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**Billy Collins**

Photograph by Suzannah Gail Collins  
Cover photograph: self-portrait of the poet

[FloridaStatePoetsAssociation.org](http://FloridaStatePoetsAssociation.org)



**Only Child**

I never wished for a sibling, boy or girl.  
Center of the universe,  
I had the back of my parents' car  
all to myself. I could look out one window  
then slide over to the other window  
without any quibbling over territorial rights,  
and whenever I played a game  
on the floor of my bedroom, it was always my turn.

Not until my parents entered their 90s  
did I long for a sister, a nurse I named Mary,  
who worked in a hospital  
five minutes away from their house  
and who would drop everything,  
even a thermometer, whenever I called.  
*"Be there in a jiff"* and *"On my way!"*  
were two of her favorite expressions, and mine.

And now that the parents are dead,  
I wish I could meet Mary for coffee  
every now and then at that Italian place  
with the blue awning where we would sit  
and reminisce, even on rainy days.  
I would gaze into her green eyes  
and see my parents, my mother looking out  
of Mary's right eye and my father staring out of her left,

which would remind me of what an odd duck  
I was as a child, a little prince and a loner,  
who would break off from his gang of friends  
on a Saturday and find a hedge to hide behind.  
And I would tell Mary about all that, too,  
and never embarrass her by asking about  
her nonexistence, and maybe we  
would have another espresso and a pastry  
and I would always pay the bill and walk her home.

~ Billy Collins  
*From The Rain in Portugal*



*Billy Collins at home. Photograph by Suzannah Gail Collins*

## FSPA CHANCELLOR CAROL FROST QUERIES Billy Collins

**Frost:** Is your edgy sense of humor and your ease with narrative related to your family, close or far? What else?

**Collins:** You know, I've never given much thought to whatever role my family played in my poems, probably because I was an only child and so there wasn't much family to think about. If the humor in some of my poems has a parental source, it would be my father. He was an irrepressibly funny man with a lot of similarly inclined male friends. He didn't tell jokes, rather he had a comic way of looking at things. He poked fun at people. Riding around with him was a real show. But humor was not easily admitted in poetry when I began reading poetry in school. All those bearded men with three names! After a while, reading poems out of school, I discovered poets who were funny with serious intent: Larkin in particular, then Thom Gunn, Kenneth Koch, Stevie Smith, William Matthews. And southern California poets like Ron Koertge and Gerald Locklin. At first, my poems that were humorous were too jokey, maybe an over-reaction to all that humor repression. Only later did the spirit of my mother enter the poems. Then my poems began to have heart. They also became longer and less snide, more capacious so as to make room for the heart. So thank you, Mom and Dad.

*(Continued on next page)*



**Frost:** If, as I've heard you say, that many of your poems start at a point of irritation, can you tell what sort of irritation gets you started (other than this list of questions, or including it)?

**Collins:** Any realization I've ever had about poetry has taken place while I'm writing a poem. I realized that an irritation or annoyance could be a completely adequate source of a poem as I was writing "Another Reason I Don't Keep a Gun in the House," which is about a neighbor's incessantly barking dog, the implication of the title being that if I had a gun, I would've shot the dog—very uncharacteristic of me. That poem was written so long ago, we can be pretty sure that Time has silenced that dog. Either that, or he's about 40 years old not and able to bark very loudly. I encourage young poets to let their faults into their poems. Too many of them want to show only their good sides, like actors having their picture taken. A lot of today's poets are angry but their anger is political, not poetic. They have opinions, which are fixed. The result is poems that are more like rain than snow. They fall instead of flying, to borrow a metaphor from Howard Nemerov.

*(Continued on next page)*



*Billy and Suzannah Collins. on their wedding day, on a beach in Southampton, New York.*

**Frost:** How can humor turn irritation into something more cosmic?

Do you measure the kind or amount of cruelty in a poem to reach your audience?

**Collins:** There are hate poems, poems of invective and satirical attack. Martial and Catullus are unsparingly cruel. Augustan satire is nasty and British, but usually not short. Today, poems tend to be against cruelty. That's the message. Being cruel these days risks losing your audience. Unless you wrap the barb in humor.

**Frost:** Who is your audience?

**Collins:** I picture my audience as one person, someone with a sense of humor who loves poetry and can enjoy sitting on a bench watching some ducks paddling along the shore of a lake. Luckily, that reader has multiplied into a lot of readers—a lot of benches and ducks!



*With a race horse named after him—Billysbirthdaygirl, Ocala, Florida. Photograph by Suzannah Gail Collins*

**Frost:** Is there anyone from the past can you think you'd like to have read your poems?

**Collins:** That's a very good question and not because I have a good answer. I'd have to think a minute. I'd like to look over Frank O'Hara's shoulder as he paged through a book of my poems. I would add John Donne and Emily Dickinson, but they wouldn't recognize my poems as poems. They wouldn't know what they were. I'd have to explain, which I'd be happy to do. I'd tell them the story of how Rhyme and Meter got lost in the woods and were incinerated in a witch's oven.

