

OUT LOOKING FOR LEW: BIOREGIONAL POETICS & THE LEGACY OF LEW WELCH

Jerry Martien

“The question is no longer: *where are you, Lew?*
The question is: *where are we?*”

—S. Fox

A poet goes to the mountain—the desert, the underworld, a river in the west—and returns to us with the news: Here’s where it’s at. Here’s where we are. The poet brings us to that ground, lets its voice resound in our hearts, and then—if the poem is successful—disappears. Almost like being a bird.

It was Lew Welch’s extraordinary gift to sing this poem of place for us, so we might more deeply inhabit the territory in which we find ourselves.

And it is his difficult legacy that he then really disappeared.

I. He Goes to the Mountains

It’s the longest afternoon in memory. Camp set up, lunch eaten hours ago, the sun still high in the sky. A ground squirrel is regarding me from behind a large rock.

I came upriver to escape the spirit-numbing coastal fog that we call summer on the North Coast, and a deeper fog that seems to come with my job description. Go, said Jenny—I need some time alone.

I gave the journey a purpose, so it might be less like running away. I would look for the site of Lew Welch’s cabin on the Salmon River. Another poet who admires his work told me he’d once come up here and found the place. He’d sent me his notes. It would be a kind of pilgrimage, to acknowledge an old debt and re-connect with a journey begun thirty years ago.

A tanager, hiding among oak leaves, performs variations on a romantic aria: *Poet In The Wilderness*.

For decades I’ve come to this remote tributary of the Klamath to visit friends, give poetry readings, or hang out at the river. Occasionally I’ve worked as a carpenter, sometimes a poet-teacher at the Forks of Salmon school. But it’s my first time this far upriver, and the first time I’ve made the connection with Lew Welch, although I knew he’d come up here in the early sixties to recover health and sanity and get back to writing. He stayed for more than a year.

I spent last night with old friends whose house overlooks the big bend in the river, this morning drove up the South Fork to a Forest Service campground. It’s early June, no one else here. I have

a rock fireplace, a big table, a few scrubby white oaks overlooking the narrow gorge. Green and white water tumbling down between rocks, above it the Cecilville road clinging to the mountain.

On the table beside the Coleman stove: two slim volumes of his letters, another of essays, his single collection of poems, and a Forest Service map. All those years, as if I haven't gone anywhere.

From across the river, the reply of another tanager: same theme.

In one of those mid-life acts of faith and desperation I fled our 1970's pastoral experiment and set up camp beside a creek in a redwood-forested canyon about five miles out of town. In the canvas-wall tent, on a makeshift desk: a 1950's Royal standard, a stack of blank paper, and a copy of *Ring of Bone*—the same book now on this campground table, its red cover scratched and faded. I'd never met its author, half a dozen years had passed since his disappearance, but I called the poems I thought I was writing *Out Looking for Lew*.

In an empty campsite I find a walking stick leaning against a big Doug fir. On the trail down to the river the stick breaks, I throw away the short half, wade into the current bent over, ridiculous. The water is bone-aching cold and moving fast. Balanced on three slippery rocks I hear my friend's words of caution this morning: *The river's still high, Jerry. Be careful.*

Then, about to be swept away, I hear Lew Welch's "Small Sentence To Drive Yourself Sane"—

So it's all come to this!

Lewis Barrett Welch, Jr., born Phoenix 1926, moves with his mother and younger sister to southern California, then Palo Alto where he gets through high school pretending to be dumber than he is and running the 400 in under 50 seconds. A year of Army Air Force followed by UC Berkeley engineering classes, odd jobs as haberdasher, auto mechanic, then Stockton Junior College where he reads English lit, paints, and plays bass to the piano of fellow student Dave Brubeck. A literature teacher, James Wilson, directs him to the writings of Gertrude Stein and then to Reed College, 1948-1950, where he writes his senior thesis on her work.

At Reed he meets Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen and the three students read Stein, William Carlos Williams, and the few available translations of eastern texts. They begin to write poetry influenced by the precepts of Zen Buddhism and infused with the rhythms of west coast vernacular English. He shares with Whalen a gift for poems that disclose themselves—where we experience the process of words coming to mind as the poem is *let through*—what Whalen calls "getting out of your own way." And he has in common with Snyder a love of wild nature and a dedication to radical spiritual and cultural change. But his chief contribution to this triumvirate is a consummate ear and voice, a poetry that honors the local and idiomatic while it sings the great mysteries, all to the tune of American speech.

He shows his writing to Williams when the older poet visits Reed in October, 1950, and is encouraged to publish the thesis. A month later he moves to New York, rents a room on West 82nd Street, and continues his Gertrude Stein studies. Working as a department store clerk, spending his after-hours in libraries and bars, he begins to experience the episodes of dread and

depression that have afflicted him since childhood. He visits Williams in New Jersey that winter but despite encouragement the Stein book remains unfinished.

