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BOOK REVIEWS

James R. Elkins, *Lawyers Poets and That World We Call Law*

Kate O'Neil, reviewer

Book Review

Lawyer Poets and That World We Call Law

James R. Elkins ed., Pleasure Boat Studio 2013, 241 pages.

Kate O'Neill*

James R. Elkins, a law & literature scholar and the founder and editor of *Legal Studies Forum*, has collected in this volume more than 100 poems by dozens of contemporary writers who think of themselves as both poets and lawyers and who chose to make poems about law or legal practice. I had some doubt that such a collection would have any particular value for literature or law, but to my pleasant surprise I found that it presents the most vivid descriptions of ordinary lawyers' and judges' daily work that I have ever read.¹ If someone were to ask me now what lawyers do, I would say, "Read this book of poems; it will give you a deeper sense and a broader view than all the lawyer memoirs, biographies, TV shows, and movies combined."

The collection will reward those who read it straight through. The collection is more than the sum of its poems. Elkins has thoughtfully grouped the poems around eight themes, each named for a line from a poem: "A Lawyer's Education," "All in a Day's Work," "Those Who Come Our Way," "No Singing in the Courtroom," "What Logic There Is," "The Ravages of the Work," "Lawyers Do Grow Old," "Going Home." The progression through a career is obvious, but the effect is brilliant. I was

* Professor of Law, University of Washington School of Law.

¹ Lawrence Joseph's *Lawyerland: An Unguarded, Street-Level Look at Law & Lawyers Today* (2004), is similarly vivid, but it is quite different, of course. It reports conversations with six lawyers, all practicing in New York. Elkins's poet-lawyers write of many places and many kinds of practice.

hooked by James McKenna's "Law School," the second poem in "A Lawyer's Education"—a short lyric that signals the onset of "thinking like a lawyer":

Late each night
at my desk, window dark,
cases were read and notes
taken. Ideas marched
by in the lamp's steady beam
until they seemed
shining, heedless armies.²

Farther on, in "The Ravages of the Work," I was mesmerized by Bruce Lahlalt's elegiac "Widow's Weeds":

Home late again from the office, I fear—caught up again
In medical reports, or dog-eared childhood books,
Or other tomes on mortal man. Still, there is another hour
Of sunlight left us below the eastern Sierra foothills,
Before the shadows from the tallest peaks engulf.

.....

Already a widow, I've left you such,
Strong and alone on a solitary summer evening.
I stand unnoticed on the deck and watch,
And hesitate to hail from afar, to disturb,
To announce my already dwindling presence.³

In between there are poems in which prosecutors gun for predators; judges cast judgment and feel torn; silken-tied counsel preen and dine in Paris; and legal services lawyers struggle to keep the indigent, the demented, the battered, and the feckless housed somewhere other than jail. There are poems about having to tie your car door shut with string because your deadbeat clients don't pay you enough to fix your car;⁴ about being a forty-year-old, lonely, woman-lawyer with one forty-year-old,

.....

² James McKenna, "Law School," in *The Common Law* (Moon Pie Press 2012), reprinted in *Lawyer Poets and That World We Call Law* 21 (James R. Elkins ed., 2013). In the Acknowledgments, Elkins notes that all of the poems in *Lawyer Poets* were published in the journal, *Legal Studies Forum*, and are reprinted with permission of the authors. Elkins explains that many poems were also previously published in other books and journals, which Elkins lists in the Acknowledgments. When Elkins has provided them, I have included the small press publishers in these notes to help readers find the original sources.

³ Bruce Lahlalt, "Widow's Weeds," in *Songs of Mourning and Worship* (Black Rock Press 2005), reprinted in *Lawyer Poets*, *supra* n. 2, at 172.

⁴ Kristen Roedell, "Family Law," in *Workers Write: Tales from the Courtroom* (Blue Cubicle Press 2011), reprinted in *Lawyer Poets*, *supra* n. 2, at 52–54.

lonely, woman–lawyer friend.⁵ There are wry poems about drafting ridiculous documents.⁶ There are funny poems:

The courtroom fills with exotic
beasts drinking from the cool waters.
Suddenly enters the litigator.
Trust and estate lawyers flee with gazelle-like hops.
Corporate lawyers freeze.
Sauber is on one in a flash,
briefs and pleadings around the throat,
the jugular neatly slit, gushing blood.
After several seconds of silence, the others
resume, warily, their refreshment.
The sounds of the jungle return.
They only eat, after all, what they kill.⁷

There are beautiful lyrics:

Nothing prepared me for life in the sky
in this narrowed concrete pencil which spires
toward a clouded underside.⁸

And

[A]pathy finer
than talc
sifts down the
the long
afternoons in
waning light.⁹

And there are horrifying lyrics: “The dead infant/ is scalded white and scarlet/ a horrible piebald fish.”¹⁰

In sum, I found this collection to be a wonderful work of legal humanism. As Tim Nolan’s introduction explains, Elkins’s collection aims to disrupt the stereotypes that cast poets and lawyers as different species,

5 Nancy A. Henry, “Our Fortieth Year,” in *Anything Can Happen* (Muscle Head Press Chapbooks/Bone World Publishing 2002), reprinted in *Lawyer Poets*, *supra* n. 2, at 171.

6 Paul Homer, “Draft of Lease,” in *Lawyer Poets*, *supra* n. 2, at 144; John Charles Kleefeld, “Boilerplate,” in *Lawyer Poets*, *supra* n. 2, at 153.

7 Steven M. Richman, “Safari,” in *Lawyer Poets*, *supra* n. 2, at 164.

8 Greg McBride, “An Office with a View,” in *Lawyer Poets*, *supra* n. 2, at 150.

9 James Clarke, “There are Courtrooms,” in *Lawyer Poets*, *supra* n. 2, at 126.

10 Nancy A. Henry, “Baby’s First Bath” in *Anything Can Happen* (Muscle Head Press Chapbooks/Bone World Publishing 2002), reprinted in *Lawyer Poets*, *supra* n. 2, at 170.

each of little interest or use to the other: the poet being sentimental, sensory, and impractical; the lawyer being cold, rational, and worldly.¹¹ The collection certainly succeeds at that, but the unstated message and the emotional effects of this collection are much grander. Many of these poems made tears well up. The most powerful poems convey what it feels like to work and to care, diligently but often futilely, for those who cannot or will not care for themselves or others. One lays down this book saddened, but clear-eyed—and curiously inspired by both lawyers and their poetry.

¹¹ Tim Nolan, “Lawyer Poets and the Practice of Law,” in *Lawyer Poets*, *supra* n. 2, at 15–18. For more information about Elkins’ project, see James R. Elkins, *Strangers to Us All: Lawyers and Poetry*, <http://myweb.wvnet.edu/~jelkins/lp-2001/intro/> (accessed April 9, 2014).