

Odes to the Majestic and Natural: An Upbeat Objectivism Returns to the Northeast Texas Poetry Reading



2023 Student Winners of the Northeast Texas Poetry Contest, First through Fourth, Michelle Calderon, Maddy Smith, Morgan Thrapp, and Odalys Adame. Photo courtesy of Mandy Smith and the [Eagle](#)

Are sprawling urban ghettos, filled with homeless people, the real prisons of America? Does half of the American population lack the savings to cover a \$1,000 emergency payment? Those statements might be true, and in the last three years of the Northeast Texas Poetry Reading, they were the kind of statements to be provocative enough to consider. But the sixteenth annual Northeast Texas Poetry Reading, held in the foyer of the Whatley Center for the Performing Arts on 8 September swerved away from social concerns and ennui. Financed for the second year in a row by **Brad and Krisan Sears** of Mount Vernon, the sixteenth reading more resembled the positivity of earlier, pre-COVID readings. Winning contestants showed an affinity for the region's semi-rural ambience, star-spangled nightscapes, and wind-awakened wildflowers, coasting before radiant sunsets.

Only one of the submitted poems in this year's contest alluded to social criticism. Negativity issues relating to COVID, and health anxiety, were almost absent. The judges, in general found more subjectivist poems, relating to individual challenges, less captivating and artistic. A boundless regional embrace with heaven, as alluded to in **Michelle Calderon's** winning poem, became a keynote.



*Student Winner Michelle Calderon with Jennifer Sparks, NTCC Instructor of English and poetry judge.
Photo courtesy of Mandy Smith and the [Eagle](#)*

‘Area Code 903—this is the place you want to be!’ Student poet **Halea Ledezma** summarized the optimistic current in this year's poems. First-place student-poet, **Michelle Calderon** won \$400 for her verbalized reverie of the “Texas Sky.” The college's Russell-Mowery Scholar expressed her enchantment for unsullied horizons, “boundless and free,” expressing the dreams of many, moments of glee. Second-place student poet, **Maddy Smith**, the college's Winkle Scholar, also focused on the sky, enjoying the beauty of “pillowy clouds that dance into shapes.” Third (\$200) and Fourth (\$100) places also went to honors students, **Morgan Thrapp**, and **Odalys Adame**, who shifted the focus from the heavens to earth. Thrapp like **Dr. Miles Young**, one of the speakers, found delight in signs of home, in this case, the resolute verticality of pine trees. Adame shifted the focus to the pastures of Northeast Texas, which although filled

with “stubborn” greens, change resolutely as spring wildflowers pass to tints of brown, and white in the autumn.



Speaker David Abernathy, Mayor of Pittsburg, Texas, with Jennifer Sparks and Dr. Andrew Yox Looking On. Photo courtesy of Mandy Smith and the [Eagle](#)

The speakers for the sixteenth annual reading also emphasized positive regional themes. **Mayor David Abernathy** of Pittsburg recounted anomalies in the history of a town he and his father, D.H., have served continuously in leadership roles since the 1950s. From the “Curley-Pine” panels of the Carson House (now a B&B) to its facsimile of the Ezekiel Airship, Pittsburg maintains a recognizable past which lends itself to a personable present. **Dr. Miles Young**, NTCC Dean of Workforce, from Morris County, noted that when he lived in Nashville, no one was from Nashville. There is still a strong emotional current, whenever one recognizes the signs of one’s native country.

The adult poet winners again this year came from an active poetry society that meets in Winnsboro. **Joe Dan Boyd**, acclaimed as “Poet Laureate of Northeast Texas,” won \$100 and the adult division for the fourth time. Boyd was a Philadelphia journalist for forty years who returned to his native Wood County after retiring. Boyd depicted the meeting of his parents, which he described as a polar encounter, of bad boy, and a good girl, “Dangerous Dan,” and adorable Dolly. Though the darkest poem among the winners, Boyd’s remarkable evocation of the Great Depression years--“eleven-cent cotton, and forty-cent meat; how in the world can a poor man eat!”—allowed the present to stand out as more hopeful and renewed era. Somehow, through wild historical circumstances, and poverty, the past bequeathed to Boyd a fulfilling life. **A. J. Chilson**, again the second-place winner, depicted his own struggle with powerful expectations that would have relegated him to a marginal existence. Again, the implication lingered, that the American Dream had been realized, that life in this region is accommodating and tolerant.



Adult Winners: Joe Dan Boyd, and A. J. Chilson
Photo courtesy of Mandy Smith and the [Eagle](#)

NTCC's Dr. Jerry Wesson Scholar, **Monse Rivero**, won \$70 and first place in the image division with one of the most iconic images of NTCC in history. Her "Three Flags over NTCC" captured a noctilucent cloud over the Whatley Center. Rivero, an inveterate worker in the dorms and for student services, noted that she snaps pictures wherever she goes, and has very much appreciated being able to stay in an NTCC dorm. **Skylar Hodson** placed among the image winners for the second year in this contest, featuring an old Southern standby, a road flanked by rows of overhanging trees. However, in Hodson's image, there is no great colonnaded home at the end of the trail, simply a vanishing point that leads in the direction of "home." Finally, **Alison Majors**, another honors student, provided an image of an old automobile. In the spirit of Carhenge in Nebraska, or Cadillac Ranch in Amarillo, the old family Mustang has embedded itself into the landscape and memories of her family.



