



Born in the Cavity of Sunsets

Michael Luis Medrano

Bilingual Press (October 2009)

Softcover \$11.00 (80pp)

978-1-931010-66-5

".. If I were a drum / in a past life, the loose skin of my palms / would have woven into a colorful fabric. / If I was a drum in a past life / you must have been a stream / washing the wounds," Medrano writes.

A drum indeed—in this, his first collection of poetry, Michael Luis Medrano sounds a deft rhythm with a broken English tongue. These poems, like the people in them, move in and out of schools, prisons, funeral parlors, and even works of art, but seem to linger and thrive on the unpaved barrio streets of Fresno, California, the poet's place of origin. His song reverberates loudly in the space it inhabits, perhaps because his lean and supple language is stretched tightly, like the skin of a drum, like the skins of the broken people he shadows and brings to light: "as if Héctor's legs were gimmicky and insignificant / as if they folded under his belly like an accordion to produce sound—...as if to be born of asphalt—...as if his language was an angry fleeting mob of words."

Medrano's song, gravelly and unapologetic, slyly opens up worlds that limp around the outskirts of America. His poems echo the drum that can beat a family down, but also that which raises the dead, and ignites revolution. In his short poem "The Rising Temperament of Sheep," ironically placed at House of Hope for Youth in Fresno, he beats out:

*On the morning the students
in the continuation classroom
were to take the state test,
mandated by Governor Davis
and the other stuffed suits before him,
the students, the ones without voice,
the ones with the temperament of sheep,
shot protesting pencils at the asbestos
in the ceiling and walked out.
Each one challenged the administration
and its underpaid staff,
each student, with their pumping fists
of protest, tested the state.*

These poems of place challenge us to examine our place in society-how we engage with and disengage from our social systems and with each other, and what songs we choose to hear. Whether banging out a battle cry or tracing a heartbeat, Medrano's poems temper their strength with humility and grace. There is melody, too: "Tonight Fresno is a jazz riff, an oversized homeboy playing alto horn at / the blues club-hands fingers, fumbling over the keys-a brown boy / trying to blow meaning into the awkward reed of beginner's horn." One hopes this is in fact only the beginning of many musical scores to be brought forth by Medrano.

JENNIFER SPERRY STEINORTH (January / February 2010)

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