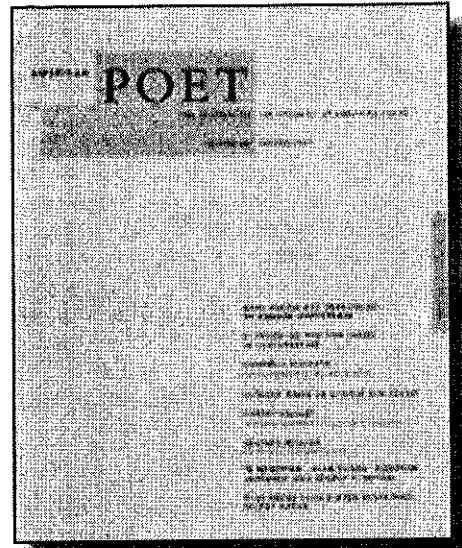


American Poet:
The Journal of The Academy of American Poets

Volume 34: Spring 2008

Nickole Brown's poems marry an enthralling and tormented narrative with woven, specific lyricism to create a layered progression through a difficult past. Brown has immediate access to how the situations she evokes are processed by the mind of a child can re-create that open and immediate seeing. Experiences of pedophilia and pregnancy, a body becoming sexual and sexualized, and the shifts and rifts that occur when a new child comes into the world are all exposed in this book but without the blaming or anger one might expect. The aim here is not retribution, but getting it right. The speaker's addresses to her sister, which are spoken even before the sister has been born, and then as she grows toward the present, shape the book as a lesson in understanding how little one can understand about this world. However, the struggle for reason, even science, is beautifully wrought in Brown's hand. About *Sister*, Cate Marvin writes, "I cannot imagine a world in which one could read this book and not experience the confluence of dismay and wonder."



the Southern Register

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF SOUTHERN CULTURE

Winter 2008

by Beth Ann Fennelly

In the debut collection from Kentucky poet Nickole Brown, readers experience the pleasures of poetry—the illuminated moment reverberating—as well as the pleasures of the novel—the narrative unfurling, driven by complex central characters. That’s because the book is conceived as a novel-in-poems, each addressed to the speaker’s much younger sister. The poems tell the story of the girls’ childhoods, but these are not the bucolic scenes of country life one might expect from that description. Instead, the book is harrowing, an unflinching portrayal of a dysfunctional family and its dangerous legacies.

Although *Sister* belongs clearly in the confessional tradition, Brown avoids many of confessionalism’s pitfalls, most importantly the stance of the speaker as professional victim. Brown achieves this partly through her skill as noticing nuances of character, partly through her stance of not exonerating the narrator herself. The strongest of these poems conjure Plath of “The Applicant” or “Edge;” in fact, one imagines the woman who wrote “The woman is perfected / Her dead / body wears the smile of accomplishment” would look with favor on Brown’s “Barren Lake,” in which she writes “I thought of my girlhood, how I was the catch- / of-the-day, how I was once a lean nymphet / swimming in the cradle of his fist, how even then I waited / arched on a plaque for someone to come / and spray the gold back onto my dead body / to make it perfect again.”

The true strength of this collection is not its compelling subject matter but Brown’s imagistic skill. The setting of her native Kentucky is richly present, but the details go beyond accidents of landscape to reveal a vision of a place deeply inhabited—Brown’s speaker imagines herself while in utero covered “with an okra fuzz of hair,” see her mama sleeping “curled tight / like the sole of a house shoe hot from the dryer,” grows into a teenage girl collecting “precious, breakable things,” including a boyfriend’s “speed skate laces and his sister’s stolen / champagne flute of Mardi Gras beads.” Rich with images, brave with difficult truths, and restrained enough to avoid melancholy, this is a collection readers will enjoy.

Lambda Book Report Fall 2007 A Review of Contemporary LGBTQ Literature

Five Lesbian Debuts by Julie R. Enszer

Nickole Brown's first book opens with the dramatic declarative, "Sister," which begins the book's machinations of understanding the complex and fraught relationships between siblings and family. Brown writes in the first poem titled "Preface,"

Sister, we come from
water we made ourselves
with the suckle and swallow of our unmade
bodies submerged in a sac so sweet
with our vestal piss that we breathed it

From the cruelty of the narrator releasing her younger sister's fireflies to the regret that "this is all/I know—not your favorite/ color or dinner or show, not/the name of this crush or that," Brown maps the terrain of childhood and adulthood for two women in a family filled with both abuse and love.

