

TO A GREEN THOUGHT

Garth Greenwell on Poetry

LOVE'S ALEMBIC: ON JACK GILBERT

Few contemporary poets have a story as compelling as Jack Gilbert's. The details of that story are frequently rehearsed: born to a hardscrabble life in Pittsburgh, he flunked out of high school and made a living at odd and demanding jobs (exterminator, door-to-door salesman, steel mill worker) before being admitted, due to a clerical error, to the University of Pittsburgh, where he began writing poetry. After years in France and Italy he lived in San Francisco, where he studied with Jack Spicer and famously argued prosody with Allen Ginsberg. His poetic debut, *Views of Jeopardy*, won the 1962 Yale Younger Poets Prize and was greeted with extraordinary welcome. For a year and a half, as he says, he enjoyed as generous a measure of fame as an American poet is likely to be afforded. The romance of Jack Gilbert, the myth that hangs so heavily about him, sometimes obscuring the poems, starts here. The toast of the literary world, Gilbert absconded to Europe, passing long periods in solitude, living in poverty and poetic silence. He waited twenty years to publish his second book, *Monolithos* (Knopf, 1982), doing so only at the vehement urging of editor Gordon Lish. Gilbert has frequently asserted his rejection of the standard literary career: "I'm not a professional of poetry," he said in an NPR interview marking the publication of his fourth book, *Refusing Heaven* (Knopf, 2005), "I'm a farmer of poetry." Instead, he has insisted that, in the Yeatsian dilemma between the art or the life, his allegiance lies with the latter: "Not wanting to lose it all for poetry. / Wanting to live the living."

The story of this stripped-down life exerts an immense appeal, especially in a poetic culture increasingly uneasy about its confinement to the Academy. The trajectory of Gilbert's career gratifies a longing for our vision of an earlier, more authentic model of the artist as Romantic solitary, adversary of a dominant culture, witness to a truer system of

values than that which we commonly share. Many of Gilbert's admirers speak of him in terms usually reserved for the mystic's inward heroism: "He has given up convenience and ease to record the depth of a human life for the good of us all," writes the poet Dan Albergotti; Meghan O'Rourke, in *Slate*, claims that in their "radical cultivation of solitude . . . Gilbert's poems capture what it might be to live out a spiritual quest for authenticity." (This spiritual quest, it must be said, is a markedly sensual one: Gilbert is a ladies' man as well as a monk, seeking out with striking literalness what Auden calls "the hermit's carnal ecstasy.") Gilbert's poems cultivate such claims; in his aesthetic as in his life, Gilbert repeatedly expresses a claim for the stripped-down, the bare, the essential, as revelatory of the truth of being. In a century of poetic careers extravagant in their conversions (think of Robert Lowell, Allen Ginsberg, Adrienne Rich), Gilbert's work is notably steadfast. Already in his first book—despite a number of poems influenced by the style of the time, aesthetic false steps that appear nowhere else in his published work—the mature style is clear; there is no "breakthrough" volume, no radical shift to a new shape for the poems. Gilbert repeatedly rejects his age's infatuation with formal ingenuity, what he dismisses as "newness strutting around as if it were significant. / Irony, neatness and rhyme pretending to be poetry" ("Measuring the Tyger").

Gilbert insists instead on privileging content over manner, and the new poems collected in his most recent volume, *The Dance Most of All* (Knopf, 2009), show that content, like style, has remained remarkably constant over the nearly five decades of his career. Indeed, as themes, images, even phrases echo between volumes, it seems less meaningful to discuss individual collections than to recognize the entirety of the career as a single project. New details and landscapes, new emphases, new biographical circumstances enter, but the concerns remain the same. His apparently discrete themes (eros, memory, transience, death) are elements of a single inquiry, a single—the chivalric word seems the right one—quest. If Gilbert seems often to eschew much of the elaborate manner of the Romantics, he is joined to them—and especially to Wordsworth—by a kind of Platonism, a sense that the appearances of the world are, however cherishable, a ruse; that there is a richer sweetness to be had in the hidden essences of things. Even though a certain late moderation has emerged in his most recent poems, Gilbert is remarkable for the ferocity of his search for those essences,

his ruthless vagrancy in seeking—in poverty, in extreme landscapes, in difficult love—experience “flayed bare.”

