

James Randall

An Interview with Bill Knott

The following interview took place on two occasions in July of this year at my apartment in Cambridge. Bill Knott drank instant iced tea, as is his custom, and talked easily once we had started. Knott is the author of nine books of poems, most of them published by small presses, beginning with the Naomi Poems; Corpse and Beans published in 1967 and up to the Selected Poems which is expected to have been published by the time this interview appears. He has been the Poet in Residence at Emerson College for the past two years, but is currently unemployed and looking for a job.

JR. Will you tell us something about your early life?

BK. Well, I lived in Michigan on a farm, and I lived in a city for a while—I lived in an orphanage for eight years.

JR. Where was the orphanage?

BK. In Illinois, near Aurora. I was about 15 or 16 when I got out of there.

JR. What were you writing then and who were you reading?

BK. Oddly enough I remember who I was reading and what I was reading when I tried to write my first poem. It was on a bus going to school, this was the Fifties, and they were putting out *New World Writing*. I lived in a very small town, about 1200-1400 people, but those *New World Writings* got around to all the drugstores. So I got one of them and I was reading a poem by John Logan about Rimbaud—and that really sparked something in me and I started writing in the margins. Then when I got out of the army—I had been in the medics at Fort Knox—I went to Chicago, and it just happened that Logan was teaching an adult education poetry workshop there for

the University of Chicago. So I took it.

JR. How did you do with Logan?

BK. At first, very bad. I had poems when I went, but he told me they were all lousy and that shocked me a lot. I stayed in his course for a year and a half, and I didn't hand anything in the entire first semester, but in the second semester I got my bravery up and I wrote a couple of new poems and handed them in, and then I went one more semester, and then I went to his private workshop, and he began to like my poetry.

JR. What were you reading then?

BK. Creeley had a great effect on me. I tried to write like him for five or six months. I was also reading Bly's *The Sixties*. About 1962 or 1963 it was James Wright who I really liked. He was working on *The Branch Will Not Break*, and I saw parts of it in magazines. They said the book was going to be published that spring but spring came and the book wasn't out, so I wrote to the publisher. They told me it had been delayed a year. I can remember being with some other poets and we were sad about that because we needed the book right then.

JR. What about European writers, particularly the Surrealists? Which of them did you like?

BK. My interest in them was based on a few poems I had seen translated in different places and mainly in Wallace Fowlie's *Mid-Century French Poets* which was out in paperback at that time. I liked Desnos and Paul Eluard, but I liked all the poets in that book at various times. Cocteau is in there—I was fascinated by him. And Michaux.

JR. Do you consider yourself a Surrealist? So many American poets seem to think the term is damaging now, and they don't want it pinned on them.

BK. I guess it's a term I don't want pinned on me either. It's obviously had an effect on all 20th century art, so if I'm an artist in the 20th century it's had an effect on me, and at various times in writing it has had a greater effect

on me than at other times. I tried to write surrealist poetry for that book *Nights of Naomi*, and maybe the book *Aurealism* too. When you ask what kind of poet I am I say well, it depends on what poem of mine is the example. I try to write all different kinds of poems. I tried to write Surrealism, I tried to write the anti-poem, then I tried to write *poesie pure* from the French, Mallarme type poems.

JR. When you write different kinds of poems it must give you an anonymity of sorts?

BK. Right.

JR. You mentioned to me once before that you don't believe in putting the stamp of yourself on your poems.

BK. Right. My "I," my first person, is with very few exceptions not the empirical "I," it's not based on any experiences that I've had.

JR. And you used the pseudonym of St. Geraud for your first book.

BK. Yes, the hero of a French pornographic novel. He was the head of an orphanage who debauched his charges. I didn't consciously make the association with my own orphanage at the time, but perhaps there's something in it.

JR. Do you feel the orphanage experience is something that marred your life?