In addition to its thematic coherence, the book also uses structural devices to hold it together. A series of poems all titled "What I Did" and then numbered one through seven recur sequentially, though at random intervals, through the first two sections of the book. In addition, Brown's insistence of the address to the sister—part epistolary, part direct address, part prayerful evocation—holds together the various explorations of the unifying narrative.

The strength of *Sister* is in the details, some of which are constructed through Brown's diction, which is gently infused with a southern dialect but resists caricature. She writes of cutting her finger then blood "pollacking the paper with red" or of "fried comfort" or when her sister came home "bawling, colicky, dispositioned/bad, a mess of black tar meconium." In each phrase, the particular word from the South captures a precise detail, making Brown's poems visually, as well as aurally, rich.

In telling of her own birth, she writes of "how the doctor grabbed / the slippery blue / feet first, an impossible breech, a twist / with a snap that meant / leg braces, special shoes, a grown woman / who would never walk right / in red heels."

The balance of this poem, titled "Footling," explores how her mother, sixteen years old at the birth, "cooed/ footling, thinking it sounded /more like the name of some imp / than a complication." The interplay between girlhood and womanhood for the narrator's mother is another theme carried through the entire collection and explored among the three central characters of the book: the mother, the narrator, and the sister.

This trifecta of women is brought to life with great pathos through Brown's artistry. Resisting sentimentality, but also dancing dangerously close to it, Brown's narrative poems are vital. In the tradition of Sylvia Plath in its insistence to look at and capture the realities of women's lives, *Sister* is a strong debut collection.



Finalist for the 2007 *ForeWord Magazine* Poetry Book of the Year Award

Review by Erica Wright
Fall 2007

Sister confronts the unspoken dangers of childhood. It's a wonder anyone makes it out alive. Even the games are violent: "I'll knot your wrists and ankles, / see if you can get free, if not, I'll torture you / with ice and ivy, drips of hot / milk, then you can do me" (from "Jessica Meyers in the Corn"). But it is not cornfield friends who are the real threat; the monster of this verse is the stepfather.

When her stepfather places a pillow with a simulated heartbeat in her baby sister's crib, the speaker explains that it is meant "to trick you into thinking / you were not born yet" ("A Heartbeat Pillow Too"). Considering the pain likely to follow in the coming years, that trick is probably for the best. The pains that the speaker endures are varied, but at the center is molestation by her stepfather. It would be easy to say that this collection is an indictment, but there is nothing easy about these poems. They are each skillfully wrought pieces about impossible subjects: "He then / showered, and smelling of fresh cigarettes and / blue soap, asked before entering, stopped / when I cried hurt" ("It Is Possible He Thought").

The real wonder of *Sister* is Brown's ability to tell of such a childhood in near-linear progression. Although the poems are more in the confessional than the narrative mode, there is an arc to this collection. When the confessions do arrive ("What I Did" parts I - VII for example), they punctuate the story. Such craft is hardly surprising from Brown who received her master's of fine arts from Vermont College, studied English Literature at Oxford University, and was once Hunter S. Thompson's assistant. Though she speaks of "straddling a fence," of "switching all the time / between isn't and ain't" ("Straddling Fences"), there is no question of Brown's belonging to the literary realm. She is a descendant of Sylvia Plath, and this collection is her "Daddy, Daddy, you bastard, I'm through."

Sister is at once memoir and confession, rebuke (of the stepfather), and invitation (to the sister). These poems are of the hour between dog and wolf when neither creature seems particularly safe. However, the "Preface" evokes light—battery-powered and not standing much of a chance against the darkness—but "light nonetheless," and this collection ends with that glimmer of hope, too."



