

## Poet of the Incommensurate

### **Half-light: Collected Poems 1965-2016**

by Frank Bidart.

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It would be easy to call Frank Bidart—who has spent much of his writing life taking on the voices of others and making them coterminous with his own, in this way reinventing the dramatic monologue as a thing of formal daring and moral urgency—a poet of great empathy.

But when that word appears for the first time in his work, it appears in quotes:

Now that she is dead (that her BODY  
is DEAD),

I'm capable of an "*empathy*,"

an "*acceptance*" of the inevitable  
(in her, and in myself)

that I denied her, living...

“*Empathy*’”: this hardly gets at the self-dividedness that governs even, or especially, our fiercest acts of solicitude. Another poem tells us what necessarily replaces the banality of empathy, when we are willing to look at ourselves as ruthlessly, and able to feel as nakedly, as the poet does. This is Bidart in the voice of Berlioz mourning his wife (these words are set off in quotes and ascribed to the composer's autobiography, but you won't find them there):

I will not attempt to describe the grief that possessed me.

It was complicated by something, *incommensurate*,  
*tormenting*, I had always found hardest to bear—

*a sense of pity.*

Terrible, overmastering

pity swept through me at everything she had suffered.

Frank Bidart is a poet of terrible, overmastering pity. *Half-light*, which collects a half century of his poetry, presents us with the extraordinary record of his effort to make something commensurate to the complexity of the human psyche as it struggles to know itself in time. He has evoked Frost in describing his ambition to “fasten the voice to the page,” and, from his first book forward, Bidart’s radically precise typography—which makes use of spacing, block letters, italics—hazards everything to try to make language adequate to the task of dramatizing both the speaking voice and the brooding consciousness.

When the dancer Vaslav Nijinsky, in the long poem Bidart has given him to speak, inveighs against the art of practiced ease and unthreatening refinement, he provides us with an origin story of sorts for Bidart’s idiosyncratic aesthetic. Idiosyncratic—also necessary, true. Reading these lines, which with such authoritative abruptness imply the moral imperative of this particular style, you can’t help but take them on their own terms:

The training she and I shared, —  
training in the traditional  
“academic” dance,—  
emphasizes the illusion  
of *Effortlessness*,  
*Ease, Smoothness, Equilibrium...*  
When I look into my life,  
these are not the qualities  
I find there.

“When I look into my life”: so one fell clause announces the project to which this style is joined. But just as the “I” and “my” here do not belong, strictly speaking, to Bidart (without, at the same time, plainly omitting his presence), the looking-into that is suggested here, and that Bidart’s work on the whole carries forward, is more metaphysical than narrowly confessional. One of his

great achievements is to make it seem no less urgently necessary for being so. This is a searching felt down to the unit of the day, the hour, the body. It is sensitively alive to each double-bind, each radical given—in the poet’s memorable phrase—that conditions any one human existence, and yet goes beyond the mere mining of biography to realize what is finally a tragic and encompassing vision of human life.

Born in Bakersfield, California in 1939 to parents who divorced when he was five—his father an alcoholic would-be cowboy, “the unhappiest man / I have ever known well,” his mother fiercely attached to her son and, in an increasingly fraught combination, entirely unfulfilled by what that time and place had to offer, unable to fashion a life apart that, as Bidart would write, “STOOD FOR HER”—he faced one more radical given in being gay, something he came to know about himself early. Whether he is taking on St. Augustine in all the extremity of his conversion, the Greek myth of Myrrha’s incestuous love, Genghis Khan’s coming to power and haunted consciousness, or his own parents, his own loves, Bidart is interested in—no, moved to, moved by—the torments and fulfillments of body and spirit, the inescapably singular fact of desire and shame, guilt and hunger (not least “hunger for the absolute,” as one poem has it), the encroachments of contingency as against the claims of an inner necessity (neither one, it would seem, saying much for freedom), and the ambiguously liberating possibility of clarity. Is transformative self-knowledge of some kind possible? some act of seeing or making that might allow us to transcend the givens and contradictions of our existence? So often in Bidart, the word insight is invoked to be immediately exposed as hollow, as apt to be thrown away as the word empathy. Looking at a photo of Marilyn Monroe, Bidart arrives at one of the great refrains of his poetry of disenthralment: “You are bitter all that releases / transformation in us is illusion.”

