weight of him sits there in his cage  
the same way Gertrude Stein is sitting  
in that portrait of her she never liked by Picasso.

## *Identity*

Shortly after it was discovered  
that Homer was not the author  
of the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*,  
that, in fact, the *Iliad* was written  
by another poet of the time named Homer  
while the source of the *Odyssey*  
remained unclear,  
it was also discovered that God  
did not create the universe.

It turns out that the creator  
of this whole mishmash  
was the identical twin brother of God,  
even though no one in heaven  
had ever been able to tell them apart,  
even on weekends, when they  
never wore the same outfit.

Does this mean that in the future  
no one will know the difference  
between a raven and a crow  
or John Adams from John Quincy Adams?  
and that you and I  
will not be able to recognize one another?  
That would be horrible,

plus, I would hate that  
because I so much enjoy dining with you  
and going on car trips with you navigating,

not to mention the pleasure  
of sleeping in the same bed with you  
with the backs of our heads  
and the soles of our feet touching

so that we'd look like a giant arrowhead  
if we ever became visible from space,  
like smoke from a vast fire or the Great Wall of China.

## *Arizona*

In the marbled silence of the desert  
it's easy to pick out the songs of birds,  
which puts me in a better state of mind  
than the one I wake up to some mornings  
as I lie in bed worrying about the same five things  
I will still be worried about on my deathbed  
if I am lucky enough to have a deathbed  
and not a tall death-wave or a deep death-lake  
or a dizzying death-cliff, a death-gun or a death-knife,  
and death is only one of the five nightly hounds  
that prowl in circles around my bed.

And so, you birds of Arizona,  
I am lucky to spend this time with you  
amid the amber rocks and sudden wildflowers  
to listen to your sweet mix of songs,  
sorry I am not as knowledgeable as the woman  
who just hurried past me up the switchback trail  
with her binoculars and her bird book,  
but grateful for the perfect acoustics  
of your company in the lowering heat,  
knowing that in mornings to come  
I might recall that you and I were truly here.

## *Irish Spider*

It was well worth traveling this far  
just to sit in a box of sunlight  
by a window in a cottage

with a steaming cup of tea  
and to watch an Irish spider waiting  
at the center of his dewy web

pretending to be just any spider at all—  
a spider without a nation—  
but not fooling me for a minute.

*Listening to Hank Mobley Around 11 O'Clock  
After a Long Fun Boozy Dinner, the Four of Us,  
at Captain Pig's, Our Favorite Restaurant in  
Town*

I'm lying down now, solo on a couch,  
imagining along with the music  
that if I were, say, 15 or 16 tonight  
and in possession of a fresh can  
of pink or orange spray paint,  
I would climb the 4th Street overpass  
and write in big letters  
HANK MOBLEY SWINGS  
for all to see on their morning drive to work.

But having sailed some time ago  
into the quiet cardigan harbor of my life,  
out of earshot of the siren songs  
that lure men onto reefs of foolishness  
not to mention the bridges of bravado,  
it's enough to let the soap bubble  
of that Hank Mobley thought drift slowly  
across the living room and burst  
with no warning, much to the amazement of the cat.

## *The Card Players*

I'm glad Cézanne was not here in Key West  
to set up an easel, and paint  
the card game I was in last night,  
unless he was really good at depicting despondency.

Cézanne once said that a single carrot,  
if painted in a completely fresh way,  
would be enough to set off a revolution.  
I'll bet he was sitting in a café that day

where such observations are usually made,  
but if I had been sitting in that café  
across from Cézanne, I would have quipped,  
“Maybe if Bugs Bunny were in charge of things,”

and I would have described in a fresh way  
how the famous rabbit might be portrayed  
using a carrot to point the mob to the Bastille.

Beer and chips and more beer and chips  
were served at the poker table,  
but no carrot soup, a staple on every menu  
in the bunny rabbit stories of Beatrix Potter  
and a dish that would have warmed me  
inside and out the way a good soup does

and made me feel much better  
about losing all my money and then some.

But at least now I have found the answer  
to the old question of who would you invite  
to your ideal dinner party:  
Paul Cézanne, Bugs Bunny, Beatrix Potter,  
and okay, maybe at the last minute, Gore Vidal.

## *Vivace!*

*No man is lonely while eating spaghetti.*

—CHRISTOPHER MORLEY

This time, I was at a corner table at Pasta Vivace!  
on that side street next to the old music store.  
The place was not at all crowded.  
Just enough young men and women  
were coming and going to keep me  
occupied as I sipped my Campari and soda  
and waited for the waiter to arrive with my pasta.

I imagined what the parents of all these people  
were doing this evening,  
then I thought of all of the diners as babies  
with looks of amazement on their tiny faces.  
Then as they kept arriving and departing,  
holding the door for one another,  
they turned into skeletons in their caskets,

each being carried by six husky pallbearers,  
who would also be dead by now,  
as I would be before too long,  
for death is the magnetic north of poetry.  
But first, I must insist on having the pleasure  
of eating my *linguini con vongole*,

dipping chunks of crusty bread into the briny sauce,

for this is also a poem about happiness,

a celebration of the senses

and of all the men and women coming and going.

