

The Art of Drowning



SUMMARY

The speaker is curious about where the old cliché that your life flashes before your eyes when you drown came from—as though sheer, wild terror, or merely the fact of being under water, had the power to suddenly scrunch up time itself, squishing your entire life into the tight grasp of your frantic dying moments.

If you fell off a ship or got swept up in a flood, wouldn't you rather take a more relaxed look at everything, for there to be some unseen hand flicking through the photo album of your life—pointing to pictures of you riding a pony or blowing out birthday candles in a pointy party hat?

Wouldn't you prefer a cartoon or a slideshow? An essay encompassing your whole life, or even just one exemplary paragraph? Anything would be better than a jarring flash, right? Your entire life exploding like a bomb right in your face, burning your eyebrows—that's hardly the kind of biography you imagined for yourself, one so rich that it would fill three thick books.

People who've had near-death experiences, the speaker says, want to convince others of this intense, profound flash, of a sudden revelation striking the water like a lightning bolt, a divine light appearing before the total darkness of death, suddenly shining on you with all its mighty meaning.

In reality, though, if there's any flash of light as you drown, it's most likely just the silvery glint of a fish as it quickly swims past, oblivious to the fact that you're dying. Then the tide will carry you out to sea, or you'll sink to the messy, weed-filled bottom of the lake. You'll leave the world and all your memories of it back at the surface, where distant clouds pass by.

entire lifetime "in the vice of your desperate, final seconds." That is, your last moments wouldn't be calm and reflective but packed, panicked, and overwhelming. This "explosion of biography" would go off like an "eyebrow-singing" bomb—which doesn't sound exactly like the *most* serene way to die.

The speaker further wonders why anyone would be in such a rush to get the end of life over with and poses some alternative, more "leisurely" ways to review the past during one's final moments: an "animated film," a "slideshow presentation," or "an essay." Almost *anything* would "be better than this sudden flash," the speaker argues—though these ideas, of course, seem just as absurd. That underscores the poem's point: the speaker doesn't really believe that *anything* great or mysterious happens when you die.

People who have come close to death talk about the profundity of this experience, describing "some bolt of truth forking across the water" and the presence of an "ultimate Light" illuminating everything before the darkness of death sets in. It's tempting to believe in these ideas about death, perhaps, because they're more comforting than the alternative: that dying is neither profound nor meaningful. Yet the poem suggests that *this* is, in fact, the truth of things. The only "flash" one might see upon drowning is the "curved silver" of a fish as it "dart[s] away." This fish will have "nothing to do with your life or death," reflecting the indifference of the world and the insignificance of the event.

Instead of some profound experience, then, death is perhaps more of a *non*-event. If "you" drown, "the tide will take you" or "you'll" sink to the bottom, having "already forgotten" all that took place on "the surface." In other words, the life you leave behind drifts into meaninglessness. It's all over in a flash—*just not that kind of flash*.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-28



THEMES



THE NATURE OF DYING

"The Art of Drowning" picks apart the [cliché](#) that "life flash[es] before your eyes" just before you die. Taking this idea literally, the speaker finds such a concept both strange and disappointing: not only would a "sudden flash" of light presumably be unpleasant to experience, but it also would mean that one's entire life could be "crush[ed]" into a few "seconds." The speaker offers some alternative takes on what dying is like before concluding that it's probably just as mundane and uneventful as everyday life tends to be.

The speaker presents the idea of life flashing before your eyes as downright uncomfortable. This "flash" would "compress" an



HUMANITY'S INSIGNIFICANCE

The speaker of "The Art of Drowning" gently pokes fun at the [cliché](#) of life flashing before your eyes before you die, pointing out that such a quick "explosion of biography" would be "nothing like the three large volumes you envisioned." People like to think their lives are significant enough to fill thousands of pages, the poem implies, and want to "believe" in the reveal of some epic "truth" when they die that would make sense of their existence. Yet the poem ultimately insists upon humanity's insignificance in the grand

scheme of themes: when people die, the speaker argues, the world keeps moving along as it always does.

