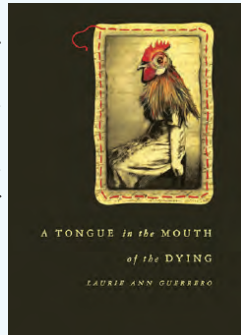


Book Reviews

A Tongue in the Mouth of the Dying by Laurie Ann Guerrero

Winner of 2013 Andrés Montoya Poetry Prize
Reviewed by Mo H Saidi

A native of South Texas, Laurie Ann Guerrero is the author of *Babies under the Skin*, which won the 2008 Panhandler Publishing Chapbook Award. Her poetry and criticism have appeared in a number of journals. She teaches for the M.F.A. Program at the University of Texas at El Paso, at the University of the Incarnate Word, and at Palo Alto College in San Antonio, Texas. Guerrero's poems have been published in local and national literary magazines and anthologies.



The book begins with a long article of acknowledgment and a short introduction that reflects her progress in writing good poetry. In the first poem, "Preparing the Tongue," she starkly reveals her intention and writes, "In my hands, it's cold and knowing as bone." The pages are decorated with poems in beautiful formats that take the reader through her life, from the age of four to the present. South Texas and San Antonio images abound. Throughout the book, Guerrero uses tongue as a metaphor that signifies language, speech, and her own culture, be it the literal beef dish, or figuratively, the cold sweat of a child's fevered sleep. In the poem "Early Words for My Son," she writes, "You will probably make sense of it all some Wednesday / afternoon as you sit with your wife and daughter..." and finishes with this moving line: "I just couldn't do it with my arms ..., and all I've ever known / is to carry you in my teeth." She says she is a woman, a mother who raised her offspring like a lioness: the lullaby, poetry.

In addition to the 2013 Andrés Montoya Poetry Prize, Guerrero is also the winner of the 2012 Award for Teaching and Leadership Excellence from Palo Alto College, a 2010 National Women's History Month Honoree, and three-time winner of the Rosemary Thomas Poetry Prize from Smith College.

Preparing the Tongue

Laurie Ann Guerrero
from *A Tongue in the Mouth of the Dying*

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, swallow the blood, add garlic.

Body and Bread by Nan Cuba

Reviewed by James R. Adair

- "There are rules," Sarah's father told her:
- #1. Happiness is primarily an attitude.
 - #2. Even Moses was punished when he made his one mistake.
 - #3. Problems can be corrected through a systematic identification of facts.

Her grandmother added, quoting Job, "whoever perished, being innocent?"

Sarah, a precocious nine-year-old, knew that everyone in her family followed the rules. Everyone, that is, except her favorite brother, thirteen-year-old Sam. "Maybe there were times when rules could be broken," she mused to herself. So begins Nan Cuba's first novel, *Body and Bread*, a story about a family bound by tradition and propriety, yet torn apart by tragedy and the nagging doubts that lie behind it.

Narrated by Sarah, an anthropology professor who specializes in Aztec civilization, *Body and Bread* alternates between the present—where Sarah, estranged from her brothers but forced to confront them when Sam's widow Terezie appears one day at her door—and Sarah's childhood and adolescence in the small town of Nugent, Texas. Although Sarah tells the story, the dominant character throughout, whether present or absent, is Sam: Sam, the rebellious son; Sam, always in search of a good time; Sam, attracted to a girl from the wrong social class; Sam, philosopher and mentor.

As a child, Sarah tries to resolve the tension between the extremely ordered lifestyle of her parents and grandparents (thesis) and Sam's utter capriciousness (antithesis), but her attempted solutions (synthesis)—her own brand of adolescent defiance, her later fascination with a countercultural religious group—fail to provide the compass she needs. Only the earth itself and the hidden treasures it holds, secrets of lost peoples and cultures, offer any ultimate solace.

As an adult, Dr. Pelton, who has rejected the traditional family pursuit of medicine in favor of academics, is forced out of her ivory tower by a family squabble involving Sam's will. Although by now she has developed into something of a loner, at least where her family is concerned, she is strangely drawn to Terezie's college-aged daughter, who seems to see something in her that no one else has seen for many years.

Body and Bread is a captivating tale of adolescence and coming of age, but it also deals with problems that adults face: ethical decisions involving the use of money, caring for the less fortunate, and the definition of family. The adolescent Sarah finds a temporary solution to her problems in the "person" of the Aztec goddess Tlahzolteotl, the Eater of Filth, the Eater of Sins. But can a deity from a distant culture and a bygone era rid Sarah's world—either past or present—of its evils and indignities? Can Sarah find a way to live, not just exist, in a world in which the foundations of her childhood understanding of reality are wrenched from their moorings? How will Sarah deal with the tragedy around which the whole book revolves? Cuba's narrative is both humorous and touching, dealing with weighty issues in ways that are thought-provoking rather than preachy. It's a book well worth reading.

