

**The So-Called Yellow Rose—
Talking with Three Women Texas State Poets Laureate:
Rosemary Catacalos, Laurie Ann Guerrero, and Emmy Perez
Moderated by ire'ne lara silva**

Saturday, March 7, 2020, 9am-10:15am
Room 214B
Henry B. González Convention Center
Meeting Room Level



Texas Poet Laureate (2013-14) Rosemary Catacalos was the first Latinx named to the post. Her poems appear in journals, textbooks, and anthologies, and have twice been collected in *The Best American Poetry*. She has earned fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, Stanford University's Stegner program, and the Texas Institute of Letters. Her first collection, *Again for the First Time* (Santa Fe: Tooth of Time Books, 1984) received the 1985 TIL poetry prize and was reissued in 2013 by Wings Press along with *Begin Here*, a fine press chapbook of newer poems. A former executive director of the San Francisco Poetry Center/American Poetry Archives, the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center's InterAmerican Bookfair, and the San Antonio literary center Gemini Ink, she is passionate about using writing to build literacy and community.

Laurie Ann Guerrero is the author of *Tongue in the Mouth of the Dying* (Notre Dame 2013) and *A Crown for Gumecindo* (Aztlan Libre 2015). She held consecutive positions of Poet Laureate of the city of San Antonio (2014-2016) and the State of Texas (2016). Her latest collection, *I Have Eaten the Rattlesnake: New & Selected Poems* is forthcoming in fall 2020 (TCU Press). Guerrero holds a B.A. in English Language & Literature from Smith College, an MFA in poetry from Drew University. She is currently working on a collection of hybrid & mixed media poems called, *When the Time Comes, They Said, Your Body Will Know What to Do* and is the Writer-in-Residence at Texas A&M University-San Antonio.

Emmy Pérez, Texas Poet Laureate 2020, is the author of *With the River on Our Face* and *Solstice*. A volume of her *New and Selected Poems* is forthcoming from TCU Press. She is a recipient of poetry fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, CantoMundo, the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, and others. Currently, she's Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, where she's also Associate Director of the Center for Mexican American Studies. In 2017, she co-founded Poets Against Walls collective in the Rio Grande Valley. This summer she will celebrate her 20th year living in the Tejas borderlands.

The Lesson in “A Waltz for Debby”

Rosemary Catacalos

in memory of Bill Evans

Amazing how this world manages to be all of a piece.
In Beirut an old woman hearing guns that are nothing
like drums pulls her apron up over her head
and wrings the air in entreaty. In La Resurrección,
Guatemala, Mayans in bright handmade cloth
are hung in trees with their wrists slit and left
to die slowly, turning like obscene ornaments

or jungle birds. And on a strait named Juan de Fuca
off the coast of Washington state, a stranger
is within peaceful shouting distance of six whales
rising and falling on the waves: the usual
and regular breathing of God. All this has everything
to do with how you wrote “Waltz for Debby” when she
was three and still had a right to believe life
would always come in gentle measures, the swoop
and sweep of a good dream doing what comes naturally.
You knew better but went ahead

anyway. Just as today I balanced in sunlight
with my own three-year-old nieces, clambering around
one of Fuller’s dreams become a toy, the joyful
geometry of a dome turned into triple-sided air.
Even if Demetra refused to step where her favorite tree
cast shadows and twice wouldn’t pronounce
the name of her missing uncle,

suspecting the pain it would bring out in the open.
Later she was sullen with the weight of it. Her swing
would not fly, though she leaned with all her might
and crazily against gravity. I thought how all the waltzes
in the world wouldn’t save her from learning this.

The man watching the whales, meanwhile, may
fear that in a few years there won’t be whales
on this coast. People either, for that matter.
But more he remembers your fingers as wingtips.
Your remains, clear notes phrased with possibility.
And since jazz musicians mostly work nights, how
you were always finding your way in the dark.

CATALYST FOR A DAUGHTER-IN-LAW

Laurie Ann Guerrero

There were parts I never
wanted to speak of. The child

widening me from the inside
made of me a stage. My breasts,

two mounds of clay, and you spoke
on his behalf and for every mother—

once and future, my own and yours.
I took the wash cloths

to my nipples, each bath,
in the weeks before he came—

toughening them up as you said
I should, that they would not be too soft,

too tender for the ravenous mouth
of a boy whose face I'd never seen.

I tried. I tried to love the natural
thing. Leading a would-be-man

to my breast. I do not blame you,
mother of the one I loved: all of us

children. And god himself—
fucking you at the pulpit.

Not one more refugee death

Emmy Perez

*A river killed a man I loved,
And I love that river still
-María Meléndez*

1.

Thousands of fish killed after Pemex
spill in el Río Salado and everyone
runs out to buy more bottled water.
Here in El Valle, the Rio Grande kills
crossers as does the sun, like the heat

of Arizona and the ranchlands around
the Falfurrias checkpoint. It's hard
to imagine an endangered river
with that much water, especially
in summer and with the Falcon Reservoir

in drought, though it only takes inches
to drown. Sometimes, further west,
there's too little river
to paddle in Boquillas Canyon
where there are no steel-column walls

except the limestone canyon's drop
and where a puma might push-wade across,
or in El Paso, where double-fenced walls
sparkle and blind with bullfight ring lights,
the ring the concrete river mold, and above

a Juárez mountain urges
La Biblia es La Verdad—Leela.

2.

Today at the vigil, the native singer
said we are all connected
by water, la sangre de vida.

Today, our vigil signs proclaimed
McAllen, TX is not Murrieta, California.
*#iamborderless. Derechos
Inmigrantes=Derechos
Humanos. Bienvenidos niños.
We stand with refugee children.*

*We are all human. Bienvenidos
a los Estados Unidos.*

And the songs we sang
the copal that burned
and the rose petals spread
en los cuatro puntos were
for the children and women
and men and all. Songs

for the Guatemalan
boy with an Elvis belt buckle
and Angry Birds jeans with zippers
on back pockets who was found
shirtless in La Joya, one mile
from the river. The worn jeans

that helped identify his body
in the news more times
than a photo of him while alive.
(I never knew why the birds
are angry. My mother said
someone stole their eggs.)

The Tejas sun took a boy
I do not know, a young man
who wanted to reach Chicago,
his brother's number etched in
his belt, his mother's pleas not
to leave in white rosary beads

he carried. The sun in Tejas
stopped a boy the river held.
Detention centers filled, churches
offer showers and fresh clothes.
Water and a covered porch may
have waited at a stranger's house

or in a patrol truck had his body
not collapsed. Half of our bodies
are made of water, and we can't
sponge rivers through skin
and release them again
like rain clouds. Today

at the vigil the native singer
sang we are all connected
by water, la sangre de vida.