

FIRST WORDS/DYSGU'R IAITH

by Gillian Clarke, translated by Elin ap Hywel

First Words

The alphabet of a house—air,
breath, the creak of the stair.
Downstairs the grown-ups' hullabaloo,
or their hush as you fall asleep.

You're learning the language: the steel slab
of a syllable dropped at the docks; the two-beat word
of the Breaksea lightship; the golden sentence
of a train crossing the viaduct.

Later, at Fforest, all the words are new.
You are your grandmother's Cariad, not Darling.
Tide and current are llanw, lli.
The waves repeat their ell-ell-ell on sand.

Over the sea the starlings come in paragraphs.
She tells you a tale of a girl and a bird,
reading it off the tide in lines of longhand
that scatter to bits on the shore.

The sea turns its pages, speaking in tongues.
The stories are yours, and you are the story.
And before you know it you'll know what comes
from air and breath and off the page is all

you'll want, like the sea's jewels in your hand
and the sound of ell-ell-ell on sand.

Gillian Clarke is a poet, playwright, editor, translator, and president of Ty Newydd, the writers' center in North Wales that she co-founded in 1990. In 2008, Clarke became Wales's third National Poet. Her work has been translated into more than ten languages. She has a daughter and two sons, and now lives with her husband on a small-holding in Ceredigion, where they raise a small flock of sheep.

Dysgu'r iaith

Dyma wyddor dy dŷ—aer,
baldorodd dy anadl, conan y grisiau.
Twrw'r oedolion lawr staer.
Eu gosteg wrth iti glwydo.

Dysgu'r iaith wyt ti: dant dur
y sillaf sy'n disgyn yn y dociau; curiad deusill
goleulong Breaksea; brawddeg aur
y trê'n sy'n croesi'r draphont.

Wedyn, yn Fforest, mae'r holl eiriau'n newydd.
Darling dy fam-gu wyt ti, nid cariad.
Ebb and flow yw'r enwau ar lanw a thrai.
Mae'r tonnau yn poeri eu ow-ow-ow ar y traeth.

Fesul paragraff mae'r adar yn pontio'r lli.
A dyma hi, yn adrodd hanes drudwen a merch,
gan ddarllen y stori yn y penllanw
sy'n ewynnu'n rhacs ar y traeth.

Troi'r ddalen wna'r môr, a llefaru mewn damhegion.
Ti biau'r stori. Ti yw y stori,
ac ar drawiad rwyt ti'n gwybod mai dyma dy gowlaid
yn berlau'r môr rhwng dy fysedd

aer, ac anadl, a'r cwbl sydd ar ddalen
fel cwyn yr ow-ow-ow ar y lan.

Elin ap Hywel is a poet, translator, and editor who works in Welsh and English. She was the Royal Literary Fund's first bilingual fellow at the University of Wales. Formerly a translator for the National Museums and Galleries of Wales, her published work has been widely anthologized and translated into Czech, English, German, Italian, and Japanese.

Hand-carved letters are still used at Gregynog, a small art press in Mid Wales. Photo courtesy of Gwasg Gregynog

