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LITERARY ESSAY

Turning on a Dime with Billy Collins *in Perpetua*

An Essay by Darryl Benjamin

[Billy Collins was Poet Laureate of the United States from 2001–2003.]

Life can and frequently does turn on a dime. In the space of ten seconds we can experience a rush of wind that blows us forever off course. Perhaps “off course” is misleading, maybe it’s simply onto a new course, uncharted, fraught with possibility, both good and bad.

While reading Billy Collins’s collection *Sailing Alone Around the Room*, one is filled with a dynamic sense of forward thrust, of motion, that life is like an elaborate dance with occasional missteps that guide us on.

As a graphic design instructor with a passion for typography, I found it fascinating that Collins’s book, *Sailing Alone Around the Room*, was entirely set in the typeface Perpetua:

. . . [Perpetua is] a typeface designed by the English artist Eric Gill, and cut by the Monotype Corporation between 1928 and 1930. Perpetua is a contemporary face of original design, without any direct historical antecedents. The shapes of the roman letters are derived from the techniques of stonecutting. The larger display sizes are extremely elegant and form a most distinguished series of inscriptional letters.

Was it an astute typesetter who chose to match the originality of Collins’s work with the solidity of a stone and the elegance of a stonecutter’s hand? Certainly! This is yet another example of how fine typography can magnify, elevate, and emphasize the message of a poem.

And what is that message? The inevitability of change is illuminated with the neon torch of Collins’s sparkling prose poetry. An overwhelming sense of presence, that you, the reader, have

front-most center-most seats to the spectacle of life unfolding, but that you are indeed a spectator, safe and secure in the ramparts of audience seating.

My own father died in a light plane accident that he was piloting. Everything changed for me in that moment. How can a poem capture the delicate balance of fortune?

Picnic, Lightning

*My very photogenic mother died in a freak accident
(picnic, lightning) when I was three.
—Lolita*

It is possible to be struck by a meteor
or a single-engine plane
while reading in a chair at home.
Safes drop from rooftops
and flatten the odd pedestrian
most within the panels of the comics,
but still, we know it is possible,
as well as the flash of summer lightning,
the thermos toppling over,
spilling out on the grass.

Imagine yourself skating on a pond in long, languid, elliptical circles. Gradually you gather speed and momentum, until you launch yourself in the graceful arc of a jump. While suspended in the air you realize with a giddy rush that you can either make a perfect landing or fall and break your neck. Any sort of action is a risk.

The opening three lines are a simple declarative sentence. You're skating along. Yes, it is possible to be struck by a meteor or a single-engine plane while reading in a chair at home. Note the use of air vs. groundedness: a meteor and a plane both sail through the air. You're reading, sitting, in a chair. You're connected to the earth. You feel safe.

But are you safe? No, because not even a *safe* is safe (Collins is clever!):

Safes drop from rooftops.

A safe is something that is supposed to be grounded, secure and protected, yet here we have it flying from a rooftop. And oh-my-god, *flattening pedestrians*? No, this is a wrong note, you might think; too violent for our pleasant lawn-chair observations, but wait. . .the very next line mitigates and forgives, as caressing as a breeze:

most within the panels of the comics

Oh, ok, just kidding, eh? We sit back in our lawn chairs, appeased. But the game voice whispers:

but still, we know it is possible

And then we're launched into the air, the skater takes his leap:

as well as the flash of summer lightning

This dramatic flourish makes real the possibility with a sudden, in-your-face slap: the flash of summer lightning is not a postulation, it *will* happen, at some unknowable moment. As if to substantiate it, we get to see the drama unfold, always as the omnisciently observant audience:

the thermos toppling over,
spilling out on the grass.

The thermos toppling over and spilling out on the grass is graphic and solid, as sure as if a man had toppled and died. Life spilling blood out onto the grass, a symbol of perennial rejuvenation.

In one deft stanza, Collins offers a casually-observed possibility in a breezy (again, air) tone, then hits us with a suckerpunch graphic image. Brilliant.

The pattern is repeated in the following stanza:

And we know the message
can be delivered from within.
The heart, no valentine,
decides to quit after lunch,
the power shut off like a switch,
or a tiny dark ship is unmoored
into the flow of the body's rivers,

the brain a monastery,
defenseless on the shore.

Roughly translated: You can be minding your own sweet business when you suddenly drop dead. The heart isn't always a valentine, brother, sometimes it's a ticking time bomb. Again note the smooth skating, the quiet airborne motion inherent in words like "tiny dark ship" and "unmoored." The skater launches himself into the air, only to fall:

the power shut off like a switch

Sudden and dramatic, an on-off switch, *Picnic, Lightning*, first you're having a picnic and then you're either electrocuted or power is shut off. What a clever weave! Collins's images are simple, alive, and accessible.

This is what I think about
when I shovel compost
into a wheelbarrow,
and when I fill the long flower boxes,
then press into rows
the limp roots of red impatiens—
the instant hand of Death
always ready to burst forth
from the sleeve of his voluminous cloak.

Why didn't Collins name this poem "The Instant Hand of Death"? This is the skater's jumpstart line in this stanza. We're doing mundane tasks, gardening, something quiet and meditative, when pow! the instant hand of death seizes you.

Instead, Collins names the poem two incongruous other things, a picnic and lightning, to demonstrate that life can indeed turn on a dime and sometimes it makes no sense.

The contrast is stronger than the straightforward "instant hand of death." In Graphic Design, as in all the arts, *contrast* is a technique that reveals differences and makes things interesting.

You could be doing something as tame as gardening, for Chrissakes, he seems to be saying, "Is there no mercy, no escape from death, not ever?"

There is an undercurrent of anger: shouldn't some things be knowable? Sacred? Certainly having a picnic or doing the garden should be protected time fragments? Note too how Collins uses "impatiens" as his choice of flowers — is he saying that death is greedy, impatient to snatch us? And the "limp roots" re-emphasize death.

Then the soil is full of marvels,
bits of leaf like flakes off a fresco,
red-brown pine needles, a beetle quick
to burrow back under the loam.
Then the wheelbarrow is a wilder blue,
the clouds a brighter white,

and all I hear is the rasp of the steel edge
against a round stone,
the small plants singing
with lifted faces, and the click
of the sundial
as one hour sweeps into the next.

Life continues, the skater skates, he prepares to make his leap and sweeps into the rushing wind, nourished by all that gave birth and raised him, as the soil is full of marvels, bits of leaf, loam, something soft and maternal, that nourishes the flowers. Collins takes us back to the earth, grounded as a man sitting in his chair reading while a meteor rushes toward him. But the narrator can only hear is the rasp of a steel edge, the rush of death. The softness of loam contrasted with a steel edge against a stone. The process is inevitable, *in perpetua*. Death is time, there is nothing to do but carry on.

COLOPHON

This essay was set in Perpetua, a typeface designed by Eric Gill in 1928. "The design expresses a note of particularity and self-consciousness not universally acceptable. . . Perpetua may be judged in the small sizes to have achieved the object of providing a distinguished form for a distinguished text; and, in the large sizes, a noble, monumental, appearance." — Stanley Morison