



IN-DEPTH  
STUDY  
GUIDE



## OVERVIEW OF "ON TURNING TEN"

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"[On Turning Ten](#)" is a beloved poem by American contemporary poet Billy Collins. Originally intended as a satire in the tradition of "midlife crisis" poems, this work became a deep and melancholy exploration of what it is to leave childhood behind. This poem originally appeared in Collins' 1995 poetry collection "The Art of Drowning," alongside other noted poems such as "Reading in a Hammock," "Keats's Handwriting," and the titular "The Art of Drowning."

The poem is broken into five irregular stanzas, each characterising a shift in tone from the humorous to the more atmospheric and introspective. "On Turning Ten" explores themes of nostalgia, the loss of innocence and magic, and the looming challenge of growing up. Though written in the early to mid 1990s, the poem contains very little that ties it to one distinctive time period or place; this makes it an accessible piece that will resonate with most childhoods around the world.

### Poet Biography

Billy Collins was born in Manhattan in 1941. He studied Romantic-era poetry at the University of California, but his long career would be influenced more by modern poets such as Karl Shapiro and Reed Whittmore and the poets of the Beat Generation. He is considered one of the most famous and best-loved American poets of all time, known for his conversational, candid humour balanced with poignancy and profound observation of human nature.

Collins has been consistently active in creating and supporting platforms for poets. In 1975 he co-founded the Mid-Atlantic Review, he has acted as Poetry Consultant for Smithsonian Magazine, and he is on the editorial board at The Alaska Quarterly Review. Collins served as American Poet Laureate from 2001 to 2003, and was the Poet Laureate for New York from 2004 to 2006. He has taught at numerous colleges and universities including Sarah Lawrence College, Columbia University, and the State University of New York. In 2016 he was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

His twelve poetry collections include "The Rain in Portugal," "Horoscopes for the Dead," "The Trouble with Poetry," "Questions About Angels," "The Art of Drowning," and others. In the late 1990s, Collins moved his work from the University of Pittsburgh Press to Random House, receiving a six-figure advance for a three-book deal — a shocking turn of events for the poetry community. Since then he has travelled around the world giving poetry readings to sold-out audiences, performing alongside noted musicians, and holding workshops for emerging poets. Throughout his career Collins has been honoured with numerous awards and fellowships including Poetry magazine's "Poet of the Year" in 1994,

the Mark Twain Award for Humour in Poetry in 2005, and the Peggy V. Helmerich Distinguished Author Award in 2016.

## Summary

The poem opens with the narrator lamenting the physical sensation of impending age — worse than a simple passing stomach ache or headache, but something more intimate, a deeply embedded assault that will leave him scarred forever onward. The narrator speaks to someone older — the reader, or a parent or grandparent — who tells him he is too young to be so melancholic. He responds by saying they have forgotten what it's like to be young and vividly aware of each moment, but he can remember each year that he's passed through.

He recounts some of the personas he has taken on through his childhood: a magician from a storybook, a soldier, a prince. But now, instead of pretending, he sits at the window watching the light streaming in the late afternoon and sees it with new eyes. He looks at his tree house and his bicycle, and they too don't look the same as they once did. Everything is darker and more solemn than it was in the adventures of his youth.

The speaker acknowledges a new beginning, the entrance to a new level of awareness, and takes a walk through the world of his childhood. He says goodbye to his imaginary friends as he prepares for the turning point awaiting him. It was only yesterday that he felt invincible, like nothing could hurt him. Now he understands that he has become a real person, vulnerable to the physical and emotional pitfalls of life.

## POEM ANALYSIS

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The poem opens in *media res*, as though the speaker and the reader were already in mid-conversation; this intimate, conversational quality is a hallmark of Billy Collins' work. "Coming down with something" (Line 2) is very likely a line the child picked up from his parents, something they would say to him when he went to them complaining of illness. He compares the feeling to the everyday plagues of childhood such as stomach aches and headaches, noting that this is something new altogether. It's important to note that despite the feelings of dread, there is a degree of humour in this opening stanza. Words like "mumps" and "chicken pox" (Lines 6-7) are innately funny words to say, and they bring to mind a sense of dramatic hyperbole akin to a child stubbing their toe and lamenting that they'll never walk again. This gives the narrator an endearing and indulgent quality that fades away throughout the later stanzas.

In the second stanza the child speaks to an adult figure, which begs the question: did they go seeking help? Did they go to a parent telling them they were "coming down with something"? Whether this opening line is in direct response to a line of unspoken dialogue,

or whether it is in response to something they are only anticipating, is up to the reader to decide. Regardless, the opening to the second stanza shows us that the narrator is feeling a sense of alienation — that there is no one who will help him, because no one knows how, or even really understands the problem. Ironically, this sense of alienation is a very real part of being a grownup, and this may be the narrator's first experience with it.

The child goes on to recount his experiences with magic and the various personas he'd adapted throughout each crystalline time period. Even at nine years old, the age he's just about to leave behind, he's still able to access that power. Collins never once uses the word "pretend"; he lays these down as objective facts, things that really happened within the child's world. He also intentionally uses broad, sweeping images that any reader can relate to. Instead of delving into detail about which specific army the soldier is fighting for or which kingdom the prince is ruling, they are left open ended so that the reader can see within them their own experiences.

In the third stanza the narrator watches the light out his window where can see his yard, including his tree house and his bicycle. This "late afternoon light" (Line 18) parallels the twilight of his childhood, drawing to an inevitable close after a long and rewarding day. He uses personification to project his own melancholy onto the light, seeing his own solemnity in the way it falls against the tree house. His bicycle, too, is seen in a new way, lacklustre and stagnant, as though it has also lost its will to become more than it appears. The colour "dark blue" (Line 23) contributes to the overall tone of the stanza.

The fourth stanza makes an unexpected choice by using the word "beginning" rather than "ending." The narrator is no longer looking backward at what he has lost, but is looking forward to the life that stretches out in front of him. He "walk[s] through the universe" (Line 25) of his imagination one last time, the landscape suddenly small enough that he can cross it in his sneakers. It's also interesting that the sneakers are a physical object rooted in reality, something that the child is probably wearing in this moment. Instead of imagining himself travelling the universe in thousand-mile moccasins or a spaceship or a submarine, he is making his final journey as himself. He is already leaving some of that magic behind.

By the fifth and final stanza, all of the lighthearted humour that opened the poem has dissipated. The child reflects that he once believed he was indestructible, as all children do; with age has come a new awareness of his body, something that will be experiencing even more changes very soon. He believed that he was composed of light, energy, and magic. He has gained a new fear of the immovable, unforgiving obstacles in life, and a new understanding that when he falls — as he will, as we all do time and again — there will be nothing to protect him from the harsh realities of the world.

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