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

Final Judge: Martín Espada

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

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

University of Notre Dame Press
Notre Dame, Indiana

© 2013 University of Notre Dame
FOR DREW, VIC, & LIV, always.
CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ix
Introduction to the Poems by Francisco X. Alarcón xiii

Preparing the Tongue 1

1.
One Man’s Name: Colonization of the Poetic, i. 5
Sundays after Breakfast: A Lesson in Speech 6
Bluing the Linens 7
Las Lenguas 8
Summer 9
One Man’s Name: Colonization of the Poetic, ii. 11
A Meal for the Tribe 12
One Man’s Name: Colonization of the Poetic, iii. 13
Yellow Bird 14
Little Mexican Pot 15
Turnips 16
Babies under the House 17
One Man’s Name: Colonization of the Poetic, iv. 19
One Man’s Name: Colonization of the Poetic, v. 20
Roosters: Homecoming 21
Esperanza Tells Her Friends the Story of La Llorona 22
Ode to El Cabrito 24
Stray Cat 25

© 2013 University of Notre Dame
How I Put Myself through School 26
Morning Praise of Nightmares, one 27
Morning Praise of Nightmares, two 28

II.
Sundays after Breakfast: A Lesson in Cotton Picking 33
Put Attention 35
One Man’s Name: Colonization of the Poetic, vi. 36
Breasts 37
Ode to My Boots 38
Ode to a Skein of Red Embroidery Thread 39
One Man’s Name: Colonization of the Poetic, vii. 40
Wooden Box 41
Black Hat 42
One Man’s Name: Colonization of the Poetic, viii. 44
Mr. G’s Collection 45
Cocooning 47
Babies under the Skin 48
Pinedale, CA 49
Like Jesus 50
When I Made Eggs This Morning 51
Stones 52
My Mother Woke a Rooster 54
My Mother Asks to Be Cremated 55
My Mother Will Take a Lover 56
Ancient Algebra 57
One Man’s Name: Colonization of the Poetic, ix. 58
The Alchemy of Mothering 59
Early Words for My Son 60
On Blinding 61
Birth Day 62

Notes 65

© 2013 University of Notre Dame
Many thanks to the editors of the following publications in which versions of these poems have been published or are forthcoming:

*Belleview Literary Review*: “Mr. G’s Collection”

*Huizache*: “Pinedale, CA”

*PALABRA*: “My Mother Woke a Rooster” and “Ode to My Boots”

*Anthology of Contemporary Tejana Writing*: “The Alchemy of Mothering”

*Acentos Review*: “Preparing the Tongue,” “Cocooning,” and “My Mother Will Take a Lover”

*San Antonio Express News*: “On Blinding” and “Ode to El Cabrito”

*Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*: “Put Attention”

*Naugatuck River Review*: “Wooden Box”


*Feminist Studies*: “Babies under the House” and “Babies under the Skin”

*Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*: “How I Put Myself through School”

*Palo Alto Review*: “Sundays after Breakfast: A Lesson in Cotton Picking”
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.

I am extremely grateful for the generosity and support of the Institute for Latino Studies/Letras Latinas at the University of Notre Dame, the Poetry Center at Smith College, my Canto-Mundo familia, and the elders at Alma de Mujer Center for Social Change.

Sincerest thanks to Francisco X. Alarcón, for your words, your fight, and your most gentle spirit. And to the man (and his family) for whom this prize is named, I give my heartfelt thanks: Andrés Montoya, whose commitment, whose passion, and whose tongue lives on in ours—whose name here, whose life here, gives me my name here, my life.

I would also like to thank Larissa Mercado-Lopez, PhD, for consulting my work for her dissertation, “I Feel a Revolution in My Womb: Mapping Cognitive and Somatic Transformation through Readings of Mestiza Maternal Facultad,” along with Carmen Velasquez, Jane Velasquez, Atta Girl Productions, Lisa Cortez Walden, Marco Cholo Quintet, Erik Bosse, Selena Sue Navarro, Monessa Esquivel, and Jesse Borrego for the adaptation of *A Tongue in the Mouth of the Dying* for a dramatic staged reading at Palo Alto College. Katherine Brown, thank you for your art and strength, and Deborah Huacuja for your generosity and belief.
Thank you, too, to Aracelis Girmay, Xelena Gonzalez, and Diana Marie Delgado, for the easing of my spirit, for your generous hearts, keen sight, and careful hands.

