

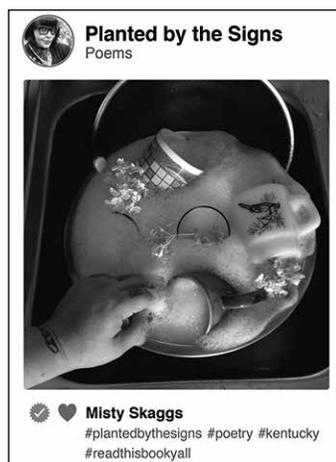
her to conform to a life of punitive indoctrination. Equally as ironic is the bitter taste of dissatisfaction left on our palate by this character's refusal to grow internally while served on a platter of delicious metaphors, lyrical language, bucolic imagery, psychological insight, environmental stewardship and attention to detail. Dektar delivers a riveting feast.

Misty Skaggs. *Planted by the Signs: Poems*. Athens, Oh.: Ohio University Press/Swallow Press, 2019. 112 pages. Softcover. \$17.95.

Reviewed by Sylvia Woods

Planted by the Signs, Misty Skaggs's first full-length collection of poetry, functions as a love letter to home, celebrating traditions of Appalachia and its "women who brought home the bacon and saved its grease." The collection is arranged according to the signs derived from the *Farmer's Almanac*, and while Skaggs depicts modern Appalachia as both beautiful and harsh, the women she knows are up to the challenge.

The signs are in the head for the first part of book with a poem set in the early morning. The images are vivid enough to feel the wet dew in the first poem set in the early morning. "Wet Dew," evokes solitude of living in a holler in Eastern Kentucky where all around there is sound. They are alone except for the sounds of nature at 5:30 a.m. The speaker sits quietly



*Except for the Cardinal
Screaming
“Wet dew! Wet Dew!”
one last time
before the light breaks
the whole holler.*

The writer’s sense of belonging is evident; she claims these generations of her people belong to her in “Home Cemetery.”

*We keep our dead
at the dead end
of a rutted gravel road.
Generations filed away
forever in staggered rows.
They belong to me.*

There are few positive descriptions of men, yet in “I’d Melt” the speaker confides she would want the kind of man who appreciates women who keep bacon grease, which is both tradition and ritual. She “longs for a love that holds up like cast iron.” Other traditions held by her grandmother in “Oatmeal Communion” underscore the theme of women needing to protect each other. They warn about preachers and other people like Uncle Charlie who is in jail and might get out.

“Small Talk” explores the divide between the narrator and people who live in town. Even while characterizing country life as beautiful, Skaggs also that the experience can be hard to endure, not idyllic. The speaker feels disconnected listening to friends in town who dine on

*organic vegetables and vegan options...
My small talk is not spicy
like an authentic curry recipe.
It is salt and pepper.*

Her friends do not want to hear about the reality she endures taking care of a dying woman who “will never be ready to die.” They don’t want to hear of the agony, of “how her arm hurts and aches until she screams” and how the narrator “stays up all night” tending to her. Instead of harsh reality, the friends prefer details that entertain.

Life in the holler is not all birdsong and crickets. Like so many mountain women before her, she does what must be done, determined to persevere in spite of hardships. One of the most imagistic poems in the collection, “War Among the Cabbages,” celebrates the battles inherent in gardening. This conversational poem addresses the reader and uses colloquialisms to describe her war with cutworms that “lurked deep. Mocking.” She doesn’t give up and digs into the dirt with spoon and sieve, “determined to slay/my solitary, slimy enemy.”

“In the Call of the Creekbank” recalls the ever-present creeks and a wilderness where concrete is an obstacle. To Skaggs, the city is an unpleasant wilderness where “the buzz of hundreds of voices / took the place of the buzz / of honeybees in the hive.” The city is a wilderness where “She balanced on tiptoes on her secondhand stiletto heels.” The sidewalks are smooth, but she feels the urge to “make a break for the first creekbank she can find.”

Women gather in “Breaking Beans” as an “assembly line.” There is a sense of community and traditional labor division, of common purpose where women bond to complete the task. This poem ends with the recitation of the kinds of beans common in Eastern Kentucky gardens, further grounding sense of place.

“Momma and Mamaw and Them,” one of the most powerful poems in the collection, explores a day in the life of three generations of women. The narrator listens as women

tell stories and gossip when they break beans or shuck corn. They laugh and cuss as they do the chores to provide food for the family. There's clear love, mutual respect, and strength; "There was always something to do / and they women all lit in and went to it." The dialect in this poem is perfect. The metaphorical reference of women as hens suggests a closeness the speaker feels to her kin after a day of caring for children and livestock:

*Mommy and Mamaw and them
Pecked around like a whole pack
Of mother hens on the prowl.*

In "Breathing Ghosts" Skaggs uses the metaphor of dandelion fluff for herself. She's too deeply rooted in this place to ever be comfortable "on a rooftop garden." She's a "prodigy seed who will always land in the hills, in the boonies in Kentucky." She feels connected to the place, though the memory of ghosts is sometimes scary

*Because roots can get tangled
they can smother out
anything else
that dares
to grow close.*

Despite loneliness, Appalachian women don't fall apart. The speaker cares for her dying Great-Mamaw throughout the collection: "We are too busy holding it together to indulge in the pleasure of falling apart." Even in the face of death, they don't give up. If this collection is a love letter to Appalachia, it is also a celebration of its women.