

Picnic, Lightning
Billy Collins

"My very photogenic mother died in a freak accident (picnic, lightning) when I was three." - *Lolita* 15

It is possible to be struck by a meteor
or a single-engine plane
while reading in a chair at home. 1

Safes drop from rooftops
and flatten the odd pedestrian
mostly within the panels of the comics, 2

but still, we know it is possible,
as well as the flash of summer lightning, 3
the thermos toppling over,
spilling out on the grass.

And we know the message
can be delivered from within. 4

The heart, no valentine,
decides to quit after lunch,
the power shut off like a switch, 5
or a tiny dark ship is unmoored
into the flow of the body's rivers,
the brain a monastery,
defenseless on the shore.

6 This is what I think about
when I shovel compost
into a wheelbarrow,
and when I fill the long flower boxes, 7
then press into rows
the limp roots of red impatiens
the instant hand of Death
always ready to burst forth 8
from the sleeve of his voluminous cloak. } A } B

9 Then the soil is full of marvels,
bits of leaf like flakes off a fresco,
red-brown pine needles, a beetle quick
to burrow back under the loam. 10

Then the wheelbarrow is a wilder blue,
the clouds a brighter white, 11

and all I hear is the rasp of the steel edge
against a round stone, 12
the small plants singing

with lifted faces, and the click
of the sundial 13
as one hour sweeps into the next.



The Black Snake
Mary Oliver

When the black snake
flashed onto the morning road,
and the truck could not swerve—
death, that is how it happens.

1

Now he lies looped and useless
as an old bicycle tire.

2

I stop the car
and carry him into the bushes.

3

He is as cool and gleaming
as a braided whip, he is as beautiful and quiet
as a dead brother.

4

I leave him under the leaves

and drive on, thinking
about *death*, its suddenness,
its terrible weight,
its certain coming. Yet under

5

reason burns a brighter fire, which the bones
have always preferred.

It is the story of endless good fortune. (A)

It says to oblivion: not me! (B)

It is the light at the center of every cell. (C)

It is what sent the snake coiling and flowing forward
happily all spring through the green leaves before
he came to the road. (D)

6

7

8