Jack Gilbert, The Art of Poetry No. 91
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On the rare occasions when Jack Gilbert gives public readings—whether in New York, Pittsburgh, or San Francisco—it is not unusual for men and women in the audience to tell him how his poems have saved their lives. At these gatherings, one may also hear wild stories about Gilbert: he was a junkie, he was homeless, he was married numerous times. In reality, he has never been addicted to drugs, has been impoverished but never homeless, and was married only once. The fascination with Gilbert is a response, above all, to the power of his poetry, but it also reflects the mystique of a life lived utterly without regard for the conventions of literary fortune and fame.

Gilbert was born in Pittsburgh in 1925. He failed out of high school and worked as an exterminator and door-to-door salesman before being admitted, thanks to a clerical error, to the University of Pittsburgh. There he met the poet Gerald Stern, his exact contemporary. Gilbert started writing poetry, he says, because Stern did. After college he traveled to Paris and worked briefly at the *Herald Tribune* before spending several years in Italy, where he met Gianna Gelmetti, the first great love of his life. But Gelmetti's family, recognizing that Gilbert would never provide her with much financial or domestic security, persuaded him to end the relationship and he returned to America—first to San Francisco and then to New York—where his career as a poet began.

In 1962 Gilbert's first book, *Views of Jeopardy*, won the Yale Younger Poets Prize and was considered for the Pulitzer Prize alongside collections by Robert Frost and William Carlos Williams. *The New York Times* called Gilbert "inescapably gifted," Theodore Roethke and Stanley Kunitz praised his candor and control, and Stephen Spender hailed his work as "witty, serious, and skillful." He was photographed for *Glamour* and *Vogue*, and was widely feted by the literary establishment. Although he continued to write, he did not publish again for almost twenty years.

In 1966 Gilbert left the country with his companion, the poet Linda Gregg. They lived in Greece, on the islands of Paros and Santorini, and for a brief period in Denmark

and England. “All Jack ever wanted to know was that he was awake—that the trees in bloom were almond trees—and to walk down the road to get breakfast,” Gregg, who remains close to Gilbert, says. “He never cared if he was poor or had to sleep on a park bench.” After five years overseas, the couple returned to San Francisco, where they separated. Gilbert soon met and married Michiko Nogami, a sculptor twenty-one years younger than him. They settled in Japan and Gilbert taught at Rikkyo University until 1975, when he was appointed chief lecturer on American literature for the U.S. State Department and he embarked with Nogami on a fifteen-country tour. In 1982, at the insistence of his friend and editor Gordon Lish, Gilbert published a second book, *Monolithos*. That same year, Nogami died of cancer. She was thirty-six. Gilbert published a series of poems dedicated to her in a memorial chapbook, *Kochan*, and then, again, went silent—this time for a decade, during which he lived intermittently in Northampton, Massachusetts; San Francisco; and Florida.

The speaker in the poems of Gilbert’s third collection, *The Great Fires: Poems, 1982–1992*, often asks to be given a second chance: “Let me fall / in love one last time, I beg them. / Teach me mortality, frighten me / into the present. Help me to find / the heft of these days.” *The Great Fires* received many accolades and earned Gilbert a Lannan Literary Award. He did not publish again until last year, when *The New Yorker* presented eight of his poems over seven months in the run-up to the publication of his fourth book, *Refusing Heaven*. “Jack rises up like an eel,” says Alice Quinn, *The New Yorker*’s poetry editor. “He dictates how and when the world sees his poems.” In the new book, Gilbert’s work expresses a deep satisfaction in the ephemeral nature of life: “We look up at the stars and they are / not there. We see memory / of when they were, once upon a time. / And that too is more than enough.”

Gilbert now lives a modest, solitary life in Northampton, where he rents a room in the home of a friend, Henry Lyman. It is a cedar-shingled house that looks out over a winding river and a vast meadow—an idyllic spot that Gilbert says brings him great comfort. This interview took place there in two sessions, in January and in July of this year. Gilbert, who is eighty, appeared frail—his hair white and windswept—but his eyes were startlingly bright. On both occasions, we had the same lunch that he and Lyman have almost every day: bruschetta with smoked salmon. Gilbert’s voice was high-pitched and he was hesitant to talk about himself. Instead he wanted to know where I was from,

what I'd studied, what I wanted from life and from him. When the subject turned back to his work, he admitted that he hopes his poems give people a sense of possibilities.

INTERVIEWER

You once said that you were the only person you knew who left Pittsburgh a true romantic—one who woke up happy, though aware of his mortality, every day.

JACK GILBERT

It's true—it wasn't easy in Pittsburgh. But I'm sure there were others.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever think you would live this long?

GILBERT

I once dreamed that I'd live to be sixty. In those days that was how old you could live to be. But many of my ancestors lived to a hundred. I have this mechanism, this body, which has been so kind to me. I've never been in a hospital, except once—I fell.

INTERVIEWER

There's a poem about that, "All the Way from There to Here."

