

85. Timothy Winters by Charles Causley – A Friend to Tim Kiely

Michael Shaeffer

Hello, and welcome to The Poetry Exchange. I'm Michael Shaeffer.

Fiona Bennett

And I'm Fiona Bennett.

Michael Shaeffer

Fi, we're here in person together. I can't remember the last time we had this. It's fantastic to see you.

Fiona Bennett

I know, there's no screen involved. It's absurd!

Michael Shaeffer

It's a big month for poetry.

Fiona Bennett

October is the month. I think it's a great thing. You know - it gets to the end of summer, you can have a little bit of a downer feeling. And poetry just swings right in and says, we're going to have National Poetry Day, we're going to have the Forward Poetry Prizes.

Michael Shaeffer

Absolutely right. Shall we start with National Poetry Day?

Fiona Bennett

Indeed. Thursday 5th October, National Poetry Day in the UK. And there's a theme every year. And the theme this year is refuge.

Michael Shaeffer

And thinking about that theme of refuge, Fi, you've selected a poem for our bonus poem reading, which comes at the end of the episode. And I just wanted to say it is a really, really special reading this month from Ciarán Hinds, who was kind enough to take part in our *In the Company of Poems* live event about 18 months ago. So I just wanted to encourage people to stay for that at the end.

Fiona Bennett

So also the Forward Poetry Prizes.

Michael Shaeffer

Yes.

Fiona Bennett

I think there's four or five prizes. Bernadine Evaristo is Chair of the judges this year, I believe. And the event where winners will be announced is 16th October. There's lots of fantastic information on the Forward Poetry Prizes website about the poets who were shortlisted and their collections and as we know, with prizes, all those on the shortlist will be worth exploring and reading and finding out more about - so don't delay.

Michael Shaeffer

Is there anyone on there that's caught your eye, Fi?

Fiona Bennett

I think it's on the best first collection. Safiya Kamaria Kinshasa has written a collection called *Cane, Corn and Gully*. And I heard a great podcast with her talking about her writing practice and about that book, and I - yeah, I think it's pretty extraordinary what she's up to there. So I think people should check that one out.

Michael Shaeffer

Great. She sounds interesting.

Fiona Bennett

Yeah, she's doing some really interesting things about exploring dance notation, and the body and how she wants to express particular narratives through that combination of form.

Michael Shaeffer

Oh, wow.

Fiona Bennett

Yeah, it's very clever stuff.

Michael Shaeffer

Shall we move on to our episode, Fi?

Fiona Bennett

I think that's a great idea.

Michael Shaeffer

So this is one again that doesn't feature either you or I in the conversation. You're going to be hearing Andrea and Al, talking about 'Timothy Winters' by Charles Causley – the poem that's been a friend to Tim.

Al Snell

So Tim, could you read the poem that you've chosen?

Tim Kiely

Sure.

Al Snell

That'd be great, thank you.

Tim Kiely

Timothy Winters

by Charles Causley

Timothy Winters comes to school
With eyes as wide as a football-pool,
Ears like bombs and teeth like splinters:
A blitz of a boy is Timothy Winters.

His belly is white, his neck is dark,
And his hair is an exclamation-mark.
His clothes are enough to scare a crow
And through his britches the blue winds blow.

When teacher talks he won't hear a word
And he shoots down dead the arithmetic-bird,
He licks the pattern off his plate
And he's not even heard of the Welfare State.

Timothy Winters has bloody feet
And he lives in a house on Suez Street,
He sleeps in a sack on the kitchen floor
And they say there aren't boys like him anymore.

Old Man Winters likes his beer
And his missus ran off with a bombardier,
Grandma sits in the grate with a gin
And Timothy's dosed with an aspirin.

The welfare Worker lies awake
But the law's as tricky as a ten-foot snake,
So Timothy Winters drinks his cup
And slowly goes on growing up.

At Morning Prayers the Master helms
for children less fortunate than ourselves,
And the loudest response in the room is when
Timothy Winters roars "Amen!"

So come one angel, come on ten
Timothy Winters says "Amen
Amen amen amen amen."
Timothy Winters, Lord.

Amen.

Al Snell

Lovely, thank you so much, Tim.

Tim Kiely

Thank you.

Andrea Witzke Slot

Great reading too, yeah.

Tim Kiely

Thank you very much. It's easy to do, I should say, with a poem that is as well put together and as well constructed as this one.

Andrea Witzke Slot

It's a really interesting poem. I'm curious when you first met this friend?

