Recently I was sitting in a café, having a leisurely lunch and reading a biography of R. S. Thomas. As I was leaving, a woman at the next table stopped me to ask what my book was. When I told her that the subject was a poet from Wales, she wondered if it was Dylan Thomas. I answered no and showed her the cover. Looking at the photograph, she said, “He’s a poet? From Wales? I didn’t know there were any others.”

Sadly, such a belief is widespread in the United States. Many readers, even of poetry, know Wales largely through Dylan Thomas. This lack of knowledge is partly because the poetic tradition in Wales has mostly been kept alive by poets writing in their native language—Welsh. In the last half-century, however, many poets have chosen to write in English, either translating their own work, writing in both languages, or writing in English alone. There is now a significant body of poetry in English from Wales, and poetry in both languages continues to be an important element of Welsh culture. From the National Eisteddfod, in which poets compete in literary contests, to the poetry published in the literary journals, the work of poets is valued and promoted—and listened to—all over Wales.

I

Two of Wales’ senior poets, John Barnie and Peter Finch, have recently seen their selected poems into print. As it happens, these two also
occupy opposite ends of the aesthetic spectrum among Welsh poets writing in English. John Barnie, in addition to being a well-known and widely-respected poet, was also for many years the editor of the cultural and political journal *Planet*, and his abiding concern with the natural world and literary history make up much of his creative project. *Sea Lilies* is a collection of poems selected from his seven previous books. It provides a good overview of his work for new readers.

The first section, from 1984’s *Borderland*, already suggests Barnie’s imaginative concerns. The dramatic monologue “Patient Griselda” gives Chaucer’s suffering character a voice with which to judge her tyrannical husband: “My husband / Has a savage eye, asks questions, / . . . / . . . He says / I should live like him in shadow, / And hates me for the light.” The landscape of “The European Consciousness” is not simply a description of flora and fauna but a political site in which “the summer dead, the winter dead, / Snow crumpling under boots, / Water birds scattering from the banks” mark the malaise of a continent remembering a violent history; here “the leaders, martyrs, tortured, / Peer into the flowing stream” of many bloody centuries.

*Lightning Country*, published three years later, also refracts the hills and fields of Wales through a lens of intellectual inquiry. “In the Black Mountains” is deeply aware of the concrete details of nature, but those elements gain meaning only through a lyric speaker:

… Here  
On this hogback  

I found an owl’s  
White skull, and  
The delicate  
Piping of bones.  

It was a hill  
Death, clean  
Like the ruined farms  
Tenanted  

By grass and nettles[.]

These do not have to be mountains in Wales, but the elegiac note rings more clearly if one understands the speaker to be walking through a
landscape in which a significant shift away from a traditional farming culture has occurred. Several poems address historical topics, particularly Arthurian tales, through haunting descriptions of an imagined setting. “The Death of King Arthur” begins at the end of the legendary realm and itself has a medieval quality. Chaos always looms in the stories of Camelot as a manifestation of evil that surrounds human life, and Barnie suggests that there is no refuge in nature as long as warfare among people continues:

The sky was shot with stars, blazing and trailing
Through deepening space. So the large-eyed night creatures
Sniffed round the harness, the useless fingers and eyes,
Scuttling at dawn down holes, into the dark, red earth.

In his subsequent collections, Barnie has experimented with many different forms, from the sequence of dramatic monologues spoken by the Romantic poets and members of their circle that make up Clay (1989) to the long-lined meditations and very short lyrics that are interspersed throughout The Confirmation (1992). The selections from The City (1993) are almost all very short poems concerned largely with family and aging (sometimes both) and reveal a poet increasingly aware of individual mortality. “End” is typical and worth quoting in its entirety:

She didn’t want to die,
but a great force
pushed her out beyond the mask.
“Oh it’s like breathing air
from a cold blue sky.”
Her face was impassive
in the morgue.

