

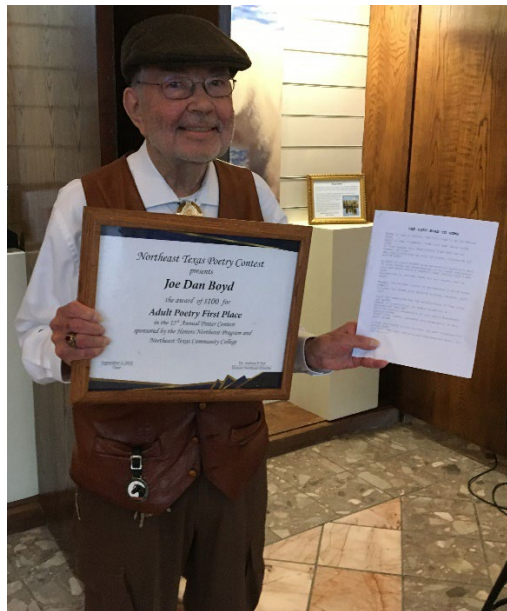
Fifteenth Annual Northeast Texas Poetry Contest and Reading



Above Student Winners of the 2022 Northeast Texas Poetry Contest. Left to Right, and First to Fourth: Evan Sears, Victoria Matiz, Skylar Hodson, and Maddy

Since 2008, the annual Northeast Texas Poetry contest has represented a singular yearly effort to define the area and culture between the Red and Sabine Rivers. At the Whatley Performing Arts Center of Northeast Texas Community College on 2 September 2022, Student and adult poets of the Northeast Texas region again marked our place and era with bids to share compelling emotions, and arresting depictions. This year, though more clearly detached from the shadow of the COVID epidemic than the previous two years, the local effort deduced expressions that again departed from the dominant tenor of the contest's first ten years. The winning entries of the first decade, still recorded faithfully on the NTCC honors website, <www.ntcc.edu/honorspoems> centered on friendship, nostalgia, and the majesty of nature. The winning poems of 2022 contained a few salutes to past themes, but were notable for sounding notes of encroaching concern—for withering traditions, environmental desolation, fragile relationships, the heat index during the summer of 2022, and social barriers.

Young adults have composed many of the better poems in the series. But this year the oft-acclaimed “poet laureate of Northeast Texas,” Joe Dan Boyd, again composed an unmatched poetic moment with his “The Dirt Road to Home.” As with baseball, the poem reached home in the end, both in the sense of winsomely evoking the region, and actually discussing what home meant. Boyd’s verses contained allusions to the continuing value of family and memory. But the work’s strategic use of the passive voice, its engagement with an impressive array of obsolete objects, songs and expressions, and the pivotal role it reserved for the words, ‘bygone’ and ‘long ago’ created a haunting ambience. The author’s home on the dirt road had no number, no sign, and today we imagine that its “battery-and-tube” powered radio, and its lamp powered by coal oil no longer work. Such a homestead today might not share a continuity to the living. The top student poem by Evan Sears alluded to the encroaching shadow of what to him constitutes the most complete environmental destruction of the countryside in Northeast Texas to date, the rise of solar farms with photovoltaic panels. At the same time as citizens of Franklin County, for example, have sought to restore the wonders of the older Daphne Prairie, powerful corporate projects to create energy have more completely terminated the free play of birds and flowers than monocultural agriculture or semi-rural housing developments.



Joe Dan Boyd of Wood County

The other winning poems lacked the critical energy of Sears’ environmentalism or the wondrous, reconceptualization of a lost past as exhibited by Boyd. Still, all exhibited grayer shades of ambivalence than the typical victors of the contest’s first-decade. Second-place Victoria Matiz’s “Nuestro Paisaje” as with Boyd’s poem had moments of friendship and warmth. The green pastures of Northeast Texas charm immigrants, and many long-term residents have welcomed newcomers “with open arms.” But an ethnic cleft remains. Our fingers “bleed from tending your rose bushes.” Young women from Mexico are welcomed to area sleepovers “only to sweep.” The first-place adult poem by AJ Chilson also alluded to a

kind of social wall, though in this case a weakening in the relationships of relatives. Third- and fourth-place student poems by Skylar Hodson and Maddy Smith acknowledged the wonders of the area’s outdoors, but also pivoted to consider nature’s limits. Hodson’s gaze into the nature of a fallen tree won points. Smith considered the wonders of the sun, only to retreat before its aberrant energy. Previous poems in the series have considered the summer screams of the area’s cicadas as bursts of enthusiasm. But for Smith, they became “deafening wails pleading for relief.”

