

*Something  
Other  
Than  
Other*

By Philip Rowland, Isobar Press, 2016

Review by Taylor Mignon

While Joseph Massey's quotation on the back cover of this volume—"You can't step in the same Philip Rowland poem twice"—holds true, a few of Rowland's poems invoke the atmosphere of Cid Corman's poetry. A friend once remarked reading Cid's poetry is like "stepping into a bottomless void." What with all those abstract nouns and lack of adjectives to speak of... Here's a quatrain from Rowland with only two adjectives:

out of thin air  
and in the thick of it  
whatever we might think  
however thin the seeming thread

Just as Corman remarkably often turned an idiom on its head, so does Rowland manage to pull off two clichés. This is a compliment, because Cid's influence on twentieth and twenty-first century poetry continues to be strong—particularly in respect to his role in shaping the genre of the short poem.

From his seminal journal *Origin*, and the championing of objectivism and beyond, to his well-respected versions of Matsuo Basho, Corman's mark can often be felt when reading short poetry these days. Yet when contemporary poets seem to mimic his voice, the result is usually compositions with a poetic spirit devoid of humor and a whiff of holier-than-thou-ness.

Returning to the poetry of Philip Rowland, the first thing that caught my attention with this volume is the title, where the vertical positioning on the cover begs that it also be read as an acronym spelling "soto," which in Japanese means "outside," or even "other." The second eye-catcher is the front cover artwork by Onchi Koshiro – "Impromptu No. 1 – Wet Pavement."

Beyond the cover is a page entitled "Vocabulary," where this little gem stands of itself: "where my vocabulary clouds clouds," showing Rowland's occasional self-deprecation among other nuances of humor.

An instance of literal and physical depth and a purposeful vagueness is expressed with: "deep within / the falling snow / a truer word for it" – as though by not naming it, it becomes named.

What sets apart Rowland from the Cormanimalistic school is his sense of humor – he has a sharp eye for it. "Snow" is an example of a short vision worth a chuckle: "a woman going bald reading a poem."

This one sends shivers up the spine, similar to how a Nagata Koi haiku would:

dark  
cloud  
  
some  
sunlight  
  
sieved  
over  
  
darker  
sea

Among the suite of poems titled, "Night Shift," are meditations on clocks in winter in empty classrooms, cherry blossom petals ("returned to sender") and a hyper-surrealistic eyeball out of its usual surroundings. Some of the poetry is syllabic ("after / love" and "dark / i / am"), there are a few examples of concrete poetry and there's even a list poem, the hilarious "Photos of Poets," seriously taking the piss out of pretentiousness.

One of the most thought-provoking poems might be:

under closed circuit  
surveillance

old snow

on an island  
in the pond

It evokes Basho with the words "old" and "pond" in a new context. Bewilderment occurs as enlightenment is exchanged for contemporary paranoia and bureaucratic absurdity.

Philip Rowland manages to reinvigorate the genre of the short poem itself with fleeting, nuanced, well-caught deep thoughts; and pointed, outstanding images – while not taking his work too seriously – which adds a rare joy and charm.