Learn English by:

1. Watching the video

2. Watching the video with the text

3. Reciting the poems to classmates
   (with video on but sound off).
The Country

I wondered about you
when you told me never to leave
a box of wooden, strike-anywhere matches
lying around the house because the mice
might get into them and start a fire.
But your face was absolutely straight
when you twisted the lid down on the round tin
where the matches, you said, are always stowed.

Who could sleep that night?
Who could whisk away the thought
of the one unlikely mouse
padding along a cold water pipe
behind the floral wallpaper
gripping a single wooden match
between the needles of his teeth?
Who could not see him rounding a corner,
the blue tip scratching against a rough-hewn beam,
the sudden flare, and the creature
for one bright, shining moment
suddenly thrust ahead of his time—

now a fire-starter, now a torch-bearer
in a forgotten ritual, little brown druid
illuminating some ancient night.
Who could fail to notice,
lit up in the blazing insulation,
the tiny looks of wonderment on the faces
of his fellow mice, one-time inhabitants
of what once was your house in the country?
Budapest

My pen moves along the page
like the snout of a strange animal,
shaped like a human arm and
dressed in the sleeve
of a loose green sweater.

I watch it sniffing the paper ceaselessly,
intent as any forager
that has nothing on its mind
but the grubs and insects that
will allow it to live another day.

It wants only to be here tomorrow,
dressed perhaps in a sleeve of a plaid shirt,
nose pressed against the page,
writing a few more dutiful lines
while I gaze out the window and
imagine Budapest,
or some other city
where I have never been.

Hunger

The fox you lug over your shoulder
in a dark sack
has cut a hole with a knife
and escaped.

The sudden lightness makes you think
you are stronger
as you walk back to your small cottage
through a forest that covers the world.
The Best Cigarette

There are many that I miss
having sent my last one out a car window
sparking along the road one night, years ago.

The heralded one, of course:
after sex, the two glowing tips
now the lights of a single ship;
at the end of a long dinner
with more wine to come
and a smoke ring coasting into the chandelier;
or on a white beach,
holding one with fingers still wet from a swim.

How bittersweet these punctuations
of flame and gesture;
but the best were on those mornings
when I would have a little something going
in the typewriter,
the sun bright in the windows,
maybe some Berlioz on in the background.
I would go into the kitchen for coffee
and on the way back to the page,
curled in its roller,
I would light one up and feel
its dry rush mix with the dark taste of coffee.

Then I would be my own locomotive,
trailing behind me as I returned to work
little puffs of smoke,
indicators of progress,
signs of industry and thought,
the signal that told the nineteenth century
it was moving forward.
That was the best cigarette,
when I would steam into the study
full of vaporous hope
and stand there,
the big headlamp of my face
pointed down at all the words in parallel lines.
Some Days

Some days I put the people in their places at the table, bend their legs at the knees, if they come with that feature, and fix them into the tiny wooden chairs.

All afternoon they face one another, the man in the brown suit, the woman in the blue dress, perfectly motionless, perfectly behaved.

But other days, I am the one who is lifted up by the ribs, then lowered into the dining room of a dollhouse to sit with the others at the long table.

Very funny, but how would you like it if you never knew from one day to the next if you were going to spend it striding around like a vivid god, your shoulders in the clouds, or sitting down there amidst the wallpaper, staring straight ahead with your little plastic face?

Now And Then

This poet of the Tsong dynasty is so miserable The wind sighs A single swan passes over head And he is alone on the water in his skiff If only he appreciated life In eleventh century China As much as I do No loud cartoons on television No music from the ice cream truck Just the calls of many birds And the steady flow of the water clock
Forgetfulness - Billy Collins

The name of the author is the first to go
followed obediently by the title, the plot,
the heartbreaking conclusion, the entire novel
which suddenly becomes one you have never read,
ever even heard of,

as if, one by one, the memories you used to harbor
decided to retire to the southern hemisphere of the brain,
to a little fishing village where there are no phones.

Long ago you kissed the names of the nine Muses goodbye
and watched the quadratic equation pack its bag,
and even now as you memorize the order of the planets,

something else is slipping away, a state flower perhaps,
the address of an uncle, the capital of Paraguay.

Whatever it is you are struggling to remember,
it is not poised on the tip of your tongue,
not even lurking in some obscure corner of your spleen.

It has floated away down a dark mythological river
whose name begins with an L as far as you can recall,
well on your own way to oblivion where you will join those
who have even forgotten how to swim and how to ride a bicycle.

No wonder you rise in the middle of the night
to look up the date of a famous battle in a book on war.
No wonder the moon in the window seems to have drifted
out of a love poem that you used to know by heart.
The Dead

The dead are always looking down on us, they say, while we are putting on our shoes or making a sandwich, they are looking down through the glass bottom boats of heaven as they row themselves slowly through eternity.

They watch the tops of our heads moving below on earth, and when we lie down in a field or on a couch, drugged perhaps by the hum of a long afternoon, they think we are looking back at them,

which makes them lift their oars and fall silent and wait, like parents, for us to close our eyes.

Walking Across The Atlantic

I wait for the holiday crowd to clear the beach before stepping onto the first wave. Soon I am walking across the Atlantic thinking about Spain, checking for whales, waterspouts.

I feel the water holding up my shifting weight. Tonight I will sleep on its rocking surface.

