The room in Earls Court had been let unfurnished, but the two young men who are sharing it have got hold of a couple of camp beds, a table and an oven which looks like a biscuit tin, placed over the solitary gas ring. The only chair has been modified for use as an easel, and on it one of the young men, Alfred Janes, is painting a portrait of his room-mate, a poet. His name is Dylan Thomas, he is twenty years old and the portrait is the first of three that Janes will make over the course of a friendship that lasts a lifetime.

The floor is scattered with beer bottles, fag ends and large pieces of cardboard covered in the poet’s writing. As Janes works, Dylan explains the use of rhythm by the Victorian poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, his mouth stuffed full of jelly babies. While the finished portrait shows Dylan neatly, if unconventionally, dressed in a dark jacket and shirt and bright yellow tie, the unheated room is so cold on this winter day in 1934 that he is sitting in bed wearing a large checked overcoat and a pork pie hat to keep warm. Fred, as he is known to family and friends, is a meticulous painter who works slowly. He is developing a new technique of incising a
grid-like pattern with a penknife over the finished work to give it a slightly raised, jewel-like quality. You can see it in the checks on the jacket in the portrait. But he knows he must make the most of his friend’s presence – Dylan never stays put for long and will be in and out of their digs ‘like a cat in a tripe shop’.

Fred had been living in London since 1931, moving up from their hometown of Swansea when he won a scholarship from the art school there to study portraiture at the Royal Academy Schools in Piccadilly. It was also the year that he had met Dylan through another mutual friend, Daniel Jones, a brilliant young musician and composer. All three had been pupils at the grammar school in Swansea, where Dylan’s father was a formidable English teacher. Fred had kept in touch when he went home for the summer holidays, or when Dylan began to make his first forays to London. Literary society in Swansea in the 1930s was somewhat limited, but in the capital the teenage poet could try to cultivate his contacts on the newspapers and magazines that were beginning to publish his work. The appearance of his first volume of poetry, 18 Poems, at the end of 1934, was a golden opportunity to raise his profile.

At the Royal Academy Fred was surrounded by rare beings. Fellow student Peter Scott constructed models of birds – he was later to be knighted for his work as a wildlife conservationist and founder of bird sanctuaries. Another, Mervyn Peake, could transform a perfectly normal model in the life class into a prototype character from Gormenghast, the fantastical trilogy he would later write. ‘Outside it was bleaker,’ Fred recalled. ‘It was soon after the Great Depression, money was scarce and the art students were all
broke.’ His parents, who owned a fruit and flower shop in Swansea, gave him £1 a week (a fraction of average earnings at the time), and Dylan’s parents followed suit. They moved around in various combinations from one set of grotty digs to the next, which Fred described as an ‘unfurnished but happy shambles’.

At one stage he and his fellow academy student William Scott moved into an unfurnished flat in Redcliffe Street in Earls Court, a rundown area of west London. It was some time before they acquired any furniture, and quite a while before they were to be seen carrying mattresses, picked up at knock-down sales on Fulham Road. On one occasion the landlady made an equally-broke fellow student a stew which he took in an iron saucepan on the bus from his digs in St John’s Wood and carried down Bond Street to heat up and share in the academy’s common room.

The painter William Scott by Alfred Janes, 1933. A fellow Royal Academy Schools student, they shared digs in London
Another student who was better off and lived upstairs from Fred and William in some style preferred their happy shambles to his well-appointed isolation, and soon moved in with a few luxuries including, much to Fred’s delight, a collection of records: ‘Schnabel playing Beethoven piano concertos; Mozart symphonies; that wonderful Bach double violin concerto and perhaps for us, even more revelatory, a broad introduction to more modern composers such as Ravel, Debussy, Scriabin, Prokofiev and Stravinsky. It was an intensely formative time, one of endless discussion,’ Fred recalled. ‘We were all immensely stimulated by the great artists of the period, from Picasso to Klee, from Gabo to Epstein.’

