

Billy Collins poems

The Lanyard

The other day I was ricocheting slowly
off the blue walls of this room,
moving as if underwater from typewriter to piano,
from bookshelf to an envelope lying on the floor,
when I found myself in the L section of the
dictionary where my eyes fell upon the word
lanyard.

No cookie nibbled by a French novelist
could send one into the past more suddenly—
a past where I sat at a workbench at a camp
by a deep Adirondack lake
learning how to braid long thin plastic strips
into a lanyard, a gift for my mother.

I had never seen anyone use a lanyard
or wear one, if that's what you did with them,
but that did not keep me from crossing
strand over strand again and again
until I had made a boxy
red and white lanyard for my mother.

She gave me life and milk from her breasts,
and I gave her a lanyard.
She nursed me in many a sick room,
lifted spoons of medicine to my lips,
laid cold face-cloths on my forehead,
and then led me out into the airy light

and taught me to walk and swim,
and I, in turn, presented her with a lanyard.
Here are thousands of meals, she said,
and here is clothing and a good education.
And here is your lanyard, I replied,
which I made with a little help from a counselor.

Here is a breathing body and a beating heart,
strong legs, bones and teeth,
and two clear eyes to read the world, she
whispered, and here, I said, is the lanyard I made
at camp. And here, I wish to say to her now,
is a smaller gift—not the worn truth

that you can never repay your mother,
but the rueful admission that when she took
the two-tone lanyard from my hand,
I was as sure as a boy could be
that this useless, worthless thing I wove
out of boredom would be enough to make us
even.

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.

No Time

In a rush this weekday morning,
I tap the horn as I speed past the cemetery
where my parents are buried
side by side beneath a slab of smooth granite.

Then, all day, I think of him rising up
to give me that look
of knowing disapproval
while my mother calmly tells him to lie back
down.

Questions About Angels

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

No curiosity about how 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 through 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 to glance at his watch because she has been dancing forever, and now it is very late, even for musicians.

Cheerios

One bright morning in a restaurant in Chicago as I waited for my eggs and toast, I opened the *Tribune* only to discover that I was the same age as Cheerios.

Indeed, I was a few months older than Cheerios for today, the newspaper announced, was the seventieth birthday of Cheerios whereas mine had occurred earlier in the year.

Already I could hear them whispering behind my stooped and threadbare back, Why that dude's older than Cheerios the way they used to say

Why that's as old as the hills,
only the hills are much older than Cheerios or any American breakfast cereal, and more noble and enduring are the hills,

I surmised as a bar of sunlight illuminated my orange juice.

“The Names”

Yesterday, I lay awake in the palm of the night.
A soft rain stole in, unhelped by any breeze,
And when I saw the silver glaze on the windows,
I started with A, with Ackerman, as it happened,
Then Baxter and Calabro,
Davis and Eberling, names falling into place
As droplets fell through the dark.
Names printed on the ceiling of the night.
Names slipping around a watery bend.
Twenty-six willows on the banks of a stream.
In the morning, I walked out barefoot
Among thousands of flowers
Heavy with dew like the eyes of tears,
And each had a name —
Fiori inscribed on a yellow petal
Then Gonzalez and Han, Ishikawa and Jenkins.
Names written in the air
And stitched into the cloth of the day.
A name under a photograph taped to a mailbox.
Monogram on a torn shirt,
I see you spelled out on storefront windows
And on the bright unfurled awnings of this city.
I say the syllables as I turn a corner —
Kelly and Lee,
Medina, Nardella, and O’Connor.
When I peer into the woods,
I see a thick tangle where letters are hidden
As in a puzzle concocted for children.
Parker and Quigley in the twigs of an ash,
Rizzo, Schubert, Torres, and Upton,
Secrets in the boughs of an ancient maple.
Names written in the pale sky.
Names rising in the updraft amid buildings.
Names silent in stone
Or cried out behind a door.
Names blown over the earth and out to sea.
In the evening — weakening light, the last swallows.
A boy on a lake lifts his oars.
A woman by a window puts a match to a candle,
And the names are outlined on the rose clouds —
Vanacore and Wallace,
(let X stand, if it can, for the ones unfound)
Then Young and Ziminsky, the final jolt of Z.
Names etched on the head of a pin.
One name spanning a bridge, another undergoing a
tunnel.
A blue name needled into the skin.
Names of citizens, workers, mothers and fathers,
The bright-eyed daughter, the quick son.
Alphabet of names in a green field.
Names in the small tracks of birds.

Names lifted from a hat
Or balanced on the tip of the tongue.
Names wheeled into the dim warehouse of memory.
So many names, there is barely room on the walls of
the heart.

Another Reason Why I Don't Keep A Gun In The House

The neighbors' dog will not stop barking.
He is barking the same high, rhythmic bark
that he barks every time they leave the house.
They must switch him on on their way out.

The neighbors' dog will not stop barking.
I close all the windows in the house
and put on a Beethoven symphony full blast
but I can still hear him muffled under the music,
barking, barking, barking,

and now I can see him sitting in the orchestra,
his head raised confidently as if Beethoven
had included a part for barking dog.

When the record finally ends he is still barking,
sitting there in the oboe section barking,
his eyes fixed on the conductor who is
entreating him with his baton

while the other musicians listen in respectful
silence to the famous barking dog solo,
that endless coda that first established
Beethoven as an innovative genius.