



Review by Susan L. Eastman

*Ghost of a Person Passing in Front of the Flag*

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“[N]ow, fifty years into later,” Vietnam veteran poet D.F. Brown reflects on the comingling of memory, time, and place in his fourth collection of poems, *Ghost of a Person Passing in Front of the Flag* (“Night Without Hours” 16). Brown is a former Army Medic who served from 1968–1977; published in 2018 by Bloomsday, an independent publisher with a mission to connect underrepresented writers to a diverse readership, Brown’s collection consists of two parts. Part One of the collection includes over 40 poems encompassing just over 50 pages, while Part Two comprises a single poem, “The Other Half of Everything” spanning 17 pages. The book also includes “Notes” that serve both as a glossary and dedication page. Here, Brown defines military acronyms and jargon such as a claymore and “Cammies” while also identifying the locales of villages, towns, and provinces in Vietnam referred to in the poems. He thereby invites civilian audiences with no connection to or knowledge of either military service or the Vietnam War into the lexicon of this collection. By doing so, Brown helps bridge the military-civilian divide. In these “Notes,” Brown also dedicates specific poems. For example, he writes that the poem “Liquids” is a memorial for four servicemembers killed in Vietnam when their chopper was shot down and “Reality Television, 1969” is for his daughter (75).

Although this is a collection of poems that manifest remembrance of a war and military service, the self-reflexive qualities of the collection underwrite its twenty-first century disposition. Brown’s free, fragmented verse confronts the possibilities and limits of language though connotations of sound and music, memory and history, time and place. Brown interweaves these elements throughout the collection; time spans from childhood to the Vietnam War to the present—including references to the War on Terror—while place ranges from the Ozarks to Vietnam and back again.

Upon first read, it may seem that Brown stresses only the limits of language, but he also explores its possibilities, predominantly those of sound and music. Some of the titles indicate the emphasis on music, such as “Rock ‘n’ Roll War,” “Binh Dinh Blues,” and “Somewhere with Elvis.” Beyond the obvious, however, in “We Did Our Own Stunts” for example, Brown merges language, music, and history when he writes, “We wanted words to sing/as thick as history...” (2-3). It seems as if, according to Brown, language and sound are “danc[ing] / Again around the fire,” chasing each other to the extremities of representation (“Echo” 3-4). Sometimes Brown is explicit such as in “Even the Spoon is a Weapon,” wherein readers encounter lines like, “English doesn’t work the way you think / like it was an obstacle course / tangled in long sentences” (3-5) and in “Night Without Hours,” when he writes, “...all the words at once / had fled and not in sentences” (1-2). The possibilities and boundaries of representation accentuate the tangled threads of memory. For example, language, music, and memory converge in the description of “a big blond kid from Kansas /...d[ying] on the jungle floor” when Brown writes about “each gesture stiff in phrases” (“Rock ‘N’ Roll War” 7, 10, 11). Playing with language and music in that word “phrases,” Brown contends with words, language, and musical phrases that converge to create a memory image.

These memories echo in purposeful repetition within poems that repeat titles or lines of previous poems. Quoting Brown in his article titled, “‘Between History and a Hard Place,’ Benjamin Hertwig’s *Slow War* and D.F. Brown’s *Ghost of a Person Passing in Front of the Flag*,” Jonathan McGregor’s 2018 *War, Literature, and the Arts* article highlights that particularly powerful line, which appears in at least two poems within *Ghost of a Person Passing in Front of the Flag* (“Fractured Fairy Tale” 7 and “What Love Makes of Us” 2). Another is “Fifty years into later” and its variation “Any time now is fifty years since” (“Liquids” 5 and “The Other Half of Everything” 28). Brown chooses the most resonating lines to repeat to accentuate the relationship between time, memory, and history.

The repetition should remind readers that, yes, even 50 years after a war it is not forgotten and that there are consequences that must be articulated by the poet and acknowledged by the readers. Moreover, the opening lines of both “Fractured Fairy Tale” and “Where Were We” repeat each other with, “Once upon a time from your left.” The most engaging example of these reverberations comprises a poem titled “Echo” which serves as a reverberation of an earlier poem titled “History.” “Echo” corresponds nearly directly to “History”—the words and line breaks are the same. However, in “Echo” the start of each line is capitalized accentuating the resonance of the repetition and of sound. These two poems further enact an echo to a time before the writing of the poems and, seemingly, before the Vietnam War. Brown writes “Memory makes us dance / Again around the fire” (3-4). That fire precedes the act of writing each of the poems and the action is repetitive—“*Again around the fire*” (emphasis added). The combination of these reverberations indicates narrative images of the past that insist on presence. In keeping with this self-reflexive core, Brown’s collection also echoes poems from previous collections. For example, the poem “Even the Spoon is a Weapon” is also the title of a previous collection (Inleaf Press, 2005). The repetition of language seems inextricably linked with Brown’s emphasis on memory that serves to remind readers that the past is sometimes cyclical and often haunts the present.