Heroes (1996) continues in this vein, with poems like “It Was Only Police,” which uses understatement to dramatize fear of death, especially lonely death, and restore dignity to the absent person: “It was only police / come to find her three days dead / but whoever crawled through that hole in the door / entered a tomb / no less than a Trojan queen’s / with a face mask of gold, / or a ritual tomb for the bones of a wren.”
Sea Lilies ends with a selection from At the Salt Hotel (2003), Barnie’s most recent collection. These poems are clearly the work of a mature poet, still deeply attentive to the natural world that surrounds him but also interested in fracturing the poetic line to create a more syncopated, internally disrupted rhythm. Some poems, like “A Hill Chapel,” continue to meditate on death; even a sunny day finds the speaker walking around a cemetery, thinking that “Death / eats with Mortality, and look what a meal they’ve / had, the remains scattered in the graveyard; / Death getting up and saying Amen.” In “What the Cats Are Saying,” the feline attitude, arrogant and dismissive, is that “God whips His creations in, the hound master, / but He never disturbs the cats who / can neither be saved nor damned; that is why / when killed, our pelts are left on the road.” The cats’ stance is one of bravado that can be sustained only when projected onto that most arch of anthropomorphized animals.

Most of the poems in this section deploy a radical enjambment that is characteristic only of Barnie’s later work. These poems are marked by an acceptance of language’s ambiguity and ungroundedness and by an abiding, though complicated joy. Surprisingly, these traits connect Barnie as a poet to Peter Finch, who seems, at first blush, to be Barnie’s formal opposite. The poems make an appropriate end to Sea Lilies, which, for all its dedication to recognizable detail, continually indicates that such detail, once rendered in words, becomes indeterminate. Here are the last few lines of one such poem, titled “Two Skulls”:

… /what was br-
eath the comfort of lu-
ngs the ribs’ slow rising and fa-
lling/what was the throat a-
nd kissing her throat/wh-
at tricked us here/trapp-
ed us and grew us and thr-
ev us down/what brutality at the bo-
ne-mounds showed us the way.

II

Even in the more fractured poems, John Barnie has worked mostly in an accessible lyric-narrative mode, but Peter Finch’s long career has been largely focused on experimentalism. His most recent collection, The Welsh Poems, samples the various styles and interests of this wide-
ranging writer. List poems, prose poems, and poems combining visual and textual elements all figure into Finch’s aesthetic, and though his poems are often wryly funny, they also express a controlled rage. This collection is mostly in English, but Finch often skirts the border between that language and Welsh; in fact, the complications and slippages of language itself are often his subject as well as his writing strategy.

One poem, for example, is made up entirely of symbols—snowflakes, flags, celtic crosses, hands, and skulls-and-crossbones—spaced into a sort of line-and-stanza structure. The title is in Welsh: “Dw’i ddim yn deall,” or, “I don’t understand.” The list poem “newjobs” combines Welsh and English: “varnish remover / dadaboxer / jocyr gwyddelig [Irish joker] / high roller / dutch nude.” His long alphabetized list poem, which has no over-arching title, is mostly in English, but the entry for “W” refers again and again to Finch’s central interest, Wales:

Welsh whiteness wanting wrong wind world
welcome we wind’s we who winds wades white
wings with Welsh witted (half) wind’s winner womb
where world will where wantons whose whisperers
wife wild winds woods with wind wind woods
wide why when wind who who world white Wales
wrenched wood whipped whose water wind whom
wing whipped where well wild work wrote woman
woman was with well warbler words with window
what with winds wound weather Welsh with when
were wild workshop when what with world woke
Wales window would with was wife watching which
wind walls winter weak with wood wind willingly
wide with women when was waving with were wait
weaving with Welsh

Finch’s strength lies in his embrace of large categories. Though Wales is his central concern, almost every poem is inclusive in the broadest sense. Writing is almost always his subject, and many of his poems self-consciously point to themselves as constructions in language. He is interested in everything and in how the things of the world can be traced in text. The prose poem “Swell” is perhaps typical, if such a word can be applied to any one poem of Finch’s, in that it ends on a self-reflexive note:
Round the back in the pub use your pad and get it down. Old pubs are best. Something about the life that’s flowed through them reaching you through the seats you sit on. Something about the talk in that air held still by the wallpaper. Something about the passion in the touch of glass. Something about the future never imagined. Something about the now surrounding you like a blanket. Get crisps and nuts for sustenance. This is not Buddhism you can eat them. Pick them. Let them clog your veins. Relax. Fear nothing. Write everything down.

