

# Confessional

by Frank Bidart  
from *The Sacrifice* (1983)

*Is she dead?*

Yes, she is dead.

*Did you forgive her?*

No, I didn't forgive her.

*Did she forgive you?*

No, she didn't forgive me.

*What did you have to forgive?*

She was never mean, or willfully  
cruel, or unloving.

When I was eleven, she converted to Christ -  
she began to simplify her life, denied  
herself, and said that she and I must struggle

“to divest ourselves  
of the love of CREATED BEINGS,” -

and to help me do that,  
one day

she hanged my cat.

I came home from school, and in the doorway  
of my room,

my cat was hanging strangled.

She was in the bathroom; I could hear  
the water running.

- I shouted at her;

she wouldn't

come out.

She was in there  
for hours, with the water running . . .

Finally, late that night,  
she unlocked the door.

She wouldn't look at me.

She said that we must learn to rest  
in the LORD,-

and not in His CREATION . . .

*Did you forgive her?*

Soon she had a breakdown;  
when she got out of the hospital,

she was SORRY . . .

for years she dreamed the cat  
had dug  
its claws into her thumbs: -

in the dream, she knew, somehow,  
that it was dying; she tried

to help it, -

TO PUT IT OUT OF ITS MISERY, -

so she had her hands around its  
neck, strangling it . . .

Bewildered,

it looked at her,

KNOWING SHE LOVED IT - ;

and she DID love it, which was  
what was  
so awful . . .

All it could do was  
hold on, -  
. . . AS  
SHE HELD ON.

*Did you forgive her?*

I was the center of her life, -  
and therefore,  
of her fears and obsessions. They changed;  
  
one was money.

. . . DO I HAVE TO GO INTO IT?

*Did you forgive her?*

Standing next to her coffin, looking down  
at her body, I suddenly  
knew I hadn't - ;

over and over  
I said to her,

*I didn't forgive you!*  
*I didn't forgive you!*

I *did* love her . . . Otherwise,  
  
would I feel so guilty?

*What did she have to forgive?*

She was SORRY. She *tried*  
to change . . .

She loved me. She was generous.

I pretended  
that I had forgiven her - ;

and she pretended  
to believe it, -

she needed desperately to believe it . . .

SHE KNEW I COULD BARELY STAND TO BE AROUND HER.

*Did you forgive her?*

I *tried* - ;  
for years I almost  
convinced myself I did . . .

But no, I didn't.

- Now, after I have said it all, so I can  
rest,

will you give me ABSOLUTION, -

. . . and grant this  
“*created being*”

FORGIVENESS? . . .

*Did she forgive you?*

I think she tried - ;  
but no, -  
she *couldn't* forgive me . . .

WHY COULDN'T SHE FORGIVE ME?

*Don't you understand even now?*

No! Not – not really . . .

*Forgiveness doesn't exist.*

II

She asked, -

and I could not, WOULD NOT give . . .

- That is the first of two sentences  
I can't get out of my head.

They somehow contain what happened.

The second is: -

THERE WAS NO PLACE IN NATURE WE COULD MEET.

*Can you explain them?*

Augustine too

had trouble with his mother, -

. . . LISTEN.

Confessor  
incapable of granting “rest” or “absolution,” -

LISTEN . . .

*Why are you angry?*

Augustine too

had trouble with his mother, -

but the story of Augustine and Monica  
is the *opposite* of what happened

between me and my mother . . .

We couldn't meet in Nature, -

. . . AND ALL WE HAD NATURE.

*How do you explain it?*

The scene at the window at Ostia  
in Book Nine of the *Confessions*

seems designed to make non-believers

sick with envy . . .

-You are listening to a soul  
that has *always* been

SICK WITH ENVY . . .

*How do you explain it?*

As a child I was (now, I  
can clearly see it)

PREDATORY, -

pleased to supplant my father  
in my mother's affections,

and then pleased to have supplanted my stepfather . . .

- I assure you, though I was a “*little boy*,”  
I could be more charming, sympathetic,  
full of sensibility, “*various*,” far more  
an understanding and feeling  
ear for my mother's emotions, needs, SOUL

than any man, any man she met, -

I know I *wanted* to be: WANTED  
to be the center, the focus of her life . . .

I was her ally against my father;  
and then, after the first two or three

years, her ally against my stepfather . . .

- Not long before she died,  
she told me something  
I had never heard, -

when I was nine or ten, early  
in her second marriage,

she became pregnant; she said she  
*wanted* to have the child . . .

She said that one day, when my stepfather  
was playing golf, she was out walking the course

with him, and suddenly

a man fell from one of the huge trees  
lining the fairways . . .

A group of men had been cutting limbs;  
she saw one of them fall,  
and for a long time  
lie there screaming.

Later that day, she had a miscarriage . . .

