Selected Philosophical Poems

Philip Bold

"Philosophy should be written only as one would write poetry."

—Ludwig Wittgenstein

"Is there an imagination that sits enthroned
As grim as it is benevolent, the just
And the unjust, which in the midst of summer stops

To imagine winter?"

—Wallace Stevens, from *The Auroras of Autumn*

A CAVE ALLEGORY

The philosopher was born under the sun—much as the rest of us. But while others moved about in the light of day, more or less content with the beauty and clarity of things before them, dealing with the myriad events of life as they come, the philosopher found himself continuously puzzled. "What are the natures of these things before me?—What is the essence that unifies them?—How can I make sense of it all in simpler and more definite terms? This world of light contains many shadows where nature hides itself and many reflections so brilliant they are blinding —how can I so much as proceed in a world that is unfit even for eyes?" And so the philosopher, with a handful of curious followers, descended into a cave, where one could not be distracted by the variety of things under the sun, where one might discover (as they say) the unity of the world by sketching pictures and playing with shadows on the wall.

KATABASIS

I remember
teaching Aristotle

and slogging through the definitions,
distinctions, technicalities—

inevitable if one
is to honestly teach this stuff.

The students, drowsy and
unimpressed,

daydreaming of their escape
into brighter pastures,

to roam with the animals
Aristotle was coldly anatomizing.

But requirements
forced their patience, so that

they eventually saw it all
precisely come together.

The pieces of the puzzle finally
put in place, its image revealed—

a chalk-drawn picture of the
cosmos on the board.

The hylomorphic beings
all ordered into a

heavenly rotation,
a cosmic dance,

all in service
of pure form,

immaterial
substance,

consciousness
itself,

eternal light
of which each harbors

a mere flickering—
a star seen off from thousands

of miles,
kindled and awakened only

with the curious intellect
that sees gods in all things,

thereby approximating
the supreme thought thinking itself,

noesis
noeseos noesis.

Immortality self-illuminating,
an immortality

resting in each of us, waiting
to be awakened within our mortal shell.

I saw the students
then blow the dust

off the series of distinctions,
witness them newly glow—

eyes wide with glee,
dumbstruck with wonder.

The new light
dazzling in their mind

for one student served as proof,
as perfect demonstration.

I looked into their whirling mind
and blazing heart at that singular moment,

and glimpsed the oft-forgotten
origin of philosophy.

And yet for me—
though I dare not tell

the students, not now at least—
the distinctions still felt

as chiseled ice,
waiting to melt

into a pool atop a hillock,
awaiting its riverine descent,

over shifting rocks
and sandy riverbeds,

along the shores of which
children laugh, playing mindless games.

DOCTOR OF THE SOUL

Wittgenstein told
students to quit philosophy,
become doctors—

yet he kept at it.

Did he see himself
doctor of the soul,

like Socrates,
master of refutation?

I destroy.
I destroy.
I destroy.

What am I?

What remains?

He said philosophy
should be written
like poetry.

That clarity demands
just three words.

That inquiry must pivot
on real need.

That we miss
what's right before us.

That the aim is
a way of seeing.

My soul thus opens
to the world.

I am
my world.

I ...
an extensionless point.

—These thoughts
echo through me
perpetually.

CONSCIOUSNESS STUDIES

Is consciousness a
blobby thing that
happens to be

attached to my
body? Is consciousness
like pixie dust

that God sprinkled
over the atoms
when He made

the world? Is
consciousness a special
fact that can

only be known
by experiencing it?
Then if that's

the criterion, why
are you surprised
that science can't

explain it? And
anyway, what do
you mean by

explanation? When I
regain consciousness after
being knocked out

by heavy drugs,
is that really
something we can't

explain? Not if
consciousness is some
fuzzy blob that

happens to be
attached to a
body, or fairy

dust that God
sprinkled over the
atoms when He

made the world.
Yes indeed, it's
true biology won't

make a bat
out of you.
Is this science?

