



Half-light: Collected Poems 1965-2016

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The collected works of one of contemporary poetry's most original voices

Gathered together, the poems of Frank Bidart perform one of the most remarkable transmutations of the body into language in contemporary literature. His pages represent the human voice in all its extreme registers, whether it's that of the child-murderer Herbert White, the obsessive anorexic Ellen West, the tormented genius Vaslav Nijinsky, or the poet's own. And in that embodiment is a transgressive empathy, one that recognizes our wild appetites, the monsters, the misfits, the misunderstood among us and inside us. Few writers have so willingly ventured to the dark places of the human psyche and allowed themselves to be stripped bare on the page with such candor and vulnerability. Over the past half century, Bidart has done nothing less than invent a poetics commensurate with the chaos and appetites of our experience.

Half-light encompasses all of Bidart's previous books, and also includes a new collection, *Thirst*, in which the poet austere surveys his life, laying it plain for us before venturing into something new and unknown. Here Bidart finds himself a "Creature coterminous with thirst," still longing, still searching in himself, one of the "queers of the universe."

Visionary and revelatory, intimate and unguarded, Bidart's collected works are a radical confrontation with human nature, a conflict eternally renewed and reframed, restless line by restless line.

Half-light: Collected Poems 1965-2016 Details

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Jeremy says

I'm quantifying, not judging, my rewarding experience through Bidart's work. I adore his two long poems "The First Hour of the Night" and "The Third Hour of the Night", but not the even hours. (I've rated all the volumes separately and named other favorite poems there.)

Gus says

my favorite

Claire says

Finally read Bidart after having taken all of his classes while at Wellesley! Liked his later poems much more than his earlier ones, but loved having all of them together in one volume for comparison.

Jim Manis says

I was a third of the way through this book when the Pulitzer's were announced and sparked the argument about whether such prizes should be awarded to such collections or for shorter, more traditional works of poetry. I understand the arguments for both cases, but frankly can't decide which should outweigh the other.

I like Bidart's longer poems. The shorter ones seem too much like what everyone else has written over the past half century. The three interviews at the end of the book are worth reading. Bidart several times refers to "voice," which no one talks about anymore. They should, as he points out.

Frank says

I absolutely love Frank Bidart's personal and autobiographical poetry; "To The Dead," "Confessional," and "Golden State" are among my favorite poems. I also found "Herbert White" to be especially breathtaking as it opens a window into an unfamiliar consciousness and conscience. I can applaud his poems celebrating homosexual love as well for their sincere representation of his experience.

However, I tend to get lost in the landscapes created by Bidart's longer and lose interest! I agree with the readers of the October 2004 issue of Poetry magazine that The Third Hour of the Night (and all the Night poems) was too long, too esoteric, and not good enough for its own issue! I value difficult poems that force one to tease out meaning (whether intended by the writer or projected by the reader), but Bidart's obscurantism annoys me. Bidart's "taking on" of various personages perspective—Nijinsky and Ellen West

for example—also does not appeal to me personally. I find that academia tends to applaud such constructions as erudite and I just cannot figure out why. It's as if delving into the faux mentality of someone else in a dramatic monologue is more "heroic" (using the description of Bidart's work from The NY Times Book Review) than your own. I selfishly wish Bidart had never reached a catharsis with his own demons (see page 699) and moved away from the autobiographical style of his earlier years!

I appreciated the notes and interview section in the book as it cast light on his thought process and intentions and fleshed out the text. I'm glad to have read this collection, but would not necessarily recommend it as a new purchase...buy it used....

Heather Lake says

This collection was a bit of a struggle for me to get through. There were some bright spots throughout, but more often than not I found the poems too distant & abstract to have any sort of meaningful connection with.

I think my biggest issue was the poems, at least in the first 2/3 or so were focused so heavily on concepts that there wasn't anything personal or solid for me to latch onto or find affecting. Maybe that's just a personal preference, but I don't care for obscure poetry unless the emotional payoff is worth the time it takes to draw out some sort of meaning.

I think the latter poems did strike a better balance at this, but again, just not my cup of tea.