PW:
Publishers Weekly

July 30, 2007

Brown's forthright debut opens with an intimate address to a sister: 'I tell you this story because it is/ the story we need/ to believe our offal is divine.' The poems that follow fuse together the speaker's harrowing history: her birth to an unwed teen, a stepfather's abuse and her teenage escape in a car packed with all her belongings and a half tank of gas. Despite its excesses and reliance on the well-worn imagery of a dusty and impoverished South, this is a striking collection. The strongest poems are those stripped of commentary, in which rough memories are offered as strange discoveries, as in "Jessica Meyers in the Corn": "In puddles of seeping/ groundwater, I plugged in electrical cords and her skin/ burned black." These are brave confessions, apologies and recollections lay everything bare: "I want nothing/ but truth between us, but I am afraid." (*Sept.*)

The Courier-Journal

Saturday, October 20, 2007

By Mary Popham, Special to The Courier-Journal

The story poems in *Sister*, by Nickole Brown, paint a portrait of misery converted to hope. In exposing the deep traumas that have stolen her childhood, the narrator takes us with her on the journey of processing righteous anger into the ability to offer sisterly comfort, instead of remorse.

In the opening poems, Brown establishes character: a sister who is about to reveal to her younger sibling some truths about themselves, their mother and their different fathers; setting: a rural area near the Ohio River; and a voice: confiding, teaching and conspiratorial.

The speaker insists on the difficult journey, for they are traveling back to the place where their "unmade bodies (were) submerged in a sac so sweet."

Everything is happy when the narrator is young. She sits in a beauty shop in Kentucky watching her mother douse ". . . perm solution on old gray" while she, a youngster, sorts the multi-colored rolling rods.

Then he came along. Her mother ". . . got herself a diamond and dropped her scissors in the neon blue for good. . ." The child resents the difference in the care taken for her sister's birth, while her own was negligible:

*So careful did not drink, not once,
I swear, the wine coolers
unopened next to the catsup in the fridge.
So careful, her feet elevated and iced, her legs rubbed
free of charley horses and cellulite,
and your daddy,
saying careful now, holding her at the elbow*

The narrator begins to let her half-sister know the horrible truth about the man

*. . . He then
showered, and smelling of fresh cigarettes and
blue soap, asked before entering, stopped
when I cried hurt . . .*

The little girl blames herself, wears "homemade haircloth underwear / filled with hamster litter paprika and hills/ of fire ants. . ."

Memories travel back and forth from adulthood to pre-birth to childhood. Trying to understand, to dissolve the anger she has felt toward him, her mother, her innocent little sister, the narrator processes Bible verses. She studies the details of pregnancy, looks at old family photo albums, remembers songs from her early youth. All in an attempt to squelch the horror of "the growling ghost of (her) childhood."

The final redemption is in understanding her mother's failures: "She knows the worst of it, she knows everything, / but the weight of knowing must be shucked. . ." Release from jealousy of her sister is forthcoming. She asks, ". . . did you feel loved, ever, / by me?" She invites her, "Come over Saturday. Drop your / sloppy satchel of books at my front door . . . but don't worry. I won't ask . . . there is warm / silence here, a smile, a gesture. . ."

