

Lynette Roberts and Dylan Thomas: Background to a Friendship

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Lynette Roberts and 'A Letter to the Dead': a lost poem in memory of Dylan Thomas

A Letter to the Dead

To you Dylan with my own voice I pay tribute
With as natural a grace as though you were near,
Remembering in a dark night, your hand in mine
When you told me to think of myself, to go abroad
And over the bounds with my poetry: to care not a fig
Pig or jig for anyone, for it was Rabelais all the way, or
Then drew out the lines, the sonorous images
Of my own work which pleased your heart and eye:

...light birds sailing

A ploughed field in wine

Whose ribs expose grave treasures

Inca's gilt-edged mine;

Bats skins sin-eyed woven

The long nosed god of rain...

So many years ago, the poem I would forget.

How many years was this?

Then followed the war, correspondence between us;

And you became best man at the 'Show'

Which turned out to be, not exactly happy but worthwhile,

And your head was flooded with the wedded words

Of pomp, fruit and carnal rectitude,

Caitlin patient, gentle, smiling at your side.

We have your signature to this, and photo in the Western Mail.

And we crossed the Estuary and visited or stayed at your domain,

Sending messages ahead with the ferryman, ringing his bell

To carry us on his back and row us in his cormorant boat,

While we, the lesser ones in the humble dwelling

Paying three and six a week to your four-storied house

Invited you, or unexpectedly found you both
Wandering in the neighbouring fields or lifting the iron gate.
Drinking and drinking, I have never done so much drinking,
And declared I would never do it again.
But you and he and they and she would insist,
And at it again, in order to discuss, listen,
Or conjure a word from you, and up with the glass again.
But what mattered: or what was remembered:
Cherished just then: the reading of those Anglo-Saxon poems
Which I gave you, 'the first time you had seen them' you said,
Riddles on our lives: the half written poem, the concentration
And discipline of your behaviour to your so eloquent a craft:
Or walking up to me, your mind tight with the unsprung words,
Was I the 'Bird woman' then? 'What bird is that?' you would say,
'And that? And that?' impetuously as they trilled and winged away
Sound and feather out of sight. It was on a cliff overlooking
Your Boathouse remember? Whimbrel, sandpiper and curlew I replied
And marveled that you did not know. '*I want to know about birds?*'
Was your repeated reply. Then rising out of that flowing Bay
Seven years later, the birds *yours*, were lifted on to the page,
Recreated, made new, with us for ever.
Then in a span of time ... not seeing ... in the years of grief,
Until my caravan pitched in the graveyard
Where your body now lies, stood for as long as Eternity,
Or so it seemed to me then. The spirits in it rising
Over my distress and stress of doom.
At such unexpected moments we met,
In ship's pub and sea pubs drinking, and at it again
If only to be alive with you, was there no end to this?
Drinking and drinking, for I hated the damn stuff,
Until the evil spell cast upon me drove us apart
I to another region away from the duck green forests

Darkened by cormorants. To the metropolis of London.
There already a legend, your name was spilled about in the air
And your voice cast over the waves, the ninth wave
Charged with Mabinogion magic, or heard from a box
Reverberating that atomic symphony of Cain
This, then, was our last meeting in the wings
Behind the bare auditorium hall
Where you and Edith stood alone.
Then when I did turn up that second time,
It was to arrive too late, too late for life
At the Churchyard Gates, passing up, through the down-going
Dying faces, up to your ever living form. Alone
At the grave, dug so many feet deep, by the gravedigger
Known to us both, the Laugharne owl staring from the yew.
You staring. And O I must tell you he had a hard time picking
At those rocks. The stone face refused to yield
To give her young Bard so soon a bed.
I saw Louis in the shade as his tears fell.
And past them all as they gathered round the pub
This time I had no need to drink against my will
For your company was everywhere. Out on the cliff edge I walked
Overlooking the Bay, its mudsilt, greying water-dunes and birds
Quietly stopping at the Boathouse, thinking to call.
What distance, since the others did not remove us,
Holds us together? What bird or bind of word
Substance of sound or rhythmic flow?
Could you, if you wished, now cold as a stream,
Warm my keen pen as it wanders afar
Out into the crystal air to charge those hypocrites
Who would acknowledge you with the mockery of your own voice
Snatch at your images, instead of their own
The rhymesters and feathered curs.

If the air above Dylan,
If the air above had ears, and could hear my request,
Would it caress your head, that for me, so personally
Brought a standstill to my heart. I would say Amen on this;
Or write Lynette to end the page. But continuous as the thought,
I write for you Dylan evermore.