GILBERT

I was supposed to die. I fell head down from ninety feet. When I didn't die right away, they let me go home. I insisted because it was Christmas. If I was going to die, I wanted to die under the Christmas tree with Linda. I still didn't die. But I couldn't support my own torso because I'd broken my spine and chest. Linda and I wanted to go to Europe, so I had them build something that was like an exoskeleton. After saying goodbye to the doctors, I walked toward the door with Linda and when I got halfway there the doctor in charge said, Oh, one thing. If you feel a little bit of tingling in your fingers, that will mean that the paralysis has started. That never happened. So I've been blessed.

INTERVIEWER

What were you doing ninety feet up?

GILBERT

Showing off. I was with Linda and her father didn't approve at all. I mean, he was resentful that I was bedding his daughter without any official rights. On Christmas Day we went up on his mountain to find a tree that would suit Linda. We were walking along and he was behaving himself. We kept walking until we came to these trees. He was crazy about nature. He said, You know, if you cut off the top of that tree—if you could cut just the top—the tree wouldn't die, and it would make it a more attractive tree without that spindly, weak top.

Being the bad guy with his lovely daughter, I immediately took the rope and saw and started climbing. I didn't know anything about it. I knew a lot about apple trees because I'd spent time in an orchard. But not a forest. I was way up there. I climbed to the top, but I'm no fool—I tied myself to the trunk. I thought I would tug on the treetop until it snapped, except in the middle of doing this there was a big gust of wind that snapped the thing, and it fell on me and was pushing me down. I was all right at first because I had tied myself in, except after a while—they couldn't get to me quickly enough—my thighs started to give way. I was heroic about it, but my thighs gave way, and the rope too. I plummeted down, shearing off the branches. I was going so fast that the speed just butchered the tree. Luckily I landed on dirt.

INTERVIEWER

How was it that you knew about apple trees?

GILBERT

I spent two summers on my grandparents' farm. And when I was thirteen, we lived in a huge house on the outskirts of Pittsburgh. I don't know if my father stole it—this was during the Depression. During the day, my mother and father went into town, leaving my siblings and me all alone in this magnificent house, three stories high and no one

there but us. We played on the roof, in the laundry chutes. It was extraordinarily dangerous. It was lovely, legendary. We owned that little world. In the back of the house were two orchards, one filled with peaches, the other with apples. We were always in the apple trees—frequently falling down.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think you would have become a poet if you'd stayed in Pittsburgh?

GILBERT

Why not? I was kind of a strange boy to be in Pittsburgh. I spent so much time reading. Even if I started a book that was boring, it was almost impossible for me not to finish it. I couldn't get the story out of my head until I knew what happened. I had such curiosity. And you might not think it, but the power of Pittsburgh, the grandeur, those three great rivers, was magnificent. Even working in the steel mills. You can't work in a steel mill and think small. Giant converters hundreds of feet high. Every night, the sky looked enormous. It was a torrent of flames—of fire. The place that Pittsburgh used to be had such scale. My father never brought home three pounds of potatoes. He always came home with crates of things. Everything was grand, heroic. Everything seemed to be gigantic in Pittsburgh—the people, the history. Sinuousness. Power. Substance. Meaningfulness.

INTERVIEWER

Can you name some of your early influences?

GILBERT

Almost any book in the library—knights saving ladies, cowboys trying to kill the bad guy. I just devoured books; each new story opened a new vista.

INTERVIEWER

Were you surprised when your first book, *Views of Jeopardy*, won the Yale Younger Poets Prize and was considered for the Pulitzer?

GILBERT

Sure. It was an accident.

INTERVIEWER

Is it true that they couldn't find you to tell you that you'd won?

GILBERT

It was more of an accident than that. I had gone to Italy and fallen in love—for the first time—with an extraordinarily beautiful woman, but her sister convinced me that I should give her up. She said, You're never going to hold a job. You're not going to be able to support Gianna. She should have babies. Gianna was made to have babies. And it was true.

But that was an awful thing for me to do; I should have talked it over with Gianna.

Anyhow, I was gathering all of my things to leave Italy. Gianna's brother-in-law—Cleve Moffet, a writer—had an application for some kind of competition. He talked about it but decided he wasn't going to do anything with it. When he got up to go to lunch he picked up the form and threw it in my lap saying, You should do it. I forgot about it until I was leaving to go back to America. The application must have gotten mixed in with the stuff I was packing. When I got to New York and was throwing things away, I must have found it and sent it in. I don't know. I forgot about it.

Later, I was living in the East Village and this one night there was pounding on the door and there was Cleve standing in the hall. He was agitated and said, They're looking all over for you. I asked who, and he explained that somebody wanted to give me the Yale prize. I didn't know what to do, how to express it. I took him out with my two friends and we had milkshakes.

The next day I roamed about trying to find a way to feel about what had happened. I finally lay down under the Brooklyn Bridge to try to feel something. I lay there all afternoon, and then I called the people at Yale.

INTERVIEWER

The journal *Genesis West*—or its editor Gordon Lish—devoted its fall 1962 issue to you. Theodore Roethke, Stephen Spender, Muriel Rukeyser, Stanley Kunitz, and others sang your praises. You were only thirty-seven years old. Did that influence you and your work?

