

A black and white photograph of a man with dark hair, looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. He is wearing a dark, heavy jacket with a thick fur collar. The background is plain and light-colored.

RING OF BONE
Lew Welch *Collected Poems*

FOREWORD BY GARY SNYDER



RING OF BONE

City
Lights

RING OF BONE

Collected Poems of Lew Welch

Edited by Donald Allen

With a Foreword by Gary Snyder

City
Lights

CITY LIGHTS / GREY FOX
San Francisco

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City

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To the memory of
Gertrude Stein & William Carlos Williams



I WANT THE WHOLE THING, the moment
when what we thought was rock, or
sea
became clear Mind, and

what we thought was clearest Mind really
was that glancing girl, that
swirl of birds. . .

(all of that)

AND AT THE SAME TIME that very poem
pasted in the florist's window

(as Whalen's I *wanted to bring you this Jap Iris* was)

carefully retyped and
put right out there on Divisadero St.

just because the florist thought it
pretty,

that it might remind of love,
that it might sell flowers . . .

The line

Tangled in Samsara!

Mt. Tamalpais 1970

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Lights

FOREWORD

It will soon be half a century since Lew Welch left his car and his camp and his plans, and walked off into the wilds of the northern Sierra. This book of his poems, *Ring of Bone*, was first published soon after. He was 45 years old then.

Lew was a handsome, talented, and charismatic man who spoke eloquently on many topics — a humanist by education, whose first prose writings were on Gertrude Stein. He was one of a set of four poets in the late '40s who were students at Reed college together — Philip Whalen, Lew, and Gary Snyder the experimentalists, and William Dickey the brilliant formalist. Whalen, Snyder, and Welch re-grouped in the Bay Area in the late fifties and participated in the San Francisco Renaissance/Beat literary scene.

Don Allen and his Four Seasons Press inherited Lew's literary archive, and published or republished eight books and chapbooks by Lew. *Ring of Bone* is the major volume of poems, and since the smaller "Selected" is long out of print, I will quote some of the Preface I wrote then:

What we recognize as poetry, different from rock lyrics say, carries a large body of cultural and archetypal lore ("makings") in loops from the past, also aiming into the future. The Poems in *Ring of Bone* have an underlying drone-tone, like the tamboura of Indian music: a rich basic Asian and Occidental humane grounding.

Lew Welch writes lyrical poems of clarity, humor, and dark probings. The poems brought together in this selection are the major works of a man who of his forty-five years of life in the west gave twenty-one to poetry. His work stands in the context of San Francisco poetry renaissance: the post-World War II libertarian energy of striving to further develop the possibilities of open-form poetry. The heart of the book is the "Hermit Poems" and "Way Back" sections — poems evoking, covering, the time spent in retreat and practice at a cabin in the mountains of coast north California deep up rivers still Yurok land. In those works Lew achieved the meeting of an ancient sage tradition and the "shack simple" post frontier back country of out-of-work workman's style, and then the (elite) rebel modernism of

art He returned to the Bay Area at the inception of the over-heavy flowering of hippie culture. It is instructive how these poems have the essence but cut through the psychedelic baroque.

The title *Ring of Bone* comes from one of his poems. It was written we are told in 1963 when he was living and writing in that cabin tucked away up a canyon on the Salmon river — pulling together lines and thoughts from a letter to Robert Duncan that was never sent. It is part of the “Hermit Poem” series.

As for poetics, jazz musical phrasing of American speech is one of Lew Welch’s clearest contributions. First clued in to write in natural speech and in terms of the musical phrase by Williams and Pound, he turns sometimes to street-talk, street-jive, blues, bop rhythms, and can score it on the page. This is done without cuteness or obscurity. Indeed, all these poems have *music* and *clarity* of language and a compression such that “the words stop, but the meaning keeps going on.” His reading of Chinese poetry and Japanese haiku in translation sharpened eye and ear, but led to imitation only when in fun.

Behind, and informing the playfulness and skill of these poems is the evolving consciousness of a man who struggled to be on the Way. He is one of the few who saw the beauty of that ecstatic Mutual Offering called the Food Chain.

(My late wife Carole Koda once said that the “Basic Practice” of her Jodo-shin sect Buddhist upbringing — the school of Buddhism which astutely critiques the “effort” of Yogins and Yoginis and Zen type ascetics to improve themselves — was Church Potlucks.) But Lew was finally brought down by his addiction to alcohol. He and I worked on his addiction together one time, both taking LSD and sitting at the edge of the ridgetop above the hamlet of Stinson Beach. That’s where he first really saw the vultures and called them to himself, but then said — almost in despair — “I’m not edible.” I was off in my own study of a dancing blinding baby Krishna and then I discovered my sense of smell. We didn’t solve Lew’s drinking problem, but after that day I never smoked tobacco again.