And if you turn your head a little this way,

you can see me at a corner table,

twirling the pasta with a fork and spoon

like an infant with a bib tucked under his chin.

## *A Terrible Beauty*

*April is the cruelest month...*

—T. S. ELIOT

If you happened to miss this year's  
Cruellest Month Competition,  
it began with all twelve contestants  
taking the stage together  
in the order of the calendar year,  
each dressed in outfits  
that sang of their personalities—  
March windblown and wet with rain,  
October resplendent in red and orange.

Many wondered why April, a perennial loser,  
would even bother to show up,  
always smiling, daffodils  
embroidered on her bodice.  
Some blamed it on a poem she'd read somewhere.

Others followed her early elimination—  
August with zinc slathered on her nose,  
December looking like the Mother of God.  
It must be said that no one was surprised  
when the tuxedoed man with the microphone  
finally announced this year's winner,

the same as every year since its beginning.

Even though she'd shivered  
during the swimsuit part  
and stumbled when asked  
how she planned to change the world,  
February was the obvious choice.  
*I mean the Super Bowl's over by then  
and spring's a mile away.*  
*What could be crueler?* as one guy put it.  
And that was about it, except for the coronation.

There she stood, the only month on the stage,  
crying a few chilly tears,  
a thin smile frozen on her lips.  
Then she bent her knees a little  
so as to be less tall,  
and some official placed on her head  
her latest dripping, silvery crown of ice.

## *Duck Blind*

The idea behind a duck blind  
is that any duck flying over it

will be blind to its existence,  
seeing (or not seeing in the case of the duck)

how well the blind was camouflaged  
with branches and leaves

to fit in with its natural surroundings.  
Ignorant of the blind, a duck

has a better shot of being shot,  
then tumbling out of the sky,

wing over useless wing,  
only to land in the reeds of a marsh,

a clump of plumage now,  
blind to everything, and deaf, too,  
to the barking of the wet dogs,  
to more gunfire later in the morning,

and to the soft talk of the hunters  
waiting there, concealed by the blind.

## *She's Gone*

leaving me here alone again,  
feeling this time  
like one of those pairs of drawings  
featured in the colorful puzzle section  
of the Sunday paper,  
where you have to detect  
the barely detectable differences between the two.

Needless to say,  
I am the drawing on the right  
where items are found to be missing—  
the guitar now down to four strings,  
the bouquet with one flower gone,  
the teacup minus its handle,  
no longer able to be gracefully raised.

That's the new me—  
no more sweet tunes, perfume, or chamomile.

And then there is the milking stool  
where the farmer used to sit  
every morning and evening  
squeezing the milk from his herd.  
But one of its legs is absent now,  
and the farmer has toppled over

in his straw hat and overalls,  
only to land beneath  
the poor brindled cow in the drawing,  
now minus a mark from her flank  
and all four of her munificent udders erased.

## *Downpour*

Last night we ended up on the couch  
trying to remember  
all of the friends who had died so far,

and this morning I wrote them down  
in alphabetical order  
on the flip side of a shopping list  
you had left on the kitchen table.

So many of them had been swept away  
as if by a hand from the sky,  
it was good to recall them,  
I was thinking  
under the cold lights of a supermarket  
as I guided a cart with a wobbly wheel  
up and down the long, strident aisles.

I was on the lookout for blueberries,  
English muffins, linguini, heavy cream,  
light bulbs, apples, Canadian bacon,  
and whatever else was on the list,  
which I managed to keep grocery side up,  
until I had passed through the electric doors,  
where I stopped to realize,  
as I turned the list over,

that I had forgotten Terry O'Shea  
as well as the bananas and the bread.

It was pouring by then,  
spilling, as they say in Ireland,  
people splashing across the lot to their cars.

And that is when I set out,  
walking slowly and precisely,  
a soaking-wet man  
bearing bags of groceries,  
walking as if in a procession honoring the dead.

I felt I owed this to Terry,  
who was such a strong painter,  
for almost forgetting him  
and to all the others who had formed  
a circle around him on the screen in my head.

I was walking more slowly now  
in the presence of the compassion  
the dead were extending to a comrade,  
plus, I was in no hurry to return  
to the kitchen, where I would have to tell you  
all about Terry and the bananas and the bread.

Three



## *Safe Travels*

Every time Gulliver travels  
into another chapter of *Gulliver's Travels*  
I marvel at how well traveled he is  
despite his incurable gullibility.

I don't enjoy traveling anymore  
because, for instance,  
I still don't know the difference  
between a *bloke* and a *chap*.

And I'm embarrassed  
whenever I have to hold out a palm  
of loose coins to a cashier  
as if I were feeding a pigeon in a park.

