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Eight Letters from Sylvia Townsend Warner to Colin House

Sylvia Townsend Warner*

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Eight Letters from Sylvia Townsend Warner to Colin House

Sylvia Townsend Warner

Lower Frome Vauchurch. Dorchester
24: 01: 1975

Dear Colin,

The wall looks so smooth and well-cared-for that I can hardly believe it is the same wall. Thank you – and Christian¹ – so much. I forgot to ask you what I owed you for the paint. Please let me know. You can work for me for love, and I am delighted: but I must pay for any materials.

I have a request to make you. I mean to be cremated, and the casket holding my ashes to be buried beside Valentine. When the time comes, I should like *you* to carry my casket from the church, and place it in the grave. You have always been my dear gardener – and I should like you to plant me. Please say Yes.

with love,
Sylvia

Letter From Varenuch. Dorchester
24. 01. 1975.

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I should like you to plant me.
Please say Yes.

With love
Sylvia.

Figure 6.1 'You have always been my dear gardener - and I should like you to plant me.' Letter requesting that Colin House buries STW's casket.
(Copyright: Sara Hudston)

Lower Frome Vauchurch. Dorchester
25: ii: 1975

Dear Colin

Thank you for the copies of your poems. Today, on this lovely day of spring, I took them into the garden and read them there. Yours is the right kind of poetry to read out of doors. The sun's 'one last look at the day that's done' is a beautiful expression of that fleeting moment, that entranced moment.

It makes me happy to think that you can see such views, hear such sounds – and *really* see and hear them.

my love
Sylvia

This is what Wordsworth wrote of a sunset.

'It is a beauteous evening, calm and free,
The holy time is quiet as a Nun
Breathless with adoration; the broad sun
Is sinking down in its tranquillity;
The gentleness of heaven broods o'er the Sea.
Listen! that mighty Being is awake
And doth with his eternal motion make
A sound like thunder – everlastingly.[']

Lower Frome Vauchurch. Dorchester
24: iv: 1976

Dear Colin²

I was sorry I could not have a longer talk with you last Monday. But I had not seen my cousin Janet for more than half a year, she had a great deal to tell and I had much to ask. And she is a rare visitor, whereas you, thank God, are not.

Now Peg is coming here on May 15th, and wants to see Strawberry Cottage, and your panel of Portland Rock, & the little church. Which would suit you better? Shall we come on the afternoon of the 15th or the morning of the 16th? If neither suits you, it doesn't matter to her, for she will be here again later in the summer.

I admire my new windowsills more and more. And was it Shellie May who left that dear little dragon basking on one of them?

I hope Sukey is better. My love to you all.

Sylvia

Lower Frome Vauchurch. Dorchester
17. v. 1976

Darling Colin,

Peg went back to London last night, saying she had never enjoyed such a morning as yesterdays at Strawberry Cottage, and that she had no idea how delicious grey mullet could be.

Now it is all over; but your rose looks at me from its throne of a peacock-blue glass vase, and assures me that your kindness and Sukey's will last on, that Strawberry Cottage will always have something new and marvellous to show me, something thrilling to hear, something loving to repose on. Thank you both with all my heart for all you mean to me.

Incidentally, should you not have been photographed with that larger mullet in your arms? Surely it must have been an exceptionally large one.

I hope sweet Georgia's teeth will not plague her much longer. It was sad to see her hiding her flushed face on Sukey's kind breast.

With love

Sylvia

Lower Frome Vauchurch. Dorchester

4: xii: 1976

Darling Colin

I look with such pleasure at your Tern.³ It looks as if it had just alighted here – but it has *come to stay*.

And thank you for all your works in the garden. I listen to the rising wind and think with comfort that there is no more dead wood for it to blow down.

After you had left I found Christian's anorak, hanging on a door-knob. And here it is. I hope he wasn't chilled on the drive back.

My love to you all

Sylvia

Lower Frome Vauchurch

14: ii: 1977.

Dearest Colin,

Thank you for that splendid post which I found firmly in place when I came home yesterday.

But I was sorry not to see you. I am shocked by the way you have been let down.⁴ I hope something may be salvaged. If not, you will still be able to say like the French king after a defeat:

'All is lost, except honour.'

