

Watching the Spring Festival

Frank Bidart

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This is Frank Bidart's first book of lyrics--his first book not dominated by long poems. Narrative elaboration becomes speed and song. Less embattled than earlier work, less actively violent, these new poems have, by conceding time's finalities and triumphs, acquired a dark radiance unlike anything seen before in Bidart's long career. Mortality--imminent, not theoretical--forces the self to question the relation between the actual life lived and what was once the promise of transformation. This plays out against a broad landscape. The book opens with Marilyn Monroe, followed by the glamour of the eighth-century Chinese imperial court (seen through the eyes of one of China's greatest poets, Tu Fu). At the center of the book is an ambitious meditation on the Russian ballerina Ulanova, "Giselle," and the nature of tragedy. All this gives new dimension and poignance to Bidart's recurring preoccupation with the human need to leave behind some record or emblem, a made thing that stands, in the face of death, for the possibilities of art. Bidart, winner of the 2007 Bollingen Prize in American Poetry, is widely acknowledged as one of the significant poets of his time. This is perhaps his most accessible, mysterious, and austere beautiful book.

Watching the Spring Festival Details


Date : Published April 1st 2008 by Farrar Straus Giroux

ISBN : 9780374286033

Author : Frank Bidart

Format : Hardcover 61 pages

Genre : Poetry

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From Reader Review Watching the Spring Festival for online ebook

Amy says

Marilyn Monroe

Song of the Mortar and Pestle

Valentine

Winter Spring Summer Fall

Ulanova at Forty-Six at Last Dances Before a Camera Giselle

Candidate

Song

Collector

(My particular favorites.)

Jeremy says

(3.5-Perhaps cutting my teeth on the greatest hits of poets has spoiled me.) Bidart finishes this collection with a strong fury, and I am intrigued enough to check out his early career. "If See No End Is" is a superb sestina. Other favorites include "Marilyn Monroe", "Watching the Spring Festival", and "Winter Spring Summer Fall" with this evocation:

"Inside time make the snake made out of
time pulse without cease electric in space"

Jesse says

The latest from one of my favorite contemporary poets, this time with a focus on lyric poetry. There's a lot of typical Bidart--particularly in the appropriation of voices from various times in past, ranging from ancient China and Rome on up to the most ephemeral present (see the amusing, surprisingly poignant "Sanjaya at Seventeen"). But let's face it--Bidart is at his best when he gives himself the pages and pages and *pages* to explicate, to breath, to fall down rabbit holes on the way to his ultimate point. So it's not all that surprising that what I found the most successful poem is also the longest: "Ulanova at Forty-Six at Last Dances Before a Camera Giselle," an unexpected coming-of-age poem where Bidart reveals where and when he became breathlessly aware of true art for the first time. A collection both impenetrable and beguiling, and to my mind, all the better because of it.

"with her iron

*nasals, Piaf regrets NOTHING: crazed
by the sweet desire to return to
zero"*

-from "Candidate"

Kent says

What I appreciate with Frank Bidart is the conscious argument he brings with his poems. I usually feel with his poems that his intelligent logic has managed to harness this great bounding poetic energy into a statement, or at least some discernible sense that I can claim I implicitly understand. In this book, I feel the main argument is dealing with age, and the way that old age idealizes its younger self. Fairly early (in "Tu Fu Watches the Spring Festival Across Serpentine Lake" to be precise) I got the sense of this argument. The remainder of the book I felt Bidart continued to treat it from different perspectives.

Sarah says

Read this book for a poetry class and wasn't much enthralled.

I found the selections a bit convoluted, and I never felt the desire to slow down and really concentrate on any poem in particular, let alone reread any of them (which is usually my gauge for a good collection of poems). This is my first time reading Frank Bidart, and I might give some of his other work another chance, but this book just wasn't for me.

Matt says

I sort of forget how weird Bidart is when I'm not reading him, because his name has been in the background of my life for so long that it's almost comforting. His books, for all their wonderful qualities, are not a comfort.

Even when they are funny, as they often are, they are unsettling, pregnant with the sense that I'm missing something essential when I can't reassemble the poem. For what appears to be abstract, Bidart is able to invest the poems with a palpable sense of how important they are. No poems of playing around, these, even when they are funny.

So what does it all mean? I'll leave it at this: I'm not sure if I could tell this book from another Bidart book, tell whether one was better than another, or even if they were different. I'm not sure that's an endorsement, but I think, too, that he writes a distinctive enough kind of verse that he will find the readers he needs, and he will be writing the kinds of poems he writes whenever I find myself in the mood for those kinds of poems.

