

12-20-2009

What We Thought We Knew Poems, 2007-2009

Katherine Durham Oldmixon
University of New Orleans

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td>

Recommended Citation

Oldmixon, Katherine Durham, "What We Thought We Knew Poems, 2007-2009" (2009). *University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations*. 1091.
<https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/1091>

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by ScholarWorks@UNO with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uno.edu.

What We Thought We Knew
Poems, 2007-2009

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

by

Katherine Durham Oldmixon

B.A. University of Houston, 1991
M.A. University of Houston, 1994
Ph.D. University of Texas at Austin, 2001

December 2009

© 2009, Katherine Durham Oldmixon

Este es para Turo—Arturo Lomas Garza—whose joy in creativity me enciende.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the editors and judges who have published or recognized versions of these poems. “La Esquina,” “Historias en Hilo,” and “Lengua Tejuana,” won the 2009 UNO Creative Writing Study Abroad Contest, and “La Esquina” appears here by permission of *The Normal School*; “When the Border is a River” appears in *Borderlands* 33 (Fall/Winter 2010); “Blue Morphos” appears in *qarrtsiluni* (May/June 2007); “Canción para los muertos,” appears in the *2009 Texas Poetry Calendar*; “After a Day in Hiroshima” appears in *qarrtsiluni* (August 2008); “Self-Portrait in a Bus Window,” winner of the UNO Vassar Miller Award 2009, appears in *Ellipsis* (2009); as part of the “If These Walls Could Speak” Blanton Poetry Project, “Rites of St. Agatha” is posted in the Blanton Museum of Art by the Riminaldi painting that inspired it; “Spanish Plums” appears in *di-verse-city* (2008) and, in English, Spanish and Italian, on Anny Ballardini’s *FieraLingue* website; “The Guadalupe Stop,” which received honorable mention for the UNO Vassar Miller Prize 2008, appears in *Ellipsis* (2008); “How I Don’t Know” appears in *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review* 29 (Fall/Winter 2007); “12/21/2012” appears in *qarrtsiluni* (September-December 2008); “El árbol milagroso,” which received honorable mention in the *2008 Texas Poetry Calendar Awards*, appears in the *2008 Texas Poetry Calendar* and in the anthology *Big Land, Big Sky, Big Hair: The Best of the Texas Poetry Calendar*.

My participation in the MFA program has been made possible in part by two Sam Taylor Fellowships provided by the United Methodist Church Higher Education Committee; by a Huston-Tillotson University faculty development award, funded by Title III (a U.S. Department of Education program), and by a University of New Orleans Creative Writing Study Abroad Contest award.

My thesis committee comprises three talented poets and scholars of poetry, each of whom brought a special perspective, aesthetic sensibility, and knowledge of poetry to bear on this project. John Gery, the extraordinary poet and scholar who chaired my committee, is the most sensitive reader of poetry I have ever known. Susan M. Schultz’s acute ear and eye for the experimental, emergent and even iconoclastic in contemporary poetry has pulled me in one direction, while Kay Murphy’s steady, firm grounding in the beautiful formal has drawn me in another. If the exceptional creative energy in this trio is not apparent in this manuscript, the fault is my own learning curve.

I have also been blessed with an exceptional community of artists. Michelle Miller, Pia Taavila, and Elzy Cogswell generously wrote recommendation letters on my behalf. Two writing circles—Brass Tacks (especially David Meischen, Judy Jensen, Joe Hoppe, Usha Akella and D’Arcy Randall) and the Writer’s League of Texas Poetry Workshop (led by Scott Wiggerman)—have offered valuable feedback on many of these poems. The UNO workshops have created for me another circle of poets, critical readers and friends, among whom I must mention with deep appreciation, Brenda Nettles Riojas, Bill Lavender, Anny Ballardini, Peter Thompson, and Jennifer Stewart.

My family, which includes musicians, painters, dancers, writers, actors, a sommelier, and other artists, are my bones, blood, flesh—my poetic pulse. I lovingly acknowledge, especially, Seth, Mary, Jonathon, Leah, Paul, Nancy (Mama), Nikki, Dylan, Barbara, Susan, and Turo.

Table of Contents

Introductory Notes: Collages, Palimpsests, Forms of Earth & Water.....	1
 <i>In This Dry Heaven</i>	
Adivina	10
La Esquina	12
Crossing Over	13
When the Border Is a River	14
Self-Portrait in a Bus Window.....	15
The Guadalupe Stop.....	16
On a Day in Hiroshima.....	17
Historias en Hilo	18
Canción para los muertos	19
“Photographs of the Saint’s Finger Are Strictly Prohibited”.....	20
 <i>Inverted on My Retina</i>	
En Plein Air	22
Mama Myrtle	23
La Guadalupe de Juan Diego.....	24
St. Sebastian.....	25
Rites of St. Agatha	26
Philomela	27
Marina, La Malinchi.....	29
Spanish Plums.....	30
Boy with Dog and Pigeons	31
Diego’s Hummingbirds	32
March Rites.....	33
 <i>Musty With Spirits</i>	
Palimpsest	35
How I Don’t Know.....	36
Louisiana Iris Blues.....	37
Blue Morphos.....	38
12/21/2012	39
Lengua Tejana.....	40
Apart.....	41
Life on Ganymede.....	42
Vespers	43
El árbol milagroso.....	44
 Vita.....	 45

Collages, Palimpsests, Forms of Earth & Water

If I were to choose one poem that I've included in this thesis as an *ars poetica* specific to this process and project, it would be "Blue Morphos." How often on this journey have I felt like the insect struggling in the winds over the sea? And, sometimes, like the quivering one dumbly underfoot on the steaming asphalt of a summer parking lot? Or, felt that my poems were those sojourning butterflies?

