

BABBLEGATE:
POEMS
FROM
CHILDHOOD

Bill Knott

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The poems in this book are fictional.
Names, characters, places and incidents
are either the product of the author's
imagination or are used ficticiously. Any
resemblance to actual events, locales or
persons, living or dead, is entirely
coincidental.

Intro notes

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Poems in which childhood is the relevant content, poems where images of childhood in general

—or memories of my own childhood experiences—

provide the matter.

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The order of the poems is random, neither chronological or thematic.

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All or most of these poems can be found in another collection in this series of vanity publications,

titled "Smoke from a Paper House: Poems of Youth and Age"—

but I thought it might be interesting to publish the childhood poems together in a separate binding,

for those who may want to have such a concentration—

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BABBLEGATE

In early childhood an act
consists of another act,
a multiplying chain of
this and that. Cat, windowsill,

sunlight, they're all events instead
of sights, but eventually they
too give way to the eye. Time
distances the other senses

until one becomes intent instead
of intrinsicate. That's why
dimensionally I can only

try to run toward the place
I've already passed, squealing
ba ba ba ba ba buh!

BOY AT THE MIRROR

A child emulates what he can't know
is true, a murderous dew
that appears every morning to be
his face, but already it evaporates at

a touch: the lurking effects of
the unity granted by night are never
enough to maintain this ripeness called
time, this waking up to a cherub-scope

that looks back at him in the glass growth
like hammerblows a devil checks off
a list—the routine begins so early

and even the wattage of the womb
behind him is too bright, too ready
to hale an unsought self into sight.

(CRIBSONG)

can the dandled infant sense
when time's tall animal
will maladroitly spill
his frons of innocence

shall butterfingers shun
that fall whose one mistake
makes each baby brain break
its meek fontanel eden

was god the klutz that let me
land headfirst splatborn splayed
today's adult once prayed
beastlike on his fat knee

what clumsy bungling rage
as Rilke trained beware
in his poem *Der Panther*
runs evolution's cage

which creature cuddly come
bids parents lose their grip
and every cradle's urge to tip
rockabye your cranium

so try to be like Rilke
the lucky little bastard
the kid who oops was daily
dropped not down but upward

FIRST THING

"The first thing I can remember at all was
a dead dog at the bottom of my pram."

—Graham Greene, *Journey without Maps*

A dead dog at the bottom of my pram
Seems to be my earliest memory,
Unless I am part of an implant program
To stock Earth with mock-human irony—

In which case I must have been abducted
By ETs and beamed up into the sky
Where I was undone then reconstructed
Out of bytes and obits from the diary

Of Graham Greene: that gruesome deceased dog
I mean: before Mother or the Mothership
Popped that pug in my pram my time was mine

Alone, unknown, a page torn from the log—
Until that moment died I had no script
No guide: no word undefied my sign.

THE UNSUBSCRIBER

Like all children, you were a de facto
Member of the Flat Earth Society,
Believing nothing but what you could see
Or touch or whatever sense led act to

Fruition: mudpies made summer beneath
A tree whose measured shade endowed decrees
Between light and dark: such hierarchies
Gave you implicit, a sophistic faith—

(Fallacious fellowship!)— Youth's adherents
Ignore the fact that most factions reject
Their lyric league (which only fools have stayed

Striplings of) and none condone its nonsense:
No one loves that vain solipsistic sect
You'd never join, whose dues you've always paid.

ELEMENTARY LESSON

Even if the mountain I climbed
Proved to be a duncecap really,
It was only on gaining its peak
That that knowledge reached me.

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SLUM SCENE

poor children sharing
back and forth their one
set of Dracula's teeth—
here even the dead
live hand to mouth

PARABLE FROM CHILDHOOD

Something about a pond, and on the pond
a paper boat; something about a child's
act, dropping a pebble upon that boat
to study the effect: but then to let
other pebbles fall to see if it holds,
to kneel there spilling them one after one
until, until finally . . . If I weigh
this poem down with much more, it too will sink—

Writing my poems of a boy on the brink
has shown how ripples horizoned by sky
remain the only real cargo aboard
whatever that craft that unmoored us was,
and yet why he treasured such passages.
Saying they be lost we would launch each word.

