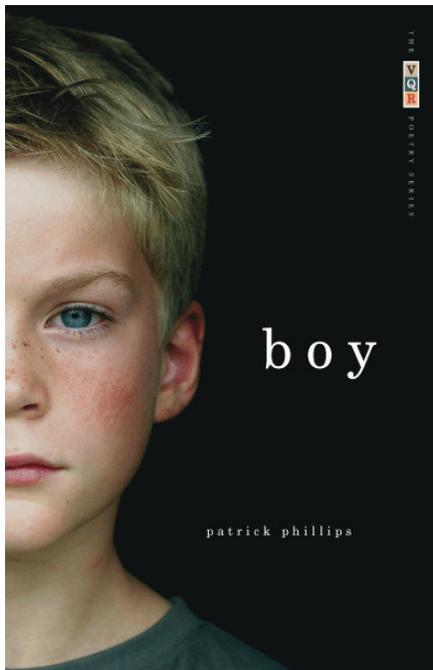


Boy by Patrick Phillips, University of Georgia Press 50 pages; \$16.95 paper



Though Patrick Phillips's sophomore collection is titled *Boy*, it is really his first book, *Chattahoochee*, that more accurately inhabits the world of the young male with its wild narratives and brimming intensity. Phillips's poetry has matured, the speaker now dealing with the deterioration of an aging father and the birth of a son, and if his first book asks questions, Phillips has decided now to provide some answers.

Boy begins with an appropriate epigraph from Francis Bacon: "He that hath wife and children hath given hostages to fortune; for they are impediments to great enterprises, either of virtue or mischief." Throughout the book Phillips's work remains enveloped by the responsibilities of family and fatherhood, especially as his own mother-father-son unit seems to be held up again and again to the reflection of the speaker's childhood. The opening poem, "Revelation," introduces us to the speaker, remembering himself a boy, setting fire to toy army men with a friend, the scene climaxing with the image of the friend, too, burning.

However, the form is not erratic like flame; the fire of this poem is cautiously kindled, couplet after careful couplet placed into the stove of imagery so expertly that though we are moved by the sight of a young boy on fire, we are more provoked by the ending, and the calm voice of the speaker, now a man, realizing that in this moment of horror he "saw things clearly / for the first time in [his] life." The speaker provides a collection of snapshot memories of his childhood pieced together only to better understand fatherhood and the implication of impending death that comes along with this great and sometimes overwhelming role.

Indeed, though the poems in *Boy* are set in terms of fathers and sons, the overarching theme of this book may well be death, which underscores Phillips's familial concerns. In "Our Situation," we encounter a familiar scene--mother and father watching their child sleep--but by the tenth and final line of the poem, the reader once more discovers not the contentment of family but rather the fear of loss. Phillips writes--

How reckless it seems.
How naive:
to love a thing
so fragile and so weak

This obsession with death changes its tone as the book progresses. In the fourth and final section of the book, we move beyond mere death to the idea of Heaven. The poem "6:12" presents a different kind of revelation from that of the book's first poem:

And as I broke into our nightly dance—
his graceless middle-aged old man,
I knew: that I will be content
if this is all the heaven we are granted

Echoing Roethke (sans whiskey), this poem is Phillips at his best: emotional, concise, aware of the tome of poetry already written on his subject, and focused on image while providing the collected insight of a modern poet-philosopher.

Boy, filled with narrative and skillful lyric, is not accidentally aligned with Bacon, the scientific philosopher. Phillips himself dances around fully inhabiting the realm of verse philosopher, and his poems explain fully the axiom of manhood, describing with analytic precision what it means to be a father and a son. His verse, skillfully crafted yet always surprising, is perhaps most effective because of its attention to clarity. Phillips is the best kind of poet, one any reader could and would want to read, the kind of poet poetry needs.