



11-15-2000

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### Recommended Citation

Ross, Nicole (2000) "William Greenway's Simmer Dim," *Westview*: Vol. 20 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.  
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol20/iss1/9>

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# William Greenway's *Simmer Dim*

by Nicole Ross

Like Pablo Neruda, who asks in *Residence on Earth* what the “upsurge of doves,/ that exists between night and time, like a moist ravine” are made of, William Greenway shapes landscape from memory, often rendering it richer than it could ever have appeared otherwise. In *Simmer Dim*, Greenway’s formal and free verse poems travel through European and American landscapes—Italy, France, Greece, Scotland, England and Ireland, the swamps of Georgia—taking root in Wales, where Greenway lived for a year, discovering his poetic and familial identity. This collection explores the dilemma of how to leave familiar landscapes and to find new places that feel like home.

The son of a strict Baptist preacher, Greenway shuttles primarily among Southern swamps and the British Isles, attempting to trace his evolution, as poet. He writes of leaving the South—a place thick with memories: childhood Thanksgivings, family vacations, his mother and father’s deaths, his wife’s near-death from an aneurysm—to explore a country with an alternate past. He explains this desire: “We’re living here this year/ five time zones away/ from all we thought,/ and if we miss something,/ we’ve learned to let it go.” Themes of aging, losing family and remaining in love complicate Greenway’s struggle to define his present self, placing it in landscapes transformed by memory.

In the first two sections, Greenway retraverses worn paths of family history: the often painful relationships with his Welsh grandfather and father. In “Teeth Will Be Provided,” he recalls the paternal legacy of men who would “*hwyl* hellfire” from pulpits, from the heads of dinner tables. Walking in the hills of Wales, Greenway remembers his jazzy teenage Southern nights of cards, liquor, dancing belly to belly, and sex. He juxtaposes this with his Welsh grandfather’s “chapel gloom that hangs/ and falls like night in

the winter by four” and his father’s “coal-dust darkness/ of the Sabbath parlor or the leather strop/ of a Bible cover.” In Wales, he tries to identify with his grandfather’s religion, nearly succeeding, but pulling back, preferring to remember his grandfather as one who “passed down *no’s*/ to my father who put them in me/ where I carry them into middle age.” Though cool, craggy Wales differs from the thick, low-hanging heat of swampy Georgia, Greenway associates both with a constraining religion that attracts and repulses him.

“Power in the Blood” illustrates how his father taught him to resent “heathens,” those who’d watch Ed Sullivan, go to bars, or write poetry on Sunday nights. Now a poet, Greenway describes “how far I’ve come from chapel,” but still experiences guilt, and perhaps self-loathing, for being a writer—a life he identifies as lonely, unattached:

Even now, I’m contemptuous  
of those who try to make their own religion,  
hate Sunday nights, the lonely, straying  
ones who end alone and childless  
in furnished, rented rooms writing  
letters to the editor, or poems,  
peculiar, faithless souls who sing  
late into the night the drunken hymns  
of childhood.

Greenway recognizes that he no longer worships his father’s God, but careens outside the confines of Christian religion where he worships “not a God of light/ but yearning itself.” He finds comfort in wandering through the Welsh countryside, but feels lonely. He searches for his family name in cemeteries, tries to imagine the lives of those beneath the stones, and places himself in Wales.

Greenway identifies further with Wales as he constructs fanciful lives for local villagers like Lucky Leg the Butcher and Rhys the Deep, born



of "fairy folk on Rhys, an island/ made invisible by an herb." He even imagines himself as a contented seventh-century Celt living separate on a bare hill, becoming the village's mythic figure. Greenway also rejoices in the poet's solitary life as he takes stock of his own. In "Troutbeck," he recalls walking alone along a trout river where Wordsworth walked, and then returns to his hotel through a green-stained world to write.

Greenway casts a Wales from memory, blending familiar nostalgia and a newcomer's awe. In memory, the Welsh landscape transforms to a painted near-idyll, a world of blurred colors, where Greenway traipses, like Frost, through a countryside that continually surprises: "They say there's a valley near/ no frost has ever touched/ and though we have no map./ why should that stop us now?" He details a cold, bright countryside populated by mines and steel mills, fairies and ghosts, castles and ruined cathedrals, farmers and butchers, graveyards and shipyards, sheep and bagpipes. Many of the poems set in Wales offer long descriptions of the natural landscape Greenway encounters reminiscent of the visceral poetry of Dylan Thomas and Theodore Roethke. In "Pwll Du," Greenway uses, as he does in many other poems, rhymed tercets to describe the harmonizing of natural elements:

Through caves of oak and beech, I walk a mile  
above the stream that sinks and wanders  
underground through limestone for a while...

However, Greenway's writing risks mixing an American's oversentimental romance with mythic Wales and an Anglo-Saxon poet's Ubi sunt lament of "Where are they now?" The first two sections, "The Once and Future Wales" and "Bread from Heaven," often lapse into such bardic romanticizing, causing readers to question Greenway's seriousness about the function of memory. For example, "At Arthur's Stone" rhapsodizes about touching the grave of a king for luck on a moonlit

night:

The moon comes up behind a pony white  
as a unicorn, the sun goes down  
and pinks the sky and bay before the night  
recalls this postcard from the past.

Yet Greenway's musings about memory are not all maudlin, and the poetry in the final three sections, "The Vines," "Depth of Field," and "The Last Holiday," mark the steps in Greenway's journey toward identity and where, if anywhere, he roots himself.