Tim Kiely

Very shortly after my family first moved to the UK. I should say I wasn't born here, I was born in the Republic of Ireland. And when I was seven or eight years old, my family moved here. And not long after that - because I remember it was in primary school assembly - my then English teacher got up in front of all of us and read this poem. And I remember it very distinctly because there was no embellishment. There was no commentary, there was no talking around it. It was just *Timothy Winters* by Charles Causley. And I think even if some of it, I am quite certain, went over my head, I think something about the verve of its composition, the freshness of its language - there was something about it that just thrilled me. I think I got an inkling even at that age that there was, in this ostensibly what starts out as I think quite a humorous poem, potentially, that there was something dark and menacing

hovering over it, and it just intrigued me. So yeah, having first encountered it when I was very young, it's just kept resurfacing at various points in my life from that point on.

Al Snell

Tim, you have reminded me that I first heard this poem at primary school too.

Tim Kiely

Really?

Andrea Witzke Slot

Did you?

Al Snell

It was read to us and like you, Tim, I had exactly the same reaction. I didn't understand it. But I was just excited by the language and the rhythm.

Tim Kiely

Oh, that's fabulous. I'm glad to hear it. I know very little about Charles Causley's body of work but I do know that this and other poems were written very much with children in mind. But also, what I find so fascinating about it is that the poem also grew with me, it's kind of perfect as a way to introduce a young audience to what poetry can do for you, and then can keep doing for you throughout your life as you keep returning to it.

Andrea Witzke Slot

Do you know, I think you are the first guest who has known their friend since primary school.

Tim Kiely

Really?

Andrea Witzke Slot

And I think that's amazing that it stayed with you, too. And I think you're right - there's this clever sort of song-like quality that would appeal to children, and obviously it's about a child, and yet it's about so much more. So, as a child, what appealed to you most about the poem?

Tim Kiely

I mean, first and foremost, I think the thing that got my attention was its memorability. The use of rhyme was something that was very easy for me to get excited about. I didn't know this at the time, I didn't find out until I was quite a lot older, that I was on the autism spectrum. But one of the ways in which that seems to manifest for me is I echo quite a lot of what I hear. I have a tendency to repeat certain words and phrases and quite a lot of other things to myself over and over again, as much for comfort as anything else. And so finding this poem that could stick in my head, and just the vividness - to me at least - I think that still survives years later of a lot of the descriptions - *his belly is white, his neck is dark, his hair is an exclamation-mark* - it's something that I've come to admire even more as I get older. There is quite a lot to be said for just the masterfulness of putting rhymes together like this and making it look easy.

Andrea Witzke Slot

Absolutely fascinating, because you're right, it's the visual and the auditory sort of combined. I mean, even that *his hair is an exclamation mark*. I mean, that is just a brilliant line. And you'll never forget that, you can just see the boy now, and it's incredible.

Tim Kiely

It's fabulous. And it's done so pithily as well, the economy of it.

Al Snell

I remember the line *a blitz of a boy*.

Tim Kiely

Yeah. Before I even knew what the Blitz was, I had an idea that there was something chaotic and explosive contained in that.

Andrea Witzke Slot

There's so much in that one word 'blitz'.

Tim Kiely

Yeah. And like I said, when I first encountered this poem, I did not know what that meant. But knowing as I do now that that poem was also written when the actual 'capital B' Blitz was a

pretty recent memory for Causley and for his audience, and the establishment of the welfare state, which also features in the poem, you look back at that and you think - the choice of that word seems like something that is designed to signal covertly to the adults reading it, that this is a poem in which something quite sinister is at work in the background. I think that even as a child, by the time you know that *Timothy Winters has bloody feet*, you know that there is something fundamentally not right about this and that this child isn't just a threadbare child who looks kind of funny, this child is actually suffering. It works quite an effective sucker punch in that regard, I should say.

Al Snell

It's sort of catches you off guard. The stanza *Old Man Winters likes his beer and his missus ran off with a bombardier* is almost comic. And then *Grandma sits in the grate with a gin and Timothy's dosed with an aspirin* is, is terrible.

Tim Kiely

And yet if I wanted to illustrate perfectly how to communicate in the most understated way possible, that this child is living in a single parent household with an alcoholic and possibly abusive parent - *Old Man Winters likes his beer* - an adult reading that immediately can tell in light of everything that we now know about this boy - ah, that's what the home life is like. It just dismantles any defences that you might have against not caring. And it does so in a way that I think is even more haunting for how unobtrusive a lot of it is.

Andrea Witzke Slot

When did you read it and realise how many dark elements were there? When did you start to worry about Timothy?

Tim Kiely

I think returning to it probably when I was in my early to mid teens, I was beginning to put together more and more that this poem was gesturing to something that was wrong not just with this boy, but with a whole other world of boys who have to live like this in one way or another.