He quits the job and undergoes “dianetics” therapy, digging in the garbage, as he puts it, of his earliest consciousness—all the way back to when he first “flipped out” as an infant. The following summer he decides to become a teacher, enrolls in the doctoral program at the University of Chicago, and studies structural linguistics with James R. Sledd, a Texas scholar with a keen ear for American speech. In his second year of graduate study he suffers another breakdown and drops out of school.

He resumes therapy, weds his girl friend Mary Barber, and is hired as chief copywriter in Montgomery Ward’s Chicago headquarters. He strenuously engages the normalcy of the times, drinks heavily to sedate himself, and after three years he and his wife are deeply in debt, his nerves and liver are shot, and he’s on the verge of his most severe breakdown to date. In 1957, recognizing he’s at a dead end, he returns to the writing of poetry and resumes correspondence with his friends Snyder and Whalen, now well-known Beat poets. He determines to return to the west coast.

He says his farewell in “Chicago Poem,” which will open his collected poems and give first expression to the characteristic gesture of breakdown, emergence, and departure:

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.

Despite the apparent failures of his eastern years, their deeper lessons—the discussions with Williams, the Stein research, his personal therapy, the din of the eastern cities, linguistics study with Sledd—all can be heard in these final lines. The flat repetitions, the *it...it...it, it...it...it*, describe a departure not only from Chicago but the spiritual plain it was built on, along with most English poetry since Milton. “The land’s too flat. Ugly sullen and big it / pounds men down past humbleness.”

The relentless vocal percussion confirms the decision to seek his idiom in the heartland of American speech, even while acknowledging that it’s beaten him down. But his departure is also an affirmation, linking him to another ad writer broken by Chicago, Sherwood Anderson, mentor and elder to Gertrude Stein and the exiled writers of her generation. Anderson taught them to find subject and voice in their American experience, and to know when to walk away from it. Lew Welch is following in the footsteps of his teacher’s teacher.

The sun’s about an hour above the western ridge. I open a bottle of wine, raise a glass to the forest and mountains. Thank the river. Thanks, Lew.

II. He Begins the Work

He reads his poetry publicly for the first time in the summer of 1958 at one of Jack Spicer's weekly North Beach gatherings. The reading is well received and confirms his belief that "what I have written so far *must* be performed." He reads at San Francisco State, "Chicago" is published in *Contact*, and he begins the "din poems," assemblages of speech from street and bar and bedroom—"letting America speak for itself." But the literary success has its price. He's fired by Ward's Oakland office, the last security of his former life, and he separates from Mary, who's still working to pay it off.

He gets a job driving cab and spends his off time across the bay in Marin, where Snyder and others have begun a zendo. Its practitioners soon include the Buddha known as the Beginner. He becomes close friends with the zendo keeper, poet and scholar Albert Saijo, and within a couple of years the circle of his acquaintance includes most of the writers who will come to be known as the Beats. Despite another breakdown in the spring of '59, by the end of that year he and his Willys jeep, accompanied by Saijo, are healthy enough to drive Jack Kerouac to the east coast, composing haiku as they travel.

His first small chapbook, *Wobbly Rock*, is published in 1960 by Auerhahn Press. The six-page poem brings the recognition of his contemporaries and the praise of older poets Charles Olson and Marianne Moore. It speaks to its readers in what will become his distinctive voice: someone is showing us something we've never seen, speaking in an unfamiliar idiom. No—we've seen large rocks on a beach. We've heard the spoken word. We just haven't believed the evidence of our senses. We're so unaccustomed to finding it in poetry.

It's a real rock, the voice begins. Then adds: (*believe this first*). Immediately we're both reassured and surprised: he's telling us how to read the poem. Well, the rock really is big, the size of the largest haystack, but here's the thing: when hit by waves it *moves*. "Yields and then comes back to it: / Wobbly tons." Like the rock, we're both centered and a little off-balance, ready to be guided by a voice with a range and energy far beyond the burned-out ad writer saying goodbye to the shores of Lake Erie. It takes us to a farther west, all the way to Kyoto's Ryoanji garden whose rocks and raked sand illuminate the poem's subject and method. The seascape-like-a-garden has evoked that garden-like-a-seascape, creating a metaphorical loop that short-circuits the reader's busy mind, tells it to give up likeness-as-explanation. In order to see the thing, lose the "poetry" about it. Now we're ready to lose the un-named poet, this voice that discloses then disappears.

