

## Fourteenth Annual Northeast Texas Poetry Contest and Reading

*By Andrea Reyes, and Dr. Andrew Yox*



The fourteenth annual Northeast Texas Poetry Reading at the Whatley Foyer of Northeast Texas Community College, September 3, featured scenes of death and life, country living, the devastations of Covid, and rays of hope—right on Texas State Highway 11! Compared with last year’s rendition on Zoom, this year’s live reading included speakers more willing to optimize the natural nuances of the voice. Long-term poetry judges, Vice President **Anna Ingram**, and Professors **Jim Swann** and **Mandy Smith** helped that process along. For the first time, the judges listened to the student finalists before selecting the winners.

One can view the two parts of the entire Reading on YouTube, on the following two sites:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ElDnrjVII5M&t=89s>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pUb4eslrqtE&t=25s>

A special stillness prevailed when **Joe Dan Boyd**, the adult winner from Winnsboro, captivated listeners with his poem, “Anthem To Hope: Living Distantly In A Northeast Texas Perpetual Pandemic.” The first speaker, Dr. Andrew Yox described Boyd as the “new Poet Laureate of Northeast Texas,” as he now has come in first in the adult division, two years in a row, after finishing second in 2019. Epic-like, Boyd’s poem recounted the many ironical twists of the ongoing COVID era, while alluding to Winston Churchill, Emily Dickinson, Peanuts cartoons, and the nineteenth-century hymn writer, William Bullock.

**Brian Ramirez**, Northeast Texas Community College’s second winner of the James and Elizabeth Whatley Honors Endowed Scholarship won \$400 and placed first among students with his poem, “Forgotten Home”, a memoir to an abandoned funeral home. Ramirez added vocable sounds to the reading of his story about a place of loss, left behind which evoked an eerie, exponential sense of alienation. **Maxime Risner**, Webb Society 3<sup>rd</sup> place Caldwell Award Winner placed second, winning \$300 with a poem entitled “Foreign Land.” Risner celebrated the “vibrancy and sheen” of country stars, and the towns of Northeast Texas, “so charming and cordial.” Third place went to incoming freshman and 2021 Coca-Cola Leader of Promise, **Skylar Fondren**. She won \$200 for her poem, “Hidden Gems of Northeast Texas.” This poem was the most upbeat, celebratory paeon of the region among all the entries. For the first time in the contest’s history, **Evan Sears and Israel Perez** tied for fourth place, winning \$50 each with their poems--“What is the nature of a Cowboy” and “Texas-Sized Words.” Perez’s work was the first example of “shape” or “concrete poetry” in the fourteen-year history of the series. The text of his poem assumed the very shape of Texas.

The contest also featured the fourth Northeast Texas Image Contest. Photographers submitted winsome sights from the area of Texas between the Red and Sabine rivers. This year, the winners in this category reflected and gave insight to the life, culture, and history of Northeast Texas. In first place in this category, winning \$70, was Joe Dan Boyd's "Tinney Chapel United Methodist Church." The church, founded in 1900, is located at 449 County Road. Boyd took the photo soon after a recent remodeling and fresh paint.



In second place, winning \$20, below, was Evan Sears' photograph of his grandfather, titled "A Farmer in Franklin County." The image read alongside Evan's winning poem, "The nature of a Cowboy", was a heartfelt tribute to his grandfather, Walter's perseverance.



In third place, winning \$10, was Jordan Chapin's view of a sunray, sneaking past the cloud-filled sky and illuminating the land on Route 11 between Pittsburg and Winnsboro.



Art Professor Mileah Hall, of Northeast Texas Community College, judged the images.