I

The attitude prompting such vagrancy is clear even in Gilbert’s earliest poems, poems that rail against the poetry cultures of San Francisco and New York, where he wrote his earliest published poems. Throughout his career, Gilbert evokes literary alter egos, figures that embody in fairly transparent ways aspects of his own biography or psychology. In *Views of Jeopardy*, Gilbert’s most frequent stand-in is Orpheus, a choice expressive of a certain confidence of vocation; but Gilbert’s Orpheus finds himself in a different sort of Hell from that of his classical counterpart:

From the beginning,
it had gone badly.
From the beginning.
From the first laughter.
It was Hell. Not a fable
of mechanical pain,
but the important made trivial.

In this Hades, Orpheus’ song is met not with the stunned silence of Cerberus or the tears of Persephone, but with an audience safe behind what Gilbert elsewhere calls “the Chinese Wall / Of laughter.” The problem, as Gilbert presents it here, is an impasse between differing sets of values; what hope is there for the poet in a culture that mistakes “the important” for “the trivial”? “You should turn yourself upside down / So your ass would stick out,” his peers advise the hapless suitor of “Malvolio in San Francisco”; writing a poetry valued by his milieu would require so severe a disfigurement as to render him unrecognizable. And any amount of transformation might prove finally inadequate; in a famous poem from this period, “Orpheus in Greenwich Village,” he figures the singer’s ultimate alienation, an audience without ears.

But Gilbert’s work often expresses deeper doubts about poetry, seeing it as imposing demands that are in competition with life, or as distracting from the business of living. Here is the first poem in Gilbert’s first book, “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.

There's a rich ambivalence here: poetry is "beautiful," a "miracle beast"; and it is precisely its fineness that results in ruin. The charge of beauty imposes unbearable obligations. Their nature is made clear in a much later poem, "Less Being More," from *Refusing Heaven*:

It started when he was a young man
 and went to Italy. He climbed mountains,
 wanting to be a poet. But was troubled
 by what Dorothy Wordsworth wrote in
 her journal about William having worn
 himself out searching all day to find
 a simile for nightingale. It seemed
 a long way from the tug of passion.

What Gilbert distrusts about poems is the necessary artifice they entail, the process whereby experience is transformed into something communicable—the searching out of a metaphor to convey a bird's call. Gilbert's fear is that the very process of that transformation entails loss, that poetry requires an abstraction from experience, a reflectiveness at odds with "the tug of passion." A day spent pondering a metaphor is a day lost to the experience of flesh-and-blood nightingales.

The poem is gently mocking of the young man who is its hero, who seeks out grand experience—climbing mountains—in order to conform to the standard narrative of the Romantic poet. Part of the inauthenticity of poetry as Gilbert conceives of it here inheres in that grandeur, in accepting another generation's poetic narratives (the idea that poetry is made on mountaintops, for example) as one's own. The poem goes on to suggest the different shape Gilbert's career has taken:

He ended up staying in pensioni
 where the old women would take up
 the children in the middle of the night
 to rent the room, carrying them warm

and clinging to the mothers, the babies
 making a mewling sound. He began hunting
 for the second rate. The insignificant
 ruins, the negligible museums, the back-
 country villages with only one pizzeria
 and two small bars. The unimproved.