BK. Well, not marred it but shaped it. It's very complicated and very hard for me to think about it, and perhaps it has something to do with de-personalization because certainly in the orphanage you have no identity per se and no parents to identify with. The orphanage that I was in was run by the Loyal Order of The Moose for children of members who had died. It's a big place—they call it Mooseheart. It's about 1200 acres, a whole community to itself. You couldn't go off the place but had to stay within its boundaries. The boys had to drill with rifles with the firing pin removed from about the 7th grade on through 12th grade. During the summer we had

parades every Sunday.

JR. You haven't mentioned anything about your parents?

BK. Well, it's hard to remember my mother. She died when I was about six and my father died when I was about 11. You don't have to be a total orphan to go to Mooseheart.

JR. So you were at the orphanage, then you went into the service. What year did you get out?

BK. I lived a year with my uncle before I was seven, then after the orphanage I lived with him again before I went into the service. I got out in 1960.

JR. After you left Logan's class, how did you get your first book published? *The Naomi Poems*.

BK. I kept writing and kept sending out poems. And Paul Carroll, I think it was in 1966, asked me for a book. I didn't think he meant it, then six months later he said, hey, where's the book? He was just getting Big Table started. He was a good friend of Logan's in Chicago and must have heard about me from Logan.

JR. And when did you get to know Bly?

BK. I sent some poems to him before the book, and he took a few of them and we had a little correspondence. I remember I sent him a year's worth of poems for him to comment on, I think this was in 1964, and it was about fifteen pages of work. And he sent back two pages and he said, "This is the poetry," and what he had done was taken every poem and cut out everything he thought was no good and left what was good.

JR. You agreed with him then?

BK. Well, I was upset at first, and then I accepted his editing of some of the material, and some of them went into the book as he edited them—as he cut them down. Some of the shorter poems.

JR. And you published others in their original form?

BK. Well, I may have revised them, and reworked them, and rethought them. I'm sure I did that, maybe put them into a new context. Because I don't write out of personal experience, I keep notebooks and I have lines and images

and I keep searching for where I can put them in. So it seems I can never start a poem and know what it's going to be about before I finish it, know what's going to be in it.

JR. I remember your losing some of the notebooks on the bus one time in 1968 and how unhappy you were. How many do you have now?

BK. I've got probably 100 by now. I have lost some of them over the years. I mine them when I'm putting a poem together. So the finished poem is an amalgam of varying moods and even language. Because I'm often trying to write the pure poem and often the impure poem I try to jam them together sometimes and maybe it works and maybe it doesn't.

JR. This tends to make your poems epigrammatic doesn't it?

BK. Yes, it does.

JR. How would you characterize writing today?

BK. There's a kind of lull because in Michael Hamburger's phrase it's a period "loose at all ends." All sorts of poems are being written and poets are wandering within their own work. What kind of society is better, one that has ten poets or one that has ten thousand? It almost seems that up until mid-century America only had ten poets.

JR. And do you feel that in that kind of situation you wouldn't have been one of them?

BK. Definitely. If I had been born in the '20s in the same circumstance I wouldn't have been a poet. I wouldn't have been able to write and get published.

JR. I'm interested in the idea of whether or not there is a community of poets. Do you send your poems to other poets for criticism or see other poets?

BK. Well, I keep in touch with Tom Lux. I've exchanged poems with Erica Jong through the mail, before she got famous. Recently I've shown poems to Anne Barbernitz who teaches at Emerson College.

JR. What poets of your generation do you particularly enjoy

reading?

BK. Well, Jong, Wakoski, Simic, Marge Piercy—I like her poetry a lot—and Tate if he gets back to the Midwest. Lyn Lifshin is a marvelous poet.

JR. What do you admire about Erica Jong's work?

BK. She has a gift for dealing with very complex issues and in a sort of style which is not heavy-handed but substantial and open, approachable by the reader. She has an epigrammatic style sometimes and a good sense of comedy.

JR. And what about say Diane Wakoski?

