

# Out of Tennessee

By Colette Inez

Book Review

*In This Maybe Best of All Possible Worlds*,  
by William Page, winner of the 2016  
FutureCycle Press Book Prize.



William Page's eloquent and rousing poems are given to us mostly in the American grain, during a middle Tennessee hill country childhood, followed by odd jobs as a mechanic, salesman, and movie-house manager. He finds his calling as a writer while serving in the U.S. Air Force, and went on to earn advanced degrees from Tennessee and Ohio Universities, becoming a professor of creative writing, a well-respected, widely published poet and founder of the *Memphis State Review*.

Page's latest book takes a look at the great subjects: family, nature, knowledge, and the split between reality and illusion. Its title, *In This Maybe Best of All Possible Worlds*, draws on Voltaire's Doctor Pangloss who in *Candide* espouses a philosophy of optimism. Page seems to take dual positions in "Standing on Edge," a poem that plays on the theme of coinage. We read "Copper and silver, little monoliths / of Mammon . . ." and in the concluding lines, "But dime / dumb or penny silly / I count my life a fortune." This poet treasures life and the wealth of language, its power of making us see. Didn't Joseph Conrad say that making us see is a writer's duty? Page makes us see and does so with verve.

For example, in an ekphrastic poem "In Hoppner's Painting" (as a New Yorker, I kept lopping off the "n" to read Hopper), he shows us in patient detail:

the boy in velvet breeches  
is drawing on paper held  
in his left hand

as his little  
 sister clutches the top back  
 of his shoulders and stares out  
 at us in the foreground . . .

In "Spirea," Page offers us meditations in his mother's garden, first at midnight under the constellations of Leo, Ursa Major, Sagittarius and Taurus. As the sun runs its course, the poet reflects on weeds as unwanted flowers. He comes to praise Marvel's green thoughts in a green shade. Here, "a voice in the wind may rise from the sown tongues / of plants that want to grow like the morning glory. / Though it knows it's doomed, it climbs not to display / its fragility to passing lovers but to show gardeners / the contemptuous beauty of the uncultivated." The duality of the natural world is presented with gusto and charm. We may speculate on the consciousness of a flower, its mystery in the scheme of living things.

The renowned author of *Lolita* has over the years been increasingly honored as an amateur lepidopterist. He is given homage in "In Entering the Woods After reading Nabokov." Page stresses the yin and yang of nature. Yellow butterflies (their caterpillar karmas) that devour his lawn are assassinated by ammonium nitrate. And yet the poet's outcry turns to exultation:

When I enter the woods next to my home  
 I do not expect to see the monarch leap  
 with its orange and black wings from daisy fleabane  
 like a señorita throwing her embellished  
 sombrero into the air but there it rises  
 with the sun burning leaves of the maple.

Page moves nimbly, armed with stranger-than-fiction fact, such as "the tunnels of our blood stretched out / could bleed around the world," and "molecules spindled around nothing / make all the substance of something." All this acknowledges the truth of the observer, who hears his "blood sucking heart pumping toward one ridiculous truth / thump, thump, thump / live, live, live."

A sense of wonder at the throb of life and a oneness with nature is expressed in the precision of an artist who celebrates the

commonplace. The opening poem, "This is Not" is constructed on the notion of what the subject is *not*, as in "not attesting / to the snow quietly melting . . ." Later, the poem states, "the translucent skin shed by the bull snake / sheds no light on this." Under the spell of these sensuous negatives, Page lists things remembered in childhood: "sad mothers, Roman candles / blue balls of fire bursting in crimson waves, roller skates." Finally, the poem rewards us with the delicate "still fly resting / on the window, its wings miraculously thin."

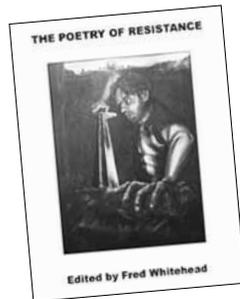
A robust and varied life force is at work in Page's world. Taking in his "Cadillacs . . . finned against a pale sky" or "the sun rippling down / the pantry wall," as in "The Biscuit Eaters"—which portrays a harridan in the kitchen—one who "snarled at the stove / cursing the spitting bacon"—we hear the language crackle and sigh, watch it as it glows.

Page excels at rendering anger in his writing. The power of pairing Timothy McVeigh and Beelzebub, in their passion for "blowing up buildings," lingers in memory. He revs the motors of a considerable imagination, as he attempts to reconcile his vision of truth and beauty. This is a strong book of well-made poems. Go read it.

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

—Truman Nelson

John Brown Press  
P.O. Box 5224  
Kansas City, Kan. 66119



*The Poetry of Resistance*, edited by Fred Whitehead.  
33 contemporary American poets. \$12 + \$4 shipping.

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."