

## BOOK REVIEWS

### Fiction

#### *Planted by the Signs: Poems*

Misty Skaggs

Athens: Ohio University Press, 2019; 99 pp.

Misty Skaggs is of the mountains of eastern Kentucky, born and reared by resilient women. She makes no bones about her setting, offers no apologies, and most certainly does not sentimentalize rural Kentucky in this collection of poems. The persona's voice is authentic and shows the reader her world in detail, leaving nothing out. The poems range in tone from the humorous to the witty, and the speaker's love of Southern Appalachia is evident throughout. Skaggs is a strong woman who has come from a line of strong women, and they appear in these poems that were inspired by Skaggs's "Great Mamaw," Lovel Blankenbeckler.

The title of the collection, *Planted by the Signs*, is a nod to the *Farmers' Almanac*, which was Lovel's favorite book. Skaggs has aptly put her poems in sections that mimic planting and harvesting by the cycles of the moon: "When the Signs Are in the Head," the "Breast," and the "Reins," respectively. These narrative poems are mini-snapshots of life in the backwoods. An early poem, "Oatmeal Cookie Communion," describes Great Mamaw: "a tender woman / and a tender, twangy voice" who wears thick glasses and her hair, falling from a "loose bun . . . with strands as thin and delicate / as spider silk" (10). This visual comes from the memory of the speaker, who is a toddler, "dragging my butt over bumps / and sinkholes settled / into the floor" (10). It is these sinkholes that make these poems real, as Skaggs celebrates all that comes with rural Appalachia, pretty or not, and that includes trailers, wood stoves, and a "rust-brown recliner" (68). Unapologetic and proud, she shows the world from a crooked kitchen window in a trailer, and the latter's "slime green tub," in which the speaker runs a bath from "groaning pipes," having deep appreciation for the "luxury / of a brand-new bar of soap" in "Single-Wide Self-Care" (17). If the reader can embrace even just one-fourth of the gratefulness that this speaker has for the basic pleasures in life, then she will come away from this collection with a deeper sense of contentment and reverence.

In fact, when reading Skaggs, I recalled the writings of the Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön, as each of these women in her own way recognizes both the "gloriousness and wretchedness" (2008, 70) of life. Skaggs's poems

also reflect the ability of the speaker to do what Chödrön persuades us to do, which is “being able to appreciate, being able to look closely” (2008, 102). And “looking closely” is what the speaker does. It is the plain truth on the page, often followed with an image that stops the reader cold. In “You Might Drown,” the speaker opens with

If you try and convince me  
 you can't smell the rain coming  
 I'm liable to conclude  
 You're full of shit. (58)

The straight-up talk is then followed by a speaker keenly in tune with the weather (figuratively and literally) who tells the reader, “Look. Every little leaf / turns its pale belly skyward. / There's a storm coming / and they're ready to drink it all in” (58).

Likewise, in the clean lineation of “Nighttime Noises,” which compares the “crickets and whippoorwills” and “coyotes” to the “sirens” of the city, the final lines of the poem startle: “I can hear things moving under moonlight / and I doubt I'll have peace before dawn. / Out here, even the stars are loud” (27).

These poems are loud in the best way, with the shortcoming being that sometimes the titles of these beauties do not do justice to the very poems themselves. Nonetheless, the speaker in these poems is one the reader will enjoy engaging with, from the sassiness of the speaker's “titties flopping” as she invites the “candidate” into her trailer in “Election Year” (21), to an homage to strong women who yearn for love “like cast iron,” in “I'd Melt” (7). Always present is the speaker who follows the teachings of her Great Mamaw, who taught her “how you should only plant flowers / when the signs are in the reins. Blossoms and bulbs are begat by blood” (92). Nothing is barred in this collection. The profane and sacred co-exist, just as the speaker and her Mamaw take joy in eating gooseberries, the “tart snack / damned near gone extinct. / We don't care if it stings.” Instead, “we keep the taste of yesterday / biting on our tongues” (69).

*Rosemary Royston* is Assistant Professor of English at Young Harris College.

## Reference

Chödrön, Pema. 2008. *The pocket Pema Chödrön*. Boulder, CO: Shambhala.

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