

Mark Antony Owen is a guest reader for Black Bough issue 3 and was approached for this role because of his outstanding poetic craftsmanship. He has been published in all of the Black Bough issues and has published his work on digital-only project *Subruria*.

## MARK ANTONY OWEN



### **Tell us about yourself and where your work is published**

As a person – much like most people, I suppose – I live a life that's hectic, sometimes complicated and typically a bit messy. As an artist, I get to control a small but important part of my world. That art can help us make sense of our chaotic surroundings is a powerful thing indeed. And that control, for me, extends to where I'm published ... or rather (and in the main), self-published. All of my work forms part of a project I call *Subruria*. Rarely, if ever, do I permit my poems to feature outside of this project. So for Black Bough to have reproduced three of these, one in each of its first three issues, is something of a coup for the journal – as well as a sign of the esteem in which I hold it.

### **How long have you been writing poetry and how did you start?**

Discount the many times I've dabbled with end-rhymed doggerel since age seven, and it's fair to say I've only been writing poetry 'seriously' since I turned 37 – nine years, so far. I was going through some personal crises at that time, and felt a deep dissatisfaction with the limited creative outlet I was getting from my work as a copywriter. After much soul-searching, I knew I had to return to poetry: my first love, artistically. There followed six, shaky months of writing two or three poems a day. But still, something was missing. Then I created nine, quite arbitrary syllabic forms, and everything clicked into place. I use these now exclusively (with a little variation here and there).

### **What poets are your favourites and what was the last collection you read?**

My Kindle library (I'm no fan of paper books) is stuffed full of poetry collections. I often buy more than I have time to read. Among the poets whose work I've bought, several stand out as exemplars of their craft: Robert Robinson, Vicki Feaver, Hugo Williams, Rebecca Goss, Philip Larkin – yes, I had to mention him – and Elizabeth

Bartlett. As a consequence of the rate at which I've added collections to my library, I don't usually read a whole work cover to cover before moving on to the next. But there was one notable exception: Claire Askew's *This Changes Things*, published by Bloodaxe. I devoured this remarkable, compelling debut in just two days.

### **You have recently joined Black Bough Poetry as a guest reader, what drew you to the publication?**

It wasn't until I had a DM chat on Twitter with Black Bough Editor-in-Chief Matt Smith that I came to realise much of the poetry I write is not just lyrical but imagistic. So when it was suggested I become involved with the journal – first as a contributor, then as a Guest Reader – it felt like a natural fit. Historically, I've been something of a poetry 'loner': choosing to neither submit to journals nor enter competitions. But Black Bough and its ethos struck me as something I could get on board with, while also retaining my somewhat 'outsider' approach to the world of poetry. It's testament to Matt's powers of persuasion and encouragement that you're reading this right now!

### **Any tips you can give poets wishing to be published by Black Bough?**

Work, work and rework those lines! Even if there are only two in your submitted poem. Copywriting taught me that short-form writing (and I include much poetry in this) is the hardest to master. Every word choice matters; every punctuation mark makes a difference to how your work is received. That's not to say you have to punctuate – many poets don't, and their skill shines through nonetheless. What matters is craft. It's everything in poetry, as the poem is almost always in the edit, rather than in the draft. Also, unless you're an outstanding poetic talent, listen to feedback. You may not take someone's advice, but at least see it in the spirit of encouragement in which it's given.