

COMMUNITY (EDITORIAL)

Perhaps too much is made of originality. We all have influences, whether or not we want to admit it. They are like parents who mean well, but whose presence sometimes prevents the taking of a necessary step. Malevolent or not, there comes a time when a writer must open the curtains of the dark apartment they've been working from. I recently finished reading *The Red Arrow* by William Brewer, whose poetry collection, *I Know Your Kind*, was a winner of the National Poetry Series. His novel tells the story of a writer who has failed to deliver a manuscript billed as the next great West Virginian novel. In debt to his publisher, the protagonist takes a job ghost writing the memoir of a celebrated physicist, though gradually comes to question whose memory it is that he's remembering. It's a terrific novel about writing and it underlines how our art form often necessitates a marriage between originality and influence, truth and fiction, past and present. Lisa Fishman's fascinating reading of Shelley's "Hymn to Mercury" in the last editorial, posits the various and unpredictable possibilities of the poem as existing "under the surface of legible pathways", a useful description for our influences themselves. While some critics may enjoy calling each influence to step forward and take a bow, I find it comforting that there exists, to borrow from Brewer, "one long daisy chain of echoes", how writers, dead or living, collide on the page, speaking to and through each other.

Working on the interview with Neil Astley, founder and editor of Bloodaxe Books (which you will find on pages 99-107) gave me the opportunity to examine the papers and letters that make up the Bloodaxe Books Archive, held at Newcastle University. There I encountered a great community of poets, young and old, at all stages of their writing lives, tapping into rich imaginative veins. Letters felt as fresh as on the days they had been written. Corrections in the margins held onto their urgencies. Words and lines struck through with red pen took on new significance, as castaways lost to the ocean of the page. It was thrilling to think my own first collection, which was published by Bloodaxe in 2021, would soon be added to that polyphony of voices.

Throughout the summer of 2021, Neil and I, along with the poet Peter Hebden who filmed our encounters, met once a week to talk about the history of Bloodaxe. On one such meeting, Neil led us into the container that keeps safe a large volume of books. It seemed apt to imagine it as a shipping container riding the back of a great whale-like ship, filled

to the brim with poetry. After all, a poem, like a shipping container, is portable, capable of holding all manner of feeling, thought, energy and influence, and delivering it to anyone wherever they are in the world.

One unexpected pleasure was found in discovering how certain poets came to Bloodaxe. In our interviews, Neil reveals that it was Tony Harrison who brought the work of C. K. Williams to his attention. Reading those poets side by side offers an interesting perspective, especially given the formal differences in their work. As Neil suggests in the excerpt published in this issue, Williams's work possibly inspired the use of longer lines by the late Irish poet, Ciaran Carson. The great network of associations poetry creates is tapped into, consciously or otherwise, and these connections are richly brought to the surface through archival research. At particular stages, Bloodaxe published all three poets. Poems lead to poems. What discoveries will researchers make years from now when encountering my own? And which poets will they hear speaking from the shadows of my lines? Astley went on to publish most of Williams's work in the UK, including his final collection *Falling Ill* (2017). In 2011 Williams visited Newcastle to deliver the Poetry Society Annual Lecture. His lecture, "On Being Old" interrogated ambition, taste and influence in the face of aging. I remember him reading his poem "Whacked" which appeared in *Writers Writing Dying* (2013). It begins: "Every morning of my life I sit at my desk getting whacked by some / great poet or other." I was lucky to see him.

I hope readers will enjoy this excerpt from the interviews. This one in particular concerns Bloodaxe's work to publish poetry in translation, focusing on Eastern European writers that Astley brought to a wider readership in the UK and beyond. If you aren't familiar with the incredible story of Irina Ratushinskaya, take a moment to read about the journey her poetry took, and how this journey helped secure her freedom from the Soviet Labour Camp where she was imprisoned for writing poems. As in the case of Ratushinskaya's work, one way or another, poems travel, landing anywhere, amplifying that "daisy chain of echoes". What a privilege it is to be a part of this ongoing conversation.

John Challis