

Afternoon with Irish Cows by Billy Collins

June 12, 2009 by smashey

a favorite poem by Billy Collins

I thought about this poem as I listened to the early evening bellowing of our bovine neighbors across from our new house. I don't know exactly why I'm so drawn to this poem. I think I just like the music in it. I've read this poem to a few of my classes during National Poetry Month (April); no applause, just puzzlement over why their Biology teacher was reading them a poem about a cow mooing (and frankly, why I would read a poem at all). Oh well, I think it's potentially helpful for students to get a peek into their teachers' interests, even if we're revealed to be nerdy or uncool.

Afternoon with Irish Cows

by Billy Collins

There were a few dozen who occupied the field
across the road from where we lived,
stepping all day from tuft to tuft,
their big heads down in the soft grass,
though I would sometimes pass a window
and look out to see the field suddenly empty
as if they had taken wing, flown off to another country.

Then later, I would open the blue front door,
and again the field would be full of their munching
or they would be lying down
on the black-and-white maps of their sides,
facing in all directions, waiting for rain.
How mysterious, how patient and dumbfounded
they appear in the long quiet of the afternoon.

But every once in a while, one of them

would let out a sound so phenomenal
that I would put down the paper
or the knife I was cutting an apple with
and walk across the road to the stone wall
to see which one of them was being torched
or pierced through the side with a long spear.

Yes, it sounded like pain until I could see
the noisy one, anchored there on all fours,
her neck outstretched, her bellowing head
laboring upward as she gave voice
to the rising, full-bodied cry
that began in the darkness of her belly
and echoed up through her bowed ribs into her gaping mouth.

Then I knew that she was only announcing
the large, unadulterated cowness of herself,
pouring out the ancient apologia of her kind
to all the green fields and the gray clouds,
to the limestone hills and the inlet of the blue bay,
while she regarded my head and shoulders
above the wall with one wild, shocking eye.

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