

For one thing, Bly's nature has its dark and dangerous side (it isn't simply the "all in all" of Wordsworth); for another, *News* makes no claims to preeminence ("I am following one stream...Another anthology would have to be created to include these other streams"). The book is far less doctrinaire than it might at first appear, especially to unsympathetic readers.

Four years ago, when this book was first published, Ronald Reagan was elected President. Now, four years later (James Watt, Rita Lavelle, etc.), he has been elected again and we need more than ever the wisdom these poems contain. We need their compassion and humility and their openness to "something foreign," to the "deep quiet" and "mad freedom" Thorkild Bjornvig finds in an owl. We need to save the wolves for their sake and for our own. We need to hear words like these from Robert Aiken:

The self imposing upon the other is not only something called delusion, it is the ruination of our planet and all of its creatures. But enlightenment is not just a matter of learning from another human being. When the self is forgotten, it is recreated again and again, ever more richly, by the myriad things and beings of the universe.

— Robert Gibb



IN GOD'S COUNTRIES, by Bil Gilbert. University of Nebraska Press, 1984. \$14.95, 203 pp.

Two fellows from Adams county, Pennsylvania, sit under a gum tree by a billabog watching two platypuses paddle under their dangling feet. Two bear-sized men stop for a smoke in a shallow draw of the Huachuca Mountains and speculate over whether a rather soggy footprint belongs to a small mountain lion, a large bobcat, or a rarely seen

ocelot. A man and his college-aged daughter count the number of chipmunks per linear mile along the Western Branch of the Susquehanna. One of the partners in each of these scenes is Bil Gilbert, whose first book of collected essays, *In God's Countries*, offers as much delight as instruction about the hardy integrity of some of our ecosystem's most exotic and most down-home habitats and the creatures who live in them.

What distinguishes Gilbert from McPhee, Carson and other expert environmental writers is his indirectness of approach, an insouciance that implies being a naturalist is more sport than work, and a lack of rhetorical closure that matches his argument. Robert Creamer, a Time-Life editor whose company published all but one of the essays individually, notes in his forward that Gilbert never begins with the journalist's "hook." Neither does he begin with the critic's thesis statement, or the scientist's statement of hypothesis unless to ironic effect. Instead, Gilbert ambles into his topics. Anecdotal asides concerning the personality traits of companions crop up often. An unanswered question about the species under investigation or a comment on the blissful neglect of government agencies appears regularly.

One might be tempted to say that his style, like his subject matter, is "natural." That would be a serious mistake. Gilbert says he avoids the adjective because it suggests the possibility of "unnatural" phenomena. When "natural" is applied to things human, it implies that we are superior to nature and have dominion over it, or we are inferior to nature and the corrupter of it. Such erroneous thinking makes us the only species estranged from "our only known habitat." Estrangement produces unnecessary and undesirable "hubris, guilt and loneliness."

Gilbert, on the other hand, is a happy subverter of hubris. *In God's Countries* is not a tragedy or a diatribe. The reader should not expect a masochistic purging of environmental guilt. Gilbert does not ignore ecological damage or extinction of species, but he treats the environment and its creatures as worthy contenders in a vigorous

game. This sport requires of its human players only moderate travel resources, an ability to discern the safest and least entangling manner of getting across rough terrain, and a great deal of waiting. The rewards can be most revealing as Gilbert's tale of his pursuit of the Tasmanian Devil attests. The devil, unlike his cartoon namesake, is a hideous beast, endowed with a personality as vile as his looks. Before we meet the devil, we meet Sam Walmer, Gilbert's "loud, iconoclastic, disrespectful, observant and curious...stimulating travel companion" to whom the book is dedicated. This time they are perched on eucalyptus stumps watching a garbage pile for their first view of a feral devil:

One flank was scored with a deep, partly healed, superating wound. It had lost an eye and was left with a socket of knotted weeping scar tissue, which twisted its face hideously. It wheezed. Its jaws hung open. Its muzzle was covered with mucous, and its odor was rank.

Nevertheless, this was an extremely satisfying animal, in part because it was a trophy representing the successful conclusion to a considerable quest. The best thing about it was that it was completely another blood, known for a brief moment more intimately than we would ever in our lives know one of its kind.