GILBERT

It was shockingly generous. It pleased me. Gordon Lish kindly pushed me. I was proud and grateful, but it didn't change my work much. I enjoyed those six months of being famous. Fame is a lot of fun, but it's not interesting. I loved being noticed and praised, even the banquets. But they didn't have anything that I wanted. After about six months, I found it boring. There were so many things to do, to live. I didn't want to be praised all of the time—I liked the idea but I didn't invest much in it.

INTERVIEWER

You went abroad soon afterwards—to Greece on a Guggenheim Fellowship. Did success influence your decision to go? Were you running away from something?

GILBERT

It wasn't that. I didn't want to stay in New York and go to dinners. I was also puzzled by the fact that so many of the established poets didn't like each other. There's competition, naturally—and naturally you relate to someone who can promote you. That's not awful; that's the way the world works. It's just not the way I work. But don't get me wrong, what they're doing—these meetings where they give each other prizes—I think it's wonderful.

INTERVIEWER

Really?

GILBERT

Yes. The people who are famous have earned it; they've earned it to an extraordinary degree. They've given their lives to it, they're professionals, they work hard, and they

raise families. And they're very smart, they stay at their desks all the time—they send out everything. They teach, which is not easy. What they do is important, but there's no way that I would use my life for that.

INTERVIEWER

So you lived abroad.

GILBERT

Many times.

INTERVIEWER

For much of your life. You lived in Japan, Italy, Greece, Denmark, â€¨England . . .

GILBERT

Lots more.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think it's important for American writers to live abroad?

GILBERT

At least at some point—so you have something to compare to what you think is normal, and you encounter things you aren't used to. One of the great dangers is familiarity.

INTERVIEWER

Is that a danger overseas too? Last summer you went back to Greece.

GILBERT

Linda wanted to finish a book she had been writing; she asked me to go with her. So we went to Paros. Unfortunately, we found the Greece we knew was no longer there. Our Greece was wonderfully bucolic. Very quiet, peaceful, slow, friendly—farmers plowing, a

couple of men in small boats, almost no electronics. A civilization that lasted four hundred years is gone now. Gone the way Paris is gone, the way Italy is gone. All gone. Everything that I dreamed of is gone. It was such a blessing to get over there when it still was. All of the things that I loved were on the brink of disappearing without my knowing it. You can't go to Paris anymore; it's not there. Greece and Japan aren't there anymore. The places I've loved no longer exist.

INTERVIEWER

What's there instead?

GILBERT

Mechanisms mostly. Europe is now rich, busy, and modern.

INTERVIEWER

When you were abroad, did you consider yourself an expatriate?

GILBERT

No. You have to understand I didn't visit places; I lived places. It makes all the difference in the world.

INTERVIEWER

Was it a solitary existence?

GILBERT

Well, of course at times it was lonely, but I don't think it bothered me much. I've been very lucky. A large part of my life I've been with someone—girlfriends, male friends. They're very, very important to me. I've been blessed by knowing and being with them.

INTERVIEWER

How did your foreign settings—those places—figure into your poems?

GILBERT

It's more how those places resonate in me. Rather than writing a poem about those places, they create something I write about.

INTERVIEWER

Did being removed from the literary community benefit you?

GILBERT

Sure.

INTERVIEWER

What did you like most about it?

GILBERT

Paying attention to being alive. This is hard—when I try to explain, it sounds false. But I don't know any other way to say it. I'm so grateful. There's nothing I've wanted that I haven't had. Michiko dying, I regret terribly, and losing Linda's love, I regret equally. And not doing some of the things I wanted to do. But I still feel grateful. It's almost unfair to have been as happy as I've been. I didn't earn it; I had a lot of luck. But I was also very, very stubborn. I was determined to get what I wanted as a life.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think that your idea of happiness differs from most people's idea of happiness?

GILBERT

Sure. I'm vain enough to think that I've made a successful life. I've had everything I've ever wanted. You can't beat that.

INTERVIEWER

When you lived overseas, did you get up every day and write?

GILBERT

If I was in an extraordinary place, I didn't want to take out my notebook and start writing down what the front of the pagoda looked like. I wanted to experience it before I wrote it down.

INTERVIEWER

What is the most exotic place you ever lived?

GILBERT

The jungle in Bali.

INTERVIEWER

Why?

GILBERT

If you don't know, I can't tell you.

INTERVIEWER

When did you stop traveling?

GILBERT

I don't think I've stopped. Traveling became more difficult about a year ago, but Linda and I went to Greece again. And this year, we'll probably go someplace else.

A couple of decades ago, I finished going all the way around the world. And after that I suddenly realized I had lived all of my dreams. I had lots of them and I've fulfilled them all. Now it's time to live the adult dreams, if I can find them. The others were dreams from childhood—first love and such, which is wonderful. It's interesting to

discover that we don't have adult dreams—pleasure and pride, but not really adult dreams.

