

PUT THIS ON, PLEASE: NEW & SELECTED POEMS. By William Trowbridge. Pasadena, CA: Red Hen Press, 2014. 203 pp. \$19.95, paper.

Reviewed by Jo McDougall

William Trowbridge's latest collection, *Put This On, Please: New & Selected Poems*, contains a generous section of recent work along with some of the best from his five books—*Enter Dark Stranger* (1989), *O Paradise* (1995), *Flickers* (2000), *The Complete Book of Kong* (2003), and *Ship of Fool* (2011)—and from two chapbooks, *The Four Seasons* (2001) and *The Packing House Cantata* (2006).

Put This On, Please is marked by straightforwardness and clarity, offering an antidote to a current trend in American poetry which celebrates the convoluted and willfully obtuse. Describing Trowbridge's writing as straightforward is not meant to imply that it lacks resonance and nuance; indeed, his poems are layered with multiple meanings and rich irony, with no whitewashing of the cruel and futile elements of existence, that first-instant-living = first-instant-dying absurdity.

To confront his often stark view of reality head-on, one might begin by reading the six poems excerpted from *The Packing House Cantata*, winner of a Camber Press Poetry Chapbook Award. While in high school, Trowbridge worked in a packing house in Omaha, Nebraska; the experience seems to have left an indelible mark on him. (W. H. Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" addresses Yeats, observing, "Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry." The packing house may well have provided such a catalyst for Trowbridge.) In "Sticker," the hogs "scream and flail / and bite"; those screams, we learn in "Blood," sound "almost human." The people laboring in this hellish place are deft at killing, seemingly inured to it, and Trowbridge learned that a certain hard attitude commands respect among one's co-workers:

"Nobody
fucks with him," said Vernie,
like we were seeing Jesus
or the tripwire on a Claymore.
"Not even Ed. That's Hurbert:
he don't give a shit."

However, most of the folk in *Put This On, Please* haven't developed Hurbert's protective armor. Trowbridge, grounding his work in vulnerable characters—as well as in his use of flinty humor and self-deprecation—has much in common with fellow poets Paul Zimmer and David Clewell. But Zimmer and Clewell generally take their time getting to the crux of a poem, leisurely exploring a subject; Trowbridge gets right to the point. For those who prefer expansion and digression, Trowbridge's style may not satisfy. His tone and sometimes bleak view of life remind one of the work of

Howard Nemerov, though Trowbridge employs a more direct, unvarnished delivery, scattered more liberally with expletives—an approach some may find off-putting. One also finds in his writing hints of the old-school diction and rich, brimming vocabulary of John Crowe Ransom, but Trowbridge uses edgier language. Like and yet apart from these and other well-known poets, Trowbridge is unique in the heightened degree to which he revs up his irreverence and comic timing.

Unlike Zimmer and Clewell, Trowbridge usually stays out of his poems, relying on such characters as King Kong, Lucifer, and Buster Keaton to put additional dramatic distance between himself and the viewpoints he explores. In so doing, Trowbridge makes use of literature's fool, tapping into the archetype of the proud but unguarded jester to both mask and reveal the Catch-22 of our lives. Trowbridge's Fool exhibits a bumbling, unmerited confidence that brings him darkly funny, sometimes tragic consequences. Always striving to make his mark, Fool plays the willing, weakling apprentice to God, the cosmos, and kings. In "Wise Fool," he's "appointed the king's confidant / and resident goofball, the mental power / behind the throne, who speaks in jests / and riddles." Fool rolls out tawdry efforts such as "chicken jokes," becoming wildly successful—surprised at and overly proud of his prowess "till they need a beloved celebrity / to burn for the smallpox epidemic." And Fool appears in many guises: a handy-man father (Mr. Fix-It) "[c]ursed by the broganed gods who govern tools," danger-addicted high school classmates, Lou Costello, and Wile E. Coyote.

In Trowbridge's re-creation of the character of King Kong, too often exploited and depicted by Hollywood as a thick-headed behemoth fool, we see a telling vulnerability that provides an original slant on this cunning, testy, but ultimately likeable American icon. In "The Madness of Kong" the titular ape—who evidently has seen a psychoanalyst—laments his fate, having been kidnapped from his "secret island" and then chased by men who think him mad. The doctor, Kong relates, "said it would be years before / I'm cured, that Mother is behind it all." But then Kong, in a lightning change of pace, exults: "When I pinched his head, it made / a little squeak." This abrupt turn in the mood of the narrative is a Trowbridge trademark. He understands, as too few contemporary poets do, the value of surprise.

Vulnerability also figures in one of the collection's most heartbreaking poems, "Obedience," when a stray dog finds his way into what he hopes will be his home. Instead, the dog is taken "through the dark to a cornfield outside town, / where the rain blew and it slumped off right away, / going to get lost, like a good dog." The volume might be better balanced had Trowbridge included more poems such as this one, in which compassion outweighs irony and speaks directly to the heart.

