

Poem and Story

The Sacrifice. Frank Bidart. New York: Vintage Books. 1983. \$5.95 paper. *The Touched Life*. David Ray. Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, Inc. 1982. *Poems & Stories*. Richard Blessing. Port Townsend, WA: Dragon Gate, Inc.. \$6 paper. *Tar*. C. K. Williams. New York: Vintage Books. 1983. \$5.95 paper.

Perhaps now we read more hybrids of story and poem than the pure strain of either form—if it exists. The fusions and partial fusions take many forms, among them the prose poem and the short poetic novel. The deliberately prosaic, almost technical object study in verse is another. For a while in the 70's the workshops had everybody writing these, but they have been supplanted, it appears, by the dramatic monologue, a dangerously charming form that has been simmering along in American poetry for years. Many a poet casting about for a subject must have been startled at the ease with which a character from the encyclopedia page could be induced to speak up. It is unusual to pick up a first collection that does not contain one or more; schoolchildren must be doing them now instead of reports.

Frank Bidart's work in the form stands out starkly in the midst of all the proficiency. His "The War of Vaslav Nijinsky," a 30-page poem including prose passages from writings of Romola Nijinsky and other prose "based on" biographies, is an example of the monologue at its most electric. It and the 22-page "Confessional" make up most off Bidart's third book *The Sacrifice*.

If, to place these two poems, we were to ask Trotsky's question, "To which order of feelings does a given artistic work correspond," we would have to set them with Dostoyevsky and plays of Shakespeare. Both poems concern bedeviled individuals, and personal suffering that is related to but transcends events.

It is difficult to quote from “Nijinsky” because it is cumulative, each episode reflecting and extending the others. It is a rather technical presentation of madness itself as cumulative (rather than mutant), and laced with comedy despite its tragic nature. Nijinsky’s quarrel with God is particularly comical:

God, on the other hand, —

* * *

perhaps felt threatened, or even
coerced — ;

he perhaps felt that though he could
agree with me

that expiation *IS* necessary

he had to agree with
Nietzsche

that expiation is *NOT* possible . . .

In any case, he has chosen, — as
so often, —

CAMOUFLAGE . . .

But then the solemn “*I am incurable . . . I did not / live long.*” The man in the poem is not Nijinsky the historical character so much as a semi-angelic figure whom World War I, the 20th century itself, and prolonged rumination on the tragic nature of life, lure into madness: “. . . *Let this be the Body / through which the War has passed.*”

It is interesting that a poet so personal as Bidart is one of the leaders away from the individualism that reached its apogee in poetry of the 60’s and 70’s. In the intimate “Confessional,” as in “Nijinsky,” idea is always struggling forward to replace scene; the glare of meaning washes out the details. A young man is being interviewed by a bland confessor who resembles a therapist, to whom he tells the story of his relationship with his mother. His mother, now dead, was the possessive, almost demonic,

adored, finally cast off primary force in his life. Bidart opens the poem in a clinical monotone, at once sinister and modest. But he avoids the predictable irony—as he has tried to from the beginning in his poetry—and except for a brief foray into melodrama goes quickly to the level of seriousness on which the poem's struggle is conducted. (The mother strangles his cat in a scene that, whatever its factuality, does not ring true.) Almost bare of scenery, and of anything other than an abstract, halting, intent explaining of his position and his mother's in the long dance of their relationship, the poem meanders to unexpected heights of *thought*. The comic daring of choosing St. Augustine and his mother Monica as the couple against whom he weighs himself and his own mother becomes serious: they are a natural choice in the search for an absolute to encompass his own and his mother's suffering.

The teeth of adult error set in the flesh of a child or an innocent: this is an inexhaustible theme of the novel, one which ranges through many levels or "orders of feelings" and the forms that contain them, from the comical (*Tom Jones*) to the spiritual (*The Idiot*). "Confessional" is built like a novel around a moral dilemma, although it might not have seemed one before Freud: how to look back on one's unhappy family and upbringing—that is, how *properly* to look back on them, wanting not to be wholly constituted by them. (Nijinsky sets himself, and Europe, the same task; such is the scope of these poems.) Part of the dilemma is how to act now, how to *be*: for the poet, having lost the mother-enemy; for the dancer, having lived, as he believes, at the expense of others; for Europe, having brutalized itself in World War I.

