INSTEAD OF A POEM

I wish this was just you and me
watching a whole field blaze up
in the honey-gold light of late August—

just the two of us, out on that big rock
covered with lichen at the edge of the woods,
passing a smoke back and forth

and listening to the same
noisy quarrel of sparrows
rising and banking against the late clouds

as a green tractor drones in the distance,
dropping perfect little ingots of hay,
one by one, in its wake,

until finally the sun sinks so low
behind the pink, and then blue,
then almost black trunks of the birches

that when I look back
I can’t seem to make out your face,
though even in the dark

I can tell that you’re smiling
and somehow not saying
all the same things I don’t say.

Raised in the
foothills of north
Georgia, Patrick
Phillips has
produced three
collections of
poetry, each of
which contends
with the lives of
his rural, work-
ing-class forebears—a body of work that
has made him a finalist for the National
Book Award in Poetry and earned the
admiration of some of America’s best
contemporary poets. Those include the
late Philip Levine, a Detroit native who
explored the tribulations of blue-collar
America for nearly 60 years. “The art
here is in hiding the art,” he wrote of
Phillips, “and he is the rare poet with
the tact and the chops to accomplish
that.” Indeed, Phillips’s limpid poems
proceed unhurriedly, marked by swerves
that softly startle and endings that feel
inevitability true, always informed by
an attentive heart. Here, one feels his
reverence for time-honored callings,
and the parallels between writing poetry
and baling “perfect little ingots of hay.”

—Alice Quinn

The National Poem

PATRICK PHILLIPS