

NATURAL COINCIDENCE

ALSO BY BIL GILBERT

Bears in the Ladies Room
How Animals Communicate
The Weasels
Chulo
The Trail Blazers
Westering Man
In God's Countries
Our Nature
God Gave Us This Country



NATURAL COINCIDENCE

The Trip from Kalamazoo

Bil Gilbert

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To Geoffrey, Riley and Kacy with love
—Carry on.

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FOREWORD

Jim Doherty

Looking back over the 20-plus years I've spent assigning and editing stories for *Smithsonian* magazine, I realize I've been blessed with more than my share of terrific writers—Richard Conniff, David McCullough, John Mitchell, Verlyn Klinkenborg, Geoffrey Ward, Robert Creamer, Sue Hubbell, Jon Krakauer, Wallace Stegner, Bil Gilbert. It's impossible to go through such an all-star lineup and say this one or that one is "the best." They're all great. But Bil Gilbert occupies a special place in my heart and my library. Bil stands out—not just because he's the only writer I've worked with who doesn't know how to spell his own name but because he is such a distinctive voice. A lot of writers are like so many slices of white bread—you can't tell one from another—but there's no mistaking Bil. Take any story or essay he ever wrote; it doesn't matter which. As soon as you start reading, you know you're dealing with the one and only.

I had been a Gilbertian for years before I joined *Smithsonian* in the winter of 1983, but I didn't actually meet Bil and start working closely with him until after I signed on. The magazine's editorial offices were located in a delightful old brick museum building on the Mall in Washington, D.C. Bil was one of our regular freelance contributors. Every so often, he'd drive in to town from his home in rural Pennsylvania to drop off a manuscript and talk shop with Don Moser, the editor, and me. Afterwards the three of us would hop in a cab and go out for a long, well-lubricated lunch at a restaurant, during which Bil, squinting and rasping, would work his way through a pack of cigarettes, lampoon the current lousy state of affairs in publishing and elsewhere, puncture various hypocrisies associated with the conventional wisdom of the day, hang the

latest version of political correctness out to dry, entertain us with outrageous theories about why things are the way they are, and relate one amusing yarn after another about the gaudy (to use his favorite adjective) characters he had encountered during his travels across the hinterlands.

What I remember best about those chummy get-togethers is the vivid quality of Bil's conversation—quirky, wide-ranging, reflective, unpredictable, wry, provocative. He writes the same way. Bil never begins a piece with the kind of self-conscious gimmickry and elaborate staging that so often passes as a "slick lead" in magazines. He just lights up and starts gabbing. His language is plain and simple. His sentences are crystal clear and direct. His subjects and ideas are uncomplicated—at the start anyhow. As the essays in this collection demonstrate, the Gilbert approach can vary, depending on the editorial requirements, but the voice and the basic pitch are always the same: "Hey, listen—I want to tell you about a subject that really interests me. I want to let you know what I think about it, and maybe even how I feel about it." Bil is that increasing rarity, a born storyteller.

If it were as simple as I seem to be implying, all Bil would have to do is turn on a tape recorder and start dictating. But it ain't easy to make it look easy. Bil knows what he wants his prose to sound like and he isn't satisfied until his ear tells him he has it just right. That means endless rewriting.

The place where Bil inflicts this torture on himself is a little shack behind his house. When he's in residence—which is to say, when he's not chasing down coatimundi in the wilds of Arizona or retracing John Steinbeck's expedition to the Sea of Cortez—he saunters out to the shack each morning, sits down at his desk and goes to work. Usually, he writes with a pencil on a pad of yellow lined paper. When things are going well, he may bang away on his old Olympia manual typewriter. There's no phone, no radio, no TV. Bil is a siege writer; he can't abide distractions or interruptions.

During a bull session in my office at the magazine a while back, Bil told me he rewrites each piece three times. He imparted this information with a studied air of confidentiality. As his editor and a sometime writer myself, I was pretty sure he was pulling my leg. Six or seven times is probably more like it; maybe 10 or 12. Writers are always trying to let on that they work faster and more smoothly than they really do, and the ones who work in solitude, like Bil, can get away with it.

But not all of them. One day I had an appointment with David McCullough to talk about a story he was going to do for *Smithsonian*. At the time, he was hosting a television series called *Smithsonian World*. As I waited in a reception area, I could see the eminent historian in his office. He was running his fingers through his elegant white locks and angrily ripping one sheet of paper after another out of his typewriter. He balled up each sheet and hurled it into a wastebasket. Then he leaped to his feet, paced, sat down, typed some more. On and on it went. Later, I told David I had witnessed his agonizing and asked what he was writing. Sheepishly, he told me it was a one-paragraph introduction for a program segment.

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A lot of writers are smart and talented. The really good ones, like McCullough and Gilbert, excel at least in part because they're stubborn as well. Maybe persistent is the word. They flat-out refuse to settle for anything less than the very best they can do. But the sage who said "I'd rather be lucky than good" understood that brains, talent and hard work aren't always enough. Luck helps.

