

# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

## American Sonnet

BILLY COLLINS

Page | 1

*A native of New York City, Billy Collins (b. 1941–) attended the College of the Holy Cross and then earned his PhD in English from the University of California-Riverside. Throughout the 1980s and 90s, he published many works of poetry, including Questions About Angels, a 1990 National Poetry Series winner—and it is from this work that “American Sonnet” is drawn. In 1994, Poetry magazine selected Collins as “Poet of the Year,” and in 2001 he was named Poet Laureate, a position he held until 2003. From 2004 to 2006, he also served as the Poet Laureate for the State of New York. Collins currently teaches English at Lehman College (CUNY), where he joined the faculty in 1968.*

*In this poem, Collins compares the traditional Italian or English sonnet to a postcard, which he describes as “a poem on vacation, / that forces us to sing our songs in little rooms / or pour our sentiments into measuring cups.” How is the postcard like a sonnet? How is it not? Consider, too, Collins’ own poem: is it a sonnet as its title claims? How does it follow, and break from, the genre’s conventions? Collins writes that “We do not speak like Petrarch or wear a hat like Spenser;” are the old poetic forms, such as the sonnet, no longer appropriate to the American experience? Why or why not? How is Collins’ American song (and those of the postcard writers he describes) different from, or similar to, the American songs in Walt Whitman’s “I Hear America Singing” or in Maya Angelou’s “Caged Bird”?*

We do not speak like Petrarch or wear a hat like Spenser  
and it is not fourteen lines  
like furrows in a small, carefully plowed field

but the picture postcard, a poem on vacation,  
that forces us to sing our songs in little rooms  
or pour our sentiments into measuring cups.

*Read the entire poem at Poetry365:*

<http://poetry365.tumblr.com/post/62623649/american-sonnet-billy-collins>.