BK. I like the "Ice Eagle," that poem I like. And I like the poem about the invisible telephone booth, and the one where she has a bullet for all her lovers, and so on. I think she writes too much, but when I say that I mean I just feel a frustration because I can't afford to buy all her books. And I saw her one time and I asked her if she was going to put out a selected poems and she said I don't need to put one out because all my books are in print, and I didn't say to her, "Diane, I can't afford to buy all those books," but I really would like a book of her best poems to have them all together.

JR. What do you think about Simic?

BK. Yes, he's really important. His Slavic sensibility mated with the American is very interesting and Codrescu also. I've read, say, Vasko Popa, the Yugoslav poet, in Simic's translation and in the Penguin edition, and Simic is a better poet. Being a Yugoslav gives Simic an angle, a slant, an approach to the language, and being an American gives him a more open, prairie sense, I think.

JR. Getting back to your own work, do you think each book is a different thing from the last?

BK. Well, I'd like to think that. Whether that's true or not I leave up to others to judge. It seems like after my first book, which was a kind of potpourri, I had a main idea or style in mind for each one. But sometimes the styles overlap. I get into periods where I'll do something for six

months but then I'll do something else for six months, but then it'll take two years to put the book together so I guess really the books are not so unified and there might be three or four different styles, or different kinds of poems.

JR. What about a specific book, say your last one?

BK. Well, *Rome in Rome* seems to me to have a lot of poems based on Polish models, Zbigniew Herbert, Thaddeus Roszewicz, the lean thin lines, the lower case, ironic, abrupt, elliptical—sort of a combination of slimy and elliptical at the same time. The Barrabas poem, the get-in-line poem, the inch giver. Then other poems got into the book, "Mother's List of Names," "Procrustes Lullaby," which aren't in that style. They were written when my Polish enthusiasm had waned.

JR. Dying and death are more subjects, what about the style of those poems?

BK. Well, it may sound funny but I tried to get a style using written sentences that would carry over into the colloquial language.

JR. I think a number of poets have had something like that in mind. What personal obsessions do you have in your work?

BK. Failure. Loneliness. They are usually the main theme. Measurement, I may be wrong but it seems to me that I have a lot of poems about measuring.

JR. Is it a kind of caution on your part that you measure?

BK. Right. I'm very much of a plodder, an incher. I write someplace that "I advance a few whines and am driven back twice as many whimpers." It seems like I always want to know how many steps have I taken, is it one or two? I'm here, how far is it to there.

JR. You speak of your new Sun Press book as a selected and a collected. What do you mean by that?

BK. Well, I wanted to make my selected only 55 pages and one publisher told me that I can't do that, it has to be 120 pages to be a selected poems. So I went with Bill

Zavatsky and I picked my 55 pages and we picked the rest to make the collected part. So it's really 2 books in one.

JR. I want to talk about another matter, your humorous poems. These are the anti-poems, or in that category, and I have heard you make even a high school audience laugh and feel happy about poetry. These are the crowd pleasers, and they show something of your range.

BK. About the range, I remember something Robert Bly wrote in *APR* where he said that I had staggering powers of feeling and intuition. He was talking about the four balances that you should have like the four spokes of a wheel: reality, intellect, feeling and intuition. He said I had staggering powers of feeling and intuition but I didn't have much intellect in the poems. And that kind of pleased me because I work very hard to put feeling and intuition into poems. I don't have much emotion, much passion. I'm kind of a cold fish, aloof and distant, and I know that it has a lot to do with the orphanage and being isolated and living in dormitories, and I'm shy and find it hard to speak to people. But I want my poems to be balanced, so I make a conscious decision, Okay, this is what you lack, so put in emotion, put in feeling, you don't want the poems to be cold.

JR. What about people in your poems, do you feel there is a variety of them?

BK. That's a problem, that's a real problem all right. I wish I could write more about people. Lots of poets write—practically every poet—poems about their relatives, their mother or their father, uncles, aunts, deaths and marriages. Not growing up with relatives, not seeing your parents every day, I didn't have that to write about.

