

The Quicken Tree by Bill Knott. Boa Editions Limited, 1995. \$12.50 ISBN 188023825X (paper).

Evolution buffs know that the Burgess Shale, a fossil-filled cliff of sedimentary rock in Canada, contains evidence of manifold life forms that didn't, historically speaking, meet with commercial success. It's a patent office full of perfectly good but discarded species, used to illustrate the random, unjust nature of natural selection. Which is why, today, we put our pants on one leg at a time and are not breathing through our hair. And that has made all the difference.

Reading the poems of Bill Knott is like looking at the Burgess Shale—one sees a diverse array of poetic avenues down which the mainstream didn't go—radiolarians and sidewinders, Argus-eyed strands of Hart Crane's DNA still in circulation. As in the hyperdrive Romantic lyricism of "Emigrations":

Oh make that prime mistake again; repeat
what the explorers of sea-roared corridors
promise each conch that coils them, desperate
to remain unsounded, sole...

His diversity of modes, as well as originality, has probably cost Knott readers; he marches to not one but many different drummers; at one moment rapturous eroticist, at the next deconstructive cynic; thus, it hard to pick up a beat and read through his work.

Critic F has said, "If Bill Knott were Croatian, or Basque, he would long ago have been translated, published in a special issue of the *Denver Quarterly*, and celebrated for his existential extremity, the labyrinthine fractals of self." True as this is, one person's fractals are another's frustration, and sometimes Knott's myopic, cerebral love of compression results in a reading experience that is cramped and claustrophobic; or sometimes, the jumpcuts are taxing, as in "Vision of the Goddess in a City Summer":

Time that diamond instant dew dulls
Is it quicker than them quote
That strode presence those fading puddles
Not in this goadless heat

In this sense perhaps, extinction was written into the script—a linguistic self-effacement has been part of Knott's song from the first, a nihilistic insistence which has an eloquence all its own: "I come from/ neitherstood, nuance of none" he says so beautifully that I selfishly wish there were more sustained, unsabotaged lyrics here. More often there is brilliance which displays, as Professor G says, "a briarlike hostility to the reader." Madame E, busybody, fins, beneath everything, the erotic wound, a counterpoint between the themes of masochism and escape. A stanza from "The Seven Last Words of Sofia Gubaidulina" uneasily concurs:

Now I pestle my face with opaque pins. You
stigmata that summarize my signature, go,
hinges down whom antiquity has vomited sequence—

but which letter misnomers my name?

Then there is Knott the conceptual artist, who loves to speculatively noodle, as in "Crapshoot":

Whoever it was, the first plagiarist
had to actually dream up the concept
of the crime, so don't fault him...
for lack of originality.

The Quickened Tree contains examples, strong and weak, of all the Knott manifestations. There is plenty to find fault with—the cantankerous resistance, the defiant adolescence, the hermetic maker of epigrammatic accordions. Yet there is sweetness, too, humor, and brilliant epigrams by the dozen. And Knott always writes with a total plunging commitment, which, considering some of the cold-blooded successes that populate the zoo of contemporary poetry, make you glad for his work.

Jack Sweeney

Commercial Traveler by Miriam Goodman. Garden Street Press, 1996.
\$13.95 ISBN 1882329066 (paper).

Poet and photographer Miriam Goodman shows us in these fine poems, and in her jacket photo of a disused greenhouse, how the dusty facts of economic life can be made to live.

In these poems about people, Goodman never ignores the weight of work; she is known for her independent moral cost-accounting of how people spend their lives earning a living. Her mordant, discordant reports from today's white-collar underclass are one side of a coin; another is her memoir, "American Dreams," of a woman making good, literally, in the marketplace of 50 years ago.

Such a poet can go from achieved strength to strength in applying economics to the rest of life, as in the piece that begins, "On her 26th birthday, our younger daughter proposes we chip in to have her jump out of a plane. Why should we fund this?"

—Her stepmother, you who took on my mistakes, you who are so sensible, what do you say?

—Being angry with her won't help. Let's help her reach her goal, even if her goal is this. I'd do it with her, but frankly with so many claims on my paycheck, this wouldn't exactly come first.

Here is a recognizable, believable voice, one of many in this book.

—What would I say?

—Persist, my darling. Jump into something.

Don't be so stalled by doubt you drift through life.

Here is the level point of view, experienced, disillusioned, yet neither angry nor depressed, which provides the strength and humor in so many of Goodman's stories. When the daughter does jump,

...She said had imagined pressure, roaring
air against her skin, like hanging her head out a car window. She had imagined
terrorized alertness, like skiing downhill in a rush. But after she exited the plane, the
air was gentle and silent. And there was nothing in sight she could hurt herself with.

Here is the magic—like the rags of plastic blown by the wind on the book's cover—
which makes these poems irreplaceable.

Sarah Kafatou