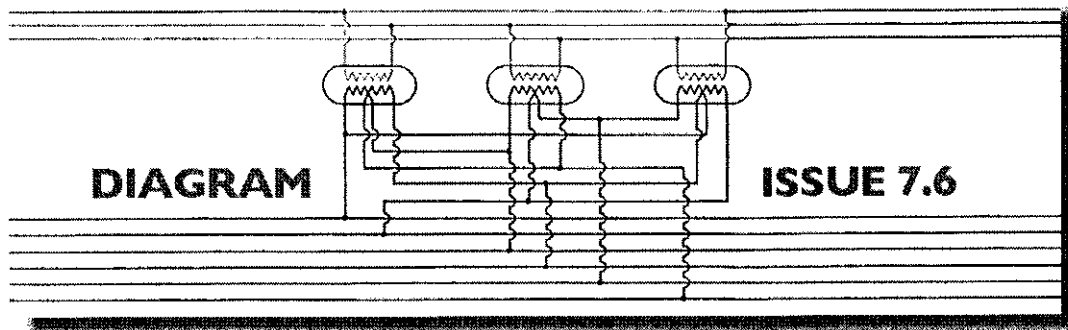
Ploughshares

THE LITERARY JOURNAL AT EMERSON COLLEGE

Fall/Winter 2007

By Cate Marvin

Using umbilicus as guide rail, the speaker of Nickole Brown's *Sister*—an unflinching and deeply intelligent first book—undertakes a hair-lifting expedition back to her childhood so as to return herself to the arms of a younger sister both long neglected and longed for. Proving that narrative and lyric are never mutually exclusive, Brown pulls the reader down the rain-swollen rush of river where her past gurgles with the 'sound of diesel,' to reveal the pedophile—'a man who simply // cannot stop.' These poems, always stunning in their clairvoyance, advise us to take such experience and 'simply / bury it, but bury it / alive.' I cannot imagine a world in which one could read this book and not experience the confluence of dismay and wonder.



Fall/Winter 2007/2008

By Cynthia Arrieu-King

A book of poems about surviving abuse has to battle a lot of clichés, not to mention a certain incredulity. Therapeutic arts, easy lyric narrative, the awkward showmanship for one's own lowest moments must all be avoided. In *Sister*, Nickole Brown invents a rhetorical frame that allows a woman speaker to address regrets and memories to a sister ten years younger. She also uses double entendre, and a highly imagistic sensual cataloguing to build this narrative project. These tools create a space for amped-up emotion, a marriage of the graphic and the intricate, and finally the rehabilitation of scenes from small town impoverished narratives.

Addressing the poems to a younger sister, Brown casts what might seem egregious confessionality in lesser hands as warnings and apologies for absence. It isn't until the fourth stanza of "It is Possible He Thought" that the descriptions of toys and presents the father had bought for the speaker is gently interrupted by the appearance of the baby sister:

It is possible the year
before you were born he quit me
and I drew fourth-grade pictures
of swan necks coughing up
eggs into the womb,
that I scored an A by memorizing
test in testicle, *fall* in fallopian. (42)

Not mentioned again in this poem, the "you" adds an intimacy and direction to the speaker's new intellectual understanding of what sex is for, rather than viscerally, wordlessly internalizing the abusive experience of it. At times the baby sister appears in the third person rather than the second, allowing Brown to establish both intimate and perplexed, distant attitudes towards this friend/intruder where another friend/intruder has already been incorporated, frighteningly, into the psyche. The sister is "you" in a poem about keeping her out of the teenage speaker's room ("The Smell of Snake") and what happened when the baby sister ran into the same room to bang on everything with a wooden spoon ("Tinnabulation"). Brown's speaker never truly relaxes at the thought of this sister in danger, yet foreign and kept at a distance as a means of self-protection.

Where the women of this novel are addressed in the third person, second person, and first person plural, the stepfather is kept at a remove in the third person, and his more vile activities are either met head-on, or allowed to simmer as double entendres. The abusive stepfather disappears into the basement to build model airplanes, "bluing himself with late night flickerings of television." The gerund "bluing" can make the reader imagine the man not only blue in the light the television casts, but cultivating, then denying himself pleasure from something he seems on-screen. This

double meaning asks the reader, “why does he need so much pleasure?” In “One Hundred and Five Times,” an argument between the mother and speaker recycles itself from *we’ve been over this 105 times, you bring it up every chance you get*, into variations such as, “he was 105 times / he was / every chance.” The separation of the mother’s words into a stunted, dark account of her husband’s actions puts the mother’s own knowledge of what happened into phrases that both avoid and make denials grotesque through collage.

In contrast to the subtler double meanings, Brown crafts earthy, visceral, organic surfaces from the expected—fetuses, ferns, lakes, mud, clitorises, penises—as well as from a lot of thrown and often artificial or manufactured objects. This teeming surface evades summary and occasionally commentary, the result being a rehabilitation of ugliness into—if not beauty—a distracted, made surface. The speaker acknowledges having been mesmerized (“It is Possible He Thought”) by a lighter and lighter fluid flamethrower trick the stepfather showed her, and being “underground / with a wild barnyard kitten / that shit the couch.” The Rolling Stones LP cover with the zipper, a reference to the electronic toy Speak ‘n’ Spell, Mardi Gras beads, etc., conglomerate as if sealing life whole in ambergris, rather than covering over, or slowly examining the worst moments.