“Repeat,” another prose poem, ends with this plea for the reiteration of poems: “Come again everyone asks. Let’s hear this one that one. You’ve got it top of your list bored flat by now meaning drifted the way edges blunt and surfaces scratch and crack. But sing it. It’s the song.” “Nothing Is New” ends with the speaker “Fold[ing] the poem back into the pocket,” and “Instead of Writing” ends with a surprisingly conventional metaphor for the writer’s career: “It’s a dark life this endless search for light.”

Not all readers will find Peter Finch’s work to their taste. Meaning is often frustrated by the skittering lists and the twisted syntax, but even those who prefer poems that maintain clear surfaces will surely find beauty in this poet’s diction. “Language music haunted stillness” reads one line from the poem “Glow.” Whether “haunted” is the verb in a sentence or an adjective in a list of words, the line captures Finch’s sensibility. He describes his work, in a footnote to the book, as “macaronic … poems with no certain home,” and he grounds the collection with its title: “They are the Welsh poems in tribute to John James whose own book of the same title, published in 1967, was an early influence and because that’s what they are: Welsh.” And that is perhaps the best description of this innovative and bold collection.

III

Like John Barnie and Peter Finch, Nigel Jenkins is a well-known literary figure in Wales. He is an accessible and wide-ranging poet, a writer of travel narratives, and a chronicler of his native Gower, the peninsula that reaches south from Swansea. His 2006 collection Hotel Gwales shows just how versatile a poet he is; from sardonic to bereaved to celebratory, the poetry displays an enormous tonal variety, even as the poems themselves remain firmly rooted in Wales.
Jenkins has always brought to his work a synthesizing impulse. As a poet from Wales, he exhibits the resistance to being lumped with the English that many others do; he also, however, makes use of the English—as well as the world’s—literary traditions when they suit his purposes. To readers outside of Wales, this negotiation is most obvious in the final section of the book. A collection of “Translations: Mostly,” this section includes adaptations from Welsh poets and thinkers as well as translations and one grafting of William Carlos Williams’ “The Red Wheelbarrow” onto a Welsh landscape (“rhos Mair” is Welsh for the herb rosemary):

so much depends
upon
a Welsh sheep’s
shoulder

braised with rhos
Mair

beside the white
earlies

The humor is as characteristic of Jenkins as the recognition that he is a Welsh poet writing in English. Jenkins’ aesthetic is a complicated mix poetically, politically, and culturally, and one of the poet’s jobs is to tease out the pieces of his own complex self. The multi-part “Advice to a Young Poet,” the last poem in the book, moves from self-conscious teacherly advice to avuncular practical guidance for younger poets in his country:

Avoid the poetic:
...
cheap ‘n’ easy lists of plants and things
with fabulous names;
the routine molestation of innocent nouns
by posses of pervert adjectives;
...
sandyfloss confections like
‘the parrot of his confusion’ and ‘the lumbago of her doom’;
waffly abstractions lost in space;
rhymes that only rhyme;
lists like this.

... Sing for Wales, sure, but don’t shut your trap
on all the rest—it ain’t crap.

Form is one of Jenkins’ abiding interests, and he experiments with very short poems as well as long, segmented meditations. Short lyrics are sprinkled throughout this collection, and a sequence of poems on punctuation marks combines lyric and dramatic monologue in a wry commentary on writing and its subtexts. “Italics” begins, “Look at me. I said look at me. / That’s more like it. / Where there is weakness, you see, / I swagger into power.” The comma defends itself, almost like a very bright student who refuses to learn standard punctuation rules: “Bourgeois, you say? / Managerial, I’d prefer: / everywhere at once, / fit and vigilant, / sorting, dividing, clarifying, // and manager of the inspirations. // What happens in the end / is no business of mine: / I’m engaged to ensure / that things proceed—.”

