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Reviewer's Name: Lisa Hartz, Executive Director, Seven Cities Writers Project

An Entrancing Encounter

REVIEW: Millicent Borges Accardi, *Only More So*, Salmon Poetry, 2016

Please allow me to compare poet Millicent Borges Accardi's complex, layered and ultimately deeply moving new collection to a family dinner. The one where you're lucky enough to be seated next to your favorite aunt.

She's the rebel-muse. The wise traveler. The one who always brought you good books along with sweets from a faraway place. The one with the best stories, who seems to be listening carefully even as she's sharing with you what she's learned, what she's still struggling to understand about the wide, marvelous and confounding world.

Many of these poems are concerned with the problem of union. The desire for oneness between people, in cultures as different (and sometimes all too similar) as Southern California and the fraught former Yugoslavia. This frustration echoes through the many voices in the collection, as the poet points out the constant dichotomy of our inner and outer lives, and what can and cannot be known. As here, in the title poem:

*As wind fragmented, as doors burned,
as fires latched, the last woman, this last
woman, clasped a bowl to her chest knowing, knowing
what the snow outside pretended, knowing
that nothing important ever belonged to her.*

Your intrepid aunt bears witness in a lilting, lyrical voice even as she's describing harrowing encounters and devastated lives. There is a deep urgency here, she is relentless in her dissection of the peculiarities of human behavior and the compulsion to make sense of it.

In a particularly moving poem, "In Prague," a jackhammer aids in the excavation of war dead, and the poet begs for a kind of mercy:

Take me where memory makes my legs move.

Take me where moss holds language.

Take me where we have a name for the things we do.

Two poems on, you're ready to take a breath, maybe refill your wineglass, and take a moment to process all you've heard. But she drives on, to "This is What People Do," which just explodes off the page:

*They live down the hall and do not answer
their phone. They are married for 18 years,
then take up with an old high school sweetheart
they found on the internet who stalks them.
They get restraining orders. They bail their
Japanese friends out of jail for DUIs and hear
about how they were tossed around in the cell.
They go to Little Tokyo and sleep in their car.*

I read this book in one sitting, lured on by the keenly observant voice, and this poet's abiding sense of compassion, even for the perpetrators. It seems the horror of the damage we do to one another has been in the works for a very long time. What we don't fundamentally understand, we cannot prevent. And so the desire for understanding rises again. For this, our only tool is language, with all its inherent flaws and limitations. This, from "Like Nameless Skyscrapers":

*All around, branches reach,
and taunt her like nameless skyscrapers,
singing spirals, furrowing,
dropping seeds and petals and conversations
she never caught.*

Words on the wing

tell her nothing, absolutely nothing.

Everything she wants to hear.

You find the dinner is coming to an end. The other guests have left the table. The candle flames are beginning to drown. You're not quite ready for this entrancing encounter to end. Someone suggests ice cream, and you're drawn back to the beginning. To that opening poem, so inviting, "On a Theme by William Stafford," which closes with:

With my tongue

pursed like a stick, I'd push my ice

cream all the way down to the end,

so that even the last bite contained

both cone and cream.

You'll go home sated, saturated. Images and voices will fill your dreams. And you'll remember this encounter, this wise woman, for a long, long time.