Readers may also detect a weak link in *Put This On, Please* in some of the poems selected from *Flickers*, Trowbridge's third book. Certainly there are fine poems here: "Walking Out" portrays tight-wire artist Karl Wallenda, who, although he carries the

balance pole “like an offering,” falls ten stories to his death when “the wind / lifts the pole past saving.” And in “Curtain Call” Trowbridge imagines his dead parents on stage with actors taking a final bow, the parents

still in makeup and costume
to show the wounds, the sicknesses are void,
the years imaginary. We grin like fools,
smack our hands together till they sting.

In awkward companionship with these, however, we find “Uncle Miltie” and “American Primitive,” both of which are marred by the use of words set in all caps. Although surely meant to mimic vaudeville’s sound effects, they instead distract. “Uncle Miltie” begins with the jarring “‘MAAAKE-UP!’ Yells the midget,” and closes with, “I will KEEOW you, / I will KEOOW you a MIWION times.” In “American Primitive,” Trowbridge creates an amusing, tumbling account of Laurel and Hardy’s slapstick bouts with (among other icons) Anger, Sex, and Authority. But I am again put off by the use of words in all caps sprinkled throughout the poem, i.e., “LOOK OUT! [Hardy] slams right into Sex” and “Ker-SMASH, go Ollie’s [dreams].”

But these are minor quibbles, and by *The Complete Book of Kong*, published three years later, Trowbridge has hit his sure, lean stride. A new and selected offers a chance to track a poet’s development, and in *Put This On, Please* we see how Trowbridge has evolved into a significant and rare source of levity and irony combined with gravity. Poem by provocative this-is-another-fine-mess-you’ve-gotten-us-into poem, he proposes that laughter provides the surest armor. In “Roll Out the Fool,” for instance, Trowbridge is at his crusty best as he takes Fool, ever-ready vehicle for ridicule and entertainment, through the centuries from “Best Victim” to “Flaming Fool” to “Exploding Fool,” or—

big mistake—
a Fool Frappé, which,
one snowy night,
everybody ate

like it was brain
food or something,
so now we’ve got
Fool in our marrow,
which explains

history, for one thing.

Few poets today can match the imagination and skill of Trowbridge’s best work. In “That Time of Year” he notes that “our lost hour returns from daylight savings time,

/ tasting like icicles used to.” He delights in the metaphorical possibilities of verbs, an often neglected and seldom taught aspect of the craft: in “Living with Solar Keratosis,” for example, a harried and protective father afflicted with damaging skin lesions watches over his son at a beach, observing that “I’m everybody’s parent, who’s always there / to haggle down delight,” and imagining himself the “*memento mori* on the tube of Coppertone.” “Haggle” is the apt verb here, niggling and chipping at joy.

Trowbridge also has few equals in the art of pacing—he possesses the timing and sizzle of a stand-up comic. The life-threatening fat carried by much contemporary poetry has been excised from these poems; they move quickly and end exactly when they ought to. They also impart, as the late Miller Williams was wont to say of poems he admired, “the grace of uncertainty.” Consider the ever-increasing speed and self-effacing tone in the closing lines of “Self-Help,” featuring losers “Wrong-Way” Corrigan, Troy Donahue, and (with a nod to e. e. cummings’ “nobody loses all the time”) “Uncle Sol / and his worm farm”:

Let’s reach down
for that minus-ten percent, that faulty premise,
those visions and revisions, that bush-league,
cockeyed, backfiring, two-left-footed,
shit-for-brains urge to go out there
and do something,
sort of.

Part of Trowbridge’s appeal lies in his proclivity for laying down bluntly, but then leavening, danger and fear. This collection’s title poem, in the section of new work, refers to a hospital gown that serves as a metaphor for vulnerability and foreboding. It’s a “winding sheet,” yes, but cut from mere “dime-store cotton.”

The book’s cover painting by German artist Michael Sowa, *The Last Hours of Pompei (sic)*, is emblematic of Trowbridge’s sensibility. The image’s zany figures, gathered in a sparse room, could have been lifted from a Trowbridge poem. Yet the darkening light, as if echoing the overall tone of this poet’s work, lends a somber ambience.

These lines from “Saint’s Life,” a tribute to Buster Keaton, perhaps best sum up the power and substance of William Trowbridge:

Now, when his life flickers miraculously before us,
we fly with him, reel to reel, in a dream of ourselves:
blessed survivors in a world where nothing works,
where everything, sooner or later, breaks, clogs,
goes kerflooy. We show the immortal deadpan,
all staring and cheekbones, as the house falls,
the boat sinks, the Lizzie dies on the tracks. . . .

In *Put This On, Please*, Trowbridge instructs us in the art of the deadpan, “the secret” to outrunning our “faults and stewings.” As mortals at the mercy of capricious gods, we need this book. Sure to win Trowbridge new readers and more accolades, *Put This On, Please* offers the carapace of comic relief against what we know of, fear, and cannot understand.

