ForeWord Reviews

Renewing the Vows
Peter Schmitt
David Robert Books
978-1-933456-71-3
(Aug 15, 2007)

Peter Schmitt's third book of poems offers a mix of poetic virtues—clean, accurate language, unobtrusively patterned lines and stanzas—and qualities more often linked to prose. Virtually every poem in *Renewing the Vows* tells a clear story, apparently drawn from the author's own life, with very little metaphoric or linguistic embellishment.

The opening poem, "Winter Memory, Miami," illustrates several of Schmitt's methods well (even the title indicates his commitment to memory as chief source). Structured as a sonnet with a rather generous rhyme scheme (door/there, casting/priest, veil/fields), the poem reads conversationally and throws up no barriers to understanding. From a dark kitchen, the speaker watches his father checking the weather, fearing their crop will freeze, while sprinklers cast "their drops as if from the hands of priests" and "the smudge pots flicker, / faceless jack o' lanterns strewn across the fields."

There is little commentary in this imagistic poem, but while the laconic briefness and Frostian plainness even in the metaphors is typical, most of this volume is more narrative than lyric. Many poems remember and mourn the poet's father. In a particularly vivid moment, the father's eyes wander off to "somewhere else, some far corner" as he and his wife renew their vows, his cancer already far along. Other poems return to youthful indiscretions—a one-night stand with a married woman, the theft of cash from a wallet found in the gutter—pondering them with a sort of rueful fatalism. "The Wallet" ends with Schmitt and his friend dutifully mailing the wallet, sans cash, back to the owner, and imagining him checking the lining, "on the longshot chance that we, / just maybe, might surprise him, that we wouldn't // turn out to be exactly who we were."

Schmitt teaches creative writing and literature at the University of Miami. His previous work has won the Lavan Award from the Academy of American Poets, the "Discovery"/*The Nation* Prize, and grants from the Florida Arts Council and the Ingram Merrill Foundation.

At times a bit more surprise would be welcome in these poems, although most do have their rewards to offer. "Modern Transit" begins with predictable treatments of rollerblading and bungee-jumping, but picks up energy with the last two sections, which ponder a "personal submersible vehicle" offered by Nieman's and, most memorably, moving through a library

where the lights are controlled by motion sensors. “It’s hard not to feel a little / like a god,” Schmitt writes, until “the whole of it nearly as fast / goes to black in your wake.” Those interested in the felt life of a modest and alert observer will find this carefully crafted volume worth their while.