

A Fleda Brown reunion

ON POETRY • JOANN BALINGIT • October 18, 2009

Fleda Brown's sixth collection of poems, *Reunion* (University of Wisconsin, 2007) was chosen for the Felix Pollak Prize in Poetry by poet Linda Gregerson, who calls Brown's language "neighborly." I like this metaphor of place, of hometown haunts and streets being recognizable.

Neighborly suits these poems in which language insists on keeping things open and familiar, where "water rises from the ravine of its own making/ and falls, taking its gravity-ease, mindlessly clean,/ filtered and re-filtered through its own bed" ("Bridal Veil Falls").

That same language, however, can seep toward its origins of strangeness and surprise, or as the poet admits, toward "yet another unspeakable sadness I couldn't stop . . ."



Fleda Brown was Delaware's poet laureate from 2001 to 2007 and is Professor Emerita of the University of Delaware, where she taught English and Creative Writing for 27 years. Brown now lives in Traverse City, Michigan, not far from the cottage where her family gathers each summer, as her family did when she was a girl. On Thursday, October 22nd, Dr. Fleda Brown returns to Delaware to give a reading of new work, hosted by the Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts on the Wilmington Riverfront.

Like the wild flowers she studies in a series of poems in *Reunion*—Lady's Slipper, Jack in the Pulpit, Trillium and others—Brown's art thrives in local habitats. Delawareans will recognize cameo appearances by the Salem Power Plant and the Indian River Inlet, and may remember reading about the woman killed by a flying deer as she drove up New London Road. Brown's elegy for this stranger is clear-eyed and intriguingly upbeat.

Some of the poet's history is revealed in poems of her return to Fayetteville, Arkansas. Especially humorous is "Fayetteville Junior High," a poem about adolescence which begins "When we weren't looking/ Mr. Selby married Miss Lewis..."

The poems in *Reunion* amaze me for how they inhabit two regions at once, rooting one foot in the earth while the other dangles in imagination's rapids. Brown, like my favorite poets, gives me steady ground and a length of rope

before she calls me to leap enchanted into a poem's wild heart. Brown is an expert guide with a sharp eye and deft command of language.

This expertise shows in three poems called "Knot Tying Lessons." Loosely instructive on the slip knot, clove hitch and perfection knot, these anchor poems braid thoughts on marriage and love, mistakes and self-knowledge. Brown ties her observations into supple musings on life's loose ends: "How do we keep from going mad/ starting over with marriages and children/ making the same mistakes?"

Maybe

*we were to come through the loop bravely,
cross its outer border until we could see
clearly how it was we began all this,
slip under what we used to think
was the route, until we caught
our waywardness in a noose, and nothing
could slip loose. (from "The Perfection Knot")*

Though "retired," Brown works her head off, she reports, on projects of her choosing.

She teaches in the Rainier Writing Workshop, a low-residency MFA program at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington. Her favorite projects are writing articles for her local newspaper and writing the commentaries regularly aired on Interlochen Public Radio.

Though she loves Michigan's lakes, skies and cities miles and miles apart, she begins to miss the intensity of the East Coast each fall. "It's a beginning-of-school-year thing that I may never outgrow," Brown says.

This poet's intensity shows in accolades she's garnered recently. Her poem, "The Kayak and the Eiffel Tower," begun as an exercise at Cape Henlopen, won a 2009 Pushcart Prize. (As poet laureate, she initiated the Writers' Retreat at Cape Henlopen, biennially sponsored by Delaware Division of the Arts.)

Another new poem, "Roofers," is included in Best American Poetry, 2009 (Scribner). Her book of memoir essays, *Driving With Dvorak*, will appear in Spring 2010 from the University of Nebraska Press's "American Lives" series.

"The first thing I do when I visit Delaware," says Brown, "happens before I get there: I line up as many visits with friends as I can. I don't want to lose touch with anyone."

The Monday and Thursday readings are free and open to the public. Books will be available for sale and signing.

State Poet Laureate JoAnn Balingit writes an occasional column looking at verse and First State poets. Her chapbook of poetry, "Your Heart and How It Works" (Spire Press, spirepress.org, \$8) has just been published.

If You Go

What: former Delaware poet laureate **Fleda Brown** reading from new work

Where: Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts, 200 S. Madison Street, Wilmington, DE 19801, 302-656-466

When: 2 p.m. Thursday, October 22nd

Admission: Free

Of interest: Book-signing to follow

MAKEUP REGIMEN

I've developed complicated pores, I need radiance, more beauty steps,
more ice-colored bottles, the old me exfoliated so the young one can emerge

dewy, daily. As if I could see my own face, as if the mirror reflected me
by the shortest route instead of at crazy angles, all probabilities adding up

to my face, as if it weren't our ignorance that makes things appear in their
classical forms. When the Newtonian God went away, what took His place

acts more like rain, mist, sunshine, bounded by horizons du jour. Enter
clarifying lotion, like the crisp, high range of stars. The face of night's

supposed to be naked and spread form ear to ear, but at dawn the workmen
arrive with their electric saws, their hydraulic hammers; everything's to be

built again. The sum of it is complex: for example, my mother's mouth
in her coffin was all wrong. They made her look mature, confident.

Their mistake was concentrating on the flesh, trying to fill the emptiness
with it. She had her red suit on. They took her jewelry off when all we asked

for was her ring, leaving her not quite put together forever. I like to think,
though, that dying is like falling all the way back to where everything's

held to itself by memory. Two old men I knew in Arkansas would pass
each other Mondays on their country road, driving so slowly they had time

to ask after each other's family. "Mr. Caid," one would say, and nod.
"Mr. Kimball," the other would say, and nod. The main thing was to come

along looking as much as possible like somebody same as the week before.

— from *Reunion* (2007)

THROUGH SECURITY

I take off my boots because of their steel shanks.
I take out my orthotics, place my coat and purse in the bin,
place my carry-on on the belt. I take off my shirt, my jeans,
my bra. I take out my contacts. I take off my makeup
and earrings, strip the dye from my hair. I relax my stomach
to its honestly protruding shape. Still, it's all over the TVs
about me. I'm buzzed again as if there's been no progress at all
since the club-carrying, the dragging-by-the-hair. I take off
my skin, veins flying like ropes, organs dropping away
one by one. I address the additional matter of bones:
unfasten ball from socket, unhook ligaments,
leave the electronic eye no place to rest.
I am almost ready to go, if I could quit
thinking, the thinking that goes on
almost without knowing, the tiny person
crossing her legs in the back
of the mind, the one who
says, "I still love you,
dear guilty flesh."
-- from Reunion (2007)