Life at the stuffy RA Schools was rather dull by comparison – students went there to work and then went home again, but fun and games were to be had at the unmissable Friday night hops at the Royal College of Art in Kensington, where other friends from Swansea and William’s native Northern Ireland were studying. The glamorous annual Chelsea Arts Ball, held at the Royal Albert Hall, was not so easily accessible or affordable, however – until someone heard that its doors were not locked but held shut by powerful springs allowing exit but not entry, unless enough fingers could prise them open. Six students, including Fred and William, having practised first on similar doors, pulled off the feat and pelted up the stairs. ‘It was a glorious night,’ Fred said, ‘but I have a strong feeling that for all of us, the climax was at the beginning and not the end.’
One weekend, a friend suggested that, if the tidal current was right, it was possible to row down the Thames from Richmond in Surrey to Limehouse in east London. A boat was duly hired and four of them, including Fred and William, made fair time until, near Tower Bridge, they met a series of barges moored side by side that blocked their progress. Unable to change direction in time, the hapless crew members were swept against them and had to force their way along to the end of the row by standing up and pushing above their heads against the barges. The more they pushed, the more they rocked and a long struggle ensued until they reached the last barge ‘exhausted by a combination of effort, panic and hysterical laughter’. They managed to reach Limehouse, but missed the return tide and did not get back to the boathouse until the early hours of the following morning, where, Fred recalled, they were ‘met with greetings entirely lacking in warmth’.

It was into this student world of art, music, crazy adventures and financial hardship that Dylan arrived in November 1934. Fred had decided to leave the academy by then, but he stayed on with the others for a short period painting in the flat. ‘I was something of a factotum preparing our evening meals of vegetable stews etc. and wondering what on earth to do next. One was now highly trained, but not to earn one’s living.’ He returned to Swansea for a summer break and then took the flat in Redcliffe in Earls Court. ‘I remember the journey up from Swansea well,’ Fred recalled later. ‘My parents drove us up, Dylan with one huge case, the pork pie hat and check overcoat like a marquee over his slight frame.’
A postcard sent from Dylan to a friend announcing his arrival at Fred’s digs in London, November 1934

‘Our room – or studio as it had become since I had left the academy and was painting on my own – seemed quite ordinary at the time, but when I thought back on it I was not surprised that it filled our parents – when they could steel themselves to visit – with utter dismay.’ An iron bedstead which they had found made an admirable wardrobe when placed up on end against the wall, castors facing out and covered with a sort of curtain. As Fred was using the only chair as an easel, they sat on the camp beds. ‘I remember one of these collapsing completely under Dylan’s father on one of his visits. This horrified me. After all, to me Mr Thomas was still my erstwhile English master at the old school.’

Dylan had spent all morning tidying up his room and it was in apple-pie order, according to his mother, Florence, with his books lined up neatly on the shelves. But they had to take it in turns to have a cup of tea in the sitting room and, she said, ‘if there was one empty milk bottle, there were twenty’. They were at last able to all
sit down at the same time when other odds and ends of furniture were lent to them by Pamela Hansford Johnson and her mother. Pamela, a young secretary and promising poet, was Dylan’s first girlfriend. She lived across the Thames in Battersea and Dylan started corresponding with her in 1933 when one of his poems was published for the first time in the *Sunday Referee*, a London-based paper which had also published some of Pamela’s work.

Dylan’s first visits to London were ostensibly to stay with his married sister Nancy and look for work on one of the publications that was taking an interest in him. But they were also to visit Pamela – and not only to share thoughts on writing poetry. Dylan had arrived on the 21-year-old Pamela’s doorstep for the first time in February 1934, his slender body enveloped in a mackintosh whose pockets were crammed with papers and poems, as well as a quarter bottle of brandy. Her description reveals how well Fred’s portrait captures his boyish, but penetrating gaze – and how attractive Dylan was to her:

> When he took off his pork pie hat (which he also told me later was what he had decided poets wore), he revealed a large and remarkable head – not shaggy, for he was visiting – but heavy with hair the dull gold of threepenny bits springing in deep waves and curls from a precise middle parting. His brow was very broad, not very high: his eyes the colour and opacity of caramels when he was solemn, the colour and transparency of sherry when he was lively, were very large and fine, and the lower rims rather heavily pigmented. His nose was a blob; his thick lips had a chapped appearance; a fleck of
cigarette paper was stuck to the lower one. His chin was small and the disparity between the breadth of the lower and upper parts of his face gave an impression at the same time comic and beautiful. He looked like a brilliant, audacious child, and at once my family loved and fussed over him as if he were one.

