

On Turning Ten

—Billy Collins

The whole idea of it makes me feel
like I'm coming down with something,
something worse than any stomach ache
or the headaches I get from reading in bad light—
a kind of measles of the spirit,
a mumps of the psyche,
a disfiguring chicken pox of the soul.

You tell me it is too early to be looking back,
but that is because you have forgotten
the perfect simplicity of being one
and the beautiful complexity introduced by two.
But I can lie on my bed and remember every digit.
At four I was an Arabian wizard.
I could make myself invisible
by drinking a glass of milk a certain way.
At seven I was a soldier, at nine a prince.

But now I am mostly at the window
watching the late afternoon light.
Back then it never fell so solemnly
against the side of my treehouse,
and my bicycle never leaned against the garage
as it does today,
all the dark blue speed drained out of it.

This is the beginning of sadness, I say to myself,
as I walk through the universe in my sneakers.
It is time to say good-bye to my imaginary friends,
time to turn the first big number.

It seems only yesterday I used to believe
there was nothing under my skin but light.
If you cut me I could shine.
But now when I fall upon the sidewalks of life,
I skin my knees. I bleed.

From Childhood

—Rainer Maria Rilke
(trans., Robert Bly)

The darkness in the room was like enormous riches;
there the child was sitting, wonderfully alone.
And when the mother entered, as if in a dream,
a glass quaked in the silent china closet.
She felt it, how the room was betraying her,
and kissed the child, saying, “Are you here?”
Then both looked toward the piano in fear,
for often at evening they would have a song
in which the child found himself strangely caught.

He sat stone still. His great gaze hung
upon her hand, which, totally bowed down by the ring,
walked over the white keys
as if plowing through deep drifts of snow.