Let me try to explain. I have a poem, "Trying to Have Something Left Over," in which I've been unfaithful to my wife and she knows it and she's mad. It's the last night and I'm going to say goodbye to Anna, the other woman. She's had a baby—not by me—and her husband has left her because he couldn't take all that muck of a baby being born. This is the last night I'll ever see her and I feel incredibly tender and grateful and loving toward her. And we're not in bed—previously we had a wild relationship. Anyway, here's the last night to say goodbye. She's cleaning house quietly and sadly, and I'm entertaining her boy, her baby, throwing him up in the air and catching him. It's a poem about that. Sad and tender. A truly adult dream. Profound tenderness.

That's what I like to write as poems. Not because it's sad, but because it matters. So much poetry that's written today doesn't need to be written. I don't understand the need for trickery or some new way of arranging words on a page. You're allowed to do that. You're allowed to write all kinds of poetry, but there's a whole world out there.

INTERVIEWER

What are some other adult dreams?

GILBERT

For a year and a half, I tried to figure that out. I had lived all of my youthful dreams, but I couldn't think of many adult ones. I finally realized that we don't have many dreams for adults because historically people have always died much younger than they do today. People died at forty-two. They died young. I think I've only found two other adult dreams.

INTERVIEWER

What are they?

GILBERT

I'm not going to tell.

INTERVIEWER

How did you start writing?

GILBERT

I started writing poetry because I finally got to go to college and I met Gerald Stern. We started hanging out together. I was interested in writing novels, but he was always talking about poetry—usually poetry, sometimes fiction. We were competitive with each other. So I decided I would write poetry for a semester and then go back to writing novels. I never went back. I mean, I've written prose. I've written several novels that no one has seen. Well, one was published.

INTERVIEWER

My Mother Taught Me, an erotic novel, wasn't it?

GILBERT

It's about sexuality. You have to understand, people were writing sex books but no one was writing them well. I thought pornography should be as much of a genre as cowboy stories. But pornography is boring. Childish. Unhealthy. I thought, Why not have a novel of sexuality that's not paralyzed by the need for orgasm? So I wrote a good pornographic novel to show it could be done. An enjoyment rather than a momentary excitement. There were so many pornographic novels written; why weren't they effective? A momentary spasm. Some people will have an orgasm if you say a dirty word or say, What he did to her body was . . . But what if you approach it as a real novel? The idea of entertainment intrigued me at the time—so I wrote one.

INTERVIEWER

Did writing poetry come easily for you?

GILBERT

Yes. During that period it was mostly instinct. Stories were important to me. Novels were very important to me.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think reading novels taught you how to write poems?

GILBERT

I think the scope of novels—the sense of the lives of the characters in the books I read—came naturally to me.

INTERVIEWER

Did school influence you as a young writer?

GILBERT

No, I failed high school; I got into college by mistake. I failed freshman English eight times. I was interested in learning, but I wanted to understand too, which meant I was fighting with the teachers all the time. Everybody accepted the fact that I was smart but I wouldn't obey. I didn't believe what they said unless they could prove it.

INTERVIEWER

Was your defiance—your resistance—ultimately an advantage?

GILBERT

Yes and no. It takes much longer if you have to find it all and do it all for yourself. My mind was not available for the impress of teachers or other people's styles. The other arts were important to me. At one time I was working in photography with Ansel Adams. He offered to help me with my photographs if I would help him write his books, which was fine until we ran short of money and the woman I was with finally said she was tired of cooking pancakes.

INTERVIEWER

How did you get involved with Ansel Adams?

GILBERT

I was teaching a class and some of his students got to know me. I wish I'd been able to continue working with him, but it was either him or the woman. I chose the woman. After that I went to Italy and everything went into my falling in love for the first time. I did some painting there and won a fourth prize. I wish I had continued with painting *and* photography—novels too. But I was excited.

INTERVIEWER

What was Ansel Adams like?

GILBERT

Very German.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever looked to other writers for inspiration?

GILBERT

I liked many writers but never found a teacher.

INTERVIEWER

In your interview with Gordon Lish in *Genesis West*, you say that there are two kinds of poetry. On the one hand, there are poems that give delight; on the other, there are poems that do something else. What do you mean by "something else"?

GILBERT

I think serious poems should make something happen that's not correct or entertaining or clever. I want something that matters to my heart, and I don't mean "Linda left me." I don't want that. I'll write that poem, but that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about being in danger—as we all are—of dying. How can you spend your life on games or intricately accomplished things? And politics? Politics is fine. There's a place to care for the injustice of the world, but that's not what the poem is about. The poem is about the heart. Not the heart as in "I'm in love" or "my girl cheated on me"—I mean the conscious heart, the fact that we are the only things in the entire universe that know true consciousness. We're the only things—leaving religion out of it—we're the only things in the world that know spring is coming.

INTERVIEWER

How do you start a poem?

GILBERT

There's no one way. Sometimes I'm walking along the street and I find it there. Sometimes it's something I've been thinking about. Sometimes it's an apparition.

INTERVIEWER

How do you know when you've finished one?

