

Classic Poetry Series

Jack Gilbert

- poems -

Publication Date:

2004

Publisher:

PoemHunter.Com - The World's Poetry Archive

Divorce

Woke up suddenly thinking I heard crying.
Rushed through the dark house.
Stopped, remembering. Stood looking
out at bright moonlight on concrete.

Anonymous submission.

Jack Gilbert

In Dispraise Of Poetry

When the King of Siam disliked a courtier,
he gave him a beautiful white elephant.
The miracle beast deserved such ritual
that to care for him properly meant ruin.
Yet to care for him improperly was worse.
It appears the gift could not be refused.

Anonymous submission.

Jack Gilbert

In Umbria

Once upon a time I was sitting outside the cafe
watching twilight in Umbria when a girl came
out of the bakery with the bread her mother wanted.
She did not know what to do. Already bewildered
by being thirteen and just that summer a woman,
she now had to walk past the American.
But she did fine. Went by and around the corner
with style, not noticing me. Almost perfect.
At the last instant could not resist darting a look
down at her new breasts. Often I go back
to that dip of her head when people talk
about this one or that one of the great beauties.

Anonymous submission.

Jack Gilbert

Portrait Number Five: Against A New York Summer

I'd walk her home after work
buying roses and talking of Bechsteins.
She was full of soul.
Her small room was gorged with heat
and there were no windows.
She'd take off everything
but her pants
and take the pins from her hair
throwing them on the floor
with a great noise.
Like Crete.
We wouldn't make love.
She'd get on the bed
with those nipples
and we'd lie
sweating
and talking of my best friend.
They were in love.
When I got quiet
she'd put on usually Debussy
and
leaning down to the small ribs
bite me.
Hard.

Anonymous submission.

Jack Gilbert

Rain

Suddenly this defeat.
This rain.
The blues gone gray
And the browns gone gray
And yellow
A terrible amber.
In the cold streets
Your warm body.
In whatever room
Your warm body.
Among all the people
Your absence
The people who are always
Not you.

I have been easy with trees
Too long.
Too familiar with mountains.
Joy has been a habit.
Now
Suddenly
This rain.

Anonymous submission.

Jack Gilbert

Recovering Amid The Farms

Every morning the sad girl brings her three sheep
and two lambs laggardly to the top of the valley,
past my stone hut and onto the mountain to graze.
She turned twelve last year and it was legal
for the father to take her out of school. She knows
her life is over. The sadness makes her fine,
makes me happy. Her old red sweater makes
the whole valley ring, makes my solitude gleam.
I watch from hiding for her sake. Knowing I am
there is hard on her, but it is the focus of her days.
She always looks down or looks away as she passes
in the evening. Except sometimes when, just before
going out of sight behind the distant canebrake,
she looks quickly back. It is too far for me to see,
but there is a moment of white if she turns her face.

Anonymous submission.

Jack Gilbert

Searching For Pittsburgh

The fox pushes softly, blindly through me at night,
between the liver and the stomach. Comes to the heart
and hesitates. Considers and then goes around it.
Trying to escape the mildness of our violent world.
Goes deeper, searching for what remains of Pittsburgh
in me. The rusting mills sprawled gigantically
along three rivers. The authority of them.
The gritty alleys where we played every evening were
stained pink by the inferno always surging in the sky,
as though Christ and the Father were still fashioning the Earth.
Locomotives driving through the cold rain,
lordly and bestial in their strength. Massive water
flowing morning and night throughout a city
girded with ninety bridges. Sumptuous-shouldered,
sleek-thighed, obstinate and majestic, unquenchable.
All grip and flood, mighty sucking and deep-rooted grace.
A city of brick and tired wood. Ox and sovereign spirit.
Primitive Pittsburgh. Winter month after month telling
of death. The beauty forcing us as much as harshness.
Our spirits forged in that wilderness, our minds forged
by the heart. Making together a consequence of America.
The fox watched me build my Pittsburgh again and again.
In Paris afternoons on Buttes-Chaumont. On Greek islands
with their fields of stone. In beds with women, sometimes,
amid their gentleness. Now the fox will live in our ruined
house. My tomatoes grow ripe among weeds and the sound
of water. In this happy place my serious heart has made.

