

Carlo Matos. *Big Bad Asterisk**. Buffalo, NY: BlazeVOX [Books], 2013.

Robert Simon
Kennesaw State University

Poetry on family can be a risky business; we know ourselves through them, and they through us. In creating a semi-fictional Azorean-American family in this collection of poems, Carlo Matos presents us with a multifaceted and multi-oriented series of voices culminating in a uniquely nostalgic poetic and cultural identity.

The book is divided into seven sections, each demarcated by the narrative perspective of the poetic voice regarding the person described (“He / Ele,” “She / Ela,” etc). As the reader flows through the poems, the poetic voice draws him or her into the realm of the 1st person, or the study of “I / Eu.” The section titled “You / Vós” consists of one poem, “This is the world’s longest Nano Chapter” in which an unreadable text is presented with a note regarding the possible purpose of this “non-sequitor.” Although each poem in the previous and following sections is composed of two parts, the central prose poem and a footnote marked with an “asterisk,” the final section shows a movement toward an exploration of historical and synchronous ideals of self-knowledge by using both the prose poem in English and a lyrical poem in Portuguese. In this, the history of the poetic voice’s family and the eccentricities of each member are highlighted, not to disparage any

one or more members but to emphasize their cohesion as a characteristically unfamiliar (yet oddly comfortable) bunch.

Themes of love, lust, and the adoration of nature seem to come and go, meandering between the subtle complexities of the meaning of a unusual family as it is born from the meeting of, apparently, several people toward the deeper issues of Portuguese-American identity, using poetic and metaphoric structure and language as a sort of hinge for the two sides of the hyphen to come together. The final section places texts in English and Portuguese which seem to coincide as translations, not just of the words but the deeper meaning the language conveys. Notably the word “saudade” is never translated into English in the book – this is not surprising given the culturally unique place the term and the sentiments it conveys hold for all those of Portuguese or Lusophone descent.

Derrida talks about the “différance” between two parallel epistemologies; this plays out with a unique and stylish, sometimes almost brutal, beauty in the collection. Each note with an asterisk represents an aside by the poetic voice to the reader falling into possibly indirect considerations about that poem’s particular focal point. Yet when we reach the end of the collection, the asterisk leads us into that notion of the place from which the poetic voice’s identity is forged, between the traditions of the “Açores” and the life this voice has found for itself here. Among the varied uses of irony to set upon those who came before him with a somehow tender (yet very much) cage fighter’s touch, the ambiguity of the self’s final resting place is not lost on the reader; indeed, it is this more than anything which makes us want even more.

Ultimately, Matos has engendered a poetic world in which we become lost yet not wanting to find ourselves again. In this new Luso-American *saudade*, it is only with eyes and mind closed that we would not grasp the beauty, efficiency, elegance, and humor with which the poetic voice of *Big Bad Asterisks** presents its world.