

100 Kinds of Silence:

A Mindful Morning with

Billy Collins



(Image: Christopher Felver)

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Introduction to Poetry

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

or press an ear against its hive.

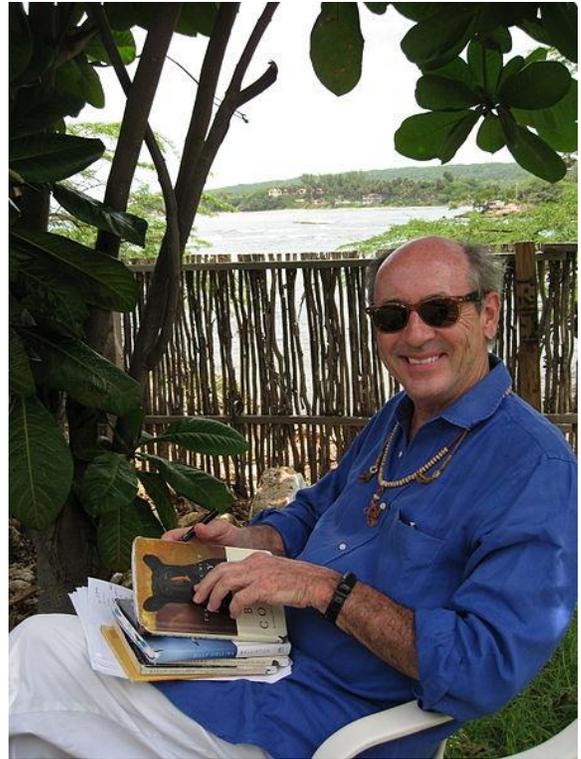
I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

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

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

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

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



(Image: Suzannah Gilman/Wikimedia Commons)

By Billy Collins, from *The Apple That Astonished Paris*. © University of Arkansas Press, 2006.

Grave

What do you think of my new glasses
I asked as I stood under a shade tree
before the joined grave of my parents,

and what followed was a long silence
that descended on the rows of the dead
and on the fields and the woods beyond,

one of the one hundred kinds of silence
according to the Chinese belief,
each one distinct from the others,

but the differences being so faint
that only a few special monks
were able to tell them apart.

They make you look very scholarly,
I heard my mother say

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once I lay down on the ground

and pressed an ear into the soft grass.
Then I rolled over and pressed
my other ear to the ground,

the ear my father likes to speak into,
but he would say nothing,
and I could not find a silence

among the 100 Chinese silences
that would fit the one that he created
even though I was the one

who had just made up the business
of the 100 Chinese silences -
the Silence of the Night Boat

and the Silence of the Lotus,
cousin to the Silence of the Temple Bell
only deeper and softer, like petals, at its farthest edges.

By Billy Collins, from *Horoscopes for the Dead*. © Random House, 2011.



(Image: Joe Prekop)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And "Ten Days of Spring Rain Have Kept Me Indoors"
is a servant who shows me into the room
where a poet with a thin beard
is sitting on a mat with a jug of wine
whispering something about clouds and cold wind,
about sickness and the loss of friends.

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

By Billy Collins, from *Sailing Alone Around the Room*. © Random House, 2002.

The Dead

The dead are always looking down on us, they say.
while we are putting on our shoes or making a sandwich,
they are looking down through the glass bottom boats of heaven
as they row themselves slowly through eternity.

They watch the tops of our heads moving below on earth,
and when we lie down in a field or on a couch,
drugged perhaps by the hum of a long afternoon,
they think we are looking back at them,
which makes them lift their oars and fall silent
and wait, like parents, for us to close our eyes.

By Billy Collins, from *Horoscopes for the Dead*. © Random House, 2011.



(Image: Wikimedia Commons)

Questions About Angels

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

No curiosity about 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 though 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



Angel, 1904 copyright free image

to glance at his watch because she has been dancing
forever, and now it is very late, even for musicians.

By Billy Collins, from *Questions about Angels*. © University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999.

Forgetfulness

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

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

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

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

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

It has floated away down a dark mythological river
whose name begins with an L as far as you can recall

well on your own way to oblivion where you will join those
who have even forgotten how to swim and how to ride a bicycle.