Andrea Witzke Slot

What is so clever about this is it reaches the adult - and reaches the child even - through a child's eyes. That is a clever poem, and an intelligent poem.

Tim Kiely

Extremely, extremely so. I think it's interesting that there are not very many adults present in this poem except as background characters, but that one of them is the Welfare Worker (capital W both cases), who - one gets the impression even from those two lines - a kind of emotional background of somebody who is trying their best, but who is just worn out by negotiating with the complications of the system, - *the welfare worker lies awake but the law's as tricky as a ten-foot snake*. It's not sentimental about the idea that there is going to be someone who rides in on a white horse and fixes everything. That the work of actually trying to make life better for even one person involves toil and emotional labour and nights spent lying awake, wondering what on earth is to be done. It occurs to me that there is something of a religious colouring to some of the kind of background images of the poem not in the least, yeah, it ends with a prayer explicitly to God about not to do anything in particular, but just acknowledging *Timothy Winters, Lord. Amen*. And while I was reading it in preparation for this, I was brought back to a line, I forget which gospel it's from, but one that sticks with me even in sort of my post-religious days, where Christ at some point says to His followers, something like 'the poor will always be with you', which I took real issue with when I was a teenager, as being not ambitious enough - that if we all just put our shoulders to the wheel, then there might come a point when the poor are not with us any longer, and that's what we should all be working towards. I think I have, even as I am not a believer, I have come to understand that line more to mean there will always be spurs to your compassion, there will always be people who are in need of your help. And I think that this poem works on a very similar kind of emotional register. It is not hopelessness at the idea that there will always be people like Timothy Winters; it is an acknowledgment that while there are such people in the world as Timothy Winters, then here is where we are, and that is where our empathy must lie, and that is what we must turn our attention to.

Al Snell

I mean, Causley seems to be saying 'let's not rest on our laurels and congratulate ourselves having created the welfare state'. He's sort of saying, 'look, there's still people slipping through the net.'

Tim Kiely

Exactly.

Al Snell

And the line, *they say there aren't boys like him anymore.*

Tim Kiely

Indeed. That smug attitude of 'yeah, obviously there's one or two little pockets of horror and agony here and there, but you know, we'll deal with that.' That attitude is - I think in that one line - expertly dismembered. *They say there aren't boys like him anymore.* Well, tell that to Timothy Winters.

Andrea Witzke Slot

Does it inspire you even now to make that change, and if so, in what way?

Tim Kiely

I mean it inspires and hangs somewhere in front of me as a thing that I'm always working towards, I decided that what I needed to do was to work in the law. What I've come to appreciate, and what this poem also, I think, highlights is that this is not the kind of thing that any one person is going to come in and fix. I think that what the poem reminds me to do is to do your bit, whatever that might be. The little corner in which you have to work matters. If I get the result that I want to get for one of the people who I am representing, then it doesn't fix everything overnight. But it makes a hell of a lot of difference to that one person. And working in concert with other people who have the same objective is also a part of being able to go to your own part in it with some hope in your heart and some fresh resolve.

Andrea Witzke Slot

I find it very inspiring what you're saying too. Just coming up with those ideas about how a team of people can make the change.

Tim Kiely

It's a thing that is on my mind in my working life. And the spectre of complacency is always there. And even in the poem, where even at the moment where the master is reminding

people to remain aware of the plight of children less fortunate than ourselves, there right there in the room with him is Timothy Winters.

Al Snell

Tim, you say this poem has had resonance for you at different stages in your life. How does it resonate with you now? And what sort of friend would you say this poem is to you now?

Tim Kiely

What resonates most with me now, I think, is the sense of resolve that deciding to make that commitment day after day after day to trying to do the right thing is a spirit that to me comes through even more so in the final stanzas of the poem. This friend probably goes to church, even though I don't, but we volunteer at the same places. And so whenever I meet him, he always asks how I'm doing. And it's the kind of friend who just holds you up. Somebody who strengthens you and reminds you to keep going even as dark as it can sometimes get.

Andrea Witzke Slot

I'm curious, just one last thing... *So come one angel, come on ten / Timothy Winters says "Amen / Amen amen amen amen."* I just really want to know what you feel about those last lines. What does that mean?

Tim Kiely

I mean, to me, it sounds one part petition, one part sort of calling for intervention - *come one angel, come on ten* - presumably, to just intervene and save this poor boy. But I'm also reminded that 'amen', as I recall, literally means something like 'so be it.' Timothy Winters is himself answering this prayer for children less fortunate than ourselves. He's the loudest voice in the room. And so just ending with his name - *Timothy Winters, Lord. Amen* - commending this boy and just sort of saying, 'Look, here he is. Be good to him.'