For the fifth year, the poetry contest also featured a Northeast Texas image contest. Contestants tried to capture quintessential aspects of the regional scene. This year, honors students swept all three places. Skylar Fondren placed first with an exquisite Camp County sunset. Skylar Hodson became the only contestant to place in both contests with her portrait of her fallen tree. Michelle Calderon came in third with her picture of a Mount Pleasant Tiger Doll in flight.



Image Winners above: Michelle Calderon, Skylar Fondren and Skylar Hodson

Mount Pleasant Mayor, Tracy Craig, and a perennial officer of the Northeast Texas Writer’s Organization, NETWO, Jeannette McDermott, also spoke at the reading. Craig encouraged the students, and noted that he too had once attended NTCC. The college had served to enhance his political ambitions, and he then won the historic 2019 election in Mount Pleasant. McDermott shared information on the scope of NETWO’s activities, adding that it would soon share with NTCC a resolve to award yearly poetry prizes.

Once again, the NTCC Reading and poetry-image awards were made possible through a Whatley Employee Enhancement grant, and the patrons of Honors Northeast. This year’s contest was particularly beholden to help from Mr. and Mrs. Brad and Kristen Sears of Mount Vernon. Professor Mileah Hall of NTCC served as the judge of images, and Associate Vice

President, Anna Ingram, as well as professors Mandy Smith and Jennifer Myers served as poetry judges.

Some of the winning Poems and Images are shown below:

First Place Adult, Joe Dan Boyd, The Dirt Road:

THE DIRT ROAD TO HOME

Muddy it was in winter, the dirt road to my childhood home;
dusty it was in summer, from rich East Texas sandy loam.
In that bygone era, Wood County Road 4620 had no number, no sign,
spanning a distance of only two miles, linking FM 312 and FM 2869.

Strands of rusty barbed wire secured our pasture's gate
To wild indigo and bermudagrass as our cows congregate.
Tall and proud stood a majestic oak, ancient ere I was born:
Generations of welcome shade for our Jersey cows to adorn.

Nearby, the earthen relics of grandfather's storm house remain,
its post oak beams once defying cyclone, tornado, wind, rain.

Stark and unpainted was the architecture of that long-ago abode:
Absent of electricity, no indoor plumbing: A bourgeoisie implode!
Built by country carpenters of the rustic Nineteenth Century trade:
Virgin pine timber, balanced atop beam posts of bois d'arc grade.

A wood cook-stove in the kitchen, an open fireplace for winter heat,
coal-oil lamplight, battery-and-tube-powered radio: All now obsolete!

A hundred and fifty acres it was: The size of our diversified farm.
Green were our meadows and break-even was our financial norm.
Un-mechanized farming was our lot: No tractor power, only a team of mules:
Cotton for our cash, grain to feed our livestock: agriculture's old-school!

We made our own clothes, using pre-printed flour and feed sacks.
Chopped our own firewood, using a crosscut saw and double-bit ax.
Grew fields of broom corn and fashioned our own brooms.
Canned our juices, vegetables and meat to supply our dining rooms.

Our work day started early and we worked from 'can' to 'can't'.

We milked our cows: Sold surplus to a local cheese plant.
Bartered for our groceries with farm eggs and home-churned butter:
In that era, it was our normal way of life: No complaints to utter!

We sang the old songs and made our own music in that bygone day:
"Pretty Redwing," "You Are My Sunshine" and "My Darling Nellie Gray."

Poochie, dog love of my life, constant companion: Always at my side:
Saddest day of my young life, November 13, 1948: Poochie died!

A home is not fashioned of lumber, furniture or defined by location.
A lot of living...and a lot of loving...required in unique combination.

If home is truly where the heart is, it's fair to claim that we all win.
And, yes, when you HAVE to go back home, they do HAVE to let you in!

