Classic Poetry Series

Jack Gilbert

- poems -

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Jack Gilbert (1925 -)

Jack Gilbert is an American poet.

biography

Born and raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, U.S.'s neighborhood of East Liberty, he attended Peabody High School then worked as a door-to-door salesman, an exterminator, and a steelworker. He graduated from the University of Pittsburgh, where he and his classmate Gerald Stern developed a serious interest in poetry and writing.

His work is distinguished by simple lyricism and straightforward clarity of tone. Though his first book of poetry (Views of Jeopardy, 1962) was quickly recognized and Gilbert himself made into something of a media darling, he retreated from his earlier activity in the San Francisco poetry scene (where he participated in Jack Spicer's Poetry as Magic workshop) and moved to Europe, touring from country to country while living on a Guggenheim Fellowship. Nearly the whole of his career after the publication of his first book of poetry is marked by what he has described in interviews as a self-imposed isolation— which some have considered to be a spiritual quest to describe his alienation from mainstream American culture, and others have dismissed as little more than an extended period as a "professional houseguest" living off of wealthy American literary admirers. Subsequent books of poetry have been few and far between. He continued to write, however, and between books has occasionally contributed to The American Poetry Review, Genesis West, The Quarterly, Poetry, Ironwood, The Kenyon Review, and The New Yorker.

He is a close friend of the poet Linda Gregg who was once his student and to whom he was married for six years. He was also married to Michiko Nogami (a language instructor based in San Francisco, now deceased, about whom he has written many of his poems). He was also in a significant long term relationship with the Beat poet Laura Ulewicz during the fifties in San Francisco. Gilbert currently lives in Berkeley, California.

Awards

1962 Yale Series of Younger Poets Competition for 'Views of Jeopardy
1962 nomination for the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for 'Views of Jeopardy
Guggenheim Fellowship
Lannan Literary Award for Poetry
Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts.

1982 American Book Award
1982 National Book Critics Circle Award
1983 Stanley Kunitz Prize for Monolithos
1983 the American Poetry Review Prize for Monolithos
1983 finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry
2005 National Book Critics Circle Award for Refusing Heaven

Works:

Views of Jeopardy (1962)
Monolithos (1984)
Kochan (1984), A limited edition chapbook of nine poems, two of which were later republished in The Great Fires: Poems 1982-1992; seven of the poems have not been otherwise published, including "Nights and Four Thousand Mornings," the longest poem Gilbert has published
The Great Fires: Poems 1982-1992 (1994)
Refusing Heaven (2005)
Tough Heaven: Poems of Pittsburgh (2006)
Transgressions: Selected Poems (UK, 2006)
The Dance Most of All (2009)
Collected Poems (2012)

Novels

Co-authored with Jean Maclean and published by Olympia Press under the pseudonym Tor Kung:
My Mother Taught Me (1964)
Forever Ecstasy (1968)

A Brief for the Defense

Sorrow everywhere. Slaughter everywhere. If babies
are not starving someplace, they are starving
somewhere else. With flies in their nostrils.
But we enjoy our lives because that's what God wants.
Otherwise the mornings before summer dawn would not
be made so fine. The Bengal tiger would not
be fashioned so miraculously well. The poor women
at the fountain are laughing together between
the suffering they have known and the awfulness
in their future, smiling and laughing while somebody
in the village is very sick. There is laughter
every day in the terrible streets of Calcutta,
and the women laugh in the cages of Bombay.
If we deny our happiness, resist our satisfaction,
we lessen the importance of their deprivation.
We must risk delight. We can do without pleasure,
but not delight. Not enjoyment. We must have
the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless
furnace of this world. To make injustice the only
measure of our attention is to praise the Devil.
If the locomotive of the Lord runs us down,
we should give thanks that the end had magnitude.
We must admit there will be music despite everything.
We stand at the prow again of a small ship
anchored late at night in the tiny port
looking over to the sleeping island: the waterfront
is three shuttered cafés and one naked light burning.
To hear the faint sound of oars in the silence as a rowboat
comes slowly out and then goes back is truly worth
all the years of sorrow that are to come.