Andrea Witzke Slot

I think that's...the hope that you'll see in that is really moving. When I when I first saw that line, that last line - *Timothy Winters, Lord. Amen* - I hate to say but I felt the boy might be lying in a coffin.

Tim Kiely

The potential for the darkest possible reading of that poem is, I think, never entirely absent, which is one of the strengths of it. You hope that by offering that up, you can in some way avert that outcome. Which really, I suppose, is if a poem is somewhat like a prayer, in that it is something that primarily does good for the person saying it, then I think that yeah, this is a good example of a poem working as a prayer, and a prayer that I can readily say and commit myself to.

Al Snell

Timothy Winters

by Charles Causley

Timothy Winters comes to school
With eyes as wide as a football-pool,
Ears like bombs and teeth like splinters:
A blitz of a boy is Timothy Winters.

His belly is white, his neck is dark,
And his hair is an exclamation-mark.
His clothes are enough to scare a crow
And through his britches the blue winds blow.

When teacher talks he won't hear a word
And he shoots down dead the arithmetic-bird,
He licks the pattern off his plate
And he's not even heard of the Welfare State.

Timothy Winters has bloody feet
And he lives in a house on Suez Street,
He sleeps in a sack on the kitchen floor
And they say there aren't boys like him anymore.

Old Man Winters likes his beer
And his missus ran off with a bombardier,

Grandma sits in the grate with a gin
And Timothy's dosed with an aspirin.

The welfare Worker lies awake
But the law's as tricky as a ten-foot snake,
So Timothy Winters drinks his cup
And slowly goes on growing up.

At Morning Prayers the Master helms
for children less fortunate than ourselves,
And the loudest response in the room is when
Timothy Winters roars "Amen!"

So come one angel, come on ten
Timothy Winters says "Amen
Amen amen amen amen."
Timothy Winters, Lord.

Amen.

Michael Shaeffer

That was Al with the gift reading at the end there. Of course, our enormous thanks to Tim for allowing us to use that beautiful conversation. And to David Higham for allowing us to use that incredible poem.

Fiona Bennett

Fantastic. I mean, in listening to that conversation, because we weren't part of it, and listening to that poem, I thought, yeah, this is for Tim - and now for me - the kind of friend that holds you to account. And it does so in such an interesting way. You know, if you're gonna hold somebody to account, you can't just sort of bang on at them. You've got to do something kind of interesting about how you do that. So I – yeah – I took an awful lot from listening to that. And certainly, it's very much part of Tim Kiely's work as both a poet and a barrister and activist. He's getting on with it. He's rolling up his sleeves and...amazing.

Michael Shaeffer

You found this great quote, Fi, I won't take credit for it. But this is that apparently Charles Causley, who was a Cornish poet, said, "if I didn't write poetry, I'd explode." I like that.

Fiona Bennett

Yeah, I think that's where these kinds of extraordinary works come from. And Tim brilliantly has just released his latest collection, which is called 'Plaque for the Unknown Socialist.' And that's coming out with Back Room poetry.

Michael Shaeffer

That's out now?

Fiona Bennett

It is indeed.

Michael Shaeffer

Oh, great. We'll put a link on the description.

Michael Shaeffer

So in this month of poetry filled news, we have one more piece of news that we wanted to let you know about, which is that if you go to our website, www.thepoetryexchange.co.uk, you will be able to navigate to the '[Nominate](#)' page. And we've revamped that just to make it more user friendly. And we'd love to hear from you if you have a poem that's been a friend to you. We recognise that we haven't got the time or the resources to be able to have a full-length conversation with everyone. But we'd be really, really interested to hear from you about the person that's been a friend to you.

Fiona Bennett

And also in the newly revamped page, you can enjoy looking at some headlines from other people. And who knows yours might appear there next...

Fiona Bennett

So Michael, we will as we've started to do, leave everybody with our bonus poem. And in the National Poetry Day theme of refuge, the reading that came to mind was the phenomenal

reading that we had as part of our *In the Company of Poems* live online reading event, with the phenomenal Ciarán Hinds as one of our readers. We will be doing another *In the Company of Poems* in the winter coming up. So hopefully by us sharing this reading now, you'll also get a taste of how brilliant it can be to listen to poems at that event. It's a poem by Yeats and we'll leave you with Ciarán Hinds.

Michael Shaeffer

That's about all we got time for this month. We'll be back with you next month with more poems as friends. Until then, thank you for listening.

Credits:

'Timothy Winters' by Charles Causley. From *Collected Poems 1951-2000* (Picador, 2000), © Charles Causley 2000, used by permission of the author's Estate.

Episode & transcript © The Poetry Exchange, 2023