Insight, illusion: these words, the competing poles they represent, predominate throughout Bidart's long career, staging a kind of agon, a variation on the war between "master" and "disaster" in Bishop's great villanelle. "Is this wisdom," he asks himself toward the close of one poem, "or self-pity?" The line's authority lies in its genuine agnosticism. "The Old Man at the Wheel," a haunting late lyric in which Bidart looks head-on at his life in the art, moves inexorably toward the sense of illusion:

Measured against the immeasurable  
universe, no word you have spoken

brought light. Brought  
light to what, as a child, you thought

too dark to be survived. *By exorcism*  
*you survived. By submission, then making.*

You let all the parts of that thing you would  
cut out of you enter your poem because

enacting there all its parts allowed you  
the illusion you could cut it from your soul.

"That thing you would / cut out of you": though we should be wary of seeking some satisfying gloss here, the line gains resonance in light of what Bidart remembers elsewhere as "terror at my own homosexuality." In "Writing 'Ellen West,'" which touches on the personal ferment that led to a defining poem—one in which he gives philosophically rigorous, hauntingly compassionate voice to an anorexic who was the subject of an early twentieth century case study by Ludwig Binswanger—Bidart uses similar language to suggest a dimension of the self that resists neat articulation or complete understanding, on the part of the poet as much as his reader. In a third-person that suggests these limits of self-understanding while at the same time conveying the urgency of the early poem—this in the way it presents Bidart as character rather than maker, prey to kindred exigencies—he writes that "Ellen West" was an effort at "exorcism of that thing within Frank that wanted, after his mother's death, to die." "That thing" again: more opaquely

overmastering than mere trait or emotion, it tells us in other language what Bidart's Nijinsky, in a penetrating moment that is perfectly of a piece with his "madness," has the terrible sanity to see:

—Now, for months and months,  
I have found

ANOTHER man in me:—

HE is NOT me— ; I  
am afraid of him.

If it is an illusion to imagine we can cut out of ourselves or somehow silence this inner other, both "The Old Man at the Wheel" and "Writing 'Ellen West'" achieve their remarkable self-possession by embodying, by taking into their being, the contradictory sense of achieved exorcism. Here, then, are grounding insight and grateful recognition, hard-won. In both poems, italics are called on to mime "a voice beneath the voice," something approximating the unsilenceable articulations of consciousness itself, the imagined—Geoffrey Hartman's phrase seems apt—trembling on the brink of the real:

*It must be lifted from the mind*

*must be lifted and placed elsewhere  
must not remain in the mind alone*

Bidart is at his most poignant in his passionate, tormented, unfinishable effort to elaborate and inhabit such an "*elsewhere*," turning to the poem as a place of the radical counterfactual, in whose "half-light" a flickeringly real weight is lent, outside the mind, to what was not lived ("why why why why"), to what could not be so much as spoken—even as the poems are haunted by the knowledge that their work of giving voice, through a medium that escapes the mind without ever quite proving itself in or upon the world, can never be finally

satisfying, must always retain the air of willed illusion. “Half-light,” a late poem that gives its title to this collected volume—and, more than that, a phrase that appears throughout Bidart’s work, reflecting the uncertain illuminations of his recurrent effort to better envisage and newly engage the dead—reads as an inspired rewriting of the title poem of an earlier book, *Star Dust*. Two collections and some years later, here is a night he has not gotten out of him:

That crazy drunken night I  
maneuvered you out into a field outside of

Coachella—I’d never seen a sky  
so full of stars, as if the dirt of our lives

still were sprinkled with glistening  
white shells from the ancient seabed

beneath us that receded long ago.  
Parallel. We lay in parallel furrows.

— That suffocated, fearful  
look on your face.

Jim, yesterday I heard your wife on the phone  
tell me you died almost nine months ago.

Jim, now we cannot ever. Bitter  
that we cannot ever have

the conversation that in  
nature and alive we never had. Now not ever.

