

SIX POEMS



Frank Bidart

ADVICE TO THE PLAYERS

There is something missing in our definition, vision, of a human being: the need to make.

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We are creatures who need to make.

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Because existence is willy-nilly thrust into our hands, our fate is to make something—if nothing else, the shape cut by the arc of our lives.

*

My parents saw corrosively the arc of their lives.

*

Making is the mirror in which we see ourselves.

*

But *being* is making: not only large things, a family, a book, a business: but the shape we give this afternoon, a conversation between two friends, a meal.

*

Or mis-shape.

*

Without clarity about what we make, and the choices that underlie it, the need to make is a curse, a misfortune.

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The culture in which we live honors specific kinds of making (shaping or mis-shaping a business, a family) but does not understand how central making itself is as manifestation and mirror of the self, fundamental as eating or sleeping.

*

In the images with which our culture incessantly bombards us, the cessation of labor is the beginning of pleasure; the goal of work is to cease working, an endless paradise of unending diversion.

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In the United States at the end of the twentieth century, the greatest luxury is to live a life in which the work that one does to earn a living, and what one has the appetite to make, coincide—by a kind of grace are the same, one.

*

Without clarity, a curse, a misfortune.

*

My intuition about what is of course unprovable comes, I'm sure, from observing, absorbing as a child the lives of my parents: the dilemmas, contradictions, chaos as they lived out their own often unacknowledged, barely examined desires to make.

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They saw corrosively the shape cut by the arc of their lives.

*

My parents never made something commensurate to their will to make, which I take to be, in varying degrees, the general human condition—as it is my own.

*

Making is the mirror in which we see ourselves.

*

Without clarity, a curse, a misfortune.

*

Horrible the fate of the advice-giver in our culture: to repeat oneself in a thousand contexts until death, or irrelevance.

*

I abjure advice-giver.

*

Go make you ready.

FOR BILL NESTRICK (1946-1991)

Out of the rectitude and narrow care of those who teach in the public schools,—

a mother

who would not let her son watch cartoons of Porky Pig because we must not laugh at someone who stutters,—

... the mystery, your brilliant appetite for the moment.

*

For Herbert, the aesthetic desideratum is

*unpremeditated art, not as "natural" or "spontaneous"
but a speaking of the Spirit as it becomes
conscious, a fidelity to*

the moment itself. The only

*appropriate gift is discovered to be
inseparable from
the giver, for man can only give himself.*

In 1975, the magazine that printed your great essay
announced: *He is writing a book on Herbert.*

*

You lived in the realm where coin of the realm
is a book,

and despite the fact that by the end of
graduate school you
already had published twenty thousand articles

you never published a book.

Against the background of this bitter
mysterious lapse your brilliant
appetite for the moment.

LUGGAGE

You wear your body as if without
illusions. You speak of former lovers with some

contempt for their interest in sex.
Wisdom of the spirit, you

imply, lies in condescension and poise.

... Fucking, I can feel
the valve opening, the flood is too much.

Or too little. I am
insatiable, famished by repetition.

Now all you see is that I am luggage

that smiles as it is moved from here
to there. *We could have had ecstasies.*

In your stray moments, as now
in mine, may what *was not*

rise like grief before you.

LEGACY

*When to the desert, the dirt,
comes water*

comes money

*to get off the shitdirt
land and move to the city*

whence you

*direct the work of those who now
work the land you still own*

My grandparents left home for the American

desert to escape
poverty, or the family who said *You are*

the son who shall become a priest

After Spain became
Franco's, at last

rich enough

to return you
refused to return

The West you made

was never unstoried, never
artless

Excrement of the sky our rage inherits

*there was no gift
outright we were never the land's*

THE POEM IS A VEIL

VEIL,—as if silk that you in fury must thrust repeatedly
high at what the eye, your eye, naked cannot see

catches, clinging to its physiognomy.

LAMENT FOR THE MAKERS

Not bird not badger not beaver not bee

*Many creatures must
make, but only one must seek*

within itself what to make

My father's ring was a B with a dart
through it, in diamonds against polished black stone.

I have it. What parents leave you
is their lives.

Until my mother died she struggled to make
a house that she did not loathe; paintings; poems; me.

Many creatures must

*make, but only one must seek
within itself what to make*

Not bird not badger not beaver not bee

*

Teach me, masters who by making were
remade, your art.