MINOR POEM

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

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FINALS

My classmates
wrote the answers
on my skin in
invisible ink then
during the Test
set fire to me

They passed
I passed away

THE DAY AFTER MY FATHER'S DEATH

It's too complex to explain,
but I was already in
the orphanage when dad died:
and so that day when I cried,
to keep the other children safe
from my infectious grief
they left me in lockdown
in some office where I found
piles of comicbooks hid
which they had confiscated
from us kids through the years,
and so through wiped tears
I pored quickly knowing
this was a one-time thing—
this quarantine would soon end—
I'd never see them again:
I'd regret each missed issue,
or worse than that I knew
that if a day ever did come
when I could obtain them,
gee, I'd be too old to read
them then, I'd be like him, dad.

GOING MY WAY

The one boy who died of polio
in our orphanage in the early
1950s was such an important
icon that even now I remember
his favorite movie since that's
what we do with the famous,
retain some anomalous fact
that quiets them in our mind.

We, I say, but was it everyone—
did all of us shed that kid: did
a thousand child incarcerates
replace his face-and-name with
an actor's mask and cast it as
star of the waste disease whose
cause was always doubt, germ
caught perhaps from local lakes
prohibited. Who thought of him
those summers we could not
swim until a vaccine came, too
late to amend lackwarm days,
to change our fate/our film to his.
That movie—"Going My Way"
featuring Bing Crosby as a young
priest, kindly, loveable, unreal—
Tommy, Jimmy, whatever he
was called, he probably knows
still by still now every camera
angle and closeup, every cut
we living are allowed to forget.

DIRECTIONS

A kite in the shape
of a map floats
over the land it depicts,

but at night no-one sees
its roads at the end
of which a child feels

his hand tugged upward,
disappearing
in salutations.

STORM: FARMBOY DREAMING TO REACH THE SEA

I skiffed up rivers
and creeks of lightning
till thunder
split my covers

and down I drowned
lung by lung
to a stone
of salt the cows licked.

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FEARS (CONT.)

niche niche niche niche
the birds go seeking a covert

eclipse eclipse eclipse eclipse
my shadow hides behind the sun

this this this this
every corner finds a crevice to keep

wish wish wish wish
the oldest word pacifies the youngest infant

OCT-NOV (MICHIGAN MEMORY #4)

The bacon of the ankles crackles, and the sky
Perks up birds this coldsnap morning—every
Breath sheds a breath-effect, brief-bloomed steam-sheaf . . .
Puddles huddle in frost. Past the barn the path

Shoots hill-pastures which rose to winter early
And sun-shucked clouds blast-off from: migrants that fly
South—mouths that wet-nurse icicles—hatch forth
A form, a furious precision I sloughed

At birth, preferring life. And like the wind
Can reduce anything to description—
Running to finish my chores, beneath my scarf

I'll feel my chinbone seek my collarbone,
As if the flesh has ceded and the skeleton
Now must precipice itself against all warmth.

MY MOTHER'S LIST OF NAMES

My mother's list of names today I take it in my hand
And I read the places she underlined William and Ann
The others are my brothers and sisters I know
I'm going to see them when I'm fully grown

Yes they're waiting for me to join em and I will
Just over the top of that great big hill
Lies a green valley where their shouts of joy are fellowing
Save all but one can be seen there next a kin

And a link is missing from their ringarosey dance
Think of the names she wrote down not just by chance
When she learned that a baby inside her was growing small
She placed that list inside the family Bible

Then I was born and she died soon after
And I grew up sinful of questions I could not ask her
I did'not know that she had left me the answer
Pressed between the holy pages with the happy laughter
Of John, Rudolph, Frank, Arthur, Paul,
Pauline, Martha, Ann, Doris, Susan, you all,

I did not even know you were alive
Till I read the Bible today for the first time in my life
And I found this list of names that might have been my own
You other me's on the bright side of my moon

Mother and Daddy too have joined you in play
And I am coming to complete the circle of your day
I was a lonely child I never understood that you
Were waiting for me to find the truth and know

And I'll make this one promise you want me to:
I'm goin to continue my Bible study
Till I'm back inside the Body
With you

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ODD

Hard rhymes of childhood ride
me back to lack's kitchen

in which it's leftovers again:
from the cyclops cupboard

I plop another half-ate
Ulysses onto my plate.

