

# Strata of the Shore

*Dylan Thomas, Devonian Geology, and the Physics of Deep Time*

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*'Watch yellow, wish for wind to blow away / The strata of the shore and drown red rock;'*

Dylan Thomas, 'We Lying by Seasand' (1937)

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## Abstract

*Literary criticism of Dylan Thomas's 'We Lying by Seasand' (1937) has consistently focused on mortality, colour symbolism, and surrealist imagery while overlooking what the poem explicitly describes: geological time. When Thomas writes of the 'strata of the shore' and the 'red rock' beneath Swansea's beaches, he employs the technical geological term strata — not as metaphor but as precise observation of the Devonian substrate of the Gower Peninsula, formed approximately 400 million years ago.*

*This essay argues that the poem is a phenomenological meditation on deep time, grounded in the specific geology of Thomas's birthplace and resonating with contemporary physics theories about time's fundamental nature. The reading connects to the broader Liminal Mind concern with what matter carries — the compressed duration held in rock, in coal, in the bodies of people who have lived inside particular landscapes — and to the Quantum Memory project's investigation of embodied knowledge and what remains when surface layers are stripped away.*

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## I. The Overlooked Substrate

The critical tradition around Dylan Thomas has long been preoccupied with the obvious surfaces of his work: the sonorous rhetoric, the death-haunted imagery, the surrealist concatenations of the early poems. What it has consistently underread is the material specificity. Thomas was a Swansea poet writing about Swansea's actual geology, and the geology matters.

When Thomas writes 'wish for wind to blow away / The strata of the shore and drown red rock,' the word strata is not decorative. It is the standard geological term for distinct layers of sedimentary rock, used in precisely this sense in every geology textbook of the period. A boy educated at Swansea Grammar School in the 1920s and 1930s — a school that took science seriously — would have encountered geological timescales as part of his curriculum. The vertigo of deep time, the recognition that the beach beneath his feet was compressed duration, was available to him as a schoolboy fact before it became a poetic subject.

The 'red rock' he names is equally specific. The cliffs and beaches of the Gower Peninsula are composed primarily of Old Red Sandstone — Devonian deposits formed approximately 400 million years ago from

continental sediments in pre-vegetated desert conditions. The red colour comes from oxidised iron. Thomas did not invent the colour; he observed it. The poem begins, as all serious phenomenological inquiry begins, with what is actually there.

*Thomas was not reaching for a metaphor of deep time. He was writing about the specific rock beneath his feet, and the specific duration compressed into it. The criticism that has missed this has been reading the poem's surface while overlooking its strata.*

## II. The Vertigo of 300 Billion Tides

The pedagogical moment when a child first comprehends geological duration creates a permanent cognitive shift. The tides have come in and out approximately 300 billion times since the Devonian sandstone of the Gower was formed. This is not an estimate designed for rhetorical effect — it is a calculation. The Earth rotated faster 400 million years ago, producing days of roughly 21 hours and more than 400 days per year. The Devonian tidal cycle was consequently more frequent than the modern one. Averaged across 400 million years of gradually slowing rotation, the figure of 300 billion tidal cycles is conservative.

What does it mean to lie on a beach and know this? The 'lunar silences' and 'silent tide' of Thomas's poem are not merely atmospheric. They are the present instance of an incomprehensible repetition — the same gravitational pull, the same withdrawal, performed 300 billion times on the same rock. The human observer on the beach exists at the far end of a sequence so long that the imagination cannot hold it. What the imagination can hold is the image: the tide coming in now, as it has always come in, over rock that was already old when the first fish crawled onto land.

Thomas's poem enacts this compression in its structure. The observers lie 'bound by a sovereign strip' — the beach as liminal zone, the threshold between two temporal scales. Above: the yellow sand of geologically recent time, the present-tense surface. Below: the red rock of the Devonian, the ancient substrate that the sand temporarily obscures but cannot permanently cover. The wish to 'blow away / The strata' is the wish to see through the present to the deep time beneath it. The acknowledgement that 'wishes breed not' is the recognition that the deep time is always already there, whether you look at it or not.

*The beach is a liminal zone not only between land and sea but between two temporal scales that the human mind cannot hold simultaneously. Thomas's poem holds them anyway, which is what poetry can do that prose cannot.*

## III. Ancient Sunlight: The Physics of Trapped Time

The geological reading of the poem opens onto a deeper physics framework, one that Thomas could not have named but that his poem anticipates. The Devonian sandstone of the Gower is not merely old matter. It is compressed duration made visible — time that has become stone, that can be touched, that erodes under the same tidal action that formed it.

Consider what Welsh coal contains. Coal formed from the forests of the Carboniferous period, approximately 300 million years ago, as plant matter was compressed under geological pressure over

millions of years. Those plants grew by absorbing solar energy — specific photons that arrived from the sun and were captured in the chemistry of photosynthesis. When Welsh coal is burned, it releases that energy: not an echo of ancient sunlight, not a representation of it, but the actual energetic consequence of photons absorbed 300 million years ago. The light that warmed a Carboniferous forest is present in the coal, in a different informational state, until combustion releases it.