Is this fantasy?
If you have
to ask, you'll

never know, said
Louis Armstrong, and
that's pretty convincing

to me. But
it recommends listening
to jazz more

than theorizing over
it. And clearly,
jazz is not

a goopy cloud
attached to a
body, or sparkle

dust scattered across
the atoms in
God's creation. But

can't you imagine
zombies? No, I
can't. Or I

have no idea
  if I can,
    or what I

am supposed to
  imagine. But surely
    you know what

I mean by
  subjective experience, and
    all I can

say is that
  replacing one word
    with two does

not really change
  things for me.
    I guess we're

just stuck with
  this mystery, aren't
    we? I'd like

to go chat
  with poor Mary,
    abused since birth,

forced to study
  optics in her
    colorless bedroom, and

ask what she
  thinks about all
    these consciousness studies.

THE LIFE OF THE SIGN

A word is an animal.

Don't cut it open.
That is disrespect.

And you'll not learn much.
Or not as much
as watching it play.

And mate.
And reproduce.

Forage for food.
Make alliances, mark its turf.

Watch the word swing.
Its weight bends the trees.

It journeys across the river.
Its environment full of risks.
Full of danger.

A word is an animal.
Relish its rainbow plumage.

Watch it live.
Watch it play.

PORTRAIT OF INNER SPACE

If one wondered
at the hidden principle
behind Picasso's brush—
feathers of blue across the canvas,
a smirk on his face
like the flick of his wrist
were an inside joke—
what would they miss,
even if they found it?

The voices in my head
are distracting sometimes—
unless I turn them into
blue brushings of imagination.

Mystified by the inner,
I put it into the world
as a moving sculpture,
and become one with it.

Nothing is hidden.

THE FLY

"What is your aim in philosophy?
— To show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle."
– L.W.

Adhering to the contours,
the curvature of conic space,

blankly buzzing by, wondering
why flying was so constricted,

constrained to a rounded fluttering,
a flapping unexplained,

while a bright world
outside always exceeded grasp.

Sweet skin to suckle appeared,
but flipping and flapping

toward it brought me round again,
as the world echoed my buzzings back—

busily buzzing this repetitiously tinny tune.
But one day, all went bleak

and blessedly black. Stopping—
nothing to buzz upon in this blank

breeze, this darkly clairvoyant sphere—
until, suddenly, a candle flickered

from an obvious yet unnoticed corner,
beyond the ovular cycles of that

assumed and assuming space.
Following it, the world opened up

to a feathered air, a vacant vastness
opening out every which way—

and, hovering over
to that tender succulent,

put down my fangs
to suckle life's fondling fountain.

DIE URPFLANZE

Discard your theories,
tired philosopher,

and learn in the myriads
to make analogies.

And never forget
what they are.

Does this light
spoil the fruit?

Or make it
ever ripe?

The artichoke heart
is what it is—

it is not its leaves,
and it is not the artichoke.

The seed of fruit
is not the fruit,

but is the seed
of the fruit.

From a seed
there may be blossoms,

but in its brilliance,
in its soft, pillowy fragrances,

do not call
the blossom the seed—

never reduce pink flowers
to scraggly weeds.

EVERY THING FITS
INTO ITSELF

Our gullible minds
  cannot withstand
language's sarcasm.

Language,
  fuller of suggestion
than the deftest comedian—

and we,
  an audience
endlessly suggestible.

When the imagination
  is tickled, one simply
cannot help but scratch.

And beg
  to be tickled
again, and again.

