

DAVID HAMILTON

Light on the Body

A review of Margaret Gibson's *One Body* (Louisiana State University Press, 2007)

In "One Body," the title poem at the exact center of Margaret Gibson's new volume of celebration and mourning, with nineteen poems and thirty-five pages to either side of it, the narrator places herself in a field of wheat as it is being cut. The "clackety mower" circles inward from the perimeter, leaving less wheat standing with each round, which in turn drives the quail and rabbits closer and closer to the center of the field with its narrowing strip of cover. The action soon to follow will be violent and quick. Men "keen on the kill, late light / on the steel of their rifles," will enjoy the rush of the hunt, and the narrative one might expect is that of the chase, with, perhaps, dogs leaping over stubble like hurdlers to catch sight of rabbits as they break from cover. From the tops of their arcs, the dogs would hover, their eager heads turning this way and that, looking for a rabbit in flight. Men may chase after the dogs, to retrieve rabbits from canine jaws, to break a neck—mercifully?—and drop one more body into a pouch. And perhaps that "late light" on the rifles is as in the phrase "late capitalism," but if so, that is implicit, as Gibson surprises by neither thrilling to the hunt nor providing easy, editorial critique, but by taking the part of the rabbit. She too crouches in the standing wheat, because she wants to see how the body of the hunted "goes still,"

how the mind, how the lens of the eye
magnifies to an emptiness
so deep, so flared wide....

and she imagines rising "up from the mown and edible / debris of
the world / wrapped in a bright / net of pollen and stars, my thighs
/ twin towers of lightning / and my voice..."

188

a “storm of voices” ready to shout “Stop this. Stop it now”; and though the men are her “brothers,” whom she also loves, she halts them, crying,

*Look into my eyes
before you shoot*

For that moment, Gibson rises as a goddess, and her swift action would correct the violence that is our world, a world that, when properly seen by an informed, contemplative spirit, knows we are all one body, hunter and hunted, wheat and rabbit, earth and sky. Those words close the poem without punctuation because, let me suggest, there is no end of need for her cry.

For the most part, however, as Gibson knows well, we are all too divisible and incapable of correction, whether that means correcting others or enduring correction ourselves. *One Body* is an inventory of loss in four parts, three of which Gibson dedicates to the memory of others: Parts I and IV to the memory of Jean North Mitchell and Hobart Mitchell, whom, one gathers, were an older couple, neighbors and dear friends, surrogate parents perhaps, mentors and guides; Part III to the memory of Gibson’s father, mother and sister. Part II, the section that culminates with “One Body” and the only one not specifically dedicated, takes up a series of singular moments that cry out for correction, however unlikely or impossible: indentured servitude of Bangladeshi women in India, a memory of Gibson’s own violation by gaze and quick groping when a co-ed, our rape of the Middle East in a poem partially in the voice of our god, “Fuel”—make that emphatically disyllabic, Fu-él—and one that imagines and in so doing forces the reader to imagine, without distancing euphemism, the stealth and purpose of a female suicide bomber. Then, most intimately painful of all, a poem of the wounds of sister upon sister and of the speaker’s white family and community’s condescension toward a black family they knew well, employed, and exploited. The moral weight of the volume seems to turn on that poem, “Respect,” one of the two longest here, a poem that poises the servant Marie’s own complicated story of anger with and love for her employers against Gibson’s childhood memories of love for Marie, of almost but not quite innocent participation in her degradation, and of the starting point of a breach with her sister

that seems to have dogged both of them long into adult life. One of the most touching poems here closes Part III and is called “Cooking Supper While My Sister Dies,” in which reference is made to the late bridging of their breach although it can never truly be healed. One sign of that is the sister’s last supper, of “sugar water and oblivion,” whereas Gibson cooks for herself, and perhaps for other family members or friends, rice, onion, zucchini, and tomatoes with wine and the vine well mentioned. All of that is secondary however to capturing the inconceivable moment of her sister’s crossing over “into the Unsayable,” wanting her

to be like a flower that opens into a summer night
of stars, breath by breath.

Wondering, *Is it here? Is it yet? Is it now?*

the hard questions that animate numerous poems of Emily Dickinson.

Four of the poems in this book were first published here and three of those I have already mentioned, so my pleasure in this volume is at least twofold, first to relish again our earlier choices since those poems, on later reading, ring even truer, then finding so many other finely made and moving poems, the whole series that comprise the first and last sections with their loving memories of the Mitchells, the beautiful sequences for her father and mother, the second relationship more troubled, more difficult of resolution than the first. Some of these poems employ long lines in which much more is given contemplative presence; others are cryptic, wreathed in silence, and brief. One of those, a quiet favorite of mine, is “Dark Night II”:

Presence
cannot be verified

by breath alone.

Nor can it be inhaled
like the smell of the fresh peach

I brought to tempt her back into her life.

Within reach

all night it ripened.

As will this book, let me add, through more nights to come.

Meanwhile, readers who may wish a fuller account of Gibson's family story will be glad to know of *The Prodigal Daughter: Reclaiming an Unfinished Childhood* (University of Missouri Press, 2008), which, by now, will have just been published.