

Turning

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Turning

Summary

Turning is a collection of twenty-two poems that reflects on the urge to migrate and explore, how that urge was expressed in my own family and life, and how it relates to a sense of place and belonging.

Apart from the opening poem, the poems are arranged chronologically, and begin with two glimpses of nineteenth century ancestors, one imaginary, the other historical. In the twentieth century poems, the immediate members of my family are introduced, and many of the poems of the second half refer to my own early life.

In all of them there is an attempt to capture some of the characteristics of Welshness, and the influence of my cultural and genetic heritage on my own life and work.

In addition to presenting the history of the Welsh side of my family, the poems reflect on nationality and diaspora in general, and the nature of the longing for home and belonging. The Welsh word *hiraeth* is never far from the surface.

Finally there is an attempt to point to a deeper understanding of the these urges and feelings, that what is felt as a desire for something outside of us, a hole to be filled by addition, whether of place or person or something more abstract, is in fact the longing to return to an unfettered state of being, for which no action is required.

Turning

1. New World

so he goes forth
almost a man
a year or two past gangly
striding out the kitchen door
armed with oiled steel
to break ground
make something his own
claiming other for mine
stepping beyond the anonymity
of his enslavement to youth
double digging
the first earth
taming a world
where sedges mark the boundaries
of the virgin territory
drawn on his chart
the extent of it
the draining of the swamp

he stands
bare-chested
well-fleshed about the bones
sweating
his muscles shake
at every strike
the slide of tines in earth
the crunch of tools through rust and grit
the tower of his body

raising high the weapon
hear him roar the height of his anger
watch him turn to blaze his eyes
hear him shout his triumph

see the design of him
the pivotal length of arm
the heave of shoulders eclipsing sun
the arc of the tool
the structure of the hand
the fullness of its growth
gripping the sword
gloves, helmet, boots

imperative of survival
imperative of conquest
a simple equation
they have it
we need it

so he plunges his sword
into the skull of the land
makes the earth his blood
the blood his nourishment

another cave
another water source
another valley
seen from a ridge
moving north
to softer lands
towards the end of day
expanding west

to another shore
where waves break
on a tide of cities
echoing with the sound of rape
the cry of babies

shall we place our finger on the wound
staunch the flow
draw the line
drown the babies
turn the ships around
at Hastings, Plymouth, Botany Bay?

or wait
for the next proud planet
to capitulate
to the same ambition
the same disregard for those who call it home
the slash and burn of ruthlessness
indifference to the boot-crushed weeds
on the road's verge
the discarded cigarettes
the empty cans of beer

until
a few miles behind
a few centuries later
when the flesh is consumed
when the vultures have moved on
and the sun has bleached the bones
hierarchy follows youth
into the ashes
to make amends

restore the wasteland
glean scrap from the battlefield
clean the wells

they look around, they build
clay, sticks, stones, mortar
replace the green of mildew
with the spring of grain
with the stirring
of the first shoots of conscience
reviving the memory
of the consequences of action
of history repeating itself
of a rationale for pillage
of justifications for appropriation
documents, treaties, titles,
fences, maps
homelands, reservations
prison camps

how long till we forget?
feet dancing in the firelight
again
the children's cries
flushing the heron
from the river bank

2. Tregaron, 1854

I have a grand time
with the boys on market days
and there's nothing like
the smile of neighbours
after chapel. Then

walking home together
the sun on the blackthorn
and the land shining
Beca trying to trip me
laughing her bonnet off
her black hair flying.

But how quickly
the sentiment turns to dudgeon
the silence of the broth to tedium
the knock of spoon on bowl
signaling from dissenting walls.

And at the fall of night
no candle breaks the darkness
that seals this farmhouse
closes on the click of door latch
in and out forever to the fold.

Betsi Davis did it
just walked away and she a girl
left Bala to her sisters
joined the drovers' walk to London
one less mouth to feed.

I could leave these walls behind
these fields this clinging mud
the chapel rising from the grass
this ancient farm
Cymraeg.

Note: Betsi Davis, born Elizabeth Cadwaladr, left home at the age of fourteen and became well-known later in life when she joined Florence Nightingale in the Crimea.