CHRISTMAS AT THE ORPHANAGE

But if they'd give us toys and twice the stuff
most parents splurge on the average kid,
orphans, I submit, need more than enough;
in fact, stacks wrapped with our names nearly hid
the tree where sparkling allotments yearly
guaranteed a lack of—what?—family?—

I knew exactly what it was I missed:
(did each boy there feel the same denials?)
to share my pals' tearing open their piles
meant sealing the self, the child that wanted
to scream at all *You stole those gifts from me*;
whose birthday is worth such words? The wish-lists
they'd made us write out in May lay granted
against starred branches. I said I'm sorry.

1946

The year noir was born; the year Nazis hid
In monasteries to restore their force;
Peace, but peace that made some things even worse
Than they were pre-war: I was just a kid,

Hard at play, cap pistols, hooky, apples
Filched through a farm fence: then my mother dies,
Killed illegal abortion style by guys
Quoting God, his badboy lies, his bibles.

Pope Vandal burnt the last *Complete Sappho*
Publicly, my mother was butchered in
A secret site; their results much the same,

So I blame him and him and him and him,
All of them from Adam onwards are men,
Meaning me, meaning the worst thing I know.

Note: In 1073, Pope Gregory VII ordered the public
burning of all books containing the poetry of Sappho.

THE HUNGER (enneasyllabics)

If a path to the Gingerbread House
could be established by breaking crumbs
off its edifice and sprinkling them
so as to find what lies behind us

across the featureless fairytale
void of childhood: yet how very quick
that trick wears out when the story's track
takes hold, takes toll, a far-older trail

prevails, we're forced to give up this lost
cause; and the fact is that every last
morsel was gone long before the you

or I might totter our way back here
to try to dissuade all these other
Hansel-Gretels hollering in queue.

MICHIGAN MEMORY #3

Are you the only one here, Year-man?
Is yours the unforgiving sermon sung
by children who hoop their eyes across
this greensward ground ground-swallows

fly round and round. Their focus carves
a ring sparkling with the loot of someday—
every lawn-sprinkler yields a chalice,
through whose rubies puppies commune.

Oh hurry after the kids, wishing
the glaciers would return from their exile
in frostee-cones, in flinty marbles.

There is one marble they call the Pure.
We scratch endless circles around it,
we set our gods on icicle pedestals.

HEGEMONY (prosepoem)

In school kids would stand in back of me and stick two fingers up behind my head to make the class laugh. Or so I was told. I took their word for what had occurred and that it was universal. Due to its process, I could not witness what had really happened or what it meant, what made it funny. And I still don't know today: but I can feel them back there, forefinger, middlefinger, ready to poke their putdown up for the world to jeer me. That V looms always, that rabbit-ears or peace-sign or whatever scourge stigmata I pledge it to represent; but what hurts most is, I know that victorious viciousness only by inference, only by report: I can never spin fast enough to catch a glimpse of it. I've never been able not once to see this joke my entire life has suffered the hands of. That's the worst part of this humiliation: that I have to take it on trust, that I have to believe in it blindly.

MRS. FRYE AND THE PENCILSHARPENER

I'll remember how in 8th-grade English class, always bending toward the desk I would try to avert my eyes from the mysterious ways Mrs. Frye's hair displaced the blackboard's space with its black coils, to the paper my penciltip raced across, certain to pass each test: and if these gaze shifts got too switcheroo I'd retreat (daily, it seems) to the back of the packed classroom

where, leaning forward on my toes, I could push with my left hand the nubile tube of wood into the mouth of the pencilsharpener which hung there like some natural protrusion of the wall, an indigenous Deity, the mask of a Goddess, erosion-endowed, rockformed—then feel my righthand fingers and thumb slowly turn the oiled wheel while knowing I would have to face

close to that sac-shaped sharpener, have to inhale the high smell of its depths, earthy, ripe, pubic: to see in my mind the parings inside, those musky dark curls whose incense was increased of course like mold-mildew by the subtle saliva we kids might use to lick the lead's point, though nearly none of our tongues could unblunt the conundrums grownups posed, in my case Mrs. Frye

especially: so if I lingered back there, grinding away, it was not to gloat, not to play the saintly A-student snickering from behind at the others' heads bent intent as penitents, because I too, I sinned at times, whenas, no matter how proud I was of my proper grammar or propounded syntax, stuffing my text thick with fetish parsemarks, I myself went taunted, teased by the urge

to erase the very prodigy evidence my page revealed—
all the knots and quirks of those perfectly traced letters—
to restore the blankness I spoiled with each sentence—
to castrate every phrase before its errors rose by rote
to make my cthonic-greatest mistake grow and grow
erectile, inherent, that habit hateful male participle
I always was unable to shear the nib the stub off of—