THOUGHT

Not always
  the correctness
    of a thought,
but how it moves—
  waltzing
    from darkness
to open light,
  or stuck
    in goopy tar,
gasping,
  stretching
    for it knows not.
Swaying
  from escarpment
    to meadow,
pausing at vantages
  to glimpse
    its crooked trail.
Or settling
  in a gloomy cave
    ending the journey
before sunset
  out of anxious hunger
    for certainty
—missing pink-orange
  breathings
    over the valley
animating its
  quiet stillness.
    Does it fly
beyond maps
  and ancestors,
    or stifle itself
chained to
  ghostly pioneers?
    —My mind
needs fresh motion.
  Without it
    it becomes
a sluggish bog,
  aching to be
    stirred,

awaiting a
  thrust,
    to be washed
away
  into rushing
    rivers.

LANGUAGE

is no more
than what it does

traipsing lazily through
populated pastures

sitting back, waxing lyrical
on the disparate shapes it sees

carelessly moving mountains
& making gods

an entire war based on words,
signs scratched in stone

asking incriminating questions,
with endless descriptive demands

occasionally gifting us combustible capsules
of revolutionary fervor

language — the aggressor, peacekeeper, vehicle
of irreproachable beauty & profound hatred

a most eventful action, yet
isn't talk so tragically cheap?

for some, an addiction,
scratching their necks, craving their fix

an obstacle for others,
recipe for immobilizing cranial fog

language, look at you —
you seductive shapeshifter

how tempting it is to pin you down
& indict you with your own words

from you we expect so much, yet
your demands & yours alone are fair

UNDER THE SAWDUST

The words were laid out
like tools from the carpenter's kit,

onto a white polishing rag,
splotched with grease,

shining strips of steel.
Each with its defined role,

each in its proper place,
each graspable by firm grip:

some wood, others metallic,
some to modify, others to solidify,

still others to precisely measure—
while most can destroy.

Remember: a tool itself
had to be invented—

and how many inventions
invention creates.

We are within the confines
of a wrench's intended function,

but in peculiar circumstances,
even a wrench is a hammer,

even a nail is a paperweight,
even a ruler is a backscratcher,

a funnel is a jester's hat.
But a table saw is not a dining table.

THE SUBLIME
OF INK BLOTS

Poetry is always
there to show you
that no one really
knows the English
language, or any
other. That would
be like having
reached the furthest
perimeter of the
universe, or having
found the last color
of paint and seen it
in combination with
every hue and shade.
If space exploration is
unaffordable for you,
consider poetry. It's a
mortal approximation
of omnipresence. If
someone tells you they
found the limit of lang-
uage in a formula, tell
them you're going on
holiday to the moons
of Saturn. Connotation is
the gravitational principle
of our most distant stars.
Shining shining shining

ON HOLIDAY

a child's
play of shadowy
particulars

amalgamated
with rational
abstraction

inchoately
infused in transparent
crystalline substance

mere images
painted imprecisely
within the mind

categories peel
back to the real
bare substratum

a symbol
of a symbol of
a symbol of a—

an object that
symbolizes itself and
its symbolism

hylomorphic products
handcrafted by fallen
subjects

so much
depending, amending—
condescending—Bah!

all these
concepts on holiday,
seeking a place to stay

—reader, what
do you see?
what do you say?—

Parmenides, hold
my calloused
hand

let's walk down
the restless shores
of the Piraeus,

ease our
abstraction,
amalgamate

with
exuberant
particulars

gather
high-flying
seabirds,

dig trenches with
quarrelsome
sand crabs

& together
we'll write
a new poem.

CONVERSATION BETWEEN
A PEAR AND A PEIGNOIR

"After the leaves have fallen,
we return to a plain sense of things."
– W.S.

I.

Wallace Stevens,
struck by the beauty of your language,
infused with metaphysical reflections,
I wondered.

There are limitations
to any perspective—
but there's no poetry
without one.

Is there anything
without perspective—
anything at all?

I heard you asking,
Wallace Stevens.

I heard the question echo
in your large imagination.

II.

The tree itself.

Well—are its leaves green?
And does that bear no relation to me?

We might perform a test:
compare the tree-with-me
to what it would simply be.

What's the result?

III.

And what you call a branch—
the beetle, who has no difficulty
with verticality,
climbs its trunk
and says, "Tree!"