3. There was a Curious Welshman

~ after John Keats' *A Song About Myself: There Was a Naughty Boy, I & IV*

There was a curious Welshman
And a curious man was he
He would not stay at home
And could not settled be –
So he put
In his knapsack
A book
Full of hymns
A family photograph
Curled at the rims
A clean shirt
Breeches
And a Monmouth cap
For a nice warm nap
A hair brush
Tooth ditto
And new socks –
For old ones
Would split-O!
He set off
With his knapsack
Tight on his back
And followed his dreams
To the West
To the West
And followed his dreams
To the West.

There was a curious Welshman
And a curious man was he
He sailed to California
The gold for to see –
There he found
That the ground
Was as poor
That a law
Was as tough
That enough
Was as rare
That a bear
Was as brown
That a clown
Was as sad
That naughty
Was as bad
And a hymn
Was as tuneful
As in Wales –
So he stood in his boots
And he wondered
He wondered
He stood in his boots
And he wondered.

4. Pant y Hirion, 1876

Is there a way to bridge the years
now the forest has darkened the mountain
and covered the mineshafts
now a wrought-iron gate
makes us back up
half way to the road?

The view is much the same
northwest down the Rheidol
to Aberystwyth.
Somebody built right here
for that view –
must have loved the summer sunsets
over the Lleyn.

What made you leave this place?
Send your wife to her mother
with your children?
And what did you tell them
when you left for Liverpool?
God be with you?
Look after yourselves?
See you in a few years?

Who knows now?
Those conversations took off
with the wind over Llanafan
and never came back.

Someone might remember
the accident

with the steam engine
the cheap foreign lead
the drift to the cities
the cough.

But that's not enough for me.

I want to lean on that gate
look in your eyes and ask
what took you away?

What longing in your poet soul
sent you wandering?

Was strong enough
to override your chapel interdictions
a life of lessons in duty
in provision
in fatherhood?

Or did the meetings merely aspirate your lungs
give service to your lips?

William Richards stonemason
they called you
so you would have known about building.
Did you never make the connection
between building and fatherhood
between abandonment and decay?

You left us letters and notebooks
full of poems brimming with guilt
that urged God's message to the needy
and gave surrogate succour
while the infants dwindled in their bowls

and in your prodigal conscience.

5. Leaving

We have all left
some clean some not so clean
some so strong
there is no justification
and we override the rules
and ride the consequences
down the rapids of remorse.

How many words does it take to heal?
How many years?
How many deaths?

And who returns?
A few to town, some into the hills
some never
with no glance back –
call it ruthless call it heartless
call it iron cold
they settle their land
and reap their honest corn.

How many moons does it take to forgive?
How much forgetting?
How many strikes of the plough?

6. 1918

death was everywhere that year

death in the sick room
death in confinement
death in the trenches
death in the mines

it's a wonder
the living
did not die of grief

7. Bargoed, 1921

What happened, Grandpa?

One day you filled
the busy valley church
with your stormy words
and your love of God
the next
you're visiting the sick
in Ysceifiog
just seven hundred souls
since so few came back
from Ypres and Gallipoli.

The question made my mother
repeat a grief-engraved surmise
though why should she remember?
She would best forget
keep walking to school
up the coal-black streets
forget her mother on her deathbed
forget her sister Gwladys
forget her brother Tom the TB took
forget the ailing infant Alwyn.

How much death can a young girl take
without some forgetting?

How much death can a strong man take
without a little help from the bottle?

I know what they're saying.
That he's close enough to his housekeeper
for a bit of comfort –

and so soon after his wife!
It's not becoming for a man of the cloth
an example to his parishioners.
And what about the girl –
the one that's left
the brainy one –
what will happen to her?

Dust muffles the voices
though there may be a vault
and a leather ledger
in a fine italic hand
with a list of his faults and his errors
the reasons why
it's better for all concerned.

The lord is my shepherd.
He leads his flock from field to field
opening and closing
the gates of his infinite pastures.
His plan unfolds from day to day
and he alone assumes the coat
from which our cloth is cut.

8. Tsientsin, 1935

Megan Myfanwy he called me.

He's a nice man
tall, and handsome too.
English, mind
but they're all right –
one at a time.

I don't know where he heard Myfanwy.

They introduced me as Megan.
But he pronounced it right
which is something –
shows he did his homework.

I think he'd be a good provider.
But what am I saying?
I've only met him twice.

I don't meet many people –
more than in Ysceifiog, mind you.
I take games after school
then there's papers to mark.

