MARGARET LLOYD

On the Way to Jack's House

Weeping
and singing of what declines
into the earth. But of having,
not of not having. What abounds.
Amazed morning after morning
by the yielding. What times there are.
My fine house that love is.
—*"Singing in My Difficult Mountains," Jack Gilbert*

In letters written to me over the years and in conversations on many walks together, the poet Jack Gilbert would speak of wanting to buy a house—one that he would live in and then pass on to his former partner and most important friend, the poet Linda Gregg. Sometimes he imagined it would be in North Carolina, or Virginia, or California, or Massachusetts. When he turned seventy-five in 1999, he wrote, "I'm hoping to see more of you this time when I live at Fort Juniper.[1] I'll be there for five months, and I'm going to look for a house to buy while I'm there. It's time to get it done. To discover how my life will change when I, for the first time in half a century, live something like permanently. Meanwhile I look forward to being back in the woods, going to the poetry group, having walks and tea with you and the others."

Once I went with him to look at a house for sale on Corticelli Street, around the corner and up the hill from my own home. Walking from room to room with Jack, it was hard to imagine him as a house owner with a mortgage and all the accompanying responsibilities. He had spent a life in movement from one place to another, essentially "free" and "gypsying around," as he would say. At any rate, again he decided against buying and for almost a decade he rented a small studio apartment connected to the Northampton home of Henry Lyman, Jack's friend and literary assistant. But still, whenever I walk by that

house on Corticelli Street, I think *that is the house Jack almost lived in*. Instead, throughout his life, Jack built for himself and for others, another kind of house — original, immense, and invaluable. On a postcard in 1994 from Paros, Greece, Jack referred to Group 18 — a poetry workshop in Northampton which he attended off and on for many years — as "a surprisingly dynamic group." He continued, "Maybe it and also poetry are from the same place as imagination — which everyone knows is a dangerous neighborhood." The house he built resides in that neighborhood; I was privileged to enter it from time to time.

On the morning I began writing this, I woke up at 6:00 a.m. in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and listened for a while to the birds. For a year I had been intending to write a memoir about knowing and learning from Jack, and I hoped to use this visit to the city of Jack's birth and early years to move me forward on the project. Jack would regularly speak of Pittsburgh as one of the crucial sources for his poetry — the large subjects he took on corresponded to the giant structures and dense smoke of the steel and iron mills. In a 2005 *Paris Review* interview, he describes the city of his birth: "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. . . . Everything was grand, heroic. Everything seemed to be gigantic in Pittsburgh — the people, the history. Sinuousness. Power. Substance. Meaningfulness." Befittingly, *Tough Heaven,* published in 2005, was the title of his slim collection of twenty poems connected to Pittsburgh. While the title Jack had chosen for his 1994 collection, *The Great Fires,* certainly referred to love, perhaps subliminally or consciously it was also a reference to those fires in Pittsburgh's steel mills and possibly even to "The Great Fire" of 1845 that destroyed a third of the city.

I was determined, if possible, to see where Jack lived as a child and in his youth. Through the 1930s census I found out that when he was five years old, he lived on 814 North Negley Avenue in the Highland Park district of Pittsburgh, a few blocks from the East Liberty district where he reportedly was born. In the "U.S. Departing Passenger and Crew Lists," I also discovered a register of passengers on the SS *Marine Falcon*, a cargo ship bound for Le Havre in 1948, Jack's name and age (twenty-three) among them. This marked the beginning of his lifelong sojourning in Europe and farther afield. Here his Pittsburgh address is listed as 5094 Stanton Avenue in East Liberty. I don't know when the family moved from North Negley, but I do remember Jack saying that

a garage next to the house he lived in became his personal living space quite early on, his mother recognizing his need for privacy. There is such a garage at 5094 Stanton.

It was, perhaps, inevitable that writing about Jack Gilbert would evoke other memories of my own journey toward poetry and the creative imagination—a journey that began long before I met Jack. He was one of three crucially influential teachers, and the multiple threads connecting these teachers have always felt significant to me. The first was the writer, classicist, and social philosopher Norman O. Brown. When I entered the University of Rochester as an undergraduate student, I was placed in a first-year seminar titled "Mystical Traditions in Literature." I had not elected this seminar, did not even know of its existence, and must have been enrolled by an administrator.