[Dated 12 February 1954; Laugharne and Llanybri, Taf Carmarthen Bay]

Lynette Roberts and Dylan Thomas: Background to a Friendship

In the early hours of Saturday 8 April 1939 the British cruise liner Hilary ran aground in dense fog at Carmel Head, Anglesey. It had begun its voyage to Liverpool in Manaus, nine hundred miles up the Amazon River, collecting holiday makers at various stops en route, including two young women writers returning to London from an extended stay on the Island of Madeira. The *Daily Mail* report on the following Monday had an especial interest in 'sun-tanned cruise girls' rudely awakened from their cabins, but it also highlighted the morale-boosting spirits of the two writers: in the third-class lounge, as the ship listed to port, Celia Buckmaster began playing the piano, whilst her friend Lynette Roberts sang along.¹ Amongst the excitement of the occasion it may or may not have occurred to Roberts that this shipwreck, as she later styled it, was a kind of unexpected homecoming. For Lynette Roberts was of Welsh descent, albeit through several generations of familial expatriation in first Australia and then Argentina, where Roberts herself spent the first fifteen years of her life.

Whether this grounding and the ensuing evacuation of the ship via the Holyhead lifeboat was symbolic or not, within a year Lynette Roberts had made a home in a small Welsh village in Carmarthenshire, following a marriage to Keidrych Rhys at which Dylan Thomas was best man. Thomas found the bridesmaid Celia Buckmaster every bit as attractive as the *Daily Mail* earlier that year. Writing in an otherwise spitefully satiric mode

¹ Anon., 'Girls Stage Cabaret as Ship Grounds', *Daily Mail*, 10 April 1939, p. 9.

to Vernon Watkins, Thomas was to comment of the wedding: 'I can tell you that it was distinguished mostly by the beauty of the female attendants, the brown suit of the best man, the savage displeasure of Keidrych's mother'.²

At the time of her holiday in 1939 Roberts was living the bohemian London life as a single woman, poet and self-employed florist under the name of Bruska, importing exotic flowers directly from the Scilly Isles to sell to wealthy clients. She probably met Keidrych Rhys, poet and editor of *Wales* magazine, at a Soho poetry reading in 1938, and through the auspices of Tambimuttu. At this point she was engaged to Merlin Minshall, an extraordinarily adventurous figure who raced cars across Europe and who was later to work for British Naval Intelligence. Indeed he is thought by some to be the model for Fleming's James Bond, and Roberts stated he also somewhat resembled Tarzan. He used to cook Chinese food for her, and was divorcing his wife, whom he introduced to Roberts. She threw her Tarzan lookalike over, however, when she met Rhys, and by summer 1939 she was accompanying Rhys to his Carmarthenshire family home, from where they went to Laugharne to ask Thomas to be best man at their wedding. They married in the early weeks of World War 2 on 4 October 1939 in the Church at Llansteffan. The best man's notable brown suit had been borrowed from the taller Vernon Watkins. Roberts noticed the inevitable result with her eye for detail:

For the wedding I did not buy anything new. I carried wild flowers and gave Dylan a bunchful of wild flowers for his lapel. Vernon Watkins' trousers were draped around his shoes. Caitlin looked outstanding in pink with a rose pinned to her breast.³

The photograph of the wedding party, with overlong trousers clearly visible, was published in the *Weekly Mail and Cardiff Times* on 7 October 1939, and includes Caitlin Thomas, Keidrych Rhys, Lynette Roberts wearing an elaborate head dress, Dylan Thomas, and the novelist Kathleen Tomkinson (nee Bellamy), another bridesmaid, and a childhood friend of Roberts.

After a short honeymoon in Swansea Rhys and Roberts moved to a small cottage in Llanybri, a village on the other side of the Taf estuary from Laugharne, and began a period of ten years of turbulent and creative marriage, during which their geographical proximity to

² Dylan Thomas to Vernon Watkins, letter postmarked 8 October 1939, in Dylan Thomas, *The Collected Letters*, ed. Paul Ferris (London: Dent, 2000), pp. 473–74.

³ Lynette Roberts, 'Notes for an Autobiography', in *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, ed. Patrick McGuinness (Manchester: Carcanet, 2008), p. 210.

the Thomases, and shared interest in poetry and drink, sustained a sporadic friendship. Rhys and Roberts separated and divorced in 1949, following which Roberts briefly lived in a caravan in the Laugharne graveyard where Thomas was shortly to come to rest. When Thomas died in 1953 Roberts was about to publish her last book, *The Endeavour*, a kind of historical novel based on Captain Cook's first voyage to Australia, and drawing on her experience of sea voyages along similar routes, including her own shipwreck on the Hilary. *The Endeavour* was published by Peter Owen in 1954, and in February that year she finished the typescript of a long epistolary poem, an elegy for Dylan Thomas, which revisits her memories of their encounters during life, and her attendance at his Laugharne funeral in November 1953.

