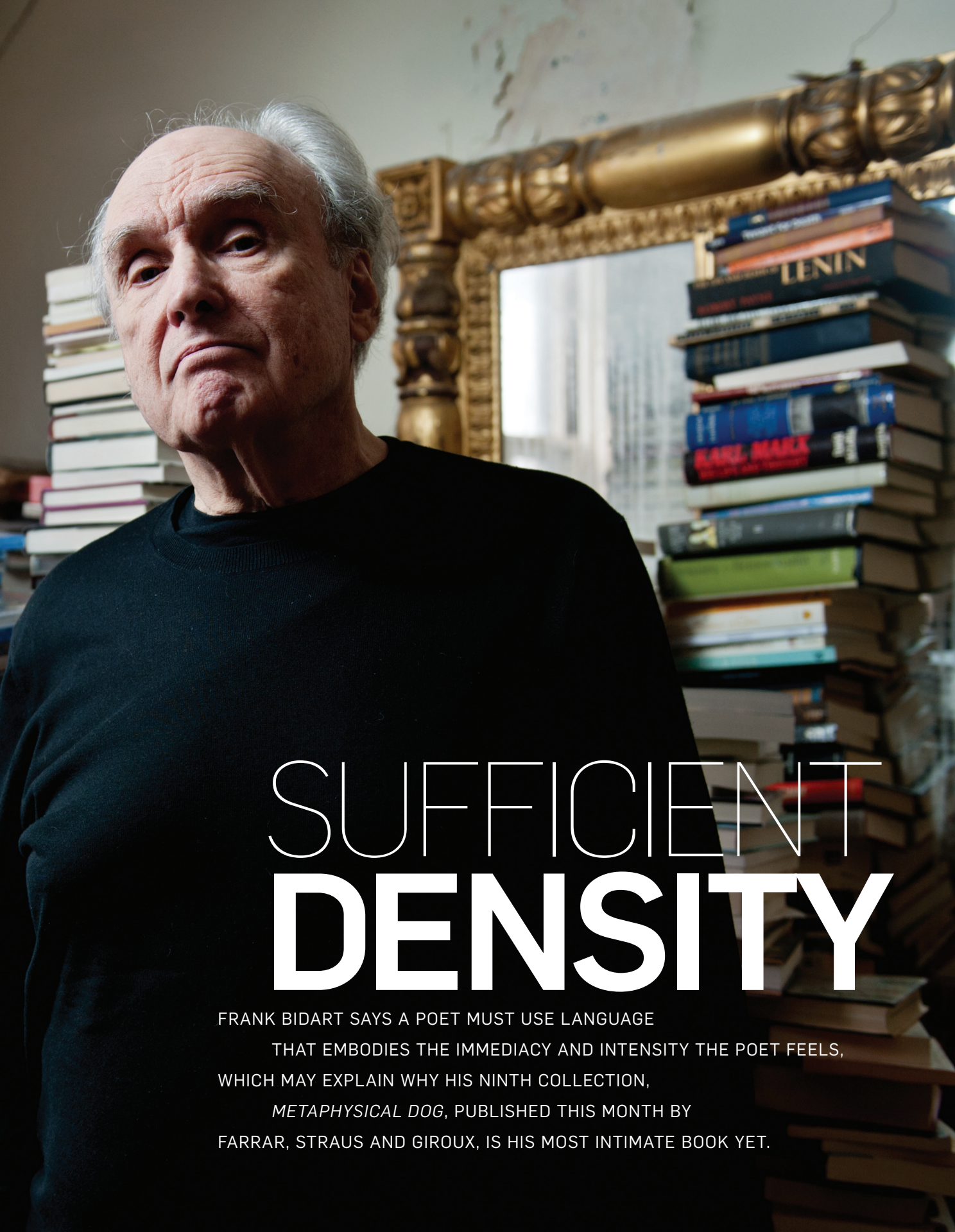
THE first time Frank Bidart and I spoke, he phoned me at midnight. Apologetic, he said he hoped he hadn't awakened me and then explained that he was a night person. This was fitting, I thought. Not the bromide of night owl, but rather Bidart the night wolf: His verse does not hoot, it howls. The second time he called was the following afternoon, to inform me that the date for our agreed-upon conversation coincided with Super Bowl Sunday. Surely I'd rather spend this day of consumer ecstasy squalling at a TV screen with my fellow Americans. When I told him that I'd never watched a Super Bowl in my life, and that his poems were infinitely more important than rich men concussing one another on Astroturf, he replied, "I've been testing the culture on that, and it doesn't agree."