- After saying all this, she

looked at me insistently and said,

*“I wanted to have the child.”*

But as she was telling me the story,  
I kept thinking

THANK GOD THE MAN FELL,  
THANK GOD SHE SAW HIM FALL AND HAD A MISCARRIAGE

AND THE CHILD DIED . . .

- I felt sick. I knew I was GLAD  
the man fell, *GLAD* she saw him fall

and the child died . . .

- When I was nine or ten, if she  
had had a child - ; if

she and a child and my stepfather  
had made a FAMILY

from which I *had* to be closed off,  
the remnant of a rejected, erased past, -

(I never had anything in common with,  
or even RESPECTED, my stepfather, - )

I would have gone crazy . . .

- How could she have *BETRAYED ME*  
in that way? . . .

*How do you explain it?*

I felt sick. I felt ill at how  
PREDATORY I was, -

(my feelings *STILL* were, -)

at the envy and violence I could



will NOT to feel,

but COULDN'T not feel . . .

- Augustine has the temerity, after  
his mother dies,

to admit he is GLAD  
she no longer wanted to be buried

next to her husband . . .

He thanks God  
for ridding her of this “vain desire.”

*Why are you angry?*

In the words of Ecclesiastes: -

“Her loves, her hates, her jealousies, -  
these all

have perished, nor will she EVER AGAIN

TAKE PART  
in whatever is done under the sun . . . “

My mother, -  
. . . *JUST DIED.*

The emotions, the “*issues*” in her life  
didn't come out somewhere, reached no culmination,  
climax, catharsis, -

she *JUST DIED.*

She wanted them to - ;  
how can I talk about

the way in which, when I was young,

we seemed to be engaged in an ENTERPRISE  
together, -

the enterprise of “figuring out the world,”  
figuring out her life, my life, -

THE MAKING OF HER SOUL,

which somehow, in our “enterprise”  
together, was the making of my soul, -

. . . it's a kind of *CRAZINESS*, which some mothers  
drink along with their children

in their *MOTHER'S MILK* . . .

*Why are you so angry?*

THERE WAS NO PLACE IN NATURE WE COULD MEET . . .

- I've never let anyone else  
*in* so deeply.

But when the predatory complicit co-conspirator  
CHILD  
was about twenty, he of course wanted his “*freedom*,” -

and then he found

that what had made his life  
possible, what he found so deeply INSIDE HIM,

had its hands around his neck,  
strangling him, -

and that therefore, if he were  
to survive,

he must in turn strangle, murder,  
*kill it* inside him . . .

TO SURVIVE, I HAD TO KILL HER INSIDE ME.

*Why are you angry?*

Now that she is dead (that her BODY  
is DEAD),

I'm capable of an “*empathy*,”

an “*acceptance*,” of the INEVITABLE  
(in her, and in myself)

that I denied her, living . . .

I DENIED HER, LIVING.

She asked, -

and I could not, WOULD NOT give . . .

I *did* “will” to forgive her, but

FORGIVENESS lay beyond the will, -

. . . *and I willed NOT to forgive her,*  
for “forgiveness” seems to say: -

*Everything is forgotten, obliterated, -*

*the past*

*is as nothing, erased . . .*

Her plea, her need for forgiveness  
seemed the attempt to obliterate

the ACTIONS, ANGERS, DECISIONS

that *made me* what I am . . .

To obliterate the CRISES, FURIES, REFUSALS  
that are how I

came to *UNDERSTAND* her - ; me - ;

my life . . .

Truly to feel “forgiveness,”  
to forgive her IN MY HEART,

meant erasing ME . . .

- She seemed to ask it to render me paralyzed,  
and defenseless . . .

Now that I no longer must face her,  
I give her in my mind

the “*empathy*” and “*acceptance*”

I denied her, living.

*Why are you angry?*

. . . But if, somehow, WHAT WE WERE  
didn't have to be understood

by memory,

and THIS EARTH, -

. . . Augustine and Monica,

as they lean  
alone together standing at a window

overlooking a garden at the center of the house  
(in Book Nine of the *Confessions*),

near the time of her death (which time,  
Augustine says, GOD knew,

though they did not), -

resting here are Ostia from a long journey  
by land,

and preparing for a long sea-journey

back to the Africa which is their home, -

. . . as they stand here sweetly talking together,  
and ask

“*what the eternal life of the saints could be*”

panting to be sprinkled from the waters of God's fountain  
to help them meditate

upon so great a matter), -

. . . as they stand alone together  
at this window,

they can FORGET THE PAST

AND LOOK FORWARD

TO WHAT LIES BEFORE THEM . . .

- They had much to forget;

in the *Confessions*, Monica's ferocity  
is frightening : -

before Augustine became a Christian,  
she saw him as dead - ;

she refused to live with him or even  
eat at the same table in his house,  
shunning and detesting his blasphemies, -

until she had a dream in which she  
learned that he would finally convert to Christ . . .

