Meeting of March 22, 1971— excerpts from the Minutes[1]

TALK
CORMAN

Excerpts from "Haiku and Japanese Culture," a talk by Cid Corman (with some questions and comments by members)

CID CORMAN: … For me poetry is everyday, or it is nothing. The large, dramatic kind of thing interests me much less than the daily thing, than the poetry that occurs at every moment—should occur at every moment, as immediate as this moment As I've often said, we meet together, now; we shall never meet together again. This is a unique occasion, as every occasion is. There is no doubt in my mind that one year hence, one person in this room will be dead. It may be me. Now it puts—it's merely another way of saying something that is familiar to all of us, but that often needs to be said over and over again: that there is an eternity now. That there is no way to put an edge around this moment. It's infinite, in all directions, and even within itself. So that, there is, if you will, a kind of risk we stand always at the edge of, as each breath is always the last breath. And, as a poet, for me, every word takes on the risk of the last word. So that a poem might, imaginarily, perhaps, end anywhere, and be complete, or as incomplete as anything can be, or must be, if you will-nothing, in a sense, is complete in and of itself. And yet, we isolate, we put a frame around things and call it "That," as though it could be "That," only. Nothing is "That" only.

The haiku, which concerns you, which concerns me only in a very broad sense, and unless you see it, I think, in a larger sense, you miss the non-point of it. It's very much like Japan. And it is very much a Japanese thing. It is not American, and can never become American, because the state of affairs in America is simply different. It could not be Chinese. It might be English. But it relates to the nature both of the language and the situation, Now the most notable feature of Japan, to anyone, I think, and to the Japanese—clearly, everything in their culture tells this much—is space … that is, the lack of it. And any Japanese person first coming to America, or to any vast country like America, is struck by the immensity of space, in all directions. The characteristic of Japan is the lack of this—space—and the *need* to extend it. To make what is clearly small, limited, into something immense and endless. That is, to put it back into contact with the universe at large, what we call the universe-and who are we to count up to "one," anyway, calling it the universe? I've never been able to count as high as one.

So that what you're dealing with is precisely this: a world such as the Japanese house, which is so small, the rooms are so small, by American standards, surely. The first

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[1] Adapted from *A Haiku Path,* 37–42.

impression … a friend of mine when I first came to Japan, in 1958, an American friend who had lived there for some time, and who was living in a two-room flat, sharing kitchen and all facilities, very small, with only paper walls between him and his next door neighbor; he was married, to a Japanese woman. (He lives now in America; he teaches at the University of West Virginia.) But, he was keen to have my impressions of Japan immediately: what was striking me as soon as he picked me up at the boat in Kobe, and as we took the train together into Kyoto, where I have lived all these years. He wanted my immediate impressions, just to brighten his own perceptions.

And the first impression, walking into a Japanese house, is you're walking into a doll's house. The scale of things is so different—this room [the library at Asia House in New York City] is a perfect example of the difference in scale. No Japanese room, except in large hotels, Western style, that is, would be designed this way. This is a Western design. It is not a Japanese design. And simply the height of the ceilings, the way—the box form—is not Japanese. Although you're dealing with the box, the box is broken in different ways, so that you cannot see all—that is, in the traditional house—you cannot see all the points at one time. So what you cannot see is always infinite.

The Japanese house immediately becomes like a Chinese box; no matter where you open it up, there seem to be other doors to open. You may be opening the same door again, but you don't know it. You feel suddenly you're going to get lost in such a house. And it's tiny, I mean it's the one place you couldn't get lost in, and yet you can. You can be lost in a Japanese house in a way you cannot be lost in a Western house. The garden may be only slightly … maybe no more than the size of this table top, considering this as a tatami unit—which it almost is, it's a little smaller, this table. And this would be your garden, in the center, let's say. But this garden can be made to seem immense. It will have a proportion to it that's scaled to an immensity, so that you have a vision, you can look at it, as though you were looking at an immense situation. As bonsai, as the dwarf plants, give you that same sensation, of looking at just such a thing.

I remember the first day, morning, I woke up in this place. Apart from the fact that I've written poems about it, and other things, of the sensation of waking up, and even in a poor flat, sleeping on the floor, and waking up and seeing on the *shoji,* on the paper windows, the reflections, the shadows of bamboo, which seemed like a painting. And the sound of the *geta* on the street at that time, not so much today, people at night, when I could hear them going to the bath house—just the sound of it, on the street, it seemed to me it had a very particular, I thought it was, it sounded like horses on cobblestones, but a little bit slower.

When I got up the first morning, in April, in early April, there was snow falling, a little touch of snow, and we lived, the house was near the Heian Shrine in Kyoto, and I walked over there. The young couple was not up yet; I was older than they were. And I

walked over, before breakfast, just to scout the area. I didn't know where I was at; I didn't know what it was, even, that I wandered into. And I wandered in the wrong door. I realized it was, but I thought that might be more interesting. And then I walked in. I was in the garden proper of the Heian Shrine, in back, where they've got an artificial pond. But the way the trees, the pines, had been laid into the gravel, that is, there was no grass or earth, there was gravel covering the earth. And the trees had been trimmed so they shot up, and the branches came down in such a way that you felt that the ground, in fact, was clouds. Because the earth had been obliterated, and you were walking on a uniform earth-space that had been made into white gravel, so that the trees just came out of this just like trees coming out of clouds. This was my sensation. So that it gave the feeling of being in a strange and distant place, a very high place. And then the snow began to fall on the pond. I was alone there.