This manuscript—like three cased collages of butterflies pinned to soft foam backing, under glass for a particular kind of scrutiny—is shaped by the processes of its creation. Of the hundreds of poems I have now written, I could have culled thirty or so to create a very focused chapbook for the thesis. I didn't—because I felt that a collage or portfolio was a better representation of my work and course of study or apprenticeship in these past two and a half years—and that's my sense of what a *thesis* is, as opposed to a chapbook or even a book.

The arrangement is also collage-like and, purposefully, non-linear. The first case collects intensely reflective poems that are based on personal experiences. These poems explore liminality, including borderlands of knowledge, cultures, and life and death. Poems that originate in travel experiences are in this section, because to travel is to be in-between. The next collection is yet more removed from the personal self. Based on literature and art, these poems emerge more from observation than reflection. The thoughts and feelings in these poems are multiply mediated, refracted through personae and representation. The last case collects poems that arise from interiority and contemplate or express personal emotions. Thus, the manuscript begins in a threshold, which some might expect to be in the center, as a transition, and moves out—the way too intense emotions force us out of ourselves—and then comes back to the inner self, in personal, familial, cultural and spiritual aspects.

While I see the manuscript as a collage of collages, I did have an arc in mind when I arranged these three cases: from “Advina,” through “En Plein Air” and “Palimpsest,” to “El árbol milagroso.” I see “Adivina,” set in Córdoba, Spain, in the high heat of summer (a time of day and season when the wall between the otherworld and our world is traditionally permeable) as raising unease, reflection, and revelation. Here I want to introduce the anxious awareness that circulates in the poems, the awareness that when we love, we live in fear of loss, and that the human systems we navigate—ethical, cultural, spiritual, socio-political, linguistic, aesthetic, historical, ideological, relational, etc—are complex and layered. In this sense, the manuscript and the poems in it are as much palimpsests as collages. I see palimpsests as uniquely apt symbols of memory, renewal and discovery, and, especially, of process.

So too, each of the poems has been through a process from the liminal, outward—opening them to the critique of others—and back to the self. I revised these poems many times and in conference with other poets, and in some instances (e.g., “Blue Morphos”) revised again in response to readers’ comments, even though I had already published the poem. Despite all the processing and collaboration, the poems remain recognizably mine, still in my voice, still characteristic of my aesthetics and thought, yet clearer and, I believe, more beautiful than I had before and alone made them. I also believe that, like the poet, the poems are far stronger for having flown in strong winds, though it is a hard flight, one that requires negotiating surrender and resistance.

As I completed the thesis manuscript, I suddenly recognized the same angst that I was feeling about the process of completing the MFA program—the anxious questioning, covering and discovering, speaking and silencing, knowing and not knowing, writing and erasing, telling and not telling—circulated as themes through the poems in the manuscript. I also realized that

tension of surrender and resistance circulates both in the themes of the poems and in the aesthetic choices I make: in the way I break lines, compose images, slip from one language to another or from one tonal register to another, weave or juxtapose allusions, code or comment.

Among the discoveries of what I thought I knew over the course of this MFA program are elements or aesthetic choices that constitute my style or voice. For example, because I often incorporate Spanish into primarily English-language poems, my use of italics, or whether or not Spanish words should always be in italics, requires deliberation. Because the convention is putting “foreign” words into italics, and the Spanish I integrate into my poems is usually not foreign, but integral to the home language of the poems’ speakers and environment, I have moved away from putting Spanish into italics. The exceptions are when the words are foreign or quotations, and I want to call attention to their word-ness or foreignness in the context of the poem. This is particularly true in “Adivina,” in which the speaker understands Spanish, but is a foreigner, a stranger, faced with someone who is a stranger to her, in a strange place.

Similarly, when the title is in Spanish, I tend to follow the convention in Spanish of only capitalizing the first word in the title (e.g., “Canción para los muertos”). Exceptions are proper nouns (“Lengua Tejana”), single nouns (i.e., “La Esquina”). In the case of “Historias en Hilo,” a desire for visual and semantic balance determined convention.

I have come to realize that these decisions sometimes seem inconsistent, and therefore, disturbing to readers, because I make different choices for different poems. Not following the conventions also might be distracting for readers (especially, but perhaps not exclusively for readers unfamiliar with Spanish). A reader might feel that distraction takes away from his or her experience of the poem as a whole, as he or she understands it. And so it is a risk I take, and it’s a risk I have to think through each time I write, in terms of what is at stake and what I want to

convey, or what the poem wants to say. My choices about language, though, are not simply about surrendering or resisting conventions.

I am intensely aware of the hegemony of the English language and the power dynamics of its many dialects and variations. Even the English language within my own speech communities presents a considerable range of choices, and some of those choices present risks. Two of the poems in this manuscript, “Louisiana Iris Blues” and “How I Don’t Know,” include or incline toward language associated with African American vernacular (AAVE). Linguists will confirm that southern white vernaculars share many features with the speech of African Americans, but it might not be fair to expect readers to recognize that relationship, or, even if they do, to be therefore comfortable with a white woman (if my ethnicity is known to them) using language that is associated with African American communities. Even adopting the blues form—which originates in African American musical traditions—might raise questions about appropriation. Especially as a white woman who teaches English in an historically Black university, I’ve struggled with these issues. In this conundrum, I have written and rewritten “Louisiana Iris Blues,” and finally rested with the version here, a version in which I avoid usage that might be associated with AAVE. Some will find the diction of this poem inconsistent with the blues form, just as some would find dialectical choices discomfiting. My hope is that if the poem ever becomes song lyrics, singers might make different choices as they perform the lyrics. My intention is to honor the blues form, for which I am deeply grateful. In “How I Don’t Know,” the voice of the woman at the end of the poem is that of an African American woman in 1960s Shreveport; it’s a voice I often heard in my childhood, and, in this particular poem that language is essential to the poem.