In Brown's seminar I was introduced to the poetry of William Carlos Williams, including his long poem *Paterson*, as well as to William Blake, Robert Duncan, Hilda Doolittle, and John Cage, among others. Equally important was learning about the work of the phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard and his investigations into the ontology of the poetic image. In my junior year, I took a comparative literature course from Brown; each lecture became a chapter in *Love's Body*, published in 1966. The notebook from that course is the only one I have kept from my undergraduate years. Rereading it now, more than fifty years later, I come across the following statements, some of which appear in *Love's Body:* "Symbolism is the apprehension of a lost unity"; "The mind is the real eternal city"; "Poetry is the holy madness. The only cure for unholy madness is holy madness"; "Think of language as a matter of life against death"; "Words made new again. Words used not to interpret the world but to change it. Use extraordinary language"; "Meaning is in between things—in the interplay." Although the language is quite different, these statements suggest a similar stance toward the workings of the imagination that I was to encounter in Jack Gilbert's poetry and in his critical observations.

Two and a half years after leaving Rochester, I found myself at the University of Leeds in Yorkshire, England, studying under Geoffrey Hill, as he was beginning his ascendance to critical acclaim in Britain. In 2012, he was described in *The Guardian* as the "greatest living poet in the English language." He is also now widely acknowledged as one

of the major literary critics of his generation. I kept hold of the strands of interest that had begun with Brown and began working on a critical study of *Paterson*, later published by Fairleigh Dickinson University Press as *William Carlos Williams's* Paterson: *A Critical Reappraisal*.

Under Geoffrey Hill's guidance, I immersed myself in Williams's poetry for five years, which, not surprisingly, had a significant influence on my own development as a poet. Here I was in England, doing research on that most American of poets, under the tutelage of the most English of poets. Hill's wide-ranging knowledge of English and European poetry, his rigor, his classical education and leanings strongly influenced my intellectual life and my gradual understanding of Williams and his place in Modernism. Hill introduced me to writers and critics such as Cesare Pavese, Terry Eagleton, Donald Davie, David Jones, and Hugh MacDiarmid, as well as to the poetry of Thomas Hardy and D. H. Lawrence. Reading Hill's own poetry was immensely challenging and rewarding. I moved back to the United States before finishing my thesis; for the next two and a half years, I sent Hill chapters to which he would respond, often at some length. The following excerpt gives an idea of the tenor of the whole correspondence and Hill's critical intellect and style:

> p. 20 'will affirm and communicate the life of the occasion.' How conscious are you, at this point, of Wallace Stevens's 'The poem is the cry of its occasion'? COMPARE AND CONTRAST (????) the tone of WCW ('Until your artists have conceived you in your unique and *supreme form* you . . . have not, in fact existed' (Underlining mine) and Wallace Stevens's *supreme* fiction (Underlining mine). Compare and contrast, that is, WCW's 'authoritarianism'' 'absolutism' (should we call it) and 'Stevens's agnosticism' (should we call it?). Deliberately I go out on a limb here; and would expect you to query my suggestion. (22nd July 1975)

In terms of the present essay, this excerpt suggests a stance toward the creative imagination that began with my tutelage under Norman O. Brown and would continue with Jack Gilbert.

In the mid-1980s, I attended a poetry reading in a small, crowded bookstore on Green Street in Northampton. The poet was Jack Gilbert. The only place I could find to sit was on one of the few steps in front of the podium. While I don't remember the precise poems he read that night, I do remember my astonishment as I listened to him. I took out

some paper and began to write down the poems as he read them, as quickly as I could. Soon after, I discovered that when Jack was a young man he had known Williams, and that Jack's first poetry collection, *Views of Jeopardy*, published when he was thirty-seven, had been nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in 1963—the year Williams won with *Pictures from Brueghel*. The threads of my education in poetry continued to entwine.

Group 18 is a poetry workshop founded by Linda Gregg and Jim Finnegan in 1985; I was invited to join soon afterward. To this day, the group continues to be very active. Jack was there at the beginning; whenever he was in the area he would attend our meetings, and, as might be expected, he was a significant presence, both as a poet and critic. During the weekly meetings of Group 18 (and at other times), I kept notes in my journals about how Jack responded to various people's poetry and what he had to say about poetry, being a poet, and the life of the human heart. An excerpt from one of his letters, written in April 1994, attests to the importance of the group to him; it also describes the intricate revision process of the poems in *The Great Fires: Poems, 1982–1992:*

> *The Great Fires* would probably never have been written except for Group 18. The poems would never have gone beyond the few written words scribbled down on a piece of paper in the palm of my hand as I walked through the woods and along the Mill Stream each day those two years at Fort Juniper. There would have been a minimal note about the perception and a while later a couple more words about a possible strategy to contain that thought effectively. Gradually the bits of paper would have gotten lost or would have been unintelligible when I looked at them a few months later… Nevertheless, those poems for the group did get typed down however messily, or written by the light in the car, and sometimes written out while the group was arranging themselves and having a last cup of coffee. Afterwards, back in my house, I would revise the poem—sometimes late into the night. . . .When Knopf got my book all finished and sent me the final proofs, I revised the whole book. Rewrote 52 of the poems. Not to fix the details because that was all done, but to get the balance right, to get the shape it really should be, to find the best rhythm of the thing (not the rhythm of the sound, though that too), to find the wholeness. Especially to find the wholeness. To take charge of the dynamics. It took three months. That's why the book came out last month instead of in January as was scheduled.

