

Thomas Lux

For Bill Knott:
In Celebration and Anticipation
of His *Selected/Collected Poems* *

I first read some poems of Bill Knott's in magazines nearly 10 years ago, in the Fall of 1967. I was a sophomore in college. I remember being stunned by the passion and mystery of the poems. At that time I'd only been reading contemporary poetry with any direction for a year or so but I sensed something that I hadn't come across before: a poetry that could be imaginative and make direct statements at the same time. There was an intensity to the speech of the poems yet I never doubted that they could be spoken by a real human voice. In the Spring of 1968 his first book, *The Naomi Poems: Corpse and Beans* (Big Table), was published under the pseudonym of St. Geraud 1940-1966. I was further stunned and delighted. I wore out a number of copies. I've re-read the book many times since then, taught it, recommended it to countless friends and students, etc. Re-reading it now, carefully, tuning my eye and ear to *harsh*, I find I can still report, joyfully: stunned. The best poems in this first collection — and there are many — confront the reader with their directness and imagination. The language is simple but rich. The "messages" are often very sensory and there is seldom confusion over what the poet is trying to say. This short poem (entitled "Poem") is certainly not in need of deep literary analysis, and no text-creeping (to use a favorite term of Theodore Roethke's) is necessary to figure its point:

The only response
to a child's grave is
to lie down before it and play dead

*Sun Books, N.Y.C.

The grief over the death of a child is so deep that we might as well pretend (as a child might “play” dead) we’re dead also. Not the most difficult thing to say or write. But, the manner in which Knott gets this poem to us is something else. We are placed into the poem by the image of ourselves — because the poem is said to whomever reads it — lying down before a child’s grave. We also get the further definite association with thousands of dead children and thousands of graves because the content of many of the other poems in the book tells us Knott is thinking of Viet Nam. The poem works both ways. In three short lucid lines. There are many fine poems in this book written in protest of the war, written without rhetoric, didacticism, and certainly without the attitude of *Ain’t-I-great-because-I-hate-the-war-in-Viet-Nam*. They’re poems of anguish and frustration because the poet takes responsibility — simply because he is an American — for the war himself:

I’m tired of murdering children.
 Once, long ago today, they wanted to live;
 now I feel Vietnam the place
 where rigor mortis is beginning to set-in upon me.
 (from “(End) of Summer (1966)”)

Or, how about the lyrical rage of the last two lines of “Nuremberg, U.S.A.”:

If bombing children is preserving peace, then
 our fucking is a war crime.

There is another major side to this book: its love poems. Most of them are of unrequited love and addressed to a woman named Naomi who Paul Carroll calls, in his introduction to the book, “half flesh and bone and half Muse or Madonna.” The best of them are heartbreaking but amazingly contain hardly a drop of sap:

The beach holds and sifts us through her dreaming fingers
 Summer fragrances green between your legs
 At night, naked auras cool the waves
 Vanished

O Naomi
 I kiss every body of you, every face
 ("Poem")

Another favorite of mine is "Prosepoem":

Each evening the sea casts starfish up on the beach, scattering, stranding them. They die at dawn, leaving black hungers in the sun. We slept there that summer, we fucked in their radiant evolutions up to our body. Ringed by starfish gasping for their element, we joined to create ours. All night they inhaled the sweat from our thrusting limbs, and lived. Often she cried out: Your hand!—It was a starfish, caressing her with my low fire.

A third kind of poem in this book is concerned with one of the major themes of all literature. And again, only three lines, one vivid image:

Going to sleep, I cross my hands on my chest.
 They will place my hands like this.
 It will look as though I am flying into myself.
 ("Death")

It was and remains a remarkable first collection. Knott was 28 when it was published and many of the poems were written in his early and mid-twenties. It certainly made him a poet to watch and reckon with.

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Perhaps I should mention here that I use the word "anticipation" in the title of this piece because the book I'm writing about isn't out yet, although it should be by the time anyone reads this. Sitting here in a studio at the MacDowell Colony, I have the five books from which the poems in the *Selected/Collected* are drawn and can only guess that these poems will be among those chosen.

