

Classic Poetry Series

**Jack Gilbert**  
**- poems -**

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# 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

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 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

# 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