JR. Do you know any people today from the orphanage?

BK. Well, I was taken out of the orphanage. I had a sort of breakdown and I was put into the state mental hospital at 15, and I spent ten months there and then I went up to my uncle's farm.

JR. Did they give you any treatment there?

BK. No, this was in 1955, and they didn't have any of the drugs that they give today. It was just custodial. There wasn't a great deal of difference between the custodial care of the mental hospital and the orphanage. It was just more dangerous in the mental hospital because of the other patients.

JR. You do have a reputation for being a loner. Do you think it's because of institutional living which is supposed to encourage a kind of . . .

BK. It certainly encourages withdrawal into oneself. But I'm not a "loner" if being that means it's *my* choice to be alone. I'm alone because no one wants me around—they reject me—so "rejectee" is more apt than "loner."

JR. Yet you do teach a marvelous course, and your students feel a great respect for you. There is a very positive side to impersonality in life and in poetry.

BK. I agree with you. I think a poet should try not to be trapped in the prison of self, should try to enlarge his imaginations and personalities to include as much as possible of the zeitgeist, of what is going on.

JR. Of course no one seems quite sure of what is going on right now.

BK. A lot of poets have certainly stopped writing political poems and have gone into art for art's sake. I love the hermetic poets, Quasimodo, Ungaretti, Mallarmé. I love that kind of metaphysical nonreferential type of poetry because I think it really liberates poetry to be itself, Paul Celan, Gottfried Benn, etc. But as Michael Hamburger says, to mention him again, most twentieth century poets battle it out with themselves, the pull between the cooked and the raw, the Apollonian and the Dionysian, aristocracy and democracy. A poet like James Merrill goes too much over to the purist side and Bukowski leans too far toward anti-poetry. I try to swing back and forth between the two, trying to write poems that everybody can read and writing poems for people who know about

the modern poem and are alert to its fluctuations since Baudelaire and Rimbaud.

JR. How many copies of *The Naomi Poems* did they sell?

BK. I don't know but they did have 10,000 copies in print. And I think they did three printings. All the other books have been small limited printings. I had a contract from Big Table for *Love Poems to Myself*, but they folded. So I sent out letters to all the big places and asked if they were interested. I only got a couple of replies and both of them said send it in, we would like to see it, but even if we take it, we are full up until 1984 or some such.

JR. It does seem strange that a poet whose first book was selling so well would have trouble getting people to look at a second book. It shows how much the small press scene was needed. But let's leave that and go in another direction. Do you think there's little sense of history in the Midwest and the West?

BK. Oh certainly less than in the East. No doubt about it.

JR. Not to press this too far because there are so many differences, apart from the generation difference, but what would you say about James Tate and Robert Lowell?

BK. Tate does "It's not the heat so much as the humidity" which is a great poem, I think, and Lowell does "Ode for the Union Dead" which is another great poem. Maybe the difference between those two poems is partly the difference between the New England sensibility and the midwestern sensibility. We look at the New England sensibility and the New England experience as elitist whether you are a Lowell or not. And everyone in the Midwest knows that they are losers, which I think comes out in Tate's poem. But if they are losers then they are not going to try to grab on to that New England type of stuff; they are going to stay with what they know. I think Tate's best poems come out of the midwestern sensibility, and I don't think I can define it more, but I know it exists.

JR. Do you think there is some kind of affinity between the

French and the Midwest?