Spanish is not my first language, but in my family, community and country, both Spanish and English are primary languages for many people. All my life in Texas, I've heard the two languages juxtaposed, blended and woven everywhere—on the radio, on my campus, in the grocery store, in my kitchen. So, in this case, resisting conventions is about honoring culture. To italicize the Spanish as “foreign” in home-language poems would be, to my ear, to reinforce power dynamics that trouble me. I also don't offer translations for the Spanish words or phrases, none of which are so esoteric that they can't be found in a good Spanish dictionary or Internet search. One of the delights of reading poetry, in my experience, is to uncover “hidden” meanings. I hope the blend of languages, like the mezcla of allusions, opens the poems for that kind of revelatory reading.

Another risk I sometimes take is shifting tone within a poem, particularly introducing a line that disrupts the gravity of a serious poem. I admit that these off-tone moments come to me naturally, and they might be attributed to a stylistic weakness (or, perhaps, a character flaw). In my experience, though, the tone of serious events is rarely consistent, and people often shift tone when narrating painful memories or experiences. Just as the sign at the convent that provided the title for the poem included here about St. Teresa is not meant to disrespect the relic to which it refers, so my intention is not to disrespect, but to emphasize through contrast and to present or reproduce the instability of emotional tension.

I've also found that I tend toward line breaks that leave a line with its own meaning or emphasis before it turns the corner. Some readers might find some of these breaks “awkward,” perhaps because the line pauses on a word that I want the reader to consider, even though it breaks a phrase or a grammatical structure. For example, in the poem “12/21/2012,” the first line breaks on “Times” in the phrase “Times Square hotel.” But, the poem goes on to focus on the

Maya-predicted end of time on 12/21/2012, and it opens with an image of “my times,” the contemporary skyscraper across from the hotel, which contrasts, ultimately, with the ancient Maya pyramid at Tulum, Mexico. What I am trying to do with line breaks, thus, is create tension or ambiguity. Similarly, in “The Guadalupe Stop,” the lines “forgetting not to / go in myself” split the infinitive, but in doing so the sign of the infinitive hovers in the possibility that what “I” forgot was not to “right the cart.” I want the lines to have the same instability and uncertainty as the experience they describe.

When I want the sense of breathlessness, impatience, or confusion, I am likely to construct sentences paratactically (with or without conjunctions) and to use dashes, for various reasons. I sometimes will choose syntax that is a bit convoluted, if I see an interesting tension or possibility in the sentence. Let me give an example of two lines that I changed in this manuscript and the way I wrote and published them before. The version of “El árbol milagroso” that appears here reads,

oye—eyes closed. Next, I listened
to the waterfall inside laddering sky

The version that, after many revisions, I published, reads,

oye—eyes closed. Next inside I
listened to the waterfall laddering sky

My original thought was to emphasize the speaker’s interior response and that she is inside the sacred space of the tree, although the placement of the adverb “inside” blurs the image slightly. That slight blur also strikes me as fitting for this experience; it’s fine to raise the questions: *what is it? What is happening?* Yet, I chose to change the line here because I have been experimenting with sharpening images and syntax as a result of my work in this graduate program. So, for this context, I decided on the easier, hopefully clearer arrangement.

Unlike “El árbol milagroso,” many of the poems in this manuscript I wrote for workshops or from experiences that I had while participating in one of the summer residencies in another country. Some of these poems are formal, but they aren’t simply formal exercises to fulfill assignments. I’ve always chosen form for matter (or, for energy), even when the form is assigned. Working within formal constraints is to me like shaping earth, working with clay. Truthfully, I am drawn to elements of formalism even when writing in free verse, and so, for instance, a meter might surface sometimes in a free verse poem, although I haven’t the intention of making that rhythm regular. When writing formal verse, I’ve found that I sometimes have to push away from rules and listen to the dynamics of the poem and allow the phrasing to emerge accordingly. I find meter to be the hardest element of form to master, but the discipline and practice is invaluable, whether or not I am successful or choose to keep any given attempt.

If my formal poems (e.g., “If the Border is a River,” “Canción para los muertos”) are earth, my free verse poems (e.g., “Lengua Tejana” and “La Esquina”) are water. In some ways, I find my free-verse poems more difficult to write than my formal ones. At least, with the formal poems, I think I know what can go wrong. In the free-verse poems, especially as I give myself greater freedom, I am always making decisions, looking for parameters. My free-verse poems, also, tend to emerge more directly from thought and feeling, and thus seem to be more fluid—which is not to say that I haven’t shaped them. I try to create vessels for them, but I can’t and wouldn’t change their element.

A special case, too, are poems that I’ve not only crafted for the page, but also for oral performance, even for musical accompaniment or complement. In the narrative poems, I especially struggle with stylistic differences between oral and written performance. What creates suspension and mood in oral storytelling often seems to come across as superfluity in a poem on

the page. This difference I've begun to resolve by having two versions of poems like "Adivina" and "Photographs of the Saint's Finger Are Strictly Prohibited," one for performance, one for readers. Similarly, by working with musicians to reshape the poem as lyrics for musical meter and singing, rather than speaking, I've learned that a poem like "Louisiana Iris Blues" presents special challenges. The version of that poem in this manuscript is for the page, but it is informed by the process of working with musicians on the lyric version still in development.