Over the years, Jack brought many poems to Group 18 that later appeared in *Refusing Heaven, The Dance Most of All,* and among the

"Uncollected Poems" in his *Collected Poems*. In 2011, Open Field Press published an anthology of poems by past and present members in order to celebrate the group's twenty-five years of close attention to poetry. As I wrote in the introduction to the anthology, I believe that the poets in attendance over the years—many of whom have published major poetry collections, won substantial awards, led poetry conferences, and given readings here and abroad—have extended the range of American poetry over the past quarter of a century. Much of this was due to the influence of Jack Gilbert and Linda Gregg.

Jack was a trenchant critic. He would often speak about a poem in a highly original and economic way, not mincing words; the poem was what mattered, not the feelings of the poet. In Group 18, he would most often wait until everyone else had spoken before he made his observations, which were often acerbic. Sometimes he communicated his criticism with a pointed question. And there were times he would listen to a poem and then simply begin slowly clapping or say "Good . . . good."

His praise often came in few words. One of his compliments was to say the poem was "adult," by which I think he meant that the poem was driven by experience.

Jack first appears in my journals in 1989; I simply wrote that what I liked is that he has something specific to say in each of his poems. On the one hand, this seems an utterly obvious and simple comment, yet the phrase "something specific to say" is significant, as he would often insist that it was life importantly lived that gave a poem its content. He was critical of most of his contemporaries because, as he wrote in an essay published in 1965, "The Landscape of American Poetry," "They have nothing to say because they have no life in them pressing toward speech. . . . Poetry . . . is a witnessing to magnitude. It is the art of making urgent values manifest and of imposing them on the reader." He also maintained that writing poems helped him to "have" his life: "Poetry gives me my life more fully, and it helps me in that direction in which I must proceed." Writing and living "sufficient to the fact that we are all dying" were intrinsically connected. In his poem "The Danger of Wisdom," he makes the unlikely statement that "it is our strength that deprives us," that is, our very ability to live successful lives and provide for our futures gets in the way of our living passionately, close to the essence of life. In an interview with David Wojahn, Linda Gregg remarked that "Jack is always willing to pay a price for things." And once in a phone conversation, she commented that "Jack knows

himself when he is walking"; he "would walk home singing in the dark; he'd go straight back to happiness."

Although Jack never owned a house or had the kind of material possessions that middle-class living typically accrues, often he would talk about the "equity" he had in his life—by which he meant, on the one hand, all the letters, draft manuscripts, paintings, photographs, and all kinds of objects (kimonos, paintings, Greek artifacts) that had meaning for him, even though, given his peripatetic way of life, he had to keep them in storage units. But first and foremost, that equity included memories of the places he had lived, the slow boat ride across the blue Aegean, his lovers, his friends, his poems.

