

poems

Gil Gilbert

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Gil Gilbert

For all old warriors, fading away.

This collection of poems
attempts to honor
the late Wendy Barker,
poet and founder
of the creative writing program
of the University of Texas
at San Antonio (UTSA),
and her UTSA team.

"It's never done...."

-Wendy Barker

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Not Used

#### **Flatbread**

Go inside unleavened bread That will be my way If others become society's gold Or devour with fiery teeth, I am happy to be bread.

Some misunderstand the bread and Mock. Some dump it from their plates And others crush it under foot; But the bread fills full, contenting Even the most desolate Hungry child who turns To break it And enter.

I have seen life renewed
When the bread is eaten,
So perhaps it is not unleavened after all;
Perhaps there is life blooming within
Waiting to be found, as darkness
Cradles unseen stars that some searching
Souls perceive, and rejoice at discerning
What is always there.

## **Desire**

she sculpted a voice
that bled stirrups onto the
boots of the unsalted bucks
who would never mount her

## **Labor Day**

after Charles Simic

Fathers who pat the muscle Of ground beef; older siblings With names like Russ and Kathy, Who block their junior from the john;

The Piels beer, and tears, of uncles Who narrate the beaches and deserts of War At the scenes of their lost flesh; the Kilroy Of cousins who play Army, spying from the hall;

The smacking lips of aunts who share fingers With each other, ensuring the perfection Of rhubarb pies; the serpentine of children Playing tag who dodge these ancient bakers;

The morning lovers who, instead of bed, thrust Upon the Charter Oak table in the kitchen, Where they will later feed and slake their guests On this last summer night in early September.

## Haiku #5

Upon the fabric of Sol's green couch, we built life in the sky's embrace.

## In the Making of Sky-Gods

this crumpled paper cup, scavenged from the airplane's bulkhead trashbin, somehow makes the caffeinated mud uncle sam provides taste less bitter. I look at my reflection smile back at me in the tar pond, encased by cracked wax beaches, and wonder if that's how my black-clad body appears to my two cadet-gods when we step into flight through 12,000 feet of cloudy, sightless night. they claim to have no fear while palmsweat darkens the cloth on their knees, one will ask me what it's like, and I know what he wants, but will tell him the coffee stinks, then he'll tell me no, that he wants to know what it's like, pointing out the Starlifter's dark window. then I will say, it stings, flying through thunderheads, because your face hits the pointy end of the raindrops, and he will believe me.

#### **Never Leave**

"I will never leave a fallen comrade" Ranger Creed, 5<sup>th</sup> Stanza

I've often used these words to bury them:

To each a time's allotted, to gather
Or plant, sit still or dance, tear down or plumb,
Peace. War. Today calls to us: Remember.
Platoon mates sprinting into tracer heat,
Just ripstop poplin armoring their skin,
Their jungle boots push souls a thousand feet
Across the pale to rocks at runway's rim.
Great heaving lungs fill, steadying each shot,
Except whose crimson breath sees future fade,
Dragged where no bullet flies, alive or not,
This act of love in every Ranger raid.
So long as men will die or bleed or break,
So long we will recall for heaven's sake.

## **A Dusty Room**

A color polaroid deep in a green footlocker leaps into wrinkled hands like a Ranger into prop blast. On this withered palm a slow teardrop smiles and through the stale room, a spring breeze.

## **My Horse**

#### after John Haines

Through my high-rise sliding door I saw—no, witnessed really—a low cloud bank above Makaha Ridge, turning light from the west into shapes in the sky below the mountain.

A horse was painted there before I stared, in part by sinking, flickering sun, in part by prancing atmospheric canter, stroked by shifting wind and polar spin.

It is a running horse, its flame and umber mane shaking, misting dusky sky with salty drops prismed in the low sealight.

I think a heart beats in this cloud, pumping full its billows; then it bellows, and the horse, bolting from some unseen gate, aims eastward, toward me, sprinting for the windward rain.

And from the fading droplets follow shadow lives, shapeshifting, ancient dreams—from thick Clydesdale to quarter horse, from pinto to a crimson roan, forms unstill that we can never name.