"The culture," I said, "disagrees to its own detriment."

At seventy-three years old, Bidart has a light, mellifluous voice that could lend succor to the shell shocked. Exceedingly generous and gentle, he also wields a supercharged intelligence, a tentacled erudition that reaches deep into what Matthew Arnold dubbed "the best that is known and thought in the world." Bidart is the author of nine highly esteemed collections of poetry, including *Metaphysical Dog*, published this month by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, his most intimate testimonial of the poetic mind in reciprocity with the personal man. Winner of the coveted Bollingen Prize from Yale University in 2007 and three times a finalist for both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize (his chapbook, *Music Like Dirt*, published by Sarabande Books in 2002, is the only chapbook ever to be nominated for a Pulitzer), Bidart was also the confidant of Robert

BY **WILLIAM GIRALDI**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **WEBB CHAPPELL**



SUFFICIENT DENSITY

FRANK BIDART SAYS A POET MUST USE LANGUAGE THAT EMBODIES THE IMMEDIACY AND INTENSITY THE POET FEELS, WHICH MAY EXPLAIN WHY HIS NINTH COLLECTION, *METAPHYSICAL DOG*, PUBLISHED THIS MONTH BY FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX, IS HIS MOST INTIMATE BOOK YET.

Lowell and the coeditor, with David Gewanter, of Lowell's behemoth *Collected Poems* (FSG, 2003). A volume twenty-five years in the making, it is a meticulous masterwork born of ardent admiration and love.

The snow came slanted on the afternoon I walked from my home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to Bidart's apartment on the lip of Harvard Square, an apartment he's lived in since 1972. The place is so magnificently strangled with books, DVDs, magazines, manuscripts, and CDs that in order to move from room to room, or within any one of the five rooms, one must literally step sideways through alleyways of stacked paper and plastic. His sink and stove have not been visible for perhaps a quarter century. "I like to joke," said Bidart, "that if there's ever a nuclear war and this apartment is the only place spared, out of it you can reconstruct Western civilization." We spoke for several hours sitting in the TV room, hemmed in by five- and six-foot towers of books and DVDs. Ours was a touchingly emotional, unguarded dialogue, Bidart becoming rawest when our talk swayed to aging, or to the deaths of Lowell, James Dean, and Elizabeth Bishop.

Ever gracious and large-hearted, Bidart wanted to begin by discussing my essays on John Donne and Gerard Manley Hopkins, essays written for this magazine on the subjects of melancholia, spiritual corrosion, and the sanative strength I found in the verse of those two poets.

BIDART: I would love to talk a bit about your essays because, first of all, I found your experience to be amazingly parallel to mine in terms of disaffection from Catholicism, and the sense that the world of the academy, which is incredibly rich and substantial, at some level doesn't itself feed the soul. In a way that's the subject of this new book. It's very much a book about the hunger for the absolute, even though one feels that almost all the representatives or embodiments of people who very explicitly hunger for the absolute are terrible, manipulative, destructive, far too convinced of rectitude. So I felt a tremendous affinity for your profound experiences with Donne and Hopkins.

At the same time, of course, yours were not exactly my experiences, because I met different masters, I was drawn to a different kind of language in poetry. On the one hand, Lowell's language is very charged and he was very indebted to Hopkins—but at the same time, with *Life Studies*, he adopted a kind of psychological openness, a narrative clarity, to some degree, that attracted me tremendously. The problem always is how one can speak directly about the things that are most central to one and not be banal, not think that a certain kind of commonplace language automatically embodies it, because it doesn't.

Like you, I always aspired in some way to emulate Hopkins—not that one can see many traces of Hopkins in my work. But I had that sense that is so central to modernism, what Pound said: that you must make it new. Hopkins certainly made it new. That, at the very least, poems have to be as well written as prose, and so many poems written in free verse are not. One must make language that actually embodies the immediacy, the intensity, one feels. All of my poems are an attempt to speak with sufficient density.

Hopkins's style has such an extreme density and clanging floridity that he could write only about certain subjects, namely the spirit or nature, and you've said that your youthful work, before you published your first book, *Golden State* (Braziller, 1973), wasn't any good because you were stretching too far for absolutes, for grand abstractions that would represent our psychological and emotional lives. Were you after that Hopkinsian "density" then

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WILLIAM GIRALDI is the author of the novel *Busy Monsters* (Norton, 2011) and fiction editor for the journal *AGNI* at Boston University.

but unable to achieve it properly?
I was very attracted to abstractions, and treated abstractions as if somehow they had a body, and, at least in the way I was handling them then, they didn't. In Hopkins, they do. The first poem I ever memorized was a Hopkins poem, "Pied Beauty." But he was very associated in my mind with Catholicism, which was exactly what I had to escape from.

