

Saxophone

My bell is Charlie Parker's
hatband. So few of you who
come to touch me understand
my feeling,
only this black voice.
I am a temple and he comes
to speak through me. I am the dream
lip because
I say what you're afraid of
facing, Living is intense.

I am bad from note to note
like god's nostril, I connect
living to what lies ahead
by breath.
You want to know how to feel
in this world, the technology
bigger than the ear? Listen,
I can't tell you what to hear.
I have no message waiting
for you, you must be-
hold enough to play.

CHRIS GILBERT

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 hears the pattern of braiding in Monk's music. The poem is more than that, though.

"What I was setting up in that poem actually, is the importance of the braiding as a cultural vehicle," Gilbert, 43, said over lunch at AI & Hany's one afternoon last week. "It's typically something that woman teach their daughters. And in my case, my sisters let me braid their hair.

"My participation was something granted to me. The importance there, I guess, is the importance that there is so much that goes on between a man and woman, brother and sister, and how wonderful it is that some things are conscious and are offerings at the same time."

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 poetry writer. I think it 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."

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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 fruit is a flesh darker than the mass filling the eye. It is the vision itself. I am closed onto myself.

Seen from the top my sensuousness is the shape of two rubied lips forming a kiss or else the blush around the purplish syllable which all but two similar lips mistake as sex's squish. The sound of the tenderest trembling spreads throughout me. I grow up flush with the deep anticipation holed up in the opening of a bell. I ripen and am living resolve that sweetens in the vase of death, and am the seed that leads deeper down into the play of melody.

Thelonious Monk is reaching for a note. A goal he already has in his inner grasp. He cups this plum in the palm of his hand, and makes that hesitation during which the music is a motion that sleeps. And for an instant his eye and his plum are alone in the world, and not regarding each other except through that deep space which connects two minds, or planets. He is living off a vision. All of the deaths in the world wake up and walk away. He is rewarding himself with a plum. When he plays he is feeding himself with himself.

CHRIS GILBERT

Though he now lives in Providence, Gilbert's connection to the Worcester poetry community goes way back to come way forward. He grew up in Lansing, Mich., and arrived in Worcester as a graduate student in psychology at Clark in 1972 after studying at the University of Michigan.

American poet, with introducing him to the Worcester poetry scene. And a vibrant scene it was 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 Levertov.

"I go to know 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 political tip to it all. There is an urge, an activism to it.

"After maybe three weeks of that workshop, Knight left, and said, you know, 'You guys do it.' And that was it! And Bonina and I carried on."

Gilbert carried on there and elsewhere.

tion, I make them up, where he's placed himself as sort of a witness," Gilbert said. "I by to write about events but I also feel like I'm a witness to my own life ... I try to 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 FraYitpsfiire:l'it: iras m~qea:olt: N~-x (National Education Association) fellowship for poetry, as well as two others from the Massachusetts Artists Foundation.

In the past five years, Gilbert has been quietly braiding his time with family, writing and teaching. He does readings whenever he has a chance. His second collection of poems, *Demos/Music of the Striving That Was There* will be published late this year by Graywolf Press.

In the critically acclaimed PBS series *The Power of the Word*, Bill Moyers 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 - that situation, that risk, that truth, is valued. And what you connect on is that honesty, that level of seeing, the situations where you've been naked, where you've told the truth, where you've been without cliché, 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; they hear the story, but they can take it into their bodies because that honesty is like their honesty."

And nowhere is that more clear than when people hear the "keepers of language and memory" read their work.

"At a reading there is a willingness," Gilbert explains. "People are there for 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 that 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.