

BILL KNOTT: NO MAN IS AN EYELID

(a wandering fan's notes)

by klipschutz

"Looking for affiliations is a game, like looking for 'influences' in literature; when the game is over, the problem is still there. In literature it's a question of genius; in history, of power."

--The Morning of the Magicians, Louis Pauwels/Jacques Bergier

His earliest work earned him nearly instant cult status, which gradually faded, to the extent that by now many of his original readers presume him missing or dead. Mention his name to someone who reads the stuff and chances are it "maybe" rings a bell. Or he might be shrugged off as a self-indulgent curiosity of the '60s. ("Why would you want to write about him?" is how one editor greeted my query.) Still, a cadre of fans, writers and critics continue to follow this extravagantly gifted, if often puzzling mystery man of contemporary American poetry -- Bill Knott aka Saint Geraud.

The Naomi Poems: Corpse And Beans came out in 1968. With its aquamarine cover against which a swirllingly dark-haired woman's face rises out of portentous waters, her closed sickle-eyelids bespeaking peace or death or both, its author given as Saint Geraud (1940-1966) as well as "Bill Knott (1940-1966)...a virgin and a suicide," with its high praise from James Wright and Kenneth Rexroth (and this before the spiraling devaluation of the blurb), here was a book at least trying to introduce itself

properly. The striking title, a poet plucked in the bloom of youth, his mismatched monikers...

1968: No one acknowledged the business section, worried about health care, knew AA from Triple A. Life was a spiritual battlefield, and to be young meant perpetual assignment to the front. Even in the free-for-all context of the times, Bill Knott's voice was singular, with unsettling lines such as "I stick my head into a womb and make faces at the unborn"; "The night is a torch of comas"; "Blood gushes into, not from, our wounds." Elsewhere, a courtly eroticism rolled deliciously off the tongue: "Summer fragrances green between your legs"; "My eyelids close on your nipples, enclosing them."

I was 13 when my older brother brought home this 44-page book, whose spare, moonstruck dispatches seemed to want to get laid, die for love, pull God's leg, tweak the Poetry Establishment and end The War all at once. I recognized the gauzy, jump-cut quality as surrealism (a word I probably thought meant 'strange'). The quotable immediacy, hopeless romanticism and fiery anger all hit home, but it was the sheer moodswings within a consistency of style that won me over completely. Its seamless interweaving of public and private, self-pity and mission, essay and fragment, free association and diatribe resembled nothing I'd previously read.

Knott could be blistering and blunt, as in the following poem, set forth entire:
NUREMBERG, U.S.A.

In this time and place, where "Bread and Circuses" has become "Bread and Atrocities," to say 'I love you' is like saying the latest propaganda phrase... 'defoliation'... 'low yield blast'.

If bombing children is preserving peace, then my fucking you is a war-crime.

or dreamy:

HAIR POEM

Hair is heaven's water flowing eerily over us
Often a woman drifts off down her long hair and is lost

There were moments of extreme childlike wonder:

And in no time,
it's evening.
The boy gazes to the west
as if all the fire-engines in the world were streaking there...

("(November) (Light, Short Days) (Dark Fiery Sunsets)")

and aching, world-weary personal loss:

I do not want this night to end.
In the fireplace,
a section of ash caves in.

The fall day you were buried
birds went over,
south,
thick enough to carry someone.

("Widow's Winter")

Direct speech ("To American Poets") coexisted effortlessly with puppydog formal play: "Three Stanzas for Yvette Mimieux" consists of two quatrains and a last 'stanza' of simply the word "Winds." Here, from inside an armor of home-grown haiku, the poet goes mano a mano with gray-flannel evil incarnate:

SECRETARY

McNamara the businessman sits at his desk
And stamps "PAID" on the death-lists

And of course threaded throughout, the doomed outpouring of devotions to Naomi:

POEM

After your death,
Naomi, your hair will escape to become
a round animal, nameless.

