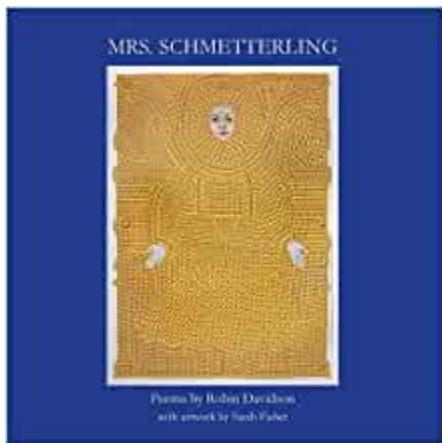


Robin Davidson's *Mrs. Schmetterling* reviewed by Tom Laichas



**Robin Davidson, *Mrs. Schmetterling*, with artwork by Sarah Fisher.
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Two decades ago, the poet Robin Davidson made a trip to Kraków, there to immerse herself in Polish language and literature. She'd recently been introduced to contemporary Polish poets in a class taught by the late Adam Zagajewski, and had been particularly moved by the work of Ewa Lipska. Little of Lipska's work was available in English, so Davidson studied up on her Polish, met with Lipska and, in concert with poet Ewa Elżbieta Nowakowska, began translating *Ms. Schubert*, published this past year.

Davidson's own collection, *Mrs. Schmetterling*, also appeared in 2021, a fortunate but not accidental coincidence. [Speaking to Kelly Howard of Lunch Ticket](#), Davidson says that she conceived of *Mrs. Schmetterling* as a "response" to Lipska's work. To read Davidson's own work together with her translation of Lipska's simultaneously is to overhear dialogue between two master poets and through their fictions.

When Davidson first introduces Mrs. Schmetterling, she is an everywoman well into a comfortable and mildly disappointed middle age:

She is neither great musician nor poet.
Not scientist nor historian. She is ordinary.
Any century's woman. She cooks, reads, bathes children
and dogs. She takes out the garbage, listens to music.
Mrs. Schmetterling is tired. Her imagination is
pressed like a tiny chestnut blossom between the pages
of old letters and recipes, a book of days.

("Mrs. Schmetterling Kneels in a Garden")

She is, on first impressions, a pragmatist who “believes in what she can see” — snow, sparrows, tulips. She “wants nothing more / than the landscape, the city’s opening / onto streets of stones, shops, small wrought iron tables (“What Mrs. Schmetterling Wants”). She “considers the scent of a dying tree” (“Mrs. Schmetterling Untrims the Christmas Tree”) and mends pajamas (“Mending Pajamas”). She is

...skeptical of the sublime. She does not trust a transcendence
that will come to her on the day the world ends.

(“Mrs. Schmetterling Considers the Beautiful”).

Outwardly, Mrs. Schmetterling is the neighbor one greets every morning for years, but who discloses little about herself. Inside Mrs. Schmetterling’s head, it’s a different story. Though intensely private, her interior life “pressed...between the pages,” her mind is intensely absorbed with meaning-making and world-building. For her, the world of things resolves, once past the eye’s literalness, into metaphor:

... When she thinks of heart, that rocking, flopping in her chest,
she does not see in her mind’s eye a muscle
or chambers, or bloody arteries twitching, rather
she sees cranes rising from a marsh *en masse...*

(“Mrs. Schmetterling Thinks of Her Heart”)

It turns out that Mrs. Schmetterling is far from “ordinary.” She possesses Mary Oliver’s gift for seeing the whole of things in modest daily truths, so much so that one might call Davidson a poet of practical metaphysics, particularly as related to one’s own entropic diminishment:

Mrs. Schmetterling has been reading what scientists say
about theories of cloaking, and now she thinks
she’s beginning to understand her own invisibility.
She wonders how fast or how slowly light must travel
Across her face to hide her eyes, nose, mouth, chin,
How much time it will take to erase her person entirely.

(“Mrs. Schmetterling Considers the Invisible”)

Beyond erasure, there is remembrance. At Montparnasse Cemetery, wandering among the graves of the once-great, Mrs. Schmetterling considers:

She pauses longest before Marguerite Duras, reads love notes covering the stone, as many as she can until she sees the open notebooks, lined unfilled, and pencils, pencils, pencils—to write unceasingly from the grave. She takes the stub of pencil from her pocket, places it in the overflowing jar, kisses the glass, and walks on in the morning sun.

("Mrs. Schmetterling Visits Montparnasse Cemetery")

Davidson unspools Schmetterling's half-whispered soliloquys in long, even languorous lines that her publisher could accommodate only with extra-wide pages. To my ear, they read like the offspring of Vermeer and Hopper—a body in a still room, possessed of a certain translucence, its surface warmed by the heat of interior meditation, sometimes anxious, sometimes assured. Reinforcing this painterly solitude are artist Sarah Fisher's radiant icon-like portraits, which I lingered on as I read.