He is many things: the observer, then the sea, the waves, and then: "If you take away the sea / Tell me what it is." Now we see *through* time and place, hear *through* the poet-voice. At first he's speaking from the beach, but now it's another day and he's with two friends in a little boat below the cliffs. *Through* him we see ocean life below the surface, then the three men in the boat, then up the cliffs to grass and rock and finally, high above the trees, we see through the eyes of a hawk looking down: *Clutching to our chip we are jittering in a spectrum....*

Now the above-it-all voice can ask, why don't we *always* see it, our human place in this vibrant harmony of water and rock? Why are we so seldom able to say it? But that's what the poem proposes to do: it brings the scene before us and the speaker (*I have been in many shapes before*

I achieved congenial form) gives it voice. Or voices—as the poet returns to his body, *rock* shifts from noun to verb.

Wind that wets my lips is salt
Sea breaking within me balanced as the
Sea that floods these rocks. Rock
Returning to the sea, easily, as
Sea once rose from it. It
Is a sea rock

(easily)

I am
Rocked by the sea

Wobbly Rock came out the same month his poems appeared in Donald Allen's ground-breaking *The New American Poetry*. That April of 1960 also saw the appearance of Snyder's *Myths And Texts*, Whalen's *Like I Say*, and Corso's *Happy Birthday of Death*, a collective declaration of spiritual and cultural revolution that for decades would be among the texts guiding its enactment. They would bring people to new and surprising places.

A fence lizard is watching me from the large rock in the middle of my campsite. The last beam of sun angles down through the oaks on the opposite ridge, illumines the Forest Service map spread open, the books, the glass of wine. The lizard does a few push-ups. No wobble in *his* rock.

By the end of 1960 Lew Welch is reading up and down the west coast to large and enthusiastic audiences. He writes to Kerouac: *this is the first time I have really lived like a writer*. But maybe it's too much the way Kerouac lived like a writer—he's staying at his mother's house in Reno, writing an autobiographical novel on a roll of paper, struggling again with the effects of alcohol. After another mental and physical collapse, diagnosed with cirrhosis of the liver, he undergoes a period of enforced sobriety. Still obsessed by money, guilty about his dependence on his mother, he takes a job, but it's more than he can sustain. A telephone interview he gives amid the din of the Bemis Bag factory remains a poignant document of the way money crushes poetry. Other prospects—a grant application, a job on a fishing boat—also come to nothing. His depression is deep and unrelenting. The novel, *I, Leo*, remains unfinished.

He calls these bouts *little suicides*, saying he can only change by breaking down and putting himself back together—something akin to the process of zen meditation, and similar to the disappearing “I” of his poems, only with the real possibility of not coming back. But his powers of recovery prove as remarkable as his capacity for damage, and by the following summer he's back in San Francisco, working on a salmon boat, active in the city's poetry scene, and sustained by a new relationship. Author of *The Love Book*, famous (and famously banned) for its open celebration of sexuality, Lenore Kandel also fills public halls with her poetry readings.

For a couple of years they share the intense cultural life of the Haight-Ashbury and the communal life of East-West House, living the wild scenes described by Kerouac's *Big Sur*, where they are Dave Wain and Romana Swartz. Something of their sweet impossibility is expressed by their saving to buy a commercial fishing boat, her with earnings from belly-dancing, his from driving cab in the off-season. When they agree to separate in spring of '62 he's without a settled livelihood and suffering severe depression, relieved only by speed, weed, and jug wine. He goes to a shrink, struggles to get sober, returns alone to Ferlinghetti's cabin at Big Sur where he eats peyote and desperately seeks a vision—but the summer of revelation and nightmare leaves him sick and terminally strung out. The Salmon River is his last chance.

III. He Finally Knows Where He Lives

He comes in over the Cecilville road, the Willys packed with food and supplies, a bed roll and necessities, typewriter, fishing gear, and a .30-.30. He has a hundred dollars a month from his mother who has agreed to support him till spring—provided he go to Japan, the nut house, or the woods. It's evident right away he's made the right choice.

Already prosperous by river standards, shortly after his arrival he earns money fighting a fire near Forks of Salmon. "I have new boots & a chain saw (a Beautiful little McCulloch) I bought with my fire money," he writes to Snyder. "This will be the first time in my life I've had (1) enough money, and (2) enough strength, and (3) a place of my own. I am still jumpy about it."

He adapts quickly to the social life of the river—the Cecilville bar, the Forks post office, the cabins of miners and Wobblies and Indians—and he's still fondly remembered by the former postmistress when my friend comes up here looking for his cabin twenty years later. But a place of his own is the crucial ingredient of his hermitage—not just for the solitary work, but to fill a hunger that must originate with his parents' divorce, he and his mother and sister moving from one southern California town to another. It surely comes, too, from a bedrock understanding that a poetry of image and the vernacular must also be a poetry of place.

