

Spring 2010

Driving with Dvorak

Fleda Brown

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DRIVING WITH DVOŘÁK

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AMERICAN LIVES

SERIES EDITOR: TOBIAS WOLFF

DRIVING WITH DVOŘÁK

ESSAYS ON MEMORY AND IDENTITY

FLEDA BROWN

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS | LINCOLN AND LONDON

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Set in Quadraat Sans
by Kim Essman.
Designed by R.W. Boeche.

In memory of my mother
Mabel Frances Simpich Brown
1922–1996

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I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart's core.

—W. B. Yeats, “*The Lake Isle of Innisfree*”

Out of this, we come in the endless sadness of children.

—Ruth Stone, “*All in Time*”

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Acknowledgments

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Changing My Name

The name that can be named is not the eternal name.
The nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth.

—Lao-tzu (571?–? BCE)

Even while the Psalmist is uttering “His name shall endure forever,” look at his fellow Hebrews, stoning each other to death for daring to utter it! Shrink the Eternal into syllables and you have idolatry, or inaccuracy. Or both. Yet the next lines from Lao-tzu are:

*The named is the mother of all things.
Therefore let there always be non-being, so we may see
their subtlety,
And let there always be being, so we may see their
outcome.
The two are the same,
But after they are produced, they have different names.*

I swear, though, my name lies down over the naked being that is not my name and gradually bleeds its color in. Pull

the two apart and each blushes with the hue of the other. My name itself, even, is colored with the past. I am a war baby and a first grandchild, named after my grandmothers—Fleda Brown and Sue Simpich—who lived next door to each other and needed to be equally appeased. They and my mother wove a tight nest while my father was overseas. The name Fleda may have come from Fleda Vetch in Henry James’s *The Spoils of Poynton*—my great-grandmother supposedly liked James—or from a children’s book, *Elfleda the Elf*, that was still in my grandparents’ library when they died. There were three of us on Garth Avenue—Fleda Brown, Fleda Brown, and Fleeta Stevens, my grandmothers’ age, next door on the opposite side from the Simpiches. We called ourselves the Fleets, and we all were: thin, alert like deer.



It is the beginning of the year at Leverett School. I know my name is next in the roll call because the teacher hesitates. I am tense, embarrassed, my name exactly matching my awkward self. I am not a Marianna or a Jane, no matter how hard I try. “Fled (as in ‘escaped’)-uh?” the teacher’s voice rises to a question mark. She has assumed a vowel between two consonants is generally short. Or she says “Frieda,” seeing not the actual letters but what she expects to see. In the sixth grade I decide to use Sue, my middle name. All of us are transmogrified that year, growing new bodies, trying the same thing with our names. When I am thirteen, I go by Sue all summer at the lake, the same summer I go without

my glasses to win the love of a boy named Lee with large, soft lips, who spends the summer with his parents at Ken-Thelm, a resort down the lake. I feel my way through a fuzz of trees all through July and August. I paddle down the lake, trusting my instincts to get me around the point, past the shallows. The last day, before we leave, the reason for my deprivation tells me he is in love with Judy Carr, whose family owns the cottage next to ours, because she is such “a sharp dresser.” Indeed, she is. I cannot argue.

Fleda and Sue represented a genteel tug-of-war between my grandmothers. My mother’s mother, Susie Pauline Rawlins Simpich, a member of DAR, family historiographer, would take me aside when I was older and suggest that I fuse FledaSue, so her Sue would not be lost when I married. The Professor Browns next door were perhaps too much for her intellectually, but she had distant relatives who sailed over on the *Mayflower* to become part of the few indisputable American elite, and she had John Quincy Adams as her direct ancestor. She had *Nec vi standum nec metu*—Neither Hesitation nor Fear—on a coat of arms. And a brick with a label varnished across its surface that proclaimed, “Made by slaves on the old Rawlins homeplace.”

