

FIFTY CONTEMPORARY POETS

THE CREATIVE PROCESS

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Fifty Contemporary Poets:

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DREAMSCAPE

On the steep road
curving to town, up
through the spruce trees
from the filled-in canal,
there have been five houses, always.

But when I sleep
the whole left side of the blacktop
clears itself into good pasture.
There are two old horses,
tethered. And a curving row
of miniature bison, kneeling,

each with his two front hooves
tucked in neatly under the lip
of the asphalt. I am asleep.
I cannot explain it. I do not
want to explain it.



HOW A POEM HAPPENS

How did the poem start?

From the beginning. Always from the beginning, trying to recover the original impulse and move the poem with it. Always, back to the beginning, to be moved by the impulse, to make the poem move.

In this particular poem the title begins to tell.

What changes did it go through from start to finish?

All possible changes that might, as I sensed and tested them, writing and rewriting, enable the poem to move toward its own conclusions. All changes that might both explore those conclusions and, naturally, light their way.

What principles of technique did you consciously use?

None, consciously. No principles as such. A poem consciously principled belongs to a School before it's begun; or ought to be left to poetry workshops: purely an exercise.

Principles inhere: say how a lifetime inhabits earthspace. How a voice gets down on a page is mostly another matter.

A poet in the process of writing need be no more or less aware of "techniques" than a skijumper approaching the lip of a jump. On hills where darkness has closed down early, he has already learned by example, and practiced every possible technique. Readied, he is full of experience and feeling, set to inhabit blank air. What may once have felt mechanical becomes, in process, organic: his form is an event: an act of intensely concentrated motion both grounded in common sense and defying it.

First courage, then skill, then luck. The luck that courage and skill help make. Worrying about a principle as basic as gravity can only bring the poet down hard; tactics become reflex are what accomplish the leap. There's some unspoken poet in every skijumper: who else leans out so far and learns, briefly, even in mid-flight, how to reshape the whole course of his life?

Whom do you visualize as the reader?

One person and one person and one person. Never, collectively, "an audience." Never, as I write, editors. Sometimes, on the far margins of my first feeling, this person or that whose art (not necessarily poetry) has lent courage to my own. But I believe the reader I hope for, reading late by simple light, is bound to be out there: one—or one with another. The person will find the poem if the poem finds the person. Writing, writing, I try only to get back, down, and out to what the world of the poem may come to.

The oldest commandment is still first: Honor Thy Subject.

Can the poem be paraphrased?

I trust not.

Dreamscape is in part about a refusal to paraphrase complex perception, and that part of the poem can probably be "talked about." Around-and-about, which is probably more illuminating than the ways that paraphrase thinks are "direct." Paraphrase, as distinct from close reading, is almost always reductive. A good poem never is: the nature and quality of its concerns are too surely human and too surely eventful. In subtracting the eventfulness, paraphrase discounts humanity.

The recurrences in *Dreamscape* seem to me, long after the fact, to reinforce my emphasis on what may be the poem's pivot-word: "always." Short of the poem itself, what lesser statement might give that word its due, or tell by context its tone?

How does this poem differ from earlier poems of yours?

Quality. Asked to guess, I wouldn't want to confuse the always singular present with the continually plural past. The poems I've earlier written are already a grove: hardwoods and softwoods, evergreens, and deciduous trees of all sizes. This apparently small poem is more likely to be shaded out by new growth than to thrust up through old. But it might seed some strong new roots. I didn't know when I wrote it. I still wouldn't want to pretend to.

Theme. It would take a reader almost as familiar with my poems as I am, and more objective, to judge the growth of my themes. I rarely look back at my earlier books; when I do, I find myself mostly amazed. I am always more interested in what I am writing than what I have written.

Technique. Before I was old enough to be a parent, yet was, I thought that poems like *L*, *M*, *O*, were so accomplished that they clearly fulfilled

the promise of what a poem could be. Now that I'm old enough to be a grandfather, and am, my belief is in more difficult trusts: the round of enigmas and ambivalences and mysteries that make life the most certain poem of all, the poem I hope my own poems may increasingly honor.

Philip Booth, born in 1925, grew up in New Hampshire and Maine. He received his master's degree from Columbia after graduating from Dartmouth. He taught there briefly, as well as at Bowdoin and Wellesley, before moving to his present position as professor of English in the creative writing program at Syracuse University. He has published five books: *Letter from a Distant Land* (1957), *The Islanders* (1961), *Weathers and Edges* (1966), *Margins* (1971), and *Available Light* (1976). His work has been honored by a Lamont Prize, by Guggenheim and Rockefeller fellowships, as well as by awards from *Poetry*, the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, and the National Institute of Arts and Letters.