Now, moving horizontally,
feels no difference
from what you feel vertically.

IV.

And what of lumber?

Well—no creature would
call "lumber"
what is, for them,
domain of slumber.

Who would dare cut down a tree?

V.

And anyway—why "tree"?

Was the label spoken
through the roots,
or was it a name tag
stuck with sloppy goop?

VI.

But a thing! A thing, indeed!
The thing itself!

But now compare a thing
to not-a-thing—
that is, to a nothing.

I'd be very curious to know
how you did it.

Did you compare a gray blob
with a knotty hole in the trunk?

You're not alone
if you feel stumped.

VII.

Well, perhaps through God's eyes,
the thing's shown in true color, shape, and size?

Yes, the grandest temptation!

The first idea!

And which God do we have in mind?

Zeus, Yahweh, Vishnu, Ra,
Odin, Allah, Isis, Thor,
Brahma, Inanna, Baal, or Buddha (in mythic mode),
Father of Christ, Marduk, or the Toad
whom Jerry witnessed on rain-soaked road.

With each remains that tricky *is* and *seems*,
as each partakes of separate dreams,
each follower's fiction most supreme—
though fiction's surely not their diction.

VIII.

"But then it's all my mind,
and not the world!"

Ah yes—that is
the classic final try,
withdrawal from all that mystifies.
And yet, here we go again...

When you carved things up
into mind and world,
I'd be curious to know
how that all goes.

Were there no labels, no adhesives,
no gerrymandered puzzle pieces?

When I point and say "tree",
you point and say "image-to-me",
and life looks on indifferently.

IX.

We've spoken tangentially,
veering away from poetry—
what of that?

Don't worry about *be*
and *seem*—not too much, at least.

The philosophers can take the job
of restless nights for us.

Just let the poem
stand tall,
drinking in the sun,

so easy to enjoy:
poēsis, *poēsis*, *poēsis*—

a thing that's made
just as much
as a thing that is.

The tree too
makes its branches,

and clutches the ground
with its roots.

X.

I suggest that we
step barefoot into the poem—

though perhaps this
new way of knowing
was already known,

and I didn't notice, while
you hid behind the tree.

I can only guess,
since I've yet to meet you,
and did not find you waiting.

WHAT I LEARNED FROM THE PHILOSOPHERS OF LANGUAGE

‘Dog’
means dog

‘Cat’ means
cat

One celestial
body can have
two names

‘It is raining’ is true
just when it is
raining

The form
of a proposition
is *P*

‘Moses’
refers to
Moses (the very guy)

Water
=
H_2O

This
sentence is
false

‘Your handwriting
is nice’ might be
an insult

The meaning of
an expression depends on
its parts

A sentence is
true when things are as
it says

‘The present king of
France is bald’
is not true

We play
games with
words

Poetry
is non-
sense

A RULE STANDS LIKE A SIGNPOST

A rule stands there,
like a signpost—
rugged,
weathered,
bent by the wind.

The rain has
soaked through;
the wood swells,
the rot deepens,
and soon
it must be replaced.

The broad tip
of the arrow
still points upward,
toward the summit.

Hikers follow
the signpost;
most reach
the sun-kissed peak.

But one misunderstood.
He read it
as he might a hand,
from finger to wrist.

He became the hiker
who, though his footing
was sure,
slid all the way down
the mountain—

and when he
opened his door,
there yawned
a dark abyss.