The way people talk about dying, the poem implies, conveys a desire for there to be some deeper meaning to their lives. "Survivors" of near-death experiences talk about seeing a "bolt of truth forking over the water" and a capital-L "Light." In short, they promise the arrival of some profound revelation in one's final moments, a grand truth suddenly "dawning on your with all its megalithic tonnage." Such a light would instill life itself with purpose, clearing up the confusion and angst of being human and making the dying feel special, seen, and significant.

Yet the speaker takes the wind out of these fantasies by saying that the only "flash" you might see before drowning is that of a small, darting fish. This humble image of an indifferent fish abruptly undercuts any illusions of humanity's importance. That fish won't care about your life or your death, the speaker declares; it has "nothing to do" with you at all, and the fact that it swims right on by during your final moments illustrates the utter indifference of the natural world to your passing.

The speaker follows this image by describing your body floating out to sea on the tide or sinking to the bottom of a lake to mingle with lowly weeds, hammering home people's individual insignificance. Your death won't shake the world; you'll disappear beneath the water, and the clouds above will pass by as if nothing has changed.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 14-16
- Lines 17-28



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

*I wonder how ...
... desperate, final seconds.*

The speaker wonders where the [cliché](#) that "your life flash[es] before your eyes / while you drown" came from. Though the poem focuses on drowning in particular, the speaker's thoughts apply to any situation in which you know (or think) you're about to die. The speaker goes on to explain why this whole "life flash" idea seems so bizarre and discomfiting.

For one thing, it suggests that "panic, or the act of submergence" could make time itself shrink—that the frantic terror of knowing you're about to die, or the mere fact of suddenly being under water, had the power to "startle time into such compression." The figurative language here treats time like an animal recoiling in shock or fear at a sudden noise.

Digging into the cliché even deeper, the speaker presents this flash as downright *violent* when taken literally. It would entail an

entire lifetime getting squashed into a few horrifying moments—or, as the speaker puts it, "decades" would get crushed "in the vice of your desperate, final seconds." This [metaphor](#) compares the "desperate, final seconds" of your life to a tool used to hold objects firmly in place, like a clamp. The image conveys the painful crunch of time collapsing on itself, as though your whole life were being crudely smooshed in a fist. Basically, the speaker argues that experiencing a whole life all at once would be frenetic and overwhelming—not exactly a pleasant way to go.

The sounds of the poem enhance the speaker's argument. Take lines 3-5, which are filled with sharp /c/ [alliteration](#) and [consonance](#) and hissing [sibilance](#):

[...] as if panic, or the act of submergence,
could startle time into such compression, crushing
decades in the vice of your desperate, final seconds.

These crunching, spitting sounds convey just how frightening and uncomfortable it would be for your life to flash before your eyes as you die. Surely, implies the poem, people would prefer a more serene, calming experience.

Despite the subject at hand, the tone of this stanza, and the poem as a whole, remains lighthearted and whimsical. It sounds conversational, opening with a simple "I wonder," and referring to the "life flash" [colloquially](#) as "this business." Billy Collins's poems are often tender and funny. Here, the casual tone also supports the speaker's argument that people treat both death and life with too much seriousness and self-importance. The use of [free verse](#)—that is, the lack of a regular [meter](#) or [rhyme scheme](#)—adds to the speaker's humor, making the poem sound more off-the-cuff.

LINES 6-10

*After falling off ...
... a conic hat.*

The speaker offers two ways that one might drown: "falling off a steamship" or getting swept up in a powerful flood. Note how [sibilance](#) ("steamship," "swept," "rush") evokes the splash and surge of swirling water. Of course, steamships had fallen out of popular use well before Collins wrote this poem, and the outdated reference is deliberately silly and cartoonish. The speaker's lighthearted tone reminds the reader that this poem isn't about making light of death but rather digging into the absurdity of some [clichés](#) surrounding it.

