

Thomas Merton

Philip Seal

He is like a bear, inviting your gaze
From the forest's edge
Without granting you entrance.
Suggest love and he will utter
Words as the wind speaks air;
Propose marriage and he is
Gone, leaving no thread
Of his hide on the leafy floors
To which access is barred.
They say they have seen him
On a high ridge, balancing
On two paws, foraging for
Summits we would have missed
Without his silhouette casting
Against them. Climb further,
We urge him, imagining
The wild pulse of his blood
Held still by the prayer-trained mind,
The claws extending into the dark,
The eyes closed.

Now

Even his prints are gone, covered
In new snows that only
We tread. It is ours to pause
In thanks at the carcass,
And journey on.

Poppy

Philip Seal

If a poppy
Came to chapel
At evening prayer
I think she would stand
Risen from the stone floor
Between us,
Her watery stem
A miracle of escape
From the hard slabs.
Her eyes would stay
Closed, whilst we said
The psalms, and her hands
Would stretch out
As though blessing
The stillness in which
Our hearts remember their desire.
Perhaps we wouldn't
See her, or perhaps
We already missed the event,
Being too busy
Praying our own prayers.
If she comes, I wonder,
Will we answer
The question:
Are poppies
Mothers or children,
Explaining a stem's stability,
Or shrugging a leaf's delicacy?
Either way
She will be there,
Smiling from behind
Silent petals.

It is lower than he thinks,
Scribbling in notebooks at seventeen,
Wordsworth still half closing on the desk.
Beyond the audacious claim
That he might climb to reach divinity,
He thinks he starts up in the bliss
At God's own height.

Much later, converted only partially
Beyond himself - with negativity
Absent from the shelf -
It is higher than he thinks.
The new audacity
Is even to try for beauty, to grow
Rhythm, voice, skill.

The formative question:
What truth, what middle,
Between making himself God
And limiting love's presence to a place
Above words?

The answer, says the spring sun
Through the leafless tulip tree,
Is not, after all, to think,
But to abide,
Becoming the one reached, voiced, written.

Philip Seal completed a PhD at Oxford in 2015, focussing on the prose forms of Merton's journal writings. He has had poems published in *Stand*, *Acumen* and *Agenda*, and currently works as a schoolteacher at Headington School, Oxford.