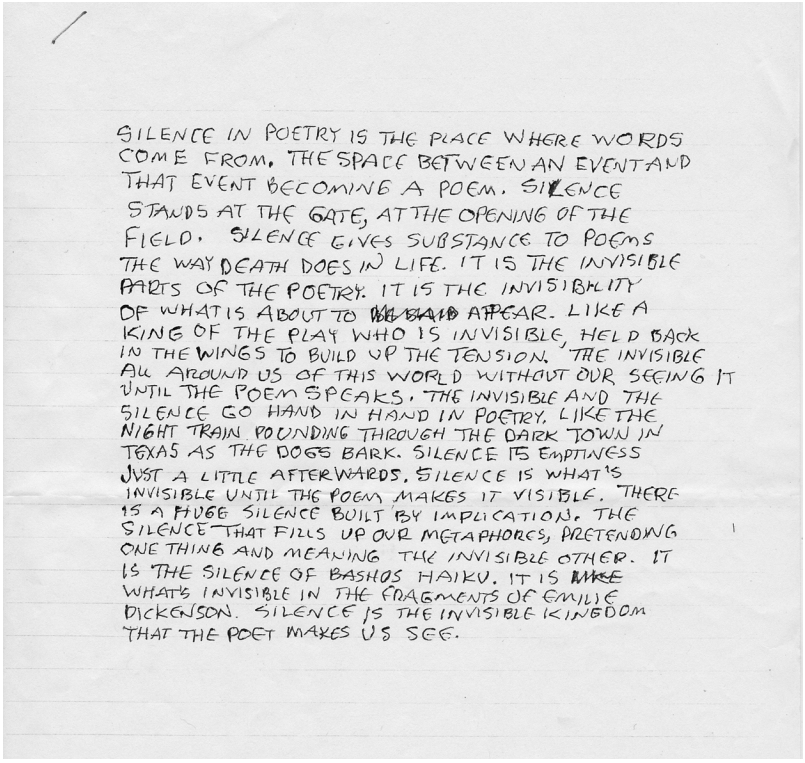
Jack put a great deal of thought into the strategy he would adopt to convince the reader of what he had to say, to convey his values, parts of his life, and to "detonate" (his word) the poem in the reader. This is accomplished through what he came to call "The Craft of the Invisible," the title of an essay he published in 1984 in *Ironwood*. This "craft" differs from the contemporary precept espoused by many poets, that each poem must find its own form. Jack believed the poet should be more in control: "I want to understand form as the means of getting something done. . . . The poet must listen hard to the voice in the poem. He or she should take account of the grain inside the stone, but in order better to leverage it to a larger purpose." Jack admits that this "craft," this "form," is hard to pin down, but he does say that "invisible form is not just a reflection of the material; it is an intrusive, enterprising, meddling, subversive, active, intervening form. In order to effectuate. It is the major craft of poetry." In his prose as well as his poetry, Jack was a master at finding an apt equivalent to communicate his thought: "With invisible form, the poet and the form and the material are like somebody riding a horse over broken terrain. The three are constantly changing. The horse and rider accede to the varying hillside, the rider adjusts when the horse finds solutions, the horse adapts to each move the rider makes. And all of it subject to where the rider plans to be that night."

What makes a poem work was always Jack's primary interest and concern when he listened to or read a poem. In the "Craft" essay, he recalls a conversation with Williams: "I remember him late one night, already crippled by the strokes but his eyes happy to be talking poetry, saying: 'The thing I like best about poems is taking them apart to see what makes them work.' He put the form to work: backstage, inside the poem." The elements that Jack would be looking for as he considered

the presence or absence of this craft would be what one might expect: the freshness of diction and images, as opposed to forced novelty; a clear focus; an individual, believable voice behind the poem; a pulse, a rhythm, timing, line and stanza breaks that support the poem as a whole; and most importantly (if more elusive), the presence of a transforming magic in the language that gives the reader an experience.

Late in Jack's life, shortly before he was no longer able to write, Linda asked him to put on paper his thoughts in relation to silence and poetry. He responded with a poem (given to me by Linda, but hitherto unpublished) which begins, "Silence in poetry is the place where words / come from." The poem in its entirety communicates what the "craft of the invisible" accomplishes through the use of "equivalents." Despite being a first draft, this poem manifests such craft. Deftly, Jack brings us to the final equivalence: "Silence is the invisible kingdom / that the poet makes us see" (see facsimile 1).

Facsimile 1



SILENCE IN POETRY IS THE PLACE WHERE WORDS
COME FROM. THE SPACE BETWEEN AN EVENT AND
THAT EVENT BECOMING A POEM. SILENCE
STANDS AT THE GATE, AT THE OPENING OF THE
FIELD. SILENCE GIVES SUBSTANCE TO POEMS
THE WAY DEATH DOES IN LIFE. IT IS THE INVISIBLE
PARTS OF THE POETRY. IT IS THE INVISIBILITY
OF WHAT IS ABOUT TO ~~BE SAID~~ APPEAR. LIKE A
KING OF THE PLAY WHO IS INVISIBLE, HELD BACK
IN THE WINGS TO BUILD UP THE TENSION. THE INVISIBLE
ALL AROUND US OF THIS WORLD WITHOUT OUR SEEING IT
UNTIL THE POEM SPEAKS. THE INVISIBLE AND THE
SILENCE GO HAND IN HAND IN POETRY. LIKE THE
NIGHT TRAIN POUNDING THROUGH THE DARK TOWN IN
TEXAS AS THE DOGS BARK. SILENCE IS EMPTINESS
JUST A LITTLE AFTERWARDS. SILENCE IS WHAT'S
INVISIBLE UNTIL THE POEM MAKES IT VISIBLE. THERE
IS A HUGE SILENCE BUILT BY IMPLICATION. THE
SILENCE THAT FILLS UP OUR METAPHORS, PRETENDING
ONE THING AND MEANING THE INVISIBLE OTHER. IT
IS THE SILENCE OF BASHOS HAIKU. IT IS ~~WHAT~~
WHAT'S INVISIBLE IN THE FRAGMENTS OF EMILIE
DICKENSON. SILENCE IS THE INVISIBLE KINGDOM
THAT THE POET MAKES US SEE.