Brown’s grotesque surfaces also imagine the father’s own burden of misfortunes. In “Wasp, Bear, Abacus,” we learn there was a woman he wanted to marry who was “killed in the melting fiberglass cage of his first white Corvette,” and his own father used a twelve-gauge to blow a “black boy’s jaw...into a confetti of buckshot and flesh.” The only explanations for his behaviors are elaborated metaphors for his nature listed in the title, and the final lines of the poem in which a “you” (either the reader or the speaker) takes a hot coal from the fire, and writes on a fence that criminals are “made, not born.” By not stating this as commentary, but showing the idea as acted out graffiti, Brown transforms the difficult action of objectively assessing a villain into an act not meditatively explained. Where one stops to wonder what is true and what is imagined in the poem, the speaker’s dedication to the seemingly impossible facts—that a life could be so wrong and that he should be forgiven—is heartbreaking.

This book dares itself into territory Robert Rebein called the mythical and clichéd dirty hicks. For Rebein, where Dorothy Allison succeeded in her candor and specificity, many others have failed to completely evade sentimentality: A desire to seem authentic via white trash culture can feel false. Brown tends to bring the (paradoxical) trope of the impoverished idiosyncratic to bear on an addressee, the young sister, with the goal of warning and explaining her own psychological distance. The most clarification happens not for the sister, but, it seems, for the speaker’s self. If you feel that high emotion and unalienated confession is not art, as Slavoj Žižek might assert—that it cops to the System where the individual is valued for trying to be different—this book asks the question: what do you do with specific experience you never chose and from which you must try to recover? In the end, Brown blows all up into an awful beauty of size, color and sound, regards the narrative from many points in time, then warns the sister:

...you are not mercury for the mouths of fish
not a plume of smoke to lift hollow bones. Do not throw it
like a bottle from an overpass onto a speeding car, do not wait
for it to seed as you wait tentacled in sleeping beauty’s hair.
Listen to me, I know how it works, simply
bury it, but bury it
alive.

(“How to Forgive”) (96).

#65 Fall/Winter 2007/2008

By Ely Shipley

Nickole Brown's full-length debut *Sister* weaves the narrative of a relationship, or lack of a relationship, between two sisters, as the elder sister and speaker of the poems struggles to articulate and thus overcome the difficulties of her childhood. The catalyst for the story is not only the obstacles the speaker has suffered, but her suspicion that abuse has also happened to her younger sister ("Tell me / but do not / tell me it / happened / to you?"). The older sister intends to address this circumstance, and many of the poems are, appropriately, in the mode of apostrophe. The speaker's desire to relate to her sister ultimately reveals the speaker herself and her story.

Though the poems coalesce into a novel in verse, each individual poem is not merely narrative. The experience unfolds in lyrical fragments. Glimpses of a working class life in the south ("a set of glass baby bottles [boiled] in the same / pot that made the pinto beans") and snapshots of a girl's socially rebellious and alternately lonely adolescence ("our father's / lighter in one hand...our mother's aerosol in the other, / sprayed fuck-you balls / of fire into the air") compile a gradual and panoramic view of a girl's irreducibly complex struggle.

What is seen and heard but not yet understood compels the reader through the narrative, built not only chronologically, but from images providing nearly inaudible hints along the way. An early poem, "Sticky Fingers," subtly portends themes that will recur later in the book, when the speaker at age six tries to open in secret the "real fly-zipper cover" of a Rolling Stones album. She is afraid that:

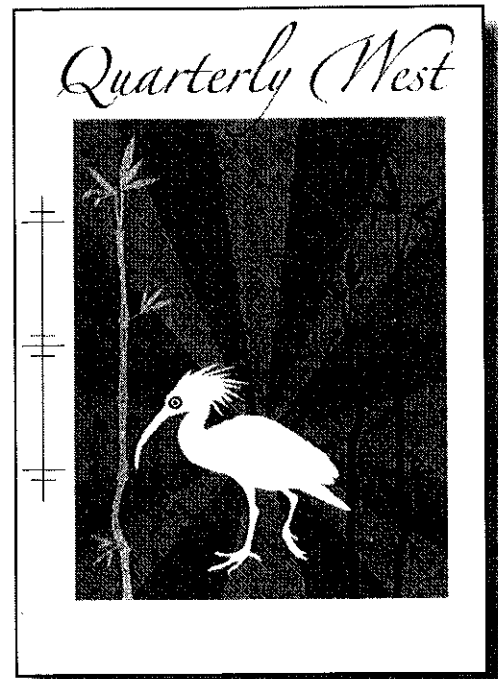
*mama's new husband [will] hear
like he heard the autumn leaf quiet
of his magazine pages turned
through the bathroom door
with my eyes submerged in
that sea wreck and anemone of
oil slick women only in boots
oil slick men only in tool belts*

a woman with legs spread wide to the white of fast water.

The stepfather does catch her and asks, "Want to see more?" The speaker does not answer. Instead, she continues her address to her younger sister; she explains the answer she knows now:

*The best I know
is that you heard a different music:
not hers not his
 but mine—*

This notion of a "[hearing] a different music" complicates the notion of what is seen, heard, and understood. Discovery through time, and then suspended in the particularity of the speaker's experience and imagination outside of time, newly forms the events. Though the poem begins "Unborn we listened", what the speaker first hears



is something approximating danger; meanwhile, the younger sister is “busy sealing up [her] gills losing / [her] tail tending to everything the unborn / must suffer all to the submerged rattle / of half-blown speakers.” The younger sister is “still safe / in” the mother’s womb, where “[her] unformed ears” are “tiny blossoms / budding from [her] head.” The poem begins in the mode of explanation, but turns to one of revelation. Similarly, the speaker’s own confessions, such as in the series of poems, “What I Did” I-VII, function as a flexible and dynamic spine, articulating the speaker’s shame, perceived implication in her and her sister’s abuse, and then her gradual self awareness, resistance, and empowerment.

Appropriate to the book’s structure, *Sister* begins before the existence of this narrative, though its presence is immanent. The first poem, the “Preface,” locates the speaker outside of time. She begins in a place of lyrical suspension; she imagines the girls pre-birth. Brown writes: “we come from / water we made ourselves / with the suckle and swallow of our unmade / bodies...” claiming, at the start, the narrator’s agency in the story she is about to unfold. Here, the speaker also marks the sisters’ relationship as primary, before this story has even begun for its readers. Significantly, there is no chance for predictability, nor is Brown’s stance one of victimization, martyrdom, or sensationalism. Rather, she begins by imagining the watery world before, the one safe and submerged in the mother’s womb, where the sisters, though born years apart, are together, their “heads / without a thought of skull / bracing [mama’s] // placenta with one prayer.”

Brown’s awareness of the book’s form, its *how* in addition to its *what*, allows for these poems’ rich complexities. The order not only forms a linear narrative, but layers experience. Because the sisters of the poems do not share a “typical” or “normative” relationship, the poems function as surrogate sisters, allowing for what might otherwise be an impossible conversation or reconciliation. This happens as the poems read one from the next, as well as through reoccurring themes and images. Later, the placenta is a sailor’s talisman, the speaker’s malformed feet are drawn in a fogged school bus window to ward off the same fate for the younger sister, the speaker as a fetal imp “sleeping inside the cup of a trumpet vine” rhymes with the image of her as a nymphet “swimming in the cradle of [the stepfather’s] fist,” and so on.

Such raw and beautiful imagery is just one of the many threads that pull this book together. The moments result in nothing short of song. Each poem develops a scene the way a photograph reveals its occasion as it develops, ghostly at first beneath the chemical liquid in the dark room, sharpening into gradual, undeniable, and vivid evidence. Such evidence must answer the speaker’s final question in the poem “Tintinnabulation,” “sister, did you feel loved, ever, / by me?” In Nickole Brown’s care this journey is an honest one; the sensation is only and always compassionate and sincere.