Like Proust, I see only trouble  
in store if I leave my room,  
which is not lined with cork,  
only sheets of wallpaper

featuring orange flowers  
and little green vines.  
Of course, anytime I want  
I can travel in my imagination  
but only as far as Toronto,  
where some graduate students

with goatees and snoods  
are translating my poems into Canadian.

## *Hawaii*

As you and I walked  
through the palm forest of W. S. Merwin,  
our guide was telling us how it began  
in an abandoned pineapple grove  
and that the soil, now without nutrients,  
had to be revived before anything would grow.

The palms came from all over the world,  
he said, and anyone who worked here  
had to know their Latin names by heart.  
The immense forest was hard to see  
for the ranks of individual trees.  
But back home, this morning, you can't miss

the four Chinese-red pots on the back deck  
with the young palms sprouting  
from the seeds you picked up  
from the litter of seeds on the forest floor,  
the ones you showed me on our flight home,  
wrapped up like little mummies in paper towels.  
This is not how the pig got his curly tail  
or how the zebra got its stripes,  
but it is how we happen to have some of the work  
of W. S. Merwin growing here in Florida  
in addition to his other major works

lined up in some rough order on a high shelf inside.

## *The Emperor of Ice Cubes*

Three small, nondescript shorebirds,  
probably sandpipers,  
investigating a clump of dry seaweed  
in the tideline,  
another one racing  
along the water's shifting edge,  
legs, thin as pencil lead,  
scissoring back and forth in the wet sand.

I might have left it at that,  
a beachgoer's morning take,  
if an ice cube I tossed  
hadn't landed near them  
and if one of them did not start  
pecking and even sipping at it,  
while rebuffing the others  
if they neared this prize in the sand.

What would a pecking bird  
make of this frozen curio  
beyond something cold to peck at?  
Did it fall from outer space?  
Would it remind the bird  
of its second home in the Arctic,  
where sandpipers migrate

flying mostly by night,  
with lots of ice to peck at on arrival?  
Imagine—a bird missing the cold  
while pecking at an ice cube  
as it melted in the Florida sand.

In the end, it hardly mattered  
if or what the bird was thinking.  
The bottled beer in the Igloo cooler,  
source of the magical cube,  
where many other ice cubes  
lay gathered, was still very cold.  
And it all seemed framed for me,  
this bigger seascape,  
when I leaned back to look—  
nothing but pale blue sky,  
clouds pushed around in the wind,  
and bright white waves  
rolling over one another,  
then breaking on the sand.

## *I Am Not Italian*

I am not Italian, technically speaking,  
yet here I am leaning on a zinc bar in Perugia  
on a sunny weekday morning,  
my foot up on the worn iron railing  
just like the other men who,  
it must be said, are officially and fully Italian.

It's 8:40 and they are off to work,  
some in offices, others sweeping the streets  
while I am off to a museum or a church  
to see paintings, maybe light a candle in an alcove.  
Yet here we all are in our suits and work shirts  
joined in the brotherhood of espresso,

or how is it said? *La fratellanza dell'espresso*,  
draining our little white cups  
with an artful rotation of the wrist,  
each of us tasting the same sweetness of life,  
if you take a little sugar, and the bitterness  
of its brevity, whether you choose to take sugar or not.

## *The Symphony Orchestra of San Miguel de Allende*

The Symphony Orchestra of San Miguel de Allende is not made up of the usual instruments.

Instead of brass, strings, and woodwinds, there are church bells, roosters, doves, and barking dogs, all of which predate the horn, the violin, and the oboe, notably the rooster, who crowed even before the time of Christ.

The orchestra plays all day and into the night, but the music is most alive in the early morning when much of the audience is half asleep and not distracted by their jobs and errands as they will be later in the day.

At first, as I listened from my canopied bed, it sounded like a jumble of noise until I imagined a gigantic score written centuries ago by the Mozart of Mexico,

the genius who decided those dogs should come in just after the thirty-two gongs of a solemn bell, who had the doves modulate into an adagio, and who added a rest here and there where the roosters should pause, but not for long. Are we not seekers of order, I thought,

as when we follow the lines in our palms  
or connect the dots of the stars to form a bear in the sky?

So before rising from our slumberous beds,  
why not listen a little longer  
to this composition for dogs, roosters, doves, and bells?

The dogs are barking to be fed.  
The roosters are beckoning us to the henhouse  
where three eggs are still warm in the straw.  
But the doves are mourning our awful losses,  
and the bells are there to remind us of God.

## *Dublin*

So much to be viewed out here in the drizzle  
with all the tall buses swinging themselves  
so close to me around corners and men  
in bunches smoking outside the betting parlors.

And when the rain falls steadily enough  
to drive me into a gallery or a city castle,  
then the learning also comes pouring down  
whether I am in the mood for it or not.

Today, it's the codex of Leonardo on display  
in the dim light where you touch a screen  
to turn a page, the margins busy with pulleys  
and siphons, whirlwinds, tides, and sluices.