At four or five, I am so intimidated by Fleda Phillips Brown that I will not call her by her name, Grandmother. The name is her choice. Susie Simpich is Nana, a name I am told I invented before I found out that half the grandmothers in the world are called Nana. But I duck my head in front of my regal Grandmother. I cannot say that I think she is wonderful: at

the age of four or five I have no such clearly formed thoughts, but her presence—maybe I pick this up from my mother, who is intimidated by her—often leaves me breathless. Who knows how energy begins to collect, to turn people into icons? She looks a little like Eleanor Roosevelt, only prettier, the same weak chin, the same slightly yellowed iron-gray hair wound on her head. The same strength in the wiry body, the same conviction in the voice. “Say Grandmother,” my mother says, and I duck my head. “Oh, you can say Grandmother,” she begs, as if it were her fault. I pull away. But I sit on Grandmother’s bed and comb her long hair while she reads to me. I stroke and stroke with the ivory comb, lost in her voice, in the privilege of her long hair.

She died when I was nine. I don’t remember any words we ever exchanged, but I remember other small scenes, walking to the outhouse with her before bedtime at the lake, for instance. We would hear the owl, the disembodied voice of the dark come to get me, to pull me into the black lake behind us. It felt as if I could not stop the downward slope of the path toward the lake. “Listen, Fleda, an owl”: I imagine she said my name, and that was what kept me from the lake, the night of the owl. Fleda and little Fleda walking to the outhouse within the radiance of the lantern. I see her at home in Columbia, wearing her apron, washing dishes in a pan in the long porcelain sink. I have just brought in a bowl of crab apples from the tree in the back yard. She dries her hands and takes it from me and sets it on the

table. How nice the crabby little things can grow, how heroic I am to have rescued them from the birds. Just that, two Fledas smiling.



Brown, however, rested invisibly on me, an unflappable, probably German name, although it shows up in many languages. I imagine the prototype *Brown*—singled out, others pointing at her hair, or her skin, darker than theirs, mouthing the difference and freezing her into synecdoche forever. Hollow the *o* in upper palate, lower the bow of the tongue, and it comes out an elegant “ow,” as in Eliza Doolittle’s practiced “How now, brown cow.” Or the name on the mailbox at Central Lake for almost ninety years. Or Great-Grandfather in a photo on the beach at Grand Traverse Bay, standing erect in his suit, vest, and tie, “properly representing the state of New York,” as he supposedly insisted. Or Grandfather with a limp from TB, rubbing down his leg with grease that he claimed helped, swimming almost out of sight down the lake with his earplugs in, deaf to the world, or sitting in his lawn chair writing all morning, then at his typewriter all afternoon, writing books arguing for Land Value Taxation. Grandfather, stopping me between the two cedars in front of the cottage to correct me on the use of “whomever” instead of “whoever,” teaching objective case while balancing on his one good leg.

When I say the name, the myth of the Browns is absorbed into me and speaks through me: Aunt Cleone, bringing her

own organically fed chickens and sprouted beans with her to the lake, Uncle Richmond, building his own cottage down the lake, running triathlons at the age of seventy-five, and my father, taking long weekend trips with his bike club until he is almost eighty, and beating everybody, hands down, in the dictionary game. Point to the hardest word, ask him to define it. If he has never heard of it, he gets it right because of its roots. I invest them all with the brains and character I want for myself. I set their ideal selves in front of me to get me where I want to go.



The truth is, my original name is dead forever. No worker in the dusty back rooms of the Social Security Office, or the Bureau of Internal Revenue is at this minute pulling out an old manila file, exclaiming, “Oh yes, there she is!” At seventeen, I traded Brown with abandon for another color, Gray. At thirty-one, I exchanged that name for Jackson for the next twenty-three years, although the marriage lasted only twelve of those. I’ve worn Jackson longer than I ever wore Brown. It is another Brown I am taking up now, the other fourteen- or fifteen-year-old, the one who took a different path, who was not so desperate for love and attention that she needed to grab the first boy to come along and attach herself to his name.