The speaker then asks the reader a [rhetorical question](#): "wouldn't you hope/ for a more leisurely review" of your life? That is, if you know you're going to drown, wouldn't you prefer to take a calm, relaxing stroll down memory lane rather than have everything be over in a sudden, jarring flash?

The speaker proposes a few alternative ideas for how people might relive their entire lives during their final seconds.

Perhaps some "invisible hand" could casually flick through an album of photographs documenting special moments in your history. It's not clear where that hand would come from—would it be God's? Some mysterious force? The whole idea is purposefully absurd.

Building on this silliness, the speaker offers two images that might appear in this hypothetical picture book: "you up on a pony or blowing out candles in a conic hat." It probably *would* be comforting to revisit happy birthday parties in the moments before death, but the speaker is being facetious: no one really expects to "leisurely" scroll through old pictures right before they die.

Note, too, that there's nothing particularly unique about the photos that the speaker proposes; these could belong to almost anyone. Most people probably have photos of themselves blowing out birthday candles in a party hat, and some lucky folks certainly got to ride a pony as a child. Such photos certainly depict moments that feel significant to those directly involved, but there's nothing objectively special about them. In this way, the poem hints at the idea of human insignificance: people might imagine they're the center of the world, but, really, they're only the center of *their own world*.

The speaker's tone remains casual throughout this stanza, thanks in part to the use of [asyndeton](#). Take line 8:

for a more leisurely **review**, an invisible hand

The poem moves swiftly and conversationally down the page. This quick flurry of ideas also makes the poem funnier and lighter in tone, even if the subject matter is anything but.

LINES 11-16

*How about an animated ...
... volumes you envisioned.*

The speaker offers more ideas for a "leisurely review" of one's past—all of which the speaker believes would be better than life flashing before your eyes.

Again, these ideas are purposefully silly:

- "How about an animated film," the speaker asks, or "a carousel of slides?" The [asyndeton](#) ("animated film, a carousel") again makes the speaker's suggestions seem off-the-cuff rather than carefully considered. That "animated film" picks up on the previous stanza's references to childhood birthday parties (with ponies and pointy hats). Once more, the frivolous image undermines the seriousness with which most people think about death.
- A "carousel of slides," meanwhile, refers to the tray used with an old-fashioned slide projector. In the days before digital cameras and social media, people would watch and share slideshows of their

vacations, big events, and so on. Pop culture often depicted these viewings as deeply boring; readers might be reminded of getting forced to look through someone else's holiday snaps!

- The speaker offers two more ways to take a look back on one's life that don't involve any pictures at all: "an essay, or in one model paragraph." Again, this is patently ridiculous; who wants to read an essay right before they die? The speaker pushes the absurdity further still by shrinking that essay into "one model paragraph": a short, exemplary bit of prose that would somehow encompass a person's entire existence.

"Any form [of life review]," the speaker continues, would be preferable to "Your whole existence going off in your face / in an eyebrow-singeing explosion of biography." As with the mention of a "vice" back in line 5, this surprising [imagery](#) makes the reader look at this cliché with fresh eyes. These lines take the "life-flash" idea at literal face value, treating it as an "eyebrow-singeing explosion": a kind of bomb that blows up right before you die, so close to your face that it burns your eyebrows. This humorous reframing makes the idea look patently absurd—and unpleasant!

All these ideas reflect not just the desire to re-experience the richness of life before dying, but also the very human desire for one's life to have *meant* something. Indeed, the speaker adds that such a brief "explosion of biography" would undermine people's assumption that their life would need "three large volumes," at least, to cover everything. That is, people "envision" their lives as being so rich that their biographies would fill up three heavy tomes. Life passing by in a flash, by contrast, implies that there's actually not all that much to see.

