

Illinois Wesleyan University

From the Selected Works of Michael Theune

2000

Deepstep Come Shining by C.D. Wright

Michael Theune, *Illinois Wesleyan University*

Deepstep Come Shining by C.D. Wright. Copper Canyon Press, \$14.

REVIEWED BY MICHAEL THEUNE

In “hills,” the autobiography/manifesto that opens *Further Adventures with You* (1986), C.D. Wright states, “I aim to carry the smoked ham of my voice to Beulahland. I do not intend to write as though I had not gotten wind of ‘this here’ and ‘that there’ semiotic theory, regardless of which if any one theory, prevails.” Though with *Deepstep Come Shining* Wright follows through on her pledge, lodging her voice deep in Dixie’s heart while referencing linguistic luminaries such as Bakhtin and Wittgenstein, the work created is a chaotic and often unsavory composition.

A book-length poem created from lyrical fragments, the twang and sting of the dialect of many voices, found elements of art-brut graffiti, literary and scientific quotation, and chant, *Deepstep Come Shining* is—ostensibly—both a travel narrative about a road trip through the rural South and a meditation on pain and healing, blindness and light. Accounts of car rides and motel

stays—"I left my chicory-blue swimsuit back at the motel where the baseball team cannonballed us out of the pool"—abut encounters with always-exotic locals—"the boneman" and "the snakeman"—and the resultant landscape is dotted with scientific trivia: "They dropped silver nitrate in my new baby's eyes. According to law. A poisonous colorless crystalline compound. Used in manufacturing photographic film, silvering mirrors, dyeing hair, plating silver, and in medicine as a cautery and antiseptic."

One assumes the clips and phrases in *Deepstep Come Shining* are meant to be symbolic, or at least significant, but it is difficult to decipher their meanings because they are embedded and embodied in problematic ways. Though code-words and -images—"white piano," "swan," and even "Deepstep" itself—recur in various configurations and, like the figures in a cartoon flipbook, give the illusion of movement, there is no apparent reason for the movement. It might be possible to respond, "Yes," when Wright repeatedly asks/states, "Now do you know where we are," but such an affirmation would be difficult if one were asked *why* they were there.

Even if destination and arrival are no longer expected of the road trip, the rest stops and back roads are considered sites for sights, epiphanies large or small. Wright, however, replaces the epiphanic with the quirky, the insight with the punchline. Although such a move might be a welcome development in the road trip genre, Wright's brand of humor is uninspired, predictable—after discovering there is a city in Georgia called Rome comes the uncontrollable "When in Rome . . ."—and burdensome—"Thrasher said he had to share with us what was written on the bathroom wall: Bite me you big-balled boogie man. Maybe he meant b-a-l-d."

Because of its ghosts, its deformed babies, and its ghoulish glimpses of the everyday—"The Eye Bank has more stock after Independence Day"—*Deepstep Come Shining* might be thought a parody, a kind of hyper-Faulkner, post-O'Connor Southern text. However, the self-consciousness that parody demands—and that Wright herself invokes ("That self-conscious Southern poetry, preposterous as a wedding dress")—is manifested as sheer bullheadedness. Rather than critique or investigate—or, sometimes, merely describe—the central speaker of Wright's text emotes, griping, "I didn't like the snakeman. He had a shitty attitude." Uninterested parody combined with the speaker's lack of sympathy for her subjects makes the occasional attempts at compassion seem desperate, forced. The occasional fine lyric moment—as in, "There are enough signs. Of the lack of tenderness in the world. And yet. And yet. All you have to do is ask. Anyone can extol the virtues of an onion. Where to get barbecue minced, pulled, or chopped. The hour of the day they have known

the thorn of love”—gets bogged down by its inclusion in a defensive text. About the strange, troubling concoction which is *Deepstep Come Shining*, one can conclude with certainty only that what the central speaker says of a woman who paints slogans on her trailer skirt applies equally to Wright and her text: “It’s her[s] ... she can say what she likes.”

If there is a central idea or motif in *Deepstep Come Shining*, it might be that strange things—silver nitrate, the boneman’s poultices and compounds—save us. What is not apparent in Wright’s book, however, is an understanding that the cure works only because of the deep laws of correspondence between the wound and the aid. Obeying few laws, *Deepstep Come Shining* fails to move or to heal, but instead undercuts itself.