Even as we come to know this woman, she preserves, against our questions, an obdurate reserve. In the collection's very first line, Davidson introduces Mrs. Schmetterling offhandedly: "let's call her Judith..." That is Davidson's last invitation to intimacy. From here to the end, in every poem, she is Mrs. Schmetterling. This has a dislocating effect: we address Mrs. Schmetterling formally, as if we hardly know her, yet we are witness to her intensely private inner life.

Many of these poems have appeared in Davidson's earlier work, particularly her chapbook *City that Ripens on the Tree of the World* and her full-length collection *Luminous Other*. Much as H.D. came to inhabit her Helen of Egypt, another woman whose surface belies rich depths, Davidson inhabits Judith Schmetterling. Schmetterling is not exactly Davidson's doppelgänger — unlike Schmetterling, Davidson invites others to share a portion of her thought — but she is more than just a fiction. In her chapbook *Kneeling in the Dojo*, Davidson suggests the shape of her relationship with Mrs. Schmetterling:

I dreamt I lived one summer
in your library
where the walls were hung with books

...

Afternoons I'd nap, dream the body of a woman
part by part, in photographs
as Stieglitz dreamt O'Keeffe
and each day the apples inside me
grew larger, like human faces waiting

for a voice, and the apples on the wall
began to swell, filling the room, opening
like skin unfolded, torn
to find the same woman
dreamt again and again
each book singing its own fruit.

("The Tree in the Library")

For Robin Davidson, Mrs. Schmetterling is that woman, dreamt again and again.

It is not hard to see what attracted Robin Davidson to Ewa Lipska's Ms. Schubert. The women are not dissimilar. Both are of comfortable middle class means, the greater part of their lives behind them. Neither is exactly nostalgic for the past, but both are sharply aware of its presence. Still, Ms. Lipska, like Mrs. Schmetterling, recognizes that possibilities remain open: "it's still too early to be too late." ("Piano")

At least, that's what we're told. While Davidson explores Mrs. Schmetterling's inner thoughtscape, Lipska's Ms. Schubert never utters a word, either aloud or in her head. What we know Ms. Schubert is learned from a former lover who reminisces on their affair in brief and often cryptic letters, all beginning with the formalism "Dear Ms. Schubert." Ms. Schubert's responses do not appear. In Lipska's work, Ms. Schubert is a silent "you," revealed only in her correspondent's retrospective male gaze, albeit a male gaze conjured by Lipska herself. Unlike Mrs. Schmetterling, Ms. Schubert is a woman whose thoughts and experiences are alleged rather than witnessed.

The brisk declarative sentences in *Ms. Schubert* establish a playful conversational sensibility. Yet the letters are also allusory and fragmented, reminding me of Julio Cortazar's *Cronopios and Famas*. Consider, for instance, Lipska's "Cities" —

Dear Ms. Schubert, there are cities that could
testify against us. We abandoned them
suddenly and for no good reason. Panicked addresses
and hotel beds chased us along highways.
Do you remember the dilated pupils of Venice?
Manhattan in a huff? Ambitious Zurich, a relative
of Thomas Mann? The cities of our birth harbored a grudge
yet behaved proudly. They knew we'd be back.
Like all children of repentant old age.

And "Lightning" —

Dear Ms. Schubert, I won't translate the words
for you I never said. They got all tangled up
with childish excuses. Cows were evaporating
in the meadow, while we ran in place,
as if struck by lightning.

Davidson's third-person account of Mrs. Schmetterling's internal monologues resists the pull of surreal dream and fracture. Here is "Mrs. Schmetterling Thinks of Returning to the City Where She Was Born" —

Mrs. Schmetterling thinks of returning to the port city of her birth
when the pandemic passes.
What will she recognize from her first year of breath in the world?
The scent of sea air? Words in Italian?
She closes her eyes and conjures window boxes of geraniums and phlox
coloring white-washed stucco walls.
She imagines cobblestone streets as narrow as alleyways, and the child
she was, jostling along beneath
the stroller's black canopy, beneath laundry billowing from wrought-iron
balconies, and the great Duomo.

Ms. Schubert and *Mrs. Schmetterling* left me with a riddle. Ms. Schubert's letter-writing former lover has a name: it is *Mr. Schmetterling*, literally, "Mr. Butterfly." In borrowing and feminizing that name, Davidson conjures a counter-world in which Ms. Schubert and Mrs. Schmetterling share landscape, outlook, and some unspecified personal history. It is a pleasure to walk within earshot of these women, their minds entangled in language, life, and story.

Tom Laichas is widely published in the United States. His collection, *Empire of Eden*, was published by The High Window Press in 2019. He is currently The High Window's Featured American Poet.