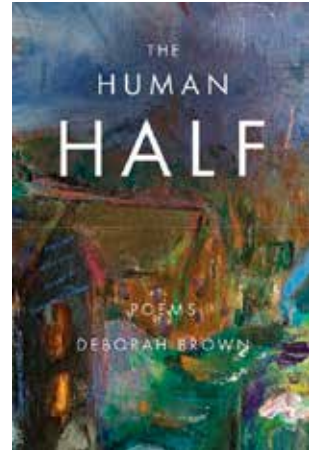


The Human Half: Poems
by Deborah Brown
Rochester, NY: BOA Editions Ltd., 2019
\$17.00
ISBN 978-1-942-68382-7



Reviewed by David P. Miller

In *The Human Half*, Deborah Brown wrests vitality and insight from doubts, contradictions, cul-de-sacs, and seemingly wrong turns. Her rich, unexpected diction reminds us that each starting point is fraught with multiple, buried potentials. Nevertheless, our lives' permanent unpredictability need not be simply disorienting; with proper attention, we can understand, maybe experience, fluidity and depth.

"Voices," the opening poem, testifies to the slippery relationships of sound with speech, speech with identity and personhood. At the start, something has gone missing:

*This isle, my ear, is empty.
Before, voices hummed in my ears,
they piled up, black cannon balls
stacked on the town green, geometric,
perfect, all memory of death
swept under June's mown carpet.*

Many different things occur here. The remarkable image of voices as cannon balls pivots into their assurance and tangibility. At the same time, their perfection is petrified, as the speaker can't help but bring death into the picture. In any event, the voices no longer have stability: they mutate into other sounds, vocal and otherwise, "rarely songs." She wishes "for tones / that shimmer, sounds that twangle, a poem / in the swill of speech" but must settle for "dried peas in a coffee can. The day rattles / empty as a gourd." Notice that although she concludes "My ear's been alone too long", it's clear from the language itself that her ear is well and thoroughly tuned, whether to voices or tones.

There are poems that suggest a difficult family history, often embedded in seemingly simple memories. In "The Unpainted House," the speaker as young girl has either just fallen from her first bicycle or is "on my knees in the woods / scraping pine needles left and right / with cupped hands to make neat trails." One or the other (or both) of these moments is wedded to remembered voices both definite and tentative:

*[. . .] From the woods –
I think I heard it—anger so loud
trees and rocks and earth piles trembled
and then—I think I remember it—
a screen door from its hinge
left to flap like a demented tongue.*

Wilderness House Literary Review 14/4

The rage that disables the door from speaking carries forward in an encounter with a mother, likely in later life, bound up again with voices both frank and stifled:

*I hear my voice, stuck in memory,
"Pull your nightgown down, Mother."
And my name in my mother's voice,
a growl in her throat, the taste of tannin
and fear in my mouth, the burnt
crust of the edge of ever[y]day.*

In "What I Know About the Night Sky," Deborah Brown fuses the qualities of light and darkness, almost to suggest them as inextricable. "The new moon is never visible / on the night of the New Moon." There's a failure, as the night betrays its own name, "though when the sky is darkest / you sometimes see fireballs flash." This image pivots in two more lines to the speaker's brother, suffering during that same night the explosions of electric shock therapy. At the same time, light arrives from a dead time: "Andromeda / so many light years away that the rays / I see tonight were emitted / when woolly mammoths and saber-toothed tigers / roamed here." A moonless night named for a moon; light in the night sky like the bursts in a wounded brain; starlight from a possibly extinct source; and finally

*The next day my brother
reaches out to me from the darkness
he's wrapped in. He tests the light.*

Many poems in *The Human Half* express the radical uncertainty of knowledge, or instability of perception, with what appear to be simple premises that go to pieces as one contingency evokes the next, the poems escaping the speaker's (and reader's) control. "Here's Looking" is an outstanding example. The lead-in title evokes "here's looking at you," and at first the poem seems genially autumnal: "at the way fingers of birches tangle / as roots reach up, reach out". That's the first couplet; the second quickly undoes it: "at the row of colored bottles lined up / that you're taking aim at". While in that first line, the bottles could have been decorative finds or souvenirs, with the second there's immediate violence or its threat. This pace slides into further rapid-fire images of danger and threat:

*and at the mulberry bush we hid under
together and at the father speeding

into the garage, ramming the bins
after you jump out of the way*

There's an attempt to recover with another "Here's looking" and some quiet expressions – "through the keyhole, out the window, / down the rabbit hole" but that can't be sustained either. The poem hurtles toward a conclusion of forced looking/refusal to look. The title finally becomes impossible, with even "Here" unbearable:

Wilderness House Literary Review 14/4

Am I still looking for, at, out

*for you? Not. And not
under the bed. Looking past*

the house, the car, the guns.

“What to Call a Chicken,” complete in six couplets, similarly seduces at its opening with a curious question: “Why call a chicken a chicken when you could / see it as a yellow feather in the eye of the morning?” An interesting, fresh metaphor. Then, as with “Here’s Looking,” the poem plummets almost instantly, one image falling into another in stunning succession. An unsettled farm (“the broken eggs, the goat’s sad bleat”) slides through an empty bed to an empty, collapsing house (“the shattered wall, the crumbling / bedroom door”), to hanging, crumbling stone and even a snow that fails:

*The stone wall has toppled all over itself,
the snow failed its banks, its whiteness.*

Quieter on the surface, but finally as unsettled, “The Green Scent of Snow” begins with a modest sensory image:

*Snowfall fills the crevices
in my dreams, a scent fresh
as green. My neighbor
leaves for the night shift,
snowbanks reflect car lights.*

Looking into the night, the speaker searches for Pluto but remembers it’s not possible with the naked eye: “Another one / not seen anymore.” That disappearance is followed by an understatement of willful collective suicide: “We clear our neighborhood / of the atmosphere we need to live.” A state of complete obscurity, created by us, ends this brief poem:

*For weeks now no one in Beijing
has seen a neighbor
walk through the thick gray air
towards her at noon.*

Although every perception is provisional, every conviction unstable, what consistently stands out in these poems is a lack of rhetorical distress. There’s no melodrama in Deborah Brown’s language: the insecurity of our existence comes through in what almost seems like a succession of rudimentary facts.

This selection doesn’t do justice to *The Human Half’s* range of tone and subject matter. There are insightful ekphrastic poems, such as “In Black and White and Red,” concerning a painting by Matisse, and “A Woman Holds a Balance in Jan Vermeer’s Painting.” In contrast with Matisse’s work, where a female model representing a maid is subjugated to function as a compositional/color element, the Vermeer painting seems to model the speaker’s own longings for reason and harmony. “A Woman” is also

Wilderness House Literary Review 14/4

one of the few poems in the book that speaks in short lines, and the only one with lines of a single word. Its line-broken diction skillfully enacts its images, as in:

*of this
derangement of mind
and senses inflicted
on me — perhaps not
on me alone —*

“Various Rains” stands out with the remarkable imagination brought to bear on its subject. These rains are sometimes personified (“sooty city rain that grabs your lapels”), sometimes not (“rain full of molasses”). Each has an unexpected relationship with human moods or emotions, but resists stereotyped associations, as the feeling-tone of each is experienced for itself.

“In the Snowfield,” the book’s concluding poem, evokes blankness, a potential fall off the edge into a void. At the same time, this hazard is countered by her actions and the imagination she brings to the place:

*[. . .] My skis
carve an equator. The wind
sketches meridians. So much
that I see is not there.
The map I make
guides me through the blank fields.*

But these markings are provisional, to be taken back by the world which includes us but does not depend on us. “The straight lines / are longing. Drifts / erase our path.” We desire, we pass through. We leave our traces, we are erased. Until then, as “In the Cambrian” reminds us, there is “that flare of life in me, through you.”