

NADIA HERMAN COLBURN

On Linda Gregg's *All of It Singing: New and Selected Poems*

Graywolf Press: Minneapolis, MN, 2008. 213 pages. \$24.00

All of It Singing is a beautiful book that displays not only the development of a writer but also the continuities and consistencies in this remarkable poet's career. Unlike poets such as Keats, Auden, or Rich, Gregg seems to be writing both in a similar style, and, more importantly, from a similar source throughout these poems that span seven volumes and nearly three decades.

In her essay "The Art of Finding," Gregg advises that poets must find "the resonant sources deep inside," and she writes, "I respond most to what is found out about the heart and spirit, what we can hear through the language." In these poems that are full of longing, desire, sex, marriage, infidelity, betrayal, and the pleasures of solitude, language is never surface; rather, it has mythic, transfigurative qualities that allow us to hear *through* to a deeper level. In their ability to tell profound truths and to transform those truths into song, I find these poems bold and powerful; they are also unsettling.

Here is a poem from Gregg's first volume, *Too Bright to See*, published in 1981:

Whole and Without Blessing

What is beautiful alters, has undertow.
Otherwise I have no tactics to begin with.
Femininity is a sickness. I open my eyes
out of this fever and see the meaning
of my life clearly. A thing like a hill.
I proclaim myself whole and without blessing,
or need to be blessed. I belong to no one. I do not move.
Am not required to move. I lie naked on a sheet.
and the indifferent sun warms me.
I was bred for slaughter, like the other
animals. To suffer exactly at the center,
where there are no clues except pleasure.

The signature style of the poet is present already in this early poem: the authority and ambition of the poetic voice; the clear, lyric “I”; the abstract thinking interspersed with classical imagery; the direct, syntactical sentences interspersed with sentence fragments. What is whole and what is fragmented, the physical and the numinous worlds, cannot be separated. Indeed, the very structure of the poem—a structure from which Gregg rarely diverges over her long career—the single stanza and lines of similar length—suggest that the whole and the part are a unit.

In an illuminating and intelligent review of *All of It Singing*, published in *The Cortland Review*, David Rigsbee compares the last three lines of this poem to Plath’s “Lady Lazarus,” in which Plath discusses her own suicidal tendencies. But whereas Plath’s poems are almost always thorny, Gregg’s poems, while complex, feel smoothed out. Where Plath is edgy, Gregg is calm and clear-sighted.

Plath is at the center of so many debates about confessional poetry not only because of the nature of her lyric voice, but also because of her role as a woman poet: in vibrant, powerful language she displayed her emotions on the page, and then she stuck her head in the oven, her two young children in the other room, and asphyxiated herself at the age of thirty. If it is unfortunate that conversations about Plath so often start here, it is also understandable. What role does Plath play for women poets? Is she a model or a warning?

I find myself asking similar questions about Gregg. What are we to make of a line like “Femininity is a sickness”? It seems to come out of the earlier lines: from a sense of having no tactics, of looking backwards to what she begins with, of looking to the source (to use that word again) of a self that has beauty but is also aware of the undertow of that beauty. Here, as throughout Gregg’s work, what is powerful is also dangerous. But do we agree? Is the line a declaration of the strength of women or is the line an abandonment of women? Does the line simply tell it as it is, and thus illuminate women’s condition, or does it help perpetuate those patterns of being? Or does it do both of these things at the same time, with a kind of ironic slipperiness that makes us probe the relationship between utterance and belief?

Whatever conclusion we come to, Gregg does not seem to care what we think: she moves on, and opens her eyes and *sees* “the meaning / of [her] life.” Note how the lovely enjambment makes the part and the whole inextricable. Similarly, the sentence fragment that follows, “A thing like a hill,” suggests not incompleteness but rather the inherent completeness of matter itself that does not even need a grammatical sentence to take its place in the poem or in the world.

Like the hill, the poet, too, *is*: she belongs to no one and lies naked on the sheet.

But the poem, which seems almost to lull us with its open voice and rhythms, does not rest: the last three lines are shocking in their linking of “slaughter,” “suffer”ing and “pleasure.” A world in which women are “bred for” this violence, this being consumed, is nightmarish. It’s partly the speaker’s complicated attitude that makes the poem, and Gregg’s larger body of work, so disturbing, and so powerful.

I want Gregg, or her speaker, to protest. And yet, the strength of the lines comes from their very refusal to protest. The singing, the celebratory voice of Gregg’s poems, the very beauty of the imagery can be seductive, but seduction itself, the poems remind us, is dangerous, and never in Gregg’s work are we far from those three lines, that sense of being bred for slaughter.

The opening lines from the title poem, “Chosen By the Lion,” of Gregg’s fourth volume, published in 1994, recall this early poem, and each of the poems assumes a deeper resonance in the *Selected* than in their first publication.

I am the one chosen by the lion at sundown
and dragged back from the shining water.
Yanked back to bushes and torn open, blood
blazing at the throat and breast of me.
Taken as meat.

Throughout her poems, Gregg never complains, nor does she cast herself in the role of the helpless, disempowered victim. Her power comes from living and writing with her eyes open.