And better informed was I to read on a little card  
the news that Herbert Hoover translated  
into English for the first time the works  
of Agricola, the father of modern mineralogy himself.  
Out the windows of the gallery,  
a jumble of raincoats and black umbrellas,  
and so my afternoon education continues  
with the discovery in a vitrine of Vegetius,  
who in the fifth century came up  
with the idea of underwater warfare,

hand-to-hand combat beneath the lily pads  
as if bloodying one another on the ground were not enough.

And if his illustration of an armed soldier  
standing on the bottom of a lake  
and breathing through a snake-like tube  
comes at me tonight and shakes me out of sleep,

I will not coax an oval pill from its bottle  
nor put on a robe and stand by the stove  
looking at the ads in a magazine  
while some milk is heating in a pan.

I only need to slide into place  
the image of Leonardo at a table by a window,  
his marvelous head resting in his hands,  
wondering if water might exist on the moon.

## *Cremation*

It's half the binary of fire or earth,  
but the question of where one's ashes  
will go has many more answers than two.

Scattering is the option *du jour*,  
maybe over a favorite body of water—  
a lake where she learned to fish,  
an ocean he liked to stare into toward the end.

Others pick multiple locations—  
a ballpark, a backyard,  
a rose garden, and the roof of a gym.  
And guess who's not here to divide  
the nearly weightless powder into equal parts?

Shake your heads, but bear in mind  
that without a wish  
you could end up in a coffee can  
on a high shelf, your widow glancing up—  
but not frequently enough—from an armchair.  
I've always thought "hither and thither"  
would make things easy on my survivors,  
who would dither, then laughing toss  
handfuls of me from a speeding convertible.

But wouldn't the easiest spot of all be  
the nearby fireplace or Franklin stove,  
where I, who enjoyed walking  
amid the yellow-green trees of spring  
or the bare, crisscross branches of winter,

would at last be indistinguishable  
from the cinders of the maple,  
the mighty oak, and even the pale mountain ash.

Now, I'm not sure how you heard it,  
but in my version, Bob Hope's wife  
asked her husband on his deathbed  
whether he wanted to be buried or cremated.  
"Surprise me," replied the comic before expiring.

## *Lakeside Cottage: Ontario*

When I mentioned to you on the phone  
that I had just witnessed a flock of Canada geese  
flying in a V only a few feet above the surface of the lake,  
you asked if I had taken a picture.

I told you no, because the phone was up to my ear  
as I waited for you to answer and also because  
it rarely occurs to me to take a picture of anything.  
So let me make a picture of the geese for you now.

There were at least thirty of them, appearing  
quite suddenly, just after I dialed your number,  
from behind the trees by the shore,  
now heavy with the greenery of midsummer,

and they flew from right to left  
like a text written in Hebrew,  
almost touching the slightly ruffled water  
as they passed by the dock at the end of the lawn.

You know, the dock with the little flight of stairs  
that disappears into the lake, which made it easier  
for your parents to go in for a swim  
in the cold water before they both died  
only months apart, as if Jack followed Mary's lead.  
Otherwise, they might be sitting here now

in the two chairs by the picture window,  
maybe holding cups of morning coffee,

as all the geese sailed by, heading who knows where,  
so close to the water, each holding its position,  
the leader pointing the way with its neck  
extended, as if he were pulling the others along.

## *The Convergence of My Parents*

This morning I am looking out my window  
at a crowd of white irises,  
imagining that I am my mother in 1934  
looking out the window of her train,  
the one she rode from Toronto to Los Angeles  
to work as a nurse in Queen of Angels Hospital,  
only her train has stopped outside a little town  
somewhere in the Midwest,  
and she is looking out at the irises in someone's garden.

Around that time, maybe my young father  
from Massachusetts was riding  
another train from Boston to Galveston  
to work as an electrician on an offshore oil rig,  
a man who was more likely to be reading a newspaper  
than admiring the flowers in a stranger's garden  
but who must have spent some time  
looking out at the scenery, wondering about himself,  
and maybe a field of wildflowers went flashing by.

I wouldn't be here looking at irises  
or anything else had they not found each other years later,  
the nonparallel lines of their lives meeting in New York,  
where I was born because I wanted to be close  
to my mother, my father liked to joke.

She was still a nurse, and he was her patient.  
He had been struck on the forehead by a tool  
a co-worker had mishandled, and that is the story  
of how I got here, how I pulled out of the first station of my life.

## *Dreaming of the Middle Ages*

I've never laid eyes on a church mouse,  
but I know what it is to be as poor as a graduate student,  
for I spent many semesters  
drinking discount beer  
and eating a concoction  
topped with melted cheese and hot sauce  
that was known at the time as Kansas City Rice.

I was studying to be a medievalist,  
and I often fell asleep in an armchair  
with a book still open on my lap  
whose margins were crowded  
with coded notations regarding  
*Beowulf*, *The Mabinogion*,  
*Piers Ploughman*, or *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

I wouldn't say I was eating and breathing  
the literature of the Middle Ages,  
because, in fact, I was eating Kansas City Rice  
and breathing in pack after pack of Marlboro Reds.  
Yet these old tales and romances  
followed me in my waking hours  
and did not hesitate to enter my dreams.