To forge a truer aesthetic—not just a rehearsal of Romantic narratives—Gilbert turns away from received traditions of poetic grandeur, relishing instead, as all of his best poems relish, unglamorous particulars, the children “warm and clinging,” “the insignificant / ruins.” In his poems—as in his life—Gilbert seeks a genuineness that he suspects is precluded by the world’s attention. Poetry requires, for Gilbert, a kind of existential privacy, a removal from familiar stories and gestures, from the expected subject matter of poems, the “first rate,” the exceptional beauty.

Gilbert expresses a mistrust of such beauty, as well as an extraordinary susceptibility to it, throughout his career; it is an ambivalence that he is never fully able to resolve. He is wary everywhere of the exceptional that is acknowledged as such. In “The Abnormal is Not Courage,” one of the most famous poems from his first collection, Gilbert denies that the heroic gesture, the moment of exceptional sacrifice performed in the crucible of the world’s attention, deserves to be called “courage,” calling it instead merely “a passion”: “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.” And yet it’s these moments that compel us to poems, that possess, as Gilbert says here, “A magnitude of beauty that allows me no peace.” For Gilbert, there is no Keatsian certainty that beauty is simply truth; instead, seeking out truth frequently requires resisting the siren call of beauty, even as its claims can’t be fully or finally denied.

This quandary is the subject of another early poem, “The Sirens Again”:

What are we to do about loveliness? We get past
 that singing early and reach an honest severity.
 We all were part of the Children’s Crusade: trusted,
 were sold bad boats, and went under. But we still

dream of the voices. Not to go back. Thinking
 to go on even into the confusion of pleasure.
 We hear them carol at night and do not mind the lies,
 intending to come on those women from inland.

Gilbert turns to the sirens—one of our earliest conceptions of beauty as disastrous—to convey his mistrust of the aesthetic, but the poem is more complicated than mere disavowal. “We get past / that singing early,” he says, and yet “we still / dream of the voices,” are still desirous of “the confusion of pleasure.” In fact, the poem isn’t a disavowal of beauty at all, but a disavowal of the usual approaches to it: “We hear them carol at night and do not mind the lies, / intending to come on those women from inland.” The poet dreams of an ingress to beauty that will allow him to avoid its perils, a way to reconcile beauty and truth, “an honest severity.”

What this reconciliation requires, for Gilbert, is a kind of aesthetic of rigor, an aesthetic he has spent much of his career articulating. The stylistic hallmarks of that aesthetic are clear even in these early poems: the halting immediacy of the sentence fragment; the impersonality of third person singular pronouns, or the universality of the first person plural; the aesthetic heat sparked by suggestive but unexplained juxtapositions (like the allusion to the Children’s Crusade in “The Sirens Again”). Throughout the career, Gilbert’s poems generally eschew suspended syntax, preferring short declarative statements over the subtlety of subordination. This is an aesthetic of limitation that has dissatisfied some critics. (“A minimalism of this sort has a knotty truth to it,” complained Helen Vendler in response to *Monolithos*, “but finally it seems constricted as a medium for existence, bound in a net of its own baffled devising.”) But what this limitation promises, for Gilbert, is a heightened intensity of experience. Eschewing abundance, he celebrates what he calls “the acute little that is there.”

II

Throughout Gilbert’s career, and increasingly in the later work, there is an anxiety about missing out on experience, about the ease with which we become mere spectators in our lives. “We end up asking what our lives really tasted like,” he writes in “Eating with the Emperor”; in “Bring in the Gods,” he complains that “we don’t have the knack for eating what we are living.” We find ourselves, he suggests, with evidence of an

existence we have somehow missed—with, as he phrases it in the title of a poem from *The Great Fires* (Knopf, 1994), “Theoretical Lives”:

All that remains from the work of Skopas
are the feet. Sometimes not even that.
Sometimes only irregularities on the plinth
that may indicate how the figure stood.
Using the feet, or shadows of feet,
and the exact diagrams of German professors,
learned men argue about what the arms
were doing and how good the sculpture was.
As we do with our lives...

