

Billy Collins

Ballistics

When I came across the stop-action photograph
of a bullet that had just passed through a book—
the pages bulging with the force—

I forgot all about the marvels of photography
and began to wonder which book
the photographer had selected for the shot.

Many novels sprang to mind
including those of Raymond Chandler
where an extra bullet would hardly be noticed.

Non-fiction offered too many choices—
a history of Scottish lighthouses,
a biography of Joan of Arc and so forth.

Or it could be an anthology of medieval literature,
the bullet having just beheaded Sir Gawain
and pierced the motley band of pilgrims.

But later, as I was drifting off to sleep,
I realized that the executed book
was a recent book of poems written

by someone of whom I was not fond
and that the bullet must have passed through
his writing with little resistance

and then through the author's photograph,
through the beard, the round glasses,
and the special poet's hat he likes to wear.

Geneology

I could spend a week bicycling
through the pages of a long novel
ringing my bell at the end of every chapter,

or I can squander a summer holding
a garden hose in one hand and a drink in the other.

In other words, I can set my mind on Aimless
and let go of the wheel,
but the minute I pick up a pen
all I can think about is death and more death.

Sometimes, I rotate the notion of it
like a geometric figure.
Other times it seems a thing left out in the rain.

And when I think of death and me,
I used to picture a boy and his bad uncle,

for I once thought I would be unhappy
to leave the world,
its clouds and hedges, its snow and long embraces.

But today, with a pen propped in my hand
and the windows gray with rain,
I feel eager to join the dead,
those ghostly multitudes milling in eternity.

What a thrill to enter into their midst,
to be the subject of their eerie scrutiny,
their blank, lotus-eating faces,
their pale white shoulders pressed together.

And how happy I will be to join the dead of Ireland
where the tree of my father grew in the lanes
of the city of Cork and in the lanes of time.

And happy, also, to join the dead of Uist,
one of the smaller Outer Hebrides
where those who brought forth my mother,
without even knowing it
inhabited an island of little but wind, rock, and sheep

before they fell down in their tracks,
closed their eyes in bed,
or were tossed over the side of a small boat
by a deep swell or a sudden sideways wave.

Oh noble, world-scarred company,
soon to be my company forever,
cousins and strangers alike,

I am putting down my pen and walking out
with a scissors to the garden, crazy with flowers.

What Love Does

A fine thing, or so it sounds
on the radio in the summer
with all the windows rolled down.

Yet it pierces not only the heart
but the eyeball and the scrotum
and the little target of the nipple with arrows.

It turns everything into a symbol
like a storm that breaks loose
in the final chapter of a long novel.

And it may add sparkle to a morning,
or deepen a night
when the bed is ringed with fire.

It teaches you new joys
and new maneuvers—
the takedown, the reversal, the escape.

But mostly it comes and goes,
a bee visiting the center
of one flower, then another.

Even as the ink is drying
on her name, it is off
to visit someone in another city,

a city with two steeples,
rows of brick chimney pots,
and a school with a tree-lined entrance.

It will travel through the night to get there,
and it will arrive like an archangel
through a gate no one ever noticed before.