GILBERT

If I'm writing well it comes to an end with an almost-audible click. When I started out I wouldn't write a poem until I knew the first line and the last line and what it was about and what would make it a success. I was a tyrant and I was good at it. But the most important day in my career as a writer was when Linda said, Did you ever think of listening to your poems? And my poetry changed. I didn't give up making precreated poetry, but you have to write a poem the way you ride a horse—you have to know what to do with it. You have to be in charge of a horse or it will eat all day—you'll never get back to the barn. But if you tell the horse how to be a horse, if you force it, the horse will probably break a leg. The horse and rider have to be together.

INTERVIEWER

Is that why your style is unadorned and not ornamental?

GILBERT

Oh, I like ornament at the right time, but I don't want a poem to be made out of decoration. If you like that kind of poetry, more power to you, but it doesn't interest me. When I read the poems that matter to me, it stuns me how much the presence of the heart—in all its forms—is endlessly available there. To experience ourselves in an important way just knocks me out. It puzzles me why people have given that up for cleverness. Some of them are ingenious, more ingenious than I am, but so many of them aren't any good at being alive.

INTERVIEWER

You once likened it to a poet giving birth without ever getting pregnant.

GILBERT

Yes. A lot of poets don't have any poems to write. After their first book, what are they going to do? They can't keep saying their hearts are broken. They start to write poems about childhood. Then what do they do? Some of it is just academic poetry—they learn how to write the poem perfectly. But I don't think anybody should be criticized because their taste is different from mine. Such poems are extraordinarily deft. There's a lot of art in them. But I don't understand where the meat is. I don't know what I'm supposed to do with this kind of poetry. It won't change my life, so why should I read it? Why should I write it?

By the time some writers—particularly poets—are twenty-seven or twenty-eight they've often used up the germinal quality that is their writing, the thing that is their heart. Not for the great poets, but for many poets this is true. The inspiration starts to wane. Many have learned enough to cover that with devices or technique or they just go back and write the same stories about their childhood over and over. It's why so much poetry feels artificial.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think this has anything to do with the fact that so many poets come out of M.F.A. programs and go right on to teach?

GILBERT

If I answer that I'll get into a rant, but I'll tell you—I think poetry was killed by money. When I started out, no poet in America could make a living in poetry except Ogden Nash. And he did it with light verse.

INTERVIEWER

Why?

GILBERT

Because people weren't interested in the poetry of that time. Poetry is an unnatural art, as my mother said to me one day. She had been reading some of my poems and said, Jack, why do you do this? What does it mean? And I told her. She said, Well, if that's what it meant, why did you have to go all the way around the barn to say so? It's true. So much of that elaborateness is not necessary. I really want to say something to someone that they will feel significantly inside themselves, and if I'm not doing that then I'm wasting our time.

INTERVIEWER

Have your poems ever adhered to strict form?

GILBERT

Sure. There's a poem of mine, a villanelle. Villanelles have a strict form, but not my versions. A poem sometimes has to have some imperfection. But if you put things in a poem just because you know they work, that doesn't help. If everything is balanced there's usually no energy in it. Good art almost always breaks the rules—subtly, sometimes radically. But of course if it's clever mush, it's a waste of time.

INTERVIEWER

You once wrote, “Poetry is a bit like cows who must be freshened if the farmer wants to keep getting milk.”

GILBERT

Yes, every seven years.

INTERVIEWER

What do you mean by “freshened”?

GILBERT

You have to have achieved something inside. You can’t make a poem out of something that’s not there. And it won’t be there unless you want it to be there. And if you don’t want it to be there, you’re in trouble. I’ll stop there.

INTERVIEWER

No, go on.

GILBERT

Why do so many poets settle for so little? I don’t understand why they’re not greedy for what’s inside them. The heart has the ability to experience so much—and we don’t have much time.

INTERVIEWER

You taught in universities very rarely, only when you had to—just enough so that you could travel and write. Do you think writing poetry can be taught?

GILBERT

I can teach people how to *write* poetry, but I can't teach people how to *have* poetry, which is more than just technique. You have to feel it—to experience it, whether in a daze or brightly. Often you don't know what you have. I once worked on a poem for twelve years before I found it.

INTERVIEWER

Did you learn anything of value from teaching?

GILBERT

No.

INTERVIEWER

Were you a good teacher?

GILBERT

Excellent.

INTERVIEWER

This may sound silly, but what is poetry?

GILBERT

It's a challenge. It's boring—sometimes. It's maddening. It's impossible. It's a blessing. The craftsmanship, the difficulty of making a poem—rightly, adequately, newly. If nothing else, it's wonderful to be that close to magic.

INTERVIEWER

What, other than yourself, is the subject of your poems?

GILBERT

Those I love. Being. Living my life without being diverted into things that people so often get diverted into. Being alive is so extraordinary I don't know why people limit it to riches, pride, security—all of those things life is built on. People miss so much because they want money and comfort and pride, a house and a job to pay for the house. And they have to get a car. You can't see anything from a car. It's moving too fast. People take vacations. That's their reward—the vacation. Why not the life? Vacations are second-rate. People deprive themselves of so much of their lives—until it's too late. Though I understand that often you don't have a choice.