Christopher says

Being only a recent neophyte to poetry, I only heard about this collection because it won the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize this past year. Having now finished reading this wonderful collection, there is no mystery in my mind as to why it was chosen. This is an astounding collection that readers both new and old to the genre can enjoy. Mr. Bidart's style is arresting, grabbing a hold of you and rarely letting go. And this is true of both his short and long poems. Until now, I had not read a poet who could hold my attention in both the long and short form. Usually they are good at one, but lousy at the other. Mr. Bidart is excellent at both. His more narrative poems are a special highlight, including his four "Hour of the Night" poems that he has written throughout his career. These poems in particular, and all of his poems in general, are meditations on history, mythology, family, and sexuality and the legacy they leave us. Some of his poems are bit explicit in their sexuality, including homosexuality, so less mature readers may want to wait before picking this book up. But this is also one of Mr. Bidart's great strengths. He is open and vulnerable about his own family and sexuality, but he never loses the plot of his poems in mindless meditations. This was a great read and I recommend it to all of my poetry friends.

Ron says

Congratulations, Frank Bidart, for winning this year's Pulitzer for poetry!

Here's a favorite from this amazing, challenging, inspiring collection, the title poem, "Half-Light":

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.

Abby N Lewis says

I loved this collection, but it definitely requires the sort of attention that stems from a mind that is content and a body well fed and rested. That being said, I still loved it. I started to read the first poem, "To the Dead," and I found I couldn't finish reading the poem--I had to stop, go back to the beginning, and read it aloud. It was the sort of poem that demands that kind of attention. By the time I had finished reading the poem aloud, I was crying. From there, I knew I had to keep reading (while reading aloud as often as possible).

In the interviews in the back of the collection, Bidart talks about his struggle to put the "voice" correctly on the page in a poem. It seems as if it's been a lifelong task/struggle for him. But in my mind, the fact that I felt compelled to read each poem aloud because of the way it appeared on the page--to me, that meant Bidart had succeeded in getting each voice across to his reader.

Samantha says

I didn't have as much time as I wanted to spend in the landscapes of Bidart's poems. Do any of us have that kind of time? A long but solid collection.

Peycho Kanev says

Poem Ending With a Sentence by
Heath Ledger

Each grinding flattened American vowel smashed to
centerlessness, his glee that whatever long ago mutilated
his

mouth, he has mastered to mutilate

you: the Joker's voice, so unlike
the bruised, withheld, wounded voice of Ennis Del Mar.

Once I have the voice

that's
the line

and at

the end
of the line

is a hook

and attached

to that

is the soul.

Michael says

A little over 700 pages, *Half-Light* isn't a collection that can be finished easily in a few sittings. I found reading much of the early poetry to require a great deal of patience, and I'm not sure that the quality of those poems merits the attention that Bidart consistently demands from his reader. By contrast, his later work as a whole becomes less affected and bombastic, making the poems more palatable, if not necessarily more approachable. In contrast to many poets, Bidart's strongest collections—*Star Dust*, *Watching the Spring Festival*, and *Metaphysical Dog*—are those he wrote towards the end of his life. In these, it seems as though he has finally figured out how to juxtapose the personal against larger social and philosophical contexts without boring the reader.

C. Varn says

Bidart's poetry is often studied in contraries, and this juxtaposition is not always easily accessible. Short-lined, long poems. Elliptical abstractions paired with motion and bodily movement. Bidart's goal is often to force empathy on us--to make the strange seem personally accessible and the almost make the personally accessible seem strange. *Half-light* includes all of Bidart's prior collections as well as his newest one. Bidart requires, however, a patience for obscure voices and obscure frames of reference. Generally, his work is worth looking for the classical and contemporary references. Definitely worth the price of the collection, but I am not sure every reader, even every reader of poetry, would be willing to go where Bidart wants to take them.

Elise says

Poems I Liked:

"To the Dead"

"Guilty of Dust"

"Advice to the Players"

"Lament for the Makers"

"Like Lightening Across an Open Field"

"Song of the Mortar and Pestle"

"Queer"

"Half-light"

From "The War of Vaslav Nijinsky":

"Now my wife wants to have / a second child. I am frightened; / the things a human being must learn, - / the things a child / must learn he FEELS, - / frighten me! I know people's faults / because in my soul, / I HAVE COMMITTED THEM." p. 26

From "Whitman":

"The question became not / whether a master, but which. / You schooled and reschooled / yourself to bind with / briars your joys and desires." p.546

Jerrie (redwritinghood) says

After 700 pages, with this collection I've finally finished all the books on the National Book Award shortlist for poetry. This one won the award, but it is my least favorite of the five. While there were many poems here that I loved, I also found many, particularly the earlier poems, much less accessible than the contemporary poetry from the other collections on the shortlist.
