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The Woods Are On Fire

Fleda Brown

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THE WOODS ARE ON FIRE

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TED KOOSER CONTEMPORARY POETRY | *Editor: Ted Kooser*

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THE WOODS ARE ON FIRE

NEW AND SELECTED POEMS

FLEDA BROWN | Introduction by Ted Kooser

University of Nebraska Press | Lincoln & London

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All things, oh priests, are on fire . . . The eye is on fire;
forms are on fire; eye-consciousness is on fire;
impressions received by the eye are on fire.

THE BUDDHA

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The author is grateful to the print and online editors in whose publications the reprinted poems in this volume originally appeared, sometimes in different versions with different titles.

The selected poems were first published in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *American Poetry Review*, *Ariel*, *Arts & Letters*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Cortland Review*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Croton Review*, *Dunes Review*, *Georgia Review*, *Image*, *Indiana Review*, *Iowa Review*, *Kestrel*, *Kenning*, *Kenyon Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *Miramar*, *New Virginia Review*, *Ocho*, *Paterson Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Poetry*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Shenandoah*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Southern Review*, *Tar River Review*, *West Branch*, and *Yarrow*.

“Einstein on Mercer Street” was first performed as a piece for orchestra and voice by the New Music Ensemble, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 2002. Composer: Kevin Puts. It is available on the CD titled *Against the Emptiness* from New Dynamic Records.

“If I Were a Swan” was set to music by Kevin Puts and premiered by the Austin, Texas–based chorus *Conspirare*, under the direction of Craig Hella Johnson, on September 27, 2012. It is available on CD, performed by the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra.

I would also like to acknowledge *The Devil’s Child*, the one book not included in this collection. Its continuous narrative and the tone of the book made it impossible to fit among these other poems. Nonetheless, I would like to thank Kathryn Harris and the real Barbara for making that difficult book possible.

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My deep gratitude to Ted Kooser, who appreciated my work enough to invite me to put this volume together. To my faithful pal Sydney Lea, who’s been reading my poems for decades now. To my Traverse City poet friends, especially Teresa Scollon, Anne Marie Oomen, Jennifer Steinorth, and Catherine Turnbull. To my geographically scattered writer friends, especially those at Rainier Writing Workshop. To my family. And to my beloved husband: first reader and first friend, to whom this book is dedicated.

INTRODUCTION | Ted Kooser

In the opening paragraphs of *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau writes, “I, on my side, require of every writer, first or last, a simple and sincere account of his own life, and not merely what he has heard of other men’s lives; some such account as he would send to his kindred from a distant land; for if he has lived sincerely, it must have been in a distant land to me.”

There’s an important suggestion behind those words: The author whom Thoreau seeks and admires makes an offer of his words *to someone else*. We might think that a transaction too obvious to point to, but there is a great deal of poetry written and published today that turns its back (sometimes with apparent disdain) upon the reader. During the past one hundred years of the Modern and now Postmodern ages, a great deal of our poetry has turned away from communication. At a poetry festival a few years ago, I heard a noted American poet say that it is the responsibility of readers to educate themselves to a level that they can understand what poets write. Thoreau would no doubt have scoffed at such arrogance.

One of my purposes in editing this series is to present the work of American poets who are doing their best to make gifts to their readers—to communicate, to charm, to persuade. Jared Carter’s *Darkened Rooms of Summer* and Connie Wanek’s *Rival Gardens* are just such gifts, as is this third book.

Fleda Brown’s book is indeed the sincere account of a life, though it is, to use Thoreau’s word, “simple” only in that it is open-handed and

conversational. These are not simple poems by any means, but neither are they intentionally difficult. They don't hide anything, nor are they coy, nor are they clever for the sake of cleverness, but they are indeed a life, offered to us with candor, care, and generosity, a life like yours and mine, in which challenges are faced and learned from. Brown's successive poems, in book after book, offer us a record of a poet's development first as a person and second as an accomplished literary artist.

The first poem here, "Fishing with Blood," from Brown's first book, shows us the poet as a child, curious and observant, attentive to her parents and the immediate surroundings, and "Mushrooms," the last poem of the new poems, shows us the same attentiveness, but now the poet has grown older, and the protections of her early life have fallen back and away. You hold the first of these poems in your left hand and the last in your right, and in between is the carefully and beautifully presented record of the life of a talented and influential American poet. And a person who reaches, in welcome, to you.