

Selected poems from The Trouble With Poetry, by Billy Collins

"Monday"

The birds are in their trees,  
the toast is in the toaster,  
and the poets are at their windows.

they are at their windows  
in every section of the tangerine of earth—  
the Chinese poets looking up at the moon,  
the American poets gazing out  
at the pink and blue ribbons of sunrise.

The clerks are at their desks,  
the miners are down in their mines,  
and the poets are looking out their windows  
maybe with a cigarette, a cup of tea,  
and maybe a flannel shirt or bathrobe is involved.

The proof-readers are playing the ping-pong  
game of proofreading,  
glancing back and forth from page to page,  
the chefs are dicing celery and potatoes,  
and the poets are at their windows  
because it is their job for which

they are paid nothing every Friday afternoon.

Which window it hardly seems to matter  
though many have a favorite,  
for there is always something to see—  
a bird grasping a thin branch,  
the headlights of a taxi rounding a corner,  
those two boys in wool caps angling across the street.

The fishermen bob in their boats,  
the linemen climb their round poles,  
the barbers wait by their mirrors and chairs,  
and the poets continue to stare  
at the cracked birdbath or a limb knocked down by the wind.

By now, it should go without saying  
that what the oven is to the baker  
and the berry-stained blouse to the dry cleaner,  
so the window is to the poet.

Just think—  
before the invention of the window,  
the poets would have had to put on a jacket  
and a winter hat to go outside  
or remain indoors with only a wall to stare at.

and when I say a wall,  
I do not mean a wall with striped wallpaper  
and a sketch of a cow in a frame.

I mean a cold wall of fieldstones,  
the wall of the medieval sonnet,  
the original woman's heart of stone,  
the stone caught in the throat of her poet-lover.

"Fool Me Good"

I am under the covers  
waiting for the heat to come up  
with a gurgle and hiss  
and the banging of the water hammer  
that will frighten the cold out of the room.

And I am listening to a blues singer  
named Precious Bryant  
singing a song called "Fool Me Good."

If you don't love me, baby, she sings,  
would you please try to fool me good?

I am stroking the dog's head  
and writing down these words,  
which means that I am calmly flying  
in the face of the Buddhist advice  
to do only one thing at a time.

Just pour the tea,  
just look into the eye of the flower,  
just sing the song—  
one thing at a time

and you will achieve serenity,  
which is what I would love to do  
as the fan-blades of the morning begin to turn.

If you don't love me, baby,  
she sings  
as a day-moon fades in the window  
and the hands circle the clock,  
would you please try to fool me good?

Yes, Precious, I reply,  
I will fool you as good as I can,  
but first I have to learn to listen to you

with my whole heart,  
and not until you have finished

will I put on my slippers,  
squeeze out some toothpaste,  
and make a big foamy face in the mirror,

freshly dedicated to doing one thing at a time—  
one note at a time for you, darling,  
one tooth at a time for me.