



**MARK TOTTERDELL**

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**Monday Writer**

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Editor: Nnorom Azuonye [editor@sentinelquarterly.com](mailto:editor@sentinelquarterly.com)

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## Mark Totterdell, Monday Writer, 26 October 2020

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## About Mark Totterdell

Mark Totterdell was born and brought up in rural Somerset and now lives in Exeter, Devon. He has a degree in English Literature from the University of Southampton and has been working as a freelance copywriter for many years.

He enjoyed writing poetry as a child, finding inspiration, then as now, in the endlessly fascinating natural world around him. His first published poem was in the school magazine in 1977, and he continued to write sporadically throughout his university days and beyond. After starting to send out poems to magazines, he became discouraged by a few rejections and largely stopped writing poetry for many years, which he now regrets. His second published poem appeared in *The Interpreter's House* in 2010. Since then, his poems have appeared in many of the UK's poetry magazines including *Acumen*, *Agenda*, *Ambit*, *Envoi*, *Orbis*, *The Rialto* and *Stand*, and in anthologies including *Bridgewatcher and Other Poems* and *Poems for a Liminal Age* (SPM Publications).

His first collection, [\*This Patter of Traces\*](#), was published by Oversteps Books in 2014, and was shortlisted for the Stare's Nest Fledgling Award for the best first collection by a poet over the age of 40.

His second collection, [\*Mapping\*](#), was published by Indigo Dreams Publishing in 2018.

He won the 2012 Fire River Poets competition, the 2014 Poems Please Me competition, the 2016 Poetry Pulse competition and the 2018 Mannings Pit competition. He has also enjoyed some success in Sentinel Literary Quarterly's regular contests, winning First Prize in the May 2014 competition, as well as a Second, a Third and several Commendeds over the years.

He has enjoyed reading his poems to audiences at Uncut Poets in Exeter, Fire River Poets in Taunton, Torbay Poetry Festival, Ways With Words in Dartington, Bodmin Moor Poetry Festival, St Ives Literature Festival and elsewhere.

## Mark Totterdell

*in Conversation with Nnorom Azuonye*



**You enjoyed writing poems as a child. What got you interested in poetry in the first place?**

I can't remember a time when I wasn't interested. There were always loads of books at home. Both my parents were librarians. My mother sang us songs and told us stories, my father told jokes. I was a bookish child and poetry was part of that.

**Why did you study English Literature at University? What did you plan to do with that?**

It was simply what I was interested in and good at. I had no career plans. I still don't, and I think it's a bit late now!

**Apart from poetry and your work as a copywriter, have you tried your hand with prose or drama?**

I have never attempted drama. I may try a short story some time, but anything longer seems unlikely. I have tried magazine articles but I think my focus will always be on poetry.

**So, Mark, what is your own definition of poetry? Why does the world need poetry at all?**

Nice easy questions! Many claims are made for the importance of poetry and its ability to say things that couldn't be said another way. I wouldn't necessarily disagree. I think for me, though, it is at heart simply

something like 'language at play', using words to do more than communicate their dictionary meanings, putting them together in patterns so they somehow 'mean' more than they mean. Or something like that. Ask me tomorrow and I might say something different.

Does the world need poetry? I don't know. This year I have read and written poems that deal seriously with our current concerns, but at the moment I'm reading and writing light-hearted limericks in a Facebook group. What can I say?

**Offer a brief review of the poetry practice in the UK today.**

Gosh, another easy one! In the ten years since I returned to poetry I have come to appreciate that there are many ways of writing poems, from the straightforward, heartfelt expression of emotion, to a more detached, intellectual concern with language itself; from what could be prose if it wasn't chopped into lines, to exacting and precise forms. And so on. Some well-respected magazines are full of poems that, while I can see their cleverness, leave me largely unmoved. Others publish poems that don't seem to show much evidence of being crafted at all. As in visual art, there is a tendency for people in one 'tribe' to look down on those in another. I think there's room for everything. Diversity is good. I just do what I do and try not to pin myself down.

**For over five years, I have enjoyed the 'word of the day' you share on Facebook. How do these daily encounters with words inspire and form part of your poetry's DNA?**

I think words are there to be used, and I enjoy finding new ones with interesting sounds or meanings. When I first joined Facebook, which I did with some misgivings as I value my privacy, I chose to do a 'word of the day' as a way of posting something regularly that wasn't too personal. I have used obscure 'words of the day' in my poetry quite a few times. My view is that, if a poem engages the reader enough, they will want to check out an unfamiliar word. I kind of assume that everyone has access to Google. Maybe this is very annoying to some people.

**If you were to write letters to a young poet as Rilke did, based on your own experience what would you say from finding inspiration, theme development, choice of form and getting a poem out there?**

Just get writing! I wasted many ridiculous years thinking of myself as a poet without writing any poetry. It's like most things, keep practising and you'll get better. Or if you truly have no aptitude for it, at least you'll find out. Keep reading, you'll be influenced by other poets but in time your own style or styles will develop. Write about anything that engages your attention. Pretty much anything can be turned into a poem, in pretty much any style. There's the world, there are words. The possibilities are vast.