Like all my poems, these water poems also emerge in a web, or a palimpsest of allusions. Some of these allusions are experiential—like the harvesting, cleaning and eating of *caracol*, or conch, in the Mexican Yucatán, or the harvesting of plums from a convent tree in Madrid. Many are cultural, as in the description of an ofrenda in "Canción para los muertos" or of the south Texas religious traditions in "El árbol milagroso." Many more are literary, like the threads woven through "Philomela" or the rituals articulated in the last lines of "Rites of St. Agatha." Others are scientific, historical, or otherwise the result of curiosity (also known as "research"), as they are in "Life on Ganymede," "Diego's Hummingbirds," "Historias en Hilo" and "Marina, La Malinche." To be sure, these poems are grounded in personal experience and come from a subjective perspective. But, they are also informed by "follow-up"—picking up a new thread, wandering where an association, an evocative image or encounter leads.

Where it leads, it seems to me, is always beyond what I thought I knew.

In This Dry Heaven

Adivina

In Córdoba past the white-washed houses
where *la gente* take their meals behind closed doors,

at midday when the *Mezquita* casts no shadows,
in its doorway an olive-skinned woman handed me

a sprig of rosemary—*un regalo*, she assured
when I tried to pull away. *What is it?* I asked,

but she had me by the wrist and began tracing
the lines in my palm chanting, *amor muy fuerte*,

inteligente, then took my other hand, asking
in Spanish if I understood Spanish. I nodded,

entranced, but only hearing words and the music
of *niños* and *la persona mas importante, la vida*—

I was ready to trust her for the reverence
in her voice until I heard her say, *accidente*,

and blood rushed into my ears, drowning
her last instructions about burning or burying

the oily herb pressed in my flesh, when it dries,
drowning the spirit that should have returned to me

when she insisted she be paid in paper only,
no coins, as I reached to hand her ten euros.

She asked for *veinte* then just walked away
as I shook my head; perhaps she saw her spell

melt, like hand-wrought wings of wax or
the ghosts of prayers, pushing pagan pilgrims

into the sanctuary. There I turned to wander
through the myriad arches of the dim interior,

trying not to talk out loud while trying to recall
what I hadn't heard, telling myself the truth:

it was a tourist scam. Why should I fear what I

hadn't understood, nothing to believe—but how
do you know what to believe or not in a mosque
that is a cathedral on the site of a Roman temple,
when you find your tongue incoherent, your map
confused in the city of Averroes and Maimonides,
after a stranger appears to read your crazed skin?

La Esquina

for Willy Santiago

In those last days we brought up caracol,
tapped a hole in their spiny crowns,
pulled the soft bodies from spiral bones,
pounded and soaked the gray-pink flesh
in saltwater, laid out the skeleton
shells still flushed scarlet in the sun,
and washed them in sand to cleanse them
of sea-stench. The clear glistening tubes
we let slide down our throats, laughing
at aphrodisiacal promise. We threw
their guts and eyes back to the fish. Fresh
lime juice, tequila, cilantro, and cebolla
cured the raw mussel, though ceviche
and cerveza were hard on your liver.
You told us again how as a boy
you fished por mano in Puerto Rico,
while we huddled in hammocks, smoldering
coco husks warding off mosquitoes.
We never spoke of dying, but you were
already so thin. How did this come to you?

We wouldn't know; we never spoke
of dying, and when back in the US
and you lay frail as dry coral
in a hospital bed, you made
no sense, and we who never
spoke of dying talked of music,
your unwritten charts, a flute's breath
line hovering over timbales,
trumpets and trombones,
the flutter of bongos,
rattle of rain-stick,
a conch shell's
hollow moan—

Crossing Over

Always warm winter in these wastelands
far from our fallow fields— we suffer no green-frost,
no wind shudders tender cactus blades clinging
hard to barbed arms since the summer sun
hung heavy in this dry heaven.

We passed a sepia gecko stirring sand,
spreading the shallows of Gulf silt
pressed in the pull pliant waters—
We hesitated there where honey-hymns
of bees bear bleared memory.

In the heat we dream our world wanders
among dust of the dying star-droppings,
flashes of gun-silver bloat-bellied fish,
sour wings of old raptors,
rasp-cold coyote whispers.

In the desert for days we huddle down
in this cardboard hut, hot corrugated walls--
our house a hole dug in parched earth
beyond the ravine river-bed
we crossed in our hunt for Eden.

When the Border Is a River

“Rillendo el rio corre.” –Tish Hinojosa

When the border is a running river
We cross beneath a fence of stars,
Water carries us to one another.

Wild radio waves against rock cliffs quiver;
Mingling tongues sing in slow-moving cars,
When the border is a running river.

Pass south to seek a dentist or doctor;
Dream of el norte while sweating in boxcars.
Water carries us to one another,

Over the chasm, where blue-northerners cluster,
Where the sun, dying, reddens the gorge's old scars.
When the border is a running river,

We wade to cure our children's hunger;
Our hopes wander to colonia bars,
Water carries us to one another.

What brings the maquiladora worker?
Blood streams in coyote jaws and coke wars?
When the border is a running river,
Water carries us to one another.

Water carries us to one another,
When the border is a running river.

Self-portrait in a Bus Window

In light I disappear, but every time
we go into dark the old familiar
face appears beside me, hazy,
mottled in day dust like an ancestor's
photograph tinted in some lost manner
of rendering blue eyes, pale hair, a smudge
of rust to give cheeks and lips color.