Her reaction was probably already familiar to Dylan – and it was one that he was to arouse over and over again in many different women. When he returned to Swansea a few days later, he wrote and told Pamela that he loved her. There were more visits to London that year, and they enjoyed what Pamela described as ‘a nice little affair’, spending a holiday in Swansea, chaperoned by her mother, enjoying the spectacular scenery of the nearby Gower peninsula. The amount he drank sometimes worried her, and she was puzzled by the way that he would pretend in company to be much drunker than she knew he was. But soon after that first visit Dylan, still only nineteen, was to win the Sunday Referee’s ‘Poet’s Corner’ prize, which guaranteed the publication of a volume of his poetry at the paper’s expense. Pamela had won it the year before. It was the appearance of Dylan’s 18 Poems in December that year that had helped convince his parents that he should move to London, the respectable Mr Janes senior at the wheel, with the older, more sensible Fred to keep an eye on him in the big city.

Another young Swansea artist lived with them at 5 Redcliffe Street, Mervyn Levy. He was Dylan’s oldest Swansea friend; they had met as seven-year-old pupils at Mrs Hole’s, a little private junior school near their homes in the Swansea suburbs. Later,
Mervyn had also attended the grammar school and then the art school. Here he met Fred, whose 1931 portrait of Mervyn helped him to win his scholarship to the RA Schools. He was now studying at the Royal College of Art. These three members of ‘Swansea’s Bohemia in exile’, Dylan thought, were going to ‘ring the bells of London and paint it like a tart’.

‘We had some wonderful times together that have merged into a sort of kaleidoscopic image of laughter, arguments, experiments, quarrels and more laughter,’ Fred wrote. ‘Both Dylan and Mervyn could be enormously funny. We all took each other’s work completely for granted. Although during this period, 18 Poems was published with great success, I don’t remember it making any difference to him or his endless comings and goings at all.’

Fred and Mervyn Levy washing up in the outdoor ‘kitchen’ at their digs in London, c.1933
Mervyn would often visit Dylan, who habitually slept fully clothed, at about nine in the morning. ‘I would shake Dylan awake, hand him a cigarette and a light and wait for the first low rumble of coughing to build up to a shattering, purple-faced crescendo,’ he recounted in a BBC broadcast. ‘He always got the most out of his coughing fits … which he really enjoyed in a curious, perverse way. He liked to spread around the entirely romantic idea that he was dying of TB. The breakfast cigarette was a great help here…’ Occasionally Dylan would vary the morning routine by reciting fragments of his poetry, such as these lines from ‘The force that through the green fuse drives the flower’, one of his 18 Poems. Mervyn and Fred didn’t know at the time that the power of its imagery was going to inspire many other artists and writers in years to come.

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower
Drives my green age; that blasts the root of trees
Is my destroyer.
And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose
My youth is bent by the same wintry fever.

Dylan and Mervyn also loved to indulge in ‘breakfast time fantasy weaving’. One morning Dylan started conjuring up an ‘oilyverse’ – a world where everything was dripping in oil. Mervyn visualised everyone slipping about all over the place. Not only that, Dylan pointed out – it would be horribly difficult to remain upright at all and everyone would have to address the Pope as
‘His oiliness’. The number of mice required to pull the Royal Scot train from Edinburgh to London at 100 mph was the subject of another conundrum, and it was agreed that dwarfs with whips might be needed to keep them all galloping in line.

There were darker moments for Mervyn, who was Jewish. The years 1934 and 1935 were a period of great tension, already foreshadowing the Second World War. Oswald Mosley’s British Union of Fascists, the ‘Blackshirts’, were making their presence felt on the streets of London, holding rallies which often ended in violent confrontations with communists and Jews. One evening Mervyn, Fred and William were to experience it first-hand. Mervyn enjoyed dressing in somewhat bizarre fashion – on this occasion in trousers slashed to the knee and one half of his face clean shaven, the other half bearded.

