

Dear Dylan – Letters to, and poems after, Dylan Thomas

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The concept of the *Dear Dylan* anthology is in itself a unique and intriguing one. A selection of poets are asked to write a Thomas inspired poem and then add a personal letter to Dylan Thomas himself.

Edited by Anna Saunders and Ronnie Goodyer, these poems have been carefully chosen to summon an essence of Thomas, while reflecting each poet's own distinctive voice. There is a freedom to the language of Thomas that is contagious and this is reflected in the world-play and the lack of conventional syntax that defines the best of these poems. For example, Nick Browne writes of 'lambent nature wild in its winnowing wreckage', and, in Olga Dermott-Bonds contribution, the narrator is 'bare-footed, bone-shriek cold' and strings the washing line 'crow-high'.

Ronnie Goodyer draws attention to the importance of form in Thomas's work, reminding us that he was a master of many poetic genres, able to be loose and wild in his verse, while also being a highly disciplined craftsman.

Nature, particularly birds, the sea and lonely landscapes feature heavily in the collection, as any Dylan Thomas fan would expect. Walking alone is a theme that runs throughout. Matt Dugan writes 'I walk the shill of black air – sills of light', capturing both the colour and rhyme that made me want to re-read Thomas's *Fern Hill* and *Love In The Asylum*.

Love for Dylan Thomas (not only as a poet but for the man himself) is an artery that runs through *Dear Dylan*. Mab Jones describes his boathouse, his habits and the physical remnants he has left with melancholy tenderness: 'Here/is a pinch of his mossy tobacco...here is a scrap of pillow/...& here is an eyelash...'

We are reminded of Dylan the person, with his pints and his quirks throughout the letters. Many poets lament not being able to buy him a drink, or imagine their paths almost crossed, only to be denied a glimpse of the man himself. Others draw on his mystical side, his early death and his poor physical health. Penelope Shuttle begins her letter with 'Now you are dwelling on Parnassus where there are no hangovers!'

Some of the contributions directly address a specific Thomas poem, for example Jenny Mitchell's response to *Do Not Go Gentle...* which cleverly reverses the speaker from the son to the father: 'Son/you shan't be self-destroyed.' The narrator in Anna Saunders poem becomes part of Thomas's actual writing process itself: 'Dylan, I

dreamt I was your poem./Dylan, I dreamt I was the page,/your starfish-fingers
splayed gold upon my skin...'

Overall, the quality of writing in *Dear Dylan* is very high. It begins with an introduction from Thomas's granddaughter, Hannah Ellis, who highlights the complexity of both his writing and his lifestyle, which towards the end left him 'both physically and mentally ill'. The anthology does a magnificent job of capturing these contradictions. Francesca Albini's poem ends 'I touch your darkness/In the empty night/And find it warm'. This is a fitting description of Dylan Thomas himself, equal parts darkness and light, genius and humility.

Reviewed by Kitty Donnelly