- BK. Well, I forgot to mention that when I was with Logan I was imitating not only Creeley but Robert Lowell. Something that Kenneth Rexroth said struck me, in an essay on translation. He said that young American poets should try to write like foreign poets because 3,000 poets are writing Creeley poems or Ginsberg poems. I thought that if I tried to imitate Yessinin or Paul Eluard or Desnos or whoever, that I would imitate what they wrote about but I couldn't really do it in their voice, since it was in another language. So I would use my own mid-western voice.
- JR. In a way I think people like James Laughlin of *New Directions* and Robert Bly with *The Fifties* and *The Sixties* magazine have done an awful lot to make foreign writers accessible to anyone.
- BK. Yes, I think one of the things people of my generation have in common is the translation explosion. It's a global village phenomenon—a six o'clock news phenomenon, seeing the Vietnam war on TV, knowing what's going on in Pakistan. The good poets were never isolated but most of the publishing houses were isolationist. About five or six years ago the anthologies started coming out of Japan. I've got four or five of them. And I was thinking, why all of this sudden interest in Japanese poets? And I wonder if it has anything to do with the fact that Japan is very rich these days. We are watching Japanese television sets, thus we read Japanese poetry.
- JR. What about morality? Do you think a lot of New England poetry owes a lot to Emerson, to the poet as teacher idea? Is part of the idea the "Midwestern Loser" as you call him that he can trade his soul for a joke and get it back again as readily? Is there less moral fiber?
- BK. I think it is a valid criticism. When you said that to me, immediately all my poems with a moral flashed into my mind, but I feel like I'm getting defensive.

- JR. I'm not sure what I said was meant as criticism, but anyway, what particular poem flashed into your mind?
- BK. Well, "S.S. Priscilla or the Marvels of Engineering" which I sub-title "a fatal fable" seems to me to have a moral. I create a myth about the way men make mythological monsters or objects out of women. How can I end the poem but with everybody dying of the shipwreck?
- JR. Yes, and your poem about the dead child again; that certainly has a kind of moral power to it. But what about other poems that expand a reader's perception but don't tell him to do anything?
- BK. Well, certainly a lot of surrealist poems and of my own try to expand a reader's imagination and my own to see that there's poetry all around. I'm thinking about O'Hara here and Williams too. Poetry doesn't have to be about exotic subjects but can be about things close at hand, the miracle of a glass of water.
- JR. When you get your subject, your glass of water or S.S. Priscilla, and your tone or midwestern point of view, how do you handle things such as line breaks?
- BK. I revise my line breaks quite a bit. If I change a word or add a word to the tenth line, it means I'm going to have to go back and change a line break on the second line because it seems out of balance, the flow of it off.
- JR. Is that a feeling, an intuitive kind of thing?
- BK. I would say that it's an intuitive thing, but also I guess that it's my being semi-conscious of the look of the poem on the page. If I'm writing about a setting that's bleak and bare and hopeless, the lines will be shorter and there will be fewer words and fewer modifiers, and if I'm sort of lyrical and flowing, the lines will naturally come longer.
- JR. And when you write a prose poem what do you feel about line breaks?
- BK. Well, with a prose poem I don't care about the line breaks. I leave that up to the printer. But like combining pure and impure poetry I would like to combine poetry

and prose in a work. Robert Graves translated *The Iliad* doing that. Robert Bly sort of did it in his last book when he said he was going to break off from the poems to write down some prose. James Tate did it in "The Distant Orgasm." Marianne Moore. I've never been very successful at it, that's for sure.

JR. How do you feel the reviewers have treated you? I remember Jim Harrison reviewed your first book in the *Times*, I think, and praised it and particularly praised the poem on the child's grave.

BK. That was nice of him. I remember a review in *Tri-Quarterly* but I can't remember who wrote it, but the reviewer said it wasn't as good as Chaucer's poem about a dead child (laughs).

JR. If you're expected to measure up to Chaucer

BK. I'm never going to make it. But I thought it was as good as some of the epigrams in the Greek anthology, and I don't mean to blow my own trumpet but I would compare it to them rather than to Chaucer.

JR. Most of the poems in the Greek anthology can be paraphrased but yours can't, and that's why I consider it a romantic epigram, because it is inexhaustible. Much like a symbol.