For women of my generation, adolescence was particularly terrible. Our mothers were not who we wanted to be; we who

wished to become powerful modeled ourselves after men. But the pulling away from our gender was accompanied by the dreaded breasts, the dreaded period, and our unconquerable, wild yearning for what they meant. We were torn from ourselves, we wrenched ourselves from ourselves with a vehemence, even while having kids, one eye on the kids, one on the open road, where our fathers were leading the way, whistling. I am perfectly aware that Brown is my father's name. Maybe in readopting it I am overthrowing my mother again. I prefer to think I'm reclaiming the joint project of their young lives, in its original, before it got distorted—like going back to original Christianity, or to Hinayana Buddhism, or Wicca. I know this is not the truth, either.

I have two grown children and five grandchildren at present, another one on the way. I have books and articles and poems published with the name Jackson on them. I have decided to quit worrying whether people will recognize me in print. "Fly down, Death: Call me: / I have become a lost name," says Muriel Rukeyser's *Madboy*. I could be a new poet, with a new name. Every poem is a new start. I suppose I might have changed Fleda, considering how many mutations naturally occur in my mail: Felda, Fleeta, Freda, Reba, Redda, Fleita, Lita, Leeda, Cleda, Cleter. But it is Jackson I have decided to abandon eleven years after my divorce, eight years into my present marriage. I have been wearing it, letting it flap at the end of my name to avoid confusion, and to avoid the dozens and dozens of agencies, bureaus, brokers, and

banks I would have to contact. I can't say exactly why I've changed my mind now. I had a thought, though, of my tombstone, Fleda Brown Jackson chiseled on it for what passes for eternity to the human mind—that name no longer signifying the old, anguished relationship but standing at the point of death for expediency, officialdom, like a Social Security number. I want to die as fully myself as possible.



I imagine other people filling out the Change of Name Form—a Brad becoming a Rambo, a Jacamaya becoming a Mary, a Bernard becoming a Brad. I imagine them all with Hollywood motives, less serious than mine. But then I see that the form allows for change of minors' names—young children losing their ousted father's name, gaining their cruel stepfather's name, a furious mother changing all her kids' names to her own. I invent stories, all worse than mine.

It costs fifty-nine dollars in Delaware to change your name, thirty-four dollars for the newspaper notice, and twenty-five dollars for the filing fee. The form simply asks for your present name and your proposed "new" one. Then—and this is the sticky part—you have to advertise your intentions in a local newspaper for three consecutive weeks and include proof that you have done this with your application form. I choose a paper in Middletown, as far from Newark as allowed. I am embarrassed, as if I were a caterpillar with a Plexiglas window cut into the chrysalis so everyone

can see the tender workings of its transformation. I wish I could let the change happen without having to say a word, just go out one day and be Brown instead of Jackson. Read my poems, don't read me. I am cringing a little, my nameless being shifting like a baby in the womb, readjusting in response to outer pressure. I am shifting inside.

This is no small change. The first person I told, besides my husband, was my son, Scott. "Well, as long as you don't change your name to something besides Mom, I'm okay with it," he said. So far, so good.

Standard Oil becomes Esso becomes Exxon. Bernie Schwartz becomes Tony Curtis. Norma Jean Baker becomes Marilyn Monroe. Prince becomes The Artist Formerly Known as Prince. St. Petersburg becomes Leningrad and then St. Petersburg again. The Belgian Congo becomes Zaire and then The Republic of the Congo. Rhodesia becomes Zimbabwe. And Czechoslovakia! Even our little Newark started out as New Ark. As thoughts roil and pitch inside our heads and interior images slide in front of our inner eye, the exterior frame is also shifting, collapsing, and being built again. Speed up time, and even the mountains undulate.