Greenway explores what memories he can trust, and which he creates nostalgically to believe life was better in the past. In the poem "The Last Holiday," Greenway recognizes how his changing body signifies age, and on the lemon-yellow Greek beach, he longs for the comfortable Southern summers of memory: "We ache for what we know." However, these summers, we learn later, abound with constant battles between stern father and rebellious son. Yet, Greenway realizes that moments lodged in memory exist as quick, negative images of the past that he's transformed to assuage past griefs: the loss of his best friend to a drunk-driving accident, that he loved his father best at his funeral, that he didn't visit his mother in the home before she died.

"The Vines," the book's third section, turns to fancy as Greenway elaborately retells Welsh myths and fairy tales, placing his year in Wales in the context of a fairy tale. He tells of Blodeuedd, whose wizard-father turns her into a "flowerface, the owl./ doomed to fly with chrysanthemum eyes/ alone at night and shunned/ by the other birds" and of the fairy folk of Rhys. He also describes Vines Cottage, the stone house in the woods he and his wife inhabited during their year in Wales; he compares their growing apart and subsequent return to each other with the Hansel and Gretel story.

By placing himself in the context of a tale that ends somewhat happily, perhaps his painful



that ends somewhat happily, perhaps his painful memories will coalesce into an assurance that indeed, things will work out for him. The countryside in "The Vines" appears alternately idyllic, then menacing and darkened, mirroring the changing nuances of memory. For the poet, both imaginary and real stories become embedded in the same landscape, and he, the storyteller, becomes part of the constructed story.

In the title poem, "Simmer Dim," Greenway celebrates the longest night of the year with his wife, as they drink and make love in a tent on Skye's plains. Here, Greenway becomes confident in memory, realizing that even as he writes the poem, "Not only is this Skye not gone/...it never left." He now knows that when he recounts a memory, he possesses the ending even before it has begun, and he recognizes the foolishness of questioning memory; whatever he remembers is how it was and who he was.

In this buoyant poem, language jigs and pirouettes along, assuring us that landscape, whether bleak or lush, lives in memory as tangibly as at the moment of experience. Greenway finally understands that "The thing about being here/ is being everywhere." "Here" is the present, the "now" that one writes from; the present self tinges all experiences occurring previously. The present self matters; the stories we construct from our memories manifest who we have finally become. As poet searching for identity in landscape, he locates himself in many places, always holding his memories, yet letting them simmer to something new, something more real:

[It's] mad for me to lie,  
and simmer, summer in her arms, to pour  
her honey on the grain and dry  
the peat that smokes the taste of stout  
and whisky malt, to shake the day  
till lads and lasses tumble out,  
to wake the squalling music up. to play...

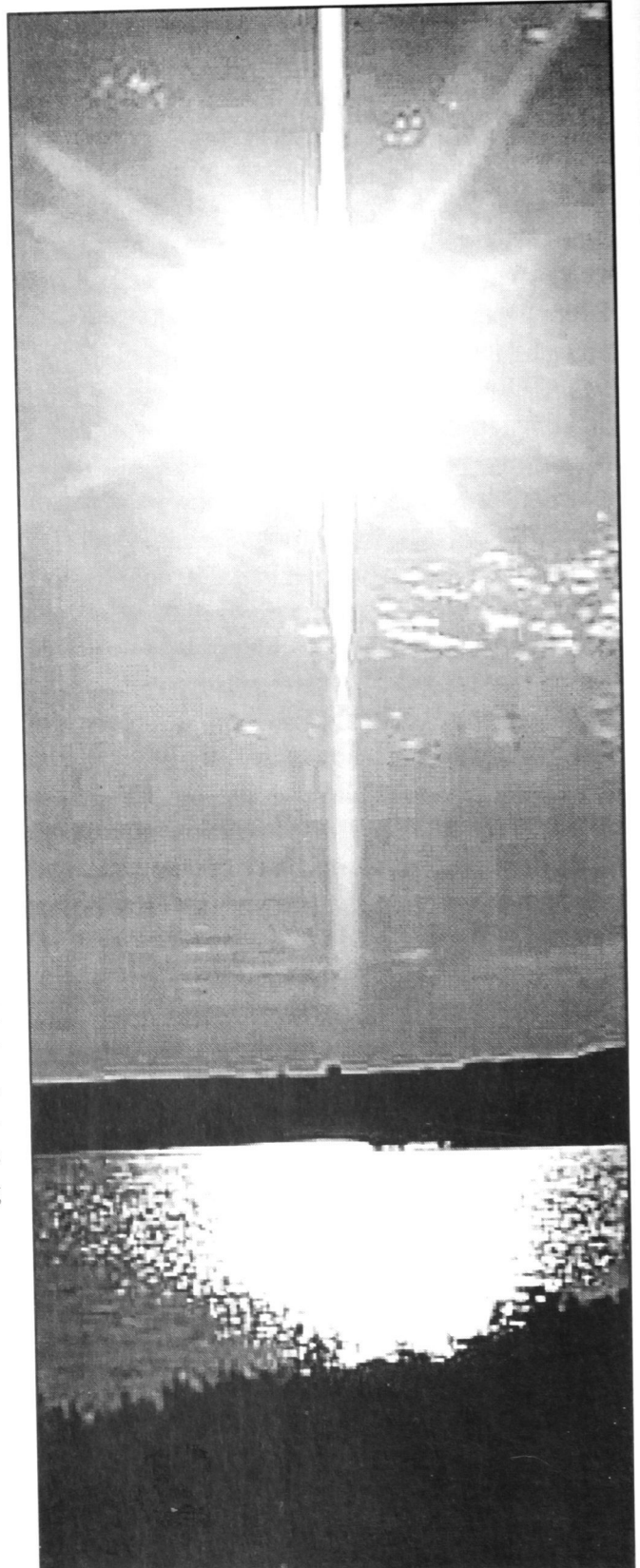


Photo by Beca Barker

