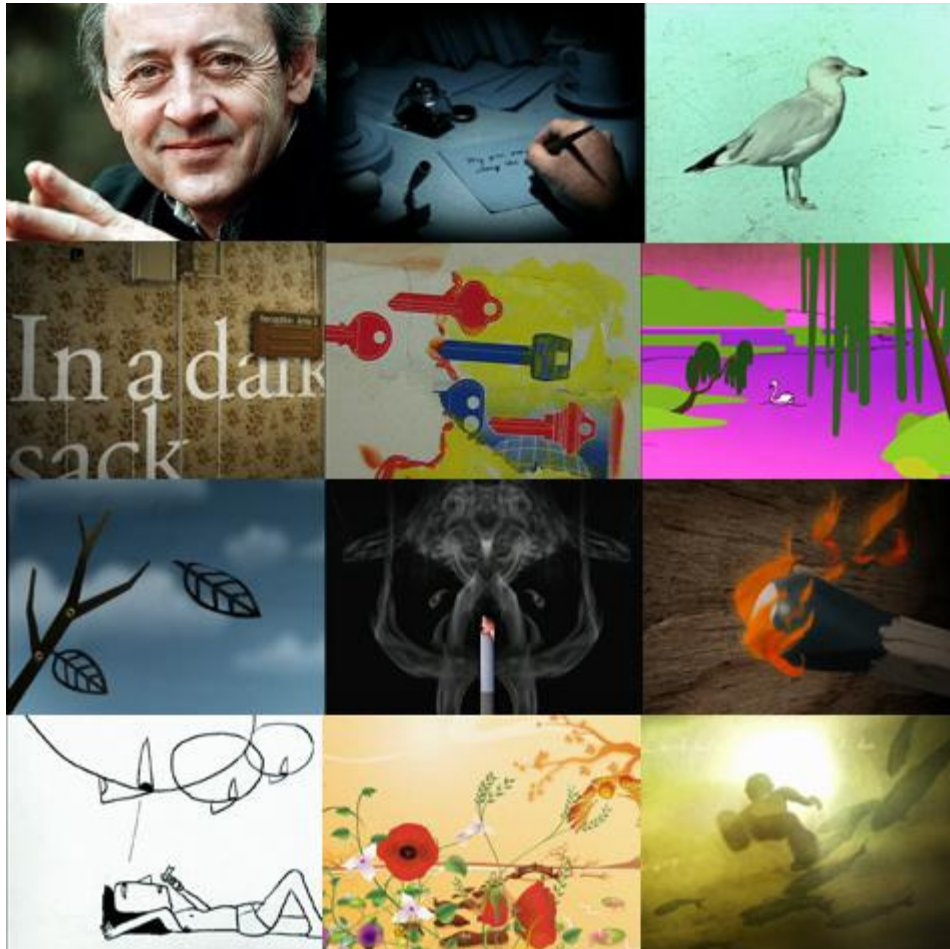


# BILLY COLLINS

Poems In Video



Youtube Playlist



**Learn English by:**

- 1. Watching the video**
- 2. Watching the video with the text**
- 3. Reciting the poems to classmates**  
(with video on but sound off).



## The Country

I wondered about you  
when you told me never to leave  
a box of wooden, strike-anywhere matches  
lying around the house because the mice

might get into them and start a fire.  
But your face was absolutely straight  
when you twisted the lid down on the round tin  
where the matches, you said, are always stowed.

Who could sleep that night?  
Who could whisk away the thought  
of the one unlikely mouse  
padding along a cold water pipe

behind the floral wallpaper  
gripping a single wooden match  
between the needles of his teeth?  
Who could not see him rounding a corner,

the blue tip scratching against a rough-hewn beam,  
the sudden flare, and the creature  
for one bright, shining moment  
suddenly thrust ahead of his time—

now a fire-starter, now a torch-bearer  
in a forgotten ritual, little brown druid  
illuminating some ancient night.  
Who could fail to notice,

lit up in the blazing insulation,  
the tiny looks of wonderment on the faces  
of his fellow mice, one-time inhabitants  
of what once was your house in the country?

## **Budapest**

My pen moves along the page  
like the snout of a strange animal,  
shaped like a human arm and  
dressed in the sleeve  
of a loose green sweater.

I watch it sniffing the paper ceaselessly,  
intent as any forager  
that has nothing on its mind  
but the grubs and insects that  
will allow it to live another day.

It wants only to be here tomorrow,  
dressed perhaps in a sleeve of a plaid shirt,  
nose pressed against the page,  
writing a few more dutiful lines  
while I gaze out the window and  
imagine Budapest,  
or some other city  
where I have never been.