In the months and years following the untimely death of Dylan Thomas there were many memorials and elegiac tributes, including the Dylan Thomas Memorial Recital in February 1954 at the Festival Hall, with readings by, amongst others, Michael Hordern and Peggy Ashcroft; Stravinsky's *In Memoriam Dylan Thomas*; and many poems of remembrance and mourning by poets ranging from Edith Sitwell to Charles Olson.

There were several poets amongst the mourners at the funeral who subsequently wrote elegies. In his 'At the Wake of Dylan Thomas' George Barker clearly faced difficulties that were far from his alone, struggling to find an appropriate voice, and lapsing into occasional Celtic cliché:

Is it you, Cymric, or I who am so cold?
Was it a word and world America killed?
The brainstruck harp lies with its bright wings furled.⁴

John Ormond published his elegy for Thomas twenty years after the funeral, by which point he was reaching for fading signifiers of memory, attempting to capture the ghost of an image available to him through its rhyme with an artistic representation of physical type:

You would stand in the corner, your glass raised,
Your head flung back, a cigarette stuck
To your lip like a white syllable, removed
Only to quaff or cough or for the defiant

Steeplejack raids into your tried thesaurus
Of laughter; with that badly-drawn Rubens hand⁵

⁴ George Barker, 'At the Wake of Dylan Thomas', in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1987), p. 311.??

⁵ John Ormond, 'Section from an Elegy (for Dylan Thomas)', in *Poetry Wales* 9:2 (Autumn 1973)??

Louis MacNeice, who Roberts saw 'in the shade as his tears fell', remembers Thomas in various Cantos of *Autumn Sequel*, and for him too the memory is sustained in part through vignettes of bar room poses:

Debonair,
He leant against the bar till his cigarette
Became one stream of ash sustained in air

Through which he puffed his talk.⁶

Canto XX describes MacNeice's affecting journey to Laugharne, the burial service, and the crowded bar later on. Moving away from the burial itself MacNeice remarks on the estuary and the birds, a focus also for Roberts's poem:

His estuary spreads before us and its birds
To which he gave renown reflect renown

On him, their cries resolve into his words (MacNeice, p. 413).

Edith Sitwell was on a ship to the USA when Thomas died, and became directly involved in the events surrounding the aftermath of his death. She did not return for the funeral, but wrote an elegy to Thomas, characteristic of a certain kind of mythologizing response to his early death, and at a late point in her career when she was perhaps being most grandiosely mythopoieic:

And he, who compressed the honey-red fire into holy shapes,
Stole frozen fire from gilded Parnassian hives,

Was Abraham-haired as fleeces of wild stars
That all night rage like foxes in the festival
Of wheat⁷

Roberts's poem is distinctive in being a most personal and intimate account of fading yet persisting memories, with occasional gestures towards a shared local poetic and mythological language. This is in part owing to the direct address sustained by the epistolary form, but also because the poem is centred on vignettes of friendship rather than questions of redemption or reputation or significance, with only a brief swipe at the unnamed

⁶ Louis MacNeice, *Autumn Sequel*, Canto XVIII, in *The Collected Poems*, ed. E.R. Dodds (London: Faber, 1966), p. 404.

⁷ Edith Sitwell, 'Elegy for Dylan Thomas', in *Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 423.

'rhymesters and feathered curs' whom she perceives as appropriating Thomas for their own ends.

Some Notes on 'A Letter to the Dead'

Roberts's 'Notes for an Autobiography', written several years after the events they recollect, identify various visits and exchanges with Dylan Thomas before and subsequent to her wedding. The likely timing and sequence of some of these recollections is somewhat suspect, but the general shape of the anecdotes persists in her elegy. She recalls: 'I took some clothes down to Wales and went to spend the weekend with Dylan and Caitlin. I took for Dylan Everyman's Rabelais Vols 1 and 2 and another book the title of which I forget but it had a number of forms for writing poetry – circular, triangular, octangular, square and many other shapes' (p. 209). Both here and in the elegy Roberts is perhaps hinting at a possible influence on the genesis of Thomas's post-war collection *Deaths and Entrances*. In illustrating their mutual discussions of poetry on this occasion she incorporates some lines from her own poem 'Song of Praise' (from 'light birds sailing' to 'The long nosed god of rain'). This was first published with the title 'To Keidrych Rhys' in October 1939 (the month of their wedding, or the 'Show', as she calls it here) in *Wales* no. 10. The issue also included Thomas's story 'Just Like Little Dogs'. Her poem is a kind of travelogue of visual experiences, with the lines here evoking a remembered image from her early childhood holidays in Patagonia.