Haiku is perhaps the short form for which Jenkins has become best known. Hotel Gwales contains one section of haiku and senryu, printed three to a page, top and bottom poems justified on one side and the middle poem on the other. This spacing creates a beautiful visual effect, as well as suggesting the silences around this brief form. These poems tend to focus on the interpenetration of the synthetic and organic worlds: “the lipsticked wineglass— / re-filled, by sunrise, with / rainwater” or “on their backs / the two plastic chairs / in a swirl of leaves.” They also capture moments in an individual life as the speaker finds himself aging and attending to those details that the young overlook:

how many of the dead,
as I climb these old stairs,
do I pass coming down

... I open the window—
dogs barking in the nights
of childhood

...
hill-top graves—
their headstones catching
the last of the light
...
the barmaid I once
craved—creased now, like me,
and double-chinned

Personal poems, about family, about aging, about love and living in the body, appear throughout the book and are among Nigel Jenkins’ strongest work. His daughters, his father, and a nephew figure in many poems that are sweet without becoming cloying or sentimental. “Once Upon a Time” recalls the days of reading in bed—“Dad a page, then Bran a page”—that are soon to end, and “An Uncle’s Satisfaction” betrays the frustration that can only be born of love: “I want, Tom, my twenty pounds, / and spare me, please, the rebound / that, pissed then, you’ve no recall— / It just ain’t believable.” This is a poet who knows the difficulties of family, of erotic love, of longing and loss. The “Poem at a Marriage’s End” is a heartbreaking admission of wrongdoing and regret, a strikingly generous poem by a speaker who can see both an irrevocable end and the traces of a joined past:

From a dream within the dream you woke me:
gone from us, gone the hooks and shrapnel,
we were in airy danger, eye to easefully neutered eye,
of floating clean away from that candel’d isle.
...
Three babies a second are born,
two babies a second die. Who hasn’t nuzzled
the yeasty hayfield of his baby’s head
and studied through brine
all the griefs of history
wobbling there on those podgy shoulders?
...
Now Mercy’s lone subterranean moan
has taken ripped red flight,
and my name in many ears is a malediction.
...
I ask for nothing, make offering only
of this scrawny effort
to wish zephyrs on your house
and presence, especially when the buzzard reels,
of strung walls of song and the remnant of a god

who’ll see you home at last, if not to heaven.

IV

Like Nigel Jenkins, Sheenagh Pugh has striven to be accessible for most of her career. The Movement of Bodies is Pugh’s tenth collection of poems, and they are mostly neat free-verse lyric-narratives of a readily recognizable sort, usually separated into symmetrical stanzas and focused on subjects from personal observation to travel to using the computer. They are printed without section breaks, which contributes to the book’s feel of tidiness and compression. These are the poems of an experienced poet comfortable with various methods of making a poem, and if the book has a flaw, it is this very ease of expression. Pugh favors a first-person speaker, and when she uses this strategy in historical settings, the results are fine renderings of dramatic monologue. When the speaker appears to be the poet herself, the results are not as even.

For example, “The Man on His Back” promises in the opening lines to reveal something about the complexities of stabilizing one’s identity: “I was waiting for the bus: he walked by / from behind, a man with a man // on his back, a life-size hardboard cut-out / that bowed him down.” This promise, however, is never realized. The man walks by, and the strangeness of the incident is noted by others, but despite Pugh’s attempt to endow it with Christian significance by adding that “a man steadied him, / a woman wiped sweat from his forehead,” the anecdote remains just an odd little incident. In “Buying Vinyl,” the narrator encounters “Cal”—“I knew it was Cal because his cardboard badge // said CAL in black felt-tip”—who cuts flooring for her while she admires him. She is attracted to his youth and good looks, and this attraction, combined with her acute awareness that he “can’t be more than seventeen,” has the makings of an interesting self-exploration. This poem, however, takes the sentimental way out. The narrator, thinking “I’m three times your age,” takes her bill from him, believing herself to have gotten “good value” because “he hadn’t even charged for the smile.”

