

Five Years of Death: Cid Corman

Cid Corman was not my teacher in any way that is recognized by the world we live in as being formal or official. He was a guide on the path of livingwriting (sic). It was not only me he guided; there were many before and he was feeding into others at the same time he was helping me.

A poetry guru seems somehow an apt way to refer to him. He said many, many times that poetry is a way of life; he meant it, and he sincerely tried to live life that way, but with poetry there is nothing worldly to gain by that living. He may have moved himself, with poetry, into a state of consciousness in which he became increasingly able to see everything--even nothing--as poetry. He “gu-rew.”

As far as I know, being a poet did not raise him into samadhi or eliminate accumulated karma. It certainly did not put him in a big fine house. Over the years he helped many but none of us donated money to buy him an expensive automobile such as a Rolls Royce (or Mercedes Benz or BMW) which some in the Indian guru-swami-yoga-Veda-biz are riding in these days.

There were things about Cid that were off-putting, and for a few years after he died for some reason negative was the main of what remained. It was as if his huge and at times ugly ego remained behind after death to haunt me. It brings to mind a funeral for Lao-tzu, and it stinks of my own rancor.

During the ten most intensive years of being under his tutelage he battered my aspirations into greatly reduced versions of what they may have been before knowing him. Pounded them into something more dependent on my actuality, which is whatever it is--if anything--and does not demand more than I can be.

His own pitiful and sickening boasts such as “I’m the most productive poet alive” or how everything he did was “the best there is” (which if you hear

once is not so horrible, but over the years hearing these again and again, well, ...) actually may have worked on me as “let that be a lesson to you,” to scare me away from letting my ego go as he had for so long he could not restrain it.

What bitterness there was falls away; it’s been five years since he died. It is my blessing to be able to let all that go, to be able to embrace Cid and love him in a larger way that includes that which I disliked in him.

No matter what or how many his faults may have been, they are celebrated now along with everything else there is to him. Just as we celebrate a sky or moon or flower, mountain rock stream stars--anything that is just what it is--we celebrate Cid.

To take me and other young writers under his wing as he did and nurture us and not ask for anything in return but serious writing, well, that kind of person in this world is not easy to find. Yes, we had to “listen” to him, we had to leave our pride--thinking we are “somebody,” thinking we “know something”--outside the entrance and sit at his knee and listen. (It seemed to me there was something “otherworldly” about that, by which I mean something almost unheard of in our world of ego-driven crass materialism.)

He played “master” writer, played “legend,” and acted his roles well. It was rare that he felt able to relax and just be Cid, forgetting for a moment that everything he said and did might become literary history (as it is here). He seemed to want it--attention as “the poet”--and not want it at the same time. He was resigned to it as he wanted to escape it. Cid knew, as did James Baldwin, its dangers. As it turned out he had it both ways whether he liked it or not.

I had to live my learnings, which is a kind of education that definitely is not going on in the standard, accredited, government approved schools most of us attended and send our children to. It was me doing my work, me “at my words” as Cid called it. He pointed a finger. To have someone give his time, to make an effort, to lift a finger and point it, well, it was to me a blessing. At times a mixed blessing. Still, it meant everything.

He saw something in me. He saw something in everyone--life (whatever that is). He was a loving man. He had his acts he put on, yes. He blew his own horn, he played his violin trying to draw us into his hole (his pecuniary nothingness), but he loved me and loved the others he was connected with. That was not a PR gimmick.

It may be that he was not the world's greatest or most productive poet. I wouldn't know, and don't care much about any of that. Last year a scholar from a university in Kyoto, Daniel Bratton, was here interviewing me about my connection with Cid. His final question to me about Cid was what, in my opinion, is Cid Corman's main contribution to poetry. My immediate answer was DEVOTION. That answer stands, unchanged.

It was maybe the last day of the year when Shizumi Corman telephoned us with the news that Cid had been admitted to a hospital after having chest pains and problems breathing. He needed surgery right away is what the doctors said.