In 'A Carmarthenshire Diary' Roberts describes the local ferry and fisherman John Roberts arriving with flat fish from the estuary that he caught by feeling them with his feet on his crossings of the Taf. Her 'Notes for an Autobiography' describe taking

the pastoral way to Laugharne [...]. John Roberts in his Breton suit was soon seen untying his ferry. It was lying in the River Taf Estuary. He rowed over, his trousers rolled above his burnished knees. This was because the river was deep at the two sides. He took us on his back and dropped us into the boat. We rowed across the narrow stretch and we were in Laugharne. [...] Dylan and Caitlin were pleased to see us' (p. 215).

It is a short walk from Llanybri, where Rhys and Roberts were renting the small cottage called Tygwyn for 3/6 a week, down to the crossing point, and to the pastoral mode of transportation across to Laugharne, where from July 1938 the Thomases were renting

Sea View, a large four-storied house. With the journey back being dependent upon the tide, and so with hours to kill, the resulting drinking session, Roberts recalls, left them the next day with ‘a Dylanesque problem – no money’ (p. 215). Elsewhere in her diary she comments that John Roberts had nice legs.

Many of Lynette Roberts’s poems take birds as their subject and theme, and her engagement with natural history is detailed and exacting. Her elegy describes an occasion where she identified some of the estuary birds for Thomas as ‘whimbrel, sandpiper and curlew’, and a later handwritten note on the manuscript of the poem explains further that ‘this was on your (Thomas’s) birthday in October and the October poem was finished but for the last line’. She has in mind Thomas’s ‘Poem in October’:

It was my thirtieth year to heaven
Woke to my hearing from harbour and neighbour wood
And the mussel pooled and the heron
Priested shore.⁸

Whilst the poem was finished during the summer of 1944, during a stay at Blaencwm in Carmarthenshire, Thomas makes it clear in a letter to Vernon Watkins that it is ‘a Laugharne poem: the first place poem I’ve written’. Paul Ferris’s footnote to the letter indicates that a version of the poem predated Thomas’s thirtieth birthday by some distance: ‘Watkins said that the poem had been “contemplated” since 1941, and originally the first line read, “It was my twenty-seventh year to heaven”’ (*Collected Letters*, p. 580). As a Laugharne poem it is likely that its inspiration derived from the earlier period when Thomas was living there (until 1941). ‘Poem in October’ was first published in February 1945, and was collected in *Deaths and Entrances* (1946). Roberts writes ‘Seven years later, the birds, yours, were lifted on to the page’, a timeline which might suggest that Thomas started the poem even earlier, in 1939. The wedding between Rhys and Roberts had taken place on 4 October that year, and according to a letter from Thomas to Glyn Jones on 27 October (the day of Thomas’s twenty-fifth birthday) Keidrych Rhys was due to visit Thomas the day after. Whether Roberts accompanied Rhys on this occasion, and talked with Thomas about birds, remains a speculation.

Roberts moved into the caravan in Laugharne graveyard in 1949, the year that Dylan and Caitlin Thomas moved back to Laugharne and into the Boathouse, with their friendship

⁸ Dylan Thomas, *The Poems*, ed. Daniel Jones (London: Dent, 1990), p. 176.

reconvened 'in ship's pubs and sea pubs, drinking'. The subsequent shift of the elegy to London alludes to Thomas's broadcasting career: 'your voice cast over the waves, the ninth wave / Charged with Mabinogion magic'. The transformation of [air] waves to 'the ninth wave' is typical of Roberts's bringing together of the technological and mythological worlds. The 'ninth wave' reverberates with an echo from Tennyson's 'The Coming of Arthur':

And then the two
Dropt to the cove, and watch'd the great sea fall,
Wave after wave, each mightier than the last,
Till last, a ninth one, gathering half the deep
And full of voices, slowly rose and plunged
Roaring, and all the wave was in a flame:
And down the wave and in the flame was borne
A naked babe, and rode to Merlin's feet,
Who stoopt and caught the babe, and cried 'The King!
Here is an heir for Uther!'⁹

