

Polar

DOBBY GIBSON

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Dobby Gibson is a poet of wind-chilled intimacies. He can associatively swirl from a leaf's bruise-colored stain on a sidewalk through leafless trees that check "us in to our little motels/of despair," without losing the situational logic that sprints us to a heart-pounding steadiness, as when reaching the safety of the other side of an ice-covered pond. *Polar*, Gibson's first book and winner of Alice James Books' 2004 Beatrice Hawley Award, is a luminous EKG of the poet's skillfully nuanced trekking through a world he cannot understand but unreservedly loves.

The sparking sway and swagger of *Polar* are the result of Gibson's refusal to let his attachments blind him and a product of his questioning of the world—the way in which he searchingly runs his fingers along the ice-shorn fissures of the lands that live both inside and around us: We are given a lawn-chair seat in the snowstorm that is ourselves, a view that is both personal and unparalleled. Gibson's unwillingness to avert his gaze gives us poems such as "Flying Buttress" in which

*More attention should be paid to the dramatic
pauses. This first snow as softly as snow
can happen, sky sniffing, like a child
in a laundromat, miserable autumn socks
stained with regret.*

There should be no denying the great and enjoyable impact poet Dean Young has had on Gibson. But *Polar's* frequently spirit-shaking intellect has radically altered the tradition to which it belongs in this lineage of contemporary American poetry. *Polar* overflows with laugh-out-loud humor, but these lines, just as swiftly as they tremble with humor, are tempered by a deepening that results in beautifully awkward sentiments. It is a book of poems that leaves the reader near bursting under the great pressure of trying to contain these emotional vicissitudes.

Gibson's use of language and wit is as piercing as the freezing landscape he writes from, but in their dexterous handling he has brilliantly fabricated a warmth that compounds the "truth" his poems yearn for. In tricks of language that a less capable poet might purposefully use to camouflage a poem's inadequacies, Gibson has fashioned birds that remain "devoted/to their own vanishing" ("Polar") or the manifold tenderness "No Surrender's" closing which urges: "Empty your pockets into mine./Now you've caught your thief."

The poems here do not succumb to *Polar's* frozen world—the "Small snow" falls "quickly and in/quantities to constitute a substantial burial" ("Solstice: IV"). Beneath the gilded ice, Gibson's land teems with a language so alive and so imaginative that one cannot help but read on with wonder and rapture, as if waking to a land-transforming layer of white, a blizzard so stunning that one must gaze with amazement at its blinding splendor, as in the poem "Upon

Discovering My Entire Solution/to the Attainment of Immortality/Erased From the Blackboard/Except the Word 'Save,'" in which a woman smoothing wrinkles from her skirt and tracing "the outlines of her thighs" makes "you" remember

*surprise assumes a space
that has first been forgotten,
especially here, where we
rarely speak of it,
where we walk onto the roofs
of frozen lakes
simply because we're stunned
we really can.*

Gibson has brought us poems of a body splitting with seeking and vision that desire answers while attempting to come to grips with this same goal's impossibility. In this he carries, heart-warmed in the insulated heat of a winter coat, Yeats' belief that "man can embody truth, but he cannot know it." In *Polar's* world "everyone's first wish/has always been to see/himself through another's eyes" ("No Surrender"), and from the sky "one snow falls like a medicine/that will never salve" ("Polar"). Because of its radiance we have no choice but to welcome this poetry in from the cold. Here are poems that fearlessly endeavor the failure of seeing from every angle with hope to understand. In watching *Polar's* snow fall slowly on a bicycle one knows that "all beauty will be lost,/and how even that loss/can be beautiful" ("Polar"), and can only eagerly imagine what shimmering whirlwind Gibson will lead us to next. ■

REVIEWER: **Alex Lemon's** poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *AGNI*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Hotel Amerika*, *Pleiades*, and *Post Road* among numerous other journals. In 2005 he received a Literature Fellowship in Poetry from the National Endowment for the Arts. He teaches creative writing at Macalester College in St. Paul, MN.