There’s much of Yeats’s “The Scholars” here, in the sense that, despite the application of a great deal of interpretive finesse and exertion, the essential object of our interest has been lost. (“Lord, what would they say, / Did their Catullus walk that way,” Yeats writes.) We’re left with increasingly less: feet, or just “shadows of feet,” from which to construe the rest of the figure. Gilbert presents another image of such distance from experience in a later poem in the same volume, “Hot Nights in Florida”: “The people here seem hardly here / at all: blond desire always in the middle of / air conditioning. He remembers love as it could be.”

While this fear is evident throughout Gilbert’s collections, the precise nature of the experience he fears missing is less clear. At times he claims to long for “the common”: “usually / we depend on meditation and having things augmented,” he writes in “Getting it All,” again from *The Great Fires*. “We see the trees in their early-spring greenness, / but not again until just before winter. The common / is mostly beyond us.” And yet his characteristic landscapes—the sun-hammered islands of Greece, Copenhagen in winter, an isolated mountain in Japan, the rusting steel mills of Pittsburgh—suggest the different scale of intensity his poems seem to be after. Indeed, he seems to long for a life augmented by a landscape that seems barely livable. Consider “The Other Perfection,” from *Refusing Heaven*:

Nothing here. Rock and fried earth.
Everything destroyed by the fierce light.
Only stones and small fields of
stubborn barley and lentils.

...

A kind of paradise. Everything itself.
 The sea is water. Stones are made of rock.
 The sun goes up and goes down. A success
 without any enhancement whatsoever.

What Gilbert repeatedly claims is that such a stripped-down landscape takes us somehow beneath appearances, removing the distractions of loveliness and allowing us access to a deeper truth: “Truth becomes visible,” he writes of autumn in “Half the Truth,” “the architecture of the soul begins to show through. / God has put off his panoply and is at home with us. / We are returned to what lay beneath the beauty.” The rigorous landscape, like the rigorous aesthetic of its representation, seems for Gilbert to promise a way to get at something like truth, “the architecture of the soul.”

The experiences that carry the greatest charge of authenticity in these poems, that seem to reveal to us the most about ourselves, are experiences of suffering. “But we are alive / in the difficult way adults want to be alive,” Gilbert writes in “The Mistake,” a new poem in *The Dance Most of All*. “It is worth having the heart broken, / a blessing to hurt for eighteen years / because a woman is dead.” And indeed, many of Gilbert’s best poems are poems in the elegiac mode. There is a series of poems in *Monolithos* astonishing in its candor as it details the deterioration of Gilbert’s marriage to the poet Linda Gregg, cataloguing what he calls “the beauty as the marriage steadily failed” (“All the Way from There to Here”). The poems that seem likeliest to ensure a permanent readership for Gilbert, however, are the elegies, most of them collected in *The Great Fires* and *Refusing Heaven*, written in memory of his wife, Michiko Nogami, who died of cancer at the age of thirty-six.

Gilbert writes with great and unsentimental pathos about Nogami’s death, and he unflinchingly details the final months of her life, when he lived with her through the unbearable intimacy of her dying. “Michiko is dying in the house behind me,” he writes in “Finding Something”:

the long windows open so I can hear
 the faint sound she will make when she wants
 watermelon to suck or so I can take her
 to a bucket in the corner of the high-ceilinged room

which is the best we can do for a chamber pot.
 She will lean against my leg as she sits
 so as not to fall over in her weakness.
 How strange and fine to get so near to it.

This is one of the most affecting descriptions of grief I know in our recent poetry, rare in its complete freedom from self-aggrandizement as it documents the speaker's tending of his wife. (The poem's final image, "my heart is as helpless as crushed birds," slightly deflates the poem's otherwise perfectly distant pathos.) The passage is moving even in the very cast of its sentences, the first—as long a sentence as one is likely to encounter in Gilbert's work—giving way to the starker declarative statement that follows it, and then to the single, shocking line of affirmation: "How strange and fine to get so near to it." The referentless "it" is a frequent element of Gilbert's poems; nearly always, as here, it signifies something like "the center of experience," the object of his most persistent inquiry. "How could he later on believe it was the best / time when his wife died unexpectedly / and he wandered every day among the trees, crying / for more than a year?" the poet asks in "Beyond Beginnings." Whatever the grief that provokes it, the discernment of the "strange and fine" thing remains a triumph.