Poets learn a lot from witches; living with the image of the Teeth Mother was the darker side of Lew’s songs.
He not only drank too much, he had a way with guns,

and took one with him into the woods, never to be seen again, in May of 1971. This is predicted in one of his last pieces, “Song of the Turkey Buzzard.”

Lew’s memory and mystery lives on. In the spring of 2011 the Central Library of Los Angeles sponsored a gathering of several poets and writers who had known Lew, and we were all surprised by the size and enthusiasm of the crowd that came, people of all ages. City Lights Books took over Lew’s works after Donald Allen’s death, and in 2011 all of Lew’s books were out of print. The Los Angeles celebration of his work was push enough to get us to a new edition of *Ring of Bone*. This bright-eyed bardic spirit, Lew Welch still wandering and singing on the back roads — I imagine — at the far edge of the West — will be with us a long time. As Lew also wrote,

Guard the Mysteries!
Constantly reveal Them!

Mystery: the life of art (though poets are always complaining) is without equal. There is nothing to regret.

Gary Snyder, 2012

City Lights

PREFACE

I. *The Structure*

This book is organized into a structure composed of individual poems, where the poems act somewhat like chapters in a novel. The poems are autobiographical lyrics and the way they are linked together tells a story. Though any of the poems will stand perfectly well by itself, each nourishes and is enriched by the poems before and after it.

I first became struck by the usefulness of such a form through a close study of Yeats' *The Tower*. In that book Yeats addresses himself to the problem of accepting old age, and discusses the subject through short lyric poems some of which cannot be understood without considering the book's scheme, and all of which become larger because of their context. *Les Fleurs du Mal* is another example of such a book, as is *Songs of Innocence and Experience*.

Ring of Bone might be called a spiritual autobiography arranged in more or less chronological sequence. But this does not always mean that poems near the beginning were written first. The mind grows in a flickering kind of way. Sometimes an insight comes too early to be fully understood. At other times, we are shocked that it came, being so obvious, so late. I have also written new poems for the purpose of filling gaps in the story, so any poem may have been written at any time or not. Yeats followed this practice. "Sailing to Byzantium" was written for *The Tower*. It appears first, as a preface so to speak, but it was written in 1927 while later poems were made as early as 1919. The last poem in his book is dated 1920, but resolves the predicament expressed seven years later.

The shape of *Ring of Bone* is circular, or back and forth. Naturally such a form never ends. The principal characters are The Mountain, The City, and The Man who attempts to understand and live with them. The Man changes more than The Mountain and The City, and it appears he will always need both.

The last section, "The Songs Mt. Tamalpais Sings," includes a sampler of the new poems which will make up my next book. It just keeps rolling along.

I'm back on the Mountain.

II. *The Music*

This book is a book of scores, for the voice. The scores will become poems only while they are sounded, performed, sung. Of course. Nobody would dream of calling the little black notes on the page the music of Bach, and so it is with poetry. Some argue that if this is so we ought to publish our poetry on tapes and records only. I don't agree with that at all.

I like the idea of giving my readers a text they can actively perform, themselves. Far too many of our pleasures are spectator sports already. All that is needed is to hear any poet read from his works once or twice. From then on you have an accurate guide to imitate or take liberties with. I was never able to enjoy or even read Dylan Thomas until I heard a record of his. From then on his poems were as accessible as conversation. But I wouldn't want to hear all of his work on record, I enjoy doing it myself.

III.

In 1959, I said, in a program note: "When I write my only concern is accuracy. I try to write accurately from the poise of mind which lets us see that things are exactly what they seem. I never worry about beauty, if it is accurate there is always beauty. I never worry about form, if it is accurate there is always form."

I phoned that statement from work. I had a dreary, underpaid job for the Bemis Bag factory, and the roar of their presses and bag-machinery was almost too loud to think, or talk over.

Since 1959 all kinds of things have happened to me and the world, but I still hold to this statement, absolutely.

What was then the "Beat Generation" is now down to a few survivors, each of whom went his only way. Most of us are gone (as so many makers go early) into prisons, looney bins, penthouses, graves, and the other silences of whatever desperation.

It has been no different for us than for any generation. Witness Rexroth's poem on the death of Dylan Thomas, where he lists the victims he loved, who lost. Then counter this, or any other, with the list of poets, painters, dancers, musicians, who lived beyond their fortieth year.

Happily, I'm still alive and am over 40. From such a rare height it is possible to say (in defense of my work, and others here or gone), that today, foolish as they may appear to the frightened eye, young America swings much harder than we did, with less fear, and more love.

American poetry, for at least 50 years, has had to screech above the din of a Bemis Bag. Hart Crane's daddy wanted him to manage the family candy factory. Whitman could say it was marvelous to see the muscled workers. But the poets who followed him (who had to be those workers, at jobs) know that there ain't no muscled workers, they's only victims.

Whitman, the roaming spectator, was victimized later. Fancy professors do it, daily, in the state universities. There's a Walt Whitman Savings and Loan in his old home town. It only goes to show what the reward is, if you work real hard and never cheat.