The Salmon River is the perfect answer to this need, having more beautiful places than people who can actually survive in them. A few weeks after his arrival he's offered a vacant cabin downriver: cross the steel bridge, drive a mile and a half up Methodist Creek, hike a steep switchback trail, you arrive at a mountain meadow. Beside a shallow lake there's a little cabin, tightly built of pole and split shake. He weeps when he sees it. After a couple of sleepless nights he names it Rat Flat, finding the cabin wasn't vacant after all. Despite the good directions I can't find it on the Forest Service map so I dig out my friend's notes, go back to the map, still nothing. I begin to wonder if I really need to go there.

After a bad fall and twice losing his pack on the rugged trail, he abandons Rat Flat in November and moves to an empty miner's shack just downriver. It's not nearly as picturesque, but a suspension bridge over the river leads directly to its door. Soon he's cutting firewood, settling in for the winter, and is adopted by a stray river cat, Stanley. He's solved one of the great riddles of his life: *This is where I live. What a thing to know!*

The sun's behind the ridge, maybe a couple more hours of light. I start a pot of water on the stove, get my town-made raviolis out of the cooler. Feel that unease brought on by the first shades of evening in an unfamiliar place. Pour another glass of wine.

Not long after I moved to the woods, fall arrived and the steep coastal canyon grew dark and cold. Most of my poems were started on bar napkins, mostly left mercifully unfinished. Then a clear-cut began, chainsaws and trucks and loaders in the woods directly above my camp. Then the rains came. Mold was eating the old canvas tent when I heard about a vacant barn loft farther up the canyon and I made a quick deal with its owner, moved a desk and a few more books from the farm, fought a wood rat for its custody, and settled in.

That winter I spent rainy afternoons looking out the loft window over the canyon and whenever it cleared a little I descended into it. The forest had suffered more than a century of ruthless logging and my naturalist neighbors soon introduced me to some of its consequences: landslides, diminished salmon runs, and watershed restoration work. I wrote rants of protest, screeds of grief and outrage, very little of the wisdom and detachment I thought I'd gone to the woods for. But I was beginning to find out where I lived.

As winter and permanent frost take hold of the Salmon River canyon, his high expectations begin to fade. The new McCulloch burns up. His typewriter breaks. One of the two Coleman lanterns quits. Stanley appears one morning so badly torn up, probably by a bobcat, he has to shoot him. Some days he stays in his sleeping bag, imagines he's a mental case following the orders of phantom doctors and nurses. But the daily urgencies of cleaning, repairing things, cooking, splitting wood, with an occasional long letter or a ceremonial bath, at last reduce him to a state not uncommon in the mountain winter: "I'm shack simple," he writes to friends. He meets Jack Boyce, a painter and carpenter, and they become regular drinking buddies, their cabins only twenty miles apart. For Thanksgiving he visits his mother, then friends in San Francisco, and brings back poet Kirby Doyle for a brief stay.

By the new year he's writing occasional poems and slowly regaining strength and confidence. His mother loses her job and can't send the last of his "therapy money," but he's confident that Forest Service work will soon open up. In the summer of 1963 she visits for three weeks and they enjoy the mutual dependencies that characterize their relationship. Her own stipend is barely enough to keep a sane distance from her conservative Phoenix family, and low-budget river life suits them both.

That fall, when the Forest Service job doesn't come through, he assures her he'll make his living panning for gold, and when that doesn't work out he discovers a more recent niche in the local economy. By his second November in the back country he boasts of having "a full mountain load and lots of brand new money." But his successful adaptation to the mountains, and the new wealth it brings, only makes the city more attractive. After fourteen months' residence, he decides not to spend another winter on the Salmon River.

He has reason to feel his task here is done. As he prepares to depart, his bundle includes dozens of poems re-drafted, including the din poems and the collection that will be called *On Out*,

spanning the years from Chicago to this place. He has the finished manuscript of *Hermit Poems*, other recent work that will become *The Way Back*, and an outline of the collected poems that will appear posthumously a decade later. The final hermit poem will sound its note of clarity and supply its title:

I saw myself
a ring of bone
in the clear stream
of all of it

and vowed,
always to be open to it
that all of it
might flow through

and then heard
“ring of bone” where
ring is what a

bell does

The measured phrasing, the meters out of old English hymn books, set against the beat of American speech (*it...it...it* again) and put into the expression of his personal Buddhist practice—Ring of Bone zendo at Snyder’s place in the Sierras honors this vision—all that high-minded clarity, draped over the loose bones of the vernacular—*where ring is what a bell does*—emerges in a syntax clear to any child but almost never written. The ending sounds utterly “natural” till compared to the first draft, composed in a letter to Robert Duncan shortly after the vision came to him at Big Sur:

And right now heard a
“Ring of bone” with
Ring as what a bell does.