Funny really
him out here for business
me here teaching –
different, but not so different
when you think about it.
We're both just here
doing what we can.

So many White Russians!

Two girls in my class –
lost everything.
Nothing to go home to now –
not like us
though tad's not well
so soon there'll
only be Elvan –
and me.

9. Come Stranger

Come stranger
sing for me
in your voice
I hear
the sound of unasked questions
that stir my longing

Come wistful stranger
sing for me
in your eyes
I smell
the smoke of ancient hearths
where stories linger

Come dark-haired stranger
sing for me
in your face
I see
the look of love abandoned
the rue of intimacy

I too at home
long for home
with my man
long for a man
with my child
long for a child

Come stranger
sing me deep
sing me the story

sing me the heart of it

10. Cilcain, 1947

A letter came this morning
from Australia.

The cousins were displayed
before a flat horizon
in their short pants.

And here the cows amble home
between the hedgerows
udders swaying
and pause to look at me
bringing me
to a view of myself
standing
in the small of the lane
with my hand on the gate
as I have stood for centuries
in my leather boots
slapping the same warm hides
calling the same humble dogs
into the yard.

Not that I could ever leave
these fields and valleys –
(no, not could, for I could
but would, for I would not) –
the pull of somewhere else
for me the proof of God
this smallholding the proving ground
this land the blessing.

So I leave the gate

and follow the herd into the barn
to the warm milk smell
and the pails clanging
on the cobbles.

11. Plas Newydd, 1951

What have these grey stones
to do with me?

these barns
these heavy cows
this clattering yard
these dusty trophies
from the county show

this strong woman
in her milky headscarf
and dung-spattered boots

this dog-loved man
whiskered and tobacco-stained
a string around his coat

these fields
these staring sheep
this cloud-raced land
these sedges sodden
from the windswept rain

What have these Welsh hills
to do with me?

12. Hong Kong, 1952

All I can think now
is that they tried
to keep me from the confusion
of a Welsh mind trapped
in an English body.

Perhaps they knew
what I didn't then
that this particular complaint
needs for its expression
the sight of daffodils
the sound of Welsh voices
the fire of Cwm Rhondda
and theirs was an innocent attempt
to shelter me from my birthright.

Friday leaving for school
mother was at the dining room table
laying out the wire and the glue
and the crepe paper.
Later, walking up the drive
I could hear the Welsh ladies
on the front porch
giggling their goodbyes.

Saturday St. David's Day
I looked through the window
and watched my family
get into the car
and drive away.

Sunday at breakfast
in the paper
a photo of my sister
and her friend Rhiannon
looking pretty in their aprons
and black Welsh hats
greeting the photographer
with trays of daffodils
for his buttonhole.

Better eat my cornflakes
and pretend I don't care –
that this is just for girls
that being Welsh is about
dressing up
and making paper daffodils.

13. London, 1956

Meet me at the Welsh Club at four
she would say
and I did
skipping the steaming pavements
a hundred miles
between the arrival of the 7:42
to Waterloo
and the fireside cup of tea
and biscuits.

The Science Museum
a ride in the lift
to the Derry and Toms roof garden
lunch at Slaters
for half a crown
the Round Pond
the Serpentine
the final sprint
down Oxford Street.

So much to tell.

The song said
Maybe It's Because I'm A Londoner –
but I wasn't.

14. Guildford, 1962

Do you remember me?
You looked up and saw me
in the helicopter
at 500 feet
on my way to an accident on the A3.
I saw you, saw you clearly
shielding your eyes from the sun
saw your face even –
my shadow passed right over you –
saw your brown bag on the grass
like a body.
You were wearing a blue shirt.
You were on your own.
You were young and skinny.
Funny how clear things are from the air.
Got me thinking about freedom.
Youth and freedom came up a lot
in my profession.
Somewhere near Ripley
I heard the victim had died
so I circled round and
by the time I got back
you'd gone.
It was only ten minutes.
I went home after that.
My shift was up.
You have no idea
how that image sticks with me
how I've thought about you
over the years.
My wife had just left me

and there you were taking off
without a care in the world
your future beside you
on the grass.

It was early.

Did you wake in the field right there?

How far did you go that day?

And how strange these things are but

I could tell

that it was not escape

from the prison of your childhood

or a necessary journey from A to B

but just a whim

and a need to fulfill it –

nor did your map

have a place called future

or a sea called adventure

just roads and roundabouts

with here and there

a ferry to board

a mountain to climb

an ocean to cross.

