

Tom Wayman / LAST ELEGY: FOR LEW WELCH

*“The great Winemaster is almost a
magician to the bulk of his Tribe,
to his Peers he is only accurate.
‘He knows the grape so well,’ they say,
‘He turned into a vine.’”*

— Lew Welch, *Courses*

1

This is the last elegy I am going to write.
I’ve had it with praise for the dead.

Hemingway’s fingers shake on the shotgun . . .
Malcolm Lowry finishes another bottle . . .
Weldon Kees closes his car door near the Golden Gate Bridge . . .

I never understood and I don’t now.
Hundreds of attics full of poets writing what they believe will be
“found on the body after death”.
Lines that hopefully their landlady burns in disgust when she goes
through their pockets for the back rent.

For me, there is more joy in my friends
working their way through lay-offs and how to get laid
and a good recipe for spaghetti sauce
than in any dead men, however righteous.

when I drive around town and see a pimply army jacket
scrawling *freedom or death* on a wall, I want to leap out
and make him write *poetry and life, poetry and life* . . .

Tom Wayman

2

But it was in Ottawa, sitting with Wheeler on his gravelly apartment
building roof
that he said: "Lew Welch is dead."
And I was still thinking how strange it is
that the idea of this as a living country will bring men and women
ten thousand miles
to stay in an ordinary Ottawa middle-class dwelling
with lights on, curtains in the windows, a view of the Rideau and
somebody to cut the grass once a week
except they put up a plaque saying *Embassy of the Republic of Gabon*
and they actually have to live there.

"He's dead," Wheeler said. "Lew Welch.
He left a note naming Don Allen his literary executor
and went off into the mountains to die."

3

And it was Welch who told us, in the bar at Riverside
his eyes starting to mist over, how lucky we were
that the poets who had come before had been right out to the edge
so we didn't have to do that.
"I'm 42. I've seen it," he said. He told us somebody
I forget who now (Whalen?), used to ride his depression down
when he got it, not try to cheer himself up
but just sit in his room hour after hour
going deeper. Welch said
the people downstairs tried to get him to stop
after a few days, invited him down for supper, and when he refused
got him to go out to the store with them to buy some food.
He buys a carton of milk, that's all, and goes back upstairs.
When they break in a week later, the milk is sitting on a table
unopened, rotten. And Whalen, or whoever it was, ends up in the
hospital.

Tom Wayman

Welch is crying now, scaring the barman.

Peterfreund and I had driven up from the beaches that morning to meet him at the airport. He wanted breakfast, meaning a drink, so we went, Welch taking and giving his poems to the dubious barman, Peterfreund matching him drink for drink me fussing to get him to the reading on time, finally we go.

Welch finds a piano at the place and begins with some jazz as people arrive, starting at last a swing version of *The Waste Land*: Frank Sinatra doing T.S. Eliot: “A-pril, is the cruel-est month . . .” until everyone is confused, and then he is speaking about Mt. Tamalpais, on S.F. Bay, the poems the mountain gives him, telling the crowd we should worship that water, so we would be clear what to do to polluters (this was in 1969). Tears on his face at the end, giving us what the mountain gave him: “This is the last place. There is no where else to go.” until a woman rushes up to comfort him, and it’s over. We go out for a hamburger, Welch groaning about a hash brownie he ate in Saleh’s office (Saleh teaching at Riverside that year), then back to the airport for the L.A. shuttle and Welch explaining about the farm he was going to get. “Gonna have a couple of big dogs and a loaded shotgun. Anybody who knows us can come out there, but if there’s a hassle or it’s the cops or anything, then BLAM. They gotta learn they can’t fuck with the Welch’s.”

Tom Wayman

4

Now he has picked up the martyr's crown.
And the bus drivers are still late on their routes,
the girls in the drive-ins stand waiting for your order,
his poems sit on the shelf.

How small a part of a man's life his poems are.
How little of the body is there: what queasiness
his stomach feels, how he burns with his whole chest
for the invisible word.

No matter how marvellous his poems appear to you
they are not what he wanted to make.
Even if his name, or his poems, get remembered
they are not him, not what he tried to do and failed at.

What Welch desired to say, like I guess what Shakespeare wanted
is mute now: what drove him, the form his Great Poem was to take
or was taking: the brain of a dolphin, texture of sour milk
the radar installation like a cancer on Mt. Tam, clear water.

5

Nothing left to do but pronounce the usual final salute.
I believe in his work he has shown us how to mourn:

*Gone into California, Lew Welch, Master,
comes to us now in the wine: fruit of the wild vine
somehow mixed with the orderly rows.*

*Tonight he is with us then, in the red wine.
Tonight he is on our tongue, tonight we are drinking him.*

Lew Welch. Let us live to the end.

Tom Wayman

6

Then after this wish, a letter from Saleh :

“Lew did disappear, and there was a good-sized suicide scare
in the S.F. *Chronicle* and a few poetry circles.
People went out looking, couldn’t find him,
then Levine heard that he had been seen
and was just wandering around in the mountains.
He had come back into town to get some more grub.
Apparently he does that, and has done that, when he’s really down
but can take care of himself. Anyway
he’s never turned up dead.”

So somewhere out there he continues
to make the point of this poem: he keeps on.
Let me call this then
Elegy For A Man Who Decided Not To Die.
Let it be a paradigm, a happy example.

Lew Welch, across a thousand miles I drink to you.
Old Lazarus, old Prodigal, out on the earth somewhere
like a vine.