Most of us would be blinded by the insight, ignore the limping iambs, the clumsy *writing* of “with...as what,” and let the double meaning of *ring* resonate like the ending of *Wobbly Rock*. But the letter asks in its next sentence, *What does that mean?* And the poem, as re-drafted on the Salmon River, answers with a new exactness of vocabulary and breath: the locating *where* instead of *what*, the verb *is* instead of *as*, and the white-space-suspended gong of *bell does*. While it appears “prosy,” as critics say of his work, in fact it’s as if Gertrude Stein had met Han Shan on a narrow mountain trail and they’d wrestled to a draw.

The tanager is back. He sings while I eat dinner, his red and yellow brilliance still hiding in the oak leaves. His evening song is more insistent, more complex in its variations. *How does he do that?*

IV. He Returns To The Work

Back in the city he begins a second literary life, an extraordinary period of publishing and readings which by the end of the 60's is almost supporting him. His insight into "the clear stream of all of it"—he doesn't only mean the metaphysical river: a friend later recalls that Lew Welch was the first person he heard use the word *ecology*—and carrying the vision, a voice that constantly discloses the poet's mind in the act of discovery—I saw...and vowed...and then heard—these qualities combine to make him a masterful teacher and a hugely popular performer.

His readings, billed as *One Man Plays*, range from sermon to song—speaking now in the voice of his zen persona, the Red Monk, now as his astrological self, Leo the bohemian voluptuary, and now singing in the inflections of American speech. We get some idea of his dramatic skills from a *Chronicle* piece by Grover Sales, after a performance at the San Francisco Museum of Art before several hundred listeners:

In addition to writing powerful and communicative verse, Welch is a musician with a remarkable ear. He composes tunes of disarming simplicity, has a resplendent singing voice well suited to the American ballad styles.... A superb mimic, his version of [Billy] Eckstein singing Eliot's The Waste Land was one of many delights he held for the museum audience, which seemed in a justifiable state of whooping hysteria much of the time. It is no exaggeration to say that Lew Welch is funnier by far than many of the comics who played the hungry i. He whistles, chants, improvises, weeps, croons—he is totally involved. Also, he is a very beautiful looking cat, well over six feet, sinewy-thin, with a shock of coppery hair matching the color of his enormous eyeballs.

As a performer, Welch has the extraordinary gift of being "on" with his audience... Even more unusual, he knows when to get on and get off, something many professionals and practically no poets manage.

But his success doesn't quite translate into money. That year he figures he's read in twenty-seven venues to a total audience of 12,000, from which he's earned about two thousand dollars. He continues to move between occupations, at the height of his literary success employed as a longshoreman's clerk. The summer after coming back from the Salmon River he's a bus boy in a Marin restaurant, and you can hear that dilemma in a piece for Ralph Gleason's *Chronicle* column:

I am a Poet. My job is writing poems, reading them out loud, getting them printed, studying, learning how to become the kind of man who has something of worth to say. It's a great job.

Naturally, I'm starving to death....

('Look, baby, you want to pay your bills, go out and get a job.')

I've got a job. I'm a Poet. Why should I do somebody else's job, too? You want me to be a carpenter? I'm a lousy carpenter. Does anybody ask a carpenter to write my poems?

He concludes by noting that he and Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen will be reading new work at the Old Longshoremen's Hall, an opportunity to support poetry. The price of admission? A dollar.

His most creative performances continue to be impromptu, among friends and students, and here the returns are more enduring. While working in Marin he meets Magda Cregg and they soon move into a house in Marin City where he finds both the crucial sense of place—at the foot of Mount Tamalpais—and the loving care that will sustain him till his last days. Magda's son, Hugh, is deeply influenced by his step-father's gifts as mentor and performer, and will later honor this connection by adopting the name Huey Lewis.

With this domestic stability comes a realization of his old desire to be a teacher, and from 1965 he regularly lectures on poetry in a UC Berkeley extension course. That year also sees the publication of *Hermit Poems*, soon followed by *On Out*. He receives invitations to read and lecture up and down the west coast and is offered a brief residency in Colorado. When the extension course doesn't come through in 1970, he instead writes out his lecture notes as *Language Is Speech*. Along with a transcribed Reed lecture, *How I Work As A Poet*, it was my first handbook to poetic practice. When I was a part-timer at our local state college I'd read it to beginning creative writing students, hoping it would make as much sense to them.

His teaching voice is not essentially different from his sermon voice—he preached at Glide Church on one occasion—and *Language Is Speech* has some of the immediacy and dynamic of his readings. Someone is talking us. He's telling us stories about language. In one of my favorites he's on a winery tour (here I caution the students about writing and booze, and they smile tolerantly). As the touring and sipping progress, the guide is droning on, his listeners drifting away, till he says: *Whose kid is that?* A child is about to fall into a wine vat, and without premeditation the guide speaks in a way that grabs everyone's attention and saves the child.

