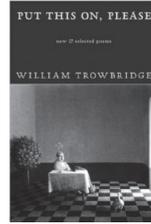


## Our Foolish, Beastly Hearts

By Shanan Ballam

Book Review:

*Put This On, Please: New & Selected Poems*,  
by William Trowbridge. Red Hen Press, 2014.



*Put this on, please*, William Trowbridge boldly invites. When we slip into this collection, we partake in a wild celebration of American culture—Jackie Gleason, sweating, as the conveyer belt speeds up its disaster of cream pies; Wile E. Coyote, dashing off another cliff; James Cagney, giving his signature “fuck-you snarl”; King Kong, swept onto the set of *Let’s Make a Deal*. Trowbridge’s Fool, as a bathtub toy, nearly drowns and even God rages in to shake “the cosmic chandelier.”

Poetry containing such a wild cast could be shrugged off as silliness, but this poetry is anything but silly. We confront dark, serious characters, from Charles Starkweather, mass murderer, in *Enter Dark Stranger* (1989), Trowbridge’s first book, to Eichmann in the *New Poems* (2014). None of the poems is far from existential despair; but the gloom of the dark is always chased by something comic—following the Starkweather poem, “Plain Geometry” instructs us to “fart *fortissimo*, scratch with verve.” The collection ends with “Unofficial Missouri Poem,” a list poem where Trowbridge shows us “The Show-Me State,” and we learn Missouri is home to “the world’s/largest ball of string (not twine).”

Each poem invites us to walk with Trowbridge down the dangerous path of the serio-comic, where we encounter a series of stunning tonal shifts and masterful manipulations of psychic distance. The beauty of this work is enhanced by sincerity and empathy. Trowbridge’s technical and emotional gifts create a bond of trust with readers, making us want to move with him and bear witness, as he exposes our human desires for fame, recognition,

acceptance, and love. In some poems, such as “Fall Guys,” we are voyeurs, watching “Stan / and Ollie trying to get a grip / on the concert grand / they’ve got to lug/clear up that bluff.”

Trowbridge adds:

We rubberneck it  
 from our chairs, like when we  
 slowpoke by a car wreck—  
 only this time we get  
 to see the crash, too,  
 thanks to the easy math  
 involved: fool+breathing  
 =pain and/or shame.

The distance Trowbridge affords us in “Fall Guys” and the other voyeuristic poems in this collection collapses in moments of empathy and recognition: “We’ve learned it by heart, remember / that little twinge before / our foot slipped.”

In his King Kong poems, Trowbridge removes our comfortable voyeuristic distance, as he switches into the first-person and slips us into the consciousness of Kong, who is living in the modern world, attempting to be accepted. We readers find ourselves inside a less-than-human skin, but once inside that skin, we recognize the human desires for love and acceptance. In “Kong Hits the Road with Dan-Dee Carnivals, Inc.,” for instance, Kong’s best friends are Ramon the dwarf and Bianca the pinhead. He carries them on his great shoulders. “We / harmonize,” Kong says, “trees swooning with our old songs / about the tenderness of lips in small hotels.” When Ramon says, “no one but the badly formed, / the set aside, can remember all their lives / how to love,” a little arrow pierces us with recognition.

In the selected poems from *Ship of Fool* (2011), we encounter the persona of Fool, moving forward and backward in time, wherever a Fool may appear: cave days, heaven, hell, Walmart. Personifying foolishness allows Trowbridge to track the sources of misunderstanding and folly back to the basic human desires for love

and respect. In "World's Biggest Fool," Fool suddenly discovers that "his weight's up / almost half a ton." He continues to grow and grow. "He takes his place / as the ninth planet in our solar system"; his heart and mind expand, and he discovers, "the missing link, the lost chord, / the cure for cancer and old age."

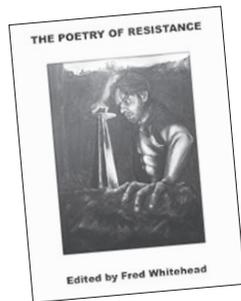
As readers, we root for Fool, who becomes beautiful, heroic. Our empathy for Fool swells as "Fool's heart / takes up a galaxy. There's room in it / for all humankind." For a moment we are suspended, with Fool, above a world scrubbed clean of its ailments, ignorance, bad luck. In yet another deft, tonal shift, Fool's antagonist, the omniscient Old Testament God blasts in, to "set off God's Doomsday Device for when / life gets too good for our own good." We, like Fool, collapse again to our vulnerable, human forms, where we are left looking into a mirror, into our own foolish eyes.

Trowbridge is a poet who takes risks; indeed, the collection's title poem, "Put This On, Please," offers a hospital gown "designed / for easy access / to your nakedness." In this gown we are bared, level with every other fool—with every fool, beauty, or hero that we have ever been.

*I finally began to understand  
that a revolutionary morality is  
inextricably woven into the expanding  
network of the world's advance.*

—Truman Nelson

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From the editor's preface: "I have not imposed any kind of political 'test' for inclusion here, instead having confidence that from a diversity of viewpoints, the light of understanding will shine forth."