BEFORE LANDING

the plane
 made its descent
  into the storm clouds.
Everything began to shake.
The passengers tensed
 as our plastic interior rattled.
Outside the window,
 a red strobe lit
  thousands of raindrops
speeding past like bullets,
 beating red into the deep,
  dark clouds surrounding us,
crashing like waves
 against a ship
  midway over the Atlantic—
a black abyss
 that looked like it could
  swallow us whole.
It groaned
 and licked the wings
  with its elephant tongue.
We held hands.
You closed your eyes to pray
 (which surprised me),
  and my thoughts raced:
What if this is the last day?
 Did I do it right?
 Did I appreciate things enough?
What are we doing in the sky?
Do we belong here,
 or is this the price we pay
 for wanting too much?
I spoke with an old friend
 before the flight, which we never do—
  perhaps that was our farewell,
perhaps he felt it in his bones
 when he decided to call.
(The very thought of death
 turns us all to mystics,
  defying our weakling wits.)
The back of the plane jerked up.
A group of children laughed—

too young to worry
about life and death.
A man turned to look at them,
smirking, confident
this was all fine, normal.
I was embarrassed
he'd seen my face—
pale with horror,
perplexed, unprepared.
I clenched your hand tighter
and said, "I love you."
(Have I loved you enough?)
The plane rumbled,
the red light beat,
my heart rose
to the top of my chest,
breaking sweat,
twisting and turning
in my head:
all my regrets,
all I ought to cherish—
if this is the end,
our last syllable:
that you are here,
that we have hands
with fingers woven
into one—
that your heart
lights our way
to dusty death,
that a poor player,
in his hour, found you
flickering amid the fog.
But then the clouds began to fade.
I saw Minneapolis below,
city lights rising to greet us
as we steadied
into a smooth descent.
Catching our breath,
you said, "Scary,"
with eyes wide and bright
like full moons.
And when we reached the ground,
the passengers applauded.

A flight attendant came
 on the intercom to say:
  "Amen. We landed."
I slowed my breathing.
Was there need for terror?
How suddenly one is made
 to look into the eyes of death—
  indeed, how quickly
one can die.
After unloading the plane,
 the passengers
  waited on the street,
packing their bags into taxis
 to be carried their separate ways
  through the midnight rain.

TRUST YOUR GUT

Neurophysiologists have discovered
that the workings of the brain
are thoroughly intertwined
with those of the gut.
And this explains something for me:
why my thoughts
all have such a sour taste
when my stomach aches.
It also shows how funny it is,
in retrospect, that we ever placed
this gray, oozy flesh
on the highest pedestal.
At least Descartes had an aesthetic—
he saw the simple elegance
of the pineal gland
and named it
the humble seat
of the royal soul.
Perhaps the most important lesson—
one that few will heed—
is that the mind
is not confined to the skull,
but is instead the captive
of simple, exciting pictures.

WAYS WITH WORDS

A waterfall
is water
falling on itself.

A rainbow
is a multicolored bow
cast through the rain.

A sawhorse
is not a horse,
but an apparatus
for dividing wood.

A tree
is a tree.
It is peace.

A school bus
is a large machine
for transporting children
to well-intended
confinement.

A horse race
is a hominid
fantasy.

An engagement
is an IOU on
eternal psychic bondage.

A concept
is not a concept,
but a word
in royal robes.

A shipwreck
is the telos
of Odysseus's vessel.

A tree branch
is an arm extended
as a gesture of peace.

A generalization
is an aid for dealing
with particulars,
or else fuel for flames.

A friendship
is not a vessel,
but a precious
weaving of threads
through time.

A footbridge
is a floating path
for ten toes
to conquer a gap.

Love
is the one thing
that doesn't care
if it's real.

A poem
is whatever
you want it to be.

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

In the time it takes
to pee,
I could fold half
my laundry,
climb a medium-
sized tree,
stare into space
vacantly,
trap a single
terrorizing bee,
hear the morning prayer
from the Holy See,
glance at my
college degree,
wonder for a moment
what will become of me,
draw a 2-D portrait of a boat
at choppy sea,
Google whether
health care's now free,
whisper my political
gripes quietly,
check my inbox again for
emails from Gary,
research the connection between
calcium and dairy—
all in the time
it takes to pee!
Why, oh why, did God not
design me more efficiently?

MYTHOLOGY

In first grade,
Mrs. Horton asked
that we each place a seed
in the ground.