The questions raised by "Confessional" move from the moral realm of the novel—the nineteenth century novel (How does what happens compare to what should have happened?), to the semi-moral purview of psychoanalysis (Why am I not permitted happiness? Why do I prevent it in others?), and finally into the spiritual and eschatological (What is the solution to ingrained guilt and sorrow? How can the separated be united?—literally, in the poem, "Shall we be changed?" In "Nijinsky" it was "Should I / REGRET MY LIFE?"). Bidart is not satisfied with Freud's answers, lacking as they do the possible solace of a conception of necessary suffering and passing over the accidents of birth that commonly put personal happiness out of reach. And his originality is partly in his unwillingness to let the culture's silence be ironic answer. Throughout the book he

returns to the religious idea of expiation as a maddening possible ingredient of meaning. "Confessional" is a demand that the past yield a meaning; it does not: "*Man needs a metaphysics; / he cannot have one.*"

The tone of Bidart's italics and capitals is sad and incredulous. Their effect, along with the spacing on the page and the heavy punctuation, is a prolonging of exclamation. The voice is mesmerized by the story it is telling—if insane, then ploddingly insane; if earnest, then blindly, childishly earnest. This effect, as of automatisms, was prefigured in *Golden State* (Braziller, 1973) and *The Book of the Body* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977). It is fully deployed in *The Sacrifice*; already one can anticipate the imitators.

Bidart does not "tinker with decrepit dramatic machines," as Louise Bogan thought too many American poets do, but rather brings into the poem some of the aliveness and activity of drama. The intense mental activity of "seeing properly" is vivid in his work. The two long poems have a dramatic pace, almost a pomp, for displaying the character's mental processes to us.

The Sacrifice is a bonding of the visionary nature of poetry with the explanatory nature of prose; the woe exists side by side with the literary, post-Freudian understanding of the woe. But this understanding is not the absolute knowledge that is sought. The emotion in these poems is almost entirely the passion to know, to get out of the dark. We can see in Nijinsky's forlornness and terror how literally the poet takes being in the dark. Bidart emerges from the dark into the limited consolation of art (one reason Nijinsky's predicament is so grave for this poet is that his art did not suffice), but the reconciliation with his parents in "Confessional" and "California Plush" from *Golden State* is a "cool" reconciliation, nothing like novelistic final partings and reunions. It's not provisional, it's real, but it does not help. Bidart is involved in a great undertaking and he has the gifts to match its seriousness.

David Ray takes a different approach to pain. The poem is not an act of wresting meaning from the past for him; it is a *return* to the past, where the scalding moments existed, the essence of life was tasted, the self was born. Katherine Mansfield wrote about this return in her journal:

Is it not possible that the rage for confession, autobiography, especially for memories of earliest childhood, is explained by our persistent yet mysterious belief in a self which is continuous and permanent, which, untouched by all we acquire and all we shed, pushes a green spear through the dead leaves . . . until one day, the light discovers it and shakes the flower free and we are alive—

Ray's childhood poems, more than two dozen of them in *The Touched Life, Poems Selected and New*, are in their sometimes dreadful pathos a writ of a man's origin and identity: this made me, I am alive.

Pathos, something not ordinarily felt by the sufferer, felt only by on-lookers and in art, has a nourishing power for Ray. It is by nature simple, transitory, and suits his preference for shortness and directness. It contains that strange contradiction, beauty incorporated into pain, and its attractiveness in art is a clue to why the terrible can be dear, as in many neuroses as well as normal love.

All is fever.
In the noon sun
In the pitiless
Growing up that
Left me running
In weeds toward my
Father a long
Time ago and he
Turning as if in
Ordinary petulance.
Does that sacred fence
Still stand? I followed
Too close at heel
Into the clearing
Where for once
Bending with hoes
We were united
Hill family
Poorer than poor
With no Kodak

To record our heart-
Break and the strange
Fare of love and the
Lack of love as we stooped
For greens or to destroy
Ourselves in the hills
Where the weeds walled
Us in till we grew tall
And broke in the sun.