III

Gilbert has been most exhaustively discussed as an erotic poet, and it is true that his poems about particular women—Gregg and Nogami, but also Gianna Gelmetti, his first love, and a woman named Anna with whom he had a brief and powerful affair—are among his best work. Since his second book, he has written beautifully—like Yeats, like Eliot—about the survival of the erotic impulse into old age: "What if the heart does not pale as the body wanes," he asks in "Getting Ready," "but is like the sun that blazes hotter each day / on these immense, perishing fields?" In one of several poems in *The Dance Most of All* that revisit his youth in Pittsburgh, Gilbert remembers the "old men of shabby clothes" who "came from their one room" to attend strip shows "in the lavish / theaters left over from vaudeville." "The old men came," he writes:

To remember what used
 to be. Like the gray-haired men of Ilium

who waited each morning for Helen
 to cross over to the temple in her light raiment.
 The waning men longed to escape from the spell
 cast over them by time. To escape the imprisoned
 longing. To insist on dispensation. To see
 their young hearts just one more time.

Gilbert invests these men, who might so easily be ridiculous, with a moving, classical dignity, insisting that the erotic impulse whose song they follow is the same that fueled the grand passions of Homeric epic. The erotic, like the landscapes Gilbert's poems so often inhabit, is a way to escape the self's diminishment.

But it is not a purely benign force, and the presentation of the erotic as savage risk has been under-read by Gilbert's critics. "Midnight is Made of Bricks," a vicious poem from his first book, vividly expresses a sense of Eros as affliction:

I am old of this ravening.
 Poisoned of their God-damned flesh.
 The ugly man-flesh.
 And the fat woman-flesh.
 I am tired and sick and old of it.
 But the precise addiction is unrelenting.

Sexual need is a crushing cycle in this poem, sending the narrator out predatory in the streets of North Beach, cruising for "the next one": "In Vesuvio's maybe / Where they come like deer." The simile both inscribes the poem into our oldest traditions of love poetry ("Whoso list to hunt, I know where is an hind") and reminds us that romance often partakes of the hunt's savagery. It is a perception that survives into the late poems collected in *The Dance Most of All*: "Gentle love and some / almost like an animal with its prey," he writes in "Cherishing What Isn't."

If the theme of the erotic inspires many of Gilbert's best poems, it also provokes his worst. I've argued that Gilbert inherits from his Romantic forebears the philosophy of essences that subtends his work, and he also inherits from them—again, especially from Wordsworth—at once an impulse to make that philosophy explicit and a sometimes painful tendency to pontificate. Poems are often fruitful resources for

philosophers, but seldom are poets successful at “doing” philosophy, and long, lifeless passages of discursive propositions—which have marred some of Gilbert’s poems throughout his career—have grown more numerous in the late work. Across his career, Gilbert has promulgated a mythology around women, investing them with the sense of numinous presence, of being at the center of experience, that so many of his poems seek. “It was not / their flesh that was a mystery but something on the other / side of it,” he writes in “Steel Guitars,” from *The Great Fires*. The transcendence promised by Eros can be a moving theme for Gilbert: in “Man at a Window,” as the protagonist feels the postcoital, “random intensity sliding away, / unrecoverable,” Gilbert writes powerfully of “trying to break the code while there is still time.” And Gilbert can engagingly ironize the quest to find truth through sex, as in the much discussed poem, “Sects,” which lambastes—not least through the pun of its title—“the failed denomination / I was part of, that old false dream of woman.”