Not photographs that freeze the sky, nor canvassed paint, nor a mind muddled by a mundane brain can stable them. They run their deeded prairie,

fighting for their own proud flesh, fleeting, but free. Their race now done, the cooling sky carries a shadow over the western shore—a shadow hovering always near, dark and dappled with its dying sparks.

And I just might believe that cloud, light, and wind paint forms like these, misty skinwalkers with helpful spirits brushed into the sky, painted horses for me to ride, to rush me from the dark I do not want to hold my spark.

## Haiku #6

To some, to be numb is a blessing. I say no, Painlessness is death.

## To Break the Chains of Angst We Must Aspire

To break the chains of angst we must aspire. I parachute into the fires of angst. Fight on! the breath of angst will soon expire.

My nightmares build on angst my funeral pyre. A mange lurks in the lovely furs of angst. To break the chains of angst we must aspire.

A Siren's song is angst when life seems dire. My addled lungs inspire the smoke of angst. Fight on! The breath of angst will soon expire.

My culture worships angst, a muse's lyre. A mold grows on the rotting fruit of angst. To break the chains of angst we must aspire.

We kill Backpage and let angst pimp for hire. Unspoken law says do not speak of angst. Fight on! The breath of angst will soon expire.

My angst, a gray beard gods refuse to hire. The eyes that peer down noses fuel my angst. To break the chains of angst we must aspire. Fight on! The breath of angst will soon expire.

#### Love

#### after Donald Hall

Red roses, cupped and thick, arc toward a skylight, bursting from myrtle, featherleaf, and gyp in a vase on a table.

The thousand decades since Aphrodite splashed their white petals, splashed her blood upon them, running to warn Adonis,

they have hovered briefly here like this, crimson spots in verdant romance,

by hearths warm with soot and flame, or with wine or smorgasbords or dance floors trying, tying heart to act,

warmed over, now, with televisions, tablets, phones. Cut

roses die gods bleed, petals stain, hearts pump

and love, and the lovers who traded roses on this day and confess the act is fleeting

and confess it is fleeting now, but still run around the vase together, ankles gladly bleeding . . .

#### **Boot**

Corcoran, always, was such a good
Boot, his behavior got him treated with
Petting—lots of pets. Quick buffs on
Top, behind an ear, under a chin,
Luxurious massages for hours shined best.
Kiwi, flame, water, elbow pushing his
Master's fingers in tight cotton circles,
Drying, fogging with hot breath, gently
Glorifying. Anyone who looked would
See: perfection. Spit shine, they called it.
His elite green world reflected in the toe:
A world that polished him, jumped him,
Forgot him.

### At the End of the Rainbow

(is the National Cemetery of the Pacific in Punchbowl Crater)

after Jared Carter

That for twenty years I have viewed Hawai'i rainbows, have seen them arcing far away above Pearl Harbor, weaving through the fronds on Royal Palm Drive, their seven lines much scuttled by the clouds, and not thought long about them. Two decades late, within my dusky high-rise parlor, I look down, to the East, through morning mist, and a rainbow's seven lines call on me

to see the pot of gold aglow where its lines end. In truth, I once dreamt to someday lie among such breathless treasure, but my dream is now disturbed by the legend's Leprechaun, who interrupts my view to explain the magic: *The legend is a reality but only in the right light to those who join her lines in bowing toward the golden treasure at the end.* I want this magic to live, to fill my hoary need to rid myself of The old Lie in Wilfred Owen.<sup>1</sup>