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Knott's second book, *Auto-Necrophilia*, disappointed many people. Expectations were high. If we hold the poems

side by side today there is little doubt that *The Naomi Poems* is a “better” book. Much of *Auto-Necrophilia* seems forced and sloppy. It also marks the beginnings of Knott’s experiments with hard-core surrealism, which would culminate in his third book, *Nights of Naomi*. Knott was off on a tangent, experimenting, bludgeoning image and language, making fun and making ugly:

lyrical tremens
 as though Bill Knott (1940-1966) were being thrown headfirst
 by the stems but these flowers
 wake no mirror like a mobile of stabs into light

when we fucked he liked
 to take a length of intestine from a new corpse
 and fix it over and around my penise and have me enter him thus
 the tiny misprints of the rain
 (“Springtime”)

The second stanza of this poem (with the exception of the last remarkable line) makes me shudder. It’s obvious what Knott is trying to do here — to shock with the contradiction — but that’s precisely the problem. The shock is irritating and insulting. And easy. There are a number of weak poems in this book. Enough, in fact, that it kept reviewers (and some readers) from noticing the half dozen or so truly excellent poems, poems as good as and even better than the best of *The Naomi Poems*. Reading the following poem one wonders what made Knott include a poem like “Springtime”:

Love, my individual,
 Your rapturous disembody,
 Your evergreen earthquake gestures,
 I don’t remember.

Love, my no-one,
 Your pores emptying into mine,
 Your name rotting on the tongues of all the dead,
 I don’t remember.

Love, my everybody,
 Dying in attempt to embrace the wakes of ourselves in each
 other,
 I remember.
 ("Poem")

Or this exquisite lyric:

With the toys of your nape
 With your skin of mother-of-throe pearls
 And your fire-sodden glances
 From the sidelong world

We break rivulets off the river and wave them in the air
 Remember the world has no experience at being you
 We are also loving you for the foreverth time
 The light, torn from leaf and cry

Even your shoulders are petty crimes
 ("Poem")

These two alone would be enough to salvage almost any book. And there are others. And, in this book, Knott was beginning to use a particular kind of humor seldom found in contemporary poetry: relentlessly self-deprecating, humor meant to offset the dead seriousness of the first book and, at times, to make fun of his previous (albeit worthy*) poses:

I wrote under a pen name
 One day I shook the pen trying to make the name come out
 But no it's
 Like me prefers clinging to the inner calypso

So I tossed the pen to my pet the
 Wastebasket to eat
 It'll vomit back the name
 Names aren't fit
 For unhuman consumption

But no again

It stayed down

*One of the reasons Knott called himself Bill Knott (1940-1966) was because he believed himself to be a casualty of the war in Vietnam.

I don't use a pen-name anymore
 I don't use a pen anymore
 I don't write anymore
 I just sit looking at the wastebasket
 With this alert intelligent look on my face
 ("Poem")

* * *

The question still remains: why did Knott publish such an uneven book? I'm sure he had some "literary" reasons: he wanted to make it clear that he was changing, he wanted to snub his nose at his own seriousness, he wanted to experiment with wrenching language in many different ways in order to recognize its limits (or limitlessnesses), etc. One other reason was serious poverty: he needed, desperately — for luxury items such as food and rent — the advance Big Table was giving him for the book. In James Wright's portrait of Bill Knott as human being (as part of an essay on how a poem of his own got written) in the book *American Poets in 1976*, he says something like: If anyone ever says to me that Bill Knott's poverty is an affectation I will fall asleep in his face. Let me add that if anyone were to say that to Mr. Wright and myself he would have two people falling asleep in his face, simultaneously.

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Knott's next book, *Nights of Naomi*, seemed to confirm (to many people) that he was losing his poetic agates. In fact, it was just a book of pure surrealist experiment. Almost automatic writing, or at least lines culled from automatic writing exercises. There is nothing quite like it in American poetry. The overall effect of the book is eerie and disquieting but it is hard to call anything in it a "poem" or to call the whole book a "poem". It was Knott at work and at play pushing language to its limits. Here's a typical poem from the collection:

You lie back on a gull's lunges of incense
 Clothed in a glancing lair
 Of submissive purple jungles
 Muzzled by a flagellant species of hair
 Homaging your profile in three squirts of deadend
 Whose jade masseuses
 Blow tendrils of halo
 Over the clandestine mirror-limp cattle
 Of painful forced maskgrafts
 Like a novice swordswallower
 Who uses the xerox's throat
 To sink into a comet's plush of mares