The Missouri Review
Spring 2008



FROM "A REVIEW OF SEVEN FIRST POETRY BOOKS"

Nickole Brown's *Sister* is focused on the sacred, lyric parts of everyday speech that bind families and loves together. *Sister* makes that kind of language into a series of portraits: moments in growing up where beauty and trauma overlap and toys take on the power of hand-held idols, where a pregnant mother is portrayed "bracing her / placenta with one prayer—*stay*." With the sustained vision of a novel and the tenderness of a letter, this collection details the process of growing up, of discovering family and body, of abuse and of survival that becomes (as the poems themselves evidence) triumph. That the speaker can communicate with frank love after trauma makes Brown's poetry a joy to read. Frankness and love are brought together with her brilliant combination of the sacred and vernacular. She draws words like "prayer" and "forgive" into family scenes, so that everyday elements such as water and air take on the power of holy icons, especially in the witnessing of a newborn sister in "Moro Reflex":

I sat in holy communion
silence charmed by the tiny rise and fall of your
speckled chest.

The holy language works on us subtly, cumulatively. This language is the language of healing, which is part of what makes the collection wonderful reading for anyone wanting to understand the experience of abuse and recovery—Brown talks about it with an honesty that helps to negate any false sense of guilt and to make a reconciliation with the self who existed before the abuse happened. In reaching out to a sister, she's also reaching out to a self who has never left, in whom both innocence and awareness of the world's realities can come together.

Brown invokes this world, partly by depicting an era where discovery of family and the body overlap with the icons of pop culture. In "Sticky Fingers," a young speaker discovers the Rolling Stones record:

its real fly-zipper cover, the one that opened
to a black-and-white photograph grainy shadows
of a man's rock thin hips

The discovery of rock mirrors what goes on in other poems, where Barbies and coloring books are shown, and Brown's language of the sacred imparts to them the glow that they contain for children. The contrast of this vision with her retelling of the abuse shows how these pieces of culture can be the stuff of survival for kids. In "Poltergeist," the speaker watches the girl in the movie, "her hair clean and straight / as an untouched sheet / of ice." She finds a sense of connection in going "close enough / to lick the hairs of static electricity / from the glass," and uses it as a way of connecting both to an inner chill and to the outer world. Brown's ear for this kind of lyric is beautifully tuned, so that we feel the speaker's empathy for the girl in the movie, surrounded by the inhuman in a place she'd thought safe. That speaker makes language itself a safe space is *Sister's* quiet triumph.

Another of the book's great achievements is the naturally fragmented narrative arc. The movement of the poems through the sister's lives is punctuated with a sequence titled "What I Did" that doesn't break the temporal progression but alternates narration with confession. Brown alternates the poems' shapes on the page, too, giving us the sense that each poem is a different vision from a different self, one that turns intense at the end

of "Ghost Dog":

It paced the ceiling
silent, watching, not doing
a thing for me.

This fluidity of identity is finally what makes *Sister* so empowering: the shifting of the self resists any attempt to fix her as one entity, refuting any notion of helpless femininity. Just as Dickinson shows power with the strength of her voice and Plath does so by turning that strength and imagery to depict the father figure, Brown gives us pulled-apart Barbies, the abusive stepfather; and the landscape in which these are finally impotent. She shows the survivor's greatest power: to go back and accept the sacred, everyday treasures of memory.

Spring 2008

By Melanie Jordan

THE FATES EMBODIED: NICKOLE BROWN'S *SISTER*

At first, I thought this book was addressed to women, to me, because it begins:

Sister, we come from
water we made ourselves
with the suckle and swallow of our unmade
bodies submerged in a sac so sweet
with our vestal piss that we breathed it,
formed trachea and kidney with it,
our soft faces forced
forward with the game of fist
and thumb. . .

Then I realized the import of this opening poem, "Preface." It is the arrival of the human, a recreation of the moment in which we are all both helpless and essentially empowered. From that seemingly contradictory place, in the language of sexuality and apotheosis, Nickole Brown issues a series of epistles. To write of one's own conception, gestation, birth—to write convincingly of unknowable-yet-familiar moments: that is the power of poetry and the power of Nickole Brown's debut, *Sister* (Red Hen Press; \$18.95, paperback) a self-styled "novel-in-poems."

