Book review

MEMORY CARDS: 2010–2011 SERIES BY SUSAN SCHULTZ
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Susan Schultz’s latest book, Memory Cards: 2010–2011 Series, is a collection of prose poems originally written on index cards. Written on a daily basis over two years, each Memory Cards poem begins with a line from another poet’s work: Lissa Wolsak, Norman Fischer, Wallace Stevens, Emily Dickinson, John Ashbery, George Oppen, Albert Saijo, Lyn Hejinian, and Clark Coolidge. The nine sections of the collection are also named for these poets. It seems fitting that every poem in Memory Cards was composed on an index card and are titled and cataloged by date. Before digitization, index cards cataloged library books and provided order. Yet, unlike library catalogs, the poems and sections in Memory Cards are ordered and simultaneously disordered. The diversity of poets, form, and structure in Memory Cards demonstrates Shultz’s range and commitment to the experimental aesthetic tradition.

Memory Cards parses the poem through form and content. The memory card form performs experimentation through its organization. The lines drawn from other poets, along with the snapshot-like rhythm, offer readers a new composition of poem and memory. The short, compact shape of each poem also makes the physical experience of holding the hard copy of Memory Cards like holding a stack of index cards. Schultz’s poems contain lines that demonstrate the contradictions in defining the poem. In “July 21, 2010,” Shultz writes, “The poem never intended to be a dictator, but it insists on form, control, an ordered space.” (74) Yet, as Schultz writes in “10 September 2010,” “Poetry is, at best, a loss leader” (44). Instead of a dictator of “form” and “control,” Schultz’s “ordered space” of the memory card is forged by its unpredictability. For example, we don’t expect a line from Lyn Hejinian such as “Lines in meditation—or inspection” to bridge with “look for broken pipes, rusted gutters, chipped slabs…” (95) as written in “19 March 2011.” However, by doing so, Schultz’s poems leap and connect seemingly disparate phenomena of “meditation” and “inspection” to the everyday such as “broken pipes.” By these poetic moves, the poem holds “loss” while confronting “ordered space.” Each day’s poem begins to blend into the other as Schultz writes, “he took one photograph a day until frame melted into story” (17). Similarly, the collection of cards melts and blends a remarkable story of memory.

Composed of snapshots, observations, insights, names, quotes, snippets, and conversations, these poems explore the boundlessness, borders, and mysteries of memory. They are rhythmic songs that push us to rethink the privileges of remembering. As Schultz writes, “your memory is contained in a cloud” (71). In Memory Cards, however, Schultz offers us how your memory can and cannot be contained in a poem. As Schultz writes, “Given a prompt (snapshot, story), the child remembers something.” (9) In the same way, Shultz prompts us—with her snapshots and stories—to remember “something” as well. Jumping from one line to another, Schultz offers a montage of daily life. In doing so, Schultz softens the hard edges of the index cards with empathy and insight.

In the collection, Schultz also explores the challenges of memory through her own mothering juxtaposed with her mother experiencing dementia. In the poem “July 21, 2010” Schultz writes, “You are not my mother! Slight memory, muscle memory.” Recalling dialogue from her daughter, Schultz brings into question how motherhood is intertwined with memory.
As much as Schultz questions memory, she questions motherhood as well. In the same poem, Schultz writes, “My mother has forgotten how to walk. Her throat forgets to swallow. Parse the word” (11). As the speaker’s mother has “forgotten how to walk” and “swallow,” questions of language are juxtaposed with forgetting. The next two lines “parse” words such as for and get. Bridged through contrast, Schultz carefully and poetically explores dementia through parsing the definitions of mother and memory. In the poem, Schultz asks a painful question: “If my mother forgets me, am I misbegotten?” (9) The poem then answers with dialogue, seemingly directed to the speaker’s own daughter: “Mother is a job, he tells her; it’s the person who takes you to school, and who makes sure you’re safe. At the day’s end, she gets you back” (11).

While gently holding the tender and difficult experiences of dementia and motherhood, Memory Cards also includes humor. In particular, themes of Hawai’i and technology illuminate wit and irony. In “July 20, 2010,” “They come pushing their carts down Kahekili, stopping by the bridge to drink. / A little boy in orange points away from my window/frame. It’s not a bad climate in which to be homeless.” (10) Or Schultz writes of technology: “Those who die shall not be forgotten by the internet (12); “Love is a feeling that wikiHow can describe and attempt to assist” (17); “It’s the language that’s a commodity, says someone else’s facebook friend.” (21). As Schultz concludes in “21 January 2011,” even “Mute Hamlet” can “talk back,” or even if “you still cannot find” your home, “there’s an app for that” (67). Schultz catalogs the influences of technology such as “wikiHow,” “apps,” and “facebook” with the ironic experience of remembering, forgetting, loving, living, and dying in our digital age.

In Memory Cards, Schultz investigates memory through her insightful, unpredictable, and empathetic cataloging of the everyday. In reading the collection, one learns tremendously also about the poem, motherhood, Hawai’i, and technology. Each poem is a small dream we compose through order, disorder, and connection. Most importantly, Schultz reminds us how the poem, like mothers, “at the day’s end” brings us back.