Jack included a poem, "The Heart in the Brain," in the envelope of a letter he wrote in 1998 (see facsimiles 2 and 3). This poem has also never been published, yet it is a robust example of the subject matter he returned to again and again ("My fine house that love is"), as well as "invisible form." The opening lines begin with the comparison of finding love as an adult to catching a blue heron in the hand by "caring" for it. The poem proceeds with image after image, giving the reader a sense of what must be done to find love later in life and also what that experience is. Throughout this poem, the diction is immoderate (it does not surprise me that Jack originally titled the poem "The Landscape of Wise Excess"), and words are yoked together in surprising ways ("cataract in the dark"; "to fashion with the woman"; "elaborates the neighborhood"). The way the poem is built from the beginning to its final argument is instructive and relentless. The order of the images, the line breaks, the pulse, and the syntactical repetition begins something moving in the body and the heart of the reader—who feels it is he or she who is proceeding, searching, finding and, perhaps, finally left convinced that such profound "having" allows even the inevitable loss to be an exultation.

Two years ago, during the process of rereading all of my journals and letters, I found a cache of Jack's statements regarding poetry. Many of these convey Jack's ideas, albeit somewhat obliquely at times, regarding what he thought a poem is, what it should do, and how craft contributes to its success, just as Wallace Stevens did in "Adagia" and Ezra Pound in "A Few Don'ts." In reconsidering this material, it occurred to me that others might be interested in what he had to say and find it helpful in writing their own poetry or in their reading of his poems or the poems of others. The majority are from Group 18 meetings, but some are from letters and from a 1995 writing conference in Little Compton, Rhode Island, led by Jack and Linda. And then there were the conversations I had with him over the years. Conversations with Jack, though often punctuated with laughter, were always serious—and always about poetry and always about the heart. The following is a sampling of Jack's observations and commentary:

> A poem is like an animal. It's alive; it's not a dead thing made neat.
>
> What an artist does is always manipulated. Strategies, tactics, clarity—you have to think of your reader.

Poetry allows you to have what you're having. It separates what happens from the flux of everything else, so you can see it.

You must effectuate the perceptions and the feelings so they detonate in the reader.

It's risky to give the reader what they already know.

Irregularity is the secret of music and the voice of great poetry.

You must not imitate; you must produce the equivalent—like how a stone indicates a temple in a Japanese Noh play.

The poem has almost no use of the magic capacity of language. It isn't ambitious. There are nice tropes but I don't think it accomplishes enough as a work of art. There's no excitement in it.

In a long poem, you have to bring in more cargo before you reach the station.

The poem is weak because it doesn't discover much.

The language isn't worked. It's a nice poem—ideas close to platitudinous. Poems must detonate an idea.

The first line announces what kind of poem you are in. When I hear "coffee klatch," I think "so this is the kind of party I'm going to."

Why does the poem have this elegance? Why is it so pleasing? When a cat jumps on the table—it jumps just the right distance. This is so satisfying to the mind.

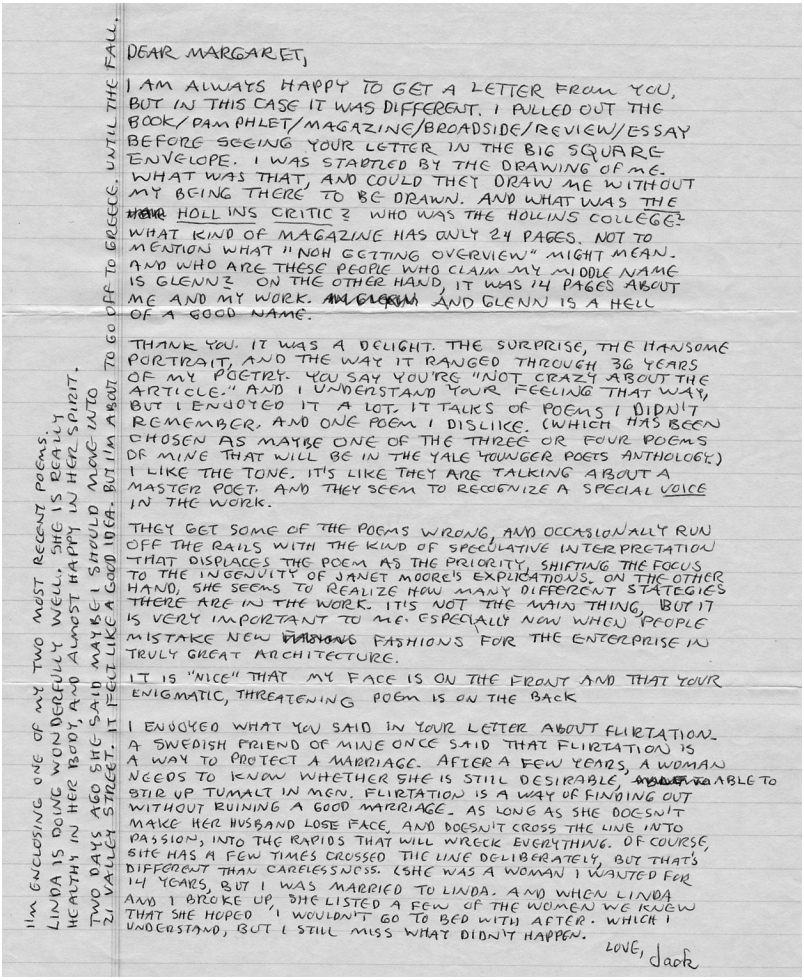
A Zen circle is not fully closed, so our minds must make it close.