This was in Southern California,

and my bedroom was suffused  
with the perfume of the nearby orange groves.  
There, I dallied with the Wife of Bath  
and rode along with the Parson and the Prioress.

On one of these nights,  
I even had a showdown with Sir Gawain himself,  
the two of us facing off  
in a large mead hall full of boisterous guests.

I had somehow sullied his honor,  
and before I could utter a word of apology,  
with one mighty swing Gawain passed his sword  
through my middle, cutting me precisely in two.

A raucous cheer went up from the crowd  
as my upper half toppled to the floor with a sick thud.  
Some of the knights and ladies stood  
in a circle around what was left of me,  
examining the many tree rings  
now visible in my exposed lower half,

while they stroked their chins  
and marveled over the many rings  
that represented my years in graduate school.

Yes, that was a big chunk of my life,  
and even though I've quit the cigarettes  
and I eat a lot better these days,  
often in candlelight with a loving woman,

I still write in the margins of books,  
and in my dreams I still chase a rabbit  
with a ribbon tied around his neck  
up and down the endless lanes of an orange grove,  
pursued in turn by Grendel and his blood-caked mother.

## *The Yellow Wood*

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
then those two roads diverged again  
and kept diverging the way branches  
diverge into more branches to form a tree,  
which you fall out of one day and die.

It's troubling to think of life that way,  
as a series of binary choices,  
each one leaving behind a road forsaken.  
No, you can't go down two at a time  
and be both tailor and candlestick maker.

But you're free to dream of the other.  
Take this poet, elbows on the sill,  
imagining my life as a baker or even a tinker,  
that is, *a person who goes from place to place*  
[though I've grown weary of traveling]

*mending metal utensils on his way,*  
as if the people who compiled  
this dictionary had the foggiest idea  
what tinkering actually demanded—  
what solitude and hardship such a life must entail!

## *My Funeral*

After the eulogies and this and that  
and a blessing  
and whatever follows,  
as pedestrians outside walk along  
under the leaning steeple  
on their way to this place or that,  
there will come a moment  
when everyone will have had quite enough.

Then the fox will tap  
a music stand with his bow  
and lift his violin,  
and the badgers will raise their horns  
to their snarling badger lips,  
ready to play what is required,  
and the bear will gently set  
his paws upon the upright bass.

And their playing will accompany everyone  
down the aisle and outdoors  
into the weather of the day,  
whatever it may be,  
and down a block or two south,  
then around a corner to a bar  
with a neon beer sign in the window.

And its interior will be a greeting,  
full of blue shadows  
with a streak of late-morning light,  
so that everyone is glad to be alive  
and sorry I couldn't be there,  
and it's even okay  
that the bartender turns out to be a horse.

And as for me,  
gliding off into space,  
all I would ask as my final wish  
is that you refrain, out of respect,  
from shouting over the heads of the others,  
now two or three deep at the bar,  
“When did the cow sell this place?”

Wait your turn, then order up.  
Today is no different in that regard.

## *The Pregnant Man*

A man is pregnant.  
He doesn't know that he's pregnant  
but unlike the other men wearing caps  
at a shady table outside a café,  
he wants to give birth  
to something that is alive

even if it's only a short poem  
breathing in and out,  
a girl poem or a boy poem,  
it wouldn't matter to his mighty love.  
Look at him now playing cards  
while the old waiter goes about his business.

*Architecture at 3:30* A.M.

Brunelleschi

is asleep

in Florence.

Christopher Wren

is snoring

in a corner of London.

Louis Sullivan

is curled up

somewhere

in Chicago.

Only Dagwood is

awake at this hour

in his bathrobe

in the kitchen,

refrigerator door open,

a pickle jar

under one arm,

the mayonnaise

balanced

on a free elbow,

about to construct

another phenomenal

tower of a sandwich.

I don't care that no one

under 55 will know

who Dagwood is,  
and no one over 55  
will remember him.

Dagwood is still  
standing in  
the Bumstead kitchen,  
bathed in refrigerator light,  
knowing his hunger  
will be appeased  
but not before  
he labors, along with all  
the other geniuses,  
under gravity's singular law.

## *The Garland*

I would like to be laid to rest in a big tomb  
topped by a stone figure of an angel,  
who appears to have landed there  
in order to sob forevermore,  
her face buried in her bent arm,  
one folded wing hanging by her side.

Then, whenever I found the time  
to visit my own grave,  
after approaching with slow, respectful steps,  
I would place around her rough neck  
the garland of wildflowers that I knitted,  
then run back to the car, laughing and immortal!

Four



## *Me First*

We often fly in the sky together,  
and we're always okay—there's our luggage now  
waiting for us on the carousel.

And we drive lots of places  
in all manner of hectic traffic,  
yet here we are, pulling in the driveway again.

