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 crossing 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.

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.