

Review of Barbara Schmitz's, *Sundown at Faith Regional*
by Clif Mason

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Barbara Schmitz's poetry is perhaps unique among midwestern Nebraska poets in that it has been informed significantly by Sufi mysticism—there are several of glancing references to “whirling” in the poems of *Sundown at Faith Regional*—Buddhist chanting, and Hindu meditation. She has also pursued a richer vision of reality's possibilities through the use of psychotropic substances (of course, she is aware that poetry itself is perhaps the most psychotropic of all drugs). In these aesthetic approaches and choices, she resembles such poets as Allen Ginsberg, Michael McClure, and Gary Snyder, to say nothing of Arthur Rimbaud. Indeed, her poems are as clipped as Snyder's—she is relentless in her elimination of articles and she eschews almost all punctuation—while remaining as metaphysically open and syncretic as Ginsberg's.

At the same time, Schmitz writes of such plains places and realities as Highway 81, on which she lives, linking her poetics with those of Nebraska contemporaries like Marjorie Saiser, Twyla Hansen, and Ted Kooser. Further, Schmitz invests her restless poetic searching with a dedication to truth-seeking that is unwavering, and with an ethical passion that lends both gravity and intellectual resonance to her poems.

Like an Elizabethan play, Schmitz's *Sundown at Faith Regional* consists of five sections: Childhood Windows, Heart Medicine, Loss, Old Dog, and Not Afraid. The arc of the book's 72 poems is the from childhood's self-consciousness and imaginative energy to the confrontation with aging and its increasing debility, culminating in the acceptance of death's inevitability and the hope for something more. The collection's proem, “Lamentation (After Rumi),” both

announces its death theme and offers Schmitz's experiential wisdom: "I thought I could trick Death / by writing poems // Ha! No one wants to read them / when they sail down / from the tower where / Death has flung them." In other words, the coming to terms with death is the origin of poetry (or at least of Schmitz's poetry). This poem's final stanza is one of Schmitz's most affirmative and tender statements of her response to death, and it encapsulates her book's vision: "Come, my love, / we will stand together here / side by side / as long as we can / watching the light." Love may not be able to defeat death, but it can stand toe-to-toe with it until the final breath, and in that way, preserve its dignity and keep faith with its own deep truth.

Schmitz's poems are spare and lean, mostly unadorned, which makes her occasional wordplay or instances of figurative language even more striking. The poem, "White Blossoms," for example, treats a young girl's confusion about, and defiance of, menstruation: "Stubby cherry tree she could climb / stubbornly sitting in its crotch / after "The Talk" *No* // she said to no one mostly herself / I'm not doing that I'm not bleeding / White blossoms not yet turned / into deep red fruit." The playful repetition of "stubby" and "stubborn" reinforce the feeling of determined opposition to the transformation of the body, even as the metaphor of blossoms and fruit generates a quiet emotional force around the inevitability of physical maturation.

"The Garden" delightfully contrasts a childhood garden—"It was my idea to bless / the ground with beer"—with a garden from young parenting years—"Sometimes I declined to drive / way across town to retrieve / a tomato." However, the poem is not about either garden, but rather, about the act of remembering and the joy it can bring. Schmitz underlines the spontaneity and brightness of that feeling through skillful use of alliteration: "Now the garden's just a butterfly flicker / flashing in my mind." As Proust realized, memory carries emotional power only when it comes unbidden. If we insist on a command performance, it often fails us, as Schmitz notes in

“Memory”: “It’s those other questions / the name of So-and-So / or the talk at such-and-such occasion . . . but as soon as he asks /some over-zealous teacher’s pet / leaps up erasing the blackboard of my mind.” The insight is poignant, but it is the metaphor that makes it stay in the reader’s memory as poetry.

A significant part of the collection anatomizes loss and the concessions we increasingly make to illness and infirmity. Death is a ubiquitous presence, and much of the wisdom so amply found in these pages derives from Schmitz’s shifting attitudes toward death. As is the case with Dickinson before her, Schmitz’s view of death differs, depending on the situation, the mood, and her ability to bring her internal resources to bear upon a subject so sobering and grim. She states baldly in “Loss”: “When it comes down to it it’s / all loss.” She invokes Thoreau, Durrell’s *Alexandria Quartet*, and St. Francis, in support of the idea that no permanent solace can be found in anything material. In “Give Me Back,” Schmitz beseeches her muse to “give [her] back the time before / worry”—a particularly effective line break. In “Might As Well,” she attempts to laugh in the face of death: “We might as well laugh / as we *ashes ashes / all fall down.*” In “Winter Solstice,” one of her most affecting poems on this theme, Schmitz supposes that, “Humans have dreamed all / these festivities / to keep the gloom away . . . We celebrate being alive / friend’s husband died yesterday / doctor cut time from my face //Sorry and joy equally stacked /wrapped in paper shining / beneath star-topped tree.” One might add that poets create poems as a way to simultaneously face and “keep the gloom away.”