How I envied you!

Now I sit in my wheelchair

and watch the sycamore

by the shed

spin its seeds

to earth.

15. Rhydymwyn, 1975

He showed me his notebook of hymn tunes
and sang one through in Welsh.
The hearth smelled of permanence
the polish had heard it before
and his son my cousin my face my closest blood
next to me with his cardigan and his silent wife
in the circumscription of their contentment
was as far from me as Pant y Hirion.

As if my father's line
had oiled the water of my ancestry
and rendered it distasteful.
The added inches bought from England
at a price I never settled on
disguised my origins and made them stranger to me
the extra adding stature only in my exile
but diminution at my roots.

But why complain? – for I was gone by then
not just from those bald mountains
or to Dover and beyond to these wild woods
but to another planet with no way back
to embrace the doilies of Rhydymwyn
and understand what they were talking about
or jump off the back of a Number 9 bus
onto the fields of Ceredigion.

16. St. Albans, 1984

something was troubling her at the end
alone in her English flat
with her occasional English friends
visited by her English children
and their English children
the line broken
the language an abandoned vehicle
mention of Wales
more a joke
or a slap on the back
on St. David's Day
than the buzz of belonging
family dead or scattered
last heard of
smudged and barely legible
in a small brown book
at a sheep station in Queensland
the remaining drops of this distillate
dispersed
on an island of indifference
with no way left to reach the mainland
though they take time off
from tennis and golf
to watch the highlights
of the National Eisteddfod

17. Roots

Roots roots so many roots
Roots roots under your boots
Carrots potatoes turnips and beets
Solid and filling not wimpy like fruits.

Roots roots how do you trace ‘em?
That’s not a problem but can you embrace ‘em?
Thank heavens that’s something I’ll never do.
Don’t be so certain – we all have to face ‘em.

Roots roots deep in the soil
Soon to be lifted and wrapped up in foil.
Pull ‘em up tear ‘em up any old way
Dig for a while and you’ll turn up a royal.

Roots roots where do I look?
Go to the library pick up a book.
That’s very easy for you to say
But what if I find a tart or a crook?

Roots roots so many recipes
Mash ‘em with butter whip ‘em with cheese
Boil ‘em in water fry ‘em in oil
Mix ‘em with mushrooms do as you please.

Roots roots digging for dirt
He was a con man she was a flirt.
Never have to be stodgy and bland
Add sugar and cinnamon make a dessert.

Roots roots over the sea

Dig 'em and cook 'em and have 'em for tea.
Tell 'em I'm hungry and make lots and lots
And swear cross your heart that you'll leave some for me.

18. Returning

The photo on the card said Tal-y-Llyn, and there
outside a post office on a main street sidewalk
I was surrounded by words I never learned in class –
mailbox, parking lot, stop light, trash –

and the cut of the clothes of the people walking by
the way they crossed the street to park their cars
the short hard shadows, a distant police car siren
struck me now as coarse, unwelcoming and foreign.

Outside a shop I was approached with a petition
bright faces sure of their consumer rights
and played my alien card to smile and turn away
not quite my problem I was glad to say.

Perhaps I'd always felt the tremor of displacement
a sideways glance of exile, checking for the charge
of infidelity from my corner of fugitive disgrace
a lack of native ease – my father's place, his father's place.

Inside the bank I joined a lunchtime queue
and took the card again and saw the quiet lake
a steam train puffing past the rowan and the oak
heard the whistle, smelled the smoke.

And it seemed as if the certainty of place had slipped
and left behind a dining room in Towyn
a wide bay window looking out across the sea
my mother charming guests for word games after tea

leaving me to ask again the question

of loyalty to here or there
recipient of drafts and statements overseas
shuffling forward in the line – Next customer please.

Now on another pavement a jet-lag day away
I wait for a bus the timetable flapping
my corner of the shelter cold and dank
beside the flaking stonework of a high street bank.

A girl with a child in a pushchair stands on her own
stares at her feet takes out her phone
and I see from her speech and her complexion
that I've left it too late to make the connection.

And the realization slowly dawns
that I've just given up the mediocrity of exile –
ravished by the ecstasy of earth –
without a chance to claim the genius of birth.

The story of there lies exposed as a myth
for I am unequivocally here. How cold the April wind!
How pink the phone that she is texting with!
How young, how white, how pierced her skin!

