

*A Review of Millicent Borges Accardi's 2021 Book
Through a Grainy Landscape: Poems*

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The poetry of immigration is multifold. Common themes include adjusting to new customs in a new land, while trying to maintain old traditions, as well as longing, loss, and a kind of nostalgia often associated with the Portuguese word *saudade*. A curious thing, this *saudade*. As a third-generation Azorean Portuguese American, I always associated this word with a “longing for lost things,” which is how I defined it in my poem, “Saudade” (Anderson, 2013). My bilingual, book-length poem, *Azorean Suite/Suite Açoriana*, has been described as filled with a longing for that which I had never known, for a past I never had. (Anderson et al., 2020)

However, after a recent conversation with my friend Rui Faria, head of the Azorean Emigrants Association in Ribeira Grande, São Miguel, my perspective on the word expanded. For Rui, *saudade* was not about longing for what was lost, but rather a longing to see someone or someplace again. “We often signed our letters ‘with *saudades*,’” he explained, “meaning, ‘until I see you again’ or ‘until we meet again’” (Private conversation, 2022). What a difference!

I now understand that for those of us whose families left our ancestral homelands—specifically, in the case of those from the Azores or mainland Portugal—our feeling of *saudade* is different from those whose families didn’t leave. Of course it would be different for those who stayed behind. This makes sense and, not to belabor the point, poets of the second, third, and fourth generations who may be further removed from that homeland, may feel that longing for what was lost more profoundly than others. For me, whose Azorean Portuguese heritage was denied me by my first-generation grandfather’s desire to be an *American* rather than a hyphenated American, I have long felt something was missing and have now embraced what I found there with the zealously of a convert.

Millicent Borges Accardi, a first-generation Portuguese American had a similar experience, although she grew up with the traditions and foods, and a father whose first language was Portuguese, she has said in an interview that she was not “Portuguese” but “American,” and consequently, she didn’t learn the language as a kid (Stafford, 2011). It wasn’t until she visited Portugal, attending the DISQUIET Literary Program in Lisbon, that she reconnected with her roots in a meaningful way and started exploring them further. Her family came from Terceira in the Azores.

For many of us with Azorean ancestry, no matter how distant, the connection feels so deep it’s almost as if it is part of our DNA—the connection to the land and the sea compels us to write about it, it becomes part of us. This inherited cultural identity links us to what Vitorino Nemésio (1932) called an “elemental love,” a love that is based on impulse rather than reason.

In *Through a Grainy Landscape*, Accardi pays homage to her heritage with poems influenced and inspired by Portuguese and Portuguese American writers, often using a line, quote, or title from a

poem as a starting point or inspiration. The poem that gives title to this book is a revisiting, as Accardi (2021) puts it, of “conduzi toda a noite...” by Tiago Araújo.

She writes, “Longing is the middle ground, when you have/ distant connections. It’s such a hard place to be in.” (Accardi, 2021, p. 85). This middle ground is, as Accardi (2021) writes in another poem, “halfway between loss and joy.” (p. 3) She describes being “trapped/ inside an identity you did not imagine/ you would be.” (Accardi, 2021, p. 5) Indeed, longing runs like a red and green thread through this entire collection, “for an absent tongue, an absent island/ where we were born and left and then/ never born to, a family abandoning its/ land and itself moving into a larger state/ of being memory alone...” (Accardi, 2021, p. 71)

Accardi has said when she writes she puts herself “in a place where the poem can grow safely rather than [be] pushed into some artificial form” (Stafford, 2011). And, in fact, her poems have an organic, natural quality consisting of stories simply told in a language that is direct and conversational.

Take, for example, “The Graphics of Home,” which tells the tale of “the lifecycle of a shirt,” starting with its arrival “from Sears, sent as a hand-me-down/ from Fall River,” worn until “the sleeves were too worn/ to restore,” and the shirt is remade into short-sleeves, then a “summer top/ or costume for play time, sleeveless,/ perhaps a vest for a pirate.” The shirt ultimately lends itself to doll clothes, cleaning materials, and is finally “sold to the rag man/ who made his round in the neighborhood,” its usefulness carried throughout its lifecycle, its story instructive for how to live a regenerative life, and an example of the old ways when nothing was wasted (Accardi, 2021, pp. 47–48).

Elsewhere, Accardi (2021) tells stories of a green dress, “the cloth of happiness,” (p. 13) and a “lemon/ polyester dress,/ matching shoes and the/ purse gotten for free from/ a soap company after/ box tops were collected.” (p. 49) The colorful fabrics of memory make up for the poet’s occasional lapses in prosody, where the line breaks feel more forced than natural.

A more natural mix of what James Longenbach (2008) called parsing and annotating line endings appears in “Lacuna: A Blank Space or a Missing Part,” with its long, meandering single sentence that speaks of

A house 65 years in the past now, a paradise
Key where the object of longing is missing
Like a deed or a lucky charm, it is the saudade
Of all we have, lost in fact, the stern dedication
Of a bridge in American, a statue in San Pedro,
Memorializing a Portuguese fisherman, our people
Carpenters, fishermen, dairy farmers, whalers,
Some worked in the mills or in the grey oblong
Factories where they manufactured golfballs,
Workers hand-wrapping string around tight wooden spheres
That they held in their hands as the machines
Whirled around them, with plastic coverings
Poured over a hardening shell, the object
Of a longing that might never return, saudade. (p. 71)

It seems to me that Accardi’s project in *Through a Grainy Landscape* is like those workers she describes winding string around wooden spheres, encasing longing in poems of faith and memory and belonging, and if you peer long enough through the windshield at her grainy landscape, you just might find your way home.

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