Brown crafts these cyclical connections and raises the specter of the past in his evocation of contemporary war and thereby the veteran experience in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In “Veterans Affairs,” Brown’s critique of veteran treatment is immediate. In the first line he writes, “Walk into a butcher shop, draw a number.” The poem then lists a litany of negative post-war experiences such as divorce, addiction, and incarceration. These may be stereotypical, but they do hold true for many veterans. The greatest emphasis of the poem, however, is his argument about the cyclical nature of the veteran experience. The speaker describes seeing others categorized as “children” who will share the same “destination”—“Walk into a butcher shop (17, 18, 19). References to children recur in several poems throughout the collection, but never more clearly are they veterans of contemporary wars who will also experience the challenges of post-war life. While a reader with military connections may discern several allusions to, or reminders of contemporary war in the collection, Brown offers an explicit reference to the War on Terror in “Houston Spring, 2010.” This poem highlights the civilian-military divide when Brown writes of the natural beauty of spring and admits that because of this, “it is difficult to see our Afghan war / Clotted in the shadows near the white picnic table” (7-8). Yet the war does intrude on the pleasant civilian life. Its presence is found in the image of clotting, as if blood encroaches like an echo of a distant war on a moment of pristine, spring rebirth. Such moments seem to represent civilian experience—seemingly ignoring contemporary war while it unavoidably remains ever-present.

Brown further emphasizes the relationship civilians have with war when he speaks directly to civilian audiences—addressing “you” in several poems. For example, in “It Was a Long Time before the Bones Spoke,” he attempts to “reach through words / and pull you closer to war, / the one you paid for” (3-5). These moments serve as reflections on the attempt to communicate the experiences of war and to create connections across the civilian-military divide. The final line also invokes civilian participation in or tolerance of war by their position as tax-paying citizens of a country at war. In these three poems, and perhaps others, Brown reminds civilian audiences of their accountability for war and post-war America.

Likewise, Part Two of the collection echoes the concerns in Part One—memory, time, representation, language, sound, music, and reflexivity. However, Part Two, “The Other Half of Everything,” serves as a sharp, counterbalance to the often-brief poems in Part One. In “The Other Half of Everything” time, for example, acquires an expansive quality. In addition to negotiating between the past and present, Brown also invites readers to “Flash forward” and he contemplates

that “Twenty years from now [he] will not keep track / of the war” (“The Other Half of Everything” 88, 141-142). In Part Two readers also encounter anger toward war and politicians in addition to sarcasm when, for example, Brown compares the draft lottery with Publishers Clearing House and describes Vietnam as a “theme park / for working class kids” (“The Other Half of Everything” 133-134). In “The Other Half of Everything” readers will further detect Brown’s reflections on excuses, lies, suicide, and machismo that are intertwined with memories of childhood, pop-cultural references, and—again—the limits of language and memory.

If we are wondering, as Brown does, whether “[n]obody lose[s] sleep over Nam anymore?” *Ghost of a Person Passing in Front of the Flag* reminds us that “fifty years into later” veterans do not forget and they worry that the general public has. However, this veteran’s voice and his collection reminds veteran and civilian audiences that memory, history, and the bounds of language do, indeed, create a “Labyrinth”—after the title of one of these poems—wherein “Between history and a hard place” we have to “[r]efurbish / memory” (“The Other Half of Everything” 107, “Night Without Hours” 16, “The Other Half of Everything” 3-4). Veterans remember and so should civilians. Public remembrance may rely on military veterans to explore the limits of representation, to share their voices, and their memories, to publish their writing. This collection, which questions, in the midst of a seventeen-page poem, “Which poem is it now?” will help to defamiliarize the idea that we have “heard it all....know the tune” (“The Other Half of Everything” 146, 21). And readers will revisit a veteran’s memories of the Vietnam War alongside the possibilities and limits of language.

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Works Cited

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