

## Sisters Of The Early Shift

We'd have fought each other, Rhiannon  
and I, long ago, had we been brothers.  
Her being Welsh, speaking the *mamiaith*  
(at home, though not as a child at school for fear  
of beating), me from Yorkshire, drawn across  
the Pennines by economics and adventure –  
Chester neighbours now, in edgy frontier  
country – the Romans, Saxons, or those French  
would have set us each at the other's throat.

Chester tried to subdue them, the *derwen*-  
worshipping Druids, the even more ancient  
hewers of tombs like Bryn Celli Ddu.  
No *Croeso i Gymru* then, no A55  
or Marches Radio – Glyndŵr's sons and  
Llewellyn's daughters were rebels all against  
William the Norman's tribe, Hadrian's heirs.  
Offa built his Dyke against the Celts,  
then came King Edward holding up his son,  
his infant, on the ramparts with some joke  
about the language; centuries on, His Royal  
Highness tries a bardic phrase or two  
and *Meibion Glyndŵr* threaten bombs  
for his invested pains.

But we are sisters,  
me and Rhiannon. Tucked in our semis,  
with kitchen windows facing at the side,  
in the middling suburbs of this border town  
we keep a parallel early morning shift.  
She lights the gas, I switch the rapid kettle  
on. She's dressed and dignified, I'm in my  
tatty towelling robe. I'm slippers, and guess  
she is too. My man's asleep upstairs;  
hers sleeps in Ynys Môn whence he came,  
the stooping farmhouse between gorse and sea.  
He brought from there his spade, his laying hens,  
and a disregard for seatbelts and yellow lines.  
The picture of him in my memory  
is on the moped, helmet straps undone,  
half-pint carton of milk between his teeth  
and waving at me with both hands and eyes.

Rhiannon's *nain* was small as a nut, upright  
as a dresser, her thoughts running like water  
till she died. My grandmama wore stays  
with fierce bone pokers that pierced the heart.

Her *hen-nain* fed the Penrhyn slate quarrymen starving under their lord and master's power<sup>1</sup>. My great-grandmama trod the streets of Hull, heard tubercular coughing behind closed doors, and invented a lining, liquid gold, for their throats and her pockets. 'Lung Tonic', she called it. It sold in gallons. The dockers of Hull slept better, but died the same.

Not all Rhiannon's brothers would have fought me long ago. Her *hen-nain's hen-daid* might have followed Telford's cambered Watling Street, hard-core underfoot, pick-axe in hand, towards Llangollen, that great aqueduct across the Dee, the Dyfrdwy, fast-flowing boundary-mark – now crossed, first by canal, then tarmac for our joint industrial age. In Chester, sandstone ramparts slide to history, watch-towers peer towards the setting sun no longer alert to raiders, though maybe to a burned-out holiday home.

One of the *taids*, Gwynfor<sup>2</sup>, struck a lasting blow for the issue of borderlands and border tongue. He struck – went on strike, on hunger strike, to bring the *mamiath* into the flicker of modern day. What? Starve, almost as the master starved the Penrhyn slate-men, for the sake of *Pobl y Cwm* on S4C? Doesn't it lower the currency? Not for Rhiannon it doesn't.

And I, her sister of the early shift but English, learn when we pass across the fence eggs for the cake and scraps for the old hens that nowt in my Yorkshire dialect compares with her Celtic mother tongue, her *mamiath*. I honour my sister of the early mornings, her ancestors, her history, and most of all her tongue. Cornish is lost, Scots Gaelic hangs by a breath, Brittany struggles, Ireland too. Rhiannon taught me through her *nain* and *hen-nain* not to set about each other's throats but to honour all our sisters' tongues.

**Alison Leonard.**

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<sup>1</sup> The Penrhyn slate quarry strike 1900-1903 was the longest strike in British industrial history.

<sup>2</sup> Gwynfor Evans in 1982.

### **Notes on the Welsh**

*mamiaith* – the mother tongue

*Croeso i Gymru* – Welcome to Wales

*Meibion Glyndŵr* – radical Welsh Nationalist group ('Sons of Glyndŵr')

*Ynys Môn* – Isle of Anglesey

*nain/taid* – grandmother/grandfather

*hen-nain/hen-daid* – great grandmother/father (*hen* = old)

*Pobl y Cwm* – 'People of the Valley' (Welsh TV soap opera)

*derwen* – oak (from which the word 'Druid' is derived).