## **Hunger**

The fox you lug over your shoulder  
in a dark sack  
has cut a hole with a knife  
and escaped.

The sudden lightness makes you think  
you are stronger  
as you walk back to your small cottage  
through a forest that covers the world.

## The Best Cigarette



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

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

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

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

## Some Days

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

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

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

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

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

## Now And Then

This poet of the Tsong dynasty is so miserable  
The wind sighs  
A single swan passes over head  
And he is alone on the water in his skiff  
If only he appreciated life  
In eleventh century China  
As much as I do  
No loud cartoons on television  
No music from the ice cream truck  
Just the calls of many birds  
And the steady flow of the water clock

## Forgetfulness - Billy Collins



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **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.

## **Walking Across The Atlantic**



I wait for the holiday crowd to clear the beach  
before stepping onto the first wave.  
Soon I am walking across the Atlantic  
thinking about Spain,  
checking for whales, waterspouts.

I feel the water holding up my shifting weight.  
Tonight I will sleep on its rocking surface.

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

## The Art of Drowning



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

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

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

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

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



## Dharma



The way the dog trots out the front door  
every morning  
without a hat or an umbrella,  
without any money  
or the keys to her doghouse  
never fails to fill the saucer of my heart  
with milky admiration.

Who provides a finer example  
of a life without encumbrance—  
Thoreau in his curtainless hut  
with a single plate, a single spoon?  
Gandhi with his staff and his wiry spectacles?

Off she goes into the material world  
with nothing but her brown coat  
and her modest blue collar,  
following only her wet nose,  
the twin portals of her steady breathing,  
followed only by the plume of her tail.

If only she did not shove the cat aside  
every morning  
and eat all his food  
what a model of self-containment she  
would be,  
what a paragon of earthly detachment.  
If only she were not so eager  
for a rub behind the ears,  
so acrobatic in her welcomes,  
if only I were not her god.

## Man In Space



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

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

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

## Sweet Talk



You are not the Mona Lisa  
with that relentless look.  
Or Venus borne over the froth  
of waves on a pink half shell.  
Or an odalisque by Delacroix,  
veils lapping at your nakedness.  
You are more like the sunlight  
of Edward Hopper,  
especially when it slants  
against the eastern side  
of a white clapboard house  
in the early hours of the morning,  
with no figure standing  
at a window in a violet bathrobe,  
just the sunlight,  
the columns of the front porch  
and the long shadows  
they throw down  
upon the dark green lawn, baby.

## 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.

## Snow Day



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

trying to hear what those three girls are plotting,  
what riot is afoot,  
which small queen is about to be brought down.

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

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

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

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

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

So this is where the children hide all day,  
These are the nests where they letter and draw,  
where they put on their bright miniature jackets,  
all darting and climbing and sliding,  
all but the few girls whispering by the fence.

And now I am listening hard  
in the grandiose silence of the snow,

## 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.

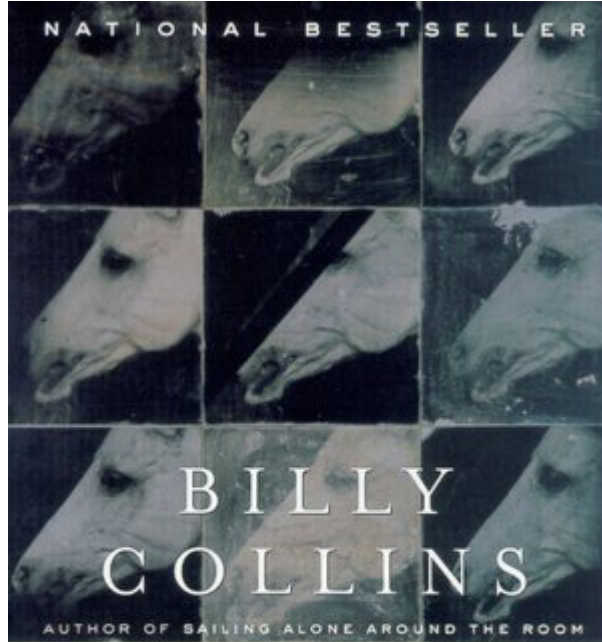
The jingling of my tags drove me mad.  
You always scratched me in the wrong place.  
All I ever wanted from you  
was food and fresh water in my metal bowls.

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.

NATIONAL BESTSELLER



BILLY  
COLLINS

AUTHOR OF SAILING ALONE AROUND THE ROOM

Nine Horses

*Poems*

"A poet of plentitude, irony, and Augustan grace."—*The New Yorker*