BK. Well, I've read some poets and some critics who say poetry is what can't be counter-phrased. I don't believe that at all. I'd be happy if anyone would paraphrase my poems.

JR. Some of your poems can be paraphrased and some can't.

BK. Maybe the ones that can are the good ones.

JR. There are different types of poems, Keats and Pope.

BK. Certainly "Ode to a Nightingale" would be hard to paraphrase.

JR. And some Simic, if not most. And James Tate.

BK. Yes, definitely. When I say some of my poems can be paraphrased, I'm thinking of the ones—going back—that have morals. I'm thinking about the poem from *Rome in Rome* where the prisoner gets a cake. And fol-

lowing the cliché he ruins the cake to see if there is a hacksaw in it, where the message that told him how to escape was written out on top of the cake, like "Happy Birthday" in the icing. He resorted to the cliché rather than looking at what he had, and that idea can be paraphrased.

- JR. That applies to most of your funny poems, but what about the purist poems?
- BK. They can be paraphrased in that they can be paraphrased around, they can be looked at from various angles and you can say well that means that and this means this, but the meaning remains fluid or refracted.
- JR. What about the lines "I call my goodbyes home in the dusk"? Are those lines from the notebooks?
- BK. Yes. That poem was put together from several different places. I had the idea of poets examining themselves and the idea that we will find out something about the poet's eye if we tear our eyelashes off because poets are always turning their eyes inward and looking at themselves without the eyelashes, and you get a visual image of the eyeball turning around and looking inside. And the eyelashes aren't there to soften the gaze.
- JR. It's a harsh kind of image that gives a reader a kinesthetic response. Like the eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckelburg in *The Great Gatsby*, that are merciless.
- BK. Maybe what I was saying in the poem to paraphrase around it, is that poets are too hard on themselves, or maybe I'm too hard on myself, that I should look at myself through my eyelashes to try to soften, instead of trying to find the "naked" truth.
- JR. Does that fit in with the softness of calling your goodbyes home in the dusk?
- BK. Yeah, I'm calling home my goodbyes. I don't want to say goodbye to the world out there. So I call them home, and I will look at the world, I won't just look inward at myself. And looking out at the world through the eyelashes will have a softening effect.

- JR. Another thing I'd like to mention is that you don't have many end stopped lines, and sometimes there is a jolt for the reader because he thinks he is still in one sentence where he is really in another one or might be.
- BK. Thanks to Mallarme. He separated the modifier from the noun by about three lines and in order to understand one you had to go back and look for the other. It pulled the reader back and forth to conquer time and rhythm.
- JR. You're very conscious of the reader's span of attention?
- BK. Yes. I usually try to throw in a good image in the first or second line. I don't want to use the opening in exposition which I save for later. I want to grab the reader right away.
- JR. And what about your endings? Calling your goodbyes home in the dusk is strong.
- BK. Yes. But I use weak endings too. I remember reading Nicanor Parra in the late sixties—I'm thinking of *The Viper*—and in a lot of the poems the endings just peter out, throwaway endings. I've done that sometimes. And I like sometimes to throw away the best images, the best lines, in the middle of something else, and I don't give the reader enough time to pay attention to them.
- JR. But you are pleased when someone responds to them?
- BK. Right. I used to just hate exposition. I used to say that if I have to indicate that it takes place here, or that this is going on, I'm just wasting my time. I just want to throw in my best images and to hell with the connectives.
- JR. Is this like Bly cutting your pages down to two and a half?
- BK. Right, just the essence of it, forget about the exposition, just the good lines. Forget about the reader getting the flow and understanding what is going on, forget the narrative element, just toss in the gems and let them shock the reader and reverberate back and forth against each other. I've sort of changed my mind on that.
- JR. But not wholly?
- BK. Not wholly. That poem about calling my goodbyes

24 RANDALL

home is still kind of a hermetic poem, kind of a post Ungaretti poem. But I'm not trying to be either a pure poet or an impure these days.