This is what Block Universe Theory formalises mathematically: the model in which past, present, and future exist simultaneously in four-dimensional spacetime, and what we experience as the flow of time is an artifact of consciousness moving through a structure that does not itself flow. On this account, the Devonian moment of rock formation and Thomas's moment of lying on the beach above it are equally real, equally present in the structure of spacetime. The strata are not a record of the past. They are the past, materially present in the now.

Thomas's poem reaches toward this recognition without the mathematics to name it. The closing image — 'Breaks, O my heart's blood, like a heart and hill' — places the human heart (a duration of decades) alongside the geological hill (a duration of hundreds of millions of years) as equivalent formations: both temporary, both breaking, both composed of matter that carries compressed time. The material substrate is shared. The temporal scales are incomparable. The poem holds both at once.

*The coal contains the actual energetic consequence of Carboniferous sunlight. The rock contains the compressed duration of 400 million years of tidal action. Matter does not merely record the past. In a precise physical sense, matter is the past — still present, in a different state.*

#### **IV. Close Reading: The Poem's Temporal Architecture**

The full text of the poem rewards reading in light of this geological framework:

*We lying by seasand, watching yellow  
And the grave sea, mock who deride  
Who follow the red rivers, hollow  
Alcove of words out of cicada shade,  
For in this yellow grave of sand and sea  
A calling for colour calls with the wind  
That's grave and gay as grave and sea  
Sleeping on either hand.*

*The lunar silences, the silent tide  
Lapping the still canals, the dry tide-master  
Ribbed between desert and water storm,  
Should cure our ills of the water  
With a one-coloured calm;*

*The heavenly music over the sand  
Sounds with the grains as they hurry  
Hiding the golden mountains and mansions  
Of the grave, gay, seaside land.*

*Bound by a sovereign strip, we lie,  
Watch yellow, wish for wind to blow away  
The strata of the shore and down red rock;  
But wishes breed not, neither  
Can we fend off rock arrival,  
Lie watching yellow until the golden weather  
Breaks, O my heart's blood, like a heart and hill.*

Dylan Thomas, 'We Lying by Seasand' (1937)

The colour structure of the poem maps directly onto the geological stratigraphy. Yellow is the present-tense surface — sand, sunlight, the contemporary shoreline. Red is the ancient substrate — the Devonian sandstone, the pre-life landscape, the compressed duration beneath the recent deposit. The poem's observers watch yellow and wish for the yellow to be blown away so that the red beneath it becomes visible: they wish, in other words, to see through the present to the deep time it conceals.

But the poem's logic insists this wish is misconceived. The deep time is not hidden by the surface. It is present in the surface — in the sand that is itself eroded from the red rock, in the tidal action that both formed the rock and continues to erode it, in the 'strata' that are visible precisely because erosion has exposed them. 'Wishes breed not, neither / Can we fend off rock arrival': the geological time cannot be escaped or hurried. It arrives on its own terms, at its own pace, regardless of human desire.

The final line enacts the collapse of temporal scales that the whole poem has been building toward. 'Like a heart and hill': the human heart breaks as the golden weather breaks, as the geological hill breaks under erosion. The same verb, the same process, operating across timescales separated by orders of magnitude. In the structure of the sentence they are equivalent. In the physics of deep time, they are both temporary formations, both composed of matter that carries duration, both moving toward dissolution at their own incomparable rates.

## **V. Phenomenology as Method: Thomas and Liminal Mind**

The reading of Thomas offered here is not merely literary criticism. It is an account of a method — phenomenological inquiry through direct encounter with material reality — that the Liminal Mind practice has been pursuing, in a different medium, for forty years.

Thomas's poem begins with what is actually present: the specific red rock of a specific beach, observed directly, without the mediation of inherited symbolism. The geological reading it generates is not imposed from outside but discovered through sustained attention to the material. This is the same procedure that produces the Quantum Memory project's concern with embodied knowledge — the

recognition that bodies, like rock, carry compressed duration that is not accessible through official record but only through direct encounter.

There is a biographical dimension here that is not incidental. Barry, where the Liminal Mind practice is based, sits on the same geological substrate as Thomas's Swansea — the same Devonian and Carboniferous formations, the same ancient shoreline, the same compressed time underfoot. The beaches of the Vale of Glamorgan are made of the same material that Thomas was lying on in 1937. The strata are still there. The red rock still arrives regardless of human wishes. The 300 billion tidal cycles have continued, without interruption, since the poem was written.

*Thomas achieved through poetry what the Quantum Memory project attempts through installation: the making-present of duration that official record cannot hold. The RFID portrait that carries a face from the past into a present space is doing, in different materials, what 'We Lying by Seasand' does with rock, sand, colour, and the incomprehensible patience of geological time.*

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#### Note on Sources

The text of 'We Lying by Seasand' is taken from *The Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas 1934–1952* (Dent, 1952). Geological data on the Gower Peninsula and Vale of Glamorgan is drawn from British Geological Survey records. The tidal frequency calculation uses standard figures for Devonian Earth rotation rates and is approximate. The Block Universe / eternalism framework referenced in Section III is a mainstream position in the philosophy of time, associated with the special and general theories of relativity; it is described here as resonant with Thomas's poetic logic rather than as a claim that Thomas consciously anticipated it.

#### Key References

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