19. Eisteddfod

Like the cricket
or the grasshopper warbler
ecstatic in its thrall
our music permeates all
no source or direction
or quest for perfection
so shall we sing
kin with every singing thing
one heart one blood
our voice a flood
that fills the space
as our embrace
and proves we need no amplification
or instantaneous translation
to spread the sound to hidden places
touch and light a thousand faces.

20. Are These the People?

Are these the people?

These rugged brute-faced men
rugby players
laughing into their lagers.

Are these the people?

These creamy diaphanous girls
caring not a jot
baring their arms to the wind.

Are these the people?

These tiny women arm in arm
bent with gossip
buoyed by the bubbles of Welsh.

21. Gathering

I'm not quite sure what I'm doing here
To tell you the truth
How I should sit and present myself.
It is not natural to be invited like this.

Tell us something about yourself, you said
Your problems, your fears
Your struggles to make ends meet.
It can be hard, I know

To fulfil your duty to your family
While a deep voice says
Tell the world *I am here*
This is the mark I make.

That's what you said, but
We're not used to the spotlight.
We do our job, what God has given us.
Yes, I'll have a cup of tea, thank you.

Waiting, now, looking out of the window.
I think it's clearing from the west.
Should be dry for the walk home
over the hill to Plas Newydd.

It's been five years now since Delyth left.
Don't know how I've survived.
Lynn's there, in Cardiff, with the children
and Dave of course.

They come up now and then.

It's hard to get away these days.

I liked Elvan's hymn.
He still has a voice.
And William's poems
Fancy writing those from so far away!
Megan is such a flirt
Always was.
Still likes the men
Always did.
Was she happy?
You mean, because she left?
I don't know.
No happier than the rest of us.

Me? My turn?
All right, then.
Well, I thought I'd give you a little recitation.
It can be in English, right?
OK then. Here we go.

Mother would shoot out snippets of Welsh and watch, sideways, hoping for a glimmer of recognition, a brightening of interest, a sign of ancient cells stirring, but I turned away to my book of trains. It was hidden too deep, held in the convoluted coils of immaturity, biding its time, not knowing how long it would wait or even what it was waiting for. When I started exploring on my own I got shot at cycling over the mountains from Rhayader with my panier bags. *Don't come and steal our language*, they said, *Like you've stolen everything else*. Well, I never stole anything, but I didn't want to cause any trouble. Who was I to know what all that was about? I was only fourteen. So I backed off. Cycled like mad down the road, of course, back of my neck prickling. Slept in a few barns. Climbed

Cader Idris. Went back to England. Put Wales behind me for another day. I was always *them*, you see, never *us*. That was the problem.

22. Last Poem

I had expected to end
this suite of reflections
of movements played
between the New World and the Old
with something strong and worthy
a dazzling coda
with a final blazing chord
to bring you to your feet
or a parting gift –
clarity in a silk-lined box
tied with a bow
and a card with your name on it.

This to provide some insight
a little closure, comfort
compensation for attention
not otherwise acknowledged.

But the metaphor collapses –
insight is blinded by brilliance
clarity may not lead to comfort
and closure is the goal of grieving –
though compensation's always nice
for otherwise who cares?
What keeps us marching
down these land-mined roads?
What is the fire that
moves us?

Is it hope or a dream
or a centripetal ache

requiring attention
or restlessness
a lovesick homesick who knows what
a craving of our pregnancy with God
a longing that we stuff
as soon as it appears
with rituals love affairs
and trips to the Bahamas
or psychoactive substances?

Though still it asks for more
our great black hole
the ultimate renewable
source of perpetual motion
to get us up and out
away from our incestuous ties
to foolproof couplings
that evolution demands.

And while it has a monstrous appetite
the wise say better not to throw it
every bone that comes our way –
excursions desertions conversions
are trifles that merely make it twitch its tail.

We've always suspected what would satisfy it
so when we've thrown it all we own
we can start to feed it what we don't
the transitory hopes and dreams
which have defined and scattered us
and sacrifice our darlings and our fears
our search for an external prize
the castles and bodies of beyond us

that will drop us on a windswept pavement
exhausted by our life's adventures
enlightened yes by what we've lost
but lightened more by what we've gained.

