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Missing Bonnet

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An Open Letter from Emily Dickinson to Billy Collins, Re: A Missing Bonnet*

Nicole Nguyen

Dear Mr. Collins,

It has come to my attention
that you may be in possession
of a certain bonnet of mine—
white cotton—white lace—
white ribbon, tied in a bow
which you undid,
with a light forward pull
while I stood—still—
on my wide-board, hardwood floor,
facing an open window—
watching the lone carriage
on the street below

A certain slant of light
came across my dress,
plain and simple and *all white*
puddled 'round my feet—
you sighed—*in dashes*—not I,
with every hook unhooked,
every pearl button undone
Your hands trembled
ever so slightly, as you handled
my whalebone corset
loosing the ties as I stood,
afraid that my movement
would disturb your concentration

My skin tingled from your touch
softly stroking, light as air,
the pale expanse of my arms—
down—to desire's perfect goal,
your Paradise, your ecstasy—
but no nearer to your reach
I tensed—you hesitated—then,
I sensed the ocean at my feet,
my head immersed in the stars,
and it became easy to yield
to the bliss of new experience

All was silent when it was over
save the Fly buzzing on the windowpane
You groped your way to the door,
in the dark—the lamp put away—
my bonnet clasped in tight fingers,
feet quickly treading, plank by plank—
creaking across my Soul

* Please note that phrases in *italics* are versions of lines in Billy Collins's "Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes," *Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes* (London: Picador, 2000).