The devil, in turn, investigates the men. The encounter is apparently more satisfying for the men than the beast: "The battered devil, either finding us unsavory or unfathomable, turned away and satisfied its blood by scavenging garbage. Shivering in the midnight cold we watched until it had finished and departed feeling, as questing beasts, fulfilled in our blood."

"Other Bloods" is also the title of the first of the book's two sections. Its six essays deal with the yearning to know other species: The Tasmanian devil and accompanying fauna; the buffalo wolf of the American Great Plains and Rockies; a Moose of uncommon adaptive abilities; black footed ferrets, who have made an unauthorized comeback in Wyoming; the Appalachian wood bison, who were slaughtered out of righteous indignation; and the oldest of freshwater fish, the spoonbilled cat or paddlefish. However, being a naturalist is a social

sport for Gilbert, and the *homo sapiens* he describes are as interesting and varied as the Other Bloods. Sam Walmer eats Tazmanian crawfish with the relish of a Tazzie devil. A fiercely independent Jack Lynch, the subject of "The Second Keeper," has spent thirty years of back-breaking labor and near penury to feed and maintain the only extant packs of *Canis lupis nubilus*, the buffalo wolf.

The Missouri Kid, a moose who journeyed hundreds of miles beyond the range of his assigned habitat, adapted to the food shortage by getting down on his "prayer bones" and nibbling winter wheat shoots. Our thinking of the moose's activity as exceptional or aberrational exemplifies the hubris of defining all species except our own by rules of commonality. The possibilities for defeating hubris broaden considerably when one thinks of each species being composed of individuals whose differences are at least as interesting as their common traits. Marcus Yelverton, the principal at a Missouri grammar school where the moose appeared, best summarized the appropriate human reaction to this beast: "He was a beautiful animal. Probably when they're old and have forgotten my name and most of their classmates, those kids will remember the day when a moose came to their school."

The last two essays in the section concern efforts to preserve endangered species. Don Fortenberry's fifteen-year watch for the elusive black-footed ferret ends in frustration and governmental indifference, but the beasts pop up years later in the 7,000-acre prairie-dog town on Jack Turnell's ranch in Wyoming. Since Turnell, like Jack Lynch, mistrusts the federal government and environmental groups, he looks after them himself. Finally, the simultaneous extinction of the paddlefish's natural habitat coupled with the government efforts to keep the newly popular game fish going "speaks well for our compassion" or our regard for sport, but the need to artificially reproduce the oldest fish in the world is also "unspeakably sad."

The second section, "In God's Countries," takes its name from a bumper sticker describing Potter County, Pennsylvania, a class III deer hunting area where 50,000 "sports" observe the annual hunting ritual. Gilbert redeems the phrase by observing that if we grant the existence of the "First Premise," the title becomes an "expression of environmental gratitude and satisfaction, not a mean, chauvinistic brag." As in the first section, the conventionally exotic gets some at-

tention. The description of the roaring glacial peaks of Auyuittuq Park in Canada's Baffinland is worthy of Sir Richard Francis Burton. However, once again, Sam and Bil arrive to fight the elements in a most plebian fashion.

In the last four essays in this section Gilbert describes worm hunting on the eighth hole of an unnamed golf course near a cafe hard by O'Hare Airport, "trailing" cats in snow-covered alleys of New York's west 80's and mountain lions in the Huachuca Mountains of southeastern Arizona, spelunking in the caves of the West Virginia Highlands, and white-water canoeing down a river which is cleaner now than it was fifteen years earlier. Gilbert deliberately withholds information essential to finding most of these places. He does so not to protect the place but because "anyone looking for a cave or a bird or a walking fern will tend to respect it more if he must exercise a little ingenuity to find it, rather than have it located like a Holiday Inn in a guidebook."

Since Gilbert sees man as a questing beast, he places his faith in our capability as individuals to adapt and prosper in uncertainty. He offers no solutions; instead, he poses intriguing questions: Where will the next Keeper of the wolves be found when Jack Lynch is gone? Has the moose died in the Missouri bottoms or returned to his "natural habitat" to live out his life as a generic moose? Why does fear of being crushed in a cave's chimney refresh the soul while the grinding fear of tax men, paranoid bosses, and muggers stultifies and drains the soul? While Gilbert does not provide answers, he does provide a new way of looking for a wilderness we can live with.

— Susan Blalock

