

Explain Yourself

after Billy Collins

Last week as I was bouncing between
the nickel-gray buildings in Chicago,
drifting between EL train and *Mercado*,
from bookshelf to pickled egg bar,
I found myself sitting alone in a booth at Denny's
waiting for my mother to arrive.

The familiar destination
unspools inside me—a place where,
as a child, I ordered blueberry pancakes
on Sunday morning with my parents
back when the three of us
could smile in the same room together.

So I said yes to coffee, and
maybe to trying. My father calls
it the right thing to do. The waitress
set down a pair of menus, brought me
a decaf, and asked, do you need anything else?
The parking lot filled and emptied.

She has a disease, the counselor said.
The side effects belong to everyone.
Here is the highway that I walked home from school on,
here is a pot of boiling water, and here are
police lights flashing on my bedroom window. And her
wrecked car beneath a loose tarp in the driveway.

At twelve years old, in the Alateen ward at St. Joe's,
I sat in a circle and listened to teenagers share their stories—
selling PlayStation games to buy hot dogs, growing
biceps from trash bags filled with bottles,
practicing math on coffee tables
next to pills scattered like loose skittles.

In the booth at Denny's, I watched steam
rise from my coffee, and thought about
how she invited my father home,
years ago, to celebrate his birthday
and the house was empty. She never showed,
he said, that was the *last time*.

I waited for half an hour, then
set five dollars on the table and walked out,
too embarrassed to ask for a check.
That evening, our neighbor burned a brush pile,
and the dark spread into the yard, and two geese
stared at the fire, where their nest used to be.