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The Billy Collins Challenge

Draped around a table at the local pub, we drink
with Billy Collins, a poet who has just read at the college
where we work. We're being Poets,

and one such poet, Erin, tells us of an ad she read for a car
for sale that has no reverse. *Let's each write a poem
about what that would mean, she says—a car with no reverse.*

Poets are like that, figuring out what things really mean.
But I don't know what a car without reverse could mean except
always going forward. *For Christ's sake, look / out where yr—*

No, that's already written. Cars don't much interest me.
Maybe because I don't know what they really mean.
A friend replaces his each month—now this is true—

he's in the driveway once a month with the latest trade,
a Chevy truck for a red SUV for a Chrysler that gets forty-four
miles to the gallon. The cars get bigger, then they shrink,

then he's back again with a mini-van. What does it mean?
The guy goes nowhere. He never leaves his house, except
to make the rounds of dealers but still he needs reverse to back

out his driveway. Another friend has had the same car
for twenty years. She has trouble remembering that she's
driving. She reached for her coffee and went through a fence.

*I just can't pay attention, she told her doctor, so he put her
on Ritalin and she fixed the fence. I picked her up for a shopping trip
in front of a sandwich shop downtown. We came back four hours*

later to a car still idling with one door open and her wallet on the
seat. When a car is old, no one steals it, or even the stuff inside it.
I love this town, but even here, you need reverse.

Like the angled parking lot of the bar where we drink with Billy Collins:

you cannot leave by going forward. Unless you are the woman
who sways on her barstool before pitching head-first

to the floor. The rescue squad is called, our table moved
to let the stretcher through—she seems okay by the time
they carry her out. Her husband trails behind—

never putting down his beer until they reach the door.
I imagine Billy Collins is quite impressed. We're a college on the rise,
a town with a lot of forward momentum.