But for now I try to imagine what this must look like to the fish below, the bottoms of my feet appearing, disappearing.
The Art of Drowning

I wonder how it all got started, this business about seeing your life flash before your eyes while you drown, as if panic, or the act of submergence, could startle time into such compression, crushing decades in the vice of your desperate, final seconds.

After falling off a steamship or being swept away in a rush of floodwaters, wouldn't you hope for a more leisurely review, an invisible hand turning the pages of an album of photographs-you up on a pony or blowing out candles in a conic hat.

How about a short animated film, a slide presentation? Your life expressed in an essay, or in one model photograph? Wouldn't any form be better than this sudden flash? Your whole existence going off in your face in an eyebrow-singeing explosion of biography-nothing like the three large volumes you envisioned.

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. 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. The tide will take you, or the lake will accept it all as you sink toward the weedy disarray of the bottom, leaving behind what you have already forgotten, the surface, now overrun with the high travel of clouds.
Dharma

The way the dog trots out the front door
every morning
without a hat or an umbrella,
without any money
or the keys to her doghouse
never fails to fill the saucer of my heart
with milky admiration.

Who provides a finer example
of a life without encumbrance—
Thoreau in his curtainless hut
with a single plate, a single spoon?
Gandhi with his staff and his wiry spectacles?

Off she goes into the material world
with nothing but her brown coat
and her modest blue collar,
following only her wet nose,
the twin portals of her steady breathing,
followed only by the plume of her tail.

If only she did not shove the cat aside
every morning
and eat all his food
what a model of self-containment she
would be,
what a paragon of earthly detachment.
If only she were not so eager
for a rub behind the ears,
so acrobatic in her welcomes,
if only I were not her god.
Man In Space

All you have to do is listen to the way a man sometimes talks to his wife at a table of people and notice how intent he is on making his point even though her lower lip is beginning to quiver,

and you will know why the women in science fiction movies who inhabit a planet of their own are not pictured making a salad or reading a magazine when the men from earth arrive in their rocket,

why they are always standing in a semicircle with their arms folded, their bare legs set apart, their breasts protected by hard metal disks.

Sweet Talk

You are not the Mona Lisa with that relentless look. Or Venus borne over the froth of waves on a pink half shell. Or an odalisque by Delacroix, veils lapping at your nakedness. You are more like the sunlight of Edward Hopper, especially when it slants against the eastern side of a white clapboard house in the early hours of the morning, with no figure standing at a window in a violet bathrobe, just the sunlight, the columns of the front porch and the long shadows they throw down upon the dark green lawn, baby.
I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.
Snow Day

Today we woke up to a revolution of snow,
its white flag waving over everything,
the landscape vanished,
not a single mouse to punctuate the blankness,
and beyond these windows

the government buildings smothered,
schools and libraries buried, the post office lost
under the noiseless drift,
the paths of trains softly blocked,
the world fallen under this falling.

In a while, I will put on some boots
and step out like someone walking in water,
and the dog will porpoise through the drifts,
and I will shake a laden branch
sending a cold shower down on us both.

But for now I am a willing prisoner in this house,
a sympathizer with the anarchic cause of snow.
I will make a pot of tea
and listen to the plastic radio on the counter,
as glad as anyone to hear the news

that the Kiddie Corner School is closed,
the Ding-Dong School, closed.
the All Aboard Children’s School, closed,
the Hi-Ho Nursery School, closed,
along with—some will be delighted to hear—

the Toadstool School, the Little School,
Little Sparrows Nursery School,
Little Stars Pre-School, Peas-and-Carrots Day School
the Tom Thumb Child Center, all closed,
and—clap your hands—the Peanuts Play School.

So this is where the children hide all day,
These are the nests where they letter and draw,
where they put on their bright miniature jackets,
all darting and climbing and sliding,
all but the few girls whispering by the fence.

And now I am listening hard
in the grandiose silence of the snow,
trying to hear what those three girls are plotting,
what riot is afoot,
which small queen is about to be brought down.

**The Revenant**

I am the dog you put to sleep,
as you like to call the needle of oblivion,
come back to tell you this simple thing:
I never liked you—not one bit.

When I licked your face,
I thought of biting off your nose.
When I watched you toweling yourself dry,
I wanted to leap and unman you with a snap.

I resented the way you moved,
your lack of animal grace,
the way you would sit in a chair to eat,
a napkin on your lap, knife in your hand.

I would have run away,
but I was too weak, a trick you taught me
while I was learning to sit and heel,
and--greatest of insults--shake hands without a hand.

I admit the sight of the leash
would excite me
but only because it meant I was about
to smell things you had never touched.

You do not want to believe this,
but I have no reason to lie.
I hated the car, the rubber toys,
disliked your friends and, worse, your relatives.

The jingling of my tags drove me mad.
You always scratched me in the wrong place.
All I ever wanted from you
was food and fresh water in my metal bowls.

While you slept, I watched you breathe
as the moon rose in the sky.
It took all of my strength
not to raise my head and howl.
Now I am free of the collar,
the yellow raincoat, monogrammed sweater,
the absurdity of your lawn,
and that is all you need to know about this place
except what you already supposed
and are glad it did not happen sooner--
that everyone here can read and write,
the dogs in poetry, the cats and the others in prose.