



Publication Day

Alyson Hallett

I'M NOT GOING TO TALK ABOUT having a book published. I'm going to talk about having a poem published in stone. The kind of publication that exists in three dimensions in a public space. One that involves collaborating with a sculptor, town planners and councillors, landscapes, the rise of a hill, the sweep of a road, the historical foundations of the place where the poem will be installed.

I'm going to talk about a publication day that requires lorries and risk assessments and pavement closures.

One day in the year 2000, I set out to have lunch with Alec Peever, a sculptor who had been commissioned to carve a poem into Milsom Street, one of the main streets in the city of Bath. He'd been given my name by the Poetry Can, and he was keen to see if we'd be able to work together.

Good collaboration means that you create work that is more than the sum of the people involved. You make something you couldn't have made alone. It's not just a case of writing a poem and handing it over: there needs to be a resonance between you, a way of working that's flexible, fun, courageous.

When you're used to publishing work in a book or journal, the idea of having words carved into stone is thrilling — and terrifying. A poem in a pavement is public, that's public with a capital 'P'. There are different responsibilities and considerations, awareness of commissioners and who the audience is going to be.



I will never forget the sound of a mallet hitting a chisel as Alec carved my words into paving slabs on an easel in his studio in Oxfordshire. A ringing sound, rhythmic, persistent, repetitive. One by one the letters came into being. It felt strange. Ancient. I remembered Odin hanging upside down in his tree and seeing the runes on stones. The shape of each letter as significant as the word they spell.

In each published word of this poem lives the eye and hand and heart of the letter carver, the imagination of the poet and the alchemy of place that led to the writing of the poem in the first place. Was that day in Alec's studio the first day of a publication? Or was it the moment when the slabs were driven on the back of a lorry into the centre of Bath and laid down?

This was a poem that was being published under the sky. Its audience included pigeons and insects, passing clouds, buskers, shoppers, sunshine, rain that falls and pools in the deeply carved letters. It's a poem that has democracy at its heart. A poem that has been lifted from a page and published in a place where anyone and anything can see it at any time of night or day.

Every time I walk over the poem, I feel as if the words have fallen out of my pockets. There is slight erosion, but it will take around two hundred years before the words disappear altogether. Until then, I like to think the publication happens every day with the rising of the sun, the patter of feet, the whirr of prams and wheelchairs.