

## Kirby Congdon

I did not know English, was deaf and tongue-tied when I started school. My Norwegian mother quickly switched to her excellent English, a doctor slit the offending cord under my tongue and my hearing was taken care of. But I am still learning how to handle the English language, to speak up, and trying to listen to the other side of the story.

My literary bent started in the third grade when my teacher took me aside and gave me a "Scribblin' Book," a blank-paged book for me to write poems in. (My first understanding of arithmetic was that every combination of figures had to be memorized like a Japanese script, rather than counted out on one's fingers. I never got much beyond that in the technological world.) Drawing, music and poetry all interested me until the newspapers began printing my poetry when I was discharged as a World War II draftee. I went to Columbia College and Columbia University but I was not suited to be a lawyer, doctor or Indian Chief. I was offered a position to teach English in middle America but life in New York was more provocative. (However, the very first roommate that I met as a freshman at Columbia was a Graduate Student in English who spent his retirement years fifty years later compiling my bibliography.) I made a living, instead, as a typesetter for the Brooklyn Heights Press newspaper, for several encyclopedia houses, as an assistant editor and at a literary agency where I met the novelist Bryher, Hilda

Doolittle and Marianne Moore, took a poetry writing course from Stanley Kunitz, and got an encouraging word from E. E. Cummings.

A lover and I started a small press, Interim books, with my first collection of poems about machines in the city. We printed poets of the period. (The Beats were most active then. Their new ideas were influential, but my own work is not in their tradition.) We had one-man shows of our art-work in Greenwich Village. At this time I unexpectedly inherited mortgages on three properties in New York and Key West when my partner died at age 54. Ralph Simmons, who was renting a room in our house then, helped me to pay up all the morgages over the next twelve years. He and I kept up the small-press activities adding the name, Cycle Press. He and I moved to Key West permanently in 1986, keeping a summer house at Fire Island Pines, until his death in November, 2009.

The University of Washington in Seattle collected my work in depth until the Head Librarian's death around 1984. Texas University was arranging to send a representative about taking on my papers but the University of Kansas (which has collected my work in depth) felt these should go to them as a voluntary extension of their collection. The conflict gave me a stroke on November 22nd, 2008 and I closed the discussion as too stressful.

My philosophy in regard to poetry is that our nation, with its influx of languages has a native talent for it which should be acknowledged as early as possible in everyone's growing up and in their education. I believe the American

tradition of success and competition does not belong in creative activities because we are individuals, not racing for the top in a game. While standards should be recognized, the emphasis on academic and commercial recognition is misplaced because judgement is too often prejudiced by a word-brand kind of reputation instead of by actually reading the work for its own sake. While we take the time to read novels and create our own opinions about them, we do not feel all that comfortable in referring to poetry in conversation when it has been kept at a distance for so many of us for so much of our lives.

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