So many opportunities to die together,  
but no meteor has hit our house,  
no tornado has lifted us into its funnel.

The odds say then that one of us will go  
before the other, like heading off  
into a heavy snowstorm, leaving

the other one behind to stand in the kitchen  
or lie on the bed under the fan.  
So why not let me, the older one, go first?

I don't want to see you everywhere  
as I wait for the snow to stop,  
before setting out with a crooked stick, calling your name.

## *A Sight*

Last night I watched a documentary on war,  
and the part I carry with me today  
is the spectacle of a line  
of maybe twenty blinded soldiers  
being led, single file  
away from a yellow cloud of gas.

That might be what accounts  
for this morning's brightness—  
sunlight slathered over everything  
from the royal palms to the store awnings,  
from a blue Corolla at the curb  
to a purple flower climbing a fence,  
one gift of sight after another.

I couldn't see their bandaged faces,  
but each man had one hand  
resting on the shoulder  
of the man in front of him,  
so that every man was guiding  
and being guided at the same time,  
and in the same tempo,  
given the unison of their small, cautious steps.

## *Air Sax*

In the dorm rooms of our snowbound college during certain parts of the Coltrane solos featured on the album *Milestones*, parts we had deemed exceedingly worthy, we boys would play imaginary tenor saxophones by placing a thumb in our mouths, leaving the free hand to handle the intricacies of the fingering,

and with puffed-out cheeks and eyes closed, we would blow hard, instead of sucking as we had done in our infancy.

And even though we would step back to laugh at the silly pathos of ourselves, there was always great intensity and joy in our playing.

## *English Roses*

In those weeks of late summer  
when the roses in gardens begin to fade,  
the big red, white, and pink ones—  
the inner enfolded petals growing cankerous,  
the petals at the edges turning brown  
or fallen already down on their girlish backs  
in the rough beds of turned-over soil,

then how terrible the expressions on their faces,  
a kind of was-it-all-really-worth-it look,  
to die here in front of everybody  
in the garden of a bed-and-breakfast  
in a provincial English market town,  
to expire by degrees of corruption  
in plain sight of all the neighbors passing by—

the thin mail carrier, the stocky butcher  
(thank God the children pay no attention),  
the swiveling faces in the windows of the tall buses,  
and now this stranger staring over the wall,  
hair disheveled, a loose scarf around his neck,  
jotting in a notebook, something about us no doubt,  
about how terrible we must look now under the punishing sun.

## *On the Deaths of Friends*

Either they just die  
or they get sick and die of the sickness  
or they get sick, recover, then die of something else,  
or they get sick, appear to recover,  
then die of the same thing,  
the sickness coming back  
to take another bite out of you  
in the forest of your final hours.

And there are other ways,  
which will not be considered here.  
In the evening, I closed my eyes  
on the shore of a lake and I pretended  
this is what it will look like  
or will not look like,  
this is where my friends keep going,  
a “place” only in quotation marks,

where, instead of oxygen, there is silence  
unbroken by the bark of a fox in winter  
or the whistle of a neglected kettle.  
With eyes still closed,  
I ran in the dark toward that silence,  
like a man running along a train platform,  
and when I opened my eyes to see

who was running in the other direction

with outspread arms,  
there was the lake again with its ripples,  
a breeze coming off the water,  
and a low train whistle,  
and there was I trembling  
under the trees, passing clouds,  
and everything else that was pouring  
over the mighty floodgates of the senses.

## *Cupid*

Fresh in from the rain,  
you asked me  
how long a cubit is.

I thought  
the subject at hand  
was love.

But it was an ark  
you were building,  
a little one, just for you.

## *Talking to Myself*

When I talk to myself,  
as I sit in a chair or pace the floor,  
I don't bother to listen,  
because my hearing is so bad  
I wouldn't be able to pick out a word,  
plus I have nothing new to say.

The sound of my voice was a comfort  
when I used to sit by my bedside  
reading to myself one animal fable  
after another until the words  
became the vowels of a lullaby  
and I vanished under the blanket of sleep.

As a boy, I talked to each mailbox  
I passed on my bicycle, a black Humber,  
made in England, it said on the frame.  
I would pedal around the neighborhood,  
sitting up tall, arms hanging limp,  
looking for the street that would lead to England.  
I'm not alone in talking to myself.  
Children sit alone on a carpet,  
talking to their imaginary friends.  
The elderly keep gabbing in empty rooms.  
A cow in a pasture is mooing to herself.

The skylark is singing pointlessly in the sky.

Down the street, a dog is barking all alone.  
The cat remains silent with no one in mind.  
And like her, I have been writing this  
in silence, moving only my lips  
over the words lined up in their pews,  
but now I see I have gone and said them all to you.

## *Ireland Floating on a Map of the World*

With Lough Neagh serving as one eye,  
the body of Ireland looks this morning  
like nothing less than a rabbit or a hare  
caught mid-flight in a mighty westward leap.

