

A close-up photograph of several pink orchids with delicate petals and yellow centers, arranged in a cluster. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green and yellow, suggesting a natural setting. The text is overlaid on the image.

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WALKING TOWARD SOLSTICE

by Anca Vlasopolos

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Reviewed by Ramona Reeves

The collection of poems *Walking Toward Solstice* by Anca Vlasopolos captures the feeling of moving from summer to winter toward the slow yet persistent dissipation of light. The title adeptly captures the mood and tone of the collection, which both mourns the loss of light (literally and metaphorically) and holds out for the possibility of its coming again. Although her collection is clearly influenced by the seasonal cycles found in the Michigan and Northern Ohio region where she lives, she strikes a level of emotional honesty that will resonate with readers whether they live in Southwest Michigan or Southwest Texas. Vlasopolos's collection, however, resists following the seasons and solstices in chronological order, so that time passes, blends, and fades.

Her poetry, like her landscape, is stripped down to the essentials, leaving little room for, or need of, punctuation. This is not to say that Vlasopolos doesn't play with other components of craft, such as margins and white space. Just as nature doesn't stand still, neither do the margins of her poetry. Her skilled use of form is evident in poems such as "August Teetering," "Faithful, In My Fashion," and "Lost in Modernity." In the last she writes,

it used to be
 full-breasted open-bloused
Summer
reclined upon the cusp of July-August
 spinning out of her
 many-teated self
 strands of cotton candy
 shielding us like mother's palm against fierce rays
 sugaring our days
 filled with long silences (1-10)

These lines demonstrate not only Vlasopolos's control of craft but also capture her collection's major thematic focus, the

cyclical nature of both time and human lives. While this is a major theme to be sure, the writing avoids an Ecclesiastical, time-for-everything sensibility. Rather, Vlasopolos's writing is honest, avoids sentimentality, and sets out across the darkening, often violent, landscape with courage and wisdom in search of meaning and, sometimes, a shard of hope.

Several of the volume's poems, such as "Foreclosed" and "Scissors, Rock, Paper," concern themselves less with the natural world and more with human actions. Still, whether a poem is located within nature, human drama, or somewhere between the two, the poet searches for hope ("A Wish for the Second Daughter") and identity in a world where impermanence or fakery is the norm. Within the eight lines of "Independence, of Us," Vlasopolos demonstrates how nature trumps human spectacle:

on the way home from an elderly Fourth of July
eastern skies in the populous city still many miles away
break open in firebursts

while to the south the low dark clouds
shrivel away like paper burnt from the other side
revealing an improbably waxing moon

outbrightening
our fake stars

While humans can aspire to create wonders that rival nature, they cannot equal it, in part because nature is indifferent. In "Fin D'Année," a mid-November graces mansions and hovels alike, and in "The Disillusionment of Ice," ice that has broken apart from a frozen lake "would not blink / at deciphering you / into component molecules" (25-27). The speaker is no more important than the ice in this poem but nonetheless struggles with seeing the ice as somehow human: "oh, it may look like white-grey edges of wounds / . . . but it is only elements" (22, 24). In fact, one of Vlasopolos' achievements in this collection is that her speakers see through their own feeble attempts to subscribe human characteristics and tendencies to a world that goes on with or

without them. This acknowledgment sets the emotional landscape for speakers who struggle with aging in poems such as "Changeling Day" and "In 2050," in which she writes, "By then I'll / most likely / most probably / most certainly / be dead?" (27-30). Such lines prepare the reader for a place where "a dumpster sits in the driveway" and "colossal black bags appear at the curb" in the poem "Burying the Next-Door Neighbor" (19-20). This same struggle with indifference also prepares readers for poems about the disconsolate and displaced in "Foreclosed," "Saved and Spent," and "Showcase at the Convalescent Center."

Although aging and the changing seasons are inevitable, Vlasopolos makes it clear that we are rarely prepared for either. This thematic focus is connected to the feeling of isolation experienced by her speakers in many of the poems. In "Recession," the speaker, who stands inside a warm, interior looking out a window, says,

there are those
for whom
this frosted glass
is as hard a barrier
as for the winged
who in fright
perhaps despair
smash like snowballs
against it (15-22)

The themes of disconnection and isolation wrought—to some degree—by seasonal forces are apparent in these lines, but so is Vlasopolos's ability to produce a wrenching image. Natural forces are at work here, but so is the poet when she gives us "fish gored bleeding / from the side" in the last two lines of "Wedded Bliss" or "today lake runs the color of eggplant flesh" in "Signals Over Water" (8).

It is Vlasopolos's unflinching vision that propels this collection forward. In the early poem "So Short Past Solstice," we are told that "it is already past midsummer / each day throws wantonly away another / minute or two of light" (4-6), and near the end, in "Small Signs," we find ourselves emerging

from winter as a “horizon incandesces lingeringly” (11). Soon after, memory and longing end the collection as the poet walks “through honeyed air viscous with memories” (11).

Like the many birds—both free and imprisoned—in her book (“So Short Past Solstice,” “Vying with Olympians,” “Small Signs”), Vlasopolos circles, hides, and surfaces around the themes of human impermanence and aging, the violence and indifference of nature, and the forged versus the authentic, but the experience is not without beauty. Vlasopolos is reaching for the ineffable in life, and within these poems, she often finds it.