Think of Keats' "Negative Capability"—the ability to exist with doubts and confusions without an irritable searching after surety.

The problem in the poem is its beauty. Like in cooking when you need something to cut the richness of the rest.

Write poems that put pressure on people.

In addition to such comments and questions, with Jack there would always be the countless references dropped casually amid everything else—movies to watch, something to read, music to listen to: read *Selected Lawrence* with an introduction by Rexroth; watch the movies of Tarkovsky; listen to the *Goldberg Variations*.



DEAR MARGARET,

I AM ALWAYS HAPPY TO GET A LETTER FROM YOU, BUT IN THIS CASE IT WAS DIFFERENT. I PULLED OUT THE BOOK/PAMPHLET/MAGAZINE/BROADSIDE/REVIEW/ESSAY BEFORE SEEING YOUR LETTER IN THE BIG SQUARE ENVELOPE. I WAS STARTLED BY THE DRAWING OF ME. WHAT WAS THAT, AND COULD THEY DRAW ME WITHOUT MY BEING THERE TO BE DRAWN. AND WHAT WAS THE ~~HEAR~~ HOLLINS CRITIC? WHO WAS THE HOLLINS COLLEGE? WHAT KIND OF MAGAZINE HAS ONLY 24 PAGES. NOT TO MENTION WHAT "NOH GETTING OVERVIEW" MIGHT MEAN. AND WHO ARE THESE PEOPLE WHO CLAIM MY MIDDLE NAME IS GLENN? ON THE OTHER HAND, IT WAS 14 PAGES ABOUT ME AND MY WORK. ~~AM GLENN~~ AND GLENN IS A HELL OF A GOOD NAME.

THANK YOU. IT WAS A DELIGHT. THE SURPRISE, THE HANSOME PORTRAIT, AND THE WAY IT RANGED THROUGH 36 YEARS OF MY POETRY. YOU SAY YOU'RE "NOT CRAZY ABOUT THE ARTICLE." AND I UNDERSTAND YOUR FEELING THAT WAY, BUT I ENJOYED IT A LOT. IT TALKS OF POEMS I DIDN'T REMEMBER. AND ONE POEM I DISLIKE. (WHICH HAS BEEN CHOSEN AS MAYBE ONE OF THE THREE OR FOUR POEMS OF MINE THAT WILL BE IN THE YALE YOUNGER POETS ANTHOLOGY) I LIKE THE TONE. IT'S LIKE THEY ARE TALKING ABOUT A MASTER POET. AND THEY SEEM TO RECOGNIZE A SPECIAL VOICE IN THE WORK.

THEY GET SOME OF THE POEMS WRONG, AND OCCASIONALLY RUN OFF THE RAILS WITH THE KIND OF SPECULATIVE INTERPRETATION THAT DISPLACES THE POEM AS THE PRIORITY, SHIFTING THE FOCUS TO THE INGENUITY OF JANET MOORE'S EXPLICATIONS. ON THE OTHER HAND, SHE SEEMS TO REALIZE HOW MANY DIFFERENT STATEGIES THERE ARE IN THE WORK. IT'S NOT THE MAIN THING, BUT IT IS VERY IMPORTANT TO ME. ESPECIALLY NOW WHEN PEOPLE MISTAKE NEW ~~FASHIONS~~ FASHIONS FOR THE ENTERPRISE IN TRULY GREAT ARCHITECTURE.