It is not surprising that the book was ignored, or dismissed, or attacked. Not surprising at all considering the breathtaking lack of imagination of many readers and critics of contemporary poetry. Sure, the book is an experiment and it might even be a failure as an experiment but it shows a poet who is obviously in love with language and the possibilities of language. If we agree with T.S. Eliot that one of the poet's jobs is to enrich his language then this is where Bill Knott really began to develop into the poet he is today. I believe that it took *Auto-Necrophilia*, *Nights of Naomi*, and also *Aurealism: A Study* to bring Knott to what I consider his best individual book to date: *Love Poems To Myself*. I'd like to devote a few pages to just two poems from this book that I think extraordinary. Poems in which he brings together his lyrical power, his rich imagination, an astounding metaphorical ability, and a superb sense of craft. This is a favorite poem of mine in which I think he creates near miracles:

BREEZE NOMADLY COUPLING) SUMMER
 SOUNDS (PRECISION INSECTS
 CHOMPING

As much as someone could plow in one day
 They called an acre
 As much as a person could die in one instant
 A lifetime—scoot over a little.

Then greatbig instruments clicked up to measure
 Stress in constellations and in navels, everywhere—tremor-
 Lorn, sharp antennaed as lovers' hissing lips
 That can gauge the remotest substitution of self instantly
 —Till it's as if
 Nothing is left—for them to record but other
 Devices, nothing, an orchard of juicy sideswipes, this air: finest
 Steeply-rooted sensor, which tinguely

Transcends its meters, like handtinted
 Applause, inching, miling, monthing, nighting
 Ultraserene,—across our lost shiver-boundried bodies . . .

The title immediately sets us up for the verbal richness and density of the poem. It sets the mood: insects in summer, their incessant invisibility, the wind, sex, the made-up word “nomadly” implying somehow the human restlessness, and the precision of the insects somehow echoing the instruments in the poem. The first two lines seem like (and indeed may be) historical and agricultural facts. A simple visual statement: someone plowing a field with one horse and a single-bladed plow. Then he switches in the third line and the beginning of the fourth to make his comparison, his metaphor — so smoothly that we are not surprised by a childlike phrase such as “scoot over a little.” He’s saying: Hold on a minute, this is what comes next: the instruments, the measuring instruments applied to our lives. Again, he uses a child-like word for the instruments: “greatbig.” The atmosphere of simplicity and innocence continues to contrast itself with the horrible power of the instruments. They can measure stress in constellations lightyears away and again in our own navels. They’re everywhere and can pick us apart as easily as a computer runs printouts. And soon there’s nothing left but instruments and devices and the air around us which travels an inch, a mile, a month, a night at a time (as we travel in our lives): “Ultraserene,—across our lost shiver-boundried bodies . . .” This poem, like all good poems, is difficult to paraphrase and I’m sure my reading of it doesn’t do it full justice. I think it’s obvious, though, that

Knott is on to something in this poem that we haven't seen in his earlier work. Or in anyone's work, early or late. There's a reaching, a pushing to create a complicated metaphor that carries all the way through and ends the poem with some kind of powerful statement. It's a poem that presents new surprises and variations in mood every time I read it. It haunts me because I *can't* paraphrase it, because it is alive with sensory activity (one of the major themes of the poem?), and because it seems to me, simply, to be true. Knott writes poems in this book that no one has written before because no one has taken the risks he has taken. Many of the risks taken in *Love Poems To Myself* (and maybe even a few in this poem) fail, of course, but when they don't fail the results are — to use again an adjective that occurred early in this piece — stunning. The variety in this book is also remarkable. Here's another poem — lighter perhaps — but unmistakably Knott:

ANT DODGER

A suicide applicant
 Who braces himself out
 On a high ledge at noon
 While busy peeking down

Noticed an ant crawling
 Dottily on the ledge
 Right
 There near his left toe

Below crowds pushed
 Oblivious babbling
 Omniscient like in the movies
 Out whooshy doors

But his gaze halt ant
 Ant the true ant
 He dimly remembers
 Not like them

So now
 He hesitates
 A million storeys up
 Shifts weight trying

Make his mind up
 Distantly deciding
 Whether to step
 Before he jumps

On it
 Or not.

In the ironic world of this poem a person who wants to commit suicide must apply for the position: the gesture of climbing onto a ledge and bracing oneself out there for a while first. It's almost a cliché situation, one seen in innumerable movies and newspaper photographs. Knott's hero is out there and notices an ant crawling around on the ledge. The ant is crawling "dottily". If there is a better adjective to describe how an ant walks (particularly an ant walking on a ledge hundreds of feet above the earth), I've yet to see or imagine it. This kind of imaginative precision occurs again and again. The first part of the scene is set: we can see it from a distance (the ground) and we can see it from the applicant's position. Now we see more of what the applicant sees. We see the crowd gathering below and we hear them. We even hear the sound the doors make (the revolving doors?) as people rush out to watch the man on the ledge, the would-be suicide. Suddenly, the applicant's mind (and the reader's mind) is snapped back to the ant, his thoughts are rushing, and the clipped language of this stanza gives us that feeling. And then he slows us down again, he hesitates, shifts his weight, "distantly" trying to decide . . . A lighter poem, maybe even a little gimmicky at the end, but still provocative in its play. Often Knott's poems can make us laugh out loud. But then there's a silence just after it. The care in writing this simple enough looking poem is obvious: one does not create the atmosphere, the sense of precision, and the balance

between the absurd and the tragic that is in this poem by accident. It is virtually flawless. I don't know exactly which poems from this book are going to be in the *Selected/Collected* (if I were editing it I think I'd include all but a handful with no hesitation) but these would be the poems I'd return to the most frequently. It is a culmination of many years work and it marks another pivotal point in Knott's career because in the final book represented in this collection, *Rome In Rome*, he seems to be beginning another set of experiments, to be shifting his concerns a little in attempts to grow further. One thing that seems evident about *Rome In Rome* is that Knott is returning, in certain poems, to social statement. The poems of this genre are not anti-war poems but poems directed towards another kind of violence: the violence of oppression, particularly the oppression of the poor. It's funny (it's called "Funny Poem") but again it has a double edge:

death loves rich people
 more than us poor
 coffin salesmen look down their sniffs
 shoot their cuffs
 at us

funeral directors obit pages priests
 all want classy
 can't afford
 a headstone
 a silk lining
 daily lawn mower flowers plus
 catering service for the worms
 they get mortally insulted

and you know it's funny
 while I never
 believed that stuff about god
 loving the poor so much
 made so many

I never believed that stuff about god
 but this

death preferring the rich thing you know
 it's kind of funny but you know
 I believe it
 it makes sense

in fact
 I think we
 should start a movement
 our slogan would be
 GIVE DEATH WHAT IT WANTS

yes
 let's lend it a helpin' hand
 be neighborly
 it makes sense
 since what death seems to want is
 the dead
 i.e. the rich

A radical poem? A poem advocating the overthrow of the ruling classes? A poem calling for the death of all masters? No. We know Knott too well by this time. He is trying to deal with issues in this book ("Sudden Death Strikes Jet Set", "Racist Poem", Lourdes") that he hasn't dealt with — at least in this manner — before. If this is another book pointing new veins for Knott to explore (as was, say, *Auto-Necrophilia*) then those veins are definitely worth watching for. The book has at least a half dozen other excellent poems in it.

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Bill Knott's *Selected/Collected* represents nearly 15 years of his work — from his early twenties to his mid-thirties. Historically, these are the years (although there are many exceptions) that poets spend discovering their voices and styles. Bill Knott has certainly done that. He's experimented relentlessly. He's worked steadily, wildly, and often inconsistently but the number of brilliant poems he's produced in this time prove, to me at least, that he is a vitally important American poet, a poet we should not and cannot

afford to ignore. His best work re-affirms that poetry can be something that does more than lie on a page. The poems come alive with an energy and a clarity made possible by the substance of his risks. There are many things I could go into about Knott but it isn't possible now because of space and because this isn't that kind of essay. Where does Knott fit in, for example, as far as a literary tradition is concerned? How much did French surrealism have to do with his own experiments? How about his Baudelarian sensibility? Could Hart Crane's theories on metaphor be in any way related to Knott's methods? I could even spend a great deal of time on his innovative prosodic experiments. But these questions and others are probably best left to someone else in some other kind of essay. This piece, as its title implies, is in simple celebration that we have a poet like Knott and poems like his. I believe the *Selected/Collected* is due cause for celebration: we can now have, between two covers and back in print, the best of this remarkable poet's work. It should delight readers who are already familiar with him and it should make the work available to new readers — that they also may be delighted. In closing, let me add one more word (a risky word, a word I would not use if I didn't think the poems were proof of it): genius. There is genius in this poetry which can be so alive with voice and risk and the content of the risk. His vision of the world we walk around on is particular. Knott, thankfully, does not belong to what is going on in the mainstream of American poetry at the moment and, even more thankfully, he does not belong to what is going on in the non-mainstream. He is alone and his poetry is both new and ancient. And we can share in it. Trust this poet. And celebrate for the rare gift he has given us.