



Philip Booth: Poet of the Hard Country

Lifelines: Selected Poems 1950-1999

by Philip Booth

Viking, 1999

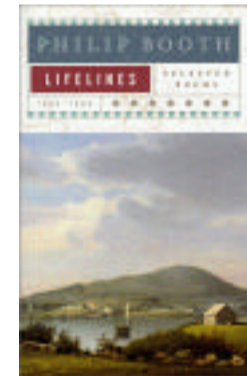
Hard cover, 291 pp. \$24.95

[Russell Astley](#)

Lifelines: Selected Poems 1950-1999 is the most comprehensive gathering to date of Philip Booth's poetry of the last millennium. Nine of his previous volumes (several no longer in print) are represented in sections numbered in chronological order. The last section, the tenth, also called *Lifelines*, is made up of poems of the last five years.

Reading the collection as a whole feels a little like leafing through someone's personal journal: quick takes of people, happenings, land- and seascapes and a self, recorded through half a century by a solitary observer not unlike Booth's role-model Thoreau or his teacher Robert Frost.

There are poems that reflect on Booth's aging, his father's death, his mother's madness, a daughter's first swimming lesson. There are elegies for neighbors (e.g., Robert Lowell) and friends (e.g., Hannah Arendt). There are poems that speak of the approaching millennium in apocalyptic tones (e.g: "Zeros," "The Turn of the Century," among others). "Species," though not a Y2K poem, may remind some readers of a certain Hitchcock movie: it deals with the extinction of humanity as witnessed by the birds.



And there are several self-referential poems. Any made thing can be a metaphor for the poem: a house, a table, a formal garden. "Supposition Without Qualification" is typical. It's about a man who tries to express a wish to try to express something with absolute honesty. Like most of these poems, it's essentially about the poem it finally becomes. When a poet's as capable as Booth, he can wake up with nothing to write about, write about *that*, and make it interesting to read.

But if you're looking for the postmodern, look elsewhere. Booth is a traditionalist in his verse and in his attitudes. The two labels for Booth's work that leap to mind are Romantic and Pastoral.

He's "Pastoral" as Frost is pastoral: his most common settings are not the idyllic pastures of Virgil but the "Hard Country" of Maine, both rural and wild. The Booth of these poems spends the "turning year" keenly aware of seasons, solstices, equinoxes, constellations; he writes more often and often more sympathetically of the rocks and trees and birds on the mountains and at the sea's edge than he does of his neighbors.

He's "Romantic" as the manifesto of the unabomber was romantic: he believes organic nature and the culture of technology are at war and nature is losing. He sees the natural as good, true, and poetic but past or passing, doomed to become the road-kill of a technological juggernaut bearing down on us more oppressively and boringly every day.

The road-kill metaphor comes straight from one of the new poems, "Narrow Road: Presidents' Day," which illustrates his handling of this mythology. The speaker, driving to work along a country road on Presidents' Day, passes a local woman just opening a window

and leaning out
on her elbows to
talk with three
backyard sheep.

"She smells spring," he thinks, in February, in Maine. But before we cynical readers can dismiss this pleasant picture as vintage Norman Rockwell, Booth inserts a flashback. "Not a mile back," he'd swerved to miss a dead skunk and spied next to it "a big mother porcupine/ dying hard." Tears had come to his eyes:

...my whole
morning messed up
by road-kill, wannabe

Presidents, street
bombs, cyberspace,
Bosnia...

The sun has been trying to pierce the fog and he wonders, as the poem closes, "when, if spring/ happens, the new/ lambs will come." What makes this upbeat ending — and indeed the whole poem — work as poetry is of course the crafty flashback that recalls us from the midst of the idyllic to the stupidity and death so casually wrought by our technological world. When we return to the pastoral vision, we recognize the intensity of the drive that informs it and may even share, for the poem's moment, its longing for the innocent harmonies of the human and the natural.

Booth is among the most accessible of 20th-century poets. Though some of these poems have richer and more concentrated manners of expression, the language in most of them yields its burden on a first reading. This kind of clarity is surely among the poetic virtues. As Booth himself puts it, in his only untitled poem, an amazing book-long meditation that winds through the whole of *Before Sleep* *, welling up irregularly, in italics, between the titled poems: "I didn't become/ a poet for nothing."

*The untitled poem is found in Section IV of *Lifelines*. Ed. Note.

ALSO OF INTEREST

Gifford, Terry. *Pastoral (The New Critical Idiom)* Routledge, 1999. Paperback, 200 pp.
Rotella, Guy. *Three contemporary poets of New England: William Meredith, Philip Booth, and Peter Davison*. Twayne, 1983. Out of Print.

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