For a long stretch I'm gone, until
I see my glance at the man sleeping
by me, his sun-burled arms folded
across his chest, the bundles tied above us,
the dark woman beside us who holds
a bag of oranges and onions on her lap
and her friend with the long black braid
who stares at the window beyond mine.

After moonrise, I linger, but before
we are far from Corozal, I flicker
across cane fields whose bitter histories
blur sweet into coffee cups and biscuits,
glimpses of startling blue sea and black
island people hunkered down fishing
from scorching rock beaches, or a scurry
of white pirates scavenging prey.

In silvering light I seem to escape, but
after the Belizean sun burns down,
my face follows among shadows
that look like other women, other men—
those who killed the ancestors
and those who kill one another and maybe
those they say will inherit the earth.

The Guadalupe Stop

It had me cold
one Austin August afternoon,
faded into facing who I might be
if I had been some other woman,
the kind who makes other women cry.
Nothing stayed without shuddering;
Everything I knew went missing.

That fall at the bus stop I came to walking,
sitting on a sweating metal slat bench,
In silence I watched Guadalupe for the sign
of the coming, beside two waiting women—

when he stumbled,
crashed his cart
on the concrete curb,
sprawled and bawling
before the moving bus:
my chest snapped me up
as if he were my
unimaginable baby
babbling smelly
heroin drool
in the street

too stupid
to be scared

I grabbed his arm
in my red-cross pull,
righted the basket,
forgetting not to
go in myself
after the drowning—
him, holding fast
my hand, me, shouting,

Are you crazy?

—I got on board, only my heart
panting, only my spit dripping,
only my change clinking inside
the air conditioned calm.

On a Day in Hiroshima

We could fold ourselves into a thousand
paper cranes each nestled snug into the one

child's bright life spread upon moving waters
out into summer, swans, fireworks bursting

too soon, a flash on the sixth of August
that burned out monograms on schoolboys' shirts

and left alone little girls' lunchboxes
to witness, as if we would otherwise

forget shadows scorched into a stair
at sunrise, a tricycle crusted black

before a father's disinterred grief,
dome of bricks resisting fall, finally

to wing perhaps a yellow paper sky
above a flame with no ash to deny.

Historias en Hilo

after embroideries by the women of the CPR-Sierra from the Civil War in Guatemala

Here again women thread their stories:
of men arriving where men are disappeared
where even a dog's left speechless but for a thin red drool
chasing a cat still under a tree's thick green leaves,
stitched chickens lay flattened over their eggs
and a giant purple flower with a pink center sprouts
a sun on a stalk pressed to cloth—in stunned
silence they washed, washed and combed and spun thick
raw wool; in their mouths pause the needles they pull,

*lo deje quebrada quemada
nuestro machetes;¹*

how bright children's blood tendered by the hands
of others, the dead mothers sutured to their cornfields
among skins and stalks stripped and split. The women's
stifled screams—their *cortas* cast over their faces before
the soldiers' slashes uprooted their tongues, their breasts
stained scarlet, yarn from their heartwood-soaked skeins.

¹ Inocente Cuyuch Baten, Maya/K'iche', from her embroidery on display in Antigua 2006 and reproduced in *Threads Breaking the Silence/ Hilos Rompiendo el Silencio*, compiled by Ramelia Gonzalez (Foundations for Education, 2005)

Canción para los muertos

Viven como canciones,
under petals of marigolds,
their skulls molded in white sugar,
clay bones holding votive candles.

Beneath yellowed wedding photos
viven como canciones,
their hands forever on the knife
still amid fresh-stripped nopales.

Here rust the medals from their wars,
rest chilis en molcajetes;
viven como canciones
the old dead beside the young ones.

Let us twist for them crepe chains of tears,
hang crisp papeles picados,
leave oranges, water, salt and wine—
viven como canciones.

“Photographs of the Saint’s Finger Are Strictly Prohibited”

Convent of St. Teresa, Ávila, Spain

Her gaze guides our mortal eyes
as if we too could peer through the sun
to record the vision with a feather

like the one poised in her sculpted hand.
We have come to see the finger—
from her right hand, a roll of bony lace

at last at rest in its gold and glass glove
after lifelong journeys on a priest’s breast—
now separate from her transverberated heart

and the arm they cut, after the finger,
revealing her body still uncorrupt
when it bled the medieval must of roses.

Later the church men sawed off a foot,
her other arm, a sliver of her jaw, bits
of flesh—there must be an inventory—

before they reburied what remained.
Here we are only for that finger
whose sometime tremble was, in their eyes,

the vital sign in her three-year coma. How
they must have watched it flicker on her bed
until it became the girl and all the body they could bear.

Inverted on My Retina

En Plein Air

Soon, I see, I will forget words.

I will take up painting: a quiver
of camel hair brushes, dried cakes
of water color, wrinkled
paper towels, salt-sea sponges,

palette
knives will be my instruments.

Hours I'll spend on the yet unnamed
blue of breath in morning,
of rendering blood,

the twenty-four shades
of natural light.

From my window I'll compose
slashing grass, peas
on bamboo stakes, bare
in the red-dirt heart of winter gardens.

I'll erase neighbors'
sharp rooftops, old hedges,
sliding glass doors.

I'll learn ways to plan
around plain white
rag cotton, to leave spittle

bright on lips.

Mama Myrtle

Her damp hair lay on coarse white sheets,
her flesh, blanched gray and pink after birthing,
froth on his minute mouth, flaccid on the nipple.

