

consequence of the massacre was the permanent erasure of the Ghost Dance, “a preparatory celebration for the coming of the Messiah.” Ultimately, a deep reverence for the spiritual practices of other people underlies Dorn’s anti-imperial stance: he promotes and cultivates devotion to a religious diversity that, despite its continual decay, he still regards as quintessential to America.

The Shoshoneans is where Dorn fully articulated his personal opposition to a particular national project of standardization, a position he had already worked out in his correspondence with LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka. Dorn rejected the idea “that any people are told to destroy, or get rid of, what is most essentially themselves before admittance into the homogeny. Since there is no spiritual life worth entering,” he argued, once America has destructively consolidated its national empire, “they are asked, as initiation, to subscribe to the cheap and dishonorable mentalism of the ‘American Dream.’” *The Shoshoneans*, then, should be read as an essay on America coming from two distinct perspectives. It is a document that both captures a particular moment in the developing concerns of a poet who was deeply committed to the notion of a heterogeneous America and reflects, in turn, his role in a project that defined the 60s as a whole: radically reimagining the nation’s democratic ideals by exposing their underlying corruption.

Gerónimo Sarmiento Cruz

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Lew Welch, *Ring of Bone: Collected Poems*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2012. 262pp. \$17.95

Lew Welch’s *Ring of Bone* was first published by Donald Allen’s Grey Fox Press in 1973, two years after Welch disappeared from Gary Snyder’s Nevada County cabin. Welch himself prepared the manuscript, arranging in roughly chronological order all the poems written between 1950 and 1971 he saw fit to publish. Supplemented by the uncollected poems Allen gathered after Welch’s disappearance (presumed to be a suicide) and included alongside the poet’s own selection, *Ring of Bone* is, as the subtitle to the new City Lights edition indicates, Welch’s *Collected Poems*. In his preface, Welch calls it “a spiritual autobiography,” and the book “tells a story”: the poet leaves soul-killing Chicago, where he worked for several years writing ad copy for Montgomery Ward, heads “On Out” west to his native California, retreats into the mountains of his “Hermit Poems,” and then finds “The Way Back” to friends and lovers in San Francisco. In this personal mythology, inflected by the Buddhist practice Welch shared with college friends Snyder and Philip Whalen, the poles are “The Mountain” and “The City,” self and “the din,” solitude and sociality.

The book records the poet's oscillation between these poles, a pilgrimage without clear progress, a ring-shaped quest. As Welch writes in "He Greeted, Again, the Open Road": "Shrineless, I // pilgrim // through the world." By both design and circumstance, *Ring of Bone* is coeval with the poet's life: it's organized according to the phases of his personal narrative, and his actual life ended not long after the manuscript was complete. This autobiographical ethic, definitive of Welch's work and shared with contemporaries such as Allen Ginsberg and Joanne Kyger, was central to the Beat sensibility. In Welch's equation of life and art, we can see plainly the Beats' avant-gardism, their transformation of artistic practice into a living countercultural force.

Reading *Ring of Bone* from front to back is a curious experience. While the cumulative effect of the book is a powerful one, many individual poems seem insubstantial or deliberately off-handed. The text almost always feels subordinate to something else, something toward which it only gestures, and indeed, Welch viewed the printed poem as a secondary artifact. "This is a book of scores, for the voice," he writes in his preface. "The scores will become poems only while they are sounded, performed, sung." However precisely scripted they are, the texts themselves are not the poet's end. Of all the New American poets wedded to a speech-based poetics, Welch was perhaps the most total in his commitment and had perhaps the finest ear for the "American idiom." But his texts are secondary not only to vocal performance but also to the person of Lew Welch himself, to his lifestyle or vocation. While he was no confessional poet, *Ring of Bone* reads as the notation of a life lived in poetry—not a life lived to produce poems, but a life lived *as* poetry, of which the texts are mere remains. Consider one of his most memorable poems, included among "Hermit Poems":

Whenever I make a new poem,
the old ones sound like gibberish.
How can they ever make sense in a book?

Let them say:
"He seems to have lived in the mountains.
He traveled now and then.
When he appeared in cities,
he was almost always drunk.

"Most of his poems are lost.
Many of those we have were found in
letters to his friends.

"He had a very large number of friends."

Here are the essential qualities of Lew Welch's poetry: irreverent yet tender sincerity, unobtrusively meticulous phrasing, a plainness of address learned from Chinese and Japanese poetry in translation and from William Carlos Williams. The poem's central gesture is to diminish the textual object and defer whatever authority we might have thought resided in the poet. Welch's diction emphasizes his craft: he "makes" his poems. Yet rather than advance his mastery, each instance of craftwork only dismantles his oeuvre, turning old works into "gibberish." Emphasis falls on the present, the event of each poem's making, not on the preservation of poems in a collection; we can see why, in gathering his poems for a book, Welch insists that they should be taken as scores for vocal re-performance. The poet's speculative afterlife is pitched explicitly against collection and consolidation, his poems lost or literally scattered among friends. Furthermore, most of this poem's words are imagined to belong not the poet but to "them," those others among whom his remains are dispersed. Here we can recall Shelley's scattered "ashes and sparks," though Welch, with characteristic Beat casualness, scales down Shelley's "mankind" to "his friends." Collective word-of-mouth replaces the "collected," singular, written self; the poet's social life displaces his literary legacy. He wants to be remembered for how he lived, not what he wrote—though this poem is surely memorable.

