

BOOK REVIEWS

Chattahoochee

By Patrick Phillips
University of Arkansas Press, 2004

Chattahoochee is a riveting and smartly organized first work. Phillips's poems are set largely in the landscape of childhood memory, though there are occasional reaches into theory and theology. Though the book contains a substantial number of personal and autobiographical poems, Phillips's work easily rises above the stereotypes of the "middling neo-confessional lyric" accused by detractors of being the staple crop of contemporary American poetry. One could argue that work such as Phillips's is a testament to the artistic, theoretical, and emotional integrity of autobiographical writing, and goes a long way to rescue the form from accusations of solipsism and facile formlessness.

The book is gathered into three parts, with an opening poem called "The Doves." This poem precedes the first section, gesturing open-handedly towards the latter three parts of the work with different meditations on the statement *if I could call the doves*. The soft meditation on the ethereal and peaceful doves is followed by the brusque, muscular opening to the first section—a poem aptly titled "The Rules." This poem quickly establishes the rules of family:

The first rule was he made the rules.
The second: we obeyed them.
The worst rule was that rules changed
Unpredictably if he was losing.

With such clarity, the murkiness and sentimentality one risks in autobiographical poems has no chance to take root. The first poem and section of the book serve as remarkably astute and effective maps to the emotional life of this particular family. Readers will easily find common ground in considering "the rules" of their own families, the sometimes tender, often strained ties between mother, father, and siblings.

Aside from family themes, Phillips reaches occasionally into philosophical theology and theory with poems like "Ars Poetica, hitting the curve" and "Ars Videndi." While these are interesting, and may appeal to one who favors more erudite or scholarly poems, they seemed a weaker and less original vessel for that which seems the trademark Phillipian move—a conveyance of the passage of time, the sadness of death, and the slowing clock which paces all of us, through very ordinary objects such as photographs, cans of beer, mugs, books, shelves and the like. A salient example of Phillips's great strength and slighter weakness as a writer can be found in the poem "Baptism" where he writes:

So often I have heard it
I can name the poker players at the table.

all dead now but bald Fred Hall
and famous Dan Vitali.

can see their cans of Pabst
sweating rings into the wood.

Phillips's writing often makes the reader play mundane scenes from their own lives all the while reluctantly realizing *this too shall pass*. It is the separation of self from the present moment, the spiritual experience of feeling one's soul lift up and glance over the time it has been granted that every poet tries to give and every reader hopes for, which is achieved here. At the end of "Baptism," Phillips writes:

and in the silence after I am touched
the third and final time, before he sets me
down,

I can hear him shouting *ghost*,
then the others, whispering *amen*.

Here, as elsewhere in the book, I felt Phillips's direct references to religious emotions or characters were less integrated and effective at conveying the desired sense of awe or dread than his depictions of everyday life. In life and writing we often get more church at the poker table, so to speak, than at Sunday School.

The poems in the second and third sections of the book were exceedingly strong as well, though I questioned the author's choice to have the second section contain only the title poem, "Chattahoochee." The solitary bearer of the entire second section, as well as the title-poem for the book—this poem had a lot of weight on it. The *Chattahoochee*, we gather, refers to a river in Georgia where the author grew up. The theme of water weaves throughout the poems, and indeed Phillips ends with a poem titled "The Flood," implying that he wishes to reflect a river-like current running through his work. While there were some stunning moments depicting a child's near drowning in "Chattahoochee," devoting an entire section to a title poem that didn't quite carry its weight was a risk I wouldn't have taken. The final poem likewise, while interesting and not without beauty, did not work as effectively as the poems grounded in autobiographical and everyday material. All in all, this is a tremendous first work. Anyone who goes to literature to connect more profoundly to their own lives and the world around them, to connect with what is important in light of the passage of time we all live with and against, will not find themselves disappointed with this book.

—Sarah Estes Graham