
A
WAY
WITH
WORDS

FAVOURITE PIECES

chosen by

FAMOUS PEOPLE

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Never was there such a town as ours, I thought, as we fought on the sand-hills with rough boys or dared each other to climb up the scaffolding of half-built houses soon to be called Laburnum or The Beeches. Never was there such a town, I thought, for the smell of fish and chips on Saturday evenings; for the Saturday afternoon cinema matinées where we shouted and hissed our threepences away; for the crowds in the streets with leeks in their hats on international nights; for the park, the inexhaustible and mysterious, bushy Red-Indian hiding park where the hunchback sat alone and the groves were blue with sailors. The memories of childhood have no order, and so I remember that never was there such a dame school as ours, so firm and kind and smelling of galoshes, with the sweet and fumbled music of the piano lessons drifting down from upstairs to the lonely schoolroom, where only the sometimes tearful wicked sat over undone sums, or to repent a little crime – the pulling of a girl's hair during geography, the sly shin-kick under the table during English literature. Behind the school was a narrow lane where only the oldest and boldest threw pebbles at windows, scuffled and boasted, fibbed about their relations:

'My father's got a chauffeur.'

'What's he want a chauffeur for, he hasn't got a car.'

'My father's the richest man in the town.'

'My father's the richest man in Wales.'

'My father owns the world.'

And swopped gob-stoppers for slings, old knives for marbles, kite-string for foreign stamps.

The lane was always the place to tell your secrets, if you did not have any you invented them: occasionally now I dream that I am turning out of school into the lane of confidences when I say to the boys of my class, 'At last, I have a real secret'.

'What is it? What is it?'

'I can fly.'

And when they do not believe me, I flap my arms and slowly leave the ground, only a few inches at first, then

gaining air until I fly waving my cap level with the upper windows of the school, peering in until the mistress at the piano screams and the metronome falls to the ground and stops, and there is no more time.

And I fly over the trees and chimneys of my town, over the dockyards skimming the masts and funnels, over Inker-man Street, Sebastopol Street, and the street where all the women wear men's caps, over the trees of the everlasting park, where a brass band shakes the leaves and sends them showering down on to the nurses and the children, the cripples and the idlers, and the gardeners, and the shouting boys: over the yellow seashore, and the stone-chasing dogs, and the old men, and the singing sea.

The memories of childhood have no order, and no end.

From: *Reminiscences of Childhood*, by Dylan Thomas

For me, the town was Holyhead, at the other end of Wales. But it was the same town, with the same cinemas, and fish and chips, and there were sand-hills and sailors, and a park, and a dame school, and a narrow lane at the back, where we also all tried to fly, though we used mackintoshes as cloaks, like Superman. I lived there till I was ten, and then the family moved to Liverpool, and I became 'taffy' for the whole of secondary school, and beyond, though my Welsh accent didn't survive the first form. And yet I never lost the ability to use the accent at will. Regular holidays back to Holyhead kept it alive, and I became quite adept at switching linguistic identities, as occasion demanded. At 5 o'clock on Lime Street Station I would speak a pure scouse that could cut like a knife; by 9 o'clock, leaving Holyhead Station, having successfully negotiated the checkpoint of Llanfair P.G.'s 18 syllables, I was linguistically reborn. I think I remember thinking, how important it was to be seen to belong, to identify with the place and the people, by using their language. So I would give my accent its yearly service, and run it in gently by exchanging Welsh hellos with every old lady polishing her doorstep in Thomas Street.

I cannot remember when I first read Dylan Thomas, or this piece, I seem to have always known it, especially its final line. I remember searching for his books in school, and doing an amalgam of Emlyn Williams and Dylan at innumerable Liverpool parish social evenings, where my Welsh reputation gave me an

unquestioned authority to perform such things, regardless of ability.

Then later, I used my English language training to take his poems to pieces, as so many linguists have done, and learned how difficult it was to put them back together again. Yet I do find it helpful still to make use of him in lectures, as a source of illustration of linguistic ingenuity and daring, and of semantic compression – for is it not remarkable how he has packed a world of associations into such phrases as 'everlasting park' and 'lane of confidences'? But for me, his individuality in language was always second to his way of communicating the individuality of a person, a place, a time ... of conveying a sense of human uniqueness, while prompting a sense of universal recognition. What happened in Swansea in the 1920s happened also in Holyhead in the 1940s, and yet it wasn't the same.

Each time I read this story, and its fellows, I find myself host to a flood of recollections, merging childhood and after, Wales and elsewhere, blurring fact and fiction. Why do I remember, now, playing a saxophone in a band, in the first wave of Liverpool pop groups? One evening our group was playing in a hall where the Quarry Men (the embryo Beatles) were later due to play. I remember meeting someone ... I'm fairly sure it was from that group ... in fact, I'm sure it was Paul McCartney ... it definitely could have been ... The story enlarges with time, and for my older children, and those of my students who have heard this rumour, I was almost a Beatle, and my subsequent career has been a long, slow slide downhill. I often wonder, what happened, really? Heaven help anyone who tries to produce coherence in that genre of fiction generally known as autobiography! The memories of adult life have no order and no end, either.