Though these gold coins might well erupt from this volcanic bowl and mouth their breathless tales past absent lips, my ears would want to hear each one. Would it be a dulcet tone, a song of cherubs, faces in the clouds, who hold these seven colors in a bow toward this verdant cauldron? Would they sing a hymn of adoration to what some call greatest love? I want to hear this symphony, resound, reciprocate, ether to earth, monument to firmament. I want

to dream these legends call me now: *Return ye to our fields of stone, hear our hymn*. I want such inspiration, a baptism of the proud flesh deep within my chest, a granting of another grace to cradle now this oft-defined great love, this golden ore, that I might feel a solace of my own as I transform into treasure—such legends, precious mettle, glowing from a crater that no pigmy sprite can hide. But I do not bow correctly, or have the proper light, so I cannot shake the Lie.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>Wilfred Owen was a poet and English teacher in France who volunteered for the British Army in WW I after seeing the war's effect on people. He died in 1918 while fighting in France. One of his most famous poems is *Dulce et Decorum Est*. In it he quotes the Latin of the Roman poet, Horace: *Dulce et decorum est Pro patria mori*. That translates into English as "It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country," which Owens calls "The old Lie." Read Owen's *Dulce et Decorum Est* here.

### **Tinnitus**

What this ancient buzzing in my ears could be, Not Hercules' roars upon jumping their doors<sup>1</sup>

> Nor hard mortar thumps or breach-team Bangalores<sup>2</sup> Not whiskey'd up joy to unplug what we know

Nor punch drunkenness from a hard Kings-Inn blow<sup>3</sup> Not rifles' reports next to each unplugged ear

(With plugs in both ears no commands would we hear!) What might this ring mean, it sings, and I see ... Me.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Hercules is the name of the C-130 aircraft often used for military parachute operations.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Bangalore Torpedoes are explosive devices military operators use to breach obstacles.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> The Kings Inn was a popular bar in Savannah, Georgia, frequented by Rangers of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 75<sup>th</sup> Infantry, locals, and civic leaders alike. Fistfights were not uncommon.

#### Ars Poetica<sup>1</sup>

My parachute deploys and shocks my gear,
As close to earth as albatrosses soar;
Descend through foes' projectiles cracking near,
My rifle scopes this battlefield once more.
I shoot my hundred rounds and get few hits,
So blood my bayonet with fifty cuts,
In combat close enough to kill with wits
And pugilistic use of rifle butts.
Objective seized the battle's not yet won
With much to do before I can go home—
Must bandage wounds then lightly oil my gun
And scour my knife and give its edge a hone.
Then get back in the fight—the fight's the key
To my next win and distant victory.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Translates as "the art of poetry." It is a poetic interpretation of the art of poetry or a personal meditation on poetry using the form and techniques of a poem.

## **Waiting Room**

My eyes perched on her ivy Sheepskins like a proud hen Ogling her owl. Then my ears Embraced the chorus of her

Lobby, sounds—like foreigners To Fascists—so strange to ears Who expected the blandness Of Muzak. But here the sounds Of classic rock were mine.

Sitting with my cane, I saw him smile At a tune we knew but had not heard Before, and shivered when he asked What more I had missed since 1991.

> The sickle chiseled granite heads with Names like Barker, Bly, McDonald; My first-loved native bard, a Muscogee, Oklahoman, who had some horses—

Laureled at The Library. Rivers named Alberto who commanded me to write Their rapids, swelling, calling, a current Which I swam against for thirty years... <sup>2</sup>

Regret? Regret ...

My P. A. spies his clipboard, calls my Name, diverts my wallowing in self Blame, saves me from my judgy Cane, and I, with ease, without delay

Forget ... Forget?

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>Among my first influences in poetry, now dead, were Wendy Barker, Robert Bly, and Walter McDonald (among others). Still living, Joy Harjo was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and is a member of the Muskogee (Mvskoke / Creek) Nation. In 2019, she was the first Native American appointed by the Library of Congress as U.S. Poet Laurate: I missed that until 2024. She first influenced me through her book, *She Had Some Horses*.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Wendy Barker coordinated poetry activities with Alberto Rios (*Rios* in English is *Rivers*) for my classmates and I to participated in. Rios signed my copy of his book of poetry *The Lime Orchard* Woman, like this: "Gil—Keep Writing!" He did, and I didn't. He has published volumes of poetry and short stories and was appointed Poet Laureate of Arizona. I have done little serious creative writing work for more than thirty years.