A love letter to the abandoned, the collection is steeped in an empathy that raises it from a place that otherwise risks solipsism. This book tackles the unconquerable terrain, as do so many first collections, of the "plucked off pieces of home," excavating the complexity of origins. Brown allows us to peer into a fabricated memory of the speaker as an infant dubiously cradled in a bathtub by a teenage mother, shielded from a tornado by an old mattress. Again, as in the opening lines of the book, we see danger and protection butting heads. Addressing primarily a younger sister from whom the speaker is estranged, the poems resonate with guilt, with a protective instinct and its failure. Without self-pity, and perhaps with a chip on her shoulder, the speaker ushers us into a world she thought she left behind.

Returning with her to childhood (diving into the wreck, as it were) is like navigating a field full of tripwires. At any moment, the poems could reveal what we do not want to know but cannot turn away from. This tension underlies the book and underscores the narrative arc. Take for instance the stepfather's basement, a place that both alienates and frightens the speaker, just as the stepfather himself does:

the only thing that was
mine

down there
was the stupid
ghost—guard dog, spirit
animal, canine Casper
hallucination, what-
ever. Howling
silent star, and I swear:



transparent white
shadow like wet
tissue, unblinking eyes
a flashlight in a white
possum's face

At this point in the book, we are far enough along to have knowledge of her mother's remarriage and the sexual abuse perpetrated by her stepfather. The complicated relationships in the book bloom partially, as we see from the above excerpt, with the speaker always concerned about what is hers, what has been taken from her, and what is her sister's in turn. These relationships unfurl gradually and are qualified over the course of the entire collection. The sister of the title is a conceit through which all of the other relationships are filtered; she is both kin and the Other. "Riddle, Riddle, Marie" opens with a confession and a plea: "Pretend I know you." It seems that this imperative could apply just as well to the speaker's mother, to her stepfather, to the other men in her life. The distance between the speaker and everyone around her draws us in.

As much as anything else, this is a book about departures—the two sisters of different fathers, the careless and storm-worn birth of the older juxtaposed with the "*careful now*" birth of the younger, the fork in the road where their lives stop traveling on the same axis. Inevitably we pack a car with the speaker:

the car windows a slide show
of every girl's high school years:
cassettes, tampons, blue jeans
prom carnations dried upside down
held 'together forever'
with hairspray.

The speaker must ask—how do I live here without descending into the muck, without descending into stereotype? The answer at first is that flight is necessary, but the poetic voice must return obsessively, must gather that sister who is a cipher in so many ways.

It is, of course, also a book of retrieval, preserving not only the verisimilitude of a generation ("a vinyl pop star jacket / dozens of zippers...") but also of place ("...the cucumber / of copperheads crisping / the creek where I waded..."). It would be difficult for the book to flee the inevitable baggage of the Southern Gothic, yet it walks that highwire gracefully and never lapses into stereotype—this is the tale of a woman "straight from the mud" and while the teenage speaker at the moment of flight from Kentucky is "...ready to drive North fast, / no apologies, / no saying / goodbye," the poems return obsessively to the corn fields, the basements, the construction sites that comprise the poetic landscape.

They return in the paradoxical way that makes Brown's writing irresistible. The poem "Christmas" begins, "I know I didn't come home / again this year, but I did come / close..." Always this collection is nervously circling.

Post-Plath, post-Sexton, we have Nickole Brown: unabashedly, she studs the book with a spaced-out sequence, numbered and titled "What I Did." Here we often see the direct reportage, the almost journalistic attention eye. She writes in Section IV, on the occasion of the speaker's first period:

...There I stripped
naked in the sun and
sunk, not splashing but floating
face down, pretending I was
drowning, opening my sex so
the blood would tempt some
tentacle or tooth from the bottom
that could not be seen
to drag me under and seal my legs

shut into one glamorous tail, to cover
the worst part of me with scales...

This vulnerability and boldness collide beautifully over and over in the book. The previous excerpt brings back my first impression of the opening poem—the book is addressed to me, a woman raised in the American Southeast, a woman of Nickole Brown's generation. But *Sister* is in no way limited; it does not limit its subjects, its language, its experiments with form, or its audience. More than ontology, more than portraiture of three Fate-like women, this is a book about the deafening silence that remains when our loved ones go, even for a little while.