

William Corbett

A REVIEW

Bill Knott (1940-1966) *Nights of Naomi (Plus 2 Songs)*
Barn Dream Press Paperback \$2.50

This new work of Knott's is remarkable: brilliant and difficult. At first I thought the poems only difficult. Not so much a book as a stone, obdurate and unfeeling. They are of such intensity that the first readings gave me a headache. They wouldn't yield, and I was ready to dismiss them as quite unlike anything I knew, but too relentless, unforgiving if poems can have that quality.

But *Nights* became unavoidable not because I admired Knott's earlier work and felt I might be missing something or because I was angered at not "understanding"; rather those qualities that made it hard made it interesting. The singularity of its voice stayed in my ear. Lines like:

light is only a shadow which has learned to write its name
Upon light

and entire poems:

Like the grapes nailed to your forehead
My lipstick of shit was lit up
By inviolate seizures

would not be dismissed.

Nights of Naomi is a long poem made up of thirty-two poems none titled some only one line in length others running to a full page. It is a love poem, a night love poem, nights in which language compels an agonized, ecstatic world to be born. The nights cohere in tone; a hard, merciless, extreme tone constantly forced to exhaustion. Knott has worked his language into a thing of pure, unremitting emotion. One cannot speak of particular images; all images are pushed beyond themselves:

To unlock the marshmellow cello of a needle's knees by
twisting a tree of
your sighs around its slowly-gouged-out somersaults
Sprinkled on a coma's tail

Which is reborn in mid-swoop as a trillion different
escapes-by sequin

The poem sustains this density throughout.

Some will write of the book's surrealism. I have found the term impossible to understand in the many senses it has obtained in talk about recent American poetry. I'm not sure what surrealism means in this context, but feel that it must emerge out of the language; it can not simply be a way of looking at things. To say that *Nights* is as real as dreams in the sharp clarity they have is not to say that Knott is a surrealist. To say that Knott's language is emotion and seems the unconscious speaking may mean that Knott is a surrealist.

Whatever the label one finds for what Knott has given us it will not of itself encompass the work. This is one-of-a-kind writing: work of such heat, vigor and wholeness that it demands we confront it on its own terms. Certainly part of what Knott has done is to deprive us of what we "know" and to force us into our imaginations. In an uncollected poem Knott published some time ago in *Lillabulero* there is the line: "Remember the world has no experience at being you." For me *Nights* is the world that has no experience at being us, no experience at being anything other than itself.

A Note on "2 Songs":

The songs are not entirely unlike the Naomi poems, but they are different. Knott here reminds me of the Bob Dylan of "Blond on Blond". I like both songs very much. Let me quote:

They came to you and they turned out the light
Hugged you and kissed you and gave you delight
Their lips and their eyes were sealed with black tape
They squeezed your blood back into grapes