Unending thanks to the cultivators of my voice, my teachers and mentors: Annie Boutelle, Ellen Watson, Barbara Ras, Linda Harris, Irene Keller, Martín Espada (for the good fight), Ross Gay, Patrick Rosal, Joan Larkin, Ginetta Candelario, Michelle Joffroy, Jennifer Guglielmo, Sharon Seelig, Nikky Finney, Daisy Fried, Nancy Soporta Sternbach, Susan Van Dyne, Charlie García, Mariana Órnelas, Rosie Castro, Alba De Leon, John Phillip Santos, Benjamin Alire Saenz, Naomi Shihab Nye, Norma E. Cantú, and Carmen Tafolla—thank you for helping me see who I am, what I can do.

Thank you also to Marta Lucia Vargas, Jonas Holdeman, David Crews, Roberto Carlos García, Michelle Ovalle, Darla Himeles, Monica Hand, Yesenia Montilla, Kathy Engle, Elliott BatTzedeck, Lisa Wujnovich, Lynne McEniry, J. Michael Martinez, Leticia Hernandez, Luivette Resto, Milicent Borges Accardi, Carl Marcum, Juan Luis Guzman, Ire’ne Lara Silva, Sheryl Luna, Eduardo Corral, Francisco Aragón, Oscar Bermeo, Deborah Paredez, Carmen Gimenez-Smith, Celeste Guzman Mendoza—for being by my side when there is work to be done.

I am most humbled and grateful for my people, my village: Terri McBride, Anel Flores, Vincent Toro, Grisel Acosta, Celeste DeLuna, Amanda Baggett, Yolanda & David Rangel, Burt & Melissa Abrego, Carrie & Tony Blackburn, Sal & Maria Muñoz, Nanette Guadiano, Susan Q. Chavez: mis suegros, Gloria & David Garcés, Sr., Noel & Nina, and Marisa Reyes, la familia García, la familia Navaira (Emilio IV & Diego for your spirit and commitment!), la familia Guerrero, la familia Cortez; my Smithies & Northampton familia: Abe Louise Young, Antonia Bowman, Krystal Bosveld, Jeri Caska, Jen Barnard, Christina Eliopoulos, Jen Williams, Kimberley Rogers-Guimont, Jacqueline Guimont, Kendra Colburn, Jessica Quiroz, Kristen Norment,
Molly Fechter-Leggett, Megs Douglas, Frances Saunders, Judith Shumway, Mark Chappelle, Walt Colby, Gerardo Alicea, Jillian Flynn, and Erin Oliver (who knows my poems as well as I)—each of you have given me and/or my children your time, your space, your energy, your encouragement and support so that I could go to school, grow my children, grow myself, teach, write this book. My thanks are immeasurable.

Thank you, dad, for challenging me and for giving me your warrior spirit.

Thank you, mom, for teaching me what unconditional means.

War & peace incarnate, I love you both more than words could say.

To my grandparents, M. C. & Mary V. Cortéz, thank you for your history and for your love for each other.

For my beloved grandpa, Gumecindo M. Guerrero, who taught me how to tell a good story, raise tomatoes, walk tall, and for my brother, Gabriel A. Guerrero, my first and eternal protector—I am most grateful.

My love, David Garcés, thank you for giving me the support, the inspiration (x3), and the room to write. Every day you are a gift to me. And to my babies, Drew Garcés, Victoria Anne Garcés, & Olivia Jude Garcés, thank you for your unwavering love and patience.

I also wish to thank the late Adrienne Rich who, one afternoon in 2006 in Northampton, Massachusetts, after hours of talking about the battles one faces as a mother-writer, held my hands in hers and assured me of two things: 1) “you’re a good mother,” and 2) “you must never stop writing.”

So very, very grateful.
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.
Bridges are thresholds to other realities, archetypal, primal symbols of shifting consciousness. . . . [They] span liminal spaces between worlds, spaces I call nepantla, a Náhuatl word meaning tierra entre medio [land in between].

—Gloria Anzaldúa

i.

This is the womb There are the men
From which my children came Those white beards
This is the skin I use to feel. These feet Wave like flags in the sky above us.

Walk the land. With these hands, I straighten The spines of my children.

On this bridge

they were given to live.

There are the men who line up ships.
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.
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.
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.
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.