

IRON AGE

Robert Gibb. *The Burning World* (2004). *World Over Water* (2007). University of Arkansas Press.

James Walton

Stubborn Yron the last.

Ovid's Metamorphoses Englished, Trans. G. Sandys (1632)

In historical memory the old steel town of Homestead, Pennsylvania, bristles with the names of Andrew Carnegie, Henry Clay Frick, and the Pinkerton Detective Agency. In the lockout/ strike of 1892, Frick was the absentee owner's enforcer, the Pinkerton agents his army. The conflict erupted into a firefight at which a reported six workers and three Pinkertons were killed, dozens wounded. In a fleeting vision of the world-turned-upside-down, townspeople guarded the mill-fortress (from which *they* had been shut out) against the invading representatives of authority, routing most of them, arresting others, until the state militia arrived to restore a sickly order. The breaking of the strike and the union started Homestead on its descent into a state verging on entropy. The descent continued until the mills themselves were gone, leaving Robert Gibb, native of Homestead, former millworker, in the presence of their mere ghosts, and the ghosts of others.

Gibb's only extended treatment of the events of 1892 appears in *World Over Water* as a sonnet sequence—the form chosen, with dour irony, to impose restraint upon feelings impatient with form. The rhymes turn slant- (or sight-), vanish, return for emphasis, then vanish again. A poem in this sequence provides the title of the volume, the last of an apparent trilogy that began with *The Origins of Evening*, winner in the National Poetry Series for 1997. The poet's function throughout is like that of Job's servant: "And I only am escaped alone to tell thee." It is a function performed by all narrative art: to give presence to what is past, absent, dead, or only imaginary. The "evolving, working lyric narrative" that Stanley Plumly has seen in Gibb's poems would belong to the genre autobiography. (Gibb gives us no reason to separate the poet from his persona.) The narrative would reach back as far as his grandfather's migration from Glasgow to Homestead, where he found the God he had left behind, "whose eye was anthracite,/ Whose breath was the cloud of fire" ("Seeing Pittsburgh," *The Origins of Evening*). It would include the grandfather's death from a fall in the mill,

an event that recurs throughout the trilogy but remains dateless—always present—until the final volume. The confessional subject's life proper begins with another recurring event, the death of his mother, which sent his “shell-shocked” father into a decline analogous on the personal scale to the decline of Homestead.

The account would proceed to his exploration, from childhood forward, of the postlapsarian world, or Iron Age, for traces of a Golden. One such glimpse occurs during a rare joyful moment with his father:

This dream is green
And actual memory:
My father and I
In the neighbor's yard,

Having just stepped
Forth from the woods,
In summer, evening,
The light gone gauzy

About the shrubbery.

(“The Connection to the Dark,” *The Origins of Evening*)

For the-artist-as-child such moments possessed Orphic power:

When my father tells me

The names of the trees
And the meanings of the terms
He uses, I can almost hear the rocks speak,
Jutting from the woods above us,
Covered with their words.

(“Homestead Park,” *The Burning World*)

For the artist-as-adolescent with a girl friend the enclosed “green world” of “Phipps Conservatory” turns into an erotic urban idyll (*The Burning World*). No vision of brightness, however, can escape the dark, iron- or ash-gray shadow of Homestead. In “A Poem Written for the Aviary at a Time of Its Possible Closing” the poet takes his small son through the gallery of exotic birds “Fabulous as the flowers/ They preen among”:

High in the hold of light,
They nest upon girders or wade
Through the waters of pools

Cloud-banked with shadows.

When the child is lifted up for a view of “the condor’s enormous darkness” like a *memento mori* he feels only a “thrill/ To be dangling there, fully/ Within creation, as if heaven/ Among us meant just such rooms.” But the father’s imagination travels through time and space to the rape of Tenochtitlán, the imagery of whose destruction is supplied by fallen Homestead:

When Cortés burned the birds
Of paradise, their plumed flames
Drifted through the rubble

Of that sun, and the ashes
They would not be rising from,
Then or later, except as words

From this prayer spoken over water
In a place of wings
For creation’s remnant flocks.

(The Burning World)

In “Rust Belt” the poet sees his own search for a world elsewhere shadowed in the efforts of a retarded boy-as-scrap collector:

The sun’s braid
Crowns the horizon, and everywhere he looks
There’s metal, the leaf of its rust turned to gold.

(The Burning World)

The child who fills his dreambook with animals and gardens, glittering pools of water and fantasies of flight (“The Connection...”); the teenager with a girl at the cinema in whose “arced, voluptuous darkness/ Curtains parted for us like the sea” (“Magnetic North,” *The Burning World*); the young worker in the Inferno of the mill who glimpses on his breaks a “heaven/ The color of steel” (“Entering the Oven,” *Origins*); the father who promises his child “his own green swatch of planet” (“The Jars,” *The Burning World*); the poet who visits the site of his grandfather’s grave and his father’s ashes, both belonging to “a race of fathers from whom only / Silence comes” (“Ash and Stone,” *The Burning World*);—from moments like these one might extract a (mere) narrative account of the development of an artist’s sensibility: a *Künstlerroman*. But such a linear re-construction would ignore the subtlety of Gibb’s own arrangements. Throughout the trilogy the strata of his pasts, his local and universal, personal and family histories,

merge and mingle within the separate poems and form associative links between them.

In what amounts to a series of mournful conceits, Gibb reaches far and wide for types of the desolation that surrounds him. Homestead is his Catalonia, his Warsaw ghetto, his Aztec ruins, his locust-plagued Egypt: "this is what it means/ To live in history, as though/ The past were a difficult music/ To keep from your head" ("Aftermath," *World Over Water*). In the town's fiery, steel-producing past he finds analogues to the origins of the earth, of life, of language:

In the beginning the planet cooled like that,
A mantle floating upon the molten core.
Slag was our horizon ringed with fire. . . .