These lines from “My Daughter As a Nuisance” have two of Ray’s prominent characteristics, his tendency to state a little too much (“poorer than poor”) and his genius for lifting out the moments of childhood that paralyze the adult with emotion. In another poet the two might combine into insistence; in Ray they sometimes seem a mark of what Marianne Moore called the “helpless sincerity that precipitates a poem.”

In Ray’s poems the children who are not orphaned, living in orphanages because they have been abandoned, ring a note of pathos not struck with this passion since Dickens. Ray still occupies the ruins of his family, and treats the notion of “getting over” one’s childhood pain as a misunderstanding of time. Still he is able to say, “I don’t believe in modern times, I believe in those times,” when “the first sadness” set in for good, and to remember in awe “the pitiless / Growing up,” the “sacred fence” of his father’s scrubby garden. His envy of the real orphans, who had no parents to fail them, has a horrible comedy subdued in the last five lines with their uncontemporary, Blakean magic:

We vowed to kill orphans, whose gurgles
we heard down the hall as they enjoyed
their intolerable freedoms,
far past midnight, learning to laugh
like rats in alleys, learning to survive
as only the children of true spirits can,
whose mothers are stars,
whose fathers are ash,
whose cousins are the pebbles around rose
bushes which would not even tear
the nylons of false mothers as they fled us.

Ray finds, as does Bidart, a particularly stinging wrong in the trespass onto childhood by wayward or indifferent adults. But his work is stamped with a unique suffering and outrage that is not concerned with explanations or resolution. It is lyrical; his poems are laments. There is no solution to “. . . the old feeling / —No home for me here—”, or the story told by the poems in the section entitled “Orphans,” of wretched childhood, abandonment, shreds of aunts’ attention:

I know there is no end to woe—by the barn
An old cow is chewing. She can go on chewing
Forever as I can grieve forever
And always a greater grief and a new land.
The heavens are still dizzy with promises.
 (“Redburn’s Vertigo Compared”)

But there is a salve, and here is the corollary to Ray’s grief: his delight in his portion of love, his readiness for what is or might be good, his sense (denied to the optimist) of what is delicious in life, his grave, child’s respect for those who act responsibly. Aunts who took him in are mythically adult and protective:

Take me again, Edris, out to the outhouse,
in the rain, stepping from plank to plank.
It’s our house, of cracked and rotting wood.
The lightning shows your face up close.
You hold me in your arms, and step lightly,
Shaking, avoiding spiders, and the years.
 (“Hymn to Aunt Edris”)

and “‘If they’re mean, just call me,’ / she said . . . / . . . Sometimes at night / I recall the brand names of / her powder and perfume.” With a child at the ocean he is transported:

You point, just two years old now,
and say “Here comes another one!”
You speak with particular reverence
for just that wave,
Giving me a moment I can take to the next world.
 (“The Waves”)

The Touched Life is a volume of more than 100 selected poems, covering a wide range of political and moral matters as well as things that simply cause poets to sing. “. . . Open our eyes, / Let them become luminous, / Amused, and kind!” This line from “The Blue Duck” could be Ray’s instruction to his poems. His tone is a blending of the plaintive with the brusque; an energetic, emotional, distinctly male presence animates the book, faintly Mediterranean: the childlike zestful male bearing stigmata but advocating life. There are pitfalls for this speaker; he says “human closeness” and “gentle” and “rendezvous with destiny;” he is disturbed, watching a drive-in movie about Kennedy, by a couple making love in the next car. He decides Kennedy “wanted better / for us than these / Drive-In thumpings,” a debatable point and one imbued with odd politics from the days of the counterculture. But he tenderly evokes the rural and out-culture scene in poems such as “Poe’s Anvil,” “The Indians Near Red Lake,” “Nowata,” “Throwing the Racetrack Cats at Saratoga,” “The Snake People.” His affinity is with those who do without, a “custom, involving such in-/visible items as the food / that’s not on the table, the clothes / that are not on the back.” His heart is on his sleeve in these poems, and the past that wrung it, too, like the campaign bars on a medal.

Dad,
 have no feeling for you any more
 can lay your snapshot on the table
 and not be moved to tears
 your ancient mustache
 and the plaid of your sport-coat collar
 your slick tie with the wings of herons
 I am unmoved

(“Note”)

Here is the end of “Analysis”:

. . . I’m
 despised
 and might as well
 be killed with a hard hoe
 (work came before
 sin). The hate

of Satan
is what I know.
My hands are small and wet
with tears.
The telling of this tale
has taken years.

