

The Trouble with Poetry

The trouble with poetry, I realized
as I walked along a beach one night—
cold Florida sand under my bare feet,
a show of stars in the sky—

the trouble with poetry is
that it encourages the writing of more poetry,
more guppies crowding the fish tank,
more baby rabbits
hopping out of their mothers into the dewy grass.

And how will it ever end?
unless the day finally arrives
when we have compared everything in the world
to everything else in the world,

and there is nothing left to do
but quietly close our notebooks
and sit with our hands folded on our desks.

Poetry fills me with joy
and I rise like a feather in the wind.
Poetry fills me with sorrow
and I sink like a chain flung from a bridge.

But mostly poetry fills me
with the urge to write poetry,
to sit in the dark and wait for a little flame
to appear at the tip of my pencil.

And along with that, the longing to steal,
to break into the poems of others
with a flashlight and a ski mask.

And what an unmerry band of thieves we are,
cut-purses, common shoplifters,
I thought to myself
as a cold wave swirled around my feet
and the lighthouse moved its megaphone over the sea,
which is an image I stole directly
from Lawrence Ferlinghetti—
to be perfectly honest for a moment—

the bicycling poet of San Francisco
whose little amusement park of a book
I carried in a side pocket of my uniform
up and down the treacherous halls of high school.

Billy Collins from *The
Trouble with Poetry* 2005

You, Reader

I wonder how you are going to feel
when you find out
that I wrote this instead of you,

that it was I who got up early
to sit in the kitchen
and mention with a pen

the rain-soaked windows,
the ivy wallpaper,
and the goldfish circling in its bowl

Go ahead and turn aside,
bite your lip and tear out the page,
but, listen—it was just a matter of time

before one of us happened
to notice the unlit candles
and the clock humming on the wall.

Plus, nothing happened that morning—
a song on the radio,
a car whistling along the road outside—

and I was only thinking
about the shakers of salt and pepper
that were standing side by side on a place mat.

I wondered if they had become friends
after all these years
or if they were still strangers to one another

like you and I
who manage to be known and unknown
to each other at the same time—

me at this table with a bowl of pears,
you leaning in a doorway somewhere
near some blue hydrangeas, reading this.

Lawrence Ferlinghetti from
A Coney Island of the Mind
1959

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Constantly risking absurdity
and death
whenever he performs
above the heads
of his audience
the poet like an acrobat
climbs on rime
to a high wire of his own making
and balancing on eyebeams
above a sea of faces
paces his way
to the other side of day
performing entrechats
and sleight-of-foot tricks
and other high theatrics
and all without mistaking
any thing
for what it may not be
For he's the super realist
who must perforce perceive
taut truth
before the taking of each stance or step
in his supposed advance
toward that still higher perch
where Beauty stands and waits
with gravity
to start her death-defying leap
And he
a little charleychaplin man
who may or may not catch
her fair eternal form
spreadeagled in the empty air
of existence