In the face of loss and grief, Schmitz proffers her ethics for living more of what Socrates termed an “examined life”: that we need, as responsible human beings, first, to be truthful, and second, to try to essay something with our time that will be a genuine and affirming response. She is unflinching, in “Making the Beds,” in her anatomizing of the shortsighted nature of many

responses: “That prayer the priest intones / at funeral masses / where hardly anything is mentioned / about the loves and joys / of the deceased / just mumblings and hopes / mainly about eternity / which is already now happening / but most of the time / we don’t notice // just go about our busy busyness.” As a counter, Schmitz offer the “Prayers we could be making / out of the mundane.” These prayers—poems?—show us how we can approach the world, not with listless hearts, but in an attitude of celebration, as we discover in “Praise.” Schmitz employs anaphora to create a list of things of which we might well be more appreciative, including the “Neighbor’s Evergreen tree,” the “grace of morning / to be alive again,” “clouds that chase / sun away,” “flowers not yet planted, “ the red of “birth death,” “the heart / that beats and flutters,” and “all the hum / everything going about its business.” The use of “business” here implies a natural process, not the “busyness” she critiqued in “Making the Beds.” And finally, Schmitz instructs us to “Praise the Praise Song / Thankful for blessing / Thankful for pain.” To live a life of praise is perhaps the highest calling we have as human beings in this world.

Schmitz also conveys her ethic through humor. One example will stand for many in the book. In “Worried Again,” she describes worry as “only a habit” of the brain. She speaks of having to “stare down / the clattering brain // get ahold of it . . . long enough to give it / a good talking to.” She elaborates on this chastisement of the brain: “. . . and then speak to it / rather loudly / even though it won’t admit it / brain is very hard-of hearing.” Quieting what Buddhists call “the monkey brain” is a universal human issue. We can be grateful, as readers, to have a teacher as witty as Schmitz.

In Not Afraid, the final section of *Sunset at Faith Regional*, Schmitz treats the subjects of death, God, and the afterlife in poem after poem. The title poem of this section envisions death as a “narrow passage,” which we must “squeeze through” “before spreading / full-sky wings.”

“Last Things” speaks of the “Hope that all who went before / Before they ceased to exist / Exist still in Someother-Else” and acknowledges the end of the body: “Flesh gives way to ruin / Ruin means nothing lasts / Last things hold special tears.” In “Ora Pro Nobis,” Schmitz employs an apt metaphor to illuminate the transience of the flesh: “Body’ll peel away / like an onion skin / disposable / no longer essential / and we’ll go.” She envisions us, “wafted away by the gathering winds.” In “Autumn Duet,” Schmitz finds her most evocative metaphor for death in the changing colors of the autumn trees and in “Earth . . . flinging herself / with tipped-over glee and / wild-armed whirling into / a tryst with winter, stretching bare limbs into the encompassing / dark and pressing toward / her lover’s ice-cold kiss.”

In “Days of the Dead,” Schmitz directly addresses the question of an afterlife. She states that “THE DEAD / mostly do not talk to me If they have anything at all // to say it’s / *I’m still alive // Can’t you see?*” However, Schmitz’s most moving depiction of the afterlife is perhaps in “When I Am Dead,” in which she disposes of her earthly possessions. She sees her notebooks, “dissolving paper and pain / Transforming perhaps into a tiny trail / showering behind my soul / as it goes / turning once / . . . to view all / that was / beautiful / hard // life.” This is the farewell of someone who has loved and appreciated life for all its beauty, all its pain. The final lines of the collection, from “Nothing at All,” reinforce this view and leave it to linger in the reader’s mind: “No moment or even / sigh escaping before we make / our formal prayer—blessing // ourselves planet universe / Giving it all up *Up and Away* / It hurts this dissolving / Still it’s where we hope to go.”

Schmitz’s search for truth and meaning unfolds in a dramatic and sustained way in *Sundown at Faith Regional* (the title itself evokes its themes of death and the search for faith). Through scores of poems, Schmitz has fashioned a testament to the will to know and to love the things of

this world, as well as to accept the stark, ineluctable reality of death and, perhaps, to continue to seek truth after departing from the body. This book offers the accrued wisdom of a life of search. It is as necessary as the heartbeat, the breath, the shaping of words.

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