

On Turning Ten

John: I suppose we have phases in life that we go through, where things change, our consciousness change, etc. I have a poem about that I'd like to read, if that's ok? Have you ever heard of this poet before, called Billy Collins?

Robert: I have heard of him, he's an American poet.

Richard: I think I'm right in saying he's one of the few poets living today who sells well, both in America, and in Britain, as a matter of fact.

John: I didn't think poets sold at all?

Richard: He sells quite well.

Robert: Yes, it's true, he is quite popular.

John: Um-hum, well, have you seen... have you heard of this poem "On Turning Ten?"

Richard: No.

Robert: Never.

John: Well, your gonna enjoy this then. "On Turning Ten..."

Robert: Well, what a lovely poem. Lost youth... lost innocence...

John: Yeah, already at the age of ten, of course.

Robert: I think that it's nice that he uses ten because we all think of these ages: twenty, thirty... but, I never included ten. Turning twenty was important, turning thirty... but, I never thought of ten before, why not? It's true, yes, you do lose something. You're entering something new.

John: Yes.

Richard: What's interesting, I think, is that this, in a sense, is a well worn subject for poets and writers generally, you know; growing old. But he, as you say, he goes back to ten, which is unusually early, and of course he uses some very vivid images and pictures in the poem. I mean, the last two words "I bleed," is a very vivid, very strong image on which to end this poem.

John: After originally shining with this imaginary feeling of light...

Robert: When you're a kid you think your invulnerable, and when you a child you don't see the consequences of the things that are going on, and that makes the world magic, just

magic. So, I do understand what he's talking about here. You begin to see the consequences, you can't anymore live directly in the moment, that "splendor in the grasses," one poet put it, that's just that summer afternoon, it lasts forever.

John: When did life stop being magic for you?

Robert: I don't know, perhaps around that time, something like that. I recall my mother calling I and my sister in from play one afternoon, and I pleaded that she didn't do so, it was getting darker, but I wanted to stay out, we were having such fun, and mother said "ok, another half hour," and my sister said "oh, is that all?" And, I thought "oh, but it's half an hour, it's forever, what are you complaining about?" Sometime between that, and the time I turned ten, I lost it.

Richard: Getting back to your point about uncertainty and so on, these... this feeling of looking to the future, he writes "but, now I am mostly at the window watching the late afternoon light," and then a little bit further down, "this is the beginning of sadness, I say to myself." This uncertainty about the future comes through very, very strongly. A sort of, you know, on the verge of something new and very different.

John: And very passive too, he's sitting watching suddenly, where as before it was action, but now his bicycle is drained of speed.

Richard: Yes, yes.

Robert: Yes, and he has to say goodbye to his imaginary friends. Yeah, but is that... is it that real? This kind of sadness? Would a ten year old sit and look melancholy out of a window and feel the heaviness of life coming down upon him, I wonder? It's...

Richard: Well, he did...

Robert: I do understand the points being made here, but this little? I'm not quite sure if I thought such thoughts when I was ten years old.

John: A little bit too much adult consciousness there perhaps?

Robert: Looking back, perhaps. Yeah, looking back.

John: Lots of stuff to talk about, he gets the whole childhood in there, all the childhood diseases are in the first stanza.

Robert: Yes, I was noticing that myself, and that's one of the things that Billy Collins is so good at, he's so good at using things that everybody knows, and often we think of poets as talking about things that are terribly complicated, or saying things in different ways than they might directly be said. Billy Collins has the gift of saying things directly, and yet strikingly with these images of his, and picking up just the right notes so that you're reminded. I was a prince too, once upon a time, I don't know if I was nine, but I

remember being a prince.

John: And if we think about these phases in life again, we say that he's had his turning at ten, what would be the next time? When will be the next great...

Robert: Certainly, becoming a teenager, but I think one of the beauties of this poem is that he doesn't see that coming. There's no intonation here about girls, or becoming... there's sadness about something being lost, and certainly he's leaving something behind, but there's no clue in the poem about what's coming, and certainly that's what's coming... Like a tidal wave, and it won't wait till twenty.

John: Things got to get started before that, yes.

Robert: Yeah.