Submitted by Joe Shields

Jack Gilbert

Tear It Down

We find out the heart only by dismantling what
the heart knows. By redefining the morning,
we find a morning that comes just after darkness.
We can break through marriage into marriage.
By insisting on love we spoil it, get beyond
affection and wade mouth-deep into love.
We must unlearn the constellations to see the stars.
But going back toward childhood will not help.
The village is not better than Pittsburgh.
Only Pittsburgh is more than Pittsburgh.
Rome is better than Rome in the same way the sound
of raccoon tongues licking the inside walls
of the garbage tub is more than the stir
of them in the muck of the garbage. Love is not
enough. We die and are put into the earth forever.
We should insist while there is still time. We must
eat through the wildness of her sweet body already
in our bed to reach the body within that body.

Jack Gilbert

The Abnormal Is Not Courage

The Poles rode out from Warsaw against the German
Tanks on horses. Rode knowing, in sunlight, with sabers,
A magnitude of beauty that allows me no peace.
And yet this poem would lessen that day. Question
The bravery. Say it's not courage. Call it a passion.
Would say courage isn't that. Not at its best.
It was impossible, and with form. They rode in sunlight,
Were mangled. But I say courage is not the abnormal.
Not the marvelous act. Not Macbeth with fine speeches.
The worthless can manage in public, or for the moment.
It is too near the whore's heart: the bounty of impulse,
And the failure to sustain even small kindness.
Not the marvelous act, but the evident conclusion of being.
Not strangeness, but a leap forward of the same quality.
Accomplishment. The even loyalty. But fresh.
Not the Prodigal Son, nor Faustus. But Penelope.
The thing steady and clear. Then the crescendo.
The real form. The culmination. And the exceeding.
Not the surprise. The amazed understanding. The marriage,
Not the month's rapture. Not the exception. The beauty
That is of many days. Steady and clear.
It is the normal excellence, of long accomplishment.

Anonymous submission.

Jack Gilbert

The Forgotten Dialect Of The Heart

How astonishing it is that language can almost mean,
and frightening that it does not quite. Love, we say,
God, we say, Rome and Michiko, we write, and the words
get it all wrong. We say bread and it means according
to which nation. French has no word for home,
and we have no word for strict pleasure. A people
in northern India is dying out because their ancient
tongue has no words for endearment. I dream of lost
vocabularies that might express some of what
we no longer can. Maybe the Etruscan texts would
finally explain why the couples on their tombs
are smiling. And maybe not. When the thousands
of mysterious Sumerian tablets were translated,
they seemed to be business records. But what if they
are poems or psalms? My joy is the same as twelve
Ethiopian goats standing silent in the morning light.
O Lord, thou art slabs of salt and ingots of copper,
as grand as ripe barley lithe under the wind's labor.
Her breasts are six white oxen loaded with bolts
of long-fibered Egyptian cotton. My love is a hundred
pitchers of honey. Shiploads of thuya are what
my body wants to say to your body. Giraffes are this
desire in the dark. Perhaps the spiral Minoan script
is not language but a map. What we feel most has
no name but amber, archers, cinnamon, horses, and birds.

Anonymous submission.

Jack Gilbert

The Great Fires

Love is apart from all things.
Desire and excitement are nothing beside it.
It is not the body that finds love.
What leads us there is the body.
What is not love provokes it.
What is not love quenches it.
Love lays hold of everything we know.
The passions which are called love
also change everything to a newness
at first. Passion is clearly the path
but does not bring us to love.
It opens the castle of our spirit
so that we might find the love which is
a mystery hidden there.
Love is one of many great fires.
Passion is a fire made of many woods,
each of which gives off its special odor
so we can know the many kinds
that are not love. Passion is the paper
and twigs that kindle the flames
but cannot sustain them. Desire perishes
because it tries to be love.
Love is eaten away by appetite.
Love does not last, but it is different
from the passions that do not last.
Love lasts by not lasting.
Isaiah said each man walks in his own fire
for his sins. Love allows us to walk
in the sweet music of our particular heart.

Jack Gilbert