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(But how could I flub and flunk such a crucial ordeal?—
Forgive me: I was lost pondering, musing about a poem
memorized from the boys' bathroom, tongued fluent
but not understood: yet how truthshod its lines ran
to my anxiety—their meaning escaped the precocious,
the goldstar me—so if I stalled—if I stayed chewed over
and left a stammering dimwit by their immallarméan

import, which paired its print alongside a syllabus
of pornocoiled stick figures whose mouths were pierced
by the sharpened ends of toonballoons—verses verse
alone can't explicate in systematic prosaic terms that
forced and torsoed my head shy—if I was stuck on
their sphinxian simplicity—unable to decipher any
of the prodigal doggerel lessons gesticulated down

our school's scribbly corridors, snicked and snatched at
across its game fields, a whole curriculum of secret lore,
a litany of my-big-brother-told-me's, my-uncle-said's,
a rumor primer which claimed complete mastery of
the only discipline inpenetrable to my inquisitive
quests never mind the autodidact airs I had to affect
during discussions of this topic, the nods and knowing

grins I wore to pass, to show my mastery of its arcana,

to prove what a pored nerd drill-diligent pupil I was of those endless piss-walls, those scrawled rhymes and confident lectures by croneys and guys who made sense of the insane instructions re the sole subject I mark zero on: all the dunno-dumb ideas I dunned then drove core to me, carved their myths into me—and one in

particular goes to this poem, from the gendergabble that gorged my brain: it hissed that She/the unknown reared an inward toothly sheathdeath essence geared to *vagina dentata* whatever pedant-pendant I'd proffer, I, alma-matered to cram every exam with phallocratic tits and sexist tripe psuedotype scionbabble, the entire wisdom of my mentors' art-patriarch, old gobbledegook—)

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All gradeschool the fear of failing hovered in overstudy as children riddled fears never to be learned, but could I have continued to hone my fate, could I have stood there for years and still the pencilsharpener wait like a patient questioner, a warm, smiling teacher, filled with such dense scents, shavings, shorn graphite, its soil rich with words no-one would ever have to write.

ELEMENTARY LESSON

Sometimes even in Math class a downpour
Would rise against the windows and render
The normal decorum hard to restore—
Fittingly we'd split a grin when lightning
Stuck out its multiple tongue at teacher.

Smartlike fling our arms in the air, crying
To be called on, smug, eye-bright, cheek-aware
When thunder drowns our correctest answer.
A failsafe secret form of defying.
(Not like spitballing the hall monitor.)

These quickstorms were at last the world's Recess,
Whose games toss random nebu-numerals
In play impromptu streams and teams across
Unmarked-off endless fields or else more schools
Reluctant-ruled, would-be truants like us—

We welcomed those rebellious showers then
And remember them now. Of course we know,
As grownups—these afteryears—their brilliant
Fractiousness scores less than quantic fractions.
Most of childhood's coups come to sum zero.

Despite which some delinquencies linger—
Take our instinctive counting by finger—
(All other tallies seem cramped in compare)—
Since age equals memory times failure—
Though mentor modes slam such bad behavior:

Our worst, they swear, is using metaphor
To avoid the quiz/to solve the problem.

Leaners from lecterns omniforum warn
That effing mistake is what makes us dumb.
Minusminds, try to amend your error.

Those tutors tell us still—they always will—
Go suffer fools what all erasers learn
To rain down blah blah blah—they talk and talk!
But in the meanwhile: cloud loud as a chalk
Rattling back in place on the blackboard's sill.