You never felt that way about Donne? Like you, Donne left Catholicism, although he left in appearances only. He never really left. Once the Catholic mythos gets its hooks in you, it's got you for life.
In Donne, in the "Holy Sonnets," as you say in your essay, language is very charged—but at the same time it's constantly connected to spoken language. There's a kind of wiry, very open appetite to absorb all the languages of the mind. When I was an undergraduate Donne was all the fashion. I liked George Herbert better. I've always just adored Herbert. He speaks to my soul in a way that Donne has never. "It cannot be / That I am he / On whom thy tempests fell all night." He's an absolute master technically, and for me there's a sweetness and vulnerability that I envy.

The influences of Donne, Hopkins, or Herbert are not immediately recognizable in your work, except perhaps in this way: One sees in your work what one sees in theirs, and also in Wallace Stevens and Geoffrey Hill, and that's the belief that ideas are events, that the mind must have a nexus to feeling—Wordsworth calls it "the philosophic mind."
It's the feeling mind, the mind that experiences the world and by necessity contemplates what it finds. There's no alternative but to think about it. I love Wordsworth. I don't love nature—in fact the natural world is rather dead to me—but one can love Wordsworth and not love nature.

Part of what's so remarkable about your poetic vision, about your mind manifest in verse, is that you live within, you ascertain the world from within literature and art, from within the history of metaphysics and poetics. You've absorbed the Western tradition of expressing and asserting. I find that too many writers nowadays believe that they don't need that umbilical to tradition. They like to write but would rather not read deeply or widely. They think that their own experience is enough.
Without the past we don't have enough ammunition or mechanism to think about experience. That's the only real point in holding on to literature and history: It's the means, the arms and legs to deal with your experience, to deal with contradiction, those things you feel but don't know how to find your way through. But you're one of the few people who have already read my new book. I can't resist asking—this is awkward and graceless—what do you think of it?

It's your most personal, most autobiographical book since *Golden State*. Your parents are everywhere here, your mother especially. I've been waiting for this book because you've made yourself intimately available in a new way. It's beautifully candid, and among your most painful work. You've been a master all along of ventriloquism, singing in the voices of others. This new book has an eagerness and an urgency and a rawness that's a real shift for you, a coming out, as it were. I was enthralled.
When I was writing it, I was very aware of returning to topics I'd written about in *Golden State*, but as you say, in a new way. But it didn't necessarily feel like a new level of candor.

POEM

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 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

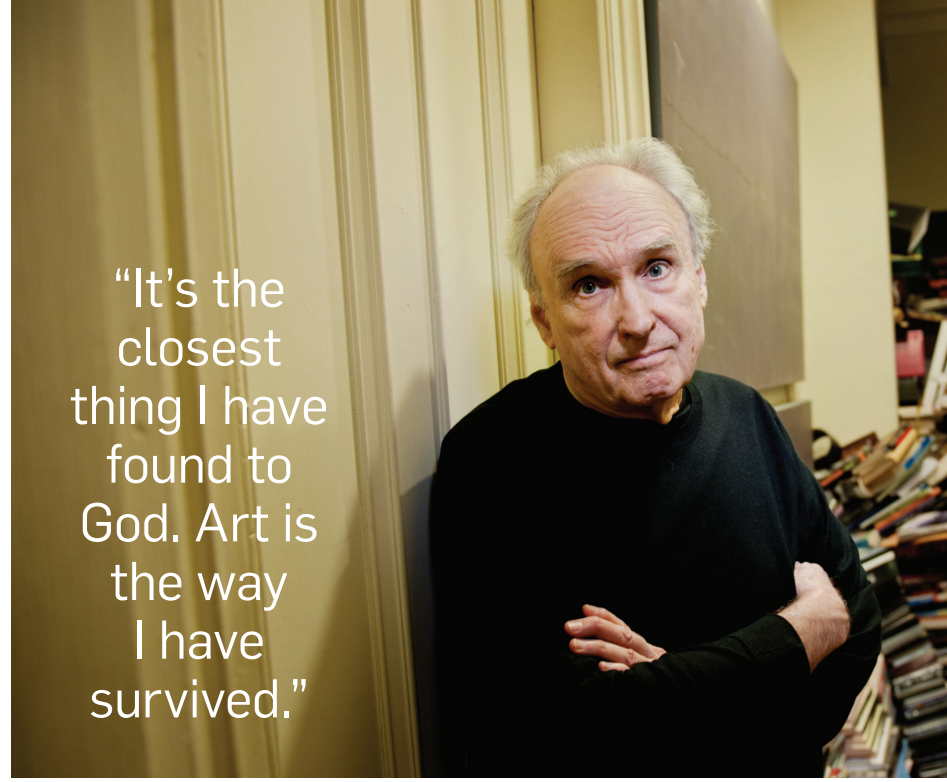
and at

the end
of the line

is a hook

and attached
to that

is the soul.