He knows his own story can be told and retold like a folk tale.

Richard Blessing died in March, 1983, after two years with a brain tumor. In that time he changed from a tall, handsome and athletic man to a stooped, partially crippled and desperately ill one, a transformation described in ten poems that close *Poems & Stories*, his third book of poems. For most of this period he was writing and teaching. As a teacher he remained as canny, benevolent and penetrating as he had ever been, and as a poet he achieved the unusual feat of at once writing with increased sweetness and wrestling with changes of style at the end of his life.

In the new book, the Northwestern gloom and portent (without the rousting) of Roethke, the subscription to the deep image, are gone; gone are the silences and shadows and ritualistic occurrences and the *aloneness* of the poet who wrote *Winter Constellations* (Ahsahta Press, 1977) and *A Closed Book* (University of Washington Press, 1981). In their place are poems of new forcefulness and a grief he made into a kind of enlightenment.

The strongest earlier poems explored boyhood, the relation of fathers and sons, the mysterious hold of athletics over his psyche. Eight or ten such poems in *A Closed Book* introduced the realism, the frankness and ardor, and the mourning cadence that mark *Poems & Stories*. Its fifteen poems include two—the first for Blessing—speculating on American conditions (“Late News,” “State of Women”), three about time (one, the fine “Callahan Park Field, Bradford, Pennsylvania,” about a baseball game with his father and his son), and the final ten, beginning with an account of his first seizure and ending with the almost sacramental “Homecoming,”

After the scanning, CAT scan and radium, the arterioscan,
those warm coals flaming behind each dumbfounded eye,
we have come home.

After the palm readings, after
the foot scratching, after the knee jerking
and the rubber hammer, we have come home.

And after the late news, as if some baffled anchor man
threw up his hands, not sad, not happy, saying only
Everything is changed. And that's how it is.

that widens to a view that includes everything “beneath the great horned
toe of God.”

The conceits Blessing employed in many of these poems can't really be
called wit. The dogged punning is a reminder of wit and a salute to it, as if
to say the figures, the tropes, all that is academic and traditional, must not
prove empty: language must be an extract of spirit when the body is hope-
less. The achievement of form, especially the use of comic devices and arti-
fice (“a poem, dreadful with puns”), is a feint of defiance toward entropy
and death.

The pain in the book's closing is far from the angst and vague dread of
many of the winter and nature poems, and from the misery of the divorce
poems, in the earlier books. The last poems attend to what has happened
to him, and to others on his ward, and in doing so stumble into a world
outside the self and its past, and horribly *inside* the “Nature” that has until
now been a backdrop. But Blessing is not swamped by the horror of his
tumor

. . . Blacker
than a coal miner's lung or a house new to mourning!
Is this what comes of them, my evil fantasies,
the sexual one guarded years like a microdot, my greed,
my pettiness, my unambiguous pleasure in a colleague's
bad reviews? Or is it only that, after all,
it has to be *someone*,

(“Tumor”)

In the hospital poem he tries, gathered with his semblables on the ward, to
face accident, sickness and death like a member of the opposing team. This
would seem to be the act of another kind of mind, a soldierly, Etonian sort

of mind, not a poet's, if it were not for the metaphoric importance of sports all along in all his thought. He resisted, in these poems, any "literary" temptation to lure or apostrophize death; he did not change sides; his interest was in what remained of health and life: "God bless my right hand,/which forgets nothing!" and

When I am stronger,
I walk beside him in the halls. Lacking weather,
we are talking about will, the human will.
(*"Hawk-Man"*)

To Blessing's characteristic nostalgia, his rehearsal in sports-poems of the disappointments, the dangers and tricks, the elapsingness of life, his sureness with line-breaks and pleasure in the verbal jump-shot, was added at the end a new poetic quality that he defined himself, in "Seizure": "It is beginning / wisdom, an apprehension of Law." Rather than severity this apprehension gave his last work sweetness and an extraordinary temperance.

