

# Thema

*Verba virumque cano*

—Virgil (amended)

*It is perhaps as difficult to write a good life as to live one.*

—Lytton Strachey

*Not just the life of my story my muse,  
You are also the story of my life;  
Potent to clarify or to confuse,  
Calming influence or exciting strife.*

—Gilmartin Jacobsen

**T**his book concerns one month in the life of the late Gilmartin Jacobsen, when he donated and delivered his library to our alma mater, Desert Wells College—a very exclusive, very remote, all-male two-year institution he attended in the late 1960s, on the border of California and Nevada near Death Valley. I was in my second year at DWC and was asked to help him catalogue and shelve his collection since he was suffering from the illness—“inoperable tumor, irreplaceable organ”—to which he would have eventually succumbed had fate not intervened. During our long hours together, we talked about his life, intellectual interests, and work.

With no firm plan in mind, but thinking it might prove useful in the future, I digitally recorded our conversations, several of his encounters with some of the faculty and students, and a seminar he conducted. Shortly before leaving, he gave me a box filled with what he called the “detritus” of his intellect and asked me “to make something of it” if I could: a trove of unpublished essays, unfinished poems, fragments of a memoir, letters, emails, reviews, even handwritten notes on the back of ATM receipts.

Over the years, working with my recordings and the materials he left behind, I wrote many versions of the manuscript that would eventually become this book. But it wasn’t until I followed-up on a suggestion by Jacobsen that I contact Mark Backman, a fellow graduate student from Berkeley, that this project reached fruition. “He’s eccentric and a challenge to work with,” Jacobsen said, in recommending him, “but he knows my mind better than I do.”

What an understatement. Backman was surprisingly difficult to locate, even with all the online tools available to me. My email eventually found him—his words—“in a town I last saw in my youth, living in a house borrowed from an absent friend.” He was “mired in regret and the loneliness of hard truths,” after losing his job as speechwriter for the CEO of a troubled insurance company “in the Great Reckoning of ’08.” He was a luxury that in hard times became a liability for a well-paid executive “with too little to say and too many people helping him say it.”

It took me a few emails, telephone calls, and Skype sessions to corral his verbal excesses and shift the focus from his story to Jacobsen’s. Once our collaboration got underway, however, Backman not only provided a useful context through stories and anecdotes about Jacobsen. He also suggested many changes and corrections that strengthened my original manuscript while reserving to me the final say on the text you’re now reading. His intelligence and critical acuity touch every aspect of my work.

Most important, he posed three questions that affected the final shape of the book: Why should anyone care about the thoughts and writings of someone as doggedly private, seemingly ordinary, and largely unknown as Gilmartin Jacobsen? What was the relationship between Jacobsen’s Desert Wells comments, on one hand, and the written remains of his intellectual life, on the other? And, finally, how could I best represent my role as both participant in and observer of those events and conversations that took place at Desert Wells?

The book you now behold is my answer to Backman’s questions. It’s true, as he put it during one of our Skype sessions, “that in the ruthless arithmetic of biographical score-keeping, Gilmartin Jacobsen’s life doesn’t seem to add up to much.” In fact, he was the antithesis of our twitter-brained, personality-obsessed, social networking culture; no Facebook or LinkedIn profile, no Twitter or Instagram account, no Tumblr blog or YouTube cat videos. He left no record of the personal relationships that vivify and define most of our lives, no evidence of any long-term professional entanglements, no proof at all that he ever existed. Except, of course, for my Desert Wells recordings, a few out-of-print publications, and the welter of materials he left in my possession.

I wasn't interested in Jacobsen's personal history, at least at the outset. What intrigued me were his ideas and the way he talked about them. At Desert Wells, I saw him in a variety of settings discussing a range of topics with an assortment of people. It took me a while to recognize his method and technique in these discussions, and to appreciate his character and conduct under what amounted to a death sentence. Not once in those public exchanges did he betray the fear or uncertainty that would afflict most people in his position. In fact, he made light of his situation several times. It was only at the end of his stay that he revealed to me something of his joys and regrets.

Because the recordings capture pauses, backtracking, and conversational dead-ends, I've edited the transcripts to communicate their content more coherently. They form the core of each dialogue. However, in order to convey the context of the conversation at hand, I found it necessary to add narrative passages at the beginning and end of each dialogue and to insert analyses, comments, asides, or quotations, either as marginalia or in breakout boxes in the text. This yields a unique structure to the book that not only illuminates the recorded encounters but also captures, I hope, my growing awareness and appreciation of the man, his words and works.

The first dialogue, *Now & Then*, relates a speech by Jacobsen at a welcoming dinner given on the night of his arrival at Desert Wells, followed by questions from the audience and his answers. The next, *Yes & No*, reports an animated conversation between him and the school's President, Tom Connell, about the humanities and the liberal arts as well as Jacobsen's education at the University of Chicago and Berkeley. The third dialogue, *How & Why*, draws from both his formal presentation and the exchanges it stimulated among several contentious participants in a seminar based on Jacobsen's book *Technotopia*. The fourth, *By & For*, borrows its form from an interview of Jacobsen by my fellow student Gideon Barrera, for the Desert Wells alumni newsletter; it explores the relationship between his education and his career as a ghostwriter. And, finally, *You & I* weaves together conversations with several people at different points in time about love, life, art, and aesthetics, from his last full day at Desert Wells.

My handling of his versifying, either as the focus of discussion in the last dialogue or to illustrate some aspect of the text elsewhere, exemplifies the relationship between Jacobsen's Desert Wells comments and his written work in general. He published a small collection of sonnets in the early 1980s titled *Persuasion of Desire (to a diffident muse)* "which thoroughly underwhelmed the critics," he quipped, "but had the desired effect on the muse who inspired it." Jacobsen never saw himself as a poet. Instead, he valued the disciplined structure, rhythm, and rhyme of lyric poetry for what it could teach him about writing concise and effective prose.

His poetic efforts, sneered at by the sophisticates of his day for producing mere "occasional" verse, at best, and simple "doggerel" at worst, were yet another way for him to perfect a style he described as "brevity at length." Its hallmark is the constant balancing of form and content guided by a clear purpose, sense of audience, and economy of language; the same qualities on display in these Desert Wells dialogues.

Thus, Jacobsen's verse constitutes yet another contribution he made to the ongoing dialogue embodied by this book—between an unknown man now gone and a reader actively engaged, as I've been, with the mind he left behind in words.

#### inbetweenwords

in between the now and then,  
 as the will becomes a would,  
 at the where beyond a when,  
 is the is without a should;  
 what was was is always was,  
 begun began as begin,  
 before done but after does,  
 could have been would have been should have been;  
 beyond this there must be that,  
 without some there will be none,  
 coming from is to be at,  
 being here is to be gone;  
 with a whom connives the who,  
 out of us ascends our we,  
 henceforth flows from hitherto,  
 while my I becomes your me.

—JC