**In my work as a literary editor and poetry competition organiser, I receive so many emails from writers, young and old, who are apprehensive about submitting their work for publication or prizing. The fear of rejection is immense. You have been there yourself. Say something to these writers, and if you can, share with us how you have handled rejections and adverse critiques of your work.**

In my mid-twenties I began submitting to magazines, convinced with the arrogance of youth that I was an undiscovered literary genius who would immediately find fame if not fortune. It only took a few rejections to discourage me thoroughly. I didn't appreciate then that rejection is part of the poet's experience. One of my early rejections was from Martin Bax, then editor of *Ambit*. As I remember it, it was quite an encouraging rejection, but at the time, the fact that he didn't want my poems was everything.

I deeply regret the wasted years. I wish I'd listened to the small part of me that always believed I could write.

When I began writing and submitting again in 2010, I was lucky enough to have an acceptance very soon. And there is a degree of luck to it. Editors have their personal tastes, acknowledged or unacknowledged, in styles and subjects, and have to choose poems that fit with others as well.

I still get more rejections than acceptances. I believe that this is true of most poets unless their name is Dylan Thomas. In a way it's worse now. I find myself thinking 'I've had two collections published and have won competitions, how dare you not publish my poem!' But I don't think that's a useful attitude.

For the record, I have had one poem accepted that had already been rejected twenty-five times. But often I'll 'retire' them long before that and try to write better ones. And I have now been published by *Ambit!*

**First time I saw the cover of Mapping. I thought it was something cartographic, and I reckoned that's what you do when you are not writing. Then I read Steve Spence's comment that the book combines "a love of maps and places with flora and fauna and a taxonomy of pubs." Why did you write a book like this?**

I've always been fascinated by maps. I got this from my father, who stuck together several Ordnance Survey maps to hang on the wall, centred on where we lived. I enjoyed playing with the idea that the map is not the reality, but does say something true about the world (like a poem maybe?). I still spend a lot of time looking at maps, mainly online now.

The maps in the book are very definitely the ones that were new in my teenage years, so there's certainly a nostalgia element too.

Flora and fauna are always likely to appear in my poems, and pubs, especially old and quirky ones, are some of my favourite places. Not that all the pub poems are necessarily just about pubs.

So the book is really simply a collection of poems about different things that interest me.

**Covid-19 has not been kind to pubs, and many are feared not to survive the pandemic. Do you reckon that *Mapping* will be instrumental in preserving the stories of some pubs, especially to the literary types for whom a little drink is muse?**

A couple of the pubs in the book closed before Covid, and I fear for some of the others. Others I'm sure will survive, though the current situation may have given the pub poems a more elegiac tone.

**Are there any recurring themes that can be found in your body of work?**

The natural world, in all its diversity, complexity and fragility. Most of my early poems especially could be labelled 'nature poems', though I like to think that a lot of them say something about the human condition as well. I find it quite hard to write directly about, say, love and grief, but with millions of species on the planet, and the continued destruction of nature being, in my view, the true big issue of our day, I don't think I'm going to run out of subject matter any time soon.

**Is a third collection simmering somewhere in your study? Tell us a little about it and when it can be expected.**

A third collection has already left my study but I don't know yet when it will appear, so I won't say anything more about it for now.

**Thank you, Mark, for giving me your time for this interview. I am particularly thankful for your support of Sentinel Literary Quarterly as a contributor, magazine buyer, regular participant in our competitions with great success. You have also judged our competition once. I trust that I may call on you to judge for us again in the future?**

Thank you Nnorom for your interesting and perceptive questions, which have certainly made me think. It would be a pleasure to be a judge again some time. For now, I'd better get my entry in for the current competition.

## One night I slept on land that isn't there

One night I slept on land that isn't there,  
the cliff now tumbled to the beach below.  
So much that once was firm has turned to air.

I was so cocksure then, so free from care,  
I had no better place to sleep, and so  
one night I slept on land that isn't there.

The music carried on, sweet, wild and rare.  
I heard it float up from the town's bright glow.  
So much that once was firm has turned to air.

The warm turf cushioned me, the stars were fair.  
Why should it matter now that you should know  
one night I slept on land that isn't there?

And when the early sun caressed my hair,  
I knew for certain which way I should go.  
So much that once was firm has turned to air.

My maps are ashes now, so who knows where  
the paths went? I'm impelled to tell you, though,  
one night I slept on land that isn't there,  
so much that once was firm has turned to air.

## Peregrine

She's the brooch that pins the sky's blue cape together,  
a kink-armed cross of tarnished silver.  
Her calling rends the afternoon.

And now she's an anchor, falling through fathoms of air,  
faster than gravity, an angel breaking  
the spine, piercing the heart of a dove.

Now she's poised in her trefoil window,  
an eclipse-eyed gargoyle with flesh caught  
in the keen contraptions of her golden feet,

warrior queen of the parapet, armoured in keratin,  
her chest barred tight, secure now in this chamber  
of sticks and stinks and bones,

though the all-seeing lens in the corner  
transmits each blink, every twitch, every stretch  
to us, who watch the screens like powerless gods.

## Trap

Your false moon  
has baffled their systems  
and angled them in,

a boxful of patterns  
to be matched to  
their printed twins,

telling tales of design  
that your theory denies.  
Burnished Brass

is condensed sunset,  
Buff Tip a trick-  
of-the-eye beech twig,

Elephant Hawk all  
olive and rose, curves  
of an obsolete jet.

Here fluff has been rubbed  
from a thorax,  
here bright dust

clings to your guilty  
fingers; moth-stuff  
that a lens

would show as tiles  
from a roof  
that will never be fixed.