- When he planned to leave Africa for Italy,  
she was determined he would take her  
with him, or remain at home;

she followed him to the seacoast,  
clinging to him, he says, with “*dreadful grief*”;

one night he escaped,  
and sailed, -

not long after, she followed . . .

- Finally, of course, he became a Christian;  
until then, she  
ceaselessly wept and mourned and prayed . . .

*Do you know why you are saying all this?*

As Augustine and Monica stood leaning at that  
window in Ostia, contemplating

what the saints' possession of God is like,

they moved past and reviewed  
(Augustine tells us)

each level of created things, -

each level of CREATION, from this earth  
to the sun and moon and stars

shining down on earth . . .

-Talking, musing, wondering  
at Creation, but knowing that our life and light

here cannot compare

to the sweetness of the saints' LIGHT and LIFE, -

(here, where he had forced her to *SEEK*  
what out of her body she had herself

brought forth, -)

. . . now, self-gathered at last in the purity of their own  
being, they ascend higher

still, and together SCALE THE STARS . . .

- And so, Augustine tells us, they came to their own Souls, -

and then went  
past them, to that region of richness

unending, where God feeds ISRAEL, forever  
with the food of TRUTH . . .

There LIFE is the WISDOM  
by which all things are made, which

itself is *not* made . . .

- While they were thus talking of, straining to comprehend,  
panting for this WISDOM, with all the effort

of their heart. for one heartbeat,

they together attained to *touch* it - ;

. . . then sighing, and leaving the first-fruits  
of their Spirit bound there,

they returned to the sound of their own voice, -  
to WORDS,

which have a beginning and an end . . .

“How unlike,” Augustine says, “God's WORD, -  
changeless, self-gathered, unmade, yet forever

making all things new . . .”

*How do you explain it?*

Then they said :

“If any man could shut his ears

to the tumult of the flesh - ;

If suddenly the cacophony

of earth and sea and air

were SILENT, and the voice of the self  
died to the self, and so the self

found its way beyond the self, -

beyond the SELF it has made, -

SILENT

our expiations and confessions,  
the voice that says: *NO REMISSION OF SINS  
WITHOUT THE SHEDDING OF BLOOD,*

the WORD that was only given us drenched in blood, -

. . . if to any man

his Self, CREATION ITSELF

(Substance and Accidents and their Relations)

suddenly were SILENT, -

and in that silence,

he then heard CREATION

say with one voice :-

*We are not our own source, -  
even those of us*

*who made ourselves, creatures  
of the Will, the Mirror, and the Dream,*

*know we are not our own source, -*

. . . if he heard this voice,

and then

all creation were, even for a second, SILENT, -

(this Creation in which creatures



of consciousness,

whose LAW is that they come to be  
through CHANGE, through  
birth, fruition, and death,

know that as they move toward fullness  
of being, they move toward ceasing to be, -)

. . . if in this SILENCE,

He whom we *crave* to hear  
SPOKE AT LAST - ;

spoke not through the VEIL  
of earth and sea and air,

thunder, 'SIGNS AND WONDERS,' the voice  
of an angel, the enigma of similitude and of

parable, all

the ALIEN that BESETS us here, -

. . . spoke not by them, but by HIMSELF,

calling us to return into that secret place from  
which He

comes forth at last to us, -

. . . just as we two  
together reached forth and for one  
heartbeat attained to TOUCH

the WISDOM that is our SOURCE and GROUND, -

. . . if this could continue, and LIFE  
were that one moment of  
wisdom and understanding

for which we then sighed, -

would not *this* be: *ENTER THOU INTO THE JOY OF THY LORD ?*

And when shall it be? At  
the Resurrection of the Dead, when all  
shall rise, but not all be changed?

And shall we then be changed? . . .”

I words like these, but not  
exactly these, (Augustine then says,)

they talked together that day -

(just as the words I have given you are  
not, of course, exactly Augustine's).

Monica then said,

“Son, I no longer hope

for anything from this world.

I wanted to stay alive long enough  
to see you a Catholic Christian.

God has granted me this, in  
superabundance.

. . . What am I still doing here?”

In five days, she fell into a fever;  
nine days later she was dead.

*Why are you angry?*

My mother, at the end of her life, was *frightened*.

She was afraid to die  
not because she feared an afterlife,

but because she didn't know what her life had been.

Her two marriages were failures, -  
she stayed married to my stepfather, but  
in despair, without trust in or respect for him, or

visible affection . . .

She had had no profession, -

she had painted a few paintings,  
and written a handful of poems, but without the illusion

either were any good or STOOD FOR HER . . .

She had *MADE* nothing.

*I* was what she had made. -

She saw that her concern and worry and care  
in the end called up in me

protestations of affection  
that veiled

unappeasable anger, and remorse.

UNDOING THIS was beyond me . . .

She felt she was here for some REASON, -  
. . . but never found it.

*Man needs a metaphysics;  
he cannot have one.*