POEM

please don't scold
the kids who hold
lollipops up
for the raindrops
to lick at on
their way down

what a waste
but imagine the taste
of rainbow thunder
if you could get
your tongue up under it

A LESSON FROM THE ORPHANAGE

If you beat up someone smaller than you
they won't (and histories prove this) tell:

look at those people on the opposite side
of the planet: they want to beat us up but

they're smaller so that's okay. Not okay is
that most of us will die in the war between

them and us, because small equals (and mice
prove this) sneaky: their spies could spirit all

our nuke aids away and we'd never know—
nick our rocket-satellite knockout Star Peace

Comcodes right out of our shrinking pockets,
even our doomsday (the FBI can prove this)

doodads, the ones we mean to use on them,
the rats: and so when they kill us will we

have killed enough of them to win, whose
fist figures bigger in the end? And what's it prove?—

In the Orphanage, hell, even if they do tell
on you there's no one for them to tell it to.

THE CLOSET

(. . .after my Mother's death)

Here not long enough after the hospital happened
I find her closet lying empty and stop my play
And go in and crane up at three blackwire hangers
Which quiver, airy, released. They appear to enjoy

Their new distance, cognizance born of the absence
Of anything else. The closet has been cleaned out
Full-flush as surgeries where the hangers could be
Amiable scalpels though they just as well would be

Themselves, in basements, glovelessly scraping uteri
But, here, pure, transfigured heavenward, they're
Birds, whose wingspans expand by excluding me. Their
Range is enlarged by loss. They'd leave buzzards

Measly as moths: and the hatshelf is even higher!
As the sky over a prairie, an undotted desert where
Nothing can swoop sudden, crumple in secret. I've fled
At ambush, tag, age: six, must I face this, can

I have my hide-and-seek hole back now please, the
Clothes, the thicket of shoes, where is it? Only
The hangers are at home here. Come heir to this
Rare element, fluent, their skeletal grace sings

Of the ease with which they let go the dress, slip,
Housecoat or blouse, so absolvingly. Free, they fly
Trim, triangular, augurs leapt ahead from some geometric
God who soars stripped (of flesh, it is said): catnip

To a brat placated by model airplane kits kids

My size lack motorskills for, I wind up all glue-scabbed,
Pawing goo-goo fingernails, glaze skins fun to peer in as
Frost-i-glass doors. . . But the closet has no windows.

Opaque or sheer: I must shut my eyes, shrink within
To peep into this wall. Soliciting sleep I'll dream
Mother spilled and cold, unpillowed, the operating-
Table cracked to goad delivery: its stirrups slack,

Its forceps closed: by it I'll see mobs of obstetrical
Personnel kneel proud, congratulatory, cooing
And oohing and hold the dead infant up to the dead
Woman's face as if for approval, the prompted

Beholding, tears, a zoomshot kiss. White-masked
Doctors and nurses patting each other on the back,
Which is how in the Old West a hangman, if
He was good, could gauge the heft of his intended. . .

Awake, the hangers are sharper, knife-'n'-slice, I jump
Helplessly to catch them to twist them clear,
Mis-shape them whole, sail them across the small air
Space of the closet. I shall find room enough here

By excluding myself; by excluding myself, I'll grow.

LAST ON EVERY LIST

Each schoolroom tells them who they are,
But rollcall always goes too far

So what boy listens any more
Beyond his own responsive roar—

If names get lost in roster blur
The zed lad's shout may not occur:

Throughout that endless classmate choir
One final voice will still aspire.

Like him the poet waits aware
He'll harken heed all others there

While he of course remains obscure,
His word ignored and ergo pure:

Unheard it screams in every ear
Its absent claim of being "Here!"

OVERNIGHT FREEZE (heptasyllabics)

Window-glints of ice glaze fast
what last night flashed the mudflats,

down in which dawn has found pressed
small animal tracks: inch-niched

skylights affix these quick paths—
Each step is trapped beneath slats

of translucency attached
rime to rim: they sit there ditched,

puttied into glare hatches—
All around the ground looks patched

and spattered with puddle-thatch,
but note rather this etched stretch

where a late trotter's tread's latched
with pondgild on its ledge trench:

how glitter-together cached;
incandescently encased.