LINES 17-22

*Survivors would have ...
... be a fish,*

In the previous stanzas, the speaker focused mostly on how seeing your life "flash before your eyes" would, in reality, be a rather hectic, unfulfilling, panicky experience—a sudden "compression" of your entire existence into a few seconds. Now, the speaker turns to the word "flash" itself, exploring [clichés](#) around seeing a bright light when you die.

The speaker says that "Survivors" of near-death experiences (specifically, in this poem, near-drowning experiences) try to convince "us" (those who haven't had these experiences) that dying is marked by "a brilliance": an intense pulse of light that those survivors further describe as "some bolt of truth forking across the water." In other words, there's some profoundly epic revelation right before you die that makes sense of it all, some grand "truth" about the nature and purpose of existence itself that shoots across the waters in which you're drowning like a lightning bolt. The bold [alliteration](#) of "believe," "brilliance," and

"bolt" adds drama to this already dramatic [imagery](#).

This light, the poem continues, is in fact the "ultimate Light"—the light to end all lights, falling on you "with all its megalithic tonnage" before you enter the total darkness of death. The capital L signifies just how important this light is and further suggests it's divine; it's not just any light, perhaps, but a light from a higher power. "Megalithic tonnage," meanwhile, makes this light seem ridiculously heavy, utterly loaded with meaning (a megalith is a large stone that forms part of a prehistoric monument). All this imagery conveys death as something profoundly significant.

Yet the speaker immediately undercuts everything, taking the wind out of those survivors' sails. The only thing that might "flash before your eyes" as you drown, the speaker declares, "will probably be a fish." Instead of some heavenly light or epic revelation, there might just be a little fish swimming past, its scales glinting. Notice how similar those two words are: "flash" and "fish." Shared sounds link the two together, humorously denying that "flash" its lofty power.

LINES 23-28

*a quick blur ...
... travel of clouds.*

The final stanza continues the sentence begun in line 21, pulling readers down the page just as one's body sinks through the water when drowning. That fish, the speaker says, is nothing but a "quick blur of curved silver," its scales glinting as it hurriedly swims past. The sounds of line 23 evoke the [imagery](#) of this little, darting fish. The line glimmers with /k/, /l/, /ur/, and /v/ [consonance](#):

a quick blur of curved silver [...]

Adding insult to injury, the speaker adds that this fish is totally unconcerned "with your life or your death." Its existence is entirely unrelated; your death might feel momentous to you, but it has "nothing to do with" that fish. People, the poem suggests, are ultimately insignificant; the natural world doesn't care a whit if we live or die.

That fish will go about its fish business. Meanwhile, the tide will drag your body out to sea or, if you happened to have drowned in a lake, your body will "sink toward the weedy disarray of the bottom." Note how passive "you" become here: it's the tide doing the taking, the lake that "will accept it all." Again, the poem deflates any sense of individual importance. The [personified](#) tide and lake don't care who you are or what you've done with your life; they will take "it all."

What's more, ending up tangled among "the weedy disarray" at the bottom of a lake hardly sounds like a dignified end, and it has none of the pomp and ceremony that people use to mark death. The lakebed's "weedy disarray" also might reflect the inherent purposelessness of people's lives, the way people drift

through a world without meaning.

In the end, the speaker argues, there will be no great replay of life's most significant moments. No flash, no picture album, no film, no essay. As soon as you're dead, you're *dead*, and you take all your memories with you. A dead person has "already forgotten" the world, "leaving behind" everything that once seemed so meaningful. Life belongs to the "surface."

And that surface world itself quickly moves on. Clouds high up above cast a shadow over the water. The "now" in the poem's closing line suggests that the sky looks different than it did when "you" first started drowning; the world kept turning, not stopping to recognize that anything had changed.



SYMBOLS



THE NATURAL WORLD

At the poem's end, the speaker describes various parts of the natural world: a glimmering fish, an ebbing tide, a weed-filled lake, and a cloudy sky. Each of these things keeps moving along as usual as "you" drown, [symbolizing](#) nature's general indifference toward humanity as well as the relative insignificance of human life. People might think their death will be some great, earth-shattering event, but the natural world of the poem suggests otherwise.

