

## Billy Collins

Billy Collins was born in 1941 and raised in New York. He received his Ph.D. in romantic poetry from the University of California, Riverside, and began teaching at Lehman College after his graduation. His poems have been published widely. Several of his poetry collections, including *Questions About Angels* (1991) and *The Art of Drowning* (1995), have become popular as well as critical successes, a rarity for poetry books.

Collins writes about what he calls the “serious bits of fluff in our lives” that people experience and that poetry can pay attention to. He often uses humor and commonplace associations to connect with his readers as he writes about the simple and profound moments of everyday life.

### Introduction to Poetry

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 water-ski  
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.

[2001]

## Edwidge Danticat

Born in Haiti in 1969, Danticat immigrated to the United States when she was twelve. As a young girl in Brooklyn, Danticat had a hard time negotiating the cultural differences between Haiti and America. In college, she began writing about cultural difference and dislocation. Her master’s thesis at Brown University became her first novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994). A collection of short stories *Krik? Krak!* (1995) was also highly successful. Her second novel *The Farming of Bones* (1998) won an American Book Award.

Danticat often writes about the problems immigrants face in new cultures, the customs of her native Haiti, as well as Haitian American politics.

### New York Day Women

Today, walking down the street, I see my mother. She is strolling with a happy gait, her body thrust toward the don’t walk sign and the yellow taxicabs that make forty-five-degree turns on the corner of Madison and Fifty-seventh Street.

I have never seen her in this kind of neighborhood, peering in Chanel and Tiffany’s and gawking at the jewel glowing in the Bulgari

windows. My mother never shops outside of Brooklyn. She has never seen the advertising office where I work. She is afraid to take the subway, where you may meet those young black militant street preachers who curse black women for straightening their hair.

Yet, here she is, my mother, who I left at home that morning in her bathrobe, with pieces of newspapers twisted like rollers in her hair. My mother, who accuses me of random offenses as I dash out of the house.

**Would you get up and give an old lady like me your subway seat? In this state of mind, I bet you don't even give up your seat to a pregnant lady.**

My mother, who is often right about that. Sometimes I get up and give my seat. Other times; I don't. It all depends on how pregnant the woman is and whether or not she is with her boyfriend or husband and whether or not *he* is sitting down.

As my mother stands in front of Carnegie Hall, one taxi driver yells to another, "What do you think this is, a dance floor?"

My mother waits patiently for this dispute to be settled before crossing the street.

**In Haiti when you get hit by a car, the owner of the car gets out and kicks you for getting blood on his bumper.**

My mother who laughs when she says this and shows the large gap in her mouth where she lost three more molars to the dentist last week. My mother, who at fifty-nine, says dentures are okay.

**You can take them out when they bother you. I'll like them. I'll like them fine.**

Will it feel empty when Papa kisses you?

**Oh no, he doesn't kiss me that way anymore.**

My mother, who watches the lottery drawing every night on channel 11 without ever having played the numbers.

**A third of that money is all I would need. We would pay the mortgage, and your father could stop driving that taxicab all over Brooklyn.**

I follow my mother, mesmerized by the many possibilities of her journey. Even in a flowered dress, she is lost in a sea of pinstripes and gray suits, high heels and elegant short skirts, Reebok sneakers, dashing from building to building.

My mother, who won't go out to dinner with anyone.

**If they want to eat with me, let them come to my house, even if I boil water and give it to them.**

My mother, who talks to herself when she peels the skin off poultry.

**Fat, you know, and cholesterol. Fat and cholesterol killed your aunt Hermine.**

My mother, who makes jam with grapefruit peel and then puts in cinnamon bark that I always think is cockroaches in the jam. My mother, whom I have always bought household appliances for, on her birthday. A nice rice cooker, a blender.

I trail the red orchids in her dress and the heavy faux leather bag on her shoulders. Realizing the ferocious pace of my pursuit, I stop against a wall to rest. My mother keeps on walking as though she owns the sidewalk under her feet.

As she heads toward the Plaza Hotel, a bicycle messenger swings so close to her that I want to dash forward and rescue her, but she stands dead in her tracks and lets him ride around her and then goes on.