That, says Lew Welch, is the intensity we want in writing. It comes not by thinking, but unpremeditated in a kind of trance. He describes Li Po before the emperor, copy writers in Chicago, William Carlos Williams on a challenge from him and Snyder and Whalen—and we see them in that moment of bringing words to mind, with the some of that urgency and exactness that saved the child.

But exactness to what? Here I'd have to read aloud, both for the lesson and the clear note that comes with painstaking accuracy:

What we try to do in the situation of teaching or writing or confessing or standing firm against those who would cheat us or lie to us or kill us, what we try to do when we need most to speak openly to our beloved or to those who believe in us, need us, ask us for really necessary advice, is to try to be, in words, exact. We must now speak. And we must now be exact. To what?

This is the moment you bring words to Mind as the poet brings words to Mind.

If we then ask—*Brings from where?*— we arrive full circle:

The words come to Mind through the whole history of whatever Tribe you learned your language in. The words come to Mind through all the private history of how you've lived your Human Being. There is no way to cheat, unless you go to too many schools, and try to be a poet.

What a relief. By now the students have relaxed a little. Making poetry is like talking, I say. Hear it, then write it down. It will be extremely difficult to do well, but it's far easier than writing somebody's idea of what a poem is. Believe me, I say—a lot of us have tried it.

I waken with the flashlight on, the book lying open, clothes and papers in piles around the tent. When I click the light off it's utterly dark. I wait for my eyes to adjust. Nothing. The sound of the river. I unzip the tent flap and crawl out. Faint starlight, complete darkness in the surrounding trees. I click on the flashlight. Turn it off. One old poet in the dark, trying to get back to something he keeps forgetting.

V. He Goes To The Mountains

One winter night during my failed hermit experiment I got another of its unexpected lessons, more helpful than what I usually brought home from the bar. A San Francisco troupe was performing animal/human plays, comic pieces drawn from Native California stories and 1970's rural life, something they called reinhabitory theater. I had met most of the company, knew they'd been part of the Mime Troupe and then the Diggers, the revelatory communitarians whose circle sometimes included Lew Welch. One of the night's players, Peter Coyote, has described Welch's visits to the Digger commune in Marin, where a vital (and voluptuous) connection was made between the elder Beat poets and a new generation of cultural visionaries. In the evening's blend of ecology and theater I was witnessing some of Lew Welch's legacy to the bioregional movement.

But another member of the cast, his former partner Lenore Kandel, had a more immediate lesson. I was an admirer of her poetry and awed by her toughness and spirit—a motorcycle crash had made theater painfully difficult—but I hadn't anticipated her gift for comedy. She played an uproariously funny chicken in a skit about hippy homesteaders. After the show I was standing at the bar, probably raving about my recent discovery of Lew Welch's life and writing, and as she walked behind me she yanked on my long braid. The gesture was playful, but it snapped my head back. When she had my full attention, she said: *Don't romanticize him.*

Then she laughed, full and generous, but I knew her injunction was drawn from hard experience and deep regard. I hear Lenore's laughter when I ask myself what I'm doing here.

When the sun finally comes over the eastern ridge I'm sitting on the lizard rock sipping coffee and regarding the river. Below a bend of white water, above the spot where I almost crossed, there's a deep pool and a sand bar where I'll spend the morning. I'm not going to look for Rat Flat. The best way to acknowledge Lew Welch's time here is to stay where I am—today,

tomorrow, the day after—to put away the books and maps and get back in touch with whatever told me thirty years ago, against all probability, to write about the beautiful damaged place I live. Maybe I'll get out the poems I dragged along, which a few days ago seemed hopeless.

The lesson I find in Lew Welch is not disappearance but recovery and return. Like his old friends Snyder and Whalen, he brings the teachings of Pound and Stein and Williams into the next generation: *Make it new. Writing is not remembering. No ideas but in things.* Along with them, he adapts the tools of modernism to a conglomerate of things I call The Wobbly Way—to Ezra and Gertrude and Bill, add the old Asian guys, then throw in Big Bill Haywood, Red Emma, ecological thinking, and everyday life in the late Holocene. It's a poetry that draws on eastern thought and western natural philosophy, speaks in the radical English idiom of the commons—the *Diggers*—yet lives in the din of today. It is Lew Welch's singular achievement that he brings this music back from the edge and sings it to the people he called his tribe.

In readings and classrooms, sermons and manifestos, straight news and underground rags, in broadside and mimeo sheet and in the public air, he addresses a community of shared understanding and culture. He speaks in the inflection of both city and mountain, knowing that the vernacular and place are an intricate knot whose untying has left us wandering in body and spirit. When he tells people it's time to get out of the Haight, he warns: *There's a danger too grave even to be named if we stand on ground we do not know.*

There's a new urgency to this public voice. *Look where we are!* he's saying, like the guide seeing the child about to fall in a wine vat. Only now it's the end of the 60's, social and environmental crisis are upon us, there's little time to bring words to mind as the poet does, no space for the play of identity and lyric wonder (*Look where we are!*) that we hear in *Wobbly Rock*. The news has not changed essentially—even in that poem he laments our indifference to the planet and one another, and the city's consequent din of suffering had already driven him to the Salmon River a decade earlier—but its urgency is new. His last writings describe the birthing of a communal and ecological consciousness, and they bear witness to a transformation that will align the tribe with the larger cycles of change. But he's not going to live to see it.