First, the speaker declares that the only "flash before your eyes" will be that of a silvery fish darting by, totally unconcerned with the fact that you're drowning. Your death won't affect the fish at all, and its humble presence undermines the importance people want to attach to their final moments.

The speaker further describes the "tide" as pulling you out to sea or "the lake accept[ing] it all," [personifying](#) these bodies of water and, in the process, denying you any agency in death. Your body will become just another object in a vast sea or lake, subject to the movement of forces beyond your control. You might then "sink toward the weedy disarray" of the lake bed, your final resting place a murky mess. This "weedy" chaos underscores the speaker's argument that there's no great plan or design to life (and thus no great secret to reveal in death).

Finally, the speaker declares that, after you've left the "surface" world behind, the sky will become "overrun with the high travel of clouds." The distance of these clouds reflects just how far you will be from the world in death; your presence in the weedy lake bed has no bearing on the movement of the clouds high above, whose position, the poem implies, will have changed since you started to drown. Their "high travel"—that is, the airborne movement up on high—reflects how quickly the world moves on; it doesn't stop just because you've left it behind.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 21-24:** “But if something does flash before your eyes / as you go under, it will probably be a fish, / a quick blur of curved silver darting away, / having nothing to do with your life or your death.”
- **Lines 25-26:** “The tide will take you, or the lake will accept it all / as you sink toward the weedy disarray of the bottom,”
- **Lines 27-28:** “leaving behind what you have already forgotten, / the surface, now overrun with the high travel of clouds.”

- **Lines 7-9:** “wouldn't you hope / for a more leisurely review, an invisible hand / turning the pages of an album of photographs—”
- **Line 11:** “How about an animated film, a carousel of slides?”
- **Lines 17-20:** “Survivors would have us believe in a brilliance / here, some bolt of truth forking across the water, / an ultimate Light before all the lights go out, / dawning on you with all its megalithic tonnage.”
- **Lines 22-23:** “it will probably be a fish, / a quick blur of curved silver darting away”



POETIC DEVICES

ASYNDETON

[Asyndeton](#) adds to the poem's casual, humorous tone. The speaker is being purposefully cheeky as they skewer the idea of life flashing before your eyes in your dying moments; the swiftness created by asyndeton suggests that the speaker is talking off-the-cuff, simply rattling off ideas as they come.

Listen to the device as the speaker presents some alternative means of reviewing your life as you die:

for a more leisurely **review**, an invisible hand
turning the pages of an album of photographs—
[...]
How about an animated **film**, a carousel of slides?

Thanks to asyndeton, the passage reads like a quick, casual flurry of ideas. Readers should get the sense that they don't have to take the speaker at face value; the speaker is deliberately being absurd in order to poke fun at the self-importance people ascribe to their lives and deaths. The speaker's not proposing realistic alternatives, but using these ideas to highlight the inherent silliness of the whole life-flash "business."

More asyndeton appears as the speaker goes into detail about what "survivors would have us believe" about near-death experiences:

Survivors would have us believe in a brilliance
here, some bolt of truth forking across the **water**,
an ultimate Light before all the lights go out,

Asyndeton again makes the lines feel somewhat dismissively casual, reflecting the fact that the speaker doesn't buy into the whole seeing "the light" idea when you die.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** “desperate, final”

CONSONANCE

[Consonance](#) and [alliteration](#) bring the poem's images to vivid and often humorous life on the page.

In the first stanza, the speaker tries to imagine what it would be like if that [cliché](#) that your whole life "flash[es]" before you when you drown were true. The lines are filled brimming with prickly, crunching sounds that convey just how overwhelming it would be if

[...] panic, or the act of submergence,
could **startle** time into such compression, crushing
decades in the vice of your desperate, final seconds.

