

Review

Cid Corman's *Root Song*

Hard to tell
 Sky from air
 breath from word—

No special initiation is necessary for the casual reader to pick up and enjoy Cid Corman's latest collection of poems, *Root Song*. The poems are simple and direct, and best of all, completely devoid of pedantic allusions and references. Corman draws his inspiration directly from the raw experiences of life, not from any literary precedents. Yet for the reader who wants to go deeper with the poems, the roots of *Root Song* indeed go deep.

The mood of the entire collection is established in the first four lines of the book:

I picked a
 leaf up

it weighed
 my vision

What Corman attempts to do, and largely succeeds in doing, is weighing his own poetic vision against the world of ordinary experience. A leaf, not man, is the measure of all things.

Corman's basic poetic orientation betrays the fact that he has perhaps spent more time in Japan than any living American poet—some thirty years, most of it in Kyoto no less. Yet unlike much traditional Japanese verse, in which poetic vision tends to lurk *under* the rocks and flowers and trees, Corman occasionally lets his vision soar, never quite allowing it to be totally absorbed by the leaf of common, everyday experience. In digging for the roots, one often finds the transcendent mingling with the imminent, sometimes even penetrating it.

Take for example the implicit mysticism in the frequent poems that make reference to light, especially the one that describes a sunlit peak beyond the "dark fringe of the near hill." In contrast to the darkness the poet finds immediately around him, he is also able to see a distant unapproachable summit, majestically wearing a "crown" of light—a nimbus provided by the sunset.

Corman's poems often reach out for an almost religious sense of transcendence. In "The Rite" he speaks of drinking the sky at sundown as if it were wine. Another poem tells of a prince lifting from a bud "a prayer for the sun" and of the net of heaven being "cast so far— / not one star / escapes it." Yet the religion in these poems—if indeed it is religion—is the religion of nature. Corman gives his thanks in "A Grace for the Meal Coming" not to God but to "the sun, the earth and the earthworm."

Corman writes as a poet who is on intimate terms with nature, as one wanting to dance with a tree like the wind, one able to listen to the rain with familiarity, as one who would see himself going out at sunrise to milk the grass of its dew. Yet the dance, this dance of life is, as Corman writes in "The Psalm," ultimately man's. This is where the transcendence comes in. The sense of spiritual resolution one discovers in these poems comes not from reaching beyond experience to some ineffable reality we can never actually attain, but by reuniting ourselves with ourselves as we are, with the world as it is.

Even when Corman takes up the familiar themes of impermanence and death, he approaches them not with the resigned sigh of *sabi*, but with an awe-struck shout of affirmation. The cherry blossom itself is more important than its falling.

Snow that the wind today
drives horizontal will pass
in a moment into sun;

this we have seen, this we know—
but how moment holds the breath!

Life and death are present together in each moment of existence. We breathe the air in, we breathe it back out.

Corman's imagery is nourishing enough to sustain his fusion of visionary insight with ordinary perception. What is difficult to digest, however, are the gristly abstractions he sometimes mixes in with the otherwise palatable feast. The word "Spirit"—capital "s"—makes its way into two of these poems. In "Sharon" it is identified as a 'green in dream'. Yet the more absolute transcendence becomes the more quickly it evaporates from view. Only more earth bound spirits—small "s"—can have colour. I would also prefer to imbue an autumn leaf floating down a stream with "a life" rather than with Corman's "The Life" Intriguing but ultimately redundant, are the explanatory poems that eloquently spell out what the more image-laden poems have already implied:

I have come far to have found nothing
or to have found that what was found was
only to be lost, lost finally
in that absence whose trace is silence.

For anyone willing to unravel the sophistic wordplay masquerading as poetry, there is undoubtedly some profound philosophy here.

Nonetheless, I find the philosophy agreeable. What these poems celebrate is the immediacy of existence, the affirmation of life, the fulfillment that can be found in the present moment. Everything is just as it should be. Snowflakes fall like the pieces of a puzzle into their proper places, reminding them of the line from Pope's *Essay on Man*: "Whatever is, is right." In Corman's theodicy the problem is not how to justify the ways of God to man, but how to reconcile man with the world in which he lives.

Perhaps it is only when "we have nowhere to get to" that we are at last able to arrive. And the way—capital "w"—is to see, to experience, to live in, and to give a final "Yes!" to the world that is right there in front of us.

Root Song was published by Potes & Poets Press in 1986. It can be ordered through New Leaf Publishing (Shibuya Coop 407,14-10 Sakuragaoka-machi, Shibuya-ku, Tokyo 150) for ¥1500.

--Richard Evanoff

Essay

Classical Russian Poetry: Part II

Alexander Pushkin, whose lyric *Prorok* was translated in the first installment of this series, was born in Moscow in 1799 to an aristocratic family. A precocious talent, he was recognized as a leading poet in his teens. Although he was exiled to various remote parts of the empire in 1820 for displaying too much enthusiasm in his verse for liberal politics, his poetry up to 1825 bears the mark of the optimism that was prevalent among Russian intellectuals in the first quarter of the 19th century. There was a feeling that the land of Ivan the Terrible was slowly but surely plodding along toward the kind of relatively liberal social order that had pervaded the West since the Enlightenment. However, in the last month of 1825 there occurred the "Decembrist Revolt," an abortive coup led by reformist army officers who planned to supplant the Tsardom with a constitutional government. The reaction of the newly crowned Nicholas I was to execute the Decembrist leaders, exile many of those who could be even remotely suspected of sympathizing with them, and to launch the most repressive regime since the middle ages.