NEW BOOKS AND MEDIA

A Lamb **by P.W. Bridgman, Ekstasis Editions, 2018, 120 pages, paperback ISBN: 978-1-77171-273-6, English, $23.95 CAD**

Reviewed by Daniel Cowper

"Inside every lawyer is the wreck of a poet" is a much-quoted remark of Clarence Darrow. But sometimes the poet survives inside the lawyer, and the same human being fiddles with a contract or factum in the morning, and with a sonnet over lunch.

"P.W. Bridgman" (a *nom de plume*) has excelled in a long legal career under his own name, while building a literary reputation, pseudonymously, as a writer of both short fiction and poetry. The recent collection and publication of a volume of his poems by Ekstasis Editions under the title of *A Lamb* presents the legal profession with poetry written from its own perspective.

The legal perspective on the world is itself of some aesthetic interest. Our equivalent of the public sphere—the courtroom—is a circus of vulnerability and exposure. Like a church, a courthouse is one of the few public places where dirty laundry is aired—where confession and repentance are demanded and rewarded.

Undoubtedly as a result of Bridgman's experience of the criminal justice system, the majority of *A Lamb* is made up of poems that honour the private disasters of ordinary people. Such poems, rather than examining the poet's own life, offer dignity and understanding to a crowd of strangers who have made terrible mistakes.

The gulf that exists, because of good luck or bad, between a mistake that ends in catastrophe and a mistake without consequence is a recurrent theme throughout the collection. For example, in "Burnt Sienna", an alcoholic woman from western Canada exposes herself to a delivery boy, but

that's as far as things go. In "This Way, That Way, Bump into a Sign", a grandfather no longer able to drive safely takes his young grandson for a drive that nearly ends in tragedy. Fortunately, the boy is returned home unscathed.

Other poems end with disasters. In one story set in Northern Ireland, "No Writers Were Harmed in the Making of This Whisky", Art and Jack babysit Jack's young grandson while the toddler's mother, grandmother and great-aunt are out shopping. The old gentlemen plop the boy in front of the TV and start making inroads on a bottle of Writer's Tears whisky and light up a few Viceroy Lights, with a touching faith in their own ability to cover up their revelry before the ladies get home:

> "Of course, yes, but there'll be no smoking,"
> Jack replies, an almost forgotten tone betokening an
> elder brother's authority creeping into his voice.
> He unscrews the bottle cap again,
> his fingers now less nimble.
> "But the w-w-women are gone," Art protests.
> "True enough, but the boy's not."
> "He's in the next room, Jack.
> No harm will come to him. We'll clear
> the smoke away with a bacon fry
> long before they're back."

Soon enough, Grandpa Jack and Uncle Art drink themselves into oblivion, and the toddler starts to wander the house. A beloved red ball gets into the toilet bowl, and the boy tries to retrieve it, toppling face first over the brim:

> the full and unforgiving weight of his body forcing
> his head beneath the surface of the water
> and holding it fast there,
> a nautilus in a porcelain shell.

Meanwhile, the unsuspecting ladies are having a grand time:

> Kathleen, Fionnuala and Valeria revel in their
> unknowing freedom. Glad and carefree, they
> periodically check their new highlights and twilights
> in the Vauxhall's rear-view mirror. They laugh
> and chatter while, as the afternoon fades,
> Kathleen drives them all home from the hairdresser's
> in Magherafelt back to Knockcloghrim—
> to Knockcloghrim where a cheap quartz clock
> ticks bravely on and where, like an unexploded artillery shell
> the end of the world awaits their return.

The poem concludes without telling us what will—or what should—happen to Jack and Art. Would they, or their wives, or Jack's daughter, or the

dead child, be well served by their prosecution or imprisonment for criminal negligence causing death? Are Jack and Art more at fault than they would be if the little boy had fallen asleep in front of the television? What's the difference between a serious crime and a bit of harmless irresponsibility, other than very bad luck? These questions run unspoken, but considered, throughout Bridgman's poems.

Another question this story (and each of the similarly excellent verse fictions in this collection) raises is formal. Why tell this story in verse? One can easily imagine the same narrative being told effectively in prose. Bridgman has previously published a collection of excellent short stories in prose.

The reason for Bridgman's choice of form may lie in the way that verse, more than prose, places the words in the mouth of a speaker: a story in poetry is not just a story, but a story that is essentially being *told*, with all that that implies. But in most of his verse fictions, Bridgman restrains himself in his manner of telling. Rarely is the voice or verse obtrusive or ornamental. Only in a few pieces (some personal, some fictional) is this austerity relaxed and the language heightened. One such instance, a compact anecdote about a fellow who lets a married but love-starved woman canoodle with him, and is later murdered by her husband, ends with one of Bridgman's rare uses of rhyme:

> Tara told Aoife's Bill who cracked Ben's skull open
> with a flowerpot and tore off his ear.
> There were witnesses and a trial, but all Bill got
> was a year.

Instead of music, Bridgman's stylistic values are the Purdyesque properties of exactness, faithfulness to the subject matter, and clarity: appropriate, necessary virtues when a Vancouver lawyer is telling stories of people very different from himself, such as the working class of Northern Ireland. It could be argued that Bridgman carries these virtues too far in places, adding words or phrases to prevent unlikely confusions. For example, in the passage about Kathleen, Fionnuala and Valeria quoted above, is it necessary to say that an unexploded shell (even having just mentioned a nautilus) is an unexploded *artillery* shell?

That punctiliousness, however, could be seen as a byproduct of the best tendencies in Bridgman's work. His interest in people different from himself, his scrupulous accuracy in setting out their actions, words, and fates, is the quality that dominates this book. That is a quality worth celebrating, when so much published poetry consists of either the glamorization of the poet's self or denigration of the poet's (sometimes imagined) adversaries.

Bridgman is a poet who not only understands ordinary people and sympathizes with them, but also sees the ordinariness and humanity of those whose misfortunes and mistakes have made them criminals. To gain some of the benefit of Bridgman's long experience of human nature by reading *A Lamb* is an opportunity not to be missed.

Unfortunately, as with most Canadian books of poetry, the layout of *A Lamb* does the poems few favours. In more than one instance, two longish poems telling markedly similar stories are placed back to back, dampening the effect of both. In a book this length—with over 100 pages filled with poetry—it is hard to justify the editorial decision to include pairs of poems or, for that matter, a knife-shaped tribute to Al Purdy that had to be printed in a reduced type to fit on a single page. Of course, the sheer amount of material in *A Lamb* must have made the editor's task of organization difficult—but in this case that difficulty has been delegated to the reader.

An alternative approach would have been to split this material into two shorter books—one of verse fictions and the other of more personal lyrics. The more I think of that possibility, the more I wish it had been done. But if wishes were horses, as the old proverb goes, beggars would ride.