Since the new year Chuck Sandy, who was then living and teaching in Nagoya (and may still be there), and who had been friendly with the Cormans for a little over a year, was sending out emails keeping all Cid's connections updated about his condition. Chuck Sandy had been visiting Cid in the hospital whenever possible. Cid had gone into surgery and had not awakened afterwards.

It was February when some free days opened up for me to go visit Cid in ICU. It did not seem that visiting someone in a coma would do anyone much good but something moved me to go see him anyway.

I arrived in Kyoto around noon and went straight to a hotel in the city's center. The room was ready so I checked in, left my bags, and went out for lunch at a nearby noodle shop. Visiting time for the Intensive Care Unit is

limited. It's twice a day, first at 10 in the morning and then at 6 in the evening, for 20 or 30 minutes each time.

Shizumi and I had arranged to meet in the hospital lobby.

Waiting for 6 p.m., Shizumi and I sit and talk in the lobby at the hospital's main entrance. She tells me what happened on that December night, the year's last. Cid was having trouble breathing. She insisted that they go to a hospital. They went by taxi to that particular hospital because that is where Shizumi's younger brother, Shige, was hospitalized for lung cancer, which was inoperable and which he died of a few weeks after my visit. (Shige-san was manager of the cake and ice cream shop, called cc's, which Cid and Shizumi had started many years ago and which specializes in various American style cakes--in large American sizes at expensive Japanese prices.)

When Cid entered that hospital he went in fully conscious under his own power. At the hospital they did various tests and said that his heart was in very bad condition and that he needed surgery immediately. He was admitted, surgery was performed. It was triple bypass surgery. Other things were done too but I forget what all it was they did. The doctors did something with his lungs because he had fluid in them from pneumonia. I don't understand what happened during the operation but after it was over Cid never regained consciousness.

It's six o'clock. We head for Cid's room in the ICU ward. Before entering the room Shizumi and I have to put on special gowns and masks, wash our hands with special fluid. The ICU seems fairly new.

My first glance at Cid. Even though I'd known for over a month that Cid was in a coma, that knowledge in no way prepared me for seeing him there in his bed. It is an unnerving sight. Never before had I seen anyone comatose. Only on t.v.

His eyes are taped shut. Once in the room a nurse comes to remove the tape from Cid's eyes. The eye taping, the nurse tells me when asked, is to prevent dryness.

Cid's mouth is open and his lips are curled over his gums. His false teeth are out. This makes his jaw look weak and sagging. After being taped closed for so many hours it takes his eyes a while to adjust to being open. Shizumi talks to him as if she were talking to a person who has trouble hearing. She holds his hand, kisses his forehead.

There he is in that bed connected to various machines. Just that morning a surgical team had done a tracheotomy. The breathing tube which before had gone, Shizumi tells me, through his mouth was now piercing directly into his neck. There is a sucking and wheezing sound as a machine pumps air into his lungs and draws it out again. Cid's chest heaves up dramatically then caves in along with the machine's workings. At his mid torso area two transparent tubes come out from under sheets and run down the bed's side to receptacles on the floor. Different color fluids move slowly through each tube: one fluid is brownish, the other amber. There is another tube going into and down a nostril.

Around his bed's head various machines, beeping and blinking, make a semicircle. Shizumi tells me that just after the first surgery the entire bed was surrounded by machines and that to see Cid one or more of the machines had to be moved. Thinking of the machines as beneficent, as keeping Cid alive, is one way of looking at things, an uplifting way maybe. Seen from a different perspective, though, there lies Cid in a cold, metallic, bureaucracy's clutch.

This is a bureaucracy that would not consider the possibility of acupuncture--which is known to be of help in some (but not all) coma cases--because it's "unsanitary." There Cid is, comatose, dying, but his doctor is worried about a possible infection from acupuncture needles.

The head doctor would not permit an acupuncturist trying, even though there are sanitized, sterilized, whatever, acupuncture needles. This hospital-think is a mind set that goes far beyond a hospital's walls; it is a worldwide mental attitude Cid had long tried his best to stay away from, but now he had fallen, fallen into a mechanical "hope," into the hands of a modern medical science that excludes any other approach. It's as if it does not matter if a patient dies so long as medical practice remains orthodox.

One of the machines he is hooked up to is a kidney machine because for some reason there seemed to be kidney failure during the operation. What happened to Cid? Did he have a stroke during the operation? It's difficult for me to understand.

A few weeks after the initial surgery they went in again to insert a pacemaker. His heart rhythm was irregular; the doctor thought it best to use a pacemaker. Now the heart seems to be getting stronger, its rhythm is regular, but Cid does not wake up.

Before going to Kyoto there were as mentioned email updates sent around to Cid's friends and connections by Chuck Sandy in Nagoya. According to these messages there are moments when Cid seems to be conscious and aware of the presence of visitors. Chuck Sandy said that Cid, during these brief moments, could squeeze his hand in answer to various questions. One squeeze for "yes," two squeezes for "no."

Shizumi is very small, not even 5 feet. She has to stretch as she leans over the bed to hold his face and run her hand over his bald head. She tells him she loves him, that he has to wake up, that he's been sleeping too long, that he has much work to do, many poems to write. She tells him Scott is here, that Scott's come a long way from Sendai, that Scott loves him, that Cid loves Scott, that he has to wake up.

I speak to him. It is difficult to find words. It is hard for me to try to speak to someone who might not be hearing me. It is a first experience for me, and seeing Cid--who I'd just assumed would live forever despite all his poems about dying--in that condition is a shock, is numbing.

While it is good to think that he may have moments of consciousness it makes me wonder how would I feel knowing the horror of my own condition. Knowing it, there's not much one can do about it. A positive attitude. That is all. How frustrating though, what a terrifying recognition it must be for Cid if he is indeed aware.

Though not a specialist, it is not obvious to me that he is--even momentarily--at all conscious. There are eye movements, yes. There is something when I hold his hand. Are these signs of consciousness, or are

they involuntary responses to changes in sonic or visual environment, automatic, involuntary responses to voices or any sounds, to any difference in the light between his eyes and the ceiling they stare up at? If I hadn't been holding his hand would the muscles have moved anyway?

I've heard that people who are in a coma are stimulated by being talked to or read to. It seems best to go on as if he can hear, can listen. Just make pretend he can. Shizumi takes out of her bag a little book of poems, poems that Cid made quite some time ago and dedicated to her. It is a book made with Japanese paper, hand sewn, hand bound. Its title is FOR YOU. She asks me to read from it and I do though it isn't a good reading. I am ill-at-ease in these surroundings.

The second day, a Friday. Shizumi and I meet again in the hospital lobby in the morning and we go together for a 10 a.m. visit. Yesterday's edginess has mostly gone. The initial shock seems to have dissipated. For reading on the plane from Sendai to Osaka I had The Portable North American Indian Reader, which contains some selections of Indian poetry. I read a few of those poems and for some reason sense the spirit of William Carlos Williams, a poet whose work had been a personal connection between Cid and I early on in our relationship. My voice is good, clear and resonant, strong with the Williams presence with us.

One very mysterious thing happens during the first visit. I am leaning over Cid, looking into his eyes. His eyes seem to look into mine. Perhaps it is telepathy, perhaps it is my own imagination, I don't know what, but I feel him asking me something, and he seems to repeat the question several times: "Are you going to speak for me?" Telepathically or even in my own imagination I make no attempt to answer. I have no idea what he means, or what the act of being asked something in such a manner means. The fact is that I have no answer and cannot answer. So much for speaking for Cid. Nothing to say.

That afternoon I walk by myself near Kiyomizu Temple along the pottery shop street. I buy a set of man-and-woman tea cups for Morie and I. That night, walking home after dinner along Shijo Avenue, I purchase some incense, the kind that is made into a coil and that burns a long time.

Scott Watson
Sendai, Japan