They were returning at night by tube from the West End to Earls Court, when a group of black-shirted youths began to taunt Mervyn. At the entrance to the tube station they met with a group of some thirty or forty Blackshirts – obviously on their way to a rally. ‘They immediately surrounded us jostling and threatening,’ recalled Fred. Fortunately the students’ propensity for ‘endless discussion’ came to their aid. ‘It took what seemed an age to convince them that we were not “Trotsky’s best friends!” Mollified, eventually they went their way. That kind of confrontation was sadly all too frequent at the time.’

When they weren’t indulging in banter or risky behaviour, work was a serious matter. ‘In the flat Dylan did much of his writing and it was there above all that one learned how
meticulous a craftsman he was,’ Fred noted. None of them had enough money to buy anything apart from a little beer, and Dylan never drank when he was working. ‘He would revise tirelessly and the room could be inundated with papers, gradually to be organised and collated and resulting frequently in a poem appearing complete and written out in his inimitable hand on a large sheet of card to be “seen” as well as read.’

One poem that particularly caught Fred’s artist’s eye was ‘Vision and Prayer’, although it wasn’t published till much later. It forms a lozenge shape by starting off with one word in line one, then adding a word to each line until there are eight words, and then reversing the process until the last line consists of one word. Dylan’s penchant, Fred believed, for experimenting with writing out his poems as word-shape compositions on these sheets of cardboard stemmed directly from his developed visual sense. Certainly, his ability to conjure up vivid pictures in the mind’s eye of his readers was one of his most compelling skills.

This sensory connection to words was mirrored by Fred’s tactile appreciation of his medium. ‘Paint has weight, it has substance. You buy it by the pound or by the tube. It has all sorts of aspects to it – its fluidity, its viscousness, its wateriness, its oiliness. It’s a love of making things.’

And perhaps only an artist would make this observation:

In some early poems, Dylan’s delight in mixing – deliberately – pure sound patterns with verbal clues and leaving the reader to ‘get on with’ the meaning was very akin, I feel, to Picasso’s device
of placing an eye here and a nose there and forcing the looker to get on with the face, which – being provided with these bits and pieces – the brain will not let him avoid.

Fred even suspected, controversially, that in his early work, Dylan was sometimes mischievously presenting the reader with a superbly constructed puzzle with no solution, ‘knowing, diabolically, that it will be finally solved and that books will be written about the solution’.

The furious bursts of work that produced such poems would be interspersed with a complete disappearance from view, after which Dylan would often turn up with some new friend: a down-and-out from the Embankment, a broken-down American boxer, a communist in hiding from the fascists. They would stay for a while, maybe hours, days or weeks, then disappear for good. ‘There must have been a strange contrast between our habits,’ Fred remarked. ‘Whereas I was glued to my easel-cum-chair experimenting away day after day, Dylan would disappear for days – perhaps weeks on end; on one occasion he went out to get a haircut and the next time I saw him was in Swansea.’

Dylan had always been restless, but perhaps this tendency to disappear was because, despite his eagerness to live in London, he liked neither the discomfort nor the cold of his digs. He was used to being molly-coddled by his mother and writing in the solitude of his suburban Swansea home, not with all the distractions of living at such close quarters with messy artists. Only a month after arriving he wrote to a Swansea friend complaining
about the ‘little maggots’ he was living with and how boring and provincial he found them.

I find it difficult to concentrate in a room as muddled and messy as ours is nearly all the time. For yards around me I see nothing but poems, poems, poems, mashed potatoes, mashed among my stories and Janes’ canvasses. One day we shall have to wash up, and then perhaps I can really begin to work.

Another reason for Dylan’s comings and goings was that he was spending much of his time with a rapidly growing circle of friends and admirers, developing relationships that were later to help him earn a living by book reviewing, broadcasting on BBC radio, writing film scripts, not to mention promoting and publishing his own work. And of course there were all the temptations of London’s Bohemian quarters in Soho and Fitzrovia. Dylan and
Fred would occasionally meet for coffee in the Lyons Corner House, or, if funds permitted, a bowl of spaghetti in Bertorelli’s restaurant. But it was in pubs and clubs like the Fitzroy Tavern in Charlotte Street or, after it shut at about 10 p.m., the arty Gargoyle club in Dean Street, that Dylan charmed his fellow drinkers with brilliant impersonations and shaggy dog stories. And it was in the Wheatsheaf Tavern, off Tottenham Court Road, that he would meet the love of his life, Caitlin Macnamara – a relationship that turned out to be so mutually destructive and almost broke the bonds with his old Swansea friends.