Each of us would see
our seedling sprout and grow.

As time went on,
the seeds made no progress—
a flat bed of dirt remained—

except for one:
the seed I alone had planted
had begun to sprout.

As more time passed,
the bed stayed flat,
all except mine,

which had grown
six feet high (as Mrs. Horton
carefully measured)

and blossomed
into a large, radiant sunflower.

This is a true story,
and I promise,
I am no mystic—

yet it stays with me,
radiating my vision
of the past.

And when my thinking machine
loses its steam—

as when I drift into dreams—
the memory creeps in
and whispers to me:

“You are a sunflower—
never forget.”

ONTOGENESIS OF FLAMES

Desire burns like fire—
but fire demands fuel.

What feeds this
restless flame?

The answer is the story
of the world.

In the beginning,
there was gas.

And God, rather indifferently,
struck His flint.

A spark erupted—
hotter than the sun.

The cosmos was consumed
in flame.

When the burning ceased,
only ash remained.

From the dust, man crawled—
on ashen hands and knees.

He cried: "Deliver us from this
wretched heap of dust!

Ignite us again; let us
remain a sphere of flame."

So God gave man
a mighty stack of wood.

"Do what you will—this
was not made in My image."

And man discovered a spark
beneath the soot.

He stirred the flame,
set fire to the wood.

But what God gave was
all the wood there was.

So, with a wry grin, He sat
and waited for the next heap of soot—

and wondered how man
might make his next plea.

God never told man
he was made in His image.

(And there's little explanation
why the thought occurred.

Perhaps an illusion,
cast by the crackling flame.

Physicists suggest it emerged
from a random flux of quanta.)

And so we pray—that
tomorrow, God will hear us,

and once more provide
the fire of restless desire.

It is this,
or a pile of dust.

HYMN TO A LIFE-LOVING GOD

Poseidon—
your storm clouds
over our heads.

Wash us,
make us
new.

Show us
the sea buried
deep within our hearts.

Be our fresh
awakening
of splashing Eros.

Flood us,
drag us
out to the ocean.

Make us
weary, then
wash us up again

in Ithaca,
covered in weeds
and sea scum.

In our filth,
we wait for you
to take us again.

Turning us,
tossing us in the sea,
rolling and swirling about.

You seek
our suffering,
and in suffering we live.

Waiting on the shore
we long for you,
salted and stale.

AT THE BOOKSTORE

I saw Wittgenstein's children's dictionary
at the bookstore yesterday.
It cost $50.

Must be worth the price—
maybe it contains the secret code
to his genius.

—I didn't buy it.

APOLOGIA

Why are
they so
persistently
cryptic?

I don't
know.

But in
the mystery,
one finds
oneself.

The mystery
is the open
expanse that
lets in
every part
of you.

Empty space
is where we
can grow into
a wholeness,

and open
ourselves

to a new
way of
knowing.

ANALYSIS

Analysis pierces clean
through every
word.

Water extracted
from a confined aquifer—
clear, crystal, pure,
but not flowing.

Or has one instead
pierced a beating heart?

Greek *lusô* means
either release
or destroy.

NATIONAL GALLERY, DUBLIN

As I wander through
on this bright, quiet morning,

all those little
burning questions
about the meaning of life

are answered—
wordlessly.

WHEN THEY FIND OUR REMAINS

A dim light crept through
the cellar window, where
they built machines that
sparked, shrieked, and spun
at their command. They danced
around the whirring steel,
dazzled by flames that reeked—
fumes funneled into a
separate chamber, but leaking,
intoxicating them into divine,
egoless mantras and chants,
invocations to the mystical
Executron, industrial creator,
eternal prophet of profits,
to whom each must
sacrifice their fallen flesh.

They worked till skin
thinned to rusted bone.
Then the fuel's last
drop was spent,
the dim light died,
the fuses ran dry.
The show was over.