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

By Billy Collins, from *Questions About Angels*. © University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999.

You can see a terrific recitation of this Forgetfulness poem on YouTube [here](#)

Or search YouTube for the title: [Learning Recitation: Jackson Hille reads "Forgetfulness" by Billy Collins](#)



(Image: Sherrie Thai)

Litany

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

By Billy Collins, from *Nine Horses*. © Random House, 2003.

The Revenant

I am the dog you put to sleep,
as you like to call the needle of oblivion,
come back to tell you this simple thing:
I never liked you--not one bit.

When I licked your face,
I thought of biting off your nose.
When I watched you toweling yourself dry,
I wanted to leap and unman you with a snap.

I resented the way you moved,
your lack of animal grace,
the way you would sit in a chair to eat,
a napkin on your lap, knife in your hand.

I would have run away,
but I was too weak, a trick you taught me
while I was learning to sit and heel,
and--greatest of insults--shake hands without a hand.

I admit the sight of the leash
would excite me
but only because it meant I was about
to smell things you had never touched.

You do not want to believe this,
but I have no reason to lie.
I hated the car, the rubber toys,
disliked your friends and, worse, your relatives.

The jingling of my tags drove me mad.
You always scratched me in the wrong place.
All I ever wanted from you
was food and fresh water in my metal bowls.

While you slept, I watched you breathe
as the moon rose in the sky.
It took all of my strength
not to raise my head and howl.

Now I am free of the collar,
the yellow raincoat, monogrammed sweater,
the absurdity of your lawn,
and that is all you need to know about this place

except what you already supposed
and are glad it did not happen sooner--

that everyone here can read and write,
the dogs in poetry, the cats and the others in prose.

By Billy Collins, from *The Trouble with Poetry*. © Random House, 2005.

Envoy

Go, little book,
out of this house and into the world,

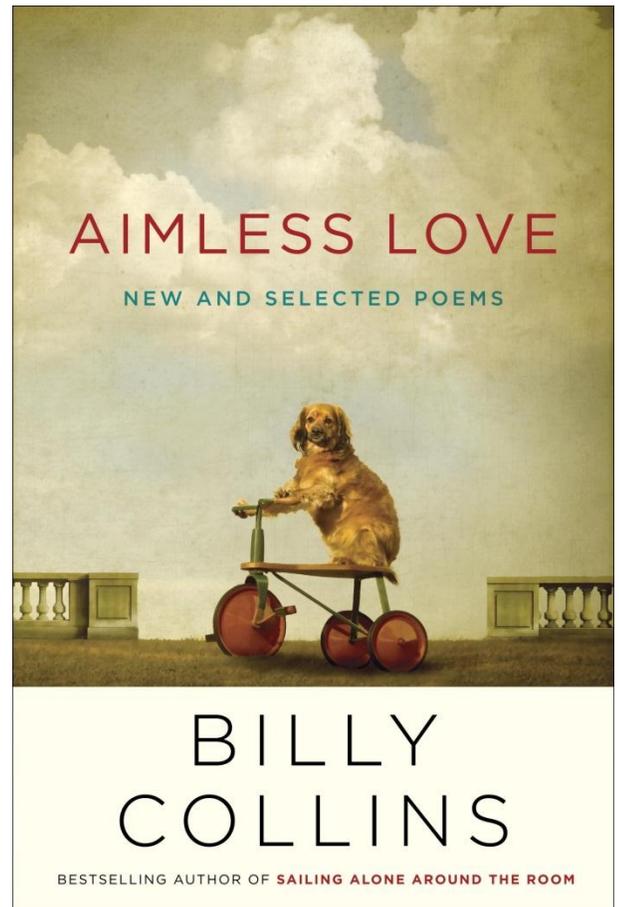
carriage made of paper rolling toward town
bearing a single passenger
beyond the reach of this jittery pen
and far from the desk and the nosy gooseneck lamp.

It is time to decamp,
put on a jacket and venture outside,
time to be regarded by other eyes,
bound to be held in foreign hands.

So off you go, infants of the brain,
with a wave and some bits of fatherly advice:

stay out as late as you like,
don't bother to call or write,
and talk to as many strangers as you can.

By Billy Collins, from *Aimless Love*. © Random House, 2013.



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