Jack Gilbert(1925 -)

Jack Gilbert was an American poet.

<b>Biography</b>

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 was a close friend of the poet <a href="http://www.poemhunter.com/linda-gregg/">Linda Gregg</a> 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 died on November 13, 2012 in Berkeley, California.

<b>Awards</b>

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
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.

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
Going Wrong

The fish are dreadful. They are brought up
the mountain in the dawn most days, beautiful
and alien and cold from night under the sea,
the grand rooms fading from their flat eyes.
Soft machinery of the dark, the man thinks,
washing them. "What can you know of my machinery!"
demands the Lord. Sure, the man says quietly
and cuts into them, laying back the dozen struts,
getting to the muck of something terrible.
The Lord insists: "You are the one who chooses
to live this way. I build cities where things
are human. I make Tuscany and you go to live
with rock and silence."
The man washes away
the blood and arranges the fish on a big plate.
Starts the onions in the hot olive oil and puts
in peppers. "You have lived all year without women."
He takes out everything and puts in the fish.
"No one knows where you are. People forget you.
You are vain and stubborn." The man slices
tomatoes and lemons. Takes out the fish
and scrambles eggs. I am not stubborn, he thinks,
laying all of it on the table in the courtyard
full of early sun, shadows of swallows
flying on the food. Not stubborn, just greedy.

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.

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
Poetry is a kind of lying, necessarily. To profit the poet or beauty. But also in that truth may be told only so.

Those who, admirably, refuse to falsify (as those who will not risk pretensions) are excluded from saying even so much.

Degas said he didn't paint what he saw, but what would enable them to see the thing he had.

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
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.

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