It is the day I am to go to civil court. Driving through the last of the golden trees, I remember that tomorrow is the third anniversary of my mother's death. I see her standing over my lawn chair at the lake, joking with me, calling me

Mrs. Beasley, my then and present husband's name. "No," I said, "That's not my name." "Well," she said indignantly, "It should be." In her day, there were rules.

If a person can choose her own name . . . I feel the hairline crack opening up in my public self. It's scary to think I could become Rebecca Allworthy, for example, or Sonia Valentine. Who would I be, then? And what am I now, halfway between one surname and the other, known to everyone by one and carrying the secret of the other? I sign Jackson on the credit slip at the restaurant because it's still on my Visa card, even though I know that name is no longer all of the truth. What does it mean to say you have changed your name? You can just do it, without the legal work. You can go by a public name but keep a secret one for Social Security and on the other main documents of your life. You have that power. Yet finally, there is some continuity of self beyond the name, beyond the change of body cells every seven years, the change of height and weight, of political party and hairstyle, of health or sickness. New cells keep appearing, repeating their mantra, "This, this, not that." New thoughts keep appearing, already dressed and dancing to the old invisible rhythms below the surface of consciousness.



I'm surprised by the formality of the occasion. I pass through the metal detector and into the courthouse, its rotunda echoing. I am directed to the Court of Common Pleas office.

I am a commoner, my cause is common. It is required that I plead my cause. I try to see myself as assured in the marble face of The State. The clerk tells me I can go upstairs to the courtroom. I climb the spiral staircase instead of taking the elevator, enjoying the depth, the height, running my hand along the gold-topped banister, up to the broad window over the city of Wilmington toward the harbor and the bridge. I want to sit on the bench in the hall and look out the window, but the black-suited attendant tells me I can go on in, which makes me feel obligated to do so. Courtroom 303 is not large but contains the accoutrements—two lawyers' tables in front of a spectator's area, and the judge's "bench," as it is called, high above, with large books and a water jug. On the right is an American flag with an American eagle at the top of its pole; on the left a Delaware flag with, sure enough, a Blue Hen—the University of Delaware's mascot—at the top of its pole. I am beginning to feel a little giddy with tension. There is a witness podium with twin microphones in front of the judge. I sit in the spectator area and commiserate with the woman sitting next to me about how low the seats are, like car seats set on the ground. From here, the judge could be a Titan, Zeus himself. Exactly as intended, I am thinking.

The court clerk has slightly damp hair and a cold. The attendant tells her she should be at home. "I had chicken soup for lunch," she says. "I'll be better tomorrow. After all, I've been sick two days already." I am in a novel, allowed to peer

through simultaneous layers, from intimate to official. The child behind me kicks his feet up and down and repeats “judge, wudge, dudge, pudge” to his father. “All rise,” the attendant says. The judge comes in, perfectly in character—white hair, black robe—and there we are, a handful of us, feeling for a moment our illusion of autonomy crumble against the immutable script of the law. One by one we are sworn in and told to sit in the witness seat. There is a mother changing her eight-year-old daughter’s surname to her own. Shelly, a pretty child with long blonde hair and a white ski jacket on, heads for the witness seat, but the judge asks her to sit below and interrogates only the mother. I am wondering why Shelly is never asked if she herself wants her last name changed, but I assume she does, since she obviously enjoys the occasion. She and her mother are a pair, I can tell by the way she swings back and forth in the lawyer’s chair below, as if all the words have been rehearsed, and now all she has to do is watch. “Have you tried to contact the father?” the judge asks. “Yes sir, but I haven’t seen him since she was born. He has had no contact with us and has not supported her.” “Has he ever acknowledged his paternity?” the judge asks. “No,” she answers more quietly. Petition granted. There is a young Black man, arriving late, dressed in new black jeans and a black Nautica jacket, changing his name from LeRoy to something that sounds like Jaméil—the judge clarifies the accent mark—“for business reasons.” The judge doesn’t ask what they are. Petition granted. There is a woman changing her young son’s

name because she promised his dead father's mother she would. I can't follow the whole story. They are there with a man she obviously lives with, maybe a new husband. She and the man are huge, very fat, and the little boy is tiny and skinny, wearing a miniature old man's cotton fishing hat. He looks like their toy, the "judge, wudge, pudge, dudge" kid, grinning in the oversized chair. Petition granted. There is a red-haired woman who gives her reason as "divorce" and will say nothing more. Petition granted. I am last. I have been planning what to say, how to make my two minutes perfectly cogent, as if I need to capsulize my life accurately, provide the nuances, make it clear who I am, before God.