INTERVIEWER

Is there a community—of writers or of anyone—to which you feel you belong?

GILBERT

Not anymore. No.

INTERVIEWER

Was there ever? Have you ever felt that someplace was home?

GILBERT

San Francisco during the sixties maybe. I lived there for seven years, like a hippie without drugs. That was lovely.

INTERVIEWER

In the late 1950s you were in Jack Spicer's poetry workshop—what was that like?

GILBERT

You have to understand that Jack and I were very different. We knew each other well. We hung out the way everyone hung out in San Francisco at that time. We used to play chess a lot. He always lost. One day he was sitting there mumbling to himself and finally said, You cheat! What do you mean, I cheat? I said. How can you cheat at chess? You're

not so stupid that I could take pieces off the board. And he said, You cheat. You're thinking. He was dead serious.

INTERVIEWER

You say it was lovely to belong in San Francisco in the sixties. It was also an intense literary scene. Did you ever feel that you were in anyone's shadow?

GILBERT

There were people I respected, but we weren't fighting. Today, you have to do something to distinguish yourself. Maybe because there's so much money in poetry now. We used to type our poems and then go around and nail them up. Nobody would give Allen Ginsberg any money for "Howl." It wasn't in the running.

INTERVIEWER

You knew Ginsberg. How did you meet?

GILBERT

We had an argument about meter. He was trying to explain anapests to one of the young poets in North Beach. I leaned over and told him he was wrong. He was fresh from New York and of course thought he knew everything. He was affronted. We started arguing. Finally, he admitted I was right and he took out a matchbook, scribbled his address on it, handed it to me, and said, Come and see me. I liked him.

When he came to town he wanted to write little quatrains. They were neat, but they weren't very good. We liked each other, but I kept laughing at him nicely. One day, he got on a bus and went across the Golden Gate Bridge to see me in Sausalito. The streets turned to lanes, and the lanes to gravel, and the gravel turned into a path and then just woods. Up and up. He finally reached the abandoned house where I was living. After we talked, he said he had something he wanted to show me. He got two pages out of his bag. I read them and then read them again. I looked at him and told him they were terrific. Those two pages eventually became "Howl."

INTERVIEWER

Some of the Beat writers used drink and drugs to spur their work. What about you?

GILBERT

I did smoke tobacco for about a week when I was thirteen. It was boring. I was never interested in chemicals making me excited or loving or happy. It's like with sexual stimulants—it would make me feel as if someone else were making love to the woman I was with. I want to be the person making love to her, not the chemical.

INTERVIEWER

It sounds like even in your San Francisco days you sustained a rather remote life away from others. Is solitude important for you?

GILBERT

I don't know how to answer that because I've always lived a life with a lot of quiet in it—either alone or with someone I'm in love with.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think that being reclusive has preserved your career?

GILBERT

Certainly to the point that it gave me some control over my vanity and helped me keep a grip on what really matters.

INTERVIEWER

You expose a lot of yourself in your poetry. Are your poems taken directly from your life?

GILBERT

Yes, why would I invent them?

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever feel uncomfortable about naming the women you've been with in your poems?

GILBERT

No, I'm so proud—even the ones that didn't work out, like Gianna.

INTERVIEWER

What was your life with Michiko like?

GILBERT

Pure. It was all the same piece of cloth—always gentle, always devilish. Always loving.

INTERVIEWER

What was your life with Linda like?

GILBERT

It had more substance to it. She was the most valuable person in my life. She's the most important person in the world to me.

INTERVIEWER

Did you and Linda ever collaborate?

GILBERT

We were intertwined. We read each other's poetry, appreciated each other's poetry, discarded each other's poetry. The presence of that spirit in my life—gentleness, beauty . . . Pretty soon I'm going to start singing.

INTERVIEWER

When you look back on your life, do you see it as divided between the three women you loved?

GILBERT

Yes and no. The highlights of my life have been the women I was in love with, but I've had a whole other life alone. I used to say that the only thing better than being alone was to be seriously in love.

INTERVIEWER

You don't get lonely.

GILBERT

No. I really don't like chitchat. Often when I went places with people I liked, they would chat the whole time. It's very human, but if there's going to be talk I want it to be interesting. I don't want to know that so-and-so spilled milk or how sad it is that she didn't get the dress she wanted. All of the things that people are shamed by or don't think they've succeeded in—I don't want to talk about that. I really like to meet people, to be with people, but I don't want to be chatting all the time. I like it when people talk about things.

INTERVIEWER

Is being childless good for a poet?

GILBERT

I could never have lived my life the way I have if I had children. There used to be a saying that every baby is a failed novel. I couldn't have roamed or taken so many chances or lived a life of deprivation. I couldn't have wasted great chunks of my life. But that would be a mistake for other people. Fine people. Smart people.

INTERVIEWER

Many writers talk about how difficult it is to write. Is poetry hard work?