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Bil was lucky from the start, by his own admission. You can read about his early life on the outskirts of Kalamazoo, Michigan, in his moving essay about a Christmas in the 1930s. He was fortunate to have a father and mother who nurtured his love of the natural world, and to live in a brushy countryside full of creatures he could study, shoot, trap or catch and keep in his room. He was a good athlete, a quick study in school and a nonstop reader with an unquenchable appetite for outdoors adventuring. By the time he graduated from college, he had long since decided that he wanted to write for a living. After he and his wife, Ann, spent a long honeymoon bicycling and canoeing across Canada, he commenced to do so.

Here again, he was lucky. When Bil started freelancing, America's hugely popular general-interest magazines were in their heyday and a brash, ambitious young fellow who knew a lot and wrote as well as he did could actually survive, even with a wife and kids to support. By the 1960s, Bil's byline was appearing regularly in *Esquire*, the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Sports Illustrated*, where he became a Special Contributor. In the 1970s, when the environmental movement shifted into high gear, he began writing frequently for *Audubon* and started his long and productive (nearly three dozen articles and essays, at last count) association with *Smithsonian*.

The editors of the biggest and best magazines knew what quality was. They were willing to run substantive, stylishly written stories at considerable length and to spend whatever was required to send Bil and other writers of stature just about anywhere they wanted to go for as long as it took to get whatever they needed. And for the most part, they knew better than to mess around with Bil's copy.

Bil put me on notice about that when I called one day in the late 1970s to ask him to do a story about wildlife researchers for *National Wildlife* magazine, which I was then editing. Although I had been a big fan for years, I had never talked to Bil before. I'd been told he was a pretty tough guy, so I was nervous.

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When he answered the phone, he sounded grumpy. His first question was: "How much are you paying?" His next was: "What kind of an editor are you?" I told him I didn't understand the question. He said: "There are two kinds of editors. The kind who show what big shots they are by rewriting everything that comes across their desk. And the kind who know good writing from bad and have enough sense to leave the good alone." I gulped, tugged on my forelock and told him I hoped I was the second kind. He delivered the piece on time, it was vintage Bil and I didn't touch it. In fact, I used a quintessential Gilbert phrase from the story as the headline: "A longing to know other bloods."

Because he has written so much and so well over the years about fascinating characters who are obsessed—rodeo champions, professional athletes, explorers and the like—it will come as no surprise to Gilbert aficionados to learn that their favorite writer is himself a bit of a character. The kid from Michigan became a burly, somewhat chubby gentleman of medium height with a graying crewcut, a shaggy mustache and a perpetual expression I can only describe as a scowl on the verge of becoming a grin. He's an indifferent dresser (a good thing, because his turtleneck sweater, sports jacket and trousers are usually flecked with ashes) and, of course, a nonstop talker. Bil loves to play the devil's advocate; if you assert that water always runs downhill, he'll try to convince you otherwise. As an ex-jock and frequent sports writer, he's also a past master of locker-room banter and the adroit put-down. Bil acts, well, too *ordinary* to be classified as some kind of genius, but he does have an extraordinary instinct for ferreting out contradictions and inconsistencies, which he delights in pointing out with a gleeful cackle.

I'm not a literary critic, so I can't evaluate the man's huge output on

that level; as his editor and friend, I'm biased anyhow. But when I put this collection and Bil's previous books next to those of other writers I admire, he more than holds his own in pretty good company.

What I think of as the golden age of nature writing began, for me at least, in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The top practitioners—which is to say, my own personal favorites—were John McPhee, John Mitchell, Edward Hoagland, and Bil Gilbert. McPhee wrote mostly for the *New Yorker*, Mitchell for *Audubon* and Hoagland for just about everyone. All four were superb stylists, each with his own strong voice. They shared this in common, too—they defined “nature” broadly to include not just flora and fauna but man and his works. Interestingly, they all liked to write about sports. Each fused elements of the personal essay, narrative and hardnosed journalism in ways I found fiercely compelling. McPhee was the grandiose architect, Mitchell the poet, Hoagland the daredevil acrobat and restless hobo. Bil? He's the garrulous good old boy who turns out to be shrewder than everybody else in the room.

They were like a pack of wolves, these four, hiding out in the wild, howling at the moon, seeing and hearing everything, pouncing on the subjects that needed to be done, saying what had to be said in ways only they could. Like other writers during those tumultuous times, they were against environmental degradation, sure, but they were uninterested in producing simplistic tracts or framing complex issues in black and white. They refused to run with the crowd. They were loners who held out for quality. They cared about issues, but more than anything else they cared about writing well.

For my money, Bil was and is the most engaging of the bunch, the most entertaining, the most down-to-earth. You have to love a guy who says, in effect: Hey, let's not take ourselves too seriously . . . let's just have fun. Bil can turn a phrase and touch the heart, but he's never been a rhapsodist or a doom-and-gloomer. He's a celebrator—a regular guy who thinks the world is a pretty neat place. So when you finish reading a Bil Gilbert story you're liable to end up with the same feeling that kid in Kalamazoo had “as he sat rocking and looking into the Christmas night” way back in 1931: “All is well.” It's a mighty nice feeling to have.