There is a little blues piece by jazz composer Thelonious Sphere Monk called "Mysterioso" in which the melody is a deliberate pattern of intervallic relationships. The notes are evenly spaced according to a specific design that walks forward and backward until a circle is formed. The work is both compelling and full of profound blues feeling.

This tone poem became a point of departure for poet Chris Gilbert, professor of English at Clark University, in the writing of his poem "Listening to Monk's Mysterioso." I remember braiding my sister's hair. Gilbert says, "I was a writer in my mind since I was a child." Gilbert said, "Maybe not so much a writer, but a maker of structure. I think that I am a writer, but not necessarily a poet writing. I think I came out of looking for cultural artifacts, things in the world that sustain and contain me. I wasn't finding those things and I think I started writing poetry because of it.

Gilbert's first book, Across the Mutual Landscape, (Graywolf Press) won the Walt Whitman Award in 1983. About the collection, poet Denise Levertov said, "Gilbert's poems are dense with intellectual content and infused with lyrical imagination; his critique of society, his exploration of its interaction with his own soul or spirit, his elegiac celebrations of Robert Hayden or Muriel Rukeyser or his invocations of jazz and its artists, don't form separate categories but flow in and out of one another.

Across the Mutual Landscape is a distillation and collection of pieces Gilbert had been gathering for years. "I'd been a writer in my mind since I was a child," Gilbert said. "Maybe not so much a writer, but a maker of structure. I think that I am a writer, but not necessarily a poet writing. I think I came out of looking for cultural artifacts, things in the world that sustain and contain me. I wasn't finding those things and I think I started writing poetry because of it. Actually, if there had been jazz, I think, when I was a graduate student, I probably wouldn't have had to write, write poetry."

The Plum

The way the music is seeing inside. My skin is the dark lid covering the note of an African's eye, but my flesh is a flesh darker than the mass filling the eye. It is the vision itself. I am closed onto myself.

Though he now lives in Providence, Gilbert's connection to the Worcester poetry community goes way back. He grew up in Lansing, Mich., and arrived in Worcester as a graduate student in psychology in 1972. The Worcester Poetry Association brought major writers to the city regularly. And there were readings everywhere.

There was a regular poetry workshop at Assumption College in Worcester in the mid-'70s. The Worcester Poetry Association brought major writers to the city regularly. And there were readings everywhere.

At one point you could see Denise Levertov holding court at Assumption, Muriel Rukeyser at Worcester State, Robert Ely strumming the dulcimer at the American Antiquarian Society or Etheridge Knight finger-popping at Circe's bar. Many of these poets also gave workshops. Gilbert fondly remembers attending one given by Lemon.

"I go to see people in Worcester who were writing because of that workshop," he said. "Fran Quinn, Mary Fell and MalY Bonina, and John Rosewald and Jean D'Amico ... a whole set of people at that time. That was important, the camaraderie. 'We are in this together,' kind of thing. It led to a sort of community."

One of the more legendary workshops to come out of the '70s was the Worcester Free People's Poets and Artists' Workshop founded by Etheridge Knight and organized by Bonina and Gilbert. It was held on Monday nights at Circe's, a lounge that stood next to the Paris Cinema on Franklin Street.

"Etheridge Knight had done that in different cities and kind of tried to put it on the road," Gilbert said about the workshop. "He was a writer who very much stressed community and communication - that collection, getting together, being in the world, putting the poetry in the world. There is a policy tip for it. There is an urgent need for it. And Bonina and I carried on."

Gilbert carried on there and elsewhere. For the next 10 years he taught poetry and writing workshops, contemporary and African-American Literature at the University of Pittsburgh, Trinity College, Worcester Polytechnic Institute and Clark. He also teaches psychology at Elms Community College in Fall River. His work has been published in many anthologies, including most recently Sweet Nothing. An Anthology of Rock and Roll. Gilbert is writing a book called Something Else: A Sample of Writing from Third World Poets. For the next 10 years he taught poetry and writing workshops, contemporary and African-American Literature at the University of Pittsburgh, Trinity College, Worcester Polytechnic Institute and Clark. He also teaches psychology at Elms Community College in Fall River. His work has been published in many anthologies, including most recently Sweet Nothing. An Anthology of Rock and Roll. Gilbert is writing a book called Something Else: A Sample of Writing from Third World Poets.

"If you were to compare me to David Williams, a lot of the things he writes are like I'm a witness to my own life. I use my imagination to make, to find, the story for those events, rather than bearing witness."

In 1986, he received the Robert Frost Award and Residency presented by the FraJan Spire. "It's m-qaeol. N-x... (National Education Association) fellowship for poetry, as well as two others from the Massachusetts Artists Foundation."

In the critically acclaimed PBS series The Power of the Word, Bill Moyer, talked about poets as the keepers of language and memory, and the stewards of honest emotions."

Gilbert elaborates: "I think, when somebody's honest in telling the truth about that situation, that risk, that truth, is validated. And what you connect on is that honesty, that level of seeing, the honesty that you've been naked, where you're told the truth, where you've been without cliche, without devices that numb us. I think that's where we relate. When people see you do that, they know what it's all about."

And nowhere is that more clear than in the work of poets who have written the truth. People hear the words, or the language and memory and read the work."

"At a reading there is a willingness," Gilbert explains. "People are there for that transformation. They are there to be informed, to be changed. It isn't something that is involuntary. They are asking you to do it to them. For the moment, for the instant, the words displace other words, displace the old consciousness and they are in a different place."

Chet Williamson is a frequent contributor to Worcester Magazine.

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