

*A Tongue in the Mouth of the Dying*

## THE ANDRÉS MONTOYA POETRY PRIZE

2004, *Pity the Drowned Horses*, Sheryl Luna  
Final Judge: Robert Vasquez

2006, *The Outer Bands*, Gabriel Gomez  
Final Judge: Valerie Martínez

2008, *My Kill Adore Him*, Paul Martínez Pompa  
Final Judge: Martín Espada

2010, *Tropicalia*, Emma Trelles  
Final Judge: Silvia Curbelo

2012, *A Tongue in the Mouth of the Dying*, Laurie Ann Guerrero  
Final Judge: Francisco X. Alarcón

The Andrés Montoya Poetry Prize, named after the late California native and author of the award-winning book, *The Iceworker Sings*, supports the publication of a first book by a Latino or Latina poet. Awarded every other year, the prize is administered by Letras Latinas—the literary program of the Institute for Latino Studies at the University of Notre Dame.

A TONGUE *in the* MOUTH  
*of the* DYING

LAURIE ANN GUERRERO

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FOR DREW, VIC, & LIV, *always*.



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Early versions of a few of the poems in this manuscript were also published in a chapbook, *Babies Under the Skin*, 2008 winner of the Panhandler Publishing Chapbook Award, selected by Naomi Shihab Nye.

8 ½" x 11" broadsides of “Preparing the Tongue,” “Ode to El Cabrito,” “Yellow Bird,” “My Mother Woke a Rooster,” “Sundays after Breakfast: A Lesson in Cotton Picking,” and “Ode to My Boots” were created by printer Deborah Huacuja, each in a limited edition of fifteen. Original artwork by the author.

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## INTRODUCTION TO THE POEMS

*A Tongue in the Mouth of the Dying* by Laurie Ann Guerrero is a stunning collection of moving poems. Here, poetry is both universal and very local; the personal turns collective in the mode of Tomás Rivera's Chicano classic . . . *Y no se lo tragó la tierra / And the Earth Did Not Swallow Him*. The authenticity and the plurality of the poetic voices strike the reader for their uncommon accomplished originality.

This is the poetry of both saints and sinners (and even murderers). The poet conjures up Pablo Neruda, Gloria Anzaldúa, Sylvia Plath, and is rooted in the best Latin American, Chicano/a, and contemporary American poetics, able to render an effective poetic version of *Nepantla*, the land where different traditions meet, according to Anzaldúa. These poems make the reader laugh, cry, cringe, lose one's breath, and almost one's mind, at times.

Tongue becomes the ever-present image. In the opening poem, "Preparing the Tongue," a cow's tongue is sliced in preparation for cooking, "I choke down / the stink of its heated moo, make carnage / of my own mouth, add garlic." The poet handles pen and butcher knife with the same great dexterity. Upon summoning up childhood memories, the poet pleads, "Open your jaws. / Let the eye of your tongue see . . . / how we licked fat black olives from tamales." Yes, here, poems become ultimately licking tongues.

*A Tongue in the Mouth of the Dying* is a collection of poems that will haunt readers and won't be easy to forget. I celebrate and praise the power of these poems that engage the great diversity of human reality with empathy, and do this, also with tremendous imagination. These poems restore my faith in the power of poetry.

—Francisco X. Alarcón,  
*Judge*

To be a hero in undiscovered territories is to be obscure;  
these territories and their songs are lit  
only by the most anonymous blood and by flowers  
whose name nobody knows.

—*Pablo Neruda*





## PREPARING THE TONGUE



In my hands, it's cold and knowing as bone.  
Shrouded in plastic, I unwind its gauze,  
mummy-like, rub my wrist blue against the cactus  
of its buds. Were it still cradled inside  
the clammy cow mouth, I should want to enchant it:  
let it taste the oil in my skin, lick  
the lash of my eye. What I do instead  
is lacerate the frozen muscle, tear  
the brick-thick cud conductor in half to fit  
a ceramic red pot. Its cry reaches me  
from some heap of butchered heads as I hack  
away like an axe murderer. I choke down  
the stink of its heated moo, make carnage  
of my own mouth, add garlic.



**I.**





SUNDAYS AFTER BREAKFAST:  
A LESSON IN SPEECH



There were no names for men like that—gringos  
who stitched up their rules, their white garb, laced snug  
the issues of the day: *Lord didn't make us to mix*

*with them folk*, they said. But God's got nothing  
to do with black boys dumped still alive into a restless river.  
God's got nothing to do with having to tell their mamas.

That bloody water ran through each dark vein across Texas,  
fed the Gulf, all its brown-skinned people. This, grandpa could name:  
*los cuerpos*—bodies swaying above the cotton like sheets on a line.

*No importaba que no eras negro, pero que no eras gringo.*  
No, it didn't matter that you weren't black, grandpa says,  
pushing himself from the table, but that you weren't white.

He lived his life this way: silent, like every man after him:  
opening his mouth only to eat, holding his head above  
the cotton, between white men and black boys.

## BLUING THE LINENS



*The white, which is the brightest of whites,  
is one that has a slight blue hue.*

—Mrs. Stewart's *Bluing:*  
*whitening since 1883*

I read the book because it promised  
to teach me. What I didn't know

was that whites don't start off white.  
They're gray goods before the burning

bleach, before they bloom in red and turquoise—  
embroidery on pillowcases, tea towels—

before grandma's napkins kiss your lips,  
say *good morning*. Gray and yellowed,

a mass of brown, pure as dirt, in their cotton  
bodies—a fibrous weave to swaddle

the butts of babies, soak up red wine,  
wipe sweat between neck and nose,

the drip of infection. Nothing starts off white  
as you know it. That kind of white takes bleaching

first, bluing ever after. White first.  
Then blue. White, blue.

## LAS LENGUAS



Once, a man told me  
to hear the voice of God  
one must first be able  
to speak in tongues.

Years later, another man  
told me speaking in tongues  
was the kind of sin  
you couldn't hide.

Who knows what the priest  
told my mother when, with a quivering  
chin, she pleaded, *Por favor, padre,*  
*necesito ir al baño*, squeezing  
her tiny, six-year-old thighs  
together in the best English  
she could muster.



## SUMMER



In the birdhouse grandpa made for me when I was four,  
life-sized, my name convex around the ovular door, I began.  
A bird of squabble, my cawing unrecognizable

in a family of boars, I'd pick the burrs off the suffocating cactus  
to decorate the red Velcro shoes my mother bought at Winn's,  
queening my birdhouse where no one was ever allowed to enter.

Not even real birds. When my father hoisted my house  
a good 3 or 4 feet up on rusted barrels made for gasoline,  
I used my tricycle as a staircase—even decorated the handle

bars as if it were Christmastime with wilted morning glories and  
yerba buena. I fell out once, nearly to my death,  
trying to keep a runaway bull from noticing the blood

red of my shoes. I could not fly. It was in the dark gray summer,  
when drops of rain began to fall, that I learned politics of men  
and birds: we framed pictures of a black bull that played

in a pile of gravel that sat where my birdhouse used to.  
I watched my house's red trim slant along the white plywood  
walls smolder with the embers of a cleared brush in the early July

rain. How in the rain I loved it most. It was in the dark gray summer, when drops of rain began to fall, that I knew the human language: my body was not my own.