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David Fratus

WINTER MORNINGS, EARLY

the cat watches
the woman dress:

flashes of white
(hands, legs, nylon)

clothes rushing up
swishing down

secret machinery
(clicks, snaps, zips)

bursts of static
electricity

hairbrush crackling
haloed in fire.

What miracles
what magician's tricks!

The cat's eyes narrow
then close again –

such a sudden
unnecessary
storm of light.

Amy Eisner

BEGINNING OF A LECTURE ON PSYCHO

The microphone, the beard, the glasses on the head, the nodding.
The distance between the swaying screen and the part of the eye
that can focus. The projection is fine, but he wants it brighter.
A woman makes the fix. "Genius, don't go away." The false lead:
we can talk about that: misdirection. You're shifting in your seat.
Are your muscles sore? Slowly, slowly, a bus goes by.
She has something she's not supposed to have. You think
it will fit but it doesn't. You think she'll conceal it; she doesn't.
The appearance of an error. "The player cannot do that now."

William Johnson

Collected Poems

By Jack Gilbert

Alfred A. Knopf, 2012

One of the delights in securing a copy of Gilbert's, *Collected Poems* is that one now has the whole of his brilliant debate book, *Views of Jeopardy*. It was this book that caused a frenzy of sorts over Gilbert resulting in photographs of the poet in both *Vogue* and *Glamour* magazines. To understand the context of these events is to revisit a cultural epoch that still lingers in many lives today. It was San Francisco in the early 60's; it was North Beach and Haight Ashbury. It was the emergence of the Beats. In a later *Paris Review* interview Gilbert states, "I lived there for seven years, like a hippie without drugs. That was lovely."

The public's interest in the counterculture's lifestyle with their changing mores and their crisscrossing the nation, generated curiosity over Gilbert's 1962 Yale Prize winner. It had much to do with the counterculture's new living experiments and the life of the poet. His early poems remain wonderfully visceral, this from "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 Debussy,
and,
leaning down to the small ribs,
bite me
hard.

Talk about friends with benefits! This poem would serve as a precursor for Gilbert's lifelong investigation into the concepts of love and lust.

Despite the counterculture world emerging in 1962, Gilbert, who hated the term Beat, quickly distinguished himself as something else. If he was a romantic it was with a classical base and his lifestyle was not always spontaneous but based on carefully considered beliefs. Even his youthful relations with women get careful consideration through the personae "Don Giovanni on his Way to Hell (II)": "How could they think women a recreation?" Giovanni states, "I would not have lost so much for recreation." It was his "relish of those archipelagoes of person." Giovanni hungers for the "under water time of night"/indecent and still, to speak to her without habit."

The irony of course is that poor Giovanni is on his way to Hell. In a later poem entitled, "Don Giovanni in Trouble," we find that the Contessa has found Giovanni looking past her nipples "to her unusual toes."

Thoughtful classical rhetoric gave Gilbert's first book its spine. In "The Abnormal Is Not Courage," Gilbert creates this wonderfully rebellious poem that challenges our traditional view of heroism:

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 passion.
Would say courage isn't that. Not at its best
It was impossible, and with form.

For Gilbert courage doesn't reside within a narrative form whose epic form can so often lead to notoriety:

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, not Faustus. But Penelope.
The thing steady and clear.

Gilbert ends the poem with courage "is the normal excellence, of long accomplishment."

Gilbert's personae's Don Giovanni and Penelope were fundamental to the course Gilbert's life would take. He's remarked that he doesn't invent poems he takes them from his life. In a poem contained in the "Uncollected Poems" section of the *Collected*, he states, "We are animals

haunted by love. Not spirits / buried in flesh, but the flesh itself.” The simplicity of his future life abroad would celebrate this physicality.

Gilbert was happy to get away from San Francisco. In a 1962 *Genises West* interview with Gordon Lish, Gilbert states, “A man who delights in the world isn’t so dependent on drugs and alcohol and novelty.” Gilbert grew very critical of the counterculture around him, “When you realize how little these people like being themselves, you begin to understand why they want to escape consciousness.”