The topic that's hard to be candid about is not my parents, or my youth, or being gay, but getting old. There are a lot of great poems about getting old, especially in Yeats. I just can't believe I'm seventy-three. Unbelievable! I realized I had no models for being in my seventies. Both Lowell and Bishop, whom I adored—she died at sixty-eight, he died at sixty. Both my parents died at sixty. In a funny way, this book is about not knowing what the hell to do with one's life suddenly, about having to relearn ways I've survived in the past.

Unprepared for or not expecting this twilight, you woke up one day to discover yourself old? How do we learn to grow old when we can't conceive of ourselves that way?
First of all, I never thought I'd be thirty. It's not that I live a wild life, but it just seemed *so hard to be alive*. Everything seemed hard. The dramas you discussed in your essays, those were hard, hard to survive, you didn't just assume you were going to survive them. And I don't mean one might kill oneself. I mean the whole process is exhausting and wearing, and it seems that whatever fuel gets things growing and changing is going to end and you will end with it, by whatever process. Thirty was very hard for me. After thirty you can no longer be a promising young man. You either have to have done something or not. So many of the poets one thinks of as having produced good work in old age produced it in their fifties and sixties, not later. Robert Frost's or T. S. Eliot's old age was not particularly productive.

But Hardy's was.
Hardy's was! His *Poems of 1912–13* are so great. He's a wonderful example of staying alive as a poet. But, boy, that's a big thing to hope for. Wordsworth did not, Coleridge did not. Stevens did. His poems at the end of his life are among his best.

That's true of Williams, too.
It is true of William Carlos Williams, yes. But Marianne Moore, no. In terms of the poets I've been closest to, as I said, by seventy they were dead. I think I had simply imagined that my arc was going to be over by seventy, or sixty-eight. Literally it feels transgressive. Why do I have the right to live till sixty-nine when Bishop and Lowell didn't? Is my work completed the way *Four Quartets* completes Eliot's work?

No. I hope I can understand what's yet to be done and that I can do it.

Bishop and Lowell were dear to you. Your introduction to Lowell's *Collected Poems* is an expert polemic that ravages his wrong reputation as a mere "confessional" poet. That tag—whether referring to Lowell or John Berryman, Randall Jarrell or Theodore Roethke—has always struck me as preposterous: at once an insult of diminishment and a needless platitude. What literature is *not* confessional?
Exactly, yes, it is indeed preposterous. But Bishop, she was very skeptical of my candor. I sensed in some brute, inchoate way that for me there was no alternative to candor. She said to me once, "I believe in closets, closets, and more closets." I came out in my second book. She thought it was all the fashion to come out, and that the world was ultimately going to punish one for it. She also lived in a world in which the best writers were not candid about such things. Writers who had come out, who published books about being gay—she felt that was to join a ghetto.

As for Lowell—he took me seriously, and that was the most amazing event, an absolutely transformative event. I had this extremely, wildly privileged position, privileged experience of him, which was one of the crucial experiences of my life. Lowell was capable of sustained and profound friendships. I think they are what endured in his life. I once asked him a question, and then suddenly said, "Is that too personal?" He replied, "We *are* personal."

In this new book, more than in any other of your books, there's an extreme suspicion of love, a potent mistrust, a looking upon romantic love with a kind of terror, and eschewing the pop-song bathos that love will always rescue one from the pall of lonesomeness and despair, that it will win out in the end.
Absolutely. I was very conscious of that and it becomes central to this book. It's complicated because I don't want to generalize about other people's lives. I don't know what's right for other people. What's written in the book has been true of my life. In the book's final poem there are the lines, "As a boy you despised the world for replacing / God with another addiction, love." I could see that happening around me.

If one looks back at the Middle Ages, one thinks, "How could there be a whole culture obsessed with the fate of the soul in relation to God?" I think our culture has simply replaced that obsession with an obsession with love and thinking that love will organize, validate one's life. I'm skeptical. Let's say I'm more skeptical of romance than I am of love. Romance in my life has not worked out. Romantic love is always bound up with imagination, with what one is and what one can be in the regard of the other person. All love is saying yes to something.

