

The Great Fires: Poems, 1982-1992

Jack Gilbert

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JOYCE'S MOTTO has had much fame but few apostles. Among them, there has been Jack Gilbert and his orthodoxy, a strictness that has required of this poet, now in the seventh decade of his severe life, the penalty of his having had almost no fame at all. In an era that puts before the artist so many sleek and official temptations, keeping unflinchingly to a code of "silence, exile, and cunning" could not have been managed without a show of strictness well beyond the reach of the theater of the coy.

The "far, stubborn, disastrous" course of Jack Gilbert's resolute journey--not one that would promise in time to bring him home to the consolations of Penelope and the comforts of Ithaca but one that would instead take him ever outward to the impossible blankness of the desert--could never have been achieved in the society of others. What has kept this great poet brave has been the difficult company of his poems--and now we have, in Gilbert's third and most silent book, what may be, what must be, the bravest of these imperial accomplishments.



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