

Driving With Dvořák: Essays on Memory and Identity

Fleda Brown

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In *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*, Vladimir Nabokov connects memories rather than chronological events. Fleda Brown does much the same in her memoir *Driving with Dvořák*. Idiosyncratic and lovely, the essays that make up this book reveal a great deal about the person named Fleda Brown but known to many as Fleda Jackson, former poet laureate of Delaware and Professor Emerita at the University of Delaware. The revelations come “in the hush between words.” The style here is oblique. “What begins as my own history, then, becomes my spiritual state, defined by absence.”

Nothing defines that more than the presence of music. As the title essay “Driving with Dvořák” suggests, music plays a significant part in the author’s awareness of her own identity growing up in the 1950s and 1960s in a complex family. “It is the music of the accumulations of my life,” she writes. Life, too, has slow allegro movements and dark largo doldrums and fast bag-slam scherzo passages, where things are speeding up. There is sadness and joy to the music of life.

She learns to let absence work for her “the way Dvořák symphony brings back the melody again: strident, purposeful, transformed into ritual.” For instance, there’s the arrival (at the lake where the family went each summer), then the gathering (of difficult family), and finally the chorus (of three grown-up sisters still trying to find their places in the universe that orchestrates our lives). It isn’t forgiveness that they bring so much as love, “but the love is a big room furnished with anger and pain.”

With a brother who was retarded and prone to seizures and parents stuck in a deadlocked union, the author not too surprisingly pulled away at a young age. She got out by getting married, which, for her was somewhat like leaving the frying pan for the fire. With humor and hindsight, she reflects on such moments that make up her existence.

You present your life to yourself. You give it a happier ending, make a shapeliness out of it. The art sends you back to memory, where it came from. You can't have the original, which maybe never was the right thing, but you can have this.

TRINA CARTER (February 17, 2011)

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