IT IS "NICE" THAT MY FACE IS ON THE FRONT AND THAT YOUR ENIGMATIC, THREATENING POEM IS ON THE BACK

I ENJOYED WHAT YOU SAID IN YOUR LETTER ABOUT FLIRTATION. A SWEDISH FRIEND OF MINE ONCE SAID THAT FLIRTATION IS A WAY TO PROTECT A MARRIAGE. AFTER A FEW YEARS, A WOMAN NEEDS TO KNOW WHETHER SHE IS STILL DESIRABLE, ~~AND~~ ABLE TO STIR UP TUMALT IN MEN. FLIRTATION IS A WAY OF FINDING OUT WITHOUT RUINING A GOOD MARRIAGE. AS LONG AS SHE DOESN'T MAKE HER HUSBAND LOSE FACE, AND DOESN'T CROSS THE LINE INTO PASSION, INTO THE RAPIDS THAT WILL WRECK EVERYTHING. OF COURSE, SHE HAS A FEW TIMES CROSSED THE LINE DELIBERATELY, BUT THAT'S DIFFERENT THAN CARELESSNESS. (SHE WAS A WOMAN I WANTED FOR 14 YEARS, BUT I WAS MARRIED TO LINDA. AND WHEN LINDA AND I BROKE UP, SHE LISTED A FEW OF THE WOMEN WE KNEW THAT SHE HOPED I WOULDN'T GO TO BED WITH AFTER. WHICH I UNDERSTAND, BUT I STILL MISS WHAT DIDN'T HAPPEN.

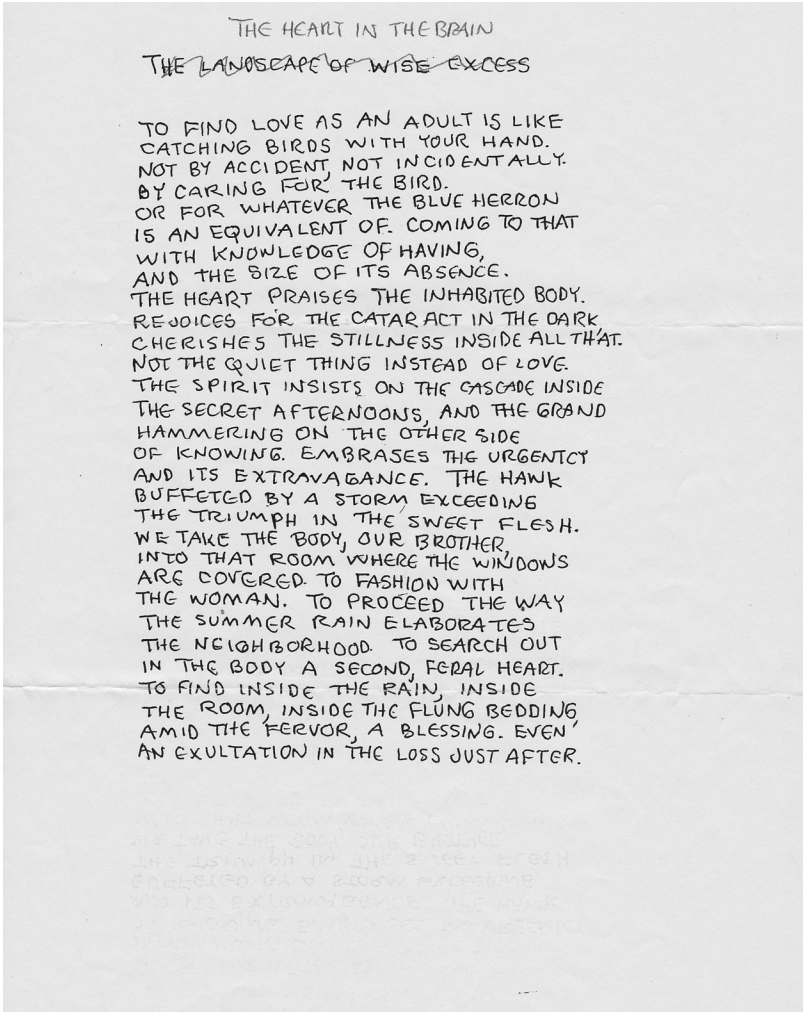
LOVE, Jack

I'M ENCLOSING ONE OF MY TWO MOST RECENT POEMS. LINDA IS DOING WONDERFULLY WELL. SHE IS REALLY HEALTHY IN HER BODY, AND ALMOST HAPPY IN HER SPIRIT. TWO DAYS AGO SHE SAID MAYBE I SHOULD MOVE INTO 21 VALLEY STREET. IT FEELS LIKE A GOOD IDEA. BUT I'M ABOUT TO GO OFF TO GREECE, UNTIL THE FALL.

Facsimile 2

In "The Threshing of the Fire," published in his second collection, *Monolithos*, Jack writes, "Insist, Insist, until I at least failed." Such was Jack's ethos from early in his life, and he persistently urged us to write the large, risky poem that "failed," rather than a small, safe, respectable, publishable poem. He would exhort us to try "failing importantly," and suggest, for example, that we write about "the defeated angels falling out of heaven, failing."