The two groups of stories in *Poems & Stories* are divided roughly by time: three about boyhood and youth, three about a divorced middle-aged father. The first three (and best) create in a very few pages, most of them dialogue, a distinct rural Maine and its inhabitants. They are terse, shaped, without the waywardness or questing of the poems. At a time when Hemingway is in eclipse, they hark back to the Nick Adams stories and stand up well beside them. The spirit of Hemingway broods over the interest in honor and in doing things cleanly (" 'Well, Eddie,' says my uncle, 'you'll just have to do the right thing now.' "), the men who cry, the quaintness, or slight charge, in the abbreviated talk. Here is the sheriff's persuasion of the Indian Eddie out of his trailer, where he is holed up after shooting his wife: "Come on, now, Eddie. I got my new Land Rover out here. I got my nephew from college out here. You don't want me to shoot up my new rig, do you?" A little later they talk about an undertaker who can make her fit to receive her relatives' last respects.

These are stories in which you know someone is crying because someone else says to stop it. The tears behind whole denominations of male behavior are in them. They suggest what many of his best poems do, that the past contains a secret that could make the present right, if we could learn

it. Only one, "Song on Royal Street," departs from the unities of mood and language these stories observe; it is the only failure in the book.

I hope anthologists will find the story quoted above, "Learning about the Russians."

After a while the crying stops, but the body goes on shivering. "Christ, Maurice," he says. "You and me. Carl Chadbin. Wayne Smallbear. When the Rooshians come, we was going to take to the woods. Live off the land, remember? Fish and hunt, like the old times. They wouldn't nobody find us."

"The Rooshians ain't comin', Eddie. That game's up for all of us."

It and its companion, "Grandma and the Eskimos," deserve, as Blessing did, a very long life.

C. K. Williams has evolved from the angry, staccato, often surreal poet of the late 60's and early 70's ("he was never going to stop crying no matter what / until they did something he wasn't going / to turn the horror / off") into a poet trying to keep to his natural material without the brimstone of his earlier work. The process of containing the wrath that formed *Lies* (Houghton Mifflin, 1969) and *I Am the Bitter Name* (Houghton Mifflin, 1972) has stretched his line to perhaps the longest in our present poetry, and stretched the poem to hold an unusual amount of telling and explaining.

His new work demonstrates a premise of the contemporary short story: that almost everything is a story. The poems in *Tar* are filled with the scene-setting of fiction, most of it beautiful, like this city snowstorm:

up across the skeletal trees to the tall center city buildings,
some, though it was midnight,
with all their offices still gleaming, their scarlet warning-
beacons signalling erratically
against the thickening flakes, their smoldering auras softening
portions of the dim, milky sky

("From My Window")

Against the romanticism, tactile and visual, of the -ing sequence he has played, in the bulk of the poem, a wretched pair from the human city. The snow extinguishes the footprints of one of them, in the kind of fictional ending that sets a seal on the characters' fates. Without opening the argument of whether a poem can work exactly as a story does, I will say that this ending raises a difficulty: Can we believe him? Oddly enough, we don't have to ask this question of stories. If a story is unbelievable, it is no good. But we don't ask if the *author* is telling the truth; the work is patently "a story." In poems like Williams', in which he figures undisguised, the reader expects that the event is not made up. So even if in real life the sad man really tramped figure-eights, the symbol for infinity, in the snow, the poem is caught in the requirement of probability.

In 1925 Virginia Woolf wrote in a letter "it is all right for me to have visions but you must be exact. I write prose; you poetry. Now poetry being the simpler, cruder, more elementary of the two, furnished also with an adventitious charm, in rhyme and metre, can't carry beauty as prose does. Very little goes to its head." Passing over her digs at an inferior writer, the remarks about beauty (in that case heightened language and a certain voluptuousness) have some authority. Fifty years later, of course, richness is coming back into poetry and much prose is bare and laconic. Rhetoric may even return from its long banishment: the grand voice becomes less and less parodic, and echoes of the rhapsodies of "Howl" can be heard here and there. Williams has put cargoes of beauty and highly wrought description into his recent poems: the buildings in the snow, and "The hoof-prints in the hardened muck are frozen lakes, their rims atilt, / their glazed opacities skewered with straw" ("On Learning of a Friend's Illness"), and