GILBERT

They should try working in the steel mills in Pittsburgh. That's a very delicate kind of approach to the world—to be so frail that you can't stand having to write poetry. There are so many people who are really in trouble just making a living, who are really having a hard life. Besides, with poetry you're doing it for yourself. Other people are doing it because they have to feed the babies. But I do understand that it's hard to write, especially if you have a family.

INTERVIEWER

Which is most important to writing poetry, description or compression?

GILBERT

Neither. I would say presence, feeling, passion—not passion, but love. I usually say romantic love, but here I don't mean being thrilled. I mean the huge experience of loving another person and being loved by another person. But it's more than just liking someone or thinking they make you happy.

INTERVIEWER

In your poems, how important is the interplay between syntax and line breaks?

GILBERT

I don't think that way. I work by instinct and intelligence. By being smart, emotional, probing. By being sly, stubborn. By being lucky. Being serious. By being quietly passionate. By something almost like magic.

INTERVIEWER

To which of your poems are you most attached?

GILBERT

That’s like asking to which of the women you’ve loved are you most â€¨attached—the best ones.

INTERVIEWER

Do you revise a great deal?

GILBERT

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

Do you throw away a lot of poems?

GILBERT

More than I would like.

INTERVIEWER

Was there a period of time when you didn’t write?

GILBERT

No. But there was a long time when I didn’t publish.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever been tempted to publish more of your poems?

GILBERT

Sometimes. But I’m not interested in being famous.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have diaries, letters, and papers?

GILBERT

Yes. I have a room piled high with papers.

INTERVIEWER

Do you hope or dread that they'll be published someday?

GILBERT

I'm going to give them to Linda. She can do what she wants with them. I hope they can be sold, so that she can use the money.

INTERVIEWER

If you had to be remembered by just one book, which would you choose?

GILBERT

This current one, *Refusing Heaven*.

INTERVIEWER

Do you show your work to anyone as you go?

GILBERT

No. Well, occasionally I show it to the women I love and the men I'm friends with.

INTERVIEWER

How important is it for you to read your work to an audience?

GILBERT

Depends on the time in my life. I used to get excited when I gave a reading. Like any performer, I was vain—*very* vain. And proud, which is a different thing. I wanted to impress the audience. To feel the impact of the poems on an audience was intoxicating. I would feel drunk. I couldn't sleep. Like jazz musicians—after their performances they can't sleep. So they get together and play music. It's not just vanity. It's as if you've given birth to something you can't put down. It's partially about being pleased by my ability, but it's also like an artist merging with what he's done. That's more than just vanity. It's a kind of happiness—more than happiness.

A really good actor doesn't just get applause. He gets to the point where he has a power over his audience. He can make the woman in the red coat in the second row turn her head to the right. I don't know how to explain it, but you have control over your audience—not in a cheap way, in a wonderful way. That's what I used to feel. To give presence or being to an idea or an emotion or a perception or a desire—that was what was important for me. I didn't care about the audience. A chance to be alive, to experience the importance of being alive. Impressing someone or having people applaud—I still like it, but if it's not there I don't miss it.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think poetry should be performed?

GILBERT

No, God no. But it must be created so that you make something happen. You don't just fool the audience—make them love you or something like that. It's an art to make the audience experience what you're talking about.

INTERVIEWER

When you write, do you read your poems out loud?

GILBERT

Sometimes. If my instincts register that something is wrong with the rhythm then I work on it, but it's almost always unconscious.

The hard part for me is to find the poem—a poem that matters. To find what the poem knows that's special. I may think of writing about the same thing that everyone does, but I really like to write a poem that hasn't been written. And I don't mean its shape. I want to experience or discover ways of feeling that are fresh. I love it when I have perceived something fresh about being human and being happy.

Ezra Pound said "make it new." The great tragedy of that saying is he left out the essential word. It should be make it *importantly* new. So much of the time people are just aiming for novelty, surprise. I like to think that I've understood, that I've learned about something that matters—what the world should be, what life should be.

INTERVIEWER

Can you describe your life in Northampton in recent years?

GILBERT

Happiness. I'm in the midst of absolute beauty, quiet. A lot of being alone. I walk in the morning, then I listen to the news, then I eat something and start working.

INTERVIEWER

You've said before that you don't miss being young.

GILBERT

Oh, of course I miss being young.

INTERVIEWER

How is that different from not minding growing old?

GILBERT

Growing old is a mistake. It seems natural that we die and grow old. It's part of the bargain. You get to be young for a long time and then you start to get old. It's also a wonderful time, but it's a different kind of wonderful.

When I was young, I was very aware of death. I was determined not to die until I'd lived my life. So much so that I used to pray and make lists. I would say, I know you have to take me away. You have to kill me. But not yet. I'd make a sort of bargain—I accept that you will kill me, but don't let me die before I've fallen in love. And then the second prayer was, Don't let me die a virgin. I started making lists about what I wanted before I died. When I finally finished going around the world, I discovered that I'd lived every one of those lists.

INTERVIEWER

Are your writing habits the same today as they were when you were young?

GILBERT

I trust the poems more.

INTERVIEWER

When do you work best now?

GILBERT

In the morning. But for most of my life I wrote late at night. When you get old your brain doesn't function as well after noon.