In relation to the larger, more public, poetry scene, Jack was an outsider; he disappeared and was silent for many years; by many he was



THE HEART IN THE BRAIN

THE ~~LANDSCAPE OF WISE~~ EXCESS

TO FIND LOVE AS AN ADULT IS LIKE
CATCHING BIRDS WITH YOUR HAND.
NOT BY ACCIDENT, NOT INCIDENTALLY.
BY CARING FOR THE BIRD.
OR FOR WHATEVER THE BLUE HERRON
IS AN EQUIVALENT OF. COMING TO THAT
WITH KNOWLEDGE OF HAVING,
AND THE SIZE OF ITS ABSENCE.
THE HEART PRAISES THE INHABITED BODY.
REJOICES FOR THE CATARACT IN THE DARK
CHERISHES THE STILLNESS INSIDE ALL THAT.
NOT THE QUIET THING INSTEAD OF LOVE.
THE SPIRIT INSISTS ON THE CASCADE INSIDE
THE SECRET AFTERNOONS, AND THE GRAND
HAMMERING ON THE OTHER SIDE
OF KNOWING. EMBRASES THE URGENTCY
AND ITS EXTRAVAGANCE. THE HAWK
BUFFETED BY A STORM EXCEEDING
THE TRIUMPH IN THE SWEET FLESH.
WE TAKE THE BODY, OUR BROTHER,
INTO THAT ROOM WHERE THE WINDOWS
ARE COVERED. TO FASHION WITH
THE WOMAN. TO PROCEED THE WAY
THE SUMMER RAIN ELABORATES
THE NEIGHBORHOOD. TO SEARCH OUT
IN THE BODY A SECOND, FERAL HEART.
TO FIND INSIDE THE RAIN, INSIDE
THE ROOM, INSIDE THE FLUNG BEDDING
AMID THE FERVOR, A BLESSING. EVEN'
AN EXULTATION IN THE LOSS JUST AFTER.

Facsimile 3

considered a well-kept secret, even a cult figure. He had no interest in promoting himself. Yet his first book won the Yale Younger Poets prize, another was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, and two other collections were finalists for the Pulitzer. He was the recipient of a number of other prestigious honors, including the National Book Critics Circle Award, a Lannon Literary Award for Poetry, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. His *Collected Poems* was described by David Orr as "a monument to an aesthetic off the grid," although it was on the

Poetry Foundation's bestseller list for thirty weeks. There is no question that Jack Gilbert is a significant figure in contemporary poetry. He is, perhaps, comparable to William Blake, who is often left off the syllabi of courses in British Romantic literature because his poetry is so different from what the other poets were writing at the time. Blake lived in poverty and obscurity in his one-room apartment in London, writing and painting, living in the "eternal imagination." And yet no one doubts that Blake is one of the major writers in the English language. Perhaps Jack's poem "Measuring the Tyger" was his assertion of kinship, as well as of his own place in the pantheon of poets.

What are the elements of the house that Jack built in the neighborhood of the imagination? When he was eighty-two and broken, Jack said to Linda, "I want my life." This is quite different from saying "I want to go on living." It has everything to do with quality, with seriousness, with the savoring of each moment, with time spent experiencing and pondering what he considered to be the large subjects — a life that "confronts things in their essence and huge importance: hunger, death, the beast we are, suffering, morality, loneliness, love and the other great matters." And then considering these things by way of the poem. Working, working, working to find the "craft of the invisible" that would communicate his life and values to the reader:

> It is one thing to learn how to play all the notes accurately, and another to understand how to play them in a way that makes the heart ripen. I heard an interview with a famous musician who had been a child prodigy. When he was three or four his father was clearing out his music and dumped some of the scores in the child's toy box. When the boy found them, he wasn't sure what they were. When he finally managed to pick out the notes on the piano, he got more and more excited. Finally he ran upstairs to his little sister and said: "We don't have to be afraid anymore." (from "Craft of the Invisible")

One chance encounter after another led me to my three greatest teachers, each of whom pointed me toward the seriousness and importance of poetry and the creative imagination. The last poem I remember Jack bringing to Group 18 was "Tear It Down," which includes the line "We should insist while there is still time." In 2010, two years before Jack's time finally ran out, I spent a few hours talking with him in his room in Northampton. He was about to go to California,

where he lived in housing for the elderly and, finally, a nursing home. When I hugged him upon leaving, it was like hugging a skeleton; he had used himself up completely. I thought then it would be the last time I would see him, and it was. He died in 2012 in Berkeley.

NOTES

Permission granted by the Estate of Jack Gilbert

[1.] The Robert Francis house in Amherst, Massachusetts, is a residence for artists.