TED HUGHES
BIRTHDAY
LETTERS



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BIRTHDAY LETTERS

Fulbright Scholars

Where was it, in the Strand? A display Of news items, in photographs. For some reason I noticed it. A picture of that year's intake Of Fulbright Scholars. Just arriving -Or arrived. Or some of them. Were you among them? I studied it, Not too minutely, wondering Which of them I might meet. I remember that thought. Not Your face. No doubt I scanned particularly The girls. Maybe I noticed you. Maybe I weighed you up, feeling unlikely. Noted your long hair, loose waves -Your Veronica Lake bang. Not what it hid. It would appear blond. And your grin. Your exaggerated American Grin for the cameras, the judges, the strangers, the frighteners. Then I forgot. Yet I remember The picture: the Fulbright Scholars. With their luggage? It seems unlikely. Could they have come as a team? I was walking Sore-footed, under hot sun, hot pavements. Was it then I bought a peach? That's as I remember. From a stall near Charing Cross Station. It was the first fresh peach I had ever tasted. I could hardly believe how delicious. At twenty-five I was dumbfounded afresh

By my ignorance of the simplest things.

Caryatids (1)

What were those carvatids bearing? It was the first poem of yours I had seen. It was the only poem you ever wrote That I disliked through the eyes of a stranger. It seemed thin and brittle, the lines cold. Like the theorem of a trap, a deadfall – set. I saw that. And the trap unsprung, empty. I felt no interest. No stirring Of omen. In those days I coerced Oracular assurance In my favour out of every sign. So missed everything In the white, blindfolded, rigid faces Of those women. I felt their frailty, yes: Friable, burnt aluminium. Fragile, like the mantle of a gas-lamp. But made nothing Of that massive, starless, mid-fall, falling Heaven of granite stopped, as if in a snapshot,

By their hair.

Caryatids (2)

Stupid with confidence, in the playclothes Of still growing, still reclining In the cushioned palanguin. The nursery care of nature's leisurely lift Towards her fullness, we were careless Of grave life, three of us, four, five, six -Playing at friendship. Time in plenty To test every role – for laughs, For the experiment, lending our hours To perversities of impulse, charade-like Improvisations of the inane, Like prisoners, our real life Perforce deferred, with the real World and self. So, playing at students, we filled And drunkenly drained, filled and again drained A boredom, a cornucopia Of airy emptiness, of the brown And the yellow ale, of makings and unmakings -Godlike, as frivolous as faithless. A dramaturgy of whim. That was our education. The world Crossed the wet courts, on Sunday, politely, In tourists' tentative shoes. All roads lay too open, opened too deeply Every degree of the compass. Here at the centre of the web, at the crossroads, You published your poem About Carvatids. We had heard Of the dance of your blond veils, your flaring gestures, Your misfit self-display. More to reach you Than to reproach you, more to spark

A contact through the see-saw bustling Atmospherics of higher learning And lower socializing, than to correct you With our archaic principles, we concocted An attack, a dismemberment, laughing. We had our own broadsheet to publish it. Our Welshman composed it – still deaf To the white noise of the elegy That would fill his mouth and his ear Worlds later, on Cader Idris, In the wind and snow of your final climb.

Visit.

Lucas, my friend, one Among those three or four who stay unchanged Like a separate self. A stone in the bed of the river Under every change, became your friend. I heard of it, alerted. I was sitting Youth away in an office near Slough. Morning and evening between Slough and Holborn. Hoarding wage to fund a leap to freedom And the other side of the earth - a free-fall To strip my chrysalis off me in the slipstream. Weekends I recidived Into Alma Mater, Girl-friend Shared a supervisor and weekly session With your American rival and you. She detested you. She fed snapshots Of you and she did not know what Inflammable celluloid into my silent Insatiable future, my blind-man's-buff Internal torch of search. With my friend, After midnight, I stood in a garden Lobbing soil-clods up at a dark window.

Drunk, he was certain it was yours.
Half as drunk, I did not know he was wrong.
Nor did I know I was being auditioned
For the male lead in your drama,
Miming through the first easy movements
As if with eyes closed, feeling for the role.
As if a puppet were being tried on its strings,
Or a dead frog's legs touched by electrodes.

I jigged through those gestures – watched and judged Only by starry darkness and a shadow. Unknown to you and not knowing you. Aiming to find you, and missing, and again missing. Flinging earth at a glass that could not protect you Because you were not there.

Ten years after your death
I meet on a page of your journal, as never before,
The shock of your joy
When you heard of that. Then the shock
Of your prayers. And under those prayers your panic
That prayers might not create the miracle,
Then, under the panic, the nightmare
That came rolling to crush you:
Your alternative – the unthinkable
Old despair and the new agony
Melting into one familiar hell.

Suddenly I read all this —
Your actual words, as they floated
Out through your throat and tongue and onto your page —
Just as when your daughter, years ago now,
Drifting in, gazing up into my face,
Mystified,
Where I worked alone
In the silent house, asked, suddenly:
'Daddy, where's Mummy?' The freezing soil
Of the garden, as I clawed it.
All round me that midnight's
Giant clock of frost. And somewhere
Inside it, wanting to feel nothing,
A pulse of fever. Somewhere

Inside that numbness of the earth Our future trying to happen.
I look up – as if to meet your voice
With all its urgent future
That has burst in on me. Then look back
At the book of the printed words.
You are ten years dead. It is only a story.
Your story. My story.

Sam

It was all of a piece to you
That your horse, the white calm stallion, Sam,
Decided he'd had enough
And started home at a gallop. I can live
Your incredulity, your certainty
That this was it. You lost your stirrups. He galloped
Straight down the white line of the Barton Road.
You lost your reins, you lost your seat —
It was grab his neck and adore him
Or free-fall. You slewed under his neck,
An upside-down jockey with nothing
Between you and the cataract of macadam,
That horribly hard, swift river,
But the propeller terrors of his front legs
And the clangour of the iron shoes, so far beneath you.

Luck was already there. Did you have a helmet?
How did you cling on? Baby monkey
Using your arms and legs for clinging steel.
What saved you? Maybe your poems
Saved themselves, slung under that plunging neck,
Hammocked in your body over the switchback road.

You saw only blur. And a cyclist's shock-mask, Fallen, dragging his bicycle over him, protective. I can feel your bounced and dangling anguish, Hugging what was left of your steerage. How did you hang on? You couldn't have done it. Something in you not you did it for itself. You clung on, probably nearly unconscious,

Till he walked into his stable. That gallop Was practice, but not enough, and quite useless.

When I jumped a fence you strangled me One giddy moment, then fell off, Flung yourself off and under my feet to trip me And tripped me and lay dead. Over in a flash.