My mother stops at a corner hot-dog stand and asks for something. The vendor hands her a can of soda that she slips into her bag. She stops by another vendor selling sundresses for seven dollars each. I can tell that she is looking at an African print dress, contemplating my size. I think to myself, Please Ma, don't buy it. It would be just another thing that I would bury in the garage or give to Goodwill.

**Why should we give to Goodwill when there are so many people back home who need clothes? We save our clothes for the relatives in Haiti.**

Twenty years we have been saving all kinds of things for the relatives in Haiti. I need the place in the garage for an exercise bike.

**You are pretty enough to be a stewardess. Only dogs like bones.**

This mother of mine, she stops at another hot-dog vendor's and buys a frankfurter that she eats on the street. I never knew that she ate frankfurters. With her blood pressure, she shouldn't eat anything with sodium. She has to be careful with her heart, this day woman.

**I cannot just swallow salt. Salt is heavier than a hundred bags of shame.**

She is slowing her pace, and now I am too close. If she turns around, she might see me. I let her walk into the park<sup>o</sup> before I start to follow.

My mother walks toward the sandbox in the middle of the park. There a woman is waiting with a child. The woman is wearing a leotard with biker's shorts and has small weights in her hands. The woman kisses the child good-bye and surrenders him to my mother; then she bolts off, running on the cemented stretches in the park.

The child given to my mother has frizzy blond hair. His hand slips into hers easily, like he's known her for a long time. When he

raises his face to look at my mother, it is as though he is looking at the sky.

My mother gives the child the soda that she bought from the vendor on the street corner. The child's face lights up as she puts in a straw in the can for him. This seems to be a conspiracy just between the two of them.

My mother and the child sit and watch the other children play in the sandbox. The child pulls out a comic book from a knapsack with Big Bird on the back. My mother peers into his comic book. My mother, who taught herself to read as a little girl in Haiti from the books that her brothers brought home from school.

My mother, who has now lost six of her seven sisters in Ville Rose° and has never had the strength to return for their funerals.

**Many graves to kiss when I go back. Many graves to kiss.**

She throws away the empty soda can when the child is done with it. I wait and watch from a corner until the woman in the leotard and biker's shorts returns, sweaty and breathless, an hour later. My mother gives the woman her child back and strolls farther into the park.

I turn around and start to walk out of the park before my mother can see me. My lunch hour is long since gone. I have to hurry back to work. I walk through a cluster of joggers, then race to a *Sweden Tours* bus. I stand behind the bus and take a peek at my mother in the park. She is standing in a circle, chatting with a group of women who are taking other people's children on an afternoon outing. They look like a Third World Parent-Teacher Association meeting.

I quickly jump into a cab heading back to the office. Would Ma have said hello had she been the one to see me first?

As the cab races away from the park, it occurs to me that perhaps one day I would chase an old woman down a street by mistake and that old woman would be somebody else's mother, who I would have mistaken for mine.

**Day women come out when nobody expects them.**

Tonight on the subway, I will get up and give my seat to a pregnant woman or a lady about Ma's age.

My mother, who stuffs thimbles in her mouth and then blows up her cheeks like Dizzy Gillespie° while sewing yet another Raggedy Ann doll that she names Suzette after me.

**I will have all these little Suzettes in case you never have any babies, which looks more and more like it is going to happen.**

My mother who had me when she was thirty-three—*l'âge du Christ*—at the age that Christ died on the cross.

**That's a blessing, believe you me, even if American doctors say by that time you can make retarded babies.**

My mother, who sews lace collars on my company softball T-shirts when she does my laundry.

**Why, you can't you look like a lady playing softball?**

My mother, who never went to any of my Parent-Teacher Association meetings when I was in school.

**You're so good anyway. What are they going to tell me? I don't want to make you ashamed of this day woman. Shame is heavier than a hundred bags of salt.**

[1995]

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## Dave Barry

Dave Barry (b. 1947) is a humor writer, journalist, and novelist who wrote a syndicated column for *The Miami Herald* for nearly twenty years. Born in New York, Barry began writing humor as a college student. He worked for newspapers and taught writing but his humor columns made him famous. In 1988, he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his "Barry's" column.