Critical Commentary

Title of Dissertation: *Turning*

The original title was *Returning*, but I dropped the *Re* because, though the poems are about movement and its consequences, most are concerned with outward movement.

Introduction

Turning is a collection of poems that reflects on the urge to migrate and explore, how that urge was expressed in my own family and life, and how it relates to a sense of place and belonging.

The idea to use an exploration of my own background and origins arose during the first residential year of my Creative Writing MA at Trinity Saint David, Lampeter.

The writing took two directions, one towards the history of the Welsh side of my family, the other towards the nature of nationality and diaspora in general. A further investigation, which forms a conclusion, approaches the nature of the longing for home and belonging. And though the Welsh word *hiraeth* does not appear in these English language poems, we could say that this dissertation is an exploration of *hiraeth* in poetic form.

If we think of the collection in musical terms as a suite of variations on a theme, the first poem is an overture, a fanfare to youth's urge to explore.

The movements that follow are chronologically arranged, allowing the story of awakening to my ancestry to be told, with historical reconstructions pinned to time and place. More general reflections are interspersed undated.

A number of poems tell the stories of particular members of the Welsh side of my family, trying to capture some of the characteristics of Welshness with illustrations of the delights and tragedies of family and diaspora. The influence of my cultural and genetic heritage on my own life and work is also touched on.

The final poem tries to point to how an exploration of these urges and feelings may result in a deeper understanding of them.

The collection is ultimately not about Welshness in particular. It concludes by going beyond attributes, beyond nationality or identity, the journey being seen not as about finding or rediscovering an external place, but an internal state of being.

Hiraeth is reconfirmed as the longing for the contentment of the home within, in whatever psychological or spiritual or religious terms we wish to express it, rather than the home on the hill. While there may always be a welcome in the hillside, home is where the heart is.

Method and Technique

I should point out that while the poems mention members of the Welsh side of my family, they are poetic fantasies, and not intended to be accurate character portraits or records of events.

As the poems took shape I had the impression of getting to know these people for the first time, though their traits and idiosyncrasies were found in my own behaviour, rather than in stories and reports about them.

I have likened the form of the whole to a musical suite, in which each part stands alone but shares a common thread and subject matter. Reading the whole in chronological order, with the development of characters and insights, adds to the value of the individual parts.

Interest and variety is enhanced by varying the form and structure of the poems. They vary in length, in stanza length and rhyming patterns, and in point of view. Most are written in the first person, some in the second and third person. There is also a range of mood – though the subject matter precludes jollity. A certain melancholy is the nature of exile and is the heart and the beauty of *hiraeth*.

I have been free with punctuation, letting each poem dictate the style. In a few poems there is none at all. In the first poem, *New World*, punctuation is reserved for a few in-line commas. *Tsientsin, 1935* is conventional, imitating the school teacher voice of the poem's subject. In all the poems I have assumed the convention that the end of a line signifies a pause, making a comma unnecessary.

Many of the poems came into being through a similar sequence of events. Each started as a decision to make a particular point or express a particular feeling, which led to writing down ideas and images, sometimes a thread, sometimes a story. This was followed by fleshing out these ideas and images in phrases and sentences, which were edited and tightened when the collection of ideas conveyed the intended message. These four steps often overlapped, and occasionally an image might appear at a later stage to take the poem in a new direction.

An example of the use of a thread in the construction of the first poem *New World* is given in Appendix 1.

I was particularly alert to two dangers which I thought would haunt any attempt to write a series of semiautobiographical poems: the risk of sentimentality and cliché, and the error of writing stories rather than poems.

Many of the poems tell stories, but I hope the focus on the mood and feelings of individuals transforms them from mere stories into vehicles for emotion.

I think cliché is a large part of how most people speak, and should not *always* be ruthlessly expunged. Cliché provides familiarity and accessibility for readers, and to speak to them from a position of knowing better is likely to alienate them. And cliché may be appropriate if used to flesh out a character, as, for example, the lines *I have a grand time in Tregaron, 1854* and *Your struggles to make ends meet in Gathering*.

In Appendix 2 I have given examples of changes made to two poems, with reasons.

Influences

I want to acknowledge the importance of the point of view expressed by Stephen Harrod Buhner in his book *Ensouling Language*.¹ Many writers have expressed their need to *stitch together the inner and outer worlds* (Robert Bly).² The argument is forcefully made in Buhner's book, dedicated to emphasizing the heart of writing rather than the mechanics of it.

