

## **Forgetfulness**

*Billy Collins*

The name of the author is the first to go  
followed obediently by the title, the plot,  
the heartbreaking conclusion, the entire novel  
which suddenly becomes one you have never read,  
never even heard of,

as if, one by one, the memories you used to harbor  
decided to retire to the southern hemisphere of the brain,  
to a little fishing village where there are no phones.

Long ago you kissed the names of the nine Muses goodbye  
and watched the quadratic equation pack its bag,  
and even now as you memorize the order of the planets,

something else is slipping away, a state flower perhaps,  
the address of an uncle, the capital of Paraguay.

Whatever it is you are struggling to remember,  
it is not poised on the tip of your tongue,  
not even lurking in some obscure corner of your spleen.

It has floated away down a dark mythological river  
whose name begins with an L as far as you can recall,  
well on your own way to oblivion where you will join those  
who have even forgotten how to swim and how to ride a bicycle.

No wonder you rise in the middle of the night  
to look up the date of a famous battle in a book on war.  
No wonder the moon in the window seems to have drifted  
out of a love poem that you used to know by heart.

**Flames**

*Billy Collins*

Smokey the Bear heads  
into the autumn woods  
with a red can of gasoline  
and a box of wooden matches.

His ranger's hat is cocked  
at a disturbing angle.

His brown fur gleams  
under the high sun  
as his paws, the size  
of catcher's mitts,  
crackle into the distance.

He is sick of dispensing  
warnings to the careless,  
the half-wit camper,  
the dumbbell hiker.

He is going to show them  
how a professional does it.

## **The Death of Santa Claus**

*Charles Webb*

He's had the chest pains for weeks,  
but doctors don't make house  
calls to the North Pole,  
he's let his Blue Cross lapse,  
blood tests make him faint,  
hospital gown always flap  
open, waiting rooms upset  
his stomach, and it's only  
indigestion anyway, he thinks,  
until, feeding the reindeer,  
he feels as if a monster fist  
has grabbed his heart and won't  
stop squeezing. He can't  
breathe, and the beautiful white  
world he loves goes black,  
and he drops on his jelly belly  
in the snow and Mrs. Claus  
tears out of the toy factory  
wailing, and the elves wring  
their little hands, and Rudolph's  
nose blinks like a sad ambulance  
light, and in a tract house  
in Houston, Texas, I'm 8,  
telling my mom that stupid  
kids at school say Santa's a big  
fake, and she sits with me  
on our purple-flowered couch,  
and takes my hand, tears  
in her throat, the terrible  
news rising in her eyes.

## **Mushrooms**

*Sylvia Plath*

Overnight, very  
Whitely, discreetly,  
Very quietly

Our toes, our noses  
Take hold on the loam,  
Acquire the air.

Nobody sees us,  
Stops us, betrays us;  
The small grains make room.

Soft fists insist on  
Heaving the needles,  
The leafy bedding,

Even the paving.  
Our hammers, our rams,  
Earless and eyeless,

Perfectly voiceless,  
Widen the crannies,  
Shoulder through holes. We

Diet on water,  
On crumbs of shadow,  
Bland-mannered, asking

Little or nothing.  
So many of us!  
So many of us!

We are shelves, we are  
Tables, we are meek,  
We are edible,

Nudgers and shovers  
In spite of ourselves.  
Our kind multiplies:

We shall by morning  
Inherit the earth.  
Our foot's in the door.

## **Night Journey**

*Theodore Roethke*

Now as the train bears west,  
Its rhythm rocks the earth,  
And from my Pullman berth  
I stare into the night  
While others take their rest.  
Bridges of iron lace,  
A suddenness of trees,  
A lap of mountain mist  
All cross my line of sight,  
Then a bleak wasted place,  
And a lake below my knees.  
Full on my neck I feel  
The straining at a curve;  
My muscles move with steel,  
I wake in every nerve.  
I watch a beacon swing  
From dark to blazing bright;  
We thunder through ravines  
And gullies washed with light.  
Beyond the mountain pass  
Mist deepens on the pane;  
We rush into a rain  
That rattles double glass.  
Wheels shake the roadbed stone,  
The pistons jerk and shove,  
I stay up half the night  
To see the land I love.

## The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter

*Ezra Pound*

While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead  
I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.  
You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,  
You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.  
And we went on living in the village of Chokan:  
Two small people, without dislike or suspicion.