Look at the next line of the poem you just quoted from: "Despised yourself. Was there no third thing?"
Yes, and of course for me the third thing arrived at is art. But one has to be skeptical about that, too. I certainly

have made it that thing that's organized my life. It's not that I think art in itself saves one's life. But, baldly put, it's the closest thing I have found to God. Art is the way I have survived. It has deflected the hunger for the absolute, has absorbed the hunger for the absolute—which I think is certainly part of love and the desire for God.

I. A. Richards wrote, in his book *Science and Poetry*, that poems are capable of saving us. And that's true for you, as it is for me with Donne and Hopkins. And of course Matthew Arnold half-seriously proposed to replace religion with poetry.

Eliot was very contemptuous of art as spilled religion, but that's the nature of art, the religious impulse, a substituted religion. Many of the energies of religion fuel art—the desire to make art that is a model of the nature of things, that's going to allow you to understand things.

The word *making* for you is a crucial word. It appears again and again not only in this new book but throughout your work. It could have an Emersonian capital on it. For your poetic vision it's more than an aesthetic endeavor; it means more than mere creativity, does it not?

As you say, a crucial word. It's one of the principles of the world. We live in this awkward culture that tells people that they have to have a job, have money to buy things, but that the job does not have to be connected to one's soul, one's inner life or spirit or sense of self-worth. On the contrary, the aim of work seems to be retirement where you can fish all day or go to Florida or someplace—which seems to me grotesque, an absolute impoverishing of the idea of human life. Human beings are makers. It's the only thing that gives human beings something approaching satisfaction. It's completely central to what a human being is, to living in a complicated process where one must constantly accept givens that one can't control.

As a prose writer for whom the poets have meant a great deal, I admire your deep admiration for James Joyce. I'm charmed by that cross-genre manner of thinking and making, by how a poet can be so invested in a novelist.

Joyce is one of my heroes. I instinctively identified with his sense that the artist in relation to society is an observer, a watcher, somebody who stands back and tries to make sense of the world rather than somebody at the barricades. One of the great things about Yeats is that he can argue with this very tendency in himself. "Players and painted stage took all my love, / And not those things that they were emblems of." You can be the observer and not quite live, and that's certainly been my temptation, my propensity. The idea of human beings as essentially makers—that doesn't mean just living inside the will. In fact I think it's a kind of death to live inside the will. I mean, there has to be a wise passiveness in relation to one's own experience, one's apprehension of one's own nature.

Wise passiveness. I'm reminded of those wonderful lines in your poem "He Is Ava Gardner": "Those of us who look on, who want // the proximate and partial to continue, / loathe the hunger for the absolute." There's Keats's notion of negative capability there—the proximate and partial—a learning to live within contradiction and paradox and antinomy.

Yes, human beings feel the hunger for both, the hunger for the absolute and the horror of the absolute, and that's where we are: in a middle state. A creature divided, as Bishop says in her last poem. Not that we always know what parts of us are the angels and which beasts. We don't.

Knowing is a problem you grapple with again and again in your verse. Stevens has that great line, "The squirming facts exceed the squamous mind." If that's true, how do we come to know anything with any semblance of certainty?

That's an issue. Making is a way of knowing and trying to embody what you feel you do know, and at the same time, you have to try not to imply you know more than you know. That's part of why ending a work of art is so hard, because you can't give the illusion that you've ordered more than you've ordered, and yet you must give a sense that you have been somewhere, and something has been seen, even something like bedrock has been reached, all without being reductive.

One of the most touching poems in the new book is the poem for Heath Ledger. Whenever I watch him it pains me to know what we lost. One needs to go back to Marlon Brando in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *On the Waterfront* to find male dramatic performances that rival Ledger's in *Brokeback Mountain* and *The Dark Knight*. His ability was astounding.

I agree, and I'd add James Dean in *East of Eden*. I was obsessed with him as a kid. It was very clear how great he was. I was walking down 19th Street in Bakersfield, California, in the center of town. There was a smoke shop on the corner, and I looked across the street, and I saw the local newspaper. I couldn't read the writing from that distance but there was Dean's face on the front, and I said, "He's got to be dead," because that newspaper wouldn't put an actor on the front page for anything short of that. And I walked across the street and he was dead. It was just horrible, the world crashing down. I was sixteen.

His sudden silence must have been shocking for you. In your poem "Defrocked," you write, "When what we understand about / what we are / changes, whole / parts of us fall mute."

I think that's true. Then it's up to the poets and artists to have the guts and capacity to say those things that have fallen mute.