

Ring of Bone

(In memoriam Lew Welch)

Autumn 2019

Let the traveler step out here
Cup of longing, blade of fear
A thousand steps to take alone
Rag and sandal ring of bone

C C F C
C C G Am
C C F C
C C G Am

A thousand poets weave the tale
A thousand captains set the sail
A thousand charts to show the way
Through the darkness of the day

A thousand steps to take the hill
A thousand dragons yet to kill
This is how it has ever been
Sow desire, harvest wind

C C F C
C C Dm Am
C C F C
Am Am G Am

The air is thick the air is thin
Weave a noose to bind the wind
You cannot stand against that tide
The rider's wedded to the ride

Sting of silence ring of bone
A thousand steps to take you home
The wind speaks loud or it speaks low
A thousand things you cannot know

Rag and sandal ring of bone
Water wears away the stone
The leagues to measure can't be known
There is no wave there is no stone

Where the sailor's hunger yearns
The white bird circles and returns
Flame that only ravens know
Settles on the precious snow

Everyone who seeks the crown
First must lay his body down
Child's whisper raven's cry
Ring as one in empty sky

Pilgrim's comfort, empty eye
Break the cup to see the sky
All you know of heaven or hell
Is ringing in a distant bell

Broken cup or winding stair
All things solid melt to air
Rag and sandal, ring of bone
Every traveler reaches home

Although lacking the Christian symbolism of “Wide World Over” and the “Gather” cycle, this song, like them, meditates on life as struggle, as journey, as pilgrimage. It contains echoes of my novel Land of Precious Snow and of the songs “White Birds,” “Lay Your Body Down,” and “Harbor Time.” “All things solid melt to air” is an image of transformation from the Communist Manifesto. I borrowed the song’s title from Lew Welch, a West Coast visionary poet who disappeared into the California mountains in 1971. This is his wonderful short lyric “[I Saw Myself]”:

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

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