They collapsed in final
sleep, stained mattresses lying
empty in a shadowed corner.
Outside, the stars kept twinkling,
unaware they'd been forgotten.

And we found their remains,
wondering what it was
that brought them here.

DULUTHIAN SANCTUARY OF DUST

We passed by it
without noticing.
Turned back
and saw an old church,
with a crooked arrow-sign
on the side, pointing back,
that read *entrance*
in lowercase letters.

Enigmatic, slightly eerie,
we wondered what
we were about to discover.

We opened the door
to a corridor crammed
with claustrophobic books
piled haphazardly on the floor.

"Have you been in before?"
the shopkeeper asked.

She ushered us
into the nave
and guided me
toward poetry,
gesturing along the way
to philosophy
and psychiatry.

This church—
once the solemn haven
of hushed devotion—
now the silent sanctuary
of towering tomes,
dust-laden authors,
devout and heretical alike.

My urges
got the better of me:
a battered volume, timeworn—
its pages
tinged with sepia,

its cover faded,
typeface dignified,
austere.

All literature
used to be printed
augustly—
neither commercially
nor opportunistically.
The words,
printed boldly,
sold themselves.

It compelled me
to imprudently purchase
books I already owned,
but the temperament
of an elder book
has an odd way
of reviving familiar words.

A printed page
is more like a painting
than we usually
care to acknowledge—
just think how many
versions there are
of *Madonna and Child*.

I brought my stack
to the antique register.

"You look happy,"
she said,
indulging my flawed impulse.

"There are worse things,"
she added gently,
noticing my bashful
look of shame.

"What did you think
of the poetry section?"

My fiancé complained
about struggling to breathe
through the layers of dust—
but I was still immersed
in a kind of spiritual drift,
that feeling one gets
when foolish enough
to embrace a book,
or slip it into one's bag
to carry out on errands,
knowing perfectly well
there will be no time to read—
yet still yearning
for the companionship
of a beloved book.

"The paperbacks
used to live in the basement—
I brought them all upstairs.
I want the poetry section
to be extraordinary."

I was spellbound
by the sentiment.

There are
worse things,
I thought.
There really are
worse things.

MOTHER & DUCKLINGS

Paddling together
against the current
of the Mississippi.

Focused, coordinated,
wordlessly in tandem—
neither a honk nor a quack.

THEORIES OF DESIRE

Is desire an absence
or a flame?

Or the painted colors
of the world, or the enemy

of civilization? A growling
beast, or the crude gutturals

of a voracious stomach? Or a word
we say after satisfaction—

and suffering? A name.
A name and a portrait.

A portrait of a dream
in a tossing night.

No, it's a winged drone,
longing to bring something

back to the hive. Honey!
Every desire is for honey.

LIGHT DAWNS GRADUALLY

It dawns piecemeal,
over varied demonstrations—
lifting one's finger
and asking where one wills it,
passing eyes over squiggles
and asking whether one reads it,
reminding how easily
we can see pain
in another's eyes,
marveling at the blueness
of the sky with a friend,
and not once wondering
whether your blue is theirs too.
Gesturing with a skin scratch
so as to say "fuck you,"
and asking, "What's the logical
form of that?"
Looking at the myriads
of games, of pains,
wandering every which way,
realizing we never
thought to define these before—
when we had the examples,
and never needed more.
Calling out for a slab,
seeing that one word
worked, and that more
words would be a distraction.

Noticing that
walking over to you
requires the roughness
of the ground; that if
all were smooth as ice,
we'd get nothing done—
that our life requires
respecting the dazzling variety
of varieties under the sun.
Our elder world of words
is ancient, yet it holds,
and still it grows,
beyond those old churches
at its gilded,
weather-beaten center—
our natural history,
our mutual need;
in the beginning
was the deed.

INTERPRETATION

my students are
so above
interpretation

but interpretation
is the most
glorious act

it is
one soul
shining light
into
another

and
the other soul
shining
its light
back