Fred and Dylan soon moved on, this time to Coleherne Road, round the corner from Redcliffe Street, where William Scott joined them again. Fred said later that it was here that he painted the 1934 portrait of Dylan – if so he must have done it uncharacteristically quickly, as Dylan had been living with him in Redcliffe Street only since November. Perhaps Dylan had sat for Fred on some of his earlier visits to London, before moving up officially. But wherever it was done, their surroundings would have been just as happy and shambolic. According to Mervyn, Fred was in charge of collecting the rent, and while Dylan only had a mattress to sleep on, if he didn’t pay his share, Fred, who was much taller and stronger, would pick him up, turn him upside down and shake him till any loose change fell out of his trouser pockets. Dylan’s habit of leaving his bed full of cake crumbs and apple cores was another source of irritation to Fred, who was a marginally tidier creature.
Fred painted a second portrait of Mervyn here in 1935 and because he was studying art himself, unlike Dylan he knew how to sit patiently, much to Fred’s relief.

By now Fred was developing the idea of the simple grid pattern visible on Dylan’s jacket in the 1934 portrait into a highly organised framework with very ordered geometry. He was moving away from the traditional idea of painting and drawings as a means of representing the world around him to experimenting with the ingredients of painting – colour, line and shape. While his chosen medium was different from Dylan’s, their desire to conjure in this way with line and shape – and in the poet’s case, sound – was closely connected and reflected a powerful Modernist streak in their outlook.

But Fred’s new ideas didn’t fit in with the traditional teaching at the RA, excellent though it was, and despite the fact that he had been a model pupil. By the end of his first year in 1931, as the local paper in Swansea proudly reported, he had won first prizes of £5 each for life drawing, head studies and painting from the antique, as well as three monthly prizes for composition, and in 1932 he won the Royal Academy of Arts Prize Medal for figure drawing. But by 1934 life drawing classes – which he had been attending by now for about seven years – were beginning to pall and he was by then a highly accomplished draughtsman. He started skipping a few daytime classes to study Chinese painting at the British Museum or fossils at the Natural History Museum and modern masters like Braque, Klee and Kandinsky in the Cork Street commercial galleries a stone’s throw from the RA.
Academy classes were in the evening as well as during the morning, and Fred had been absent from some of the daytime sessions. As he was going in one evening, he met the Keeper (principal) of the Royal Academy Schools, Sir Walter Russell, a traditional painter of landscapes and portraits in the Victorian mould. ‘We haven’t seen much of you recently, Janes,’ Sir Walter said sternly. When Fred explained that he had been studying in art galleries and museums, Sir William retorted: ‘We don’t cater for part-timers here.’ ‘It was Picasso v Sir Walter Russell,’ Fred explained. ‘Picasso won.’

By the summer of 1935 the ménage at Coleherne Road had broken up. All three met up over the next year or so in Cornwall, where William and Fred had gone to paint, and Dylan to recuperate from the excesses of London life. Weekly dances in Penzance were not to be missed, but for Fred this meant walking the ten miles back to St Ives, where he was staying, fuelled by 3 a.m. cheese and onion sandwiches eaten in a hedgerow to keep him going.

Fred went back to Swansea for the holidays, thinking he would return to London. But he didn’t, and all four years’ worth of his RA drawings and paintings, which he had left in the flat, were nearly lost. Luckily for him, the influential artists Augustus John and Cedric Morris (who was also from Swansea) were organising an exhibition by Welsh painters in Cardiff, and wanted to include paintings by Fred that they had seen in a one-man show held at the Everyman Cinema in Hampstead, so Fred had gone up to London to fetch them. Two were subsequently bought for £15 each by the National Museum and Gallery of Wales in Cardiff – a still life, *Bream*, and the portrait of Dylan – which hang there to this day.