Those sharp /c/ sounds, biting /t/ sounds, thudding /d/ sounds, and hissing [sibilance](#) evoke the jarring, jolting feeling of time suddenly being crushed, as though smothered by a fist. Note that these lines also contain [assonance](#): "such"/"crush," "decades"/"desperate"/"seconds." This makes the language sound even *more* intense, in turn conveying just how unpleasant and even frightening this experience would be.

In the next stanza, sibilance, fricative /f/ sounds, and airy /w/ sounds evoke the crash and swirl of water that would accompany "falling off a steamship or being **swept away** in a rush of floodwaters." At the end of the stanza, the consonance and [alliteration](#) of "candles in a conic hat" call readers' attention to the lighthearted image of a person blowing out birthday candles in a pointy party hat.

Later in the poem, the speaker rejects the idea that death is momentous and meaningful. Instead of some great "flash" rerun of life, someone drowning will probably see a little "fish." These words sound very similar: "Flash"/"fish." This similarity gently mocks the pretentiousness of the "life-flash" idea, replacing it with something *sonically* close but in reality completely different.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “panic,” “act”
- **Lines 3-5:** “submergence, / could **startle** time into such

compression, crushing / decades”

- **Line 5:** “vice,” “desperate,” “seconds”
- **Line 6:** “falling off,” “steamship,” “swept away”
- **Line 7:** “rush,” “floodwaters”
- **Line 10:** “candles,” “conic”
- **Line 12:** “expressed,” “essay”
- **Line 15:** “eyebrow-singeing explosion,” “biography”
- **Line 16:** “volumes,” “envisioned”
- **Line 17:** “believe,” “brilliance”
- **Line 18:** “bolt,” “truth”
- **Line 21:** “flash”
- **Line 22:** “fish”
- **Line 23:** “quick,” “blur,” “curved silver”
- **Line 25:** “tide,” “take,” “lake,” “accept”
- **Line 26:** “sink”
- **Line 27:** “forgotten”
- **Line 28:** “surface”

IMAGERY

The speaker uses powerful and often humorous visual [imagery](#) to make their case that nothing special really happens when someone dies. Through imagery, the speaker pushes readers to see the old [cliché](#) that “life flashes before your eyes before you die” afresh. For example, in lines 14-15, the speaker wonders what it would be like for this *literally* to happen—and in doing so reveals the idea’s inherent absurdity:

Your whole existence going off in your face
in an eyebrow-singeing explosion of biography—

The speaker envisions this life-flash as being like a bomb suddenly exploding in your face, so close it burns your eyebrows. This imagery is purposefully silly, and it’s meant to convey just how unpleasant such an experience would be.

There’s more imagery in the next stanza, when the speaker describes what “survivors” of near-death experiences tend to say about what happened to them. The dramatic imagery here underscores just how much importance people tend to ascribe to death, treating it as the moment of some earth-shattering revelation:

Survivors would have us believe in a brilliance
here, some bolt of truth forking across the water,

The imagery here is almost cartoonishly grand, and it makes the speaker’s declaration that any such “brilliance” is more likely just the “quick blur of curved silver” from the fish all the more cutting. This fish imagery is a far cry from some great, weighty revelation; it’s just some random encounter with a creature that has “nothing to do with your life or death.”

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** “startle time into such compression, crushing / decades in the vice of your desperate, final seconds.”
- **Lines 14-15:** “Your whole existence going off in your face / in an eyebrow-singeing explosion of biography—”
- **Lines 18-20:** “some bolt of truth forking across the water, / an ultimate Light before all the lights go out, / dawning on you with all its megalithic tonnage.”
- **Line 23:** “a quick blur of curved silver darting away,”
- **Line 26:** “as you sink toward the weedy disarray of the bottom,”
- **Line 28:** “the surface, now overrun with the high travel of clouds.”

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The poem uses [rhetorical questions](#) to deconstruct the idea that life flashes “before your eyes / when you drown.” To the speaker, this concept seems patently absurd. They ask the reader, “wouldn’t you hope / for a more leisurely review”? That is, wouldn’t you rather that your final moments were marked by a calm, gentle look back on your life?

