Sources of Light

on the inauguration of President Grant Cornwell at Rollins College

It’s easy to ignore the rounds of the sun—
the grazing of first-light on a mountain peak
at the daily birth of dawn,

and the last light that follows,
the day expiring across a bay or behind a stand of trees.

Between times, light saturates the spaces of the world,
slanting through the slats of a barn
to reveal the brown flank of a horse
and his confidante, a cat curled in the hay,

light easing into a meadow
or awakening a street with its barber pole, façade of a bank.

And the lights of our own making—
lights of a passing ship, and a lighthouse to warn her.

Light under a kettle on a stove,
the flames of a campfire in a circle of stones.

And here, in this place,
daylight ignites the tip of a chapel,
then the surface of a lake, smooth or vexed,
reeds clustered along the shore,
light catching an immaculate white bird.

The sunlight filtering down on these lawns
may also fall upon an open book, a student
come outdoors to read, where a breeze
may turn a page, this way or that,
and the shadow of a cloud slides down the lines of a poem.

And if we could look within,
we might behold an exhibition of lights
where the opening mind is being lit

maybe by a torch blazing in a cave
where a man is reaching up to draw a beast,  
light from a window above a copying monk.

The mind can be lit by the small flames  
flickering on the pages of Shakespeare or Swift  
or by the one candle by the bedside of Emily Dickinson.

The gooseneck lamp of Wittgenstein,  
Thomas Merton, or Annie Dillard  
can light the mind, or it could be a match  
Jackson Pollack used to light a cigarette,  
or a cigarette Dylan Thomas used to light another cigarette.

There are too many such lights to name,  
but this is what we know here:

to set the mind on fire, you need only  
to light the wick of a single thought  
with the taper of a book,  
or the fiery movement of a symphony,  
or the sparks flying in the air of a painting,

even the pale agony of a marble statue will do  
or the perfect knot of a perfect equation.

Yet how easy it is for us to swerve away from these ignitions,  
our heads bowed to a screen, all thumbs.

Let us promise to shine long after when we leave this place—  
some firebrands, some famous flames,  
others night-lights, there to show others the way—  
but everyone, daughters and sons, illuminated from within.

--Billy Collins