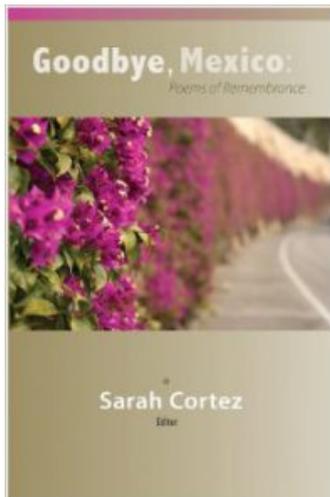




## Goodbye, Mexico: Poems of Remembrance, Edited by Sarah Cortez



*Goodbye Mexico: Poems of Remembrance* is, at its heart, a series of poems of love for the nation and lament for the loss of fluidity of the U.S Mexican border. This border, once porous and easy to cross both ways, is now a site of political turmoil, violence, and danger. Written by numerous, talented poets with various relationships to the nation of Mexico, this collection offers a vast array of perspectives on a country that's at once beautiful and ugly, filled with wealth and poverty, peaceful and ravaged with violence. *Goodbye, Mexico: Poems of Remembrance* is an expertly curated anthology that both celebrates and mourns this rapidly changing, vibrant nation.

Many poems in the collection paint an image of an idolized Mexico – an exotic landscape that's sensual, beautiful, and alluring. These poems are reminiscent of a first love. The poem, "First Mango," for example, recalls the speaker's first experience with eating this "peeled mango on a stick" in a sexualized manner with specific imagery of the "juice running down... closed-eyed bliss / over my chin / down my neck." The poem ends with a Biblical allusion: "I wandered lost, happily expelled / from the garden / delirious, all tongue."

Any real relationship, of course, isn't only sensual, and it isn't only sweet. *Goodbye Mexico* digs much deeper than a simple sensualization of a place. Scattered throughout the collection, we also get a nuanced look in the crevices of a land that has been ravaged by narco violence, poverty and greed. In the poem, "Mercado de Hierbas," we feel this tension in the buildings, in the food, and in the speaker's interactions with the people in a bazaar where "candles for Santa Muerte, skeletal / and smiling in her evening / finery" burn and the sage grows on the buildings "like nooses to cleanse / all

the mold and human rot away." The poem continues to unfold with the speaker noting that the candles must be working – "no shootings / for three weeks." However, the poem closes with a chilling image of the speaker eating ceviche that's dissolving in citrus acid. "I spit the small bones left / from careless consumption, left for her."

"The Kentucky Club, Juarez," paints quite the opposite image of a border town. Instead of the undertones violence hidden behind a surreal sense of calm, here, the danger comingles with the revelry. The poem opens with festive references to the first margarita "born / just across the Santa Fe Bridge," a drunken Jack Dempsey, a freshly divorced Marilyn Monroe. The poem turns in the last two stanzas, where we're suddenly made privy to the danger that lingers in plain sight:

Where Chapo moves cocaine  
And young soldiers, rifles over their shoulders  
Languish on the corner

Where the juke box  
Like the killing never wants to stop.

These two portraits of Mexico, this abrupt shift in tone, make readers feel the tension that exists in the borderlands.

“Zargoza Plaza, 6am”, though, shows hope. This poem depicts an average day at the border crossing in Laredo and opens with the “Smell of diesel fuel from the International Bridge” and an image of a boarded up window “where ghosts of commerce dig deep in dusty buildings.” Like “The Kentucky Club, Juarez,” though, the poem shifts in tone towards the end, only this time, to provide perhaps a more optimistic outlook for the borderlands: “On this breezy August morning, sensational headlines / and travel warnings lift away. In this moment / Laredo has a chance to be reborn, if not today, tomorrow.”

My favorite poems in this collection are the poems that paint a portrait of Mexico that’s authentic, showing at once its shadow and its light. The poem, “Portrait of Mexico,” personifies the nation as a woman with brambles for hair, thorns in her ear, a mouth filled with hornets. It’s a difficult place, though, too, filled with beauty: “Your iris smells of cinnamon bark, your hair-bound / forest of coriander.” The speaker sees beauty and strength in this image, and in the end, accepts the image for what it is. The poem ends with a particularly sensual image: “I want to taste the humming in your ear.” It isn’t an easy love, but what real love is?

The collection’s final piece, “When the Ghosts Say,” echoes a similar sentiment of a difficult but inevitable relationship with the nation. The poem opens with a declaration – “You have terror and I have tears. / In this cruel way, we are for each other.” The poem continues in this fashion, showing the yin and yang of a difficult relationship, one where the speaker refuses to give in and allow the memories of this place to be simply of violence and terror, but colors them with fondness and love. For example, the speaker states “You shoot me with bullets, but you have nothing else... I shoot you / with fragments of childhood... memories of your mother ... spring in the rolling mountains / and the taste of plantain bananas and sugar.” The speaker fights to keep the pleasant memories of this place alive, to define the nation as more than simply a broken place. The poem ends with a powerful declaration:

All this blood you have drawn  
From the bodies of so many who need it

You win. You have always won.  
All I can do is not go away.

Not go away is my name.

This final poem digs deep and offers a solution. Instead of saying “Goodbye” to Mexico, the speaker refuses to do so, and instead, continues to fight by remembering the moments of joy along with the pain endured in this nation. In this sense, *Goodbye Mexico* is a powerful collection of poems written in numerous voices all with a similar goal – to complicate the narrative of a nation, to offer the only salve we know to be effective to this wound we call a border – poetry.

Katherine Hoerth is the author of four poetry books. Her most recent, *Goddess Wears Cowboy Boots* (Lamar University Literary Press, 2014) won the Helen C. Smith Prize from the Texas Institute of Letters for the best book of poetry. Her work has been published in journals such as *Pleiades*, *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*, and *Voices de la Luna*. She teaches writing at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley and serves as poetry editor of *Amarillo Bay* and *Devilfish Review*. She lives in deep south Texas.