INTERVIEWER

Do you keep to a work schedule?

GILBERT

No, I have an approximate rhythm, but I don't like the idea of anything creative being mechanical. That'll kill you. On the other hand, if I was not satisfied with how much I'd written in a year, then I would set out to write a hundred poems in a hundred days. I force myself to write poems even though I don't approve of it because it does keep something alive. So I guess I have a little bit of a pattern that I live by. For instance, the

other day I woke up at one in the morning and worked until four in the afternoon. I do that a lot. I can do that because I don't have to accommodate anybody but me.

INTERVIEWER

So discipline is important to you?

GILBERT

Yes, because I'm lazy. If you have it in you, you want to create, but I won't force myself—because it's dangerous. People who are organized are in danger of making a process out of it and doing it by the numbers.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever experience writer's block?

GILBERT

It depends if you consider laziness writer's block. I don't know. I've always been able to write at least satisfactory poems, ones that weren't mechanical.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel you have any flaw as a writer?

GILBERT

I can't spell. I'm hopeless.

INTERVIEWER

What's your relationship with the contemporary literary community now?

GILBERT

I don't have one.

INTERVIEWER

Does that bother you?

GILBERT

No. Why? Why would it bother me? Those people are in business. They're hardworking.

INTERVIEWER

Don't you work hard?

GILBERT

Not in the same meaning of the word *hard*. I put in a lot of effort because it matters to me. Many of these people who teach would do anything not to teach. I don't have any obligations. I don't have a mortgage. These people are working hard at a great price.

INTERVIEWER

I'm struck by how rarely I see your poems in anthologies and how â€¨often I see the same poems by other poets over and over again. Do you think there's a disadvantage to spending most of your life abroad or outside of literary circles?

GILBERT

It's fatal, which is all right with me.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever feel any professional antagonism toward other writers?

GILBERT

Them toward me or me toward them?

INTERVIEWER

You toward them.

GILBERT

No.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel it from them toward you?

GILBERT

Sure. I contradict a lot of what they're doing. I don't go to the meetings and dinners. I don't hang out.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever followed a particular religion?

GILBERT

Presbyterianism. Till I was about seven, I guess. My mother never went to church, but she was a believer. She loved God and believed God would be good to her. She sang when she cleaned the house on Sunday mornings.

INTERVIEWER

Do you consider yourself religious now?

GILBERT

I'd like to be. I think I'm very religious by temperament. I think it would be a great comfort to believe. But you don't have a choice. Either you believe or you don't. It's not a practical matter. Religion is a beautiful idea, but I don't have a choice.

INTERVIEWER

Where does your preoccupation with mythology and the gods come from?

GILBERT

Careless reading. I never read mythology or any fiction as if I were in a class. Myths give shape to what I feel about the world and my instinct about what I'm looking at. They inform what I think about the past.

INTERVIEWER

How has old age changed you? What's the main thing that it's altered in your life?

GILBERT

Romance. You can still play at it, but when you get into your sixties—even your fifties—romance seems a little bit silly. After people get to be thirty, generally speaking, they don't want excitement. The glands might flutter up every once in a while, but basically I think people want to be comfortable. To be sexual takes a lot of work. One of the difficulties, I think, is that when you look in the mirror it's hard to think of yourself as romantic.

INTERVIEWER

Toward the end of her life Elizabeth Bishop said that she wished she'd written more. Do you ever feel that way?

GILBERT

No, I still like writing poems. But I'm eighty. I think I should write something about getting old. It's never been explored appropriately.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever thought of writing your memoirs?

GILBERT

Yes. Every once in a while someone asks to do it for me. Sometimes I'm interested because I've forgotten so much of the past and I like the idea of walking through my life. What's more, it's a profound experience to be with people from my past again. To be with my memories. Things that I thought I'd forgotten all of a sudden become visible, become present.

INTERVIEWER

Like a film?

GILBERT

Different than that. It's more like a feeling rising from the tops of my knees. Then I start remembering. It's complicated; a child seldom remembers anything before he's four years old. I just wonder how much I know, how much I've been through, that I no longer remember.

INTERVIEWER

Is there a particular time period in which you'd prefer to live?

GILBERT

To live with Michiko again. For a lot of reasons.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have any unfulfilled ambitions or regrets?

GILBERT

No.

INTERVIEWER

Is there a particular subject that you feel you haven't covered in â€¨your poems?

GILBERT

None that interests me.

INTERVIEWER

But you're still writing?

GILBERT

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

Does the United States—Northampton—feel like home to you now?

GILBERT

No, I don't have a home. Not anymore. When Linda's not teaching anymore we'll probably leave this lovely Massachusetts world for another fine world. To be happy. Very happy.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think poetry is relevant in our society anymore? Do you think it has a place?

GILBERT

Someone once asked Gandhi what he thought of Western civilization. And he's supposed to have said, "I think it would be a very good idea." That's the way I feel.

INTERVIEWER

Do you still wake happy but aware of your mortality?

GILBERT

Yes, though sometimes I have to have a cup of tea first.