We have not spoken in years. I thought  
perhaps at ninety or a hundred, two

broken-down old men, we wouldn’t  
give a damn, and find speech.

When I tell you that all the years we were  
undergraduates I was madly in love with you

you say you  
knew. I say I knew you

knew. You say  
*There was no place in nature we could meet.*

You say this as if you need me to  
admit something. *No place*

*in nature, given our natures.* Or is this  
warning? I say what is happening now is

happening only because one of us is  
dead. You laugh and say, Or both of us!

Our words  
will be weirdly jolly.

That light I now envy  
exists only on this page.

“Our words / *will be* weirdly jolly”: the great grief of the poem is the way it can’t bring itself to believe in the conversation it has at last staged—hence the self-canceling and the desperate hope of this future tense, intruding so near the poem’s close. An heir to Faulkner, Bidart has written that “the need for the past / is so much at the center of my life,” but the tragedies he has spent his life writing—as he puts it in another poem—draw as much of their pathos from the need of an unbelieved-in future, from a longing whose intensity, in a transformation of religious utterance, cries out at once for more and less life: “(Now that they have no / body, only when I have no body // can we meet—).” Or, turning to the first lines of the first poem in this collected volume, “To the Dead,” whose rending beginning presents in embryo so much that is vital to Bidart:

What I hope (when I hope) is that we’ll  
see each other again, —

...and again reach the VEIN

in which we loved each other.  
It existed. *It existed.*

You yearn toward an unreal future when you can no longer persuade yourself even of the reality of the past (the *pain* of those italics, the way they bore in). The avowed and immediately slighted hope to “see each other again”—is this faith, or merely the disabused staging of it? The need of the future in “Half-light,” the poem’s inability finally to believe in the conversation it has enacted, is especially piercing given that an earlier Bidart poem, “Music Like Dirt,” suggests that a conversation very like this one *did happen* outside the bounds of any poem:

I will not I will not I said but as my body turned in the solitary  
bed it said But he loves me which broke my will.

*music like dirt*

That you did but willed and continued to will refusal you  
confirmed seventeen years later saying I was not wrong.

*music like dirt*

When you said I was not wrong with gravity and weird  
sweetness I felt not anger not woe but weird calm sweetness.

“Weirdly jolly,” “weird calm sweetness”: you can’t help but be drawn to the way that word—which, before it came to suggest the merely strange or unearthly, pointed toward fate, destiny—surfaces in both of these poems, that first phrase almost bearing the residue of a worked-through self-loathing, the second finding form for something stretching beyond, but not fundamentally discontinuous with, “*acceptance*.” In a prose section of a poem about *the difficulty* of writing a poem about the dancer Ulanova, Bidart writes:

You have spent your life writing tragedies for a world that does not believe in tragedy. What is tragedy? Everyone is born somewhere: into this body, this family, this place. Into the mystery of your own predilections that change as you become conscious of what governs choice, but change little.

“That change...but change little”: this sense of almost-fate is, from an aesthetic standpoint, borne out by *Half-light*. The tremendous range and capaciousness of this collection, this career, is not in question—take the four *Hour of the Night* poems that have appeared from 1990’s *In the Western Night* onward, unmatched in the ambition with which they take on being, necessity, love, power, insight and their antitheses; or take the arresting short lyrics of later volumes like *Star Dust* and *Watching the Spring Festival*. Yet *Half-light* does not present a story of outwardly discernible artistic “development” separable into discrete stages. In an accompanying note, Bidart says that he has toned down certain visual effects in several early poems; his very inclination and ability to re-enter these poems suggest this basic continuity, an essential sameness of character that connects the earliest work to the most recent (a set of poems written



in 2016 and published for the first time here under the title *Thirst*). Bidart's war, to borrow the term he uses in reference to Nijinsky, has been one of obsession and return, a ritual effort to get at essences, courageous in its willingness to risk possession by "terrible, overmastering pity" and giving courage, all the same, in the "weird calm sweetness" it finds itself possessed by: Bidart's own *amor fati*, a given that is also a grace, and that makes for the particular solace of his much more than illusory presence, his unrepeatably human voice.