Monse Rivero's "Three Flags Over NTCC"

In addition to Brad and Krisan Sears who again covered the bulk of the prize money, for student poets, the reading was beholden to many. Once again, the event was made possible through a Whatley Employee Enhancement Fund grant, and the patrons of Honors Northeast. The NTCC business office and administrative personnel enabled the awards to again be in cash, and to be accompanied by framed certificates. **NTCC Vice President, Anna Ingram, as well as professors Mandy Smith and Jennifer Myers** served as poetry judges. **Professor Mileah Hall** of NTCC served as the judge of the image portion of the reading.

Winning Poems and Images are shown below:

Michelle Calderon, First Place Student
Under the Texas Sky



Under the Texas Sky

In Texas' boundless embrace, where earth meets sky,
A canvas unfolds, so majestic and high.
With colors bold, a symphony of hues,
The Texas sky, covered in bluebonnet blues.

Morning's blush, a gentle rose,
Beautyberry pink, the world it shows.

Golden cedars like liquid gold,
Painting the clouds in stories untold.

The sun, a blazing orb of golden fire,
Like Southern sugar maple, climbing higher,
Spilling warmth and light on hills and plains,
A radiant beauty that forever reigns.

The sun descends in a fiery display,
Oranges and reds of crossvine in a grand ballet.
The horizon's kiss, a tender embrace,
As the day takes leave with gentle grace.

Luminous stars appear, each one aglow,
A sprinkle of brilliance, a celestial show.
This vast expanse, an eternal scope,
Always imbued with seemingly endless hope.

In the quiet of night, a celestial choir,
The cosmos ablaze, a cosmic fire.
A tapestry of stars, a dazzling array,
A reminder of beauty that won't fade away.

On stormy days, the sky unleashes might,
Rolling thunder echoes with raw delight.
Torrential rain paints patterns in the air,
Cleansing the land with each descending tear.

Yet even in the tempestuous storm,
The Texas sky still holds its powerful form.
Above the chaos, a glimpse of azure hue,
A reminder that dreams can still come true.

Oh, Texas sky, so boundless and free,

You hold the dreams of many, can't you see?
You inspire us to hope, to dream, to cease,
To embrace your beauty and find eternal peace.

So let us gaze upon your canvas wide,
And feel the depths of emotions amplified.
The Texas sky, a poet's muse, it seems,
Awakening our souls, igniting our dreams.

Maddy Smith, Second Place Student
Our Texas Sky

Nothing compares to the Texas sky.

From its glowing sunrise,
Soft with pink clouds lacing the horizon
And golden rays ripening the morning with all it touches,
Warming everything with gentle brushes of light.

From its radiant noon,
Bright and blue, framed by our loved land below.
Full of pillowy clouds that dance into shapes as they pass by,
Hoping to entertain those who even notice.

From its vibrant sunset,
Striped with blazing oranges and deep violets.
Giving a final performance filled with bold blasts of color,
Still alight with the heat of the sun's amber gaze.

From its inky night,
That is guarded by the moon's glassy eye.
Tucking in the countryside under its star-speckled blanket
And waking the few crickets that lull us to sleep.

Nothing compares to our Texas sky
And its beautiful reminders of what Texas is to us.

Morgan Thrapp, Third Place Student
Pines

Planted by man tended by the mother
nurtured by the heat and toughened by the cold
Pines that stand tall and old what have you seen
Did you see the small houses get bigger
And the small town grow larger
Did you see people come
and did you see their children leave
Have you seen the boy grow from young to old
The one that played among and around you
The one moving into denser forests know
And
do you watch him now
from your high vantage point
as he moves through the forest
like he used to when he played among you
For this boy has grown strong because of you
and he stands tall like you do now
But did you see the girl in the White flower dress
She did not grow up around you but she has enjoyed being with you

When she leaves she hates to see you leave too
for when you leave the roadside it means she has left home
And she can't wait to be surrounded by you again
But she and the boy have moved into the deeper forest
And they both hope to see you again atop that hill when they return home
because home are where the pines are

Odalys Adame. Fourth Place Student
Changes

a spring meadow is a common sight
here in the smallest town of delights
hidden between the cracks of daylight
lies the precious jewels of life

years of spring and summer i've seen
and not a single one without blues and greens
the smell of citrus fills the air
from the wildflowers that grow with care

times have changed and so have we
yet the colors are more stubborn than thee
the fields are filled with the earth's art
the pigment bright and strