



Standing at an Angle to My Age, by P.W. Bridgman. Surrey, B.C.: Libros Libertad, 2013. Paperback; 166 pages. \$20.

Reviewed by Roberta Rich

Standing at An Angle to my Age is a collection of eighteen short stories written by the mysterious P.W. Bridgman. Like B. Traven, author of *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* and other tales of valour and greed, P.W. Bridgman guards his anonymity jealously. The only clue to his identity—and I am sticking my neck out by using the masculine pronoun—is a quote from his Spartan web-site: “P.W. Bridgman is a writer of literary fiction living in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. He has earned undergraduate and graduate degrees in psychology and a degree in law as well.”

Whoever Bridgman is, I salute him. My first and only foray into short story writing was a class I took many years ago labouring under the delusion that writing a short story would be a snap, compared with writing a novel. I thought it would be like the difference between a quickie *ex parte* chambers application and a long, arduous trial. [*Will an ex parte application ever feel quite the same?—Ed.*]

Foolishly, I assumed there was ease to be had in brevity. My bravado extended to supposing that emotions could be captured, flash-frozen, savoured and then passed from reader to reader like a bite of cake being passed from one mouth to another—and all this in the space of a measly ten pages or so. My class left me with an undying admiration for those who, like Bridgman, have mastered the genre. Short stories may be short, but easy they ain’t.

There is an inherent challenge in reviewing a short story collection, particularly one as diverse as this. The breadth and width of these stories are impressive. They range in setting from the Okanagan Valley and the English Department at UBC to Ireland, London and Paris, and in time from the Second World War to the present. The cast of characters is an assortment: male, female, old and young, rich, poor, kind, cruel.

The prose is spare, each word chosen with surgical precision. The enigmatic Bridgman knows how to craft a sentence. Phrases such as “a well-tethered Catholic”, “small, moist hands”, “curled up like a fiddlehead under the coverlet” and “an airbus javelined me from London to Paris” resonate long after the book is finished.

In the coming-of-age story, “The Meaning of Life According to Fred W. Kane”, a shy, bookish boy trying to find his footing in the world is “poised like a pearl diver on the brink of adulthood”. His mentor, Fred W. Kane, has a contagious calmness that works for the boy better than any therapy could.

The dialogue is wonderful. For example, the cadence of Northern Ireland speech rhythms is beautifully captured. In “Cean Dubh Dilis” the saintly mother says to her husband in gentle reproof, “Catch yourself on, Lorcán...is that the example you want to be setting?”

The opening line of “The Mars Hotel” is a good example of the use of rhythm and tempo to impart a feeling of slowness and then increasing speed. Read it out loud and you will see what I mean:

Down, down the long avenues and grand boulevards, across the wide sweeps of French lawns sprawling in supplication at the feet of imperious French municipal buildings, along the sidewalks rain-shiny and earthy of smell, by the open doors of rue Cler merchants selling cheeses and olives, my quickening footsteps cadenced by a quickening heartbeat carry me past the art dealer, the patisserie, and the betting house, finally to the Mars Hotel and to you.

Clearly, Bridgman is a student of poetry.

The characters, on the whole, are tender, given to simple acts of kindness, not outward displays of rage or violence except those that have been carefully staged, as in “Cake, Bang and Elm”, the story of two men simulating a fight to conceal their homosexuality. “In Trading Places” a working-class woman, an invalid, is being tended to by her social superior, a solicitor’s widow, for unexplained reasons. What is the nexus between the two? Guilt? The need to control? Compassion? The reader is left to decide.

There is a quiet heroism in many of the characters, particularly the female ones. In the lead story, “Cean Duhn Dilis”, a mother takes an old, demented man into her home. When her second child is born, she has “to feed the two of them side-by-side”. It is a touching example of the type of loving patience that is difficult to sustain in the day-to-day cauldron of life, especially among families who have limited incomes and are crammed into small council flats. Her kindness is rewarded when, just before the old man dies, he plays “Dear Dark Head” on a borrowed harp.

And then there is the mother in “Open Secret”, who suffers a stroke but manages to pin a note to her blouse for her daughter to find—a note that reveals the girl’s true paternity. This was my favourite of the collection, a

lovely tale of mother and daughter joining forces against a tyrant of a stepfather before the mother dies. The tale ends on a wistful note as the daughter, watching from her bedroom window, sees the doctor talking to her stepfather, announcing her mother's death.

"So and Not Otherwise", set at UBC's Department of English, is the tale of a relationship between a diffident doctoral candidate and his adviser, a dipsomaniacal Brit from Balliol with a huge contempt for his students, his colleagues and himself. It elegantly describes the jealousies, petty back-biting and self-congratulatory elitism of a university department. The language, tone and vocabulary skewer academic pretence neatly. The student, explaining to the professor what attracts him to university life, says: "It's the fact that someone like you can carry on exactly how he pleases and it will all be tolerated, sort of, at least, because he can do something extraordinary." The two characters are foils for each other, the professor a thinking, feeling, exuberant, misguided mess of a man and his student, with "his pale freckled hands", the Jesuitically rational student.

"Sir" is about an authoritarian teacher who delights in humiliating his students, abusing them in every way, including sexually. The teacher is unremittingly nasty, the story told through the eyes of one of his beleaguered pupils. Does the boy learn anything from his experience with the teacher? We don't know.

And then tucked in, here and there, like Oreos in a lunchbox, are several pieces of "flash fiction". For the uninitiated, flash fiction is a story which takes about as long to read as it does to smoke a cigarette, or to walk a dog around the block or eat an ice cream cone. To establish character and setting in barely one and a half pages requires great dexterity. These pieces were, I confess, the least satisfying of the collection. This was, I suspect, for the simple reason that if you have an idea you think is good enough for a story, why not develop it? Flash fiction often comes across as a fragment of something larger, something that should continue but for some reason does not.

However, one of the flash fiction pieces is an exception: in the space of a page and a half it gives an Alice Munro-like spark of insight capturing a tiny moment, giving a small ping of epiphany, which leaves the reader with the feeling, "Yes, I have felt just that emotion, too." "Ad Te Clamamus, Exsules, Filii Hevae" is one such story. Here a group of friends and family are gathered around a table, eating a meal fraught with unnamed tension. We do not learn the reason for the unease until the last line, which delivers the bomb: "...the thick fingers of his right hand roughly tapp[ed] the table in synchrony with the beating of our newly post-coital, runaway hearts."

I do, however, have a few grumbles. Titles in general often puzzle me, and I confess last more than most. The titles within the collection often seemed

unnecessarily obscure and often as not did nothing to provide a clue to the author's meaning. What purpose is served by entitling a story "De Mortuis Nil Nisi Bonum" except to make the reader wish she had paid closer attention in Latin class?

Another complaint. There are a few stories in which the pace is slowed down by too much narrative, too many descriptions of weather and clouds and not enough dialogue and conflict. As the late, great Elmore Leonard said, "I try to leave out the parts that readers skip." Mercifully, these moments are few.

Bridgman is a rare bird. At a time when most writers are prostrating themselves before the public in their eagerness to sell books and have praise heaped upon them, Bridgman remains aloof.

Bridgman, *ostende te!*