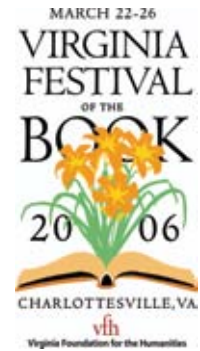


Breathing In, Breathing Out by Fleda Brown recommended by Dabney Stuart

A program of the Center for the Book at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, the “VABooks!” column suggests books for Virginians to read in common. This month, Dabney Stuart—author of *Family Preserve* and 15 previous poetry collections—recommends *Breathing In, Breathing Out* by Fleda Brown. We hope that individuals, book groups, families and neighbors will read and discuss VABooks! selections.



The Poet Laureate of Delaware, Fleda Brown has published five collections of poems. Her fourth, *Breathing In, Breathing Out*, which won the Philip Levine Prize for Poetry, shows her wide-ranging interests. Her subjects vary from piano lessons to buying a king-size bed and other suburban traumas to jazz, cats and dogs, murder, quantum physics, embalming, and baseball. This seems a motley list, but Brown subsumes everything to the integrity of her voice, and to her absorbing curiosity and probity into the mystery she finds in the most unusual places.

In “Cosmic Pitching,” for instance, she sees Luis Tiant’s famous glance at the sky as he brought his arm down to deliver the pitch as “proof that the center of the world is in / the body, not the sight.” The participants in “Fourth of July Parade,” passing and repassing when the parade sweeps by and then returns, seem copies of themselves: “Quantum physics says it’s true, / particles coming and going. / The road not taken may be taken.” In “Leaving Lewisburg on Easter Morning” she is tempted to escape the highway, but concludes, “I wouldn’t want to leave for another world, / but keep on straight along this one, / that would turn out cleverly / to be everywhere I go.” For all the pressure to flee, where she is turns out to be the best gift; for all the seductive power of metaphor, Brown roots her poems in the physical world.

But her turning everyday concerns toward other dimensions inevitably leads to the writer’s conundrum of seeming to replace experience with verbal constructions. This concern poignantly informs the whole of “Mary Rose Quotes James Joyce on the Cliffs of Bray.”

Similarly, she interprets “The Hare and the Tortoise” as being about “the stubborn drive / I have, and you, too. You’re / a strange fellow stretching your / neck into the world.” Along with instances of this sort of fanciful seriousness – both poet and poem stretch themselves into the world – Brown can poke fun at her preoccupations. Walking along a path in “Dogs,” she zones out, and wonders if she should be trusted at all, “the way I get lost / in Bishop and her lion and mutton-fat jade // while the world around me is / slurping and sniffing with recognition and pleasure.” The solemn melodrama that muddies much of contemporary poetry is mercifully absent from her poems.

At the center of her work is the skewing of sight slightly aside from its object, so as to see it better, catch a hint of its complex mystery. “So much that’s farfetched / lodges between the in and the out,” she says, evoking the book’s title. It is difficult to “speak directly to / the thing you want more than anything,” yet her poems embody such wanting, its glimpsing and indirection. Her poem for Bill Clinton’s inauguration (she’s originally from Arkansas) is a masterpiece in this regard. She realizes such a public parade “doesn’t bode well for the quiet poem, or the insect / inside the bark, or the old tree crumbling to dust / inside itself while the public word tree holds it erect.”

Fleda Brown said once, “The better you dance, the less you care where the next step takes you.” For those of us who think poetry enriches daily life, it’s fortunate that she has learned that kind courage and grace, as well as the guts it takes to keep sticking her neck out.