

John Medeiros. *Couplets for a shrinking world*. Saint Cloud, Minn.: North Star Press of St. Cloud, 2012.

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Stanley Kunitz, in one of his last public appearances at the Dodge Poetry Festival in the early 2000's, said, upon taking the stage with a vigor that belied his 90-plus years, "Ever since I was a little boy, my dream was to live forever." Given that Kunitz died two months shy of 101, he very nearly achieved his dream. For others among us, time is not as long, though, as with poets, it is rarely linear. Rather, the dream is to be in two (or more) places at once to fully taste the time that is left. Capturing this experience is John Medeiros' aim in *couplets for a shrinking world*, and the best poems in the collection do it very well.

Writing as a twin, Portuguese-American, and gay man who came up and out in the age of AIDS and, despite the scars, has lived to tell, Medeiros has much material to draw upon for his meditations on multiplicity, multi-locality and the fragmentation of consciousness that emerges from the fragmentation of the body. For a slim volume, this first book is ambitious: 48 poems in two parts covering the big and usual artistic territories: childhood, love, politics, death, the arc of a life so far lived. The most successful poems distill these experiences over the arc of the book, whittling down the big themes to piquant and poignant observations—on childhood abuse and sexuality, new

lovers and lost partners, Portuguese-American ambiguities, AIDS and gay maleness in contemporary America, the very molecules of disease and its drugs—all while paying homage to literary and artistic forebears.

Right from the opening poem, “Facing North” Medeiros establishes that he is not afraid to (literally and metaphorically) face the direction of adventurers, outcasts, and lovers:

I have looked for heroes in the seaweed.
Searched for tongues in the ocean’s waves

blue & green & wet with nature’s fury.
All to find him.

I swear he was there once, lobster trapped
Along the shores of Narragansett Bay.

Here, there is an obvious nod to Rimbaud’s “The Drunken Boat” and its “clapotements furieux des marées,” its “azurs verts” of the “poem of the sea” and/or its carnal associations with ‘semen.’ But in “Facing North” Medeiros furthers refracts a poem—that, like Rimbaud’s, could be an *ars poetica*, a paean to corporeality, or maybe neither but something else—into an exercise worthy of Pessoa’s heteronymic homoeroticism in “Ode Marítima.” Medeiros’ narrator seeks refuge in “north” as if it were a “monastery,” but “Then, like parted waters, my body split in two—/One half crushed by his weight,/the other, long detached like an unknown twin/before dawn has planned her dirty day.” Pessoa, through Álvaro de Campos, is subtler but no less torn: “Os paquetes que entram de manhã na barra/Trazem os meus olhos consigo/O mistério alegre e triste de quem chega e parte.” (It is interesting that “paquete” means both packet ship and errand-boy or page).

Medeiros continues the splitting of body and soul in “Temptation,” which is saved from being just an earnest look at bar cruising and hooking up by an enigmatic reference to a “himself” that leaves us unsure whether the narrator is the tempter or the tempted, the specter of “The Jesus that followed me to class at the castle/on the edge of town,” or indeed whether he embodies “The accent in his voice” or “the smell of Portuguese bread

baking in the alleys.”

Portuguese and Portuguese-American references in *couplets* are particularly notable for how sparingly, but effectively, they are used as counterpoints to other identities (an ‘under the radar move’ move, which, I daresay, is very Portuguese). That is, with the exception of the collection’s midpoint piece, “faith,” which wallops any expectations of cultural Kumbaya: “a portuguese man/who loves another man/is neither a man/nor Portuguese/for he has been /away too long” even though the Portuguese “embrace pessoa/...and erect a status for him/on the busiest street” and “when asked why did sa’-carneira/succumb to strychnine” say it is because “*he was an artist.../[and] lived in france...*” “faith” is the most direct indictment of a culture whose “catholic” attitudes have embraced “miracles like blood/raining from the sky” while, in effect, leaving others among it out in the rain.

But Medeiros embraces the Portuguese faith in seers, mystics and artists to champion these ‘others’—to bare their “thin-veined wrists, waiting for the world/to lick that skin clean” so they can “rise above it all feather-bellied” until “gravity itself succumbs to its rope” (“Levitation”), or, in the tradition of a fadista, to “clench my fist, to/capture the universe of that moment” of recognition between lovers, “as if to seize it forever./i clenched my fist until it bled (“couplets for a shrinking world”).

Medeiros’ most ambitious piece in this mystical respect is “Seven Trumpets for the Living and the Dead (The Awful Naming of Things)”. Taking his cue from the Book of Revelations, he ascribes each of seven sections of couplets to the seven heralding angels who link heaven and earth. Numbers are an obvious trope throughout the collection, though not all of the poems in couplets are in couplets. Rather, Medeiros uses numbers to create a similar effect as Katherine Vaz does in her short story, “Math Bending Unto Angels” (*Fado and Other Stories*): Their message is memory. In “Seven Trumpets” each numbered stanza either recalls a single moment with multiple resonances, or resonating moments of singular import: virus and war upon what “we once called home”; a man dead or dying who never came out to his Portuguese fisherman father; a boy witnessing an eclipse with another boy to whom he is attracted; the wintering weight of disease; deaths; hope—all the links between past and present as prelude to—an answer? A cure? A love that

outlasts us?

Medeiros leaves those possibilities open, as does the collection's final poem, "*four letter words: fear*": "I'm not afraid of feelings hanging on me like suits/cadaver-black & napkin starched. i'm afraid of words.../for my hungry words to swallow me like an epitaph/and turn themselves into number./I am ready to start counting backwards."

Of course, not all of the book's poems work as well as those discussed here (and others not discussed but equally noteworthy—e.g. "How to Love a Poz Man"). Some lines are flat or overwritten ("the days are always beautiful/& the nights live on forever"). Others use tired metaphors and unclear line breaks ("Pentathol blowing into/veins like helium into a/balloon" or "a wishing well full of penniless dreams"). There is also a tendency towards chiasitic phrasing, whose aim may be either to elevate or subvert tone but whose result is distracting ("Pig not of plastic on a toy" or "like pages of a book censored").

However, Medeiros' willingness to keep "counting" makes *couplets for a shrinking world* a worthwhile addition to recent literature by Portuguese-American writers. Ars poetica, paean to corporeality, meditations, or something else—enough of these poems enter the "sentido Marítimo desta Hora," as Pessoa/de Campos puts it, to make the journey worthwhile.