It took me five years to write a poem about that, which is about five or six words long. It's the opening poem in a small book of poems of mine:

On the swept
pond
the snow sets
out

And just the wind moving across the water, and the snow … just that feeling of the snow, touching the water-that element. And I had at that time never heard of haiku. So that, this kind of feeling … is *there,* it's part of the place.

ANITA VIRGIL: But it's *here* too.

CORMAN: But your space is different. You don't need a little poem, as it were, for America.

HERTA ROSENBLATT: But what about inner space?

CORMAN: Inner space is another thing. But then it wouldn't be haiku, though. I don't—I'm not saying—the short poem is another thing, altogether, of course. The short poem can extend in many ways. If you can sound the inner, that way, do it, do it-if you can do it. It's very difficult.

But there are no rules. For poetry there are no rules. If you can do it, do it. The poems of my friend Robert Creeley when he first sent them to me—I thought My God, you can't do that. But it works. I couldn't explain why it was working, but it was working—I was very much moved by them. But he was doing all the things I had felt you're not supposed to do in poetry. But it worked. And you suddenly realize that there are no rules, that when poetry happens, it happens, and it makes, you make rules to fit the

poem, if you need rules at all. But the thing is, the poet himself finds his own discipline.…

CORMAN: … I remember an interesting thing that happened in Kyoto, oh, about a year—I think it was a year ago. Willem de Kooning came to visit Japan. He was in Kyoto with the man who runs the gallery that features his work, in New York—one of the younger men. I was the only English-speaking person to be invited to this gathering of artists in Kyoto with de Kooning, with the director of the American Cultural Center there. Art was not his particular specialty, and he usually called upon me to help him with visiting artists of one kind or another to help make the artist feel more at ease, and so forth. And all the Japanese artists were friends of mine, as well, so it was a very comfortable situation for me. And none of them spoke any English, so it was useful to have somebody else there. But of course, it was almost expected that sooner or later somebody would put the question to de Kooning: What struck your eyes most in Tokyo? They did, and *they* were thinking, of course, of art works. What had struck him most was a new superhighway, and especially one part where the cloverleaf came in—the color of the thing, and the way it came into an overpass. This was what struck him most in Tokyo. I'm sure they thought he was joking. He was not joking. This is precisely what did strike him most. And he inquired of them, to be sure that that color was the final coating, and not just a temporary coating, and so forth, and no, they assured him they knew that it was the final coating, and he was tremendously impressed by it. But if you know his work, you can see a relationship between this and what he is himself into.

And he was saying—he had gone to the rock garden in Kyoto—he was also saying to me, he said, "Well, it was alright, but … I could go to a beach any day and see that." That's true. But a Japanese couldn't go every day, and have that, do you see? It isn't so simple. So that, if you can create the universe, in your back yard, as it were, that's quite remarkable. Especially when you don't have, like an American does, the universe at his command—or thinks he does.

EDYTHE POLSTER: I want to say something about the difference in reaction. When I was a little girl my father imported pottery and porcelains from all over the world. And I used to get in the car and get the privilege of riding out in Ohio to the potteries with him. And the old craftsmen, who are no longer there, would let me stand over the wheel and watch how they did things, and this impressed me a great deal. When I was in Japan, I went out on a rainy day, to see some potteries near Nagoya. And they were quite mechanized, and they were much more industrialized than the potteries I had visited in Zanesville, Ohio, and so forth, when I was a little girl. And there were these racks and these ovens and everything, and it was raining, and someone offered me an umbrella to go from one building to another, and held it over my head. And when I got over there, everybody ran off the assembly line for a minute, because there was a rainbow.

[general laughter]

POLSTER: Now, I don't think anybody would run off the assembly line *here.* And I said this was a mechanized factory, a factory with ovens and everything. And I use this as an example I bad memories of seeing craftsmen work here, you know, devoted to their work and everything—I can't say they were less skillful—that place has made pottery that will live in American tradition in ceramics—which is no longer being produced in Ohio—but there I was in Japan in a mechanized factory, on a rainy day, and they just walked off the assembly line, ran outside and stood in the rain—marvelous—then went back to work. It was rainbow-break.

[general laughter]

ROSENBLATT: That starts—in the family, at home. It starts with the woman.

CORMAN: That's right. True.

ROSENBLATT: I mean, it's extremely simple. I mean, naturally, you wake up your children, no matter if they are below two, when there is something going on, of this kind, in the middle of the night, when it's the aurora borealis—of course you do!

CORMAN: But in New York City …

ROSENBLATT: Sure you do!

CORMAN: If you can *see* it, yes. You're not usually in a position to see it, but if you happen to be, then …

ROSENBLATT: But there are other things.

CORMAN: Yes. That's true. There are other things.

ROSENBLATT: And that's the point, to me that's the point of the haiku. It's my immediate life, and …

CORMAN: Well, if you can do it, lovely. If you can make it so.

ROSENBLATT: I mean, what good does it do me, to dream of chrysanthemums, when here are dandelions—they're glorious!

CORMAN: That's fine! Sure, there's no question of that.

ROSENBLATT: And that's it, you know, all this—take the general things: sunbeam dust, and it's everywhere, flies, subway crowds, what—your weed at the doorway.

VIRGIL: Isn’t she pleading for American haiku, Mr. Corman?

CORMAN: There’s nothing to plead for. You have to *make* it.