With the Ring of Kerry and Beara  
as the springing hind legs  
and jutting Mayo as its tender forepaws,  
the rabbit, or again possibly a hare,

is turning his head to look back  
at the middle part of Britain  
around the Lake District, say, or Hadrian's Wall,  
and thinking nothing but pleasant thoughts

about the America where he will eventually  
land, for he is only famous for his leaping.

## *The Flash Card*

The real jazz insiders  
like to refer to it as “the flash card,”  
or if they don’t, they should,  
or at least they could come up with some name for it.  
What is the matter with these people anyway?

Would it not help to have a term  
to describe a sequence of notes  
so brilliant that the rest of the solo  
turns into wallpaper behind it  
yet the musician absolutely refuses to repeat it?

He played it with such felicity  
we know he could easily play it again,  
passing the phrase through a ring of keys,  
even cruising it around the circle of fifths,  
but the man stone-cold refuses to give us another taste.

There’s a name for that little indentation  
between your upper lip and your nose  
(I can’t think of it right now)  
and the Japanese have a special word  
for the act of looking at cherry trees in bloom.  
So why shouldn’t we have a name for this?  
“The Tease?” “The Now-You-See-It?”

Surely, there is room in the box of jive  
for another bit of lingo.

Language belongs to its users, right?  
Not to the professors and lexicographers  
in their baggy jackets flecked with chalk dust.

How about it, people? Can you stop nodding  
and drumming on the table with a swizzle stick?  
Can we work as a team for once? Win one for Prez? For Bud?

## *Anniversary*

The moment I turned a corner  
into a quiet side street  
of an unfamiliar city,

I ran into the realization  
that you had died  
exactly nine years ago today,

which led me to imagine a baby  
born on the day you died,

a child who would always remain  
the same age as your death  
and whose birthday parties  
would be secret memorials to you.

As time passed, more people  
would meet this growing person,

but fewer and fewer people  
would remember who you were  
until one day when no one  
would be alive  
to remember you, not even me

or the make-believe boy  
whom I contrived that day,

as my bicycle leaned against a tree  
on a leafy side street,  
somewhere in Philadelphia.

## *Early People*

*Little is known about the Iberian people  
called the Laietani  
sounds like the unpromising beginning  
of a term paper, does it not?  
I'm guessing a C-minus at best.*

But a better performance  
than the paper that went:  
*Little is known about the writer Edgar Allan Poe,  
for he left behind only his dates  
which are Born 1809 Died 1849.  
In conclusion, it's sad for anyone  
to be dead for such a long time.*

Teaching is a noble and time-honored profession,  
but little is known about it  
because no one is allowed in the classroom  
except the teacher and the students.

The students don't take notes anymore,  
and the teacher will forget everything  
she said by lunchtime,  
or she has been saying the same thing  
for twenty or thirty years, or both.

Twenty or thirty years is not a long time  
when you consider the Laietani people,  
the smoke from whose fires rose  
over the Iberian peninsula  
even before the marauding Romans arrived  
to give everyone an inferiority complex  
with their alphabet, their aqueducts,  
frigidaria, the important process of fermentation,  
and their martial skills—  
all those legions, phalanxes, vanguards, and catapults.

And that pretty much does it  
regarding the Laietani,  
although about the ancient Romans much is known,  
too much to go into really  
given the strict parameters of this assignment.

*My Father's Office, John Street, New York City,  
1953*

He would take me with him when I was a boy,  
before it became a thing to do,  
the two of us riding the subway,  
then walking a few confining blocks  
to the insurance company where he worked.

There, he would set me free to roam  
up and down the long rows of typists,  
clacking away on their manual machines,  
fingernails red and hands blue  
from the carbon paper, famous then  
for working the miracle of triplicates.

The place was an Avalon of supplies—  
reams of paper, envelopes neat in their boxes,  
even a franking machine, your own private post office.  
Sometimes I would stop to look down  
on the wide expanse of New York Harbor,  
never guessing how many of the office's  
rituals and devices would soon disappear for good  
into the gaping maw of obsolescence.  
Now the oasis of the water cooler is gone,  
and silenced is the aggregate racket of typing.

Blown away is the haze of smoke from cigarettes.  
Gone, the ashtrays from every desk  
and the tall ones by the elevators,  
their sand kept smooth and clean  
as if tended every night by a tiny man with a tiny rake.

No more thick tear-off calendars,  
the days disappearing one page at a time.

No more fountain pen drawing  
nectar from the black flower of an ink bottle.

No more black rotary phone,  
ringing with good news, bad news, and worse.

Gone, the switchboard and the intercom,  
the cable room, Rolodex, and Dictaphone.

Gone, too, the many paperweights,  
which weighed down the stacks of papers,  
so they wouldn't blow away  
on a hot summer day with the windows wide open,  
fans oscillating this way and that,  
and men in shirtsleeves leaning  
out high windows to catch a breeze.

Goodbye to the hat rack and the hats they held,  
and gone the men themselves and gone my father,  
gone my father as well.