The question challenges the reader to think about the old “life-flash” [cliché](#) from a different perspective. Such an idea would, in reality, be unpleasant and overwhelming. The alternatives that the speaker then proposes hammer home how silly such an idea is in the first place. To the speaker, “an invisible hand” flicking through a photo album is no less absurd than believing that a lifetime suddenly crunches into a few “desperate, final seconds” or that you see some “bolt of truth” when you die.

In lines 11-13, the speaker suggests some more ways to “review” your life in the moments before death:

How about an animated film, a carousel of slides?
Your life expressed in an essay, or in one model
paragraph?
Wouldn’t any form be better than this sudden flash?

The speaker isn’t looking for any answers here. Instead, this quick flurry of questions demonstrates the speaker’s attitude toward death. It’s funny and silly to think of watching a slide show of your own life or listening to some well-wrought “paragraph” that sums you up. The speaker is showing the absurdity of an idea by taking it to its extremes.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-9:** “wouldn’t you hope / for a more leisurely review, an invisible hand / turning the pages of an album of photographs”
- **Lines 11-13:** “How about an animated film, a carousel of slides? / Your life expressed in an essay, or in one model

photograph? / Wouldn't any form be better than this sudden flash?"



VOCABULARY

Submergence (Line 3) - The process of being covered with/ sinking in water (as with drowning).

Vice (Lines 4-5) - A metal tool used to grip something tightly (like a clamp).

Leisurely review (Lines 7-8) - A relaxed look back over one's life.

A conic hat (Line 10) - A cone-shaped party hat.

Carousel (Line 11) - Refers to the type of tray used to hold slides in an old fashioned slide projector.

Model (Line 12) - Exemplary.

Volumes (Line 16) - Large, heavy books.

Megalith tonnage (Lines 19-20) - A "megalith" refers to a large stone used as part of a prehistoric monument. "Tonnage" here means weightiness.

Disarray (Line 26) - Unorganized, random messiness.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Art of Drowning" contains four stanzas: two quintains (five-line stanzas) and two [sestets](#) (six-line stanzas). Apart from that, the poem doesn't follow any particular form. There's no regular [meter](#) or [rhyme scheme](#) here either. Altogether, the poem feels casual and conversational rather than strict and rigidly controlled. This makes sense, given that the speaker implies that there's no grand plan guiding people's lives and deaths.

Note, too, that while most of the stanzas are firmly [end-stopped](#), there's a connection between the final two stanzas:

as you go under, it will probably be a fish,
a quick blur of curved silver darting away,

Line 22 carries over into line 23, speeding up the poem and subtly mimicking the quick, darting movement of the fish being described. The moment also drags the reader's eye downwards on the page, mirroring the way that a drowning body will "sink toward the weedy disarray of the bottom" of a lake.

METER

"The Art of Drowning" is written in [free verse](#). Its lines are unconstrained by any sort of regular [meter](#), and this keeps the

poem feeling loose and conversational rather than rigid or controlled. A strict meter might sound too serious for a poem in which the speaker is gently mocking people's inflated sense of self-importance.

RHYME SCHEME

As a [free verse](#) poem, "The Art of Drowning" doesn't use a [rhyme scheme](#). In fact, there's no real rhyme here at all here, a choice that keeps the poem feeling conversational; it's as though the speaker is talking directly to the reader, rattling ideas off as they come.



SPEAKER

"The Art of Drowning" has a first-person speaker who feels like the idea that "life flash[es] before your eyes / while you drown" is a load of nonsense. Indeed, the speaker rejects the possibility of any profound experience when it comes to dying (or nearly dying). Life is mostly unremarkable, the speaker suggests, and so too is death.