She stirred awake in her post-labor dream
to see red-fever blooms on Sarah's cheeks.
The doctor's miles away, Sam's in the fields;

she called their eldest from her playroom games.
Round and round and ring-around the farmhouse,
Little Sue trundled her bundled wagon

keeping sister moving in cool sweet air;
crushed quick clover let its medicine scent
exhale under the rolling cradle where

Sarah beneath the flannel breathed her spirit bare,
and Myrtle pulled herself to rise
by her dead newborn as her daughter died.

My mother says she was little, the seventh child
raised on Compromise, when her mother
first told her of her hard-remembered grief,

the sister and brother she'd never known.
How old was I when Mama first told me?
Were my babies small or was I only

a child, my mother letting go story to me
as her mother had let go to her, girl
like a bubble tied to an apron string?

La Guadalupe de Juan Diego

after Tepeyac

In the way of saints, disproportionate—
clay-colored skins, icon haloed in flames

of indigenous red-gold, the woman
wears a veil of stars on a Mexican-blue sky,

its underside like rare grass, her robe spun
cotton of red roses, and the man sprouts

green wings, arms emulating the native
moon, his hands clutching her gathering hem.

He is only half a man, with no need
for anything below waist to hold her.

Her eyes look aside, as if she's ashamed
of religion's power, but so seems he, his vision

cast on earth below, his head bowed down,
bearing her above their up-cupped crescent.

Saint Sebastian

*after the painting by Guido Reni in the Huston Collection, Franciscan
University of Steubenville*

Guido, how many times did you imagine him?
No one could love that young man more than you.

Each time you stretched him on your dark canvas,
he seems more beautiful—his face, serene

after agony, the left leg, raised to relieve
pressure from the arrows under his breast,

a soft-knotted sheet laid over his pubic bone
(the white cloth's loose end left dangling)

rose light and shadow sculpting his flesh—
Then muscles you hadn't before considered the way

you would at last, when here in your full maturity,
you painted him differently, as a man of sinew,

wrists bound over his reclining body draped
in a red robe rising to meet between his bare thighs.

Rites of St. Agatha

*after the painting Saint Agatha by Orazio Riminaldi, in the
Blanton Museum of Art*

Agatha doesn't look at her severed breasts
nor the hinged metal shears in her hands.

Resting on a silver salver like fine fare
wanting wine, two camellia-pink glands

make a delicate still life you can't bear
to glance at, though you do, then to the touch

of lace at her bodice, that shadow of cleft,
and her face—tucked lower lip, upturned chin,

flush-mottled flesh, two open-earth brown eyes--
evoke that sigh before you return her gaze.

You face a woman forced from her body.
A body pushed out of language defies

meaning. Let us bless the nurturing breads;
let no one brush her hair; may our bells sing.

Philomela

long after Ovid

I.

After a time it felt like my native tongue,
this split root. When my swallow sister

flew not too long afterwards, grieving her
child, she'd gathered every scrap in winter

into her nest. (What can I say but what a mess?)
Everywhere, bits and pieces and soft matter.

She starved at last, leaving all she had to me,
each tender morsel and fruitless eggshell.

II.

It's true I sang in their ears, each man who would
make me artful. All night perched in a cypress

outside a window, into a bedchamber
I poured my song like poison into the air

of a sleepless king or lured an aging poet
to cold, enameled gold and jeweled flesh,

or a young one to scribble crumbs for birds,
my voice a thread drawing them to my mouth.

III.

Here, you see: my lips sheathed in bone,
my sex downed over, my soft hands good

only for flying. Now I grow quills to hone
needles whose eyes pierce my skin and

darkness, closed lids, weave where I am
trapped again under his body, his fingers

pulling out my language, my shuttle
pressed into the dirt under my head.

IV.

Beneath dirt a wild man once dreamed
songless birds sojourned in the clay—

How I wish I could lay down this lyric,
ravel my story and weave the threads

into a turquoise shawl, pink booties,
slipcovers for the dining room chairs.

But the poet who wrote my escape left
me trapped in this form, in this singing.

Marina, La Malinche

I could fold my tongue into a hollow
reed, pretend I'm an amber butterfly

pressed into the neck of milkweed florets
dripping nectar through my waiting channel.

I could push my tongue to palate, swallow
like a wood thrush gathering sand grit, cry

evensongs until the skin-pale moon forgets
our Mexican sky for another continent.

I could roll my tongue like the snake below
the feathered body who struggles to taste dry

desert air; I could thread cactus spines to whet
native spirit, could teach mother tongue to pray;

I would hold my tongue but to survive must
speak. My father sold me destined to lie

with a man who crossed our oceans to let blood
and tongues mingle. Let me keen lullabies.

Spanish Plums

In Spain some nuns grow tiny golden plums
on a tree that leans over their wrought wall

to shade the sidewalk and passers-by
who wander from one red brick business

or metro stop, maybe *Metropolitano*,
to another. They cluster amid green

leaves, sheltered from *Madrileño* sun,
gathering occasional bees who seek

repast in succulent flesh on summer days
in a land where water lies beneath

the surface, rock like their smooth skins split
artless in the sisters' garden—until

a few young women see them waiting and one
reaches to gather breakfast for her friends.

Boy with Dog and Pigeons

Let me tell you about this boy I saw in Central Park—
all bound in black leather, chains—in the remains
of late snow in early April, the cruel kind of cold
that herds ducks to huddle in leaves of deciduous trees,

but not common city birds, who frequent the statues
in the paved walk of authors, like Shakespeare and Hugo,
beyond the artificial ice rink, under the sky line of brick,
and mortal men and women with newspapers or coffee,

or the saxophonist in the crescent shadow of a bridge.
There, I paused to point the camera at this boy above him—
in a crevice of pale spring grass, his back against the rocks,
at his spread boots a Shepherd in a spiked collar waiting

while pigeons fed from seeds in his pockets and he gazed
through the glass to the inverted image on my retina.