### Whole

My eyes cast off the chains of sleep's abyss, embrace your majesty and wake my heart. How long, my wait to reunite, macushla. How long—my faith wavering in doubt that I would ever. As you lay your hands upon me, faith becomes touch once more. Your words caress my eyes; your lips, my soul. Your *you* becomes my *me* and I am *whole*.

#### **Brother**

The strength of my lines evaporated In a cloud of smooth, small batch Bourbon and a flood of smoldering maduro. But I enjoyed wondering more.

I wondered why your white Fairlane From 1964 was dead, unwashed with Mildewed seats, under the black spots Of that sap-dripping, century-old

Maple shading our driveway for so long. I wondered, but not long enough for Wonder to escape its own evaporation, Or to move your car, or fix it, or wash it,

Or love it, during your Vietnam absence. I had girls to chase, smoking to do. But I remember that Ford, so I remember You, in this fifth decade since you died.

## Relativity

#### after Robert Creeley

Smooth, semisweet raindrops of your

sweat, present just a few days ago, for a

few days, twenty plus three, but no way to be sure

of the sum, obtained by adding the powers of two

people. The last day, you sat down on your bed

washed, makeup free, hair cascading over

your breasts, a haloed mane, voluptuous soul,

eyes bright against can it be, can it be visions of me

of us, stretching each breath of time into a hot-air balloon's

capacity, eternities wanting, wanting to fill us, full

of these years achieved in days, and memorial.

## **Disjointed**

The dirty heavyweight strength machine Standing proudly on my basement floor

In his best bodybuilding pose, leaned Closer to the dusty ergonomic rower

To gossip about the costs of service. The costs of needing a titanium knee

In 2016, supposed to last until 2031, The costs of that fifteen-year knee

Dropping loudly out of its femur and Popping soundly out of its tibia in eight.

They tittered: after years of infantry Humping; & years of paratroop

Jumping, launching from airframes 500 times, hard landings, malfunctions,

& combat time; after one thousand Miles road running at least; & one

Thousand more with knee-buckling rucks & full LCE; pugil sticks & hand-to-hand pits...

They blathered on, then skidded to a stop: *Rejected: not service connected,* failing to

Muffle their guffaws about our Veterans Administration and its promise to care.

## Haiku #7

This poet of woes
I find him droll, composing
pains he does not know.

#### An Email to You

Subject: I think I saw you today

sitting in a waiting room, both hands pressed between restless thighs, thumb tumbling over thumb, eyes focused on a void somewhere between the floor and the universe. You dressed quickly today – tussled silver locks, scuffed canvas slipons, a wrinkled half-sleeve pullover with pink and gray scenes of lives that were not your own – punctuality meant more today than the soigné of your youth now that half of all you had become had fallen into the rubber gloves of strangers with scalpels. Yes, that was you

I think I saw reclining on both spaces of the waiting room love seat, smartphone propped on the pear that was your belly, streaming a soap so loudly the room almost boiled. You dressed well today – wedge espadrilles with filigree and gilded straps complementing your glistening black silk blouse, its tailored "V" cut so deeply that it could only fail to contain voluptuous. Your lungs heaved to fuel your sighs – more today than in the youth of your union with the one who excited you then but

now bores you, forcing you to wait for him here. Yes, that was you

I think I saw sporting blue mushroomcaps of tight fishnet covering your hair and shoes, new mauve scrubs and a white-rimmed mask dismissed under your chin, unshaven but still unbearded. Why this room and not the break room with peers, I thought, your phone's volume also teasing the room to boil. Your face knew it should not be here but also knew that no one of meaning would notice, so it hides in this room full of eyes who wait to spy official faces, harbingers of death or life who will soon stride into this room emptied of all the eyes who refuse to say Yes, that is you

I saw today, and I want to see you again.

Love,

You

## **Coloring**

```
As he turned
  and turned
  the pages of his mind
  He wrote
  and wrote
  and crumpled every page
As he forced
  and forced
  demanding perfect rhyme
  He wrote
  and wrote
  and crumpled every page
As he gave
  and gave
  control back to his mind
He wrote
  and wrote
  and colored every page
```

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