At fourteen I married My Lord you.  
I never laughed, being bashful.  
Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.  
Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back.

At fifteen I stopped scowling,  
I desired my dust to be mingled with yours  
Forever and forever and forever.  
Why should I climb the look out?

At sixteen you departed,  
You went into far Ku-to-yen, by the river of swirling eddies,  
And you have been gone five months.  
The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.

You dragged your feet when you went out.  
By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different mosses,  
Too deep to clear them away!  
The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.  
The paired butterflies are already yellow with August  
Over the grass in the West garden;  
They hurt me. I grow older.  
If you are coming down through the narrows of the river Kiang,  
Please let me know beforehand,  
And I will come out to meet you  
As far as Cho-fu-Sa.

## **Tableau**

*Countee Cullen*

Locked arm in arm they cross the way  
The black boy and the white,  
The golden splendor of the day  
The sable pride of night.

From lowered blinds the dark folk stare  
And here the fair folk talk,  
Indignant that these two should dare  
In unison to walk.

Oblivious to look and word  
They pass, and see no wonder  
That lightning brilliant as a sword  
Should blaze the path of thunder.

## **Beautiful Changes**

*Richard Wilbur*

One wading a Fall meadow finds on all sides  
The Queen Anne's Lace lying like lilies  
On water; it glides  
So from the walker, it turns  
Dry grass to a lake, as the slightest shade of you  
Valleys my mind in fabulous blue Lucernes.

The beautiful changes as a forest is changed  
By a chameleon's tuning his skin to it;  
As a mantis, arranged  
On a green leaf, grows  
Into it, makes the leaf leafier, and proves  
Any greenness is deeper than anyone knows.

Your hands hold roses always in a way that says  
They are not only yours; the beautiful changes  
In such kind ways,  
Wishing ever to sunder  
Things and things' selves for a second finding, to lose  
For a moment all that it touches back to wonder.

## **The Fish**

*Elizabeth Bishop*

I caught a tremendous fish  
and held him beside the boat  
half out of water, with my hook  
fast in a corner of his mouth.  
He didn't fight.  
He hadn't fought at all.  
He hung a grunting weight,  
battered and venerable  
and homely. Here and there  
his brown skin hung in strips  
like ancient wallpaper,  
and its pattern of darker brown  
was like wallpaper:  
shapes like full-blown roses  
stained and lost through age.  
He was speckled with barnacles,  
fine rosettes of lime,  
and infested  
with tiny white sea-lice,  
and underneath two or three  
ragged green weeds hung down.  
While his gills were breathing in  
the terrible oxygen  
—the frightening gills,  
fresh and crisp with blood,  
that can cut so badly—  
I thought of the coarse white flesh  
packed in like feathers,  
the big bones and the little bones,  
the dramatic reds and blacks  
of his shiny entrails,  
and the pink swim-bladder  
like a big peony.  
I looked into his eyes  
which were far larger than mine  
but shallower, and yellowed,  
the irises backed and packed  
with tarnished tinfoil  
seen through the lenses  
of old scratched isinglass.  
They shifted a little, but not  
to return my stare.  
—It was more like the tipping



of an object toward the light.  
I admired his sullen face,  
the mechanism of his jaw,  
and then I saw  
that from his lower lip  
—if you could call it a lip—  
grim, wet, and weaponlike,  
hung five old pieces of fish-line,  
or four and a wire leader  
with the swivel still attached,  
with all their five big hooks  
grown firmly in his mouth.  
A green line, frayed at the end  
where he broke it, two heavier lines,  
and a fine black thread  
still crimped from the strain and snap  
when it broke and he got away.  
Like medals with their ribbons  
frayed and wavering,  
a five-haired beard of wisdom  
trailing from his aching jaw.  
I stared and stared  
and victory filled up  
the little rented boat,  
from the pool of bilge  
where oil had spread a rainbow  
around the rusted engine  
to the bailer rusted orange,  
the sun-cracked thwarts,  
the oarlocks on their strings,  
the gunnels—until everything  
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!  
And I let the fish go.

**Poems by other American poets to consider (Approve with Ms. Lorey First:**

Robert Frost  
Langston Hughes  
Emily Dickinson  
Richard Wilbur  
Walt Whitman  
Anne Bradstreet

**AND LOOK THROUGH THE LITERATURE BOOK AT OTHER POEMS!**