The speaker gently and tenderly pokes fun at the human desire for significance and meaning throughout the poem, couching much of what they say in humor; their tone is cheeky, [ironic](#), and even flippant at times. They use casual, [colloquial](#) language (calling the life-flashing [cliché](#) "this business," for example), and their suggestions for alternatives to the life-flash are all pretty funny and absurd: "an animated film, a carousel of slides [...] one model paragraph."

Note, too, that the speaker addresses the reader in the second person. This makes the poem even more light-hearted, as though the speaker's having a chat directly with the reader. At the same time, it makes the poem come across as more of a direct challenge to readers, pushing them to question their own assumptions about life and death.



SETTING

"The Art of Drowning" imagines various scenarios in which someone might drown. As might be expected, then, there are lots of references to water in the poem: the "steamship" or the "rush of floodwaters" in the second stanza, for example, or the "tide" and "lake" in the last. It's all hypothetical, of course; this isn't a poem about anyone in particular drowning but rather about the myths and [clichés](#) people tell themselves about death.

Still, this hypothetical watery setting reflects nature's general indifference toward humanity. For instance, the speaker envisions a fish swimming past a drowning person, caring "nothing" about them. The clouds, too, soon rearrange themselves, [symbolizing](#) how quickly the world moves on after you die.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Billy Collins is one of America's most popular poets, and this poem's down-to-earth humor and conversational tone are typical of his work. "The Art of Drowning" is the title poem in Collins's 1995 collection of the same name. *The Art of Drowning* was Collins's fifth collection, and other poems in the book also explore the various ways in which people make sense of their lives (and deaths).

With his funny, poignant poems about human nature and everyday life, Collins helped popularize a turn away from dense, difficult verse toward more approachable ways of writing. Collins cites the [free verse](#) of the Beat poets like Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti as significant influences in his development as a poet. He also describes the modernist 20th-century poet Wallace Stevens as a major source of inspiration. (Collins has said his "life goal" as a young poet was to be seen "as a third-rate Wallace Stevens.")

Collins has been a professor of English since 1968 and often writes about education and the classroom (for instance, in "[The History Teacher](#)") and about poetry itself. One of the most popular living poets, he served as the Poet Laureate of the U.S. from 2001 to 2003.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Art of Drowning" was published in 1995 but touches on an age-old philosophical dilemma: what happens when we die? The speaker rejects the long-held human convictions about death, satirizing the idea that an "ultimate Light [will appear] before all the lights go out." In this, Collins's poem reflects a distinctly modern understanding of humanity's place in the universe. Western society throughout the 20th and 21st-century has increasingly rejected the comforts of religion and the idea that a grand "plan" would be revealed upon death. Instead of viewing human life and death as deeply meaningful and earth-shaking, the poem reflects contemporary existential dread about there being *no* overarching meaning to existence. The poem's nod to the indifference of the natural world might further reflect modern anxieties about climate change and humanity's destructive attempts to dominate its surroundings.

Interestingly, recent [research](#) suggests that there might be some truth to the cliché of life flashing before your eyes when

you die: scientists took a scan of a patient's brain as they died, finding "an increase in gamma waves, suggest[ing] memory recall (the gamma band decreases external interference, allowing for deep inward concentration like recalling memories)."



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Billy Collins and the Creative Process](#) — Enjoy some pearls of wisdom about writing from one of America's favorite poets. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bRlftnvHO2A>)
- [The Poem Out Loud](#) — Listen to a reading of the poem via the Nashville Public Library. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9u_TCsjNl8w)
- [An Interview with Collins](#) — Read the Paris Review's interview with Billy Collins, part of the magazine's "Art of Poetry" series. (<https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/482/the-art-of-poetry-no-83-billy-collins>)
- [Collins's Life and Work](#) — A biography of Collins from the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/billy-collins>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER BILLY COLLINS POEMS

- [Afternoon with Irish Cows](#)
- [Introduction to Poetry](#)
- [On Turning Ten](#)
- [The History Teacher](#)



HOW TO CITE

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