Something of the light, oddball touch of (dare I say) Richard Brautigan breathed through these poems, though with a stylistic freshness and thematic weight lacking in Brautigan's zen-hipster whimsies. James Wright, coming upon an unpublished, unsigned sheaf of Knott's poems, found them "gentle, totally clear in their meaning on the most casual first reading, and shocking only in the sense that they were so original...the true thing, finally unaccountable...and yet unmistakable." His clarity of voice rings through in this excerpt:

I am one man, worshipping silk knees,
picking myself from between my teeth,
I write these lines to cripple the dead,
to come up halt before the living:

I am one man, I run my hand over
your body, I touch the secret vibes
of the earth, I breathe your
heartbeat, Naomi...

("Poem")

In "(End) of Summer (1966)," the discursive 23-line poem closing The Naomi Poems, hopeless love object, despondent self and Vietnam sin-eater all finally bleed together. It opens with the declarative statement "I'm tired of murdering children," ranges through "your scorched forehead a constellation's suicide-note," despairs "The earth

has been squandered by the meek / And upsidedown in the earth a dead man walks upon my / soles when I walk," before landing squarely inside the poet's own skin, with a cracked-mirror image of the famous last lines of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening":
I'm tired, so tired.
I have sleep to do.
I have work to dream.

Where Frost's poem inhabits a pristine, non-industrial world full of rhyme and reason (he hears the siren's song -- "The woods are lovely, dark and deep" -- but stays the course, this time), Knott's diseased global village is unhorsed, inside out: the villagers foreign, the woods booby-trapped. Rhyme and reason are bureaucrats signing off on death counts, order a sham arbitrarily imposed on infinite subterranean mysteries. Sleep and responsibility have inverted, we must dream ourselves out of the age's predicament.

On top of everything else, the book's final lines cast a tragic shadow over the premature silencing of Our Hero, martyred at 26.

* * *

Except of course Bill Knott was very much alive, if somewhat of a hoaxster, according to Paul Carroll in his introduction to The Naomi Poems. (Carroll also explains the derivation of the pseudo-pseudonym Saint Geraud -- the hero of an 18th century French pornographic novel by an anonymous author -- in terms of masks, their ability to free one from the constraints of "sincerity" in pursuit of larger truths, etc.) Assumptions of Knott's premature demise persisted nevertheless, as did a related

view of him as forlorn victim-genius, not long for this world -- an outlook his suicide-obsessed meditations did little to dispel. At the very least, an aura of "whatever happened to..." has attached to his name. Many early readers are surprised to find that he has continued to publish consistently and has taught at Emerson College in Boston since the early '80s.

* * *

Robert Bly, an initial touchstone for innumerable young poets and readers, was himself a fan and supporter of Knott. Bly came to prominence with The Light Around The Body (1967), which for all its finger-pointing at high places, won a major establishment award and reached a wide audience. Allegory and unrelenting outrage over the Vietnam War provided the momentum for these potent "poems of judgment," as Bly later termed them. Their philosophically compressed, Spanish/Latin American-flavored surrealism, yoked to a historical perspective evoking Emerson and Thoreau, pulsed with shockwaves of dissent too well-grounded for the sensation-driven, self-obsessed Beats. Especially the political aspects of The Naomi Poems owe a marked debt to Bly's voice and line of attack. Through both his confrontational bent and topical mining of the unconscious, Bly staked out the claims Knott explored in lines such as "...there's no longer enough America to feed Whitman or Poe, and I'm getting very thin." (from "Prosepoem")

Bly's poems moved me during adolescence, but Knott presented

a more intriguing figure, the fellow lost seeker. For all his social rebellion, Bly's voice contained a whiff of the pulpit, the poems themselves tightly wound and argumentatively deliberate. The typical Bly poem was structurally solid, at root pontifical. In contrast, Knott performed a kind of linguistic hopscotch -- playful, restless, seat-of-the-pants impulsive. While both spoke directly to the Vietnam War, favored brief lyrics and wrote what Bly characterized as "leaping poetry," Bly's leaps now feel mapped-out while, depending on the poem, Knott may be bouncing on a trampoline or jumping off a cliff.

Over the years, these differences in approach and character would become increasingly pronounced. For starters, as I later learned, though they shared midwestern backgrounds, Bly was a Harvard Man (of sorts) and Knott an Invisible Man.