Two blocks in, the old slate sidewalks shatter and uplift — gnawed
 lawns, aluminum butane tanks —
then the roads begin to peter out and rise: half-fenced yards
 with scabs of week-old snow,
thin, inky, oily leaks of melt insinuating down the gulleys and
 the cindered cuts

(“Neglect”)

The language is descended from *Leaves of Grass*, the thought from *Democratic Vistas*—the part about cities “crowded with petty grotesques, malformations, phantoms,” not the Assumption of the nation at the end. In the loaded passage above, everything is a victim, from the snow to the acne on the boy in the five-and-ten; everything has come about because something is awry in the country. And the degeneration of this “vivid and disconsolate” mining town has something to do with the traveler passing through; he is political; he has an opinion about the closure of the mines and the disappearance of work.

Williams’ poems are very much addressed to us, missives. They solicit opinion and belief, specifically the opinion that we must change somehow. His ruined towns and urban desolation call not for a policy but for a conversion in us, as descriptions of the fallen cities in the Old Testament did.

For this exhortation, he uses a highly elaborated and qualified language that seems conversational only on first reading. He is imprudent; he risks much in phrases like “sorrowing brute,” “murderous prow,” “vile desire,” “fearful ardor,” and in the direct appeals for empathy in “smoldering with impatience,” “wildly uneasy with her,” “those vulnerable creatures of the heart.” He stands by the Victorianisms. They are cornerstones of his writing. These excesses, say his poems, are ours; the “dehumanized” city contains everything the city has ever contained. Things are not flat, as we are told in flat voices by other poets, they are vivid, they arouse storms of feeling, memory and partisanship, they overflow with meaning.

One might pause at the fact that in poems of broad sympathies the women who are not young and vulnerable (a favorite word) tend to be ugly, hard, or “cheap,” in the style of a fifties movie; and at the inclusion of “The Gas Station,” a sentimental account of a visit to a prostitute. Otherwise the sympathies are genuine and make of Williams a rarity in current poetry, a social poet. He can write about what happens to people other than himself (or surrogates for himself, as in the vogue for the dramatic monologue); he notices what happens to the many.

His close interest in the self muffled up in habit and need, going among similarly muffled up selves, in places they have somehow made congenial to both habit and need, is the interest of the tallying and judging, urban and partisan artist who has until recently spoken through the medium of the novel. “Combat” is as much a novel of Jew and non-Jew as was *Portnoy*. Then he can turn around and write the lovely, private poem

about his son's waking up in the morning ("Waking Jed"), or the bitterly personal "On Learning of a Friend's Illness" with its prodigious last line, "the river, bitter to look at, and the passionless earth, and the grasses rushing ceaselessly in place." In this poem the city is "for once more docile and benign" than the natural world; the poem seems to me the deepest and most finished writing Williams has done.

The book closes with a poem in 25 parts (of three stanzas each) that after many readings still seems like a long trip up a down escalator. "One of the Muses" is "about" the coming and withdrawal of a presence that (or who) seemed to have a message for the poet. In it Williams' long line simply can't do what it is designed to do, twine itself around the profusion of verifying details. Part of the trouble is its stock of words and phrases from the psychology shelf: "reflexive act of faith," "ambivalence," "emotional ecology," "working out its implications," "experiential accumulation," "essentially passive." Then too, the feminine abstraction, never after the title called "muse," is a figure out of a transcendentalism that can't be argued, so we must be hypnotized by words in order to enter the action at all.

And indeed the poem has something hypnotic about it. After its relaxed, complaining, almost weary rhythms have stopped, the reader is bemused. The suggestion has been made that there is a mystery; the poem ends suggesting that the mystery is the poem in our hands. Is this the creative process? . . . my conclusion would be Augustine's "if it were so, it were the part of wisdom not to know it."

I keep suspiciously rereading this poem, partly because Morris Dickstein considers it a masterpiece but really because Williams is one of the most serious poets writing today, avid for the truth of the times, able to find the language for our cultural shambles, a writer to whom society matters, who is genuinely stretching poetry. It seems to me he strives in "One of the Muses" for something that is not only not compatible with his gift but next to impossible, done in this century only by Rilke in the *Duino Elegies*. Interestingly, Rilke's popularity and influence are high right now, when his habits of mind are quite out of our reach. But perhaps Williams' next poems will spring from "One of the Muses" in ways a reader can't foresee.