Joanne Merriam says

I saw Frank Bidart read from this book in April 2011, at Vanderbilt University. He's an engaging speaker and well worth seeing if you have the opportunity. He read some shorter poems, including a sestina ("it's my only sestina; it will be my only sestina – I feel lucky to have escaped with my neck") and the very long poem "Ulanova at Forty-Six At Last Dances Before a Camera Giselle," during which I fell asleep. In fairness to Bidart, I was working on a substantial sleep deficit and the reading was in one of those university lecture halls seemingly designed to sedate students. I saw the Winnipeg ballet perform Giselle in 2001, so I was familiar with his inspiration, but it didn't help me understand the poem, which combined several speakers with a meditation on the writing of the poem itself.

Bidart's work makes me feel stupid; this isn't Bidart's fault – he's obviously a genius, and he expects his audience to be as well, and, alas, I am not. But that's not why I am giving this book only three stars. I don't particularly mind being made to feel stupid, and even appreciate it in some writers (Eliot comes to mind) whose work I feel rewards a patient reader. But I find Bidart's poetry distancing and cold, completely aside from its difficulty. I think he's doing something (modernist, allusive), that I'm just not interested in. He has some other, more approachable poems (like "Marilyn Monroe") which I enjoy, but by and large I think his approach to poetry is simply too emotionless for me. His writing is experimental and convoluted, and will be rewarding for readers with the patience to sort through his many allusions and who enjoy poetry as an intellectual puzzle.

Robert Beveridge says

Frank Bidart, **Watching the Spring Festival** (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008)

The jacket copy for *Watching the Spring Festival* mentions that Bidart's poetry here is less violent than his previous work. Maybe in the immediate sense, but there's still a streak of—what, nihilism?—a mile wide here:

"The desire to approach obliteration
precedes each metaphysic justifying it."
("Song of the Mortar and Pestle")

Maybe not nihilism in the sense we think of it these days, with all its negative connotations, but that Hindu or Buddhist reaching for nothing-consciousness (with its greater sense of "living in the now" rather than "the destruction of all things"). Of course, I could be off the mark here. I often am. But I didn't feel even the specter of violence hovering over this volume. Discomfort, sure, but then most good poetry is in some way discomfiting. Man vs. self, man vs. nature, all that jazz. Bidart is very interested in man vs. self, but not in a solipsistic sense. Man vs. self through the lens of said man seeing the outside world, perhaps? (I want to draw a parallel to Richard Siken's sublime *Crush* here, and I have since I started thinking about this review, but can't quite make the connection.) There's a definite sense of the outside world, and a recognition of Heisenberg, that what is observed is changed by observation, even when the observer is the self.

"When you wake, sixth grade will start. The finite you know
you fear is infinite: even at eleven, what you love is
what you should not love, which endless bullies in-

tuit unerringly.”
 (“If See No End In Is”)

If I seem to be giving the book a low rating (though remember that on a five point scale that uses half-stars, as mine does, three stars is above average), it's because of that desire of mine to compare it to *Crush*, one of the best books I've read in the past decade, if not longer. If it doesn't stand up to Siken, it's with the codicil that few things do. That doesn't make *Watching the Spring Festival* any less worth reading. ***

Grady Ormsby says

I am interested in cosmology and physics. I am curious about our universe, how it's structured and how it works. Sometimes I read books on these topics. While I am reading some of these books, I can often follow the author's discussion and am excited about the majesty and wonder of the cosmos. I must admit, however, that at other times the abstractions can leave me feeling lost and confused. Poetry can sometimes offer the same sort of challenges when it comes to understanding. One of the joys of poetry is being able to navigate the depths of imagery, symbolism and allusion. Sometimes there is clarity and sometimes one feels lost in a cloud of density and opaqueness. I found the poetry in **Watching the Spring Festival** by Frank Bidart to be similar to explanations of string theory and dark matter. I do not doubt Mr. Bidart's ability as a poet, rather only my ability to understand and appreciate what he has written. His verse goes way beyond my skills of interpretation and decoding.

Jon says

These poems definitely need to be read aloud...I started reading these and they seemed really opaque. Then I read them out loud (I'm a nerd) and my appreciation skyrocketed. The cadences and rhythms are compelling, but sometimes the meaning still was unclear...but any poetry book that features a poem about American Idol's Sanjaya will hold a special place in my heart.

T. says

The snake swallows its own tail—the book revolves carefully around this theme and symbol, and how could we forget? It is there on the cover and in the form of Bidart's poems — repetitions, cycles, visions.

He begins: "...*Poor, you thought being rich is utterly / corrosive; and watched with envy.*"* We are creatures swallowing ourselves, "...*that slight / brutality intimacy induces.*"** When I first started reading his works some years ago, critics have always said that Frank Bidart's poems tend to veer towards the violent, add to that his sprawling monologues that I simply cannot get into then. This book is probably the first where I've seen quite short verses, and they are elegant and meditative. The longest poem, which spanned about ten pages — *Ulanova at Forty-Six At Last Dances Before a Camera Giselle* — is interesting, in that it talks about memory, but also creation.