I put my hand on the Bible, the relic of truth, the old threat of damnation. Yes, I'll tell the truth, the truth of my whole life, give me a chance—the slow pains of recognition, the bursts of joy, the wrenching of love, of sorrow—but there isn't time, so I distort it into what can be delivered in a flash. Like a name. I state my name. I seem to be reading it off my Change of Name Form, in my head. "Are you changing your name in order to defraud any creditors?" the judge asks. *Sure, I think, my mind giggling to itself on a separate track: I am here to tell you, Mr. Judge, I'm changing my name to defraud my creditors.* On the other track, I answer what he wants to hear, unsmiling. "Were there any children by this marriage?" "Yes, uh, oh, no, not by THAT marriage." Now I've done it; I sound like a reckless woman, all those marriages. What kind of mother am I who can't remember which one produced the children? How fit am I to be allowed to

shift my life again? I try a smile that projects warmth, sincerity, and stability. I draw myself up in the chair. “Why do you want to change your name?” he asks. I lean slightly toward him. “I should have done this eleven years ago,” I say, “but I was too upset, you know, to take it on then, all the forms to change.” He smiles slightly, nods toward me. I have him, I think. “And I am a writer; I was a little worried about name recognition. I’ve decided I can work with that after all.” *Work with that*, stupid way to put it, but too late now. It’s over. He mumbles “Petition granted,” as if it were a sure thing all along, which we both knew it was, but give anyone a highly restricted forum, I’m thinking, and she’ll knock herself out to be all she can be within it, creating herself every second.

Each of us is separately counseled to go back downstairs to the civil office to pick up our certificates. The others are waiting when I get there, the two kids watching the computer screen savers dance in multiflora patterns behind us, begging to play on the keys. I am surprised at how elated we all are. We smile and joke while the clerk triumphantly pounds a gold circle onto each certificate and squeezes the official imprint over it. He signs copies. He gives me the original and five copies in a manila folder. I ask him where the Social Security office is, and since it is on my way home, I take on the first of my tasks.

I do that, and I get a new driver’s license, too. I am floating between names all afternoon, showing evidence of who I

am. I am called Ms. Brown three times. At the DMV, I see the computer screen as the woman erases Fleda B. Jackson and types in Fleda Brown, and for a moment I am sad for Fleda Jackson, who has stuck it out for twenty-three years, for her own separate hard-won self. I see her brushing back her hair, gathering up her notes, cleaning out her files. She asks me what I will need and puts those folders aside for me. What will she do without writing? What have I done? I walk down the corridor to the photo room, dazed, but on my new driver's license, Fleda Brown is grinning. It looks as if she had just been crying, and someone had said something funny that made her grin in spite of herself.



Fleda Jackson keeps flashing at me from magazine labels and letters, from voice mail and e-mail. Last weekend I gave a poetry reading in Kansas and didn't bother to correct anyone when I was called Fleda Jackson, over and over. After all, there were my books, solid evidence. I allow her to go on, skating out like Roadrunner over thin air for a while. She'll fall soon enough. I have *the rest of my life*. Years ahead of me, Fleda Brown sits on her deck, a withered version of the driver's license picture. She wants to laugh and cry at the foolishness of names in the face of the nameless infinite. But still, it is good old foolish life itself, its pickiness, that she loves, has loved. The right word. Exactly the right word, if she can find it.