And though he's lecturing and reading widely, collecting poems and correspondence, his writing still isn't returning much income. Grove Press agrees to publish his collected poems, then keeps putting it off and eventually drops the book. And finally, alcoholism and the years of bodily and spiritual crisis have taken their toll, both on him and those around him.

That spring he and Magda Cregg agree to go separate ways, she to South America, he to build a cabin near Snyder's place in the Sierra foothills. But this one more effort of recovery, the prospect of hard labor added to all that he expected of himself as friend, son, lover, poet—it just isn't in him. In a last desperate and graceful act he leaves a note, takes his .22 target pistol and walks into the Sierra and is not seen again.

Albert Saijo's luminous "Last Days of Lew Welch" says it clearly: the man is mortally wounded, and he knows it. He's already written his ending.

*Let no one grieve.
I shall have used it all up*

used every bit of it.

What an extravagance!

What a relief!

“Song of the Turkey Buzzard” is clearly meant to be his last word. It concludes his final chapbook, *The Song Mt Tamalpais Sings*, printed in a small edition in 1969, and it ends the collection *Ring of Bone*. The mountain’s abrupt edge, the Marin headland, provides setting and refrain: “This is the last place. There is nowhere else to go.” It evokes the old American confrontation of limits that we hear in Whitman’s “Facing West From California’s Shore,” and it speaks from the sense of dire end-times that characterized the closing of the 60’s.

Like the voice of his public sermons, this ending is also unmistakably personal, but here we don’t get the same tone of urgency and crisis. It’s as if he’s already left and is looking back to the people and places that nourished him—*Ring of Bone* will open with the dedication “This Book Is For Magda,” and end with the mountain—spirits that kept him sane enough to get this far. He’s resolved the koan of past lives, foresees his next embodiment, and leaves us this riddle to work on.

The poem opens in a formal voice of invocation and prayer, addressed to the mountain in whose fog-shadow he lived his last years—*Praises Tamalpais, / Perfect in Wisdom and Beauty, / She of the Wheeling Birds*—then the voice finds embodiment in the Red Monk, challenging us to answer his Rider Riddle: *which sentient being do you ride?* The poem then answers in the first-person narrative of Leo, the long-maned romantic who wants so badly to be Cougar but misses the recurring experiences that say no, no—till finally, in a fevered vision, he sees the wounded turkey buzzard he once nursed to health. His next form.

Using the strategies developed in *Wobbly Rock* and *Hermit Poems*, the speaking identity becomes part of the poem’s landscape, undergoes the mortal change it describes. Rotten meat and all, it remains his last word, a voice of acceptance and characteristic sweetness that returns again to prayer.

NOT THE BRONZE CASKET BUT THE BRAZEN WING
SOARING FOREVER ABOVE THEE O PERFECT
O SWEETEST WATER O GLORIOUS
WHEELING

BIRD

I used to read “Song of the Turkey Buzzard” to nature writing students at the end of the term, say Look, here’s a guy who knows how to get out of the way. Like we’ve been learning to do. He lets us see it all. But when I’d come to the poem’s last will and testament and then this ending, I’d have to add: imitate the lesson of the book, not the man. The poem, not the suicide note.

By disappearing himself, as if following the instructions of this last poem, he’s taken with him the distinction between his life and art. He steps out of the poem and walks into the territory, a supreme transcendental gesture of American poetry. But it will forever confuse us and invite us

to romanticize him *and* the territory, so that again and again we have to catch and correct ourselves as if we were figures of his poem.

I shouldn't have been surprised to find other poets with stories of looking for Lew, with other outcomes. An old friend, Stephen Vincent, told me he'd also looked for Lew Welch—but it was a month *before* his disappearance. He was supposed to read for a poetry class but all that week couldn't be found in his usual bars and hangouts, so Stephen took the class to Muir Beach instead, where they read *Wobbly Rock*. Later, he wrote a memorial of the event and a subsequent dream, premonitions of Lew's departure.

For poets who came of age in San Francisco in the sixties, it was hard not to feel that this respected elder and teacher had abandoned them. In Lew Welch's last prose writings we hear the voice of the tribal bard predicting ecological collapse and advising people to get out of the city. The *Chronicle* story of his disappearance—*Bay Poet Missing: Big Search*—mentions that he'd been deeply depressed by the massive oil spill in San Francisco Bay a few months earlier. It's hard to disagree with his prophecies. And his need to escape the city he loved was already well established—having to come all these hundreds of miles to the Salmon River to finish the urban din poems.