Here, some lines I liked:

...Each gesture
cuts through these other earlier moments to exists as

a new gesture

but carries with it all the others, so what you dance
is the circle or bubble you carry that is all this.

•

Inside the many ways to dance Giselle

*the single way that will show those who sleep what
tragedy is. What tragedy is*

your work in Act One. Then comes something else.

Valentine is also a favourite: "How those now dead used love to explain / wild regret", as well as *Song of the Mortar and Pestle*: "The desire to approach obliteration / preexists each metaphysic justifying it."

Yes, he can be brutal—

Catullus: Id Faciam

Frank Bidart

What I hate I love. Ask the crucified hand that holds
the nail that now is drive into itself, why.

But this is because truth is brutal:

why why why why

It is an illusion you were ever free

— from *Like Lightning Across An Open Field*

Reading this book has been a pleasure.

—

* from *Marilyn Monroe*

** from *Tu Fu Watches the Spring Festival Across Serpentine Lake*

Jaffa Kintigh says

This is my second time reading this collection, the first being 5 years back in grad school. Last week I re-

read and wrote a review for *Up to Speed* by Rae Armantrout. The second half of this collection salvaged my opinion and enjoyment of this collection ultimately adding the third star to this review. Clearly, not every poem is going to connect with every reader and this was my experience with this collection until I got to the longest included poem, "Ulanova at Forty-Six at Last Dances Before a Camera Giselle." I found this poem exquisite. The opening section recreates the dance: "Many ways to dance Giselle, but tonight as you/watch you think that she is what art is, creature//who remembers//her every gesture and senses its relation to the time/just a moment before when she did something//close to it//but then everything was different so what she feels/now is the pathos of the difference. Her body//hopping forward//remembers the pathos of the difference. Each/hop is small, but before each landing she has//stepped through//many ghosts." The poem expertly weaves in prose-poem sections that contemplate the desire to write this very poem, muse on the typical tragedies, and even quote contemporary reviews of the performance, all while reconstructing the dance.

A few other moments stand out when it feels like the poet is speaking from personal experience. [from "Little O"] "When I was young, I tried not to/generalize; I had seen little. At sixty-six,//you have done whatever you do//many times before." The most vivid, just-shy-of-graphic moment comes in the final poem, "Collector:" "When your stepfather/went broke, you watched as your mother's//money allowed survival--//It is not release. You watched her pay him/back by multitudinous//daily humiliations. In the back seat of//the car you were terrified as Medea/invented new ways to tell//Jason what he had done to her."

Finally, I cannot end this without making mention of the single form-poem in the collection [a sestina without the traditional final tercet], "If See No End In Is." I loved it. Doing a form-poem just to do a form-poem is usually a class exercise these days. However, this poem works beautifully from the opening stanza: "What none knows is when, not if./Now that your life nears its end/when you turn back what you see/is ruin. You think, it is a prison. No,/it is a vast resonating chamber in/which each thing you say or do is//new, but the same. [. . .]" The fourth stanza stands as a supplication: "*Familiar spirit, within whose care I grew, within/whose disappointment I twist, may we at last see/by what necessity the double-bind is in the end/the figure for human life, why what we love is/precluded always by something else we love, as if/each no we speak is yes, each yes no.*" Who needs a finalizing tercet with the following sixth and final sestet? "Something in you believes that it is not the end./When you wake, sixth grade will start. The finite you know/you fear is infinite: even at eleven, what you love is/what you should not love, which endless bullies in-/tuit unerringly. The future will be different: you cannot see/the end. What none knows is when, not if."

I regret that more of the collection eluded me, but what spoke to me, moved me.

John Tessitore says

These poems force you to probe the shadowy corners of your thought, the essential nuances you rarely take the time to recognize, name, and understand. They are not easy poems--each is a Jamesian exercise in difficult and sometimes exhausting self-awareness--but their effect is remarkable and likely different for each reader. A real achievement.

What they don't do is sing. Perhaps it's too much to ask a poem to do both.

Jon says

Frank Bidart is one of my favorite living American poets, if not my very favorite, and I admire him for not jumping off a bridge in the tradition of Weldon Kees, John Berryman, Hart Crane, et. al. (Actually I think Crane jumped off a ship, but you get the idea.) The trouble is, at 66 Bidart may have said everything he has to say and this book largely reiterates his viewpoint on familiar themes such as sexuality (mostly homo-), death, and his Southern California background, while breaking no new ground stylistically. Worth reading for a fan like me, but if you've never read him don't start here, get *IN THE WESTERN NIGHT*--he'll likely never top early poems such as "Herbert White", "Ellen West", "California Plush".

Gus says

Beautiful but definitely need to look at again sometime in the future. I'm too tired rn
