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Actions Taken

Philip Booth



Philip Booth teaches in the Creative Writing Program at Syracuse University each spring but spends as much of the year as possible at his home in Maine. He is a frequent contributor of poetry to such magazines as *The New Yorker* and *Harper's* and is the author of several books. In 1980 he received a Fellowship in Writing from the National Endowment for the Arts. Most of the poems in *Before Sleep* were composed in the 130-year-old family house where the author's grandparents lived, and where his grandson represents a fifth generation.

All poems are from *Before Sleep* by Philip Booth. "Thoreau Near Home" © 1979 by Philip Booth, originally published in *The New Yorker*. All other poems © 1978, 1979, 1980 by Philip Booth. Reprinted by arrangement with The Viking Press.

These seven poems from Philip Booth's recent book, Before Sleep, which in my view is not only his best book so far but one of the best by any American poet in the past decade, are the work of a man in mid-life who has stripped his consciousness to its essentials. The concepts of "nothing" and "will" return again and again in all their meanings. A man must take life into his own hands, just as a poet must take the poem into his own imagination: The will to act is our fundamental human attribute, whether we view our existence as free or determined. Action itself, once taken, is what invests our deeds and words with their multiple values.

Booth's poems are compressed and intense, but never thick-ety. They are light-filled, lucid, and in some sense almost translucent, and they are worth reading and rereading. Of course, this small selection cannot represent the range of Before Sleep, but I believe it shows at least something of Philip Booth's great accomplishment.

—Hayden Carruth

In This Gray...

In this gray depression
 I try to sleep off, or
 wake from, nothing connects.
 Nothing gets to me. In that
 there is nothing to say,
 I have to begin with nothing.
 In that there is nothing
 to feel, there's nothing
 I'd better question. I find
 myself far into mid-life
 willing at last to begin.

Matter

No matter what you do
or don't, or imagine,

the tree you live by
is bound to come down.

Maybe not in your lifetime.
Without doubt in its own.

Still Life

The new-cut key on the blue-paint table.
Your place now. The third-floor door,
the stairwell turn no bed
could get up through. But did.

After you get the boy to sleep
you sit at the blue-paint table.
Tea with nothing. No milk, no honey.

Against the table: the small brass shine.

By the time you lie back down
on the same old mattress
you've decided: strip the blue paint off,
bring the whole thing back to natural.
That's what you promise yourself you'll do.

Do for yourself. For Christmas.

*Nothing Is
More...*

Nothing is more than
simple absence: no father,
no tree to lean on,
no current to ride,
no rock off the shore
to feel a toe down to.

Nothing, at bottom,
is to have nothing
at heart: no self left
who will hear one's
other self speak, no
sense that relates
to another sense,
feeling nothing
permeate everything.

Nothing has meaning.
Nothing means what
it says: the acute
presence of absence:
the who I am not,
the where God isn't,
the void the dead leave,
the when I am dead.

Nothing is infinite absence
invading the finite truth
of my life: my own absence
from years of mornings,
the emptying-out of self
I cannot avoid, the void
of not being I cannot
learn to believe in.

Thoreau Near Home

Seasick off Cape Ann, by moonlight,
 on the night boat bound for Portland,
 he took a week by mailcoach
 tacking inland in hope
 of some new school that wanted teaching.
 No one listened save an Oldtown Indian.

May 13: looking east from Belfast for
 some fairer weather, he booked passage
 for Castine, an eight-mile reach, aboard
 the sailboat *Cinderilla*.

He found the harbor full: coasters, one
 square-rigger, shallops, pulling-boats.
 Walking Argyle Street's steep hill, he
 step by step rested his whole frame,
 that each moment might abide. White clapboard,
 spires, and cupolas claimed his eye.
 A boy named Philip Hooke pointed to
 Fort George, meadowy ramparts crowning
 the peninsula. A war ago, boys
 hardly men were posted here to die.

No, no teaching offered here.
 By another spring, he thought, I
 may be a Greenland whaler or
 mail-carrier in Peru. All answers
 being in the future, day answering
 to day, he studied, into evening, how
 merchants and how seamen paced their lives.
 Bright as roadside shadblow
 the night came fresh with stars.
 He stayed the night at Deborah Orr's.

Captain Skinner, on the morning packet
 back to Belfast, kept the poems of Burns
 shelved in his cabin. As strewn clouds cleared,
 Thoreau took the deck and looked back at the cliffs
 that had not heard of Emerson.
 The village shone.

Within a week, Thoreau would be home;
 two months from now he would be twenty-one.
 He stood watch on Castine, the farthest east
 he ever sailed. He thought back to the *Iliad* and Homer;
 he found the day fit for eternity, and saw
 how sunlight fell on Asia Minor.

Before Sleep

The day put away before bed,
the house almost closed before night.

By the time I walk out over the knoll,
down the steep Main Street

that dead-ends in the sea,
the village has put out its lights.

The winter stars are turned up over
the tide, a tide so quiet the harbor

holds stars. The planet holds.
Before the village turns over in sleep,

I stand at the edge of the tide,
letting my feet feel into the hillside

to where my dead ancestors live.
Whatever I know before sleep

surrounds me. I cannot help know.
By blood or illness, gossip or hope,

I'm relative to every last house.
Before I climb home up the hill, I hold:

I wait for myself to quiet, breathing
the breath of sleepers I cannot help love.