

## HUMOR



Billy Collins

(1941- )

### Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes (1998)

First, her tippet made of tulle,  
easily lifted off her shoulders and laid  
on the back of a wooden chair.

And her bonnet,  
the bow undone with a light forward pull.

The the long white dress, a more  
complicated matter with mother-of-pearl  
buttons down the back,  
so tiny and numerous that it takes forever  
before my hands can part the fabric,  
like a swimmer's dividing water,  
and slip inside.

You will want to know  
that she was standing  
by an open window in an upstairs bedroom,  
motionless, a little wide-eyed,  
looking out at the orchard below,  
the white dress puddled at her feet  
on the wide-board, hardwood floor.

The complicity of women's undergarments  
in nineteenth-century America  
is not to be waved off,

and I proceeded like a polar explorer  
through clips, clasps, and moorings,  
catches, straps, and whalebone stays,  
sailing toward the iceberg of her nakedness.

Later, I wrote in a notebook  
it was like riding a swan into the night,  
but, of course, I cannot tell you everything --  
the way she closed her eyes to the orchard,  
how her hair tumbled free of its pins,  
how there were sudden dashes  
whenever we spoke.

What I can tell you is  
it was terribly quiet in Amherst  
that Sabbath afternoon,  
nothing but a carriage passing the house,  
a fly buzzing in a windowpane.

So I could plainly hear her inhale  
when I undid the very top  
hook-and-eye fastener of her corset  
and I could hear her sigh when finally it was unloosed,  
the way some readers sigh when they realize  
that Hope has feathers,  
that reason is a plank,  
that life is a loaded gun  
that looks right at you with a yellow eye.