Pugh has included several poems in memory of writers, singers, and historical places or events. Johnny Cash makes an appearance, as do the Scottish poet George Mackay Brown and the navigator William
Dampier. Fewer of these poems make use of a first-person speaker because they focus on external subjects, and they are generally more successful. “Chocolate From the Famine Museum” is set in County Roscommon, Ireland, and uses the museum docent’s point of view to highlight the irony that is often part of the “historical site” experience. The children are bored, and the docent is “at a loss / / how to bring it alive.” He tells stories with horrific details, but the kids are not won over:

… They fidget
through the video,

dying for their reward:
the gift shop.
Their faces light up,

for the first time, at sheep
in green hats, penny whistles,
toy blackthorn sticks,

and the chocolate. Praline,
ganache, mint, mocha, truffle.
They’re spoiled for choice,

their day flavoured
for ever with the velvet
dark in their mouths.

The boys, like many adults, experience the place as a necessary but dull part of their education. Their own suffering is more acute than that of the people they have come to learn about, and what they take away is happiness at buying something delicious for themselves.

“The Curator and the Art of Concealment” is one of the stronger poems of this kind. Spoken in the voice of an art restorer at an unspecified time and place, the poem refers broadly to the “young zealots” who “blazed through galleries, slashing, burning, / wherever they saw a face.” The identity of these zealots is left unclear, though they suggest iconoclasts of the Protestant Reformation. The speaker has gone through the paintings and carefully covered up the figures, leaving
only “landscapes / and still lifes.” Now he has the task of uncovering them:

And now the godly are fallen, it’s safe
for everyone to come out, all the faces,
the limbs. I hid them so well, sometimes,
I’m at a loss to find them. It needs care,
a hesitant touch in each likely place,
much disappointment. But that sudden flutter
of the heart, when a living face
lights up, when an eye meets mine …

The creative act of remaking the human face in art is here opposed to the violence of the self-styled religious soldiers. The resonance with contemporary politics and warfare is unmistakable, though the reference remains, like the paintings in the poem, disguised.

The best poem in the book is the closing sequence, “The Curious Drawer,” a series of poems spoken by the Elizabethan miniaturist Nicholas Hilliard. This is a wonderful set of poems about various subjects that Hilliard painted, and the details are historically accurate as well as resonant. Some of the techniques and problems of limning feature in the poems, but the teasing-out of the relationship between the painter and his noble sitters is what makes these poems stand out. The fifth and last section, describing the “Unknown Young Man Against a Background of Flames,” shows that making art elevates the lower-class painter not just to his subjects’ social level but also to the status of mirror-image, even lover:

This penitent in silk, this martyr
to love. When you hold him
close in his jewelled case, remember
limning is an art of secrets. I look
for a face few have seen. That longing
in his eyes, he was gazing
at his warm cloak, hung
carefully on my wall,
while I opened his thin shirt,
the match of mine.
Pugh’s keen ear for speech and her careful choice of concrete details make this poem memorable, an *ars poetica* as well as an ekphrastic poem. This is a very strong ending for *The Movement of Bodies* and it reveals that when Sheenagh Pugh is at her best, she is certainly a very fine poet.

### V

Tiffany Atkinson’s debut collection, *Kink and Particle*, sparkles with sharp wit. Educated in Cardiff and now teaching at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, Atkinson works mostly in the lyric, but her lyrics are less centered on an individual life than they are concerned with the sounds of the language by which a life is constructed. Nervy, confident, and self-aware, these poems take on the world while remaining firmly grounded in a seaside town. Printed without section breaks, the poems gain speed as the book progresses, and this is exactly right, since the poetic persona struts through them.

The speaker is not always completely self-assured. In “Photo from Belfast,” she recalls a brief encounter with a man who later turns up in a news report, suggesting that he was somehow involved in the factional violence of Northern Ireland. She remembers having “one of those conversations you have perhaps / twice in your life” and going for a drink; she would “have stayed for the fourth pint, only / [she] was mulling over a pair of spike-heels [she’d] taken / a shine to a while back.” The crime, whatever it might be, is more hers than his, as she tries to picture the young man she ditched to go shopping: “I develop him / nightly from the reeling dark—each particular fluke / of space, time, matter. You’d not think it difficult, / to filter him down through the pinhole of morning, / to bring him back to light, to get the picture.”