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**Frost:** Would artificial intelligence ruin poetry?

**Collins:** If I knew the future, I would spend a lot of time at Tampa Bay Downs, betting on the ponies.

**Frost:** How have your poems changed over time?  
Is *Whale Day* your most serious book?

**Collins:** *Questions About Angels* was published 30 years ago, and I'd say the voice in those poems can still be heard in *Whale Day*, which appeared last year. When I was in my mid-30's I happened to find myself with a persona, that is, a voice that seemed to be distinctly mine. Prior to that, I sounded too much like the poets I was imitating. I was heavily under the influence. Now, I had a way of sounding. It was as if a wooden puppet had come to life in the shop of a toy maker. If that voice is like a gear, I'm still in it. And I'm still trying (and failing) to do the same thing I was trying to do back then: perfectly combine in a poem seriousness and comedy so that the reader is simultaneously amused and a little shaken. The near impossibility of doing this keeps me trying. The poem that comes closest to this perfect mix for me is Donne's "The Flea." It's both sexy and hilarious. Give that a try! It's a matter of managing to avoid the extremes of thinking (cerebral poem) and feeling (emotional poem). This is usually accomplished by taking the third way, which is irony. Too bad the down-turned mouth on the mask of Tragedy and the rictus smile of Comedy are not accompanied by the Mona-Lisa-like smirk of Irony.

**Frost:** Do you have a short list of poetic principles for readers and writers to remember or forget?

**Collins:** Poetic advice. For the poet, don't get ahead of the reader until it's time. That is, don't make your move too soon.

Also, always bear in mind the Indifference of the Reader. The reader needs to be won over. There are many ways to do this. Charm is one. Landscape is another.

For the reader: 83% of contemporary poetry is not worth reading, so don't be afraid to stop and turn the page. A poem ends where you decide to stop reading it. With poetry, it's an easy bail because you've only invested less than a minute of your time. It's not like looking for a reason to continue when you're on page 155 of a deteriorating novel.

Shop around until you find the good poets (the 17% Club) and read them every day.

By the way, I also think 83% of movies aren't worth watching, 83% of cars aren't worth driving, and 83% of restaurants aren't worth patronizing.

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**Billy Collins** is an 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*, *Bright Wings: An Illustrated Anthology of Poems About Birds*, and his most recent offering, *Whale Day*. A former Distinguished Professor 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.

**Carol Frost** studied at the Sorbonne and earned degrees from the State University of Oneonta and Syracuse University. She currently teaches poetry and directs Winter with the Writers at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida. Frost is the author of numerous collections, including her newest book entitled *Alias City* (Mad-Hat Press). Its signature poem appeared in the November 2015 issue of *Poetry*. Frost has received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, won several Pushcart Prizes, and has been nominated for many more. She is one of five finalists for the poet laureateship of Florida and is a Chancellor of the Florida State Poets Association.



Billy Collins on stage with Carol Frost, at a Winter with the Writers event, Rollins College, Winter Park.



Billy Collins with Chris Calhoun, his agent, at a New York City art gallery.



Carol Frost

# BY BILLY COLLINS

## POETRY

### **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 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.

~ Billy Collins  
From *Whale Day*



# BY BILLY COLLINS

## POETRY

### Species

I have no need for a biscuit,  
a chew toy, or two bowls on a stand.  
No desire to investigate a shrub  
or sleep on an oval mat by the door,

but sometimes waiting at a light,  
I start to identify with the blond Lab  
with his head out the rear window  
of the station wagon idling next to me.

And if we speed off together  
and I can see his dark lips flapping  
in the wind and his eyes closed  
then I am sitting in the balcony of envy.

Look at *you*, I usually say  
when I see a terrier on a leash  
trotting briskly along as if running  
his weekday morning errands,

and I stop to stare at any dog  
Who is peering around a corner,  
returning a ball to the thrower,  
or staring back at me from a porch.

So early this morning  
There was no avoiding a twinge  
of jealousy for the young spaniel,  
tied to a bench in the shade,

who is now wagging  
not only his tail but the whole of himself  
as a woman in a summer dress  
emerged from the glass doors of the post office

then crouched down in front of him  
taking his chin in her hand,  
and said in a mock-scolding tone  
"I told you I'd be right back, silly,"

leaving the dog to sit  
and return her gaze with a look  
of understanding which seemed to say  
"I know. I know. I never doubted that you would."

~ Billy Collins  
From *The Rain in Portugal*

# BY BILLY COLLINS

## POETRY

### **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 mountains 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,

# BY BILLY COLLINS

## POETRY

and for his trouble he was stood up  
with fourteen other insurrectionists—  
save Connelly 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.

~ Billy Collins  
From *Whale Day*

### **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.

~ Billy Collins  
From *Whale Day*



# BY BILLY COLLINS

## POETRY

### **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.

~ Billy Collins  
From *Whale Day*

Here is a link to purchase Billy Collin's book [The Rain in Portugal](#)

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