We find a similar simultaneity of egoism and self-dispersal in another of Welch's best poems, again from the "Hermit" sequence:

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

This poem's craft is one of carefully enjambed assonance, its modulations of open "aw" and "o" sounds rendering audible the hollowing out Welch avows. Without fuss, the poet's act of regarding his own bony image mirrored in

a stream becomes a figure for his poetics, which is also his way of life—an open conduit sounding out what passes through it. Welch is a self-involved writer, but he strives to write himself out, leaving a hole in the center usually occupied by a consolidated ego. The “ring of bone,” at once so physical and so disembodied, is his variation on the poet-as-receiver myth, in line with Coleridge’s Eolian harp and Spicer’s radio. This Buddha-inspired project of receptive self-negation occupies much of the writing from the last few years of Welch’s life. Among the most interesting of the fugitive poems Allen collected is a sermon-in-verse entitled “How to Give Yourself Away” and delivered at Glide Memorial Church in February 1967. Welch’s spiritual meditations can be serene or optimistically ecstatic, but despair and self-disgust are never far off. His self, so hounded it seems by demons that threatened to destroy him in less receptive ways, was a particular burden for him—something not perhaps to be given away but to be outrun or put down. Welch’s scattering of himself in so many transcriptions of speech, pages to be “given away” to friends, at some moments seems a virtuous self-effacement, at others a desperate self-annihilation. A life lived as poetry can also become a scripted death. In “Song of the Turkey Buzzard,” the final poem in the *Ring of Bone* manuscript, Welch imagines a buzzard eating his remains as the realization of a “new form,” but his “disembowelment” seems equally a gory premonition of his early death.

At the center of *Ring of Bone* is Welch’s masterpiece of self-dispersal, the nine-page collage called “Din Poem.” In “Language is Speech,” the statement of poetics included at the end of this new edition, he writes, “That is language. Speech. The din of the Tribe doing its business. You can’t control it, you can’t correct it, you can only listen to it and use it as it is.” While the well-honed “Hermit Poems” meditate on sociality from a position of quiet solitude, “Din Poem” is sprawling and polyvocal, comprising ad jingles, sheet music, Eisenhower’s holiday address, a barrage of racist slurs hyperbolically repeated into inane gibberish, and drawings of a meadowlark and a dove surrounded by musical notes. When some “I” tells a story of viewing New York City from the Empire State Building or of visiting a mysterious spiritual adviser, we cannot be sure whose “I” it is. *Paterson* is the poem’s nearest predecessor, but *Paterson*’s materials are more mediated and synthesized by an authorial presence. “Din Poem” is not well-served by quotation, and perhaps the best way to read it is while listening to Welch’s astonishing 1967 performance of it at the Magic Lantern in Santa Barbara, which is available on PennSound. He was a commanding performer of his work, a decent singer who sometimes performed with San Francisco rock bands, and his performance of “Din Poem” is filled with song, whistling, and a proliferation of voices. It makes me want to perform the poem myself, to make noise as Welch did, to add to the din. This displacement of his voice by my own seems perfectly apt to the poetry, consistent with the way Welch imagined his literary

(or anti-literary) afterlife. *Ring of Bone's* textual record gives way to archived audio recordings; his scores give way to his own ghostly voice, technologically preserved and reanimated; his voice gives way to his reader's voice, his breath and body to my own. In ways that he perhaps could not quite predict, Welch has become a multimedia poet. Somewhere between the book and the audio archive, his *Collected Poems* almost dissolves into collective life itself.

Patrick Morrissey

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Frederick Seidel, *Nice Weather*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012. 112pp. \$24

Who's afraid of Frederick Seidel? All of his critics, apparently. The "most frightening American poet ever," says Calvin Bedient. "Frederick Seidel is a ghoul," says Michael Robbins. Adam Kirsch thinks his poetry as scary as a nightmare. Michael Hofmann calls him a "cannibal." These are terms of praise, from critics who think Seidel one of our best living poets. It is notable, however, that the epithets used to describe Seidel sound like an advertisement for the latest Hollywood horror film. In a recent review of the Jeff Koons Retrospective at the Whitney, Jed Perl comments on "the S&M of the contemporary art world," which assumes that whatever shocks and disgusts must, *ipso facto*, be good. But, he rightly points out, "not all unease is equal." Frederick Seidel is the Jeff Koons of contemporary American poetry, with "the swagger of a macho buffoon," in Perl's words, scaring his readers into admiration.

But what has happened to the carnivore, the cannibal, the bogeyman, and above all, the phallus-man that for decades have combined to form Seidel's signature poetic persona and the hallmark of his poetic style? In his latest book *Nice Weather* (2012), most of the poems are as bland as the kind of small talk the title suggests. Here's the title poem in its entirety:

This is what it's like at the end of the day.
But soon the day will go away.
Sunlight preoccupies the cross street.
It and night soon will meet.
Meanwhile, there is Central Park.
Now the park is getting dark.

Okay. This is Cheez Whiz Robert Frost. But if it is true, as Randall Jarrell said, that "any poet has written enough bad poetry to scare away anybody," then Seidel has to be judged on the best lines and the best poems of his career, where his "macho buffoon" persona first began to take shape and scare critics