Not bins or barns' coiled harvest,
glozen molds hold placed this trace,

bold encroachments caught across:
each hoof-, paw-, claw- mark's embossed

by its lunge run: each rut crests
to extend its range, end-launched—

it must hate these lit nimbus
lids, must wince beneath such frost—

sun has tamed them flame of squints
yet some after-image haunts:

Lands on every side lie creased
with spoor that mars their hard crust

and floorflares most summer's waste
imagination, that pinch

not worth pittance, that thin purse
clutching what breast abundance

of flurry foliage tossed, prize
profligate with years' penance

whose cease has summoned what peace—
tarp white winter's carapace

tries to hide that mislaid dust
carrion in graneries

and bury deeper what grace
war's jarrior deifies—

what Troy, what toy's sacrifice
leaks justification, beast

whose Homered oathwraths can't match
this farmstead's secular crafts—

Beyond the coop's chickenhatch

pieces of a greenhouse burst
up from the clays as ghosts pass
to implant sole-sills for what's
still clear to me—I approach
each glimpsy-glaziered gapgulch
afraid my galoshes squelch
break their skittery sketches
or skidheel slide a childprance
puncturing every damn sash
I can smash, whatever blanched
and specious glow my outstanced
kick can dislodge idolfest
haloes those pit-portholes hoist
from lamb-trample slaughterous
gods displayed bad raptor hosts—
herds of ape they pasture-traipse
bestial cattlecats who scratch
paved prowess in the dirt splotch
like border-dots on mapwatch
or liens miser ledgers clutch
feral figures for our debts
predator prey pays poets
that panther pads our wallets

Ted Hughes' cunning hawk-pastiche
plugs its parrot author rich

this savage extravagance
animates each TV pitch

your Energizer Rabbits
breakfast lions and leopets

like easter eggs and christ creche
exist to rake in the cash

as you sit and clicker switch
from Tiger Attack stabsites

to Martyred Bible Prophets
can you diff any difference

in sanguinary scams which
verse-ho's popes and other shits

exchange/exploit for lootsplits
getcher *guts* getcher *spirits*

festering fetish lame wish
goldgash wildpack "religious"

imperious dazzlingments
its screen between me unleashed

shall I plain idealize
the sight. Pitter pattered glitz

the poorest field-rat can task:

"Trance entombed, my forage-struts?

strangely crowned with iciclets,
thaw-askance in silver nets

that snag some Nixnaut banished
from huge spook-lakes diminished

to these mini: spangle-splashed
and scaly his mermarsh face

is damming yours to a drowse:
your powers sod, your earth cursed,

bear null this lair's fatal laze—
bide its nether-tide enclosed,

its potent emptiness poised
to bolt free, vain, hopeless wish:

train of hymen's bridal dress,
heil flower drowned mire and mess

in this fecal foul recess—
delusional any parse

that aspires to soar from smutch
or scat escape its burnished

prison-urned prism-units
lathed and locked, crystal cubits

where spot-carpeted carets—
pools, flood-scummed with gem, facets

unstrung-flung diamond pendants
it strangles you, chain necklaced.

Immured your murder-led bents
that followed friendly bloodscents

till fangs throat-fonts firmly drenched
and feast fell anticlimax—

till cycle lay established
again. Eternal matrix,

your game's destined accidents
choreograph each pounce once

but here they're preserved in twice:
cryocrypts halt their advance,

vaults for phantom enpassants—
stabatjammed their rhythm dance.

Here stands this clearing's essence,
filmed upon fillspace distance—

oh hear its car-crash score-scants:
sharkshrieks stilled, prowl-growls silenced.

Look: its slope grows near scar grazed
with overtook's veer. Steer-squished

leap-lopes laned below this sluice
this rapacious avalanche—

this meander labyrinth's

constellated those hunt-sprints.

Star-quenched in lurid casements
what vent revives these vagrants.

Plunged in pent, your harms unhitched.
Sprawled for sleep's random ambush—

hibernate, die! sink finished
along this blank fishtank maze

or wake, with mindblink ablaze—
see your scintillant depths catch

magic from the mimic glance
of this mirror while it lasts—

how soon noon will melt to mush
your hoar hour which Eskimos

have more words for than I, mouse
Michigander, verminous

mite of this sheer terminus
the Knott brat teetertoes his

trespass at. He has spare choice
and careless proceed he must

toward the devouring bless
this coldsnap moment's incised

in his own flesh. Oedipus
ankled. Pale autumn's glozes

grail incarnations of slush
frail trail we fugitives mashed

in the wet soil till chill lashed
it tight with glacier paces

palls in the mornings' stale mess
of luminescence. Sunrise

et al. Against its bright best
(nature's norm-channel brilliance

versus some thumbed thesaurus)
this polar-stamped dirt contrasts

my feet in a fret of froze
silly syllabic sets of rows

extinguished glimmer glimpses
shattered all their gleams I guess—"

