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“It was like this, only more so” is the way Millicent Borges Accardi ends the titular poem in her fourth collection, Only More So. The simple sentence could be read as a mission statement for the book, as she understatedly tackles war, history, disease, survival, and womanhood. Words fail when describing the width and breadth of life, and she reminds the reader to marinate on her poems, then add “only more so.”

Accardi focuses on quiet moments, creating specific characters even as she jumps decades in referencing Raymond Carver to Lena Horne to the band Sublime to Frida Kahlo, jumping from New York City to Spain to Indiana to Eastern Europe—the connective tissue is the day-to-day minutiae it takes to survive everything from a boy learning to shave to the need to placate occupying soldiers in wartime. No matter the subject, her speakers grab onto details that elevate the poems from words on the page to lived scenes in the reader’s mind. The book grounds the horrors of ethnic cleansing in “the rebel tanks / with nudies plastered to their sides” in “Ciscenje Prostora” and looks to a couple early in marriage “giddy with guessing” the husband's disease in “Arrhythmia.” The husband is “a 40-something man / in a sea of waiting room seniors” determined “To build a new fence, jamming post piles / Into the ground with the same brute strength” he had when he was younger.

The collection begins with a declaration of wanting to live life more fully and of eating ice cream “so that even the last bite contained / both cone and cream” in “On a Theme by William Stafford.” Yet, it’s the second poem, “Coupling,” that lets the reader in on what Accardi mostly explores: the understated violence that exists everywhere, even in an average marriage. The woman in this couple has a “heart as compact as plywood,” and the man’s heart is a pair of “fearless / hands holding a piece of wood steady / while a diamond-point blade cut through.” The following poem, the aforementioned “Ciscenje Prostora,” increases the cognitive dissonance of gently describing violence, this time a soldier raping an Eastern European woman, where “Even little sounds, like birds overhead, / encourage him to go on, to spit, to breathe / three generations of her surrender into his lungs. / Then, silence.” By aiming the readers’ eyes away from the scene up to the birds and then zooming in to breathing, the disconnection and the intimacy of the violation are highlighted powerfully. “It was like this, only more so.”

Disease hovers around the edges of poems throughout the collection, and the poem “Under Different Conditions” does the best job at skirting around the topic before dealing with it more directly than anywhere else in the book. It opens a mystery:

They say once you have it
it does not go away, like a thirst
for liquor, a child, intelligence,
an abusive hand, a talent with
words, blindness, poverty,
a green thumb, perfect pitch.
Almost all of the things with which “it” is compared also show up in the book, so the reader is left wondering what “it” may be. And where “an abusive hand” is negative, “a green thumb” rarely is, leaving no hint where we’re headed. Clues start to appear as “it changes forms,” sneaking “inside the bones / of imagination, in the minds / of worry, between the lines / of every poem you read.” Accardi returns to referencing the body, hinting at the disease which is also “between the lines” of many poems in the very book the reader holds in their hands. The ominous and ever-presence of “it” grows and expands so that the reveal, as awful as it is, almost feels like release:

“Write it; you can say this.”
Breast Cancer. People might stop
and watch rooftops as an unexplained
plume of black smoke rises and changes directions above us.

We see the speaker urging herself to say out loud, write it explicitly, “Breast Cancer,” capitalized to give it its full weight, heavy and dark like the “plume of black smoke” that “changes directions” much as the poem, too, changed directions, as many of the poems in the book do. The final line's length is doubled so it sits fully on the reader. Again, “It was like this, only more so.”

But it isn't all restrained brutality. There are moments of, if not all out levity, then signs that Accardi is aware the reader might need a second to breathe away from the war atrocities and diseases creeping in all of us. This change of pace is by no means less thought provoking. Halfway through the book we get “Musings in January,” where the speaker is in a hotel room watching “a definitely B / chick flick” and pondering what it is about the main actor that intrigues her. It's more than “his body” even if that “used to have been / a reason”; it's more than “the bull dog neck” or “flat boxer's nose” she favors. The speaker decides that, in every movie and every image she's seen of this actor, he looks “lost, thirst and lost” and “Even when he is starving, thirsty, dying, / Even then. / He would rather listen.” While it's obvious that Accardi is fascinated by the grimmer aspects of human nature and history, the lighter moments are where her eye for minutiae can shine, separated from subject matter that could overshadow the work being done. Watching a movie and wondering about one's attraction to a celebrity is incredibly human, as is soldiers committing war crimes or a grieving woman dealing with a cancer diagnosis. It's in poems and passages like “Musings in January” within Only More So that capture Accardi's stunning ability to show exactly what life is like.

Only more so.