But his last withdrawal must have also felt like an abandonment of his urban poetics—and his urban poets. Where rural romantics would be following him into the mountains for years, their city cousins felt like he'd deserted the voices that were his chief legacy. As if he'd taken his poems with him. Leaving his urban descendants like the rest of us, unable to distinguish between the man who disappeared and the book we still live with.

When he says in his last note *I've gone southwest*, surely he means: *don't look there*. But of course friends have to look, and for some the search continues to this day. Suicide is a terrible blow to the living, but disappearance is beyond that. Cleaner maybe, but unrelenting in the never knowing. People report talking to him in their dreams, seeing him on a San Francisco street, or they say he's come back to these mountains.

VI. He's Not There

In the late morning of my third or fourth day on the river, the weekend it must be, a family of four sets up in the middle of the campground. The mom heads down to check out the river, stops to talk when I say good morning. We love this place, she says. They've come here for years, all the way from Corvallis. Soon they're hauling baskets and towels and a beach umbrella past my camp and down the trail to the river. Then two vans pull in, a bunch of guys with tents and kayaks, all the colors and gear of an outdoor store. Bits of German conversation drift across the campground as they gather huge amounts of wood. I pray they know that fire season has come early.

I've lost the shade of my little oaks so I put away the morning's work and go down to the river. The family is occupying the sand bar so I jump into a pool a little way downriver, perch on a warm rock for a while. Where I crossed halfway and turned back, the young dad and one of his little girls wade across. The afternoon is getting up into the 90's.

I say farewell to the tanagers, the lizard, his rock. Thank the river again. A couple of miles downriver I pull into a narrow turnout, get out of the car and take a snapshot. The cabin is long gone, burned down in a Forest Service campaign to get rid of miners and settlers who were beginning to question their timber harvest plans. All that remains of the suspension bridge is a couple of posts on the opposite bank, rusted cables and weathered boards left hanging. I recall his description of the rickety bridge, how a raccoon would shit on it every night just where he had to step across. Then the long-awaited image of a spring morning:

*Butterfly on a coon turd.
A wet, blue jay.*

And then the lines that first endeared me to his voice, recovering itself again:

and even that is just a
pretty imitation of a
State of Mind I don't possess.

He cracks up. Goes to the mountains, puts himself back together. Falls. Catches himself again.

The world flows through us like the river cutting down through serpentine. Water and rock one and inseparable, a mystery that we must somehow speak to. Must speak *through* what breaks in us, what fails us as we fail, and yet comes back. The poem survives in spite of the vessel it overfills and sometimes breaks. Survives because it returns us to the necessary ground note of our human being.

No need to keep looking. It's all right here, it says.

It's real. (believe this first)

That's still the hardest part.

On my next to last day on the river, lying on the sand bar in the clear flow of it all, I see a turkey buzzard high overhead cruising the afternoon wind currents. He banks and circles, rocks in the wind, comes over again, closer this time. I wave, like I always do.

Hey, Lew. Not yet. There's this thing I'm still working on.

The books on the table:

Lew Welch. *Ring of Bone. Collected Poems 1950-1971*. 1973, 1979.

— *How I Work as a Poet & Other Essays*. 1973, 1983.

— *I Remain: The Letters of Lew Welch & the Correspondence of his Friends*.
Two volumes. 1980

All impeccably edited by Donald Allen, named in Lew Welch's final note as his literary executor. Published by Grey Fox Press, now defunct, these and other Welch titles are currently made available through City Lights Books. Not quite out of print, they may be "temporarily out of stock."

Hey Lew. Homage to Lew Welch (Bolin, 1997), inspired and edited by Magda Cregg, collects the memories and stories of many friends, including the prefatory quote from S.Fox and Albert Saijo's "The Last Days of Lew Welch."

The readings:

PennSound <<http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Welch.php>> has audio files of a reading at Magic Lantern bookstore in Santa Barbara, April 1967, and another at Renaissance Corner in 1969. Reed College library has recordings of a reading there in 1971 and a 1970 Berkeley reading. The American Poetry Archive at San Francisco State's Poetry Center has a recording of a reading there in November 1959, though the quality is too poor to offer it through their website. I'm indebted to the archive and its staff member, Jiri Veskrna, for access to the tape.

Peter Coyote's recollections of Lew Welch at Olema are part of his chronicle *Sleeping Where I Fell*. Stephen Vincent's "Lew Welch—A Journal of Remembrance" appeared in *Io* in 1974. Thanks to Bill Yake for the notes and directions, and to Gary Snyder for setting some of the facts straight. And thanks, Lenore.