She made me dye her white pubic hair back
To its original black then had me lick it till it was white
again

("Oral Poetry is Dead (It Tasted like the Whip's Shadow)," Rome in Rome, 1976)

Twenty-eight-years ago, I think I thought Bill Knott was famous -- my copy of his book was a third printing, important poets had high-fived him, etc.

Since then, my unsentimental education has supplied ever-widening ripples of perspective: The limelight is fickle, to put it mildly. Besides, even a world-famous poet is unknown compared to a winning quarterback. Artistic spells get cast with the

assistance of technical effects, and can be deciphered and dissected and reconstructed until precious little is left of the magic but the trick. And viewed through the lens of lineage, style or development, Knott can be filed, variously, under: early-on, fellow traveler of the deep image poets (Bly, Wright, John Haines, et al.); quasi-pop-surrealist (special emphasis on the French -- his first title a punning nod to Robert Desnos); absurdist; satirist; social critic; wordslinger; misfit; frightened Wizard of Oz hiding behind dense literary gamesmanship; even, regionally, product of the Midwest ("your hair the color of barnlight").

The century stomps onward, the universe of poets expands (and contracts), Vietnam invades Cambodia, beautiful boys lose their hair, goddesses sick of being objectified start their own magazines/presses and do it for themselves...

* * *

THE GOLDEN AGE

is thought to be a confession, won by endless torture, but which our interrogators must hate to record--all those old code names, dates, the standard narrative of sandpaper throats, even their remorse, fall ignored...

(excerpt, 1990, Collected Political Poems 1965-1993)

As noted, Knott continues to publish lyric poems -- 13 books at last count (including four selecteds), some by major presses, and two recently self-published. For all this activity, and despite high-flying copy ("the American Rimbaud," -- unsigned

jacket copy; "averages four interesting things per line in an age when one interesting thing per poem is all we can hope for." -- Sandra McPherson), he remains lost in the pack, undiscussed critically and missing from most anthologies -- even, curiously, Vietnam-related ones. Maybe his poems and titles portrayed the fall guy a bit too convincingly for the winner-take-all 80s. (Regardless, when a commentator in The Hudson Review (Spring 1996) observes that recognition and accomplishment are barely on speaking terms, the general state of affairs of po-biz is an open secret.)

* * *

As of Auto-necrophilia (1971), Bill Knott is still dead (1940-1966), but Saint Geraud disappears. Compared to the fluidly thematic Naomi Poems, Auto-necrophilia lacks focus -- your basic sophomore slump. Stylistically, there is more of the same, only slighter and lighter. The old fake-table-of-contents gag, with the poems named after monster movies ("Mothra," "The Giant Killer Shrews," "The Gamma People," etc.), wears out quick.

Notable poems include "Survival of the Fittest Groceries," "No-Act Play," "Monopoly," and "The University Abandoned Overnight," but overall it suggests a rush to print without enough solid work on hand. Conspicuously absent are the towering pillars of light and darkness, Naomi and Vietnam. Perhaps Knott had fidgeted through too many anti-war read-ins when he penned:
POLITICS

Am I Left or Right?

--I can be located exactly arm's-length
From either of my hands

* * *

There are miracles that nobody survives
Observers of to remember where or when
And these are the only true miracles
Since we never hear about them

("Lourdes," Rome in Rome, 1976)

After his early period, Knott gradually becomes the servant of language as well as its master. The good news is the fully-realized, inspired poems that appear in each successive book. The less good is that the sharpened wit, ever at the ready, starts to show the strain of cerebral overload -- private jokes, reliance on classical allusions, the occasional word that should never leave the unabridged dictionary.

As to form, where earlier poems seemed to assume their shapes organically, by the late '70s he adopts a series of more conventional, sometimes rather chatty, free verse poses. As of the '80s, he brings in the heavy structural artillery -- customized sonnets, both with and without rhyme. Mostly though, he bends form to his purpose, and fills his 14-liners with flurries of freshly-minted language; they read like daffy, avant-garde creations. Through this period, his imagery-net begins to pull in the by-products of sci/fi and biotechnology -- DNA, decontamination chambers, robots, even (by the 90s) grandclones.