Ever

Sylvia

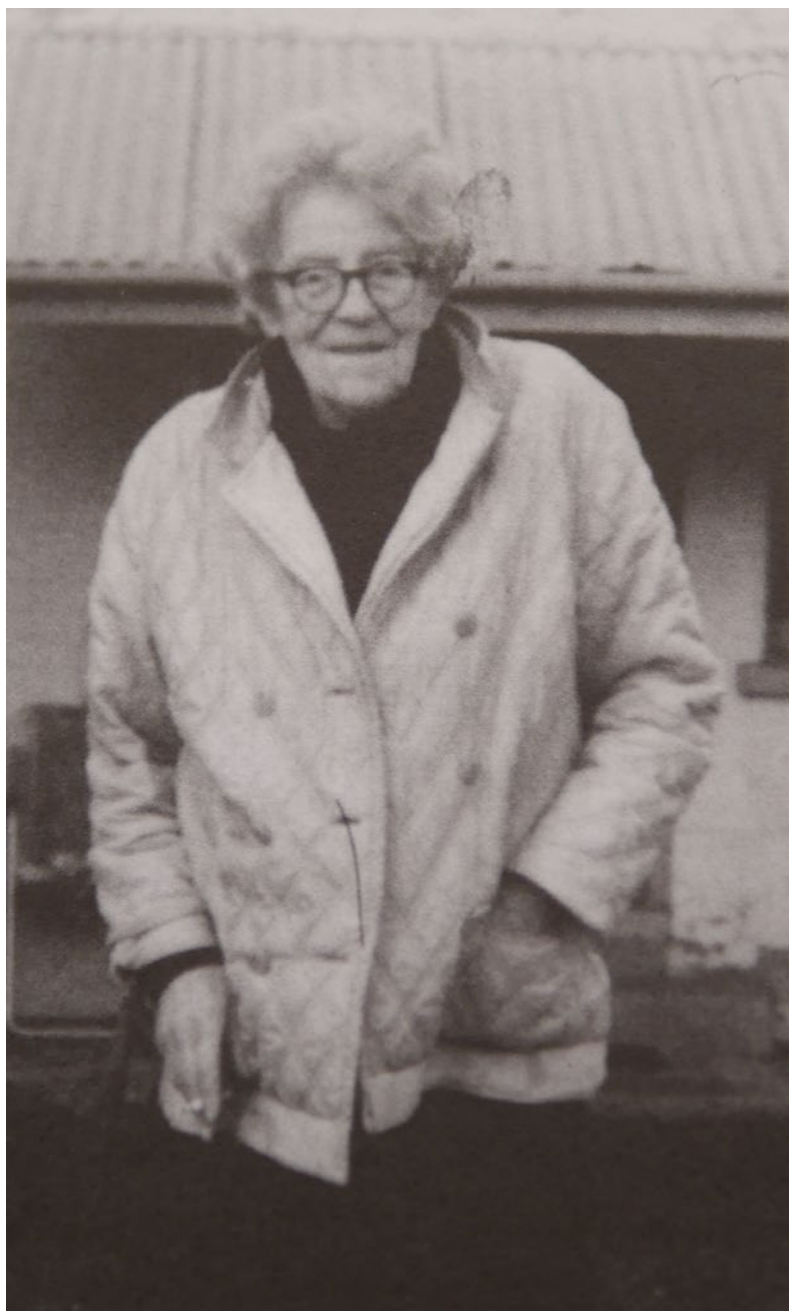


Figure 6.2 Sylvia Townsend Warner in her garden at Frome Vauchurch during the 1970s. Photo taken by Colin House.

(Copyright: Colin House)

Lower Frome Vauchurch
24: vii: 1977

Dear Colin,

Thank you so much for all your work on the wall, for the carnations, for the grey mullet. I had some for my supper, it was delicious. Thank you for being Colin.

Your pretty blue plate will be kept in a safe place till you come again. And when you come again, I hope you will not have any more disastrous days to tell me about. You may be the next nearest thing to a fish, but even so, *Fish don't get cramp*, and it alarms me that you had this attack of it.

And my love to you all –
Sylvia

Lower Frome Vauchurch
6: ix: 1977

Dear Colin,

I have told Vic Mearns that *Cornom* now belongs to you, and that he should pay for the rent.⁵ He has it till September 1978.

He has it on a yearly tenancy (Sept. to Sept.) so if you want to let the grazing to Arthur Squires, I think you should give Vic Mearns notice now.

Ever,
Sylvia

Notes

- 1 Colin's son Christian.
- 2 Arrangements for forthcoming lunch with Peg Manisty at Strawberry Cottage, Colin's house in Fleet, Weymouth. Janet is Warner's cousin Janet Machen, Sukey is Colin's wife and Shellie May his daughter.
- 3 Colin had made a model of a tern (a bird common on Chesil Beach) and given it to Sylvia.
- 4 Warner refers to the disastrous time when Colin was swindled by his business partner.
- 5 Warner helped Colin financially by giving him 'Cornom', the field next to Riverside, her house in Frome Vauchurch. See Sara Hudston, 'The Gardener's Story', *Sylvia Townsend Warner Journal* (2017).