But perhaps more immediate for Roberts is an echo out of the direct Welsh medieval bardic tradition. The text of 'Cad Goddeu' ('The Battle of the Trees'), from the Book of Taliesin, had been reassembled by Robert Graves and published in Rhys's *Wales* magazine, along with various articles on the subject which were to form the groundwork for his *The White Goddess*. Graves considered the text to contain other poems, one of which he separated out and published alongside his version of 'Cad Goddeu' in the twenty-first Birthday Issue of *Wales*, under the title 'The Blodeuwedd of Gwion ap Gwreang', dedicated to Angharad Rhys (Rhys and Roberts's young daughter). The poem ends: 'Long and white are my fingers / As the ninth wave of the sea'.¹⁰ Roberts had provided considerable help with Graves's work on Welsh mythology, and is acknowledged in the foreword to the first edition of *The White Goddess*. Blodeuwedd, a beautiful maiden formed from flowers and trees, is metamorphosed into an owl in 'Math, Son of Mathonwy', the fourth branch of the Mabinogion, which may resonate with the 'Laugharne owl staring at the yew' in the graveyard towards the close of Roberts's elegy.

Roberts describes a specific occasion in London for her final meeting with Thomas, at a concert performance of Humphrey Searle's setting to music of Edith Sitwell's poem 'The Shadow of Cain', for two speakers (on the night in question, Dylan Thomas and Edith Sitwell), male voice choir, and orchestra. This is the 'atomic symphony of Cain', a setting of

⁹ Tennyson, 'The Coming of Arthur', in *The Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson* (London: Macmillan, 1891), p. 315.

¹⁰ Robert Graves, 'Two Poems', *Wales*, 5:8-9 (December 1945), 22-25 (p. 22).

Sitwell's poem which is an elegiac and apocalyptic response to the atomic bombs dropped on Japan, and the ensuing post-war nuclear age. It was performed at the Palace Theatre, London, on 16 November 1952, and a review by Neville Cardus for the *Guardian* exclaimed that 'it was a joy and a privilege to hear the English language spoken with Dr Sitwell's and Mr Thomas's intense feeling for the beauty of words'.¹¹ Sitwell was a champion of Thomas's work, writing in a review of *Deaths and Entrances*:

I think of the martyred youth of the time – and remembering that in this world made hideous by the cruelty and greed of mankind there is still a young man who can give us a song of the heaven that this world could – can – be, I think, perhaps there is still hope for us.¹²

Roberts had also known Sitwell for many years, and they had corresponded extensively from 1942 onwards. Sitwell wrote to Roberts from Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood in January 1954, sorrowful for the loss of Thomas: 'First there was Dylan's death, under appalling circumstances about which I will tell you when I see you'.¹³ When Thomas died he was in the early stages of planning an opera with Stravinsky, a work which was to imagine the world following a cataclysmic atomic incident.

The final recollection of Roberts's poem centres on Thomas's funeral and burial at St Martin's Church, Laugharne, on 24 November 1953. She mentions one of her fellow mourners Louis (MacNeice), and otherwise comes back to the subject of drinking. Thomas's childhood friend Daniel Jones, who is most prominent in the British Pathé news footage of the occasion, gives some sense of the atmosphere: 'The day was deteriorating, or improving, according to the way you look at it. Drinkers poured drink not only into themselves but over one another. [...] Someone suggested that a jar of pickled onions and a pint of bitter should be poured into Dylan's grave.'¹⁴

In this, Thomas's centenary year, it seems fitting that Roberts's quietly personal poetic remembrance of Thomas should finally come to light.

¹¹ Neville Cardus, 'The Story of Hiroshima in Music', *Manchester Guardian*, 18 November 1952, p. 5.

¹² Edith Sitwell, 'A True Poet', *Our Time*, 3:9 (April 1946) pp. ?

¹³ Unpublished letter, Edith Sitwell to Lynette Roberts, 31 January 1954. The original manuscript is held in the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas. Later in the same letter Sitwell reiterates a point she often made in their correspondence: 'You are the only young woman who can write. I have always said so, and I continue to say it.'

¹⁴ Daniel Jones, *My Friend Dylan Thomas* (London: Dent, 1977), p. 6.

Editorial Note

The poem, to my knowledge, has never been published before. It exists as a typed manuscript held by the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, and the copy I have worked from, owned by Roberts, has additional handwritten emendations and marginal comments. Roberts also typed out a clean copy of the poem at a much later date, incorporating many of the handwritten emendations, and reworking whole passages. The text given here is a reconstruction of the earlier typed manuscript, ignoring the later emendations, as the initial incarnation is surer of itself as a poem, and closer to the events it remembers. I have silently corrected obvious typographical errors in spelling and punctuation, and a couple of word and phrase orders are best guess reconstructions from ambiguities in the manuscript itself.

Charles Mundy, August 2014.