In the late work, however, Gilbert has increasingly presented this “old false dream” with all the shine of true revelation. “We are / allowed to visit hearts of women, / to go into their bodies so we feel / no longer alone,” he writes in “The Lost Hotels of Paris,” from *Refusing Heaven*; in “Moreover,” just twelve or so pages later in the same volume, he ups the ante: “We are allowed / women so we can get into bed with the Lord, / however partial and momentary that is.” “What we are given is taken away,” he acknowledges—the revelation is partial and momentary—“but we manage to keep it secretly.” In “A Fact”—notice the title!—from *The Dance Most of All*, he delivers a miniature lecture on the nature of “The woman”:

The woman is not just a pleasure,
nor even a problem. She is a meniscus
that allows the absolute to have a shape,
that lets him skate however briefly
on the mystery, her presence luminous
on the ordinary and grand.

Again what’s promised is promised only “briefly,” but the genuineness of the revelation—it “allows the absolute to have a shape”—is not questioned. Gilbert’s admirers often feel the need to defend passages like these from charges of sexism. To my mind, there’s no question

that those charges are well-aimed. However vivid and loving Gilbert's portraits of individual women, his philosophy of Woman sees her as existing entirely and exclusively for the benefit of men, the repository of a mystical significance it is man's privilege to unlock. But charges of sexism are beside the point; more egregious is the leaden abstraction of these lines. And yet even this risible philosophy can be made genuinely pathetic in the context of other poems, as when Gilbert writes, of the presences of past loves he has summoned: "I know how easily they come, / summoned by our yearning. I realize the luminosity / can be a product of our heart's furnace. It would / erase my life to find I made it up" ("Becoming Regardless").

IV

Other poems suggest a more compelling notion of what the erotic promises for Gilbert, and suggest another sense of the experience he seeks in his battered landscapes and life of rich deprivation. In "The White Heart of God," from *The Great Fires*, the poet finds himself in yet another punishing landscape, a cabin "in the naked woods," alone in the depth of winter, where he is "doing the year's accounts," attempting to take the measure of himself, "trying to estimate how much / he has been translated." Here is the end of the poem:

He hopes for even the faintest evidence,
the presence of the Lord's least abundance. He measures
with tenderness, afraid to find a heart more classical
than ripe. Hoping for honey, for love's alembic.

What Gilbert hopes for, in a strange paradox, is that somehow deprivation will be revealed to be abundance: that the self stripped bare will be distilled, refined, and transformed. Repeatedly his bare landscapes inexplicably become places of plenty, as in "On Stones," from the same volume, where a region of granite is invested with a "sun / hammering this earth into pomegranates / and grapes." Similarly, in "Everywhere and Forever," the first poem of the new volume, "on a mountain / flayed bare by the great sun" there thrives "the pomegranate tree with its exaggerated fruit."

Just as bare earth might be hammered into plenty, so Gilbert imagines his heart blistered to ripeness. His real "quarry," as he writes in "Triangulating," also from the new volume, has been "The something we

were changing into.” This image of transformation is frequently figured as distillation (“Love’s alembic”), a process whereby—by reducing a thing to its essence—a new potency comes into being, a new sweetness to recompense the pain of what has been lost. And this—not skating on the meniscus of the absolute—is what he seeks in the experience of love. He writes in “Painting on Plato’s Wall,” another new poem:

We cobble love together
 from this and those of our machinery
 until there is suddenly an apparition
 that never existed before. There it is,
 unaccountable. The woman and our
 desire are somehow turned into
 brandy by Athena’s tiny owl filling
 the darkness around an old villa
 on the mountain with its plaintive
 mewing. As a man might be
 turned into someone else while
 living kind of happy up there
 with the lady’s gentle dying.

Even in these late, perhaps last poems, Gilbert seeks out still the fruit of a life lived in the heat and pressure of “the heart’s furnace”: the renewal and transformation of the self.