The individual transcends itself in these poems and takes on the

qualities of myth, just as her language transcends itself and takes on the qualities of song. *All of It Singing* can be read as a dialogue with Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," in a poetic world in which time itself is paramount, at once eternal and fleeting, and in which the poet is always self-conscious about her own role as artist, making beautiful things, but by doing so participating in a world that itself is full of danger and brutality.

Almost always at issue in Gregg's poems, as in Keats's Ode, is the relationship between beauty, truth, and power—not least the power of the poetic voice to record, question, subvert, or perpetuate human violence. What exactly are the last lines of the Ode doing? The beauty and truth of the urn, which will "remain, in midst of other woe / Than ours, a friend to man" can transform the rape and sacrifice of lived experience to the immortal space of art, in which nothing is painful. But we must not forget the original pain of lived experience.

Keats's happy, happy love, on a mature reading, is at least partially ironic, as is the urn's simple equation of beauty and truth. Similarly, if Gregg is first and foremost a love poet, and if the poems celebrate relationships between men and women, they also show, especially placed side by side in the *New and Selected*, their dark underside and the dark underside of art, which is able to make beauty out of suffering. *Chosen By the Lion* chronicles an affair with a married man, who leaves the speaker waiting as he goes back to his wife, and throughout the *New and Selected* this pattern of women who are behind the scenes at the mercy of men becomes more apparent: there is the poem in which the speaker talks to her sister who is being beaten by a boyfriend, the poem in which the young girl is taken off to a prison camp in Greece because she refuses to

sleep with an officer, poems about whores, and a new poem, “You Never Loved Me” in which it appears Gregg’s first husband, Jack Gilbert, would leave the poet—at this point, when people are being named in poems, it becomes almost impossible not to do autobiographical readings—at the house all day when they lived together in Greece and go off with a male friend and do secret, unspeakable things to women, things that were “never told / except by rumor. / Maybe a naked woman on a roof.”

In this late poem, as in so many others, Gregg doesn’t make easy judgments. Like the Urn, her role is to participate as a kind of presence and witness, an empty vessel to contain the life. In “You Never Loved Me” the poet places herself at home; she was “alone / was feeling empty / was washing the floor with a bucket of water and a short broom.” The purity of the lines, the purity of the poetic voice, which seems to want to excise all extraneous imagery and language to get to a core of meaning and of song itself, comes, one can’t help but feel, in part in response to what else is happening. But again there is a part of me that wishes the poet would protest.

When Gregg’s poems from her many volumes are read together, other patterns emerge: the male God in *Chosen By the Lion* becomes more ominous, more startling, after the capitalized “Her,” that represents a female God, in Gregg’s previous book, *The Sacraments of Desire*. What is happening with the male body in the place of authority in the later book, and what does it do to the woman’s authoritative poetic voice? Like Keats’s Ode, Gregg’s poems seem self-conscious about the questions they are raising about themselves, but also as in the Ode, these questions are more easily asked than answered.

Always a careful craftsperson, Gregg constructed her previous six volumes of poems very much as books, with a coherent center and voice, and *All of It Singing* also, remarkably, reads as a coherent volume with beginning, middle and end that reflects back on that beginning.

Throughout the new poems, Gregg seems to be looking forward and back at once, to be looking both to her own beginnings and ends, and to be thinking about and commenting on her own body of work and her own working methods as a poet. The first poem in the section of new poems is an elegy for the poet Liam Rector, who, as the poem tells us, shot himself. Gregg's poem, "If We Are Quiet" opens: "Now that you are dead / I want to remember the year, / the month, the hour, and the season, when I began to write poetry,". When Gregg started to write, the poem tells us, she was a "young girl" and "what was secret was visible." This poem, as so many of the new poems, emphasizes themes that are present throughout Gregg's work: the fleeting nature of time, the exigencies of being alive, and the secrets that we carry with us, often from childhood—those secrets that are at once visible and invisible, known and not known.

But what are the secrets that the poems carry with them? Gregg herself invites us to read for content: "Best of all, of course," she writes in her essay "The Art of Finding," "is when the language and other means of poetry combine with the meaning to make us experience what we understand. We are most likely to find this union by starting with the insides of the poem rather than with its surface, with the content rather than with the packaging." Reading Gregg's poems, I at times long for more disclosure: what are the secrets that used to be visible and that become invisible, secrets that must be a

source, not only of the language of these magical poems, but also of their silences?

There are few voices in contemporary American poetry as strong as Gregg's. And the strength of her voice comes largely from the way her poems take at their center the secret material of women's experiences. By turning that experience into myth and song, the poet makes the experiences beautiful, larger than the self, and enduring. But it also, in some ways, perpetuates the patterns of rape and sacrifice that are fundamental to Western Civilization.

Gregg's book jacket is adorned with praise from many of today's heavyweight male poets: Gerald Stern, W. S. Merwin, Joseph Brodsky, and Czeslaw Milosz praise her. Jack Gilbert, too, has been a major figure and influence throughout her career. These men are wonderful poets, and she certainly deserves their praise, and deserves to be in their company; indeed, I believe that Gregg is one of the most talented poets writing today. But Gregg's poems come out of and are primarily about a woman's experience and placing Gregg in this male canon may distract us from that fact. For me their power comes from the way they document the simultaneous power and vulnerability of being alive: the poems ask that we hear through the language. What we hear is necessary, important, beautiful, and also, as the best art so often is, scary.