Stoic, lone, those shine-lines cast
to show no magnificence

or quests quixotic-thrust, just
folk stalked by their hungriness,

critters croaked, varmints vanished
species extinct or deathwish—

Theirs is not an innocence
chosen, their hands are not clenched

on church-prayers' lack-response.

Their trek unlike ours abounds.

Under gait-grates it waits wise
in its ways portrayed saycheese—

Carnivore, killer-corps seized;
poacher captured, frozenchase.

Mid-stride taken, frigid paste
haste-hail jails this trodden caste.

Roadcage for an arctic race;
shod-zoo stocked with dull dreambrates.

Before the snow's blind expanse
blunders every further fence

a walk may stop precipice
top this fierce fenestrated lens

but what happens then depends
on some lost, glossed over sense.

One might pause to muse that post
or else forget, astonished.

Or kneel to urge weathers worse
come seal his brr-brief life's course—

(Let elf and unicorn dash
climate at its timeliest

congeals their furtive crevasse
strayhorde stayed for a nor' rest.)

Spurts of rhyme, suicide-sparse
For obvious sake. Because

It all seems so colorless.
The past and everything since.

But our chameleon's footprints—
have they been paned with stained glass?

THE I DID

One memory from childhood
how when it was summer and hot
at ground level where I stood
above me I saw the tops of trees
palpitating in a proper breeze

that never came down to ease me.
I can't say I swan why I remember
what it is that makes it linger or
else enriches such a significant
nor could I see it now if I went

on a breathless day and looked up
I would not be far enough away
physically for the contrast: memory
needs that distance for its truth
to swerve from the present's path.

Is it right to hold the past fixed in
former attitudes like tops of trees
or whatever it is records history's
external focus switched to days
depictions drawn by winds upon

clouds or branches flexing wide
their leisure of purpose pause
from the hell of here. Sight cannot
even in summer when it is hot
share the airs enjoyed by the eyed.

CAESAR LEARNING TO JUMP ON CHESSMEN'S BACKS

Why he'd have to be taught what comes so normally to male-kind is puzzling, unless inbreeding of noble strains has left him esthetic, less stoic, timorous—a child, his toes babyfat, his bare soles poised in the approved Colossus-of-Rhodes at the count of three jump up and down; while his tutors applaud young gods the fragments are brushed away by slaves, the black-and-white pieces crushed bloodily together form a tragic alternate ideal society where the kings queens etcetera are indistinguishable from the pawns, and maybe that's the fun—no rival to the Rome where the scum who whisk away the grey-by-defeat shards are neutered or both and made so at birth, representative of the mass: consigned to bear their broken brethren down past the intuitive, the dirt that heaps their dirt beyond lowest dungeons and to bury there the chess-bits that spoiled the boyking's heels, his small insteps and ankles, indeed the entire tootsies of the six-year-old Emperor must then be amputated just below the shin, be replaced after every lesson by the royal transplant surgeons. Which could explain that curious adage (that Cretan riddle), “Where do our plebs go without feet?”

AN INSTRUCTOR'S DREAM

Many decades after graduation
the students sneak back onto
the school-grounds at night
and within the pane-lit windows
catch me their teacher at the desk
or blackboard cradling a chalk:
someone has erased their youth,
and as they crouch closer to see
more it grows darker and quieter
than they have known in their lives,
the lesson never learned surrounds
them; why have they come? Is
there any more to memorize now
at the end than there was then—
What is it they peer at through shades
of time to hear, X times X repeated,
my vain efforts to corner a room's
snickers? Do they mock me? Forever?
Out there my past has risen in
the eyes of all my former pupils but
I wonder if behind them others
younger and younger stretch away
to a day whose dawn will never
ring its end, its commencement bell.

