Naomi Poems: Corpse and Beans by **Bill Knott** (Black Ocean, 2024.)

Reviewed by **Douglas Piccinnini**

> 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.

Deliberate in play and style, Bill Knott's 1968 debut collection, *The Naomi Poems: Corpse and Beans*, is full of gentle violence and rough desire, serving a kind of spoiled eros fed into a foaming maw – with ashes and delight alike digesting all from sea to star.

> Alight if I have to be famous let it be for this great
> starfish-shield I made
> And the sands of her face drift over her body

Let's say: the authorial "Sherif-badge Sea Star" at work in these poems resists post-mortem reductions even as the voice(s) try to float, latch to, and detach from ideas of attachment in life, in love, and *especially* art.

As Richard Hell notes in the introduction, Knott shielded his own authority from ownership of the work by loading *The Naomi Poems* into a mirrored fictional being – "St. Geraud (1940-1966)"—while also stating in the 1968 edition that "it was still the work of the living Bill Knott." This play of authorial presence and absence (*maybe I am if you love me, maybe I'm not if you don't*) seems to energize much of the collection. Perhaps this ambiguity explains Knott's appeal to counterculture movements and his influence on surreal, psychedelic, and punk cultural productions. While it's also clear that the rejection of fixed identity is itself a faceless fixed identity—the very consistency of inconsistency becomes a kind of branded authenticity.

The occasion of this reissue of Bill Knott's first book, *The Naomi Poems: Corpse and Beans*, serves to further distinguish Knott as an enduring literary figure. This new edition hopefully introduces the work to a generation of writers perhaps

unfamiliar with Knott's uncanny ability to braid the surreal with tenderness, hope with vulgarity, while creating poetry that seems both of and above its time. In an era increasingly concerned with questions of authenticity and artistic identity, Knott's early mastery of authorial shape-shifting feels remarkably prescient – a "starfish-shield" that continues to regenerate new meanings with each reading.

The book, like a kind of human core sample, penetrates layers of the performance of art-making in its offering of poems that push and pull against lust/love, alienation/devotion, and an often sweet vulgarity.

As Sandra Simonds notes in her recent essay "The Crown Prince of Bad Judgment" (up at The Poetry Foundation) – "*The Naomi Poems* is among a number of groundbreaking American poetry collections that appeared in 1968, including George Oppen's *Of Being Numerous*, Etheridge Knight's *Poems from Prison*, Lorine Niedecker's *North Central*, and Ed Dorn's *Gunslinger*."

What makes Knott's work groundbreaking is perhaps its stunning use of the shape-shifting patois of the surreal, the romantic and the confessional while20988
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remaining distinctly American in the ability (desire) to self-mythologize and eulogize. In Simonds' clutch of ground breaking poets and respective collections, Knott is merely 28 years old to Knight's 37, Dorn's 39, Oppen's 60 and Niedecker's 65.

In history's context, perhaps Knott felt already a fading flower in Flower Power's garden – publishing *The Naomi Poems* just as the counterculture peaked, with an uncanny sense of the coming mortality. Within three years, The Rolling Stones' Brian Jones would drown, Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin would overdose within weeks of each other in 1970, and Jim Morrison would mysteriously die in Paris by 1971, all at 27. At 28, Knott was already writing from beyond the fatal age that would systematically claim the counterculture's brightest stars, making his pseudonymous death hoax seem less like artistic game-playing than precocious survival instinct.

Defiant of defiance itself, Knott justifies the preservation and negation of self so casually the book reads like a small wave lapping against a malformed castle along the shore. The poet plays a sleight of hand with identity, existing in the liminal space between muse and writer, virgin and suicide, the living Bill Knott and the dead St. Geraud.

The poems in this collection share a kinship with René Char's line, "[r]estore to them what is no more present in them... / For nothing is shipwrecked or delights in ashes" — a sensibility that finds its echo in Knott's own poetics of restoration, transforming Desnos's surrealist "Corps et biens" (Bodies and Goods) into the more visceral "'Corpse and Beans," suggesting both decomposition and nourishment, death and sustenance with the call to "cherish their emptiness until heart's next desire."

For the 28-year-old Knott, writing in the intensity of the Cold War/ Vietnam era, this game of self becomes the poet's best defense. The speaker of these poems reaches and clings in disparate directions, seeking attachment to an earth "squandered by the meek." In this context, Knott's starfish image functions as a protective shield, regenerative symbol, and erotic metaphor within a broader surrealist exploration of trauma and healing.

The renewal of the obscene serves to refresh and reset the senses as witness to intimacy — clinging to its romantic ideal in imagery both oceanic and celestially distant. Like the starfish itself, capable of regenerating lost limbs, Knott's poetry suggests that even the most damaged self can grow back from fragments, that even apparent failure contains the source of its own restoration.