Diego's Hummingbirds

How did she feel when she found the small
stiff bodies dropped in a lacquered casket

hidden in the blue house closet? Picaflores
her husband had chloroformed and carefully

desiccated: their feathers still vibrant
as his wife's best embroidered huipil.

When did she paint her corpse in a box,
sketch a dressmaker form within its lid?

When could he who captured struggle
no longer bear to hear another life hum?

March Rites

Dancing about the floodlights,
an ecstasy of moths convenes--
the old army type, black witches,
gypsies and sphinxes; in their midst
two or three glistening green
lacewings flutter, and a trinity
cloaked as dust or bark
trembles in the shadows.
A rapt virgin tiger clasps
the long white filaments
of a Maya hammock
suspended from the necks
of those beguiling lamps,
as the purple wisteria
censes the night air.
Down below, dervish beetles
whirl about their heads
on sand-yellow tile.

After-hours in my garden—
the cult, eclectic as Americans,
worships an electric god
I could turn off with one flick.

Musty With Spirits

Palimpsest

First they scraped flesh from skin,
turned to sun what had never felt light,

in vitriol bathed open wounds,
seared to moon-yellow the papery

inner vellum, until verso and recto
no longer seemed animal matter.

One folded quarto, another folio,
herds of pages lay in wait until

somebody sharpened a feather,
dipped the shaft in iron-black gall

to write angel-pin philosophy,
the brewer's daily tabs, a royal

grocery list, hymns for a collegial
choir gathered to praise one true

God before someone thought, no more—
Take a knife edge to old stories,

rub out names, erase histories, cut
leaves to strips, use them within

other spines and covers of wood,
bone. So they buried in layers

unremembered lives in the skeletons
of their books, in the thick tissues

of volumes we open on velvet cradles,
word shadows musty with spirits.

How I Don't Know

But do we really need another poem like this one?
I read on the ragged snapshot edge of my childhood
past I couldn't write before, of passing life in rows
and rows of white shacks, furrows of white shacks
like amber fields of grain in black and white, crops

of people like seeds sown in wooden boxes under
the freeway where above the child sees rows below
pass her window and knows—how does she know?
Black people live in row after row of white shacks in
Shreveport where I come to visit my grandparents.

I am sure these experiences are meaningful to you
but what worth to write memories of a girl become old
as grandmother when overhead trolley wires pulled us
downtown to see my grandfather at work in the state
agriculture office that taught small farmers how better

to grow sorghum and yams and their wives to put up
safe in jars black-eyed peas and figs sealed with paraffin
and I just old enough to read writing on a wall of cement
blocks FOR COLORED ONLY with *Wizard of Oz* wonder
landed in my memory box with the shacks and the story

really too plain prose to be told as if it were poetry
we all knew of the woman sitting on the courthouse steps
sipping coffee from a glass-lined metal thermos bottle
but it was my grandfather asking her if it kept hot and she
saying, “yessir, and cold stay cold—but how do it know?”

Louisiana Iris Blues

No use thinking about those windows
no use thinking about that door
I say, no use looking out etched windows
no use looking out at all

Put up your kitchen curtains
go on, rip up my sweet plum tree
you can dig up those old crepe myrtles
it's not my garden anymore

Tear out Yesterday-Today-and-Tomorrow
strip that fig ivy from the walls
parch those Louisiana iris
it's not my garden anymore

No more use that hanging yellow jasmine
no use my daddy's loquat tree—
just let that bed go to weed, I say,
you're not my garden anymore.

Blue Morphos

Where does a butterfly sail in her red nectar reverie?
This summer morning, two languorous butterflies suckled

the hummingbird feeder—wings unfolded and folded now
and then as if they dreamed they were flying, the way

a dog asleep in a sunny spot of yard runs a meadow.
I have seen them exult in the winds of the Caribbean,

sheer wings glistening with sea spray, trembling
with the wild insect certainty that inspired Icarus.

On the road to Cobá, they drifted like spring sun motes,
swirling in clouds before the windshield, slight and pale

Mexican Yellows, Orange Fritillaries. Iridescent Morphos
imbricate paths in my memory through crumbling ruins.

That day we couldn't move for fear of crushing them;
tiptoeing across a quivering sea of shimmering wings,

we urged them to fly: what could they be thinking?
Suicide, to sojourn in the parking lot of a tourist stop.

I thought of my grandmother's tray, a gift from a traveling
relative, fine wood framing amputated azure wings—

dust to dust under glass, keepsake of a time when
someone flew over an ocean, someone wingless arrived home.

12/21/2012

The skyscraper across from my Times
Square hotel appears under destruction:
a sculpture in steel and glass, all angles
like an abstract colt or a weeping
woman watching her man launch
onto a sea of sky from her
salt-grass baskets. Yesterday
a woman reminded me the Maya
predicted world-end at 2012.
She handed me a pencil and a string
of paper to write what I would be
doing that day. I imagined
touching your faces, planting
something in earth.
I thought of people
in our Americas
so poor they sell one another
dirt for food and of the bottle-green
Caribbean beneath the temples of Tulum.

