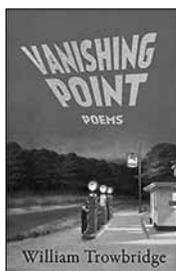


Who Is Mr. Trowbridge?

By Robert Stewart

Book Review

Vanishing Point, by William Trowbridge,
Red Hen Press, 2017.



First, transparency: I have been to William Trowbridge's house. I know where he lives, and, more important for a reviewer, he knows where I live. I call him Bill, except sometimes, for fun, Poet Laureate for Life (he once served an extended term as Missouri's poet laureate). I normally would avoid reviewing work by someone I know as well as Bill Trowbridge, but, in fact, it's hard to find poetry critics who don't know Bill, and not only those from the Vietnam or Korean-war generations.

I had a male poetry student recently who argued with me whenever I would lay out principles of prosody or grammar. Grammar and coherence seemed old-timey to him, bothersome and restrictive rules more suited to the generations of Vietnam or Korea. He and certain peers preferred as subjects obscure (to me) video-game characters or (also to me) literary theorists. That student, nevertheless, started showing up whenever the man he called Mr. Trowbridge gave a reading, even, sometimes, out of town.

"You know Mr. Trowbridge?" the student said to me one day after he saw us together.

"You mean Bill?" I said. Suddenly, I had credibility.

Bill, as it happens, writes in well-composed sentences, with vivid nouns and active verbs. His poems combine story and lyric, not sacrificing either. The poem "Tilt-A-Whirl" gets us going: "It speeds you in a circle on a wavy platform / and, at the same time, whips you around / inside that circle: wheel within a wheel, / to quote Ezekiel." I want to yell, "*Wheee*," but there's more. That poem has a center, and the center eases our fears of a chaotic world. "Hang on tight," it advises. Many of Bill Trowbridge's poems allude, even revel in, old-timey things such as a tilt-a-whirl in post WWII days, subscriptions

to *Boys' Life* or the terrifying (to me) performer of the 1940s and '50s Spike Jones, "in bow tie and big-square suit / with bigger shoulders," who did, as the poem "In Memoriam" relates, musically mock "Der Führer" on national TV.

Such revelations connect Mr. Trowbridge's poems with generations much more recent than his, and they do so by humor, yes, but even more by the tremendous relief of their empathy. In a villanelle called "Elegy," the actress, "Myrna Loy's been stolen from her prime." Trowbridge mocks his own impulse: "We shouldn't pine / over one loss in a blight so universal." Yet we do, and so the universal—that quality all young poets seem to pine for—turns up in some long-ago movie star, and that's the shocker. An individual can stand for everyone.

This book is, indeed, a tumble toward vanishing points, with elegies to Meadowlark Lemon, of 'Trotters' fame, Bob Steele, star of B-flicks, as the poet says, and the poet's old track coach, still alive but with memory fading into a dial tone, as the poem concludes, "serious as prayer." Trowbridge is so well known among his readers as a humorist, no one seemed surprised that his previous book—his 10th—*Oldguy: Superhero* (2016), came out in comic-book format, with drawings of the utility-belted, caped avenger of time, Oldguy. Now, many new Oldguy poems appear in *Vanishing Point*, as well. Yet this new book gives us an experience less of humor and more of human passages, as in "Vanishing Point," the poem, where childhood crayon drawings provoke allusions to Plato's cave, then historical references to Wounded Knee and Auschwitz, shrinking, by the perspective of time, into something we can deal with, something life sized.

Even Trowbridge, himself, has been shrunk by perspective to less stature than the characters and subjects of his own poems, which perhaps accounts for his appeal among many generations. Only by being self-effacing can he work his wit. He takes no position I can find of cultural superiority, no insider, coded lingo. He fearlessly lets the reader in on his jokes, albeit with Twainesque deadpan, as from "Sticky Notes," those reminders that hedge against age-related memory lapses: "We slap them on the fridge, car keys, toothbrush," he writes, and pushes forward: "we stick them / on birds and trees—*goldfinch, / chickadee, sugar maple. . .*"

Who is this Trowbridge? Read for yourself.