

Pride

Dagoberto Gilb

Dagoberto Gilb is a writer, teacher, and carpenter. Born in Los Angeles, he has lived in Arizona and Wyoming, and now lives in Texas. His book *The Magic of Blood* won the 1994 PEN/Hemingway Award and was a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award. Gilb's most recent work of fiction, a novel, is *The Flowers* (2008). His work has also appeared in the *New Yorker*, the *Threepenny Review*, and *Harper's*. A nonfiction collection, *Gritos*, appeared in 2003 and is the source of this essay, which offers an elaborately lyrical definition of a common human emotion. As you read the essay, think about why Gilb attempts to define this particular word, *pride*.

PREREADING: THINKING ABOUT THE ESSAY IN ADVANCE

What are you proud of? Think about your hometown, your job, your family. What do you take the most pride in? Is your pride always justified? From your thoughts, develop a preliminary definition of pride.

Words to Watch

asphalt (par. 1) black material used for paving roads
watts (par. 2) units of electrical power
hemline (par. 3) line formed by the bottom of a skirt
agave (par. 8) a plant native to the southwestern United States and Mexico
heritage (par. 8) culture that is passed on from generation to generation
ancestors (par. 10) earlier generations in one's family or race

It's almost time to close at the northwest corner of Altura and Copia in El Paso. That means it is so dark that it is as restful as the deepest unremembering sleep, dark as the empty space around this spinning planet, as a black star. Headlights that beam a little cross-eyed from a fatso American car are feeling around the asphalt road up the hill toward the Good Time Store, its yellow plastic smiley face bright like a sugary suck candy. The loose muffler holds only half the misfires, and, dry springs squeaking, the automobile curves slowly

into the establishment's lot, swerving to avoid the new self-serve gas pump island. Behind it, across the street, a Texas flag—out too late this and all the nights—pops and slaps in a summer wind that finally is cool.

2 A good man, gray on the edges, an assistant manager in a brown starched and ironed uniform, is washing the glass windows of the store, lit up by as many watts as Venus, with a roll of paper towels and the blue liquid from a spray bottle. Good night, m'ijo! he tells a young boy coming out after playing the video game, a Grande Guzzler the size of a wastebasket balanced in one hand, an open bag of Flaming Hot Cheetos, its red dye already smearing his mouth and the hand not carrying the weight of the soda, his white T-shirt, its short sleeves reaching halfway down his wrists, the whole XXL of it billowing and puffing in the outdoor gust.

3 A plump young woman steps out of that car. She's wearing a party dress, wide scoops out of the top, front, and back, its hemline way above the knees.

4 Did you get a water pump? the assistant manager asks her. Are you going to make it to Horizon City? He's still washing the glass of the storefront, his hand sweeping in small hard circles.

5 The young woman is patient and calm like a loving mother. I don't know yet, she tells him as she stops close to him, thinking. I guess I should make a call, she says, and her thick-soled shoes, the latest fashion, slap against her heels to one of the pay phones at the front of the store.

6 Pride is working a job like, it's as important as art or war, is the happiness of a new high score on a video arcade game, of a pretty new black dress and shoes. Pride is the deaf and blind confidence of the good people who are too poor but don't notice.

7 A son is a long time sitting on the front porch where he played all those years with the squirmy dog who still licks his face, both puppies then, even before he played on the winning teams of Little League baseball and City League basketball. They spring down the sidewalk and across streets, side by side, until they stop to rest on the park grass, where a red ant, or a spider, bites the son's calf. It swells, but he no longer thinks to complain to his mom about it—he's too old now—when he comes home. He gets ready, putting on the shirt and pants his mom would have ironed but he wanted to iron himself. He takes the ride with his best friend since first grade. The hundreds of moms and dads, abuelos y abuelitas, the tios and primos, baby brothers and older married sisters, all

are at the Special Events Center for the son's high school graduation. His dad is a man bigger than most, and when he walks in his dress eel-skin boots down the cement stairs to get as close to the hardwood basketball-court floor and ceremony to see—m'ijo!—he feels an embarrassing sob bursting from his eyes and mouth. He holds it back, and with his hands, hides the tears that do escape, wipes them with his fingers, because the chavalitos in his aisle are playing and laughing and they are so small and he is so big next to them. And when his son walks to the stage to get his high school diploma and his dad wants to scream his name, he hears how many others, from the floor in caps and gowns and from around the arena, are already screaming it—could be any name, it could be any son's or daughter's: Alex! Vanessa! Carlos! Veronica! Ricky! Tony! Estella! Isa!—and sees his boy waving back to all of them.

Pride hears gritty dirt blowing against an agave whose stiff 8
fertile stalk, so tall, will not bend—the love of land, rugged like
the people who live on it. Pride sees the sunlight on the Franklin
Mountains in the first light of morning and listens to a neighbor's
gallo—the love of culture and history. Pride smells a sweet, musky
drizzle of rain and eats huevos con chile in corn tortillas heated on
a cast-iron pan—the love of heritage.

Pride is the fearless reaction to disrespect and disregard. It is 9
knowing the future will prove that wrong.

Seeing the beauty: look out there from a height of the moun- 10
tain and on the north and south of the Rio Grande, to the far away
and close, the so many miles more of fuzz on the wide hori-
zon, knowing how many years the people have passed and have
stayed, the ancestors, the ones who have medaled, limped back on
crutches or died or were heroes from wars in the Pacific or Europe
or Korea or Vietnam or the Persian Gulf, the ones who have raised
the fist and dared to defy, the ones who wash the clothes and cook
and serve the meals, who stitch the factory shoes and the factory
slacks, who assemble and sort, the ones who laugh and the ones
who weep, the ones who care, the ones who want more, the ones
who try, the ones who love, those ones with shameless courage
and hardened wisdom, and the old ones still so alive, holding their
grandchildren, and the young ones in their glowing prime, strong
and gorgeous, holding each other, the ones who will be born from
them. The desert land is rock-dry and ungreen. It is brown. Brown
like the skin is brown. Beautiful brown.