Farewell, adding machine,

and the spindles where memos were impaled.  
They went away while you were out.

But stay, oh paper clip,  
and stay, too, rubber band,  
keepers of order, logic, and sense  
in the days of saloons and nightsticks,  
evening editions, and newsreels

and still in these days when they both  
dwell in the drawer of a worker  
in a cubicle in a tower of glass.

She is bent over a glowing screen, her hand on a mouse  
that she is using to download an elephant,  
of all things, and to print out its picture in color,

the huge creature slipping through a wire  
then materializing in her hand, a new miracle in triplicate.

## *April 21st*

It's the birthday of John Muir and Charlotte Brontë,  
born just 18 years apart,  
she in Yorkshire and he somewhere in Scotland,  
both in their bassinets under the same grey clouds,  
but then their lives diverge so wildly  
you might question the claims of astrology,  
if you haven't had the sense to do that already.

Muir heads off to Wisconsin (with his parents, I suppose),  
whereas Charlotte is placed in a nearby boarding school.  
Muir then stomps all over North America,  
exulting in Nature and writing it all down,  
while Charlotte stays mostly indoors, composing poems  
with her sisters, Emily and Anne.  
He leaves us *Picturesque California*, she *Jane Eyre*.

I don't have much on my calendar for today,  
another April 21st featuring a walk around the lake,  
then boxing up the cat and driving her to the vet.  
It's overwhelming to think of all the things  
I'm not doing today, including being born.  
But I will say that my life, maybe like yours,  
falls somewhere between John Muir's and Charlotte Brontë's.  
My morning walk takes under an hour,  
but I do pay attention to the water and the birds,

and here I am writing a poem, just like the Brontë sisters.  
Muir was blinded for a spell,  
Charlotte married then died still pregnant,  
and I've had the same headache for more than a month.  
And if that's what ends up killing me,

would someone please slide this poem  
into a side pocket of the coat they bury me in?  
Until then, let us picture John Muir  
on a windy mountaintop in Oregon  
waving in the direction of the coastal dunes,  
while Charlotte Brontë lifts her head  
from her morning prayers, remembering that it's her birthday.

## *Massage*

i

Face down  
in that cushioned horseshoe,  
the face cradle,  
I watched her shoes appear, then disappear.

ii

Where else could you hear such music?  
Unless you came across a waterfall  
with a naked man  
sitting under it playing the flute.

iii

The one in San Diego  
could have been a kindly aunt  
applying sunscreen to my back  
when I was about four,  
but I would have told  
the one in Rochester every top secret  
I knew and invented some others.

iv

While the right leg is being rubbed,  
the left leg is thinking *I'm next*.

v

When I muttered *sorry*  
for dozing off,  
she said *no worries*.  
She only minded  
the crying, which more people do  
than you would think when they are touched.

vi

When she lifted the sheet  
for me to turn over,  
it felt like a dream, or the afterlife.  
A dream about the afterlife.

vii

Afterward,  
I wanted to shake both  
of her hands goodbye,  
but one was occupied  
with the offer of a paper cup of water.

## *Hotel Rex*

Looming over the little sewing kit  
and the miniature bottles

of shampoo and conditioner,  
I am a giant, a colossus,

a king standing before the royal mirror  
in an enormous robe of terrycloth.

As a sign of my benevolence,  
I will forego coffee,

scrambled eggs, and toast  
from room service and check out early

before my tiny subjects arrive  
to wash their hair and mend their simple attire.

## *Going for a Walk as the Drugs Kick In*

It's Friday, and the sun's all over everything  
after a long week of steady rain.  
The clouds have moved on  
to hover over other counties.  
The irises are showing their white faces  
streaked with yellow and purple.  
The bees are out again  
making their floral visitations.  
The beaver swims with a stick in his mouth.  
The otter is looking out his window.  
The butterfly doesn't seem to know where it's going.  
So ample and worthy is the air around me,  
I am only able to take in one bird at a time.  
A fruit tree has started to sing.  
The little town is farther away than ever.  
I have my arm around the otter,  
holding him by the shoulder.  
The scene out his window is so plentiful  
and everything is billowing with our love.

*For Laura,  
treasured friend and patron*

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*Whale Day*  
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BILLY COLLINS is the author of twelve collections of poetry including *The Rain in Portugal*, *Aimless Love*, *Horoscopes for the Dead*, *Ballistics*, *The Trouble with Poetry*, *Nine Horses*, *Sailing Alone Around the Room*, *Questions About Angels*, *The Art of Drowning*, and *Picnic, Lightning*. He is also the editor of *Poetry 180: A Turning Back to Poetry*, *180 More: Extraordinary Poems for Every Day*, and *Bright Wings: An Illustrated Anthology of Poems About Birds*. A former Distinguished Professor of English at Lehman College of the City University of New York, Collins served as Poet Laureate of the United States from 2001 to 2003 and as New York State Poet from 2004 to 2006. In 2016 he was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He lives in Florida with his wife, Suzannah.



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