Though my tendency is to write in free verse it has taken time to overcome the belief that the best poetry is conventionally structured, if not in rhyme, at least in the regularity of its stanzas and lines. Robert Pinsky's latest book³ helped me overcome that view. As he puts it: *The work's freedom to establish its own unique principles, alive in particular cadences and words and lines and sentences: that is the goal.*

¹ Buhner, Stephen Harrod: *Ensouling Language* (Inner Traditions, 2010)

² Bly, Robert: *American Poetry: Wilderness and Domesticity* (Harper & Row, 1990)

³ Pinsky, Robert: *Singing School: Learning to Write (and Read) Poetry by Studying with the Masters* (Norton, 2013)

Wislawa Szymborska's poems,⁴ albeit in translation, are the perfect example of Pinsky's goal, with their distinctive voice and disdain for classical form. It is the rhythm of the line and its words, combined with the resonance of their sounds and meanings, that make poetry accessible and give it whatever capacity to connect it may have.

One poem from the collection that establishes its own principles is *Gathering*. It starts in free verse and ends as a prose poem. It also changes voice at the same time. I think of it as a wish-fulfilment poem, where identification is made between the ancestor and the poet telling his story, the two voices merging to represent the continuity of the generations.

For general ideas that apply to the collection as a whole I was impressed by the writings of Robert Ardrey,⁵ in particular his claim that countless species have an innate compulsion to explore, lacking either the pressure of deprivation or the seeking of economic reward (*The Territorial Imperative*, Pg. 256), and that the history of war is in large part the story of peoples who will risk all for release from boredom (ibid., Pg. 338).

There is a rich tradition of narrative poetry (William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*) but collections of related poems that reflect on a topic or tell a story – a cycle of poems – are less common. They are common in music, the song cycle, where the composer may unify poems which even the poet did not intend to be related.

I read W. D. Snodgrass's *The Fuehrer Bunker*,⁶ published in 1995. It consists of twenty-two dramatic monologues, the poet's reflections on

⁴ Szymborska, Wislawa: *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems* (Faber & Faber, 1993)

⁵ Ardrey, Robert: *The Territorial Imperative* (Atheneum, 1966)

⁶ Snodgrass, W. D.: *The Fuehrer Bunker* (BOA Editions Ltd, 1995)

the last days of Nazism. It is a large-scale work and has been performed on stage.

Poets may collect their poems into a volume, and may or may not have a unifying theme or title in mind while they write. I am thinking of Carol Ann Duffy's *Rapture* from 2005 and *The Bees* from 2011⁷, where the title itself, rather than the poems, provides the glue.

Two recent collections have parallels with *Turning*. One is a group of poems in *Banjo* by Samantha Wynne-Rhydderch,⁸ which reflects on the lives and circumstances of the men on Captain Scott's Antarctic expeditions. The second is a sequence of poems on Catrin Glyndŵr in Menna Elfyn's *Murmur*.⁹

I will mention two poets who have clearly influenced my writing. It was months after I finished *Rhydymwyn*, 1975 that I realized that the last line of that poem, *onto the fields of Ceredigion*, echoes the last line of one of the stanzas of Dylan Thomas's *Fern Hill*, *On to the fields of praise*.¹⁰ It is hard to write about rural Wales and not be influenced by Dylan Thomas's particular way with images of the land: fields, trees and streams. There are other places where his style is echoed: *and the land shining* in *Tregaron*, 1854 and *this cloud-raced land* in *Plas Newydd*, 1951, for example. In fact whenever I form a new adjective from two words joined by a hyphen I think of Dylan Thomas.

Some critics have argued that Dylan Thomas suffered from verbal extravagance to the detriment of his poems. In an article in the *London Review of Books* Adam Phillips wrote that it was the sound that mattered for Thomas, that his notion was it is possible to write

⁷ Duffy, Carol Ann: *The Bees* (Picador, 2011)

⁸ Wynne-Rhydderch, Samantha: *Banjo* (Picador 2012)

⁹ Elfyn, Menna: *Murmur* (Bloodaxe Books, 2012)

¹⁰ Thomas, Dylan: *Collected Poems* (New Directions, 1957)

great poems without worrying too much about what they mean.¹¹ To me, meaning is as important as sound.

