

The History Teacher (poetry)

BILLY COLLINS

Billy Collins (b. 1941) served two terms as poet laureate of the United States, beginning in 2001. He has written more than ten books of poetry, including *Nine Horses* (2003), *Picnic, Lightning* (1998), and *The Art of Drowning* (1995). A distinguished professor of English at Lehman College in New York City, Collins has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation. He was chosen in 1992 as a Literary Lion of the New York Public Library. Collins, who actively promotes poetry in the schools, edited *Poetry 180: A Turning Back to Poetry* (2003), an anthology of contemporary poems that aims to increase high school students' appreciation and enjoyment of poetry.

Trying to protect his students' innocence
he told them the Ice Age was really just
the Chilly Age, a period of a million years
when everyone had to wear sweaters.

And the Stone Age became the Gravel Age, 5
named after the long driveways of time.

The Spanish Inquisition was nothing more
than an outbreak of questions such as
"How far is it from here to Madrid?"
"What do you call the matador's hat?" 10

The War of the Roses took place in a garden,
and the Enola Gay dropped one tiny atom
on Japan.

The children would leave his classroom
for the playground to torment the weak 15
and the smart,
mussing up their hair and breaking their glasses,

while he gathered up his notes and walked home
past flower beds and white picket fences,
wondering if they would believe that soldiers 20
in the Boer War told long, rambling stories
designed to make the enemy nod off.