Over all, the winning poems and images this year depicted a sense of hope, resilience, and grit. Despite the uncertainty and helplessness bought on by COVID-19, “our perpetual plague, the pandemic that never ends at all,” in Joe Dan Boyd’s words, “Hope persists; hope prevails.” Brian Ramirez’s endearing history of the funeral home, “harassed by graffiti,” still ended on a strong note--it stands. Evan Sears’ descriptive and inspiring poem on the cowboy asked: “What makes them who they are? Is it the boots, the hat, the spurs, the horse? Nay, it’s their unwavering drive.” Maxime Risner’s poem began with the subject grieving the loss of a home. But she moves to Northeast Texas. A few elegant sunsets later, she takes stock in her situation. “I breathe in and cheer, but God knew what he was doing when he brought me here.”

This year’s poetry contest and Reading was made possible through generous help from Beverly Kelley of Mount Vernon, Jerald, and Mary Lou Mowery, and other patrons of Honors Northeast.

The winning poems of previous years can be viewed at [www.ntcc.edu/honorspoems](http://www.ntcc.edu/honorspoems).  
The text of the top poems are provided below:



## **Anthem To Hope: Living Distantly In A Northeast Texas Perpetual Pandemic**

**By Joe Dan Boyd, July 28-Aug. 25, 2021**

*With contrite hearts to Thee, our King,*

*We turn, who oft have strayed;*

*Accept the sacrifice we bring*

*And let the plague be stayed.*

*-- William Bullock, Songs Of The Church, 1854*

**Came the calendar in all its innocence,**

**2020, masquerading as a normal year:**

**Social distance, safety masks, quarantines:**

**Northeast Texas in all its pandemic fear.**

**It was the worst of times for us, 2020,**

**Watching our own sad lives evolve.**

**Intimacy was the first casualty:**

**Kept our distance, felt our lives devolve:**

**Caricatures of ourselves, six feet apart:**

**Almost like shells of our former selves**

Without the catalyst of closeness and conversation,

Both now discouraged, quarantined, shelved.

Incredibly, came July, 2021; We heard

the CDC decision to reverse course,

Mask up again, even with a vaccine shot

Giving the lie to a pandemic without force.

Is Covid-19 to be our perpetual plague,

The pandemic that never ends at all?

Is Dr. Fauci a stand in for Lucy

Holding a Charlie Brown Covid football:

Pulling it away, like a Peanuts cartoon,

Ending one pandemic, starting another?

Just when we drop our masks, and end

Isolation to get close again to each other?

More than 630,000 U.S. dead from Covid,

As the pandemic body count goes on and on.

Florists must make funeral wreaths from

Wedding flower bouquets come undone.

Vaccines touted as our ultimate, final salvation

From surveillance of our every move.

But even medicines have limitations,  
Including freedom from side effects to prove.  
"Breakthrough infection analysis" is the term  
For a virus masking up like a chameleon:  
The Delta variant "breaks through" our vaccines;  
Dr. Fauci fears more lurking on the horizon.

For some, the pandemic, social constraints,  
Even the virus itself, seem unreal,  
They publicly denounce all as an evil hoax.  
Some of those in denial even died of Covid's zeal.

Helpless but not hopeless is the watchword:  
Churchill's advice to a war-torn British nation:  
Never give in, never, never, never, never.  
Already adopted by a perpetual pandemic population.

Some stopped worrying, started living with Covid:  
Wear masks if legally or politely asked to do so,  
Keep proper distancing, even if they don't agree  
That science backs any such requirement though.

Even vaccine hesitancy can be tolerated,  
Since reality can make a very convincing case:

Hospitalizations, high death rates urge vaccines;

For some, a vaccine "booster" already in place.

Hope persists, despite more than 164 million

U.S. cases of Covid-19 virus to date.

Hope prevails because vaccines can be adapted

To deal with evolving new virological traits.

Hope, said the poet Emily Dickinson, is the thing with feathers

That perches in the soul, and sings the tune without the words,

And never stops, at all. Hope is also the thing we seek from

Our leaders and clergy, though many have gone unheard.

Pastors like Kelly Williams concede that Covid-19 has already

Prompted its question: Is anxiety our new normal? Asked or not.