First Place Student, Evan Sears:
"Unknowing, The Evolution of Daphne Prairie"

"Unknowing"
The Evolution of Daphne Prairie

Six thousand acres of flat prairie land,
Soon to be known as Northeast Texas.
No trees, rolling hills, and game aplenty,
A perfect place to start a home.
The deer were many, the birds blocked the sun,
Monarch butterflies laid eggs on the native milkweed.
The settlers knew that this was good,
Unknowing what their descendants would do.

The settlers made a living here,
A haven for families moving west.
They called it Daphne Prairie,
Once home to the Caddo Indians.
The Old Indian highway was the only path through,
Using rose bushes and bent trees to point the way.
The Caddo always knew that this was good,
Unknowing what the next generations would do.

A century later, and the land is ranched,
An ideal place to raise cattle.
Plenty of land for livestock to roam,
No hiding for a predator on the prowl.
The cowboys were pleased with their ranches,
The families, pleased with their new home.
They all knew that this was good,
Unknowing what the future would hold.

Nuestro Paisaje

Nuestro Paisaje ("These Green Pastures")

NE Texas Poem Entry By Victoria Matiz

For every crevice and every fissure,
In every nook and every corner,
There is a story that has written itself within this town

Your concrete foundation has forgiven our burdens;
Your green pastures have welcomed us with open arms

It is on this land that we were given opportunity;
You spared us a second chance when our motherland could not

Your people taught us to soften our tongues;
To calm the rapid fire that is our native language

They fed us ladles of chili, glass cups full of the sweetest tea;
Quickly we learned to make peach cobbler and pecan pie

Your culture pulsing so smoothly within your veins;
Your Stetson resting on your head like the cowboys on TV

We pick your bluebonnets on field trips and listen to folk lyrics on the way home;
We swim in Lake Bob Sandlin's waters in the summer and visit Tyler's Rose Garden in the spring

Your beauty never fails to amaze us, Texas, yet you so often overlook ours.

Our men come home with callused feet and bled dry fingers from tending to your rose bushes;
Their backs burnt and bent from maintaining your pastures green

Our women are welcomed to sleepover if it is only to sweep your floors and cook your meals;
Leaving their children home to feed extra mouths that are not their own

We are grateful for the fruits your people have given us;
But we will never forget the labor it took to grow our own

These green pastures have provided us the foundation for which we have built a home on;
Yet its beauty has always and will continue to be maintained by our people.

Third Place: Skylar Hodson
"Nature's Invitation"

Nature's Invitation

I walk along the path
And round a corner,
My sight beholds a new wonder.

Rays of sunlight shine upon it,
Nature's invitation beckons me forth.

A fallen tree, one of many in Lake Bob Sandlin.
But this one is different.

My gaze is drawn to the bark,
Worn away by so many others who sat here,
Accepting nature's invitation.

For a moment I ponder
How many others have been here.
Alike or different,
This space now connects us.

The thought runs through my mind as fast as a river's current.
Like a stone in the water, it settles,
And I move on.

Fourth Place, Maddy Smith
The Nights of Days

The Nights of Days

I will never forget your summer days,
Always brimming with a cheerful brightness,
Illuminating all that is good in the world every morning,
Though slowly becoming more aggressive the longer it stared.
The once dazzling glaze,
Now an unsettling glare resting on all,
Causing everything to wilt and writhe in its presence.
The relentless ballad of the cicadas,
Transforms into a deafening wail pleading for relief from the loathsome heat.
The once green-complected plane,
Now a desecrated wasteland wavering in the unbearable warmth.

But it will always be your summer nights that I cherish.
An ever-waning eye gazing at me through all of the day's destruction,
Coming to revive all that had been so devastatingly scorched.
The lull of assembled crickets,
Soothing the now brown-seared land with their chorus,
Forgiving the sky for its crude actions mere hours before.
The hushed whisper of a breeze,
Caressing the trees with welcomed tenderness, causing them to shiver.
The gentle flicker of fireflies,
Proving that not all light is fierce and threatening.

The night always reminds me that all will be better,

Even when the day comes once more,
To burden all with its unbearable stare.
Though all of the night's remedies will dissolve at the first ray of light,
I know the night will always return,
To grace me once more with its soft-glowing regard.

First Place Image, Skylar Fondren

Sunset on a Camp County Country Road



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