

# "My Life" by Billy Collins

Sometimes I see it as a straight line  
drawn with a pencil and a ruler  
transecting the circle of the world

or as a finger piercing  
a smoke ring, casual, inquisitive

but then the sun will come out  
or the phone will ring  
and I will cease to wonder

if it is one thing,  
a large ball of air and memory,  
or many things,  
a string of small farming towns,  
a dark road winding through them.

Let us say it is a field  
I have been hoeing every day,  
hoeing and singing,  
then going to sleep in one of its furrows,

or now that it is more than half over,  
a partially open door,  
rain dripping from eaves.

Like yours, it could be anything,  
a nest with one egg,  
a hallway that leads to a thousand rooms ---  
whatever happens to float into view  
when I close my eyes

or look out a window  
for more than a few minutes,  
so that some days I think  
it must be everything and nothing at once.

But this morning, sitting up in bed,  
wearing my black sweater and my glasses,  
the curtains drawn and the windows up,

I am a lake, my poem is an empty boat,  
and my life is the breeze that blows  
through the whole scene

stirring everything it touches ---  
the surface of the water, the limp sail,  
even the heavy, leafy trees along the shore.

by Billy Collins

How does he do this? I mean, write about trifles, the little moments of any ordinary day, a wry, half-smile flickering all the way through the poem, and yet at the same time manage to address something wonderful? Something, well, something that brings a deeper breath to your lungs, or that catches you off guard and takes a weight from your heart? Practically any one of his poems can stir something in you before your mind can quite decipher what it is that has affected you so. This, of course, is one of the hallmarks of great poetry. It was Wallace Stevens who once said that "poetry must resist the intelligence almost successfully."

Billy Collins is a recent poet laureate of the United States, and the most widely read poet in America today. The deceptive simplicity of his work, I think, must be one of the reasons for his success, which is far greater than any other American poet since the time of Robert Frost, who was also a "poet of the people." Collins is a poet of the vernacular, of everyday speech and things, yet with a twist. His work seems so simple, so transparently obvious in its everyday concerns, that it would seem to have no interest in resisting anyone's intelligence, not even "almost." Yet it can deliver a side blow that can have you either bent double with laughter, wincing at a truth you may know but not have especially wanted to name—

*The name of the author is the first to go*

he says, with ironic self-deprecation, in the first line of the poem "Forgetfulness"—or gasping a little for air at the sheer vision he has opened up in a single phrase or a line. And there can be times when he manages, astoundingly, to achieve all these effects at the same time.

This poem, "My Life," winds me effortlessly between its banks like a river from beginning to end, no hard knocks, no rapids, all flow and ease; yet by the time I come out at the other end something has happened; I feel different, and I don't quite know why.

All the images are from the daily round, and since he is describing his life, that may seem natural enough. But would you see your life

*as a straight line  
drawn with a pencil and a ruler  
transecting the circle of the world?*

So matter of fact, so deliberate and precise? So . . . geometrical? It is almost as if someone sat down and drew up a life in much the same way as you dissect a triangle. There is something so cleanly dispassionate about this image, and this is just the quality that Collins carries through so much of his work. As if he were floating slightly above the scene he is describing; or as if he were always at a certain distance from himself, noting with a certain humor the foibles and little daily rituals that fill out the texture of his life.

Distance does not necessarily imply a disconnection. On the contrary, it can give a perspective that fosters a kind of warmth, a fondness for what is being observed. And it is distance, too, that can allow us to see the humorous side of things, especially when it comes to ourselves. It was Czeslaw Milosz who said, in his poem "*Love*" that

*Love means to look at yourself  
The way one looks at distant things*

Milosz goes on in the same poem to say that it is distance that allows us to realize we are only one thing among many, and that when we see life that way, our heart is healed of ills we may not even have known we were suffering from.

So here is Billy Collins, inspecting his life, and for a moment he sees it

*. . . as a finger piercing  
a smoke ring, casual, inquisitive,*

It's something of a game, blowing smoke rings, and even more of a game to try and pass your finger through it. Life can seem like that, Collins tells us; and again, whoever would have thought of such an image to describe a life?

Collins always seems to manage to come at the familiar from an odd angle, and the very oddity is awakening, some-how. I *feel* my life in a new way when taking in this image, even if I can't quite articulate what the newness is. The events, the stuff of life, are as evanescent as smoke, it suggests; and my passage through this hall of mirrors is all curiosity and wondering. Pause for a moment and consider this image for yourself, the feeling or the sensation it arouses in you, the associations it evokes from your own life's journey.

And as if to make his point, the whole image disappears in a ray of sunshine, just as the cards in a magician's hand disappear up his sleeve, and we are back in Collins's day, in which, for a moment, the sun has come out, or the phone has rung.

Excuse me for a moment, let this poem look after itself for the foreseeable future, while I answer the phone, or at least contemplate its ringing tone.

Except that, when it comes to poem-making, the tele-phone is as fair game in Collins's mind as a smoke ring is. Anything, anything at all, is likely to work its way into one of his poems, since anything and everything is equally a part of our living world. This is it, you see, he seems to be saying. Don't think poetry and the poetic image must always come on wings from some other, transcendent world; or from deep deep down in the archeology of our unconscious. No, the visible world of pens and rulers and telephones also comes tinged with an uncommon light, should we wish to see it that way. And Collins does.

So is it one thing, or many things, your life

*—a large ball of air and memory,*

perhaps? Here he is again, edging the familiar right up to the strange. Well, isn't it strange, to think of your life as a ball of air and memory? Strange, and perhaps disconcerting somehow? When we are very old, perhaps it is only our memories that keep us alive; that, and air—pure, thin air. But then again, his life (and ours, by implication) might equally be

*a string of small farming towns,  
a dark road winding through them.*

How comforting, to think of a life this way, a series of settled communities with established traditions, all tilling the earth and sowing seeds, everything connected, given continuity, by a winding road. That the road is dark we probably take for granted, for who can expect to see where that road leads? Stanley Kunitz, the oldest poet still at work in the Western world, offers a somewhat similar image of warmth and continuity when he describes his own long life in the poem "The Layers." He speaks of the milestones receding in the distance toward the horizon,

*and the slow fires trailing  
from the abandoned camp-sites,*

Collins goes on to add another farming image, comparing his life to a field he has been hoeing, one in whose furrows he curls up to sleep in, which reminds me that we all make a bed of our lives to lie in. That good old farming wisdom, reaping what we sow. So many of Collins's poems let loose a cascade of images, one after the other sailing by, as if to say, if that one doesn't fit, then try this one? And so it is here, where he says of his life,

*Like yours, it could be anything,*

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*so that some days I think*

*it must be everything and nothing at once.*

And right there, in those last couple of lines, you might think him whimsical; or, instead, approaching the insight of some old Buddhist sage; or both, all at the same time. Because isn't that what the deepest wisdom is like—so simple, almost offhand, that it might pass right over your shoulder without you catching even the scent of it?

But let's not stray too far from the concrete and the quotidian: that would never do in a Billy Collins poem. So here we are, finally, this very morning, and Collins is

*. . . sitting up in bed,  
wearing my black sweater and my glasses,  
the curtains drawn and the windows up,*

and he paints one last, beautiful picture that manages to bring together all in one scene both the physicality and the ineffability of the life that we live. He returns us to the time-less metaphor of life as breath, as wind—*ruach*, the Hebrews called it, breath-as-spirit—and it is this that pushes his poem along, and that stirs into life everything that is. This is the genius of Billy Collins, that he can lead us seamlessly from his black sweater and his glasses to the living spirit that moves across the waters and through all things.