Lengua Tejana

Your art silvering my eyes, your tongue in my mouth wanting sweet blood-red cactus blooms, spring nopales stripped of thorns you stir into my morning eggs. . . the skin of your voice sun-baked brown darts claro y verdad, hummingbird palabras resting in your English of purple and gold lantana, tea of hibiscus in rain water, chili pequins and avocado in the molcajete; what you say hovers and slips to flesh. The kindergartener ran away from home, ran to his abuelito watering rows of corn, ran to his abuelita cocinando sopa de sun yellow squash blossoms. In the morning he was returned to the nuns; in school they beat you for speaking. You tell me secrets. I wonder about gathering peyote, sickness and revelation, the floods you rose from. We cross borders borders cross over us we are one another at the other's side. I live where you are native where we live nuestras lenguas son mingling vines

Apart

Waking midway through your night as the rooster
crows above the vineyard, traveling daylight
streaming through the window to feed my foreign
pots of thyme and lavender, I rise *sola*,
aching to touch you.

Mid my afternoon, you rise, take your coffee
redolent with sweet vanilla where grapevines
shade our garden, hand-watered every day
now, and you alone keep our life—while, sleeping,
I ache to touch you.

Life on Ganymede

Last night fiery planet Jupiter arose
to star nearby our quarter crook of fall moon,
its lunar hook hovering low where evening grows
silky clouds that cast a fuzzy light-cocoon
about a streetlamp's yellow head and old rows
of red oaks shadowing November lawns. Soon
the glistening giant assumed its aspect high,
as your slow, warm palm crawled up my mid-life thigh.

Vespers

I love how evening blues right before night
falls, dry sky turned a color of water

delicate as eggs. For fifty-odd years, at this hour
katydids have hummed up my summers

raising loud their chant to neighboring trees—
an insectual challenge: did you say

the knot on my heel is only a spur?
My vegetable self turning mineral,

every green year I become a layer
of salt spread thin beneath flaking

skin—small rivers of interrupted veins
never meant to go beyond a season

surface a natural kind of tattoo
I'm paying on time,
no mind to design.

El árbol milagroso

On the way to el árbol milagroso
the young girls told stories del otro lado—

like their brush with the spirits through
a window over the washer and dryer—

Turo's sister laughed as she drove
over vanishing pools on hot asphalt.

Unexpected, a bristle of javelinas
appeared grazing the dry kiñena ditch,

but pale plastic Jesus fixed to the dash,
cardboard signs and suspicion led

past the weeping virgin's water-tank,
past the dead snakes hung on a rail,

to a fence laced with sun-faded garlands,
to a cross studded with glinting milagros,

guarding the Jerusalem olive tree,
bound in burlap and colored ribbons

protecting the saint from pilgrims
with pocketknives and prayers.

Mira—she led us to the shrouded trunk,
planted her ear against its skin, sighed—

oye—eyes closed. Next, I listened
to the waterfall inside laddering sky

to ground, through the live green core
so far from what we thought we knew.

Vita

Born in Cambridge, England, Katherine Durham Oldmixon grew up in Texas and her parents' native Louisiana. She earned a Ph.D. in English from University of Texas at Austin, where she was awarded the University Continuing Fellowship, a Women's Studies Dissertation Fellowship and a Martin M Crow Fellowship in Medieval Studies. Her doctoral dissertation, "Otherworlds/Otherness: The Cultural Politics of Exoticism in the 'Breton' Lays in Middle English," focuses on four medieval English poems. A Cynthia Mitchell Scholar at University of Houston, Katherine earned M.A. and B.A. (magna cum laude) degrees in English. Her M.A. thesis, "Culture, History and Genre in Three Late Medieval Works," explores literature by Geoffrey Chaucer, Christopher Marlowe, and Juan Ruiz. As a graduate student at University of New Orleans, she won the 2009 Creative Writing Study Abroad Contest in Poetry and the 2009 Vassar Miller Poetry Prize.

Through the low-residency MFA program, Katherine studied in Madrid, Spain, San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, and at the Ezra Pound Center for Literature at Brunnenburg in Italy. In 2003, Katherine participated in a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar in Puerto Rico and has been a participant in a number of NYU Faculty Resource Network Seminars in New York, Puerto Rico and Hawaii. Outside the U.S. she has also traveled widely, including journeys in Belize, Guatemala and Honduras, Portugal, France, Spain, England, Canada, Japan and throughout Mexico,. She is Associate Professor of English at historic Huston-Tillotson University, where she teaches literature and writing and directs the writing program.

Katherine's poems and photographs have appeared in many online and print magazines, including *Borderlands*, *Utter*, *qarrtsiluni*, *Real*, *Passager*, *di-verse-city*, *Ellipsis*, *The Normal School*, *Texas Poetry Calendar* and the anthology *Big Land, Big Sky, Big Hair: the Best of Texas Poetry Calendar*. Her chapbook *Water Signs*, a finalist for the New Women's Voices Chapbook Award, was released in January 2009 by Finishing Line Press. She is the author of many scholarly papers and presentations on literature, culture, and writing.

An artist active in the community, Katherine serves on the board of Texas Folklife and the Austin Poetry Society, and on the Community Council for the Humanities Institute at the University of Texas at Austin, where she has also been a Research Fellow. She serves regularly as a moderator at Texas Book Festival, has been a featured poet for Austin International Poetry Festival, and a judge and workshop leader for Writer's League of Texas. Katherine was guest editor for a special issue of *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review* dedicated to ekphrastic poetry, co-editor of an issue of *qarrtsiluni* on the theme "water," and editor of *Reflections: The 60th Anniversary Anthology of Austin Poetry Society*.

The mother of four adult children, Seth Oldmixon, Mary Oldmixon Ling, Jonathon Oldmixon and Leah Oldmixon and grandmother to Dylan and Nikki Ling, Katherine makes her home in Austin with her husband, Arturo Lomas Garza.