When ingots got lifted out of those pits
In which they'd been soaking up heat
And were broken, glowing, into sections,
One ton each, then we said steel had turned
Into *blooms*, the air about them flowering
Like light at the red end of the spectrum.

The whole mill seemed to be flourishing
Within the blush of that florescence
When we rolled them into rails. . . .

Hot saw, we said, cutting lengths. *Chill*
And *annealing*. *Grooving the mill*, when it
All went well. *Cupola* and *case* and *pulpit*.
(*"Steel Engravings," The Burning World*)

The broad compass of Gibb's analogies is directed always by the same principle: "Homestead's still/ The most magnetic of my norths." For analogues to his own art he chooses, for their reflectiveness and mutability, the waters of the Monongahela, and for static, *noir* precision a series of black-and-white photographs by (chiefly) Lewis Hine (1910) and W. Eugene Smith (1955-58). In the title and cover art (by Smith) of *World Over Water* the two media come together as original and representation. A sonnet from "The Homestead Lockout & Strike, 1892" gives the whole picture in the wake of a violence that has cracked the frame:

Dark clouds billowing over the mill shore
In a great plied mass, spilling upward
Out of the picture, above the watery horizon

Which splits the work in half: the murky
 Buildings divided from their reflections,
 The smoke churning upward from its cindery
 Twin burning head down in the stream.
 It's either evening or nineteenth century,
 That light's dissolve into longshot and time,
 The world over water, its ashen stacks,
 Guttering on the surface like a match.

In his application of the Horatian *Ut pictura poesis*, Gibb includes a painter of the "Pittsburgh School," Aaron Harry Gorson (1872-1933), whose night-scenes preserve images of things now absent, ephemeral things: "The silhouetted colonnades of the chimneys," the smoke and flames of a Bessemer converter, "arrayed against the beryl of river and sky." As in his photographic studies, Gibb goes behind the reflective surface to join the artist at his work, capturing images no longer there for the poet occupied with the filling of vacancies:

If he'd lived here later he could have sketched
 The erasures of light in which the great sheds
 Were dismantled—brownfield sites he'd wash
 With the stain of oxides. Perched on the bridge
 As in the sky, he could plot out lines of perspective,
 Bird's eye and horizon, the vanishing points
 From which the skeleton girders streamed apart.
 Back in his rooms, he could grid them in again.
 ("Industrial Landscapes," *World Over Water*)

In "Lewis Hine in Homestead" from the same volume the artist, "squinting above the viewfinder," calls for light "in floods." His light makes darkness visible, revealing the ghosts of maimed millworkers.

Gibb's identification of photographer with poet comes through obliquely in "Lewis Hine: Two Photographs" (*The Burning World*). Theirs is an art of "opacity" and "depth," an "aesthetic of protest and fact." The compositions of both are a "mixture of light/ And time." Who but Hine, the poem asks, "Has been down there, head bowed above/ The shuttered world, lens set to the fire?" The answer, of course, is the poet, but also the anonymous skilled ironworker, or "puddler," whose "figures," like theirs, are "fixed in emulsion":

Like "coming to nature,"
 As the puddler would say, the churned mass
 Starting to harden. And isn't it by now

Second nature to them both, that flash
 Of combustible metal—silver halide
 Or manganese—at work on the world
 They render from the material at hand?

Old anonymous photographs appear in Gibb's work as a means of repopulating his past. But the art of Hine, Smith, and company consists rather in transforming absent things than merely recovering them. In *A River View With Barges* by Hew Charles Torrance (1924) the agent of transformation is "Gelatin silver, not oxides," which makes "the spidery fretwork of bridges" seem "Like shapes in the rain." The place was locally known as "Hell with the lid off," but here and elsewhere the poet supplements the pictorial artist in the production of objects "fit for a jeweler's scale" ("Pictures at an Exhibition," *The Burning World*).

The merger of pictorial and literary art serves at last as epilogue to *World Over Water*. "*Dream Street*" takes its title from an exhibition of photographs that W. Eugene Smith called his "long poem" about Pittsburgh. The pictures

hold the shapes of our light
 In surfaces of silver—halides and gelatins—
 Contact like the laying on of hands
 Or the fossil leaf printed on the sidewalk,

As though light were a falling body
 Here come to rest, the circumference
 Of darkness around it.

Like Baudelaire in Paris, a critic has remarked, Smith in Pittsburgh "sought semblances of himself." Gibb finds his "semblance" in Smith's darkroom, where, like the poet, he works to the accompaniment of jazz in hi-fi,

Deepening the contrasts of light and shade:
 The platinum of the train tracks,
 Barges seen like dark drowned wings

Being freighted down the river,
 The blast-furnace sun having back-lit the hills.

Smith's pictures are shown together with excerpts from his writings, epistolary and other:

Man carries his loneliness with him,

A blown-up letter reads, *regardless of place*.

“He sounds just like you,” says the poet’s wife while he contemplates Smith’s re-creation of the city of his childhood. “It has no business being beautiful,” says the poem, contradicting itself:

not the bridges on their old

Stone stanchions or the sheen of the rivers
 Strewn with fire. Geysers of steam
 Erupting as if from fissures in the earth.

Like the skies in Smith’s pictures, Gibb’s poems are mirrors, “flawless as polished steel,” uniting surface and depth, mixing fact with protest. To the poet who confesses in “Aftermath” that he would restore the infernal scene of his youth—and to the reader—they emerge as a species of cold pastoral, retrieved from a post-industrial waste land and nearly all, like the picture from an earlier exhibition, “fit for a jeweler’s scale.”