Jack Gilbert

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

Failing and Flying

Everyone forgets that Icarus also flew.
It's the same when love comes to an end,
or the marriage fails and people say
they knew it was a mistake, that everybody
said it would never work. That she was
old enough to know better. But anything
worth doing is worth doing badly.
Like being there by that summer ocean
on the other side of the island while
love was fading out of her, the stars
burning so extravagantly those nights that
anyone could tell you they would never last.
Every morning she was asleep in my bed
like a visitation, the gentleness in her
like antelope standing in the dawn mist.
Each afternoon I watched her coming back
through the hot stony field after swimming,
the sea light behind her and the huge sky
on the other side of that. Listened to her
while we ate lunch. How can they say
the marriage failed? Like the people who
came back from Provence (when it was Provence)
and said it was pretty but the food was greasy.
I believe Icarus was not failing as he fell,
but just coming to the end of his triumph.

Jack Gilbert

Going There

Of course it was a disaster.
The unbearable, dearest secret
has always been a disaster.
The danger when we try to leave.
Going over and over afterward
what we should have done
instead of what we did.
But for those short times
we seemed to be alive. Misled,
misused, lied to and cheated,
certainly. Still, for that
little while, we visited
our possible life.

Jack Gilbert

Horses at Midnight without a Moon

Our heart wanders lost in the dark woods.
Our dream wrestles in the castle of doubt.
But there's music in us. Hope is pushed down
but the angel flies up again taking us with her.
The summer mornings begin inch by inch
while we sleep, and walk with us later
as long-legged beauty through
the dirty streets. It is no surprise
that danger and suffering surround us.
What astonishes is the singing.
We know the horses are there in the dark
meadow because we can smell them,
can hear them breathing.
Our spirit persists like a man struggling
through the frozen valley
who suddenly smells flowers
and realizes the snow is melting
out of sight on top of the mountain,
knows that spring has begun.

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

South

In the small towns along the river
nothing happens day after long day.
Summer weeks stalled forever,
and long marriages always the same.
Lives with only emergencies, births,
and fishing for excitement. Then a ship
comes out of the mist. Or comes around
the bend carefully one morning
in the rain, past the pines and shrubs.
Arrives on a hot fragrant night,
grandly, all lit up. Gone two days
later, leaving fury in its wake.

Jack Gilbert

Summer at Blue Creek, North Carolina

There was no water at my grandfather's
when I was a kid and would go for it
with two zinc buckets. Down the path,
past the cow by the foundation where
the fine people's house was before
they arranged to have it burned down.
To the neighbor's cool well. Would
come back with pails too heavy,
so my mouth pulled out of shape.
I see myself, but from the outside.
I keep trying to feel who I was,
and cannot. Hear clearly the sound
the bucket made hitting the sides
of the stone well going down,
but never the sound of me.

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

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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 impossib1e, 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.

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 laguage 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

The Mistake

There is always the harrowing by mortality,
the strafing by age, he thinks. Always defeats.
Sorrows come like epidemics. But we are alive
in the difficult way adults want to be alive.
It is worth having the heart broken,
a blessing to hurt for eighteen years
because a woman is dead. He thinks of long
before that, the summer he was with Gianna
and her sister in Apulia. Having outwitted
the General, their father, and driven south
to the estate of the Contessa. Like an opera.
The fiefdom stretching away to the horizon.
Houses of the peasants burrowed into the walls
of the compound. A butler with white gloves
serving chicken in aspic. The pretty maid
in her uniform bringing his breakfast each
morning on a silver tray: toast both light
and dark, hot chocolate and tea both. A world
like Tosca. A feudal world crushed under
the weight of passion without feeling.
Gianna’s virgin body helplessly in love.
The young man wild with romance and appetite.
Wondering whether he would ruin her by mistake.

Jack Gilbert