Gilbert who had little interest in a life with children, was bent on seeking a life of constant discovery. He would live in Greece, Denmark, England and Japan. In the *Paris Review* interview, he states at one stretch he visited 15 countries. Readers come to *Collected Poems* (a further four books after *Views of Jeopardy*) for the individual poems yes, but also readers have a drive to understand the autobiography inherent in Gilbert’s story. Many of Gilbert’s poems struck a chord with those who were exhausted by the politics of the 60’s and were part of the back to the land movement. Gilbert was no farmer, but he definitely lived simply and elegantly and there was still an interest in how he was faring during the twenty year gap till his second book *Monolithos* appeared. In the poem “The Cucumbers of Praxilla of Sicyon,” Gilbert gets at the rhythm of his new life:

What is the best we leave behind?
Certainly love and form and ourselves.
Surely those. But it is the mornings
that are hard to relinquish, and music
and cucumbers. Rain on trees, empty
piazzas in small towns flooded with sun.
What are we busy with doesn’t make us
Groan *ah* , *ah* , as we will for the nights
and the cucumbers.

Along with wonderful poems that document his informal integration into new cultures and into the rare beauties of his surroundings, Gilbert continued his forays into love and lust: poems like “Transgressions” and “Infidelities.” Then there is the compelling look from “The Container for the Thing Contained” at Picasso with his models:

He had known nakedness everyday
For sixty years. What could there be in it still
To find? But he was happy even then to get
Close to the distant, distant intermittency.
Like a piano playing on a second floor
In a back room, The music seems familiar but is not.

Or this poem “Textures” whose type exists nowhere else in the English language:

We had walked three miles through the night
when I had to piss. She stopped just beyond.
I aimed at the stone wall of a vineyard,
But the wind took it and she made a sound.
I apologized. “It’s alright she said out
of the dark, her voice different. “I liked it.”

In Gilbert’s third book of poems a coda type poem is placed called “The Spirit and the Soul.” It’s a poem that asks what lasts in memory, not his sister not his peasant mother, or father but the three loves of his life Gianna Gelmetti, Linda Gregg, and Michiko Nogami. Gelmetti his first love was in Italy and her parents broke-up the relationship because Gilbert was not perceived as one who could provide. Linda Gregg, a superb poet in her own right, has some poignant poems about her relationship with Gilbert. From Gilbert’s perspective, “Trying To Be Married”: “Eight years/and her love for me quieted away. / How fine she is. How hard we struggle.”

If Gilbert has a shortcoming as a poet it’s that he often goes in and out of his poems in a predictable way, in “Hunger,” he digs into an apple, predictably “Refusing the sweetness.” Getting to the wooden part.”” Getting to the seeds,” “Getting beyond the seeds.” While helping his dying wife Michiko Nogami in “Finding Something,” : . . .”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.” Though the sentiment is moving, unconditional love, these poems have both predictable pacing and results. In the *Paris Review*, interview Gilbert himself has said, that he doesn’t understand “the need for trickery or some new way of arranging words on a page.” He doesn’t think much about the interplay of syntax or line breaks, he relies on “instinct, and intuition.” This was a slight turn away from early poems like “The Whiteness, the Sound, and Alcibiades” that were more abstract, spacious and symbolic.

Throughout Gilbert’s writing life, he has managed the “excellence of long accomplishment.” Those of us from rust belt cities appreciate how well he’s captured his youth in Pittsburgh. In absence of religion, “he chooses against the Lord,” Pittsburgh anchors Gilbert’s personnel mythology. In the poem “Refusing Heaven,” also the title of one of his late books, he states:

The mills are eaten away, and eaten
again by the sun and its rusting. He needs them
even though they are gone, to measure against.

I waited for Gilbert's poems to appear in Lehman's Oxford anthology or Dove's Penguin anthology; they were not forthcoming and Gilbert has remained an outsider. I hope *Collected Poems* will begin to remedy this. Jack Gilbert is currently battling Alzheimer's. Gerald Stern has written that Jack Gilbert is as of recent in the Sunrise nursing home in Berkley California. The folks at Alfred A. Knoph should be congratulated for this timely book, particularly jacket design editor, Abbey Weintraub for a color scheme of oat and sea foam and the cover's woodcut of a young Gilbert by Gianna Giammetti. This is a book whose heft, you'll certainly want to hold in your hands.