

INFERNO

Like the wife who leaves the iron on
and makes her husband turn the car around
I awake and realize I have left a cigarette
burning in my dream.

Over breakfast I can smell the fumes
of the four-alarmer as it rages through
my subconscious,
sweeping down its paper tunnels,
consuming every cellophane maze and castle.

The enormous appetite of fire that ate Rome
and the library at Alexandria
is devouring the catacombs of my deepest city
where boogeymen grope in the smoke

and swallowing the volumes of childhood's
dreads and lusts lined up on the once
dark shelves.

No engine company can respond, no hose
is long enough to reach those twisting corridors
and dungeons full of hay where nightmares
are chained,

to reach the great underground zoo
full of colorful wild-eyed beasts
whose choking I can almost hear.

In the future, sleep will be blank as a blackboard
in mid-summer,
a wide, pale, empty stage, devoid of sharks,
uncles and blimps, all the fantastic nonsense
of dreams

for heat is building up fast near the refineries
of sex
and the vast munition dumps of fear.

SCHOOLSVILLE

Taking a long look over my shoulder, I realize
that the number of students I have taught
is enough to populate a small town.

I can see it nestled in a paper landscape,
chalk dust flurrying down in winter.

The residents age but never graduate.
The wives push baby carriages full of books.
The men carry their notes in lunchpails.

On summer afternoons the old folk gather
on park benches to sweat the final,
and Saturday morning a group forms
at the gas station to read disorganized essays.

Naturally I have forgotten their names
but the boy who always had his hand up
is an alderman and owns the haberdashery.

The girl who ducked assignments hangs out
by the drugstore, chain-smoking, a pink
comb in her back pocket.

All the creative writing students live
in a meadow of wild flowers and practice the lute.
Wherever they go, they make a big circle.

I, of course, am the mayor
and occupy the big colonial at Main and Oak.
Now and then someone knocks on the door
with a term paper that is fifteen years late
or a question about Yeats or double-spacing.

But usually they just walk past in silence
or tiptoe sometimes up to a window to watch me
bent over in a dim batch of lamplight
correcting everything they have ever done.

-- Billy Collins

Scarsdale NY

POETRY BROKER

a young man of considerable promise
has recently gotten into the racket
of appropriating to himself
the scheduling of poetry readings.

he does not understand
that poetry seldom co-exists
with power.