



Letter to My Teachers

Paul Dodgson

DEAR MR SMITH,

I want to take you back in time, way back in time to the nineteen-seventies. You're an English teacher at my secondary school and I am a pupil with neatly combed hair, a black polyester blazer and polished shoes. I want to remind you of one day in particular. Let me set the scene: we're in a classroom with bright strip lights on a dark winter morning, and you're stood in front of the blackboard, tall and thin, wearing a tweed jacket. You say you want to play us something, and there's a murmur of excitement because that isn't what usually happens. You walk over to a record player and lower the needle onto a disk. There is a crackle as the needle settles into the groove. Then a deep, rich voice, like nothing I've ever heard before. We're listening to *Under Milk Wood* spoken by Richard Burton. I remember you scanning the faces in the room for reactions. Some are bemused and look at each other in disbelief, and some boys think the whole thing is ridiculous. But for me, the rich, mellifluous word music of Dylan Thomas spills into my drab winter morning like sunshine.

In that moment I learn the power of the spoken word and discover an inner landscape; a world as real as the one I was live in. And it seems infinitely preferable to be in that little Welsh village, with the sound of the sea and its snoring inhabitants, than it is to be in a smelly classroom full of teenage boys.

I'm transfixed; and later, when you give us the whole play in a small, slim



volume, I take it home to read all the way through and it seems I've been shown another universe.

Maybe everything that's happened since can somehow be traced back to this moment: a love of words, language and stories beginning in earnest that day, as I stepped away from *Winnie-the-Pooh* and the Enid Blyton and into the village of Llareggub. It would be a very long time before I stopped attempting to imitate Dylan Thomas: trying and failing to fill my sentences with literary fireworks. Perhaps I only began to be a writer once I stopped trying to sound like him. I expect that for you, Mr Smith, this was a day like any other. You would've gone from this class to the next, to the next, until the school day ended and you went home, never realising what had happened to me. And time passed, time passed. I left it too late and now you'll never know.

If I could, I would sit you down and tell you about that day: how a teacher can change the course of someone's life and might never know what they've done. But most of all I would say the one thing I never said in all the years you taught me.