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"[T]he remarkable poet Bill Knott is not the type to win prizes, become the pet of academic critics or cultivate acolytes. But this thorny genius has added to the art of poetry." —Robert Pinsky, Washington Post, 2005

"For the past thirty-five years Bill Knott has shown himself to be one of our very best poets and perhaps the most original. . . . I think he is one of the few poets of my generation who will remain with us." —Stephen Dobyns, Harvard Review (Spring 2002)

"Bill Knott is a meld between Gerard Manley Hopkins and MTV, producing poems with the former's violent beauty and the latter's largely ironic postmodern presence." —Mary Jo Bang, Lingua Franca (May 2000)

"Knott was an incredibly important poet to me and still is; I think Bill Knott is a genius and probably the least known great poet in America. It's really kind of pathetic that he's not as well known as he was even thirty years ago because he's even better now." —Thomas Lux, The Cortland Review (August 1999)

"Bill Knott is one of the best poets writing in America. Without question, he is the most original." —Kurt Brown, Harvard Review (Spring 1999)

"Bill Knott is a genius." —Tom Andrews, Ohio Review (1997)

"It is no accident that the major British and American poets of the 19th and 20th century were outsiders. . . . The most original poet of my generation, Bill Knott, is also the greatest outsider." —Stephen Dobyns, AWP Chronicle (1995)

"Bill Knott is the secret hero of a lot of poets. . . . [P]oets who differ radically from Knott look to his work for the shock of recognizing themselves." —David Kirby, American Book Review (1991)

"Bill Knott's poems . . . are the poems Beckett's Gogo would write if he were among us." —Sharon Dunn, Massachusetts Review (1990)

"[Knott's 'Poems 1963-1988' is] a powerful and original book, a record of one of the most disturbing imaginations of our times. Few people can create a world so completely and concisely as Knott does time and time again." —Kevin Hart, Overland (1990)

"Knott is no parlor poet. His work is the most sharply original of any poet in his generation." —Jim Elledge, Booklist (1989)

"Among people who know his work, Bill Knott is regarded as one of the most original voices in American poetry." —Charles Simic, blurb for Poems 1963-1988 (1989)

"Knott sets up principles far outside most of those we know, and he always writes up to and beyond those standards." —Sandra McPherson, blurb for Outremer (1989)

“Bill Knott is an American original. No one else could have imagined what James Wright once referred to as Bill Knott’s ‘indispensable poems.’” —Stuart Dischell, Harvard Book Review (1989)

“I think Bill Knott is the best poet in America right now.” —Thomas Lux, Emerson Review (1983)

“Bill Knott’s first book, ‘The Naomi Poems,’ published in 1968, established him instantaneously as one of the finest poets in America. Subsequent publications deepened and reinforced that reputation.” —Andrei Codrescu, The Baltimore Sun (1983)

“[Knott’s poems are] shrouded almost always in the glaring and polluted light William Burroughs foresaw with such brilliance in ‘Naked Lunch.’ In fact, Knott, Poet of Interzone, is the poet Burroughs seemed to call for in his seminal novel. . . . Knott is one of a handful of original poets working today. His genius suits the times better than any poet I’ve read . . .” —Robert Peters, Los Angeles Times (1983)

“With the death of Berryman, Knott seems to me to be the chief embodiment in language today of Mallarmé’s spirit. . . .” —John Vernon, Western Humanities Review (1976)

“. . . Knott’s originality as a poet: he is absurd and classical and surrealist all at once. A marvelously impossible animal.” —Paul Zweig, Contemporary Poetry in America (1974)

“At his best, Knott is a kind of surreal classicist. . . . He is already a formidable poet.” —Karl Malkoff, Crowell’s Handbook of Contemporary American Poetry (1974)

“[Knott’s] images are astonishing. Whatever you may think of Knott’s poems, they have not been written before by anyone else. . . . Poetry such as this strikes me as extending our awareness.” —Louis Simpson, New York Times Book Review (1969)

“Bill Knott is one of the most remarkable poets to appear since James Wright and James Dickey.” —Ralph J. Mills, Jr., Poetry (1969)

“I think [Bill Knott] is one of the best poets I know.” —James Wright, blurb for *The Naomi Poems* (1968)

“I think the most significant group of young poets are those published in Choice and The Sixties, and the most impressive of these is certainly William Knott.” —Kenneth Rexroth, Harper’s Magazine (June 1965)