

Bird Droppings
By Michael Ventura
August 3, 1990

my dying teacher could not wipe himself unlike you disciples
who use bamboo I cleaned his lovely ass with my hands
– Ikkyu

There aren't enough great shit-poems in the world, Considering the importance and universality of defecating, this is surprising. The master of the shit-poem was also a master of Zen: Ikkyu (1394-1481) of Japan. You see how, in the great poem about his dying teacher, he mingles sweetness, disgust, love, loyalty, criticism, tenderness and wisdom in just two lines. (Four, actually, in Japanese; but they're very short.) In another brief poem – Ikkyu wrote only brief poems – you can almost see him jumping up and down:

*That stone Buddha deserves all the birdshit it gets
I wave my skinny arms like a tall flower in the wind*

And many years later, a gesture of much greater stillness:

*Age eighty weak
I shit and offer it to Buddha*

And from another period, another mood:

*even if Buddha himself kneeled at my deathbed
he wouldn't be worth shit*

What is shit, anyway? It's important, or every living creature wouldn't need to produce it. There's another obscene about it – not unless Nature itself is obscene. In Ikkyu's poems it is an ultimate test of love, as when he must wipe his teacher; a stern judgment on the pretensions of whoever would mistake a statue for a divine; a worthy offering to a prophet from one with nothing left to give; and something which, with its stench and universality, can humble even the most holy one. Powerful stuff. Worthy of poetry, and of the contemplation of a priest.

Ikkyu was both poet and artist. (In fact, he became the abbot of one of Japan's most sacred temples.) He belongs to a small company of poets: those with whom, after you read just a few lines, you feel as though you can hear their voices, see them walk, watch their faces. Even in translation.

The versions I'm quoting are by Stephen berg, from his new book, *Crow With No Mouth: Ikkyu, 15th Century Zen Master Copper* (Canyon Press, \$9). They were sent me by a woman I met in Las Vegas. These days I get my poems through the mail, because browsing the poetry sections in bookstores is too depressing. Too many thin voices of

poetry-workshop leaders unlearning educations that they shouldn't have tolerated in the first place. So as far as poetry goes, I've stopped searching. And found that when you sit back and let the poems come to you, it's like birds coming to your windowsill.

That was how Ikkyu came. A crow, yes, cawing at the sill. Right there on the first page, he pecked at me:

*if there's nowhere to rest at the end
how can I get lost on the way?*

I walked up and down the apartments with a silly grin on my face, saying it over and over again. Try it. Say it over and over again, It will make you happy.

But happiness isn't peace. Peace is harder:

*peace isn't luck for six years stand facing a silent wall
until the you of your face melts like a candle*

But don't equate peace with calm. That's just a cop-out, Ikkyu says. Peace isn't transcendence – your pain is here to stay. Rather, peace means seeing through the veils and living true to your own nature. Coming to terms with how . . .

*we're lost where the mind can't find us
utterly lost*

Ikkyu writes wonderfully about sex, grief, drinking, feeling stupid, knowing beauty. He writes, as his translator says, as one “skilled in the uses of suffering.” Not an American concept, that. We want to escape suffering, not use it. Escape doesn't interest Ikkyu. He sees no human possibility of ease. Nor is he trying to sell some inflated concept of nirvana:

*wife daughter friends this is for you satori
is mistake after mistake*

He was cranky. Offensive. Compassionate. Unafraid. He shocked everyone at the temple when, as an old man, he fell in love with a young blind girl. She was a singer. They had a great time. He wrote sweet poems about them going down on each other. And that must have been when he came to this conclusion:

*don't hesitate get laid that's wisdom
sitting around chanting what crap*

Oh, Ikkyu, you old crow – you perched at my window and flew around my house, dropping crow-crap on all my favorite things. Why can't you be politely wise like Rumi and Kabir? They didn't find it necessary to shit on my head. But they're comfortable – they're so impossibly enlightened that they're safely beyond me. But you? You don't want me to be nice or holy, much less wise. You want me to be more alive. Get into trouble. Make mistakes. State at the wall. Fuck instead of chant. Wipe somebody's ass

with my hands (I'm not sure I'm ready for that – I'm not even sure I wanna be.) And here you are now with some more feces, telling me:

*it takes horseshit to grow bamboo
and it too longs forever weeps begs to the wind*

Another poem-bird came to my window not too long ago. A quieter bird than Ikkyu, but just as uncompromising. Cid Corman. A piece of mine got to him, and he wrote me a letter. It had been many years since I'd heard his name, much less read his poems. I vaguely knew that he'd lived in Japan for decades (the letter was from Japan) and that he was involved with Buddhism. He was part of the generation of Ginsberg, Creeley, Snyder and McClure – one of the people who helped give my generation its voice. It was an honor to be greeted by him. In thanks, I lit him a candle on my altar.

That altar was becoming a problem. It had been ages since I'd dusted it. There were umpteen candles, photographs, stones, bits of this and that. It was a mess. But I didn't have the will to tend it. I was a mess, too, that spring. To clear the clutter from the altar, and from myself, seemed one and the same task. I knew that if I began with the altar, I'd have to continue with myself, and I hadn't the courage.

Anyway, I wrote Cid Corman back, and very quickly received from him another letter and two of his books: *In Particular* (Cormorant Books, 1986) and *Aegis* (Station Hill Press, 1983). I opened *In Particular* to:

Too many things on the altar.

A petal would do.

Or the ant that stops for a moment at it.

It was as though a fresh wind had blown through my hair. Somehow his poem gave me what Doris Lessing would call the "moral force" to tend the altar, which inevitably meant examining what was clotting unexamined within me and weighing me down.

I took the books everywhere, needing the crisp yet tender clarity of Corman's diction. These were cleansing poems.

Though I wouldn't have admitted it, I was still harboring some expectation of a peace that transcends pain. Corman helped separate me from that delusion. From *Aegis*:

*No one is content –
for every breath
a breath is wanted.*

And he reminded me, in the grip of what was very dangerous solitude, of how community works:

*You quote my own words to me
and I think they must be yours –*

*they are beautiful. Of course,
they are yours – as they return
through your affection. I wish
all our words could be so shared.*

I'm telling you about this just to say: that even in this noisy excuse for a culture, with so much chaos, ugliness and raging pain, where artists have become just another special-interest group clamoring for their sticky piece of the tax pie, where the book publishers and music makers are owned by soft-drink companies and oil conglomerates, where so many poets and thinkers retreat to universities, where the state pays them to stay away from the people -- even now, there are some universities where the state pays them to stay away from the people -- even now, there are some poem-birds flying about, like Ikkyu and Cid Corman.

They speak in clear voices. They aren't intimidated. They can sing from the grave. And they don't just bitch about their life and hard times. They give you the benefit of their experience, as Charles Olson might have put it, *FOR USE!*

Cid Corman wrote one of those verses that makes me get out of my chair, put on my hat, and walk around the block saying it over and over, smiling. It's marvelous for when you're confronted with both the well- and ill-intentioned who try to explain you to yourself according to the limits they want you to have (which are invariably theirs). Now, just when I begin to believe them, here comes Cid with:

*Don't tell me
who I am
let me guess.*