Merrill Gilfillan. *The Warbler Road*. Chicago: Flood Editions, 2010. $15.95

Merrill Gilfillan. *The Bark of the Dog*. Chicago: Flood Editions, 2010. $14.95

The twenty-six short essays collected in *The Warbler Road* record Merrill Gilfillan's wanderings in "the sweet gregarious" spaces of North American warblers. These tiny birds are "leisurely" in their days and ways, "with not a hurry in the world"; a flock of yellow-rumps moves "luxuriantly" when one is lucky enough to see them. Watching and waiting requires ample leisure, too. It is a privilege "reclaimed in the name of the wandering useless," as Gilfillan puts it in an essay from the excellent earlier collection *Magpie Rising: Sketches from the Great Plains*. Gilfillan's is a practice of guiltless delectation resistant to both the ironic postures and the embittered political critique familiar in contemporary poetic and intellectual culture.

Born in Ohio, Gilfillan traveled as a child to the rural Appalachian Mountains to harvest sassafras with his father, and to Lake Erie with a group of bird-watchers, "mildly eccentric people," slowly learning to identify and differentiate a range of warblers and their songs. *The Warbler Road* shows how formative these experiences were, and how a practice of sustained, discerning attention to simple things has the capacity to shape an entire way of life. For Gilfillan, bird-watching is analogous to Issa and Basho's "Way of Poetry": a "way of ordering one's priorities in life…at a core aesthetic level" ("The Warbler Road") .

Readers of Gilfillan's essays will be prepared for the Native American vocabularies and various names of birds and flowers that appear in the poems, but even these readers will need, in order to do them justice, a very good dictionary and a keen set of ears. These sparse poems do not provide explicit glosses or explanations. *The Bark of the Dog*'s evocative, songlike poems encode memories, foreign expressions, and natural nomenclature in a fragmented, associative manner not encountered in the essays. Many are fine formal accomplishments. "The Bays," for example, which opens the volume, establishes a sense of setting and then effusively chants a botanical litany:

> Plow Monday: second-best beast
> high in the sweetsop tree.

Sweet rocket, sweet amber,
sweet gale. Sweet sultan, sweet Wilson
of saxifrage. Sweet tangle,
sloshing in the bays.

One may not know what or when Plow Monday is, and may not realize that the sweet sultan is the fruit of the sweetsop tree, or that sweet tangle is a kind of large seaweed, the fronds of which are loaded with sugar. Or that the tufted perennial herb called saxifrage is also called sweet Wilson in its early blooming, or that it sometimes provides habitats for warblers. The poem suggests: *we should know more about this than we do*. But even lacking such knowledge, one is still struck by the number of botanicals that we call "sweet," all of which could plausibly appear together in nature, just as we are impressed by the accruing effect of the "sweet-sweet" onomatopoeia of birds chirping that the poem becomes. This is a place of singing names and singing birds, and revisiting the poem further acquaints us with the particular character of the ecology of the scene. Returning to this poem is like returning to a rich, strange place we are still getting to know.

"Sage in September" opens with a trochaic, nursery-rhyme meter syncopated by irregular line breaks. It is a praise song for sage, a plant long holy to various native peoples, and one that appears frequently in Gilfillan's writings.

Sprigs for sunrise,
sprigs for Taos, and soldiers
on the steep blue sea.

Just under these lines, the nursery rhyme can be heard: "Sprigs of sage for sunrise / Sprigs of sage for Taos / Sprigs of sage for soldiers/ On the steep blue sea." I take Gilfillan to be offering a variation on this pattern, so that the soldiers usurp the place accorded to sage. And yet at the syntactic level the sage is for the soldiers too. They intrude and yet are accommodated.

In the second stanza, this sonic pattern becomes more complicated, taking on a kind of Hopkinsian intensity:

The slopes of Taos,
true south, building, firing
to the aspen smoulder-golden—
sage for the cello in its breeze.

The building rhythmic pressure of "building, firing" and "smoulder-golden" is released when we return to the "sage for" refrain and the trochaic measure of the early lines. The last and longest stanza imperils the ordering power of this refrain by embedding it in longer lines more alive to forces fugitive and violent:

> Sprigs for small things
> rousted, on the run, Septembered.
> Flocks of longspurs slipping down
> the continent by night. Sage for them,
> moving through the mesh
> of the dangerous starlight.

