

Graduate Entrance Exam:

Critical Reading

Please read the following Jack Gilbert poem. Write your reaction to its meaning to the poet, its poetic structure, and its meaning to you. (100%)

### THE POET AT SEVENTEEN

My youth? I hear it mostly in the long, volleying  
Echoes of billiards in the pool halls where  
I spent it all, extravagantly, believing  
My delicate touch on a cue would last for years.

Outside the vineyards vanished under rain,  
And the trees held still or seemed to hold their breath  
When the men I worked with, pruning orchards, sang  
Their lost songs: *Amapola*; *La Paloma*;

*Jalisco*, *No Te Rajes*—the corny tunes  
Their sons would just as soon forget, at recess,  
Where they lounged apart in small groups of their own.  
Still, even when they laughed, they laughed in Spanish.

I hated high school then, & on weekends drove  
A tractor through the widowed fields. It was so boring  
I memorized poems above the engine's monotone.  
Sometimes whole days slipped past without my noticing,

And birds of all kinds flew in front of me then.  
I learned to tell them apart by their empty squabbings,  
The slightest change in plumage, or the inflection  
Of a call. And why not admit it? I was happy

Then, I believed in no one. I had the kind  
Of solitude the world usually allows  
Only to kings & criminals who are extinct,  
Who disdain this world, & who rot, corrupt & shallow

As fields I disced: I turned up the same gray  
Earth for years. Still, the land made a glum raisin  
Each autumn, & made that little hell of days—  
The vines must have seemed like cages to the Mexicans

Who were paid seven cents a tray for the grapes  
They picked. Inside the vines it was hot, & spiders  
Strummed their emptiness. Black Widow, Daddy Longlegs.  
The vine canes whipped our faces. None of us cared.

And the girls I tried to talk to after class  
Sailed by, then each night lay enthroned in my bed,  
With nothing on but the jewels of their embarrassment.  
Eyes, lips, dreams. No one. The sky & the road.

A life like that? It seemed to go on forever—  
Reading poems in school, then driving a stuttering tractor  
Warm afternoons, then billiards on blue October  
Nights. The thick stars. But mostly now I remember

The trees, wearing their mysterious yellow sullenness  
Like party dresses. And parties I didn't attend.  
And then the first ice hung like spider lattices  
Or the embroideries of Great Aunt No One,

And then the first dark entering the trees—  
And inside, the adults with their cocktails before dinner,  
The way they always seemed afraid of something,  
And sat so rigidly, although the land was theirs.