Are we in an emotional prison cell dank, dark: Contract Covid?

Pass it on to others? Or, does hope whisper an alternate lot ?

*Soft as the voice of an angel, breathing a lesson unheard  
Hope with a gentle persuasion whispers her comforting word*

*Wait till the darkness is over, wait till life's tempest is done  
Hope for the sunshine tomorrow, after the shower is gone*

*Whispering hope, O how welcome thy voice  
Making my heart in its sorrow rejoice. ---Alice Hawthorne, World Wide Church Songs, 1947 END*



## **The Forgotten Home**

**By Brian Ramirez**

The home that once dealt with a coffin

Became a coffin of its own

The walls one day softened

And the place was left alone

Oh how many passed

Oh how many stayed

It all happened so fast

But yet we still prayed

The home is now abandoned

The home is stuck in the past

This place was back-handed

And with graffiti harassed

But we must not forget

Because it gave us something to remember

While outside you smoked a cigarette

Inside they gave a service, to your family member

In the corner of Washington and Arkansas

Lay the remains of a funeral home

Yet you may not know what you saw

Tis but another home, with the abandonment syndrome.





## Foreign Land

By Maxime Risner

I look around this will be the last I see of this place,

This city is all I've ever known.

Anxiety builds as I load the last box.

I was here for just a few months I grew.

In the back seat, I say goodbye,

To not only that old city but my old self.

Out the window, I watch the small trees fly by.

Approaching my new journey.

Towering beams of life, with boundless foliage

A new and unfamiliar place,

Almost alien to me,

Yet holds so much embrace.

Instead of burnt brown vegetation luscious green;

Wildlife makes its appearance as I pass by.

Followed by pastures, so serene

Occupying various farm animals.

Backroads showcase neighborhoods with a charming atmosphere.

The comforting feeling of driving through small towns,

The people, so cordial and spectacular.

Interstate roads with a seemingly everlasting scene,  
The elegance of the reflection as the sunset hits the waters.  
The stars awing vibrance and sheen  
I breathe in and cheer.  
This may be new land,  
But God knew what he was doing when he brought me here.



**Hidden Gems of Northeast Texas**  
**By Skylar Fondren**

Have you ever noticed Northeast Texas?  
There are many hidden gems to be found.  
A church pastor whose sermons perplex us,  
The choir's hymns of praise spread faith around.  
Perfect sweet tea only Grandma can make,  
Picked pecans made into a homemade pie.  
Fishing for a big catch at Lone Star Lake,  
Eyes rising past the pine trees to the sky.  
Once noisy cicadas lull you asleep,  
While humid air gently blows through the night.  
Wise parents that make you work for your keep,  
A small-town college that teaches what's right.  
Though these things may not seem monumental,  
These gems define what's most influential.



## **The Nature of a Cowboy**

**By Evan Sears**

What is the nature of a cowboy?

What makes them who they are?

Is it the boots, the hat, the spurs,

the horse? Nay, it's their

unwavering drive.

The drive to ranch, the drive to farm,

The drive to pick others up when

they fall. The drive to get up and work,

And greet their old friend, the

morning sun.

Sure, their clothing is iconic,

From the Stetson hat and pearlsnap shirt,

To the Wrangler jeans and Ariat

boots. However, that's just clothing to them.

The reason they are who they are,

Is more simple than expected.

Nature waits for no man, and they

have to help. That is the nature of

a cowboy.



## Texas Sized Words

By Israel Perez

Pecan trees with  
Summer breeze,  
D a l l a s festivals  
A n d c o u n t y fairs,  
Rainy days, with sunny vibes all within  
the same hour. Cedar trees, picnics at the lake  
Armadillos and blue jays, blue bonnets on interstate 30, Green grass  
and clear skies, long days and short nights. Birds chirping and dogs  
Barking, neighbors smiling, friends laughing, all is good in  
The Lone star state. No-where else  
will there be another  
north east  
Texas