

QUIET SOULS

Michael Dylan Welch

Like many others, I corresponded with the poet Cid Corman, receiving his blue aerogrammes, having long admired him for his translations of Bashō and other Japanese haiku masters, his long history of influence in American poetics, from the Beats and Black Mountain poets to the Objectivists. I was also able to visit him in Kyoto on 24 October 2002. He had given me meticulous walking directions from Ryoanji. I still have them, and a *meishi* (business card) for CC's, the American cake and ice cream shop he ran with Shizumi, his wife. As it turned out, Cid met me and my wife on the road not far from where he lived—he said he was worried we wouldn't find his house. I knew it was him by his beret—and because he was a *gaijin* in a part of town where not many foreigners lived.

the wind of his laughter —
 persimmons swaying
 in a neighbour's tree

Cid led us to his nondescript house, where my wife Hiromi (who's Japanese) spent two hours with Shizumi in their tiny kitchen, chatting over tea and gummy sweets about anything but poetry. My wife remembers Shizumi telling her that Cid had left everything in America to be with her in Japan, and that she looked after him and helped him with the computer and email. Shizumi also told Hiromi that their rent was \$300 a month for their small two-story attached house. Cid and I disappeared into his study—so filled with books and tall piles of paper, some of them up to my elbows and shoulders (“finished manuscripts”). He said he wrote “a new publishable book of poetry every day.” I had to be careful not to knock anything down while maneuvering carefully through what little floor space remained. And oh how I wanted to look at every single book on his old, twisted, overstuffed shelves, spotting rare and wonderful books and knowing each one held an extensive story, or was signed by a

famous poet. I barely remember what we talked about, but he would occasionally pull a relevant book from the shelves that related to our discussion. It was like trying to drink from a fire hydrant, and I wanted to drink it all. Though he was often a boaster, he also promoted others tirelessly, and I recall him giving me a copy of Frank Samperi's *The New Heaven Now*, published by Bob Arnold's Longhouse, and issue #13 of Scott Watson's poetry journal, *Bongos of the Lord*.

curtains in the breeze —
the light of his smile
at the name of a common friend

I remember Cid telling me how he wanted a university library to acquire his books and papers. He wanted a million dollars—"at least one million," he said. And I remember his feeling of sadness over all of this, how there had been no takers, even for a fraction of that. Not bitterness, but a deep sadness. He knew his worth as an editor, writer, and publisher, and mentor for generations of poets, a leading light of 20th century poetics, but academia hadn't quite come to the same understanding, his influence as out of mind as his choice to live for decades in Japan. He had inspired so many, endlessly generous with his time, yet impatient and exacting as soon as it came to assessing poems (I have a few letters that took me to task for one poem or another).

My wife and I had promised to take Cid and Shizumi out to a restaurant (I got the feeling that their finances made this a welcome treat). Here I remember a verse Shizumi contributed to "Sleety Snow," a renga written by twenty poets exactly a year after Cid died. Her only contribution was this: "the memory of us walking / hand in hand" (published in Raffael de Gruttola's *Voice of the Cicada* in 2014). I have a picture of Cid at the restaurant, in his beret, and a picture of me and him together, and a few other photos, including one showing him standing in front of their home's low front door, with a sign on a string saying "CORMAN"—perhaps for our benefit to help us find the place. I also had him write in my haiku autograph book. I asked him to choose a poem that was a favourite of his, and he wrote the following, if I'm reading his handwriting correctly:

I picked a
leaf up

It weighed
my vision

I knelt and
placed it

almost
where it was

Under his name he wrote the date and location and what looks like “quiet souls.” Most likely he wrote “quiet sounds,” but I like to think it was “souls.” Yes.

a view of Fuji
from the starboard window ...
a zephyr of reverie

About two weeks later, after returning to the United States, my wife and I moved from California to Seattle. When we were in Kyoto, Cid and I had talked about my doing an interview with him, focusing on haiku, and I started drafting a long set of questions, to send two or three at a time, expecting answers by aerogramme. But for some reason I never sent the first questions, caught up in starting my new job at Microsoft, house hunting until January of 2003, my wife getting pregnant, and our son arriving in October. And then Cid was gone on March 12 of 2004. I regret never sending him those questions, and still wonder how he might have replied. I immediately thought of these phantom answers when I read at the end of *Quiet Accomplishment*, Gregory Dunne’s memoir about Cid, about him and Dennis Maloney visiting CC’s after Cid’s death. The shop was then being run by Shizumi’s elderly sister, Sachiko. They chose not to ask her about Cid and Shizumi’s graves, leaving her to tend to other customers. Perhaps later he found out where they were. I would like to visit one day.

quiet souls —
 even the gravestones
 catching the wind

POSTSCRIPT

I've learned from Scott Watson that where the Cormans lived is now a two-story apartment building. Bob Arnold has also told me that many of Cid's books went to the Lilly Library in Indiana. "Not a million dollars but as together as possible," Bob said. He also added, when I shared this reminiscence with him, "As for Cid's burial, some was in Kyoto (cremated) and some came here to Vermont where we hiked it up to the highest summit on our woodlot and a stone cairn that was built over a year of daily hikes and a stone brought to the cairn each day. Cid's also up there. Some have made a pilgrimage."