The difficult thirtieth birthday is one of the subjects through which this poet both investigates and ridicules herself. “Birthday” looks askance at the heart of a woman, that conventional site of erotic and domestic love, by making it a metaphor for violence and anger:

> A woman of thirty smokes
> all morning, sips espresso
> so strong she can taste her heart-beat through it. The bad taste of hearts. That fist of gristle which has yet to punch its own weight.
That soufflé stashed in the high heat of the chest, obliging good humour for its proving or its pratfalls. Thirty-year olds sense they’re nothing special. all loneliness is like theirs.

In “Worst Case Scenario,” a cartoonishly large envelope—“It’s not just me, there really is / an elephantine envelope folding itself / round the corner”—slides toward the house of the narrator at the end of her thirtieth year. The hyperbole is funny, but the subtext, brought to the surface by the last line, is a serious self-denunciation:

… It’s a question of proportion, but beige on this scale is menacing, believe me. That, and knowing the address dragged face-down through the dirt is mine. My prodigal havoc, gummed edge rucked to a snarl, rears like a breaker now, bent on deliverance. And what to do, but unseal the front door with bare face, bare feet, breathe, breathe—and crash through the crackling cellophane window of thirty years’ comeuppance?

Atkinson is not a poet for self-pity, however. Often happily solitary, her speakers celebrate love, including transitory lovers. What makes this work so arresting is the freshness of the language, especially when the topic is words. “Then Everything Was Axe” explores how the nature of the immediate world changes when an expected order is upset. An axe is lost on an overnight camping venture, “Too late in the day, with / (what were we thinking of) // no tent, thunder scuffing / the tips of the hills,” and the couple discover that their experience is fundamentally altered. They forget the food, fail to see the “single heron / pitched like once-in-a-lifetime // at horizon,” and dismiss the “freestyle . . . sex.” They are momentarily dehumanized, made foolish by the tool’s disappearance, and only the restoration of the object can make reality recognizable:
Without it, out there, we had

all the personal resourcefulness
of berries. Would you believe I

was searching my own back pocket
when your cry struck out? The palpable

click of a clean fit, of hickory heft
and honed wedge to the shape

hewn inwardly of old-style need,
then world springing back on its axis.

Two poems near the end of the book, printed on facing pages, seem to suggest two different sides of this poetic personality: “Enemy” is on the left page and “Hey Love—” appears on the right. Both make use of braggadocio, and the response of the listener is never heard. They exaggerate and challenge, presenting a tough, take-no-prisoners attitude toward their subjects, though neither is without Atkinson’s characteristic humor. It’s not the kind of comedy that all readers will warm up to, but Atkinson’s willingness to push the boundaries of “good taste” gives her writing undeniable courage and originality. “Enemy” ends with an insult that gains momentum by force of its own piled-up examples:

“Truly, I will see to you like smallpox
dressed as a bailiff whose daughter you jilted
for his wife, the morning he got fired for smoking crack
to forget the tumour. All your exes will be watching. Lights blown out … taps running blood … Anything might happen.

“Hey Love—” is directed at one of the speaker’s own exes, and though it seems initially to call out to someone dear, the poem makes clear that those feelings have changed and are shared by his other lovers:

… since you’re asking, yes, she’d rather be dead
unmissed for five days with her face gnawed off
by cats than one of your lot. Lordy me, she never
used to be extreme. We had her down as a sound one,
Not every poem in *Kink and Particle* hits the mark. A few seem self-important, working too hard to be clever, including the last poem “Nietzscheanism and the Meaning of the Superman,” but this is a stunningly promising first book by a very intelligent and talented poet. The poems manage to be both direct in tone and complex in their tropes, a difficult combination even for seasoned poets.

These five poets represent just a handful of the active writers in Wales. The conversation about poetry and poetics is vital and fresh all over the country, and one would think that such a community would be well known in the United States. But it isn’t, and cafés are not the only sites where our lack of information is apparent. In fact, a colleague came into my office a year or so ago and picked up a copy of *Poetry Wales* that was lying on a shelf. He laughed, tossed the issue down, and said, “Big fish in a small pond.” True, Wales occupies a small geographical space, but the poetry being written, performed and published there indicates that, artistically, it is a very large place indeed.