The stanza opens with the standard formulation "Sprigs for," but what is praised has become more nuanced and darkly evocative as the established meter of the lines comes untethered, making them more difficult to process as one reads. Then one hears the effort to return to praise in the "Sage for them" refrain at the end of the fourth line; the strain is evident. Praise is imperiled or made vertiginous when directed at fleeting forces rather than stable ones like the sunrise or Taos, yet it persists among the tumults the prosody registers.

Poems like this one can be contrasted with others in the volume that read like easygoing epistles or notes to an essay that I would also like to read, possibly even *instead* of the poem. A prosaic poem from such a gifted writer of sentences can make one hunger for the paragraphs from which they seem to have been torn, in part because sometimes we'd rather know than guess, as when, in "Paschal Letter," we learn that the speaker has "dropped down / off the plains into the crease / of the Arikaree— / a good honest place / for it, out of sight / of the Horizon King, out of the wind." In an essay, Gilfillan would tell us more about Horizon King, or he would not mention it. I want to know what it is. At the same time, Gilfillan sometimes uses the essays to comment on certain lines or stanzas that appear in the poems, and this self-referencing sheds light on his creative process.

The superb title poem, which concludes the volume, combines a visit to a Native American ceremony observed from a nearby hill (a scenario well described in an essay from *Magpie Rising*) with reminiscences of a past lover, mysterious visitations of maidens bearing honey and cream, fireflies, mound builders, and tanager tongues. As a whole, the poem is a cryptic string of transport and long-considered poignancies of various stripe. The speaker is awash in these vibrant particularities, all experienced in a "mandala-haze":

Young birds in nest
know it best—

tanager tongue—

one in falcon colors,
cinnamon teal

(the great river effigies
wingspread by night to north
and west, watermark and cachet).

One with ready summer brie—

shell, far inland,
beads from the sea.

•

Waves of love grass,
bobbing, nodding—

These memories make me
drive too fast. Three
tickets in two days—

plea the love-grass plea.

Eragrostis, or lovegrass, flourishes in American deserts and plains, just as it does in this poem and in the speaker's memory, where it appears as "love grass" and adjectivally as "love-grass," probably for the first time in English. Gilfillan loves the names of this grass (really a whole array of different grasses), just as he loves the grasses themselves, just as he loves knowing that others before him have also loved them. The poem "Ancestor" ends like this:

Someone loved
the back roads, loved the cove
of the knee.

Someone loved
the hair in the mouth, someone
loved the sea.

Gilfillan's treatment of Native Americans past and present includes elements of critique. In "Three Songs" he remembers the shooting of a band of Cheyennes who escaped from the Fort Robinson barracks in 1879. He insists that we imaginatively inhabit this site and notice both what is there and what is lost:

> Antelope Creek will never
> sleep. Boys and girls
> cut down. Meadowlarks sing,
> pronghorns run the hills—
> six join twelve, five more
> from the east make twenty-three—
> But Antelope Creek can never sleep.

In no way is Gilfillan blind to or naive about the violence of our national history; to the contrary, he directly confronts that history. Yet he does not follow the more familiar route of ironically sending up the false ideology of Manifest Destiny. Such critique relies on distancing itself from what is disagreeable, whereas Gilfillan's poems implicate themselves in the past and present of the spaces they evoke, in both their horror and their beauty. They affirm that a candid encounter with a place like Antelope Creek should always also be an encounter with oneself. Such affirmation is made explicit in this section of "Paschal Letter":

> Of course, the Cheyenne battle
> there, the death of Roman Nose,
> lends a dialectical glamour,
> even a hint of "noble rot."
> But mostly airy amplitude
> and sweet-tooth thoughts.

In a clever reversal, Gilfillan makes the engaged, political impulses of this speaker rather pat ("Of course"), jokingly hinting that such political concern largely functions to add that touch of bitter complexity cherished by more cultivated palates, even as it pretends at a de-enchanting self-abnegation. Instead, all the emphasis here is on abiding a while in the "sweet gregarious," and it is implied that doing so makes us better, not worse. The gentle self-mockery of admitting to one's "sweet-tooth thoughts" keeps that stripe of critical stridency at bay, and the way is cleared for the modest work of coming to know a bit more about just where one stands, and is standing.

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