The sound we hear from our tribe is not much different from the thousand sparrows who used to sleep in a palm tree outside my window, once. The racket was unbelievable, but the birds were only arguing about who has the right to sleep, and where.

So, in my poetry, I've tried to keep the din while still being accurate to the poise of mind that lets us know what's what. Sometimes I've called this din "Letting America speak for itself." Often it's a depressing job.

But I still have faith that if I do this right, accurately, the sound will emerge a "meaningless din of joy." Because I know that the true sound of living things, a carrot or a tribe, is meaningless, joyful, and we, singing it, know this joy.

This sound, the din of joy, is quite distinct from the sound of the Pentagon, Washington in general and especially Mr. Johnson, the fear-ridden hateful spites of J. Edgar Hoover, and the killing orders of anyone who wants to "boss" anything whether or not the work ought to be done.

It all comes down to the ring of bone. Where "ring" is what a bell does.

IV.

I once took a guided tour through a California winery and the guide, a young man about 20 years old, droned away with his memorized speech of facts and figures, chanting them perfectly in that guide-chant all of us have heard, and suddenly he stopped and yelled, "Whose kid is that!" A small child was determined to fall into a 500-gallon vat of wine.

The force of real speech slammed right against false speech was startling as a thunderclap, and not because he called out loudly.

I vowed never to release a poem of mine which couldn't at least equal the force of that guide's "Whose kid is that!" Pound said that poetry ought to be at least as well written as prose. I say that poetry ought to be at least as vigorous and useful as natural speech.

* * *

Tapes of readings are available through the Poetry Center, San Francisco State University, the University of California at Berkeley and Santa Barbara, and station KPFA in Berkeley. "A Round of English" is on a 33 rpm record produced by Mother, edited by Lewis MacAdams and Duncan McNaughton.

I shall always be grateful for the vigorous "underground" world of small presses and "little magazines," without which there would be no poetry in America.

[1968-1970]

*Ed. Note: KPFA recordings of Lew Welch can be accessed at the Pacific Radio Archives—
pacificaradioarchives.org*

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BOOK I
(1950 - 1960)

ON OUT



THIS BOOK IS FOR MAGDA

What strange pleasure do they get who'd

wipe whole worlds out,

*ANYTHING,
to end our lives, our*

wild idleness?

*But we have charms against their rage—
must go on saying, "Look,
if nobody tried to live this way,
all the work of the world would be in vain."*

And now and then a son, a daughter, hears it.

Now and then a son, a daughter

gets away

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CHICAGO POEM

I lived here nearly 5 years before I could
meet the middle western day with anything approaching
Dignity. It's a place that lets you
understand why the Bible is the way it is:
Proud people cannot live here.

The land's too flat. Ugly sullen and big it
pounds men down past humbleness. They
Stoop at 35 possibly cringing from the heavy and
terrible sky. In country like this there
Can be no God but Jahweh.

In the mills and refineries of its south side Chicago
passes its natural gas in flames
Bouncing like bunsens from stacks a hundred feet high.
The stench stabs at your eyeballs.
The whole sky green and yellow backdrop for the skeleton
steel of a bombed-out town.

Remember the movies in grammar school? The goggled men
doing strong things in
Showers of steel-spark? The dark screen cracking light
and the furnace door opening with a
Blast of orange like a sunset? Or an orange?

It was photographed by a fairy, thrilled as a girl, or
a Nazi who wished there were people
Behind that door (hence the remote beauty), but Sievers,
whose old man spent most of his life in there,
Remembers a "nigger in a red T-shirt pissing into the
black sand."

It was 5 years until I could afford to recognize the ferocity.
Friends helped me. Then I put some
Love into my house. Finally I found some quiet lakes
and a farm where they let me shoot pheasant.

Standing in the boat one night I watched the lake go
absolutely flat. Smaller than raindrops, and only
Here and there, the feeding rings of fish were visible a hundred
yards away — and the Blue Gill caught that afternoon
Lifted from its northern lake like a tropical! Jewel at its ear
Belly gold so bright you'd swear he had a
Light in there. His color faded with his life. A small
green fish . . .

All things considered, it's a gentle and undemanding
planet, even here. Far gentler
Here than any of a dozen other places. The trouble is
always and only with what we build on top of it.

There's nobody else to blame. You can't fix it and you
can't make it go away. It does no good appealing
To some ill-invented Thunderer
Brooding above some unimaginable crag . . .

It's ours. Right down to the last small hinge it
all depends for its existence
Only and utterly upon our sufferance.

Driving back I saw Chicago rising in its gases and I
knew again that never will the
Man be made to stand against this pitiless, unparalleled
monstrosity. It
Snuffles on the beach of its Great Lake like a
blind, red, rhinoceros.
It's already running us down.

You can't fix it. You can't make it go away.
I don't know what you're going to do about it,
But I know what I'm going to do about it. I'm just
going to walk away from it. Maybe
A small part of it will die if I'm not around
feeding it anymore.