



Thursday, September 12, 2002

The Names

By Billy Collins

Yesterday, I lay awake in the palm of the night. A fine rain stole in, unhelped by any breeze, And when I saw the silver glaze on the windows, I started with A, with Ackerman, as it happened, Then Baxter and Calabro, Davis and Eberling, names falling into place As droplets fell through the dark.

Names printed on the ceiling of the night. Names slipping around a watery bend. Twenty-six willows on the banks of a stream.

In the morning, I walked out barefoot Among thousands of flowers Heavy with dew like the eyes of tears, And each had a name — Fiori inscribed on a yellow petal Then Gonzalez and Han, Ishikawa and Jenkins.

Names written in the air And stitched into the cloth of the day. A name under a photograph taped to a mailbox. Monogram on a torn shirt, I see you spelled out on storefront windows And on the bright unfurled awnings of this city. I say the syllables as I turn a corner — Kelly and Lee, Medina, Nardella, and O'Connor.

When I peer into the woods, I see a thick tangle where letters are hidden As in a puzzle concocted for children. Parker and Quigley in the twigs of an ash, Rizzo, Schubert, Torres, and Upton, Secrets in the boughs of an ancient maple.

Names written in the pale sky. Names rising in the updraft amid buildings. Names silent in stone Or cried out behind a door. Names blown over the earth and out to sea.

In the evening — weakening light, the last swallows. A boy on a lake lifts his oars. A woman by a window puts a match to a candle, And the names are outlined on the rose clouds — Vanacore and Wallace, (let X stand, if it can, for the ones unfound) Then Young and Ziminsky, the final jolt of Z.

Names etched on the head of a pin. One name spanning a bridge, another undergoing a tunnel. A blue name needled into the skin. Names of citizens, workers, mothers and fathers, The bright-eyed daughter, the quick son. Alphabet of names in green rows in a field. Names in the small tracks of birds. Names lifted from a hat Or balanced on the tip of the tongue. Names wheeled into the dim warehouse of memory. So many names, there is barely room on the walls of the heart.

Billy Collins is the poet laureate of the United States. This poem was read before Congress Sept. 6, 2002, at its joint session in New York City.

SUMMARY

Poem written by Billy Collins, poet laureate of the United States, and read before Congress Sept. 6, 2002, at its joint session in New York City.

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