I also hear echoes of T.S. Eliot¹² in some poems – *New World* for example, where the reader is addressed with a question, *shall we place our finger on the wound?* which reminds me of *Shall I say it again?* from *Four Quartets*. T.S. Eliot, especially *Four Quartets* and *Ash Wednesday*, entered my sound world at an impressionable time, and his phrases and images continue to influence me.

Topics Covered in the Poems

Explicitly or implicitly, the poems explore the need to break away from the confines of family, from poverty and nutritional inadequacies, from an unsuitable climate, and the need to find adventure, or a mate, to open new land and explore, whether for scientific or geographical knowledge. They also hint at something deeper and unconscious, a biological need to spread our seed to ensure genetic diversity.

We are held back from this outward movement by our ties to family and ancestry, to land, landscape and climate, to patterns of behavior, rituals, habits, religions and language. If and when we return, we face a second break with the past, the adoption of a new identity, the possibility of disillusionment, and a realization of the maturity of these discoveries.

¹¹ Phillips, Adam A Terrible Thing, *Thank God* (London Review of Books, 4 March 2004)

¹² Eliot, T.S.: *Four Quartets* (Harcourt, 1968)

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17. *Roots* – a lighthearted look at roots.
18. *Returning* – disillusionment.
19. *Eisteddfod* – the power of music to connect and confirm identity.
20. *Aberystwyth, 2012* – a very short glimpse of the Welsh.
21. *Gathering* – time to listen to two generations.
22. *Last Poem* – an attempt to find the common denominator.

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Critical Commentary

Appendix 1

An Example of the Use of a Thread

The first poem, *New World*, started life as a thread of images and ideas that interested me. I also made a note of what I considered the poem's main message – that conquest is the teenage of humanity.

Some of the ideas in the thread are used in the poem as they first arose, some adapted. Not all the ideas in the thread find expression in the poem, and additional ideas arose during the writing of the poem that were not present in the original thread. In particular, some of the ideas may seem to possess a significance that demands inclusion, though they are absent. Deciding which to include and which to exclude was determined by the way the poem unfolded in the writing and whether subsequent addition would spoil its natural flow. None of these facts detract from the importance of the thread as a source of inspiration.

Later I noticed that no women had been mentioned in the poem, and decided that was appropriate for a poem about a particularly male aspect of human expression, though the presence of women is implied towards the end of the poem.

In this poem in particular, some of the ideas of genetic determinism, as I understand them from the writings of Robert Ardrey, are suggested. The urge to explore and make war are seen as functions of human biology.

New World: Thread

making a garden, new territory, expansion, breath

taming, cultivating
pride in new tools, oiled
grind of tools in earth
the sound of tilling, tillage, unheard
earth smells
boot prints in dirt and faces
swords to ploughs
war to agriculture
strike it rich, sexual strike, conquest of territory
pioneer, frontier
thrusting into wilderness
territorial expansion, male, female
technical superiority
ambition, ruthlessness, disregard for natives
steel of unused weapons, rust of use and disuse
the sound of battle
daily grind, sexual grind, steamy jungles
skull of the land
the human horror story
territorial imperative, driven by history
beyond family, society, conscience, accountability, law
beyond humanity
beyond the need, or desire, for memory
innocent adventure, happy-go-lucky
when we don't consider the consequences
the teenage of humanity
the teenager – immaturity
before the crystallisation of conscience
the consequences of action
history repeating itself
colonial behaviour, missionaries
a rationale for pillage
after-the-fact justification

documents, treaties, titles, maps
fences, reservations, homelands, prison camps

Critical Commentary

Appendix 2

Examples of Earlier Versions

1. Come Stranger

Earlier versions of this poem included the underlined phrases in the first two stanzas. The final version dropped these sentimental phrases in favour of images which, though still abstract, make a more immediate impression.

Come stranger
sing for me
in your voice
I hear
the yearning in my heart

Come dark-haired stranger
sing for me
in your face
I see
the look of longing

2. Hong Kong, 1952

In early versions of this poem the quality of the writing was compromised by the need to tell a particular story – the making of paper daffodils. The story opened the poem, providing little of interest to hold the reader's attention.

When I left for school
My mother was laying out the
Wire and glue
And crepe paper
On the dining room table

When I got home for lunch
the ladies
were saying their goodbyes

In later versions this sequence of events, though essential to the narrative, was preceded by two stanzas which introduce the subject of the poem in a way which makes the subsequent descriptive story more interesting.