Rome in Rome (1976), Becos (1983), and Outremer (1989) all move through his full range of styles; mature satires and thought-provoking poems sit cheek-by-jowl with lesser and more abstruse pieces that pay off in small change.

* * *

As I grow older, can I grow better
learn more, love more, become a sage, get rich--
is improvement still possible
at this late stage of my life, as
for example it's possible to improve the phrase
'It is assuredly summer'
--if one works long and hard enough--to:
'It is assuredly autumn'

("The Oldest Story," Becos, 1983)

Knott's mentor, the ever-reappraising Robert Bly, would eventually take him to task (along with eight other "new generation" poets) for not "show[ing] much growth beyond their first books." Seemingly due to his uniquely squandered gift,

Knott is the only poet singled out:
[He] has staggering powers of feeling and of intuition, but his obsession with the French surrealists is his way of avoiding the pain of developing a thinking function.

Bly, who habitually speaks ex cathedra, is also partially blinded by his own agenda, and in pressing his point ignores other facets of Knott's work. Plenty of evidence of a "thinking function" can be found, just not the kind Poppa Bly is on the look-out for.

As a social critic, Knott takes the low road but gets there just the same in "Sudden Death Strikes Jet Set," from Rome in

Rome (1976). (By then he is just plain Bill Knott, sans birth/death dates.) In this skinny acidly diaristic 85-line send-off prompted by a People magazine obit, he adopts a Rodney Dangerfield pose to take his own sadsack measure while savaging class privilege in the burnt-offering guise of a rich, handsome Revlon cosmetics heir, newly 'translated' by way of a race car crash:

well Peter Revson's luck ran out today
the Rev revved up once too
often... [lines 1-3]

one year older than me
a playboy
millionaire frequently
seen with the world's most
beautiful
and glamorous
personalities... [lines 16-22]

in
New York
Lauren Hutton is reported
to be devastated on
behalf of VIP's
everywhere thank you

one year older than me
hmm
say why am I writing this poem
is it to gloat
glad he's dead

glad I don't have to try to be
him anymore a poet
penniless frequently
seen with the world's most
ugly and worthless
nobodies

and that's just what
I have to put
Pete down for
in the end

snobbery

[lines 53-74]

In the poem's middle, intervening lines the tone is cruel, macabre ("...burnt pan / cake skin"), before the above self-reflexive twist in which Knott keeps himself on the hook even as he leans on the hot button to knee-jerk and more profound resentments stoked by our incessantly breezy pop-culture.

* * *

Eyelashes did their job:
they lengthened the afternoon,
like a dress hem.

Then that night the hem began to rise, in stages
revealing
scenes from my shameful life.

("Fear of Domesticity," originally titled "Generic: After Reading Plath and Sexton," Becos, 1983)

In his reminiscence quoted from earlier, James Wright describes first meeting Knott and pegging him for a sad, intensely shy fellow not given to discussing personal details. (From several poems it appears that Knott was an orphan.) According to Wright, he never attended college. After a stint as a charity hospital orderly lasting well into his twenties, he survived as an 'academic gypsy' before landing his permanent teaching post in Boston.

I came across no information about Knott's attitude toward teaching and its effect on his work, but did encounter opinions that he has "gone academic" -- not exactly meant as a compliment. Speculation seems pointless as to the trajectory his work may

have taken had he, say, remained a prole, married well, or moved to Crete. Regardless, the "academic poet" tag doesn't fit him any more than it did Theodore Roethke -- both taught probably because they couldn't do anything else.

Certainly, surroundings take their toll, but Knott came to the classroom fully-formed, with the kind of self-guided, quasi-scholastic leanings that can be seen in action on any day at the public library. (Here I draw a distinction between the 'academic misfit' and the 'anti-academic-academic' -- e.g.: Philip Levine; Ed Dorn; Gerald Locklin -- who teaches throughout his/her life, yet proudly and often drags Real World/Tough Guy/Honest-Day's-Work bona fides into the poems.)

* * *

The extremes running through Knott's work extend even to his choice of poem titles -- many simply go by "Poem"; others, at random, range from the invitingly maudlin ("Two or Three Sites From a Failed Affair") to the slap-happy ("Pass the Plasma, Phantasma") to the tiptoe-through-the-tulips juvenile ("Mother Teresa Treats Terrorists to Taffy").

Poems themselves seem to be subject to revision when they come up for reprinting -- I found three different versions of one piece. He also tends to harvests lines and repackage them; in one selected these appear under the headings "Shorts/Excerpts."

As with anyone, Knott's strengths double as weaknesses. He is not unaware of charges that he is 'too clever by half'. In the

early '70s, when he regularly gave readings punctuated with responsive laughter, he once bemoaned being typecast as "some kind of Henny Youngman." Fair enough, though punch lines lace his poems all the same:

A single misprint in a survival manual kills everyone
[1984]

*

I shot 436 people that day
2 were still alive when I killed them [1971]

*

Sentenced to 12 whiffs of the pope
I protest
with curly hair [1976]

*

all over my lips my love my lust for
those poets whose pics appears in APR. [1995]

*

but at least
you've got to admit
at least he
made the quatrains run on time [1983, re: Ezra Pound]

Here are two in a more classical epigrammatic mode:

Tongue: the lightswitch of the body. [1986]

*

Mouth: the word's exit-wound. [1995]

Such humorous insights jump out of even his otherwise tedious productions.

* * *

"Mitts and Gloves" (from Becos), Knott's entry in the Great American Baseball Poem Pageant, gets my vote for Mr. Transubstantiation:

The catcher holds a kangaroo fetus in his,
the firstbaseman's grips a portable hairblower,
but everyone else just stares into theirs

punching a fist into it, stumped

trying to come up with a proper occupant--
the pitcher for example thinks a good stout padlock would go

right in there, but the leftfielder,
perhaps influenced by his environment,

opts for a beercan...

[After the shortstop, second- and thirdbaseman, we pick up with:]

...The rightfielder looks DIS-
GUSTED at this, he like snorts, hawks, spits

into his and croaks Hey look: heck,
my chaw of tobac fits it perfeck.

The team goes mum, cowhided by
the rectitude of his position, the logic.

[and, lines later, end on:]

As for the ball, off in mid air it dreamily
scratches its stitches and wonders
what it will look like tomorrow when it wakes up
and the doctor removes its bandages--

In a coda, as per the poem's title the respective merits of
mitt and glove undergo thorough analysis and comparison.

Controlled, smart, systematically complete and all kinds of
entertaining, I call this one for an inside-the-park home run.

* * *

Romance in its many manifestations crops up again and again.
Here he looks back in clinical quasi-acceptance at Self as
Teenage Strikeout King:

Those scars rooted me. Stigmata stalagmite
I sat at a drive-in and watched the stars
Through a straw while the coke in my lap went
Waterier and waterier...

...I see: it's not you
Who is not requiting me, it's something in you
Over which you have no say says no to me.

(opening/closing lines, "The Consolations of Sociobiology,"
14 lines, Becos, 1983)

* * *

While I have chosen to emphasize the winning motifs, poems and moments embedded within his books, Knott's bending of the language to the point of torture cannot be left wholly unaddressed. Unlike "The Consolations of Sociobiology," numerous poems that superficially resemble it strike me as word-drunken exercises, so much world-class poeticized gobbledygook.¹ He seems to have ingenious imagery virtually on tap, though it too often adds up to wisenheimer finger music. Robert Peters identifies this tendency in Knott and others as "catatonic" poetry. Peters' Rx for concocting such a poem [excerpted]:

...remove as much furniture from your mind as you can...In this pristine space, let figures, images, and symbols freely appear. Eventually, invent a narrative, no matter how slender, to accompany the surrealist scenes playing themselves out against the scrim in your mind. And the scrim is important, for it is here that the irrational and the bizarre materialize, almost without your willing them into life.

Gordian-Knotted head-scratchers include such passages as:

Whoever heard of a cloud refusing passengers
--I reaffirm the virginity of all stigmata
By nailing your footsoles to mine and storming out to search

¹I should identify a prejudice, perhaps already evident, towards intelligibility. My interest flags in poems that stray out of striking distance of an identifiable core -- even when the culprit is Dylan Thomas or Sylvia Plath.

for you
Palmists rub their genitals through your hands dowers suck
your
tits phrenologists fingerfuck you...

Flags slap the screeching sky awake but we we disappear
Upon whichever side of eyelid is the far
When yours carve this loftiness peer on the air

("High Wind: To Myself," 1976)

Sure: the more me, the more morituri.
Mine duels his hand; some scroll of manliness,
Whose downfall almost dolored us. Though
Soon, up the brain tanks, gracias oozed.

("Castration Envy #21) Does the Swordswallower
Shit Plowshares?," 1987)

The moon long undue to none of us follows
Typifying some life we phonetically loathe
Or other dolls umbilical to our desires
Let my lips fizz out against your thighs.

("After Breton Expels Me From the Group, I Go
Down on Samson and Delilah," 1989)

This vein of his work may one day find supporters to make
its case. I cede the field gladly.

* * *

[My Name]

The only alias
Anonymous never uses.

("Shorts/Excerpts," Poems 1963-1988, 1989)

From his countless references to literal self-effacement,
one may get the impression that Knott protests too much. Irony,
however, dogs his paranoia. Contemporary Authors, a 100-volume-

plus definitive reference encyclopedia, catalogs another Bill Knott, but not this one (although numerous current poets of lesser renown appear). The Bill Knott indexed has published over 50 books, mostly genre westerns and sports novels (High Fly to Center, Fullback Fury), under his own and a half dozen pen names. Under his 1969 listing, The Naomi Poems: Corpse and Beans can be found, right before Danger at Half-Moon Lake. (It had been removed as of a 1988 update.)²

* * *

As mentioned above in passing, Knott has twice self-published, out of apparent mid-career frustration. I unearthed a signed copy of Collected Political Poems 1965-1993 (from an edition of 20) in the City Lights consignment rack. Neutral gray and saddle-stitched, its aesthetic distinctions include flamboyantly crude hand-numbered/circled pages. The Terrence Des Pres Prize for Poetry's form-reject letter makes up the back cover, and an inner credits page explains: "It should be obvious that if I could find a real publisher for this book, I wouldn't be doing it myself. No one wants to be a vanity author." In this worthy stab at compiling outward-bound pieces, Knott serves up a grab bag of greatest hits, rewrites, excerpts, oddities and newer work I didn't find elsewhere ("The Golden Age," "After the Persian Gulf War").

²A woman from Contemporary Authors told me they aim for "comprehensiveness," but writers do escape and please send along a copy of this piece.

* * *

Knott's most recent release, The Quicken Tree (1995), features some of his most successfully distilled poems yet. Following the maddening dithyrambs of Outremer (1989), it encapsulates everything diverting and indispensable, frivolous and opaque about his work -- with the usual surplus of the latter two qualities. If you dive in chronologically, it's reader beware. I suggest poking around for pleasure before tackling the more obstinate poems. "Grant Proposal," "Ledgeline," "Another First Kiss," "Frozen," "In Memoriam," "Futurism," and "Christmas at the Orphanage" all find Knott on his game, using assorted rhythms and dictions while moving freely between free verse and rhyme. Themes continue to be love, sex, loss, tribute, heartache, some social comment; responses to middle-age begin to emerge. As always, his topics seesaw from the classical to the up-to-the minute to the speculative, with sidetrips into the confessional and the hermetic. Three distinct reader-friendly excerpts:

...I won't leaf through the life
those tabloids provide rumors of: none of them

are beautiful as what infills me as I enter
as I am queued up for that brief orgasm
as my cash is on the counter and I am free.

("The Man Who Married His Checkout Lane")

And yet what if the sweat that breaks
Even from Her feet as they pass
Can never rain these pavements back
To a mud- a milk-cud grass

("Vision of the Goddess in a City Summer")

Minutehands
choked in a fist, we sin

and tell the day to die. Still,
will a clock ever be real

to us until time ends; similarly,
can a cemetery

truly exist
before

we are immortal--

("Futurism")

The style remains elliptical in both Webster senses:
"extreme economy [of language]" and "studied obscurity." His
recent habit of footnoting poems persists -- a brilliant timely
satire on the arts-funding follies ("Grant Proposal") makes fine
sense on its own, though I don't mind the bottom-of-the-page
glosses on the OED, Heidegger and the poem's metrical pattern --
"hendecasyllabics with variant last line." Significantly, the
book closes with an odds-and-ends piece called "Lines from Future
Poems."

* * *

"[H]e has devised a form...[and] he can say almost anything or
nothing and run it through his form and he has a lot of
people believing it. This is Cummings, they say, the way
they say, this is a Van Gogh, and all critical faculties
fall lax because they have been pre-sold. People are pretty
hard to sell, but once they believe, they believe and you
cannot make them say no with a hammer."

--Charles Bukowski, 1961

Bill Knott commanded a good-sized audience (for a poet)

early-on, drifted from view and surfaced only to confound his old audience and face potential newcomers with no critical champions or popular 'buzz'. His versatility can confuse, especially the reader who enters his work at random, without any kind of an owner's manual. He pulls forms and diction out of a heavy bag of tricks, sometimes executing dare-devil feats, banana-peel antics and heart-on-sleeve soliloquies within the same book.

Even so, when it comes to lyricism, originality, durability of voice and entertainment value, this guy delivers again and again -- poems of multi-leveled appeal that "can't be gotten rid of" (to paraphrase Frost), assuming they aren't entombed through circumstance or active neglect.

Knott's work would shore up any anthology aiming to cover the high watermarks of mid- to late-20th century English language poetry, and he continues to offer an uncommon earful that needs only an assist from independent-minded editors and critics. Added to which, a mighty selected from his ongoing work awaits its sculptor -- attempts so far having failed to capture his sundry strengths and pleasures.

* * *

I SHOULD HOPE SO

Next year when this book is
pulped and the pulp recycled to
print your Collected Poems, will I
still be here writing this?

(The Quicken Tree, 1995)

Given the variety of personas and styles within Knott's

work, no wonder there is something to alienate every strong taste. If you like your artists forthcoming, he hides behind the poems. If you prefer them subtle, he's full of himself, embarrassingly emotional. Right when you want a role model, he plays the badboy. No more a Bukowski than a L+A*N@G%U=A^G-E poet, in patches he may at first seem both.

* * *

I won't go away

I shall be myself--
Free, a genius, an embarrassment
Like the Indian, the buffalo

Like Yellowstone National Park.

(from "Further Notice")

The 10-line poem excerpted from above could have been Knott's own, in his mode of direct syntax. Penned by the equally inscrutable Philip Whalen, it gives voice to the Eternal Outsider, the self-asserted Individual of dubious Destiny -- not unlike Knott's own seeming megalomaniacal self-absorptions.

* * *

Like everyone I demand to be
Defended unto the death of
All who defend me, all the
World's people I command to
Roundabout me shield me, to
Fight off the enemy...

("The Enemy," Becos, 1983)

Beaten silly by my fantastic journey through the mind of Bill Knott (and having attained the vantage point of 40 long years), it hit me that two generations-worth of my lifetime's

culture-fate now hangs in the canonical balance. Official tastemasters and pedagogues will certainly lay down the law and pound their gavels ad nauseam, but how will any of it fare? Who's gonna miss a pop singer here, a Bill Knott there? There will be no consensus, nor order in the court for quite some time -- not when perfectly intelligent people deem jazz intrinsically superior to rock 'n roll, and Bob Dylan either is or is not a poet at all, depending on who you ask.

Posterity may yet hear Norton Anth., et al. v. Knott on remand, before a new judicial panel. Phrasemaker, inventor of words, joker, thief of hearts, attentive (at times uxorious) lover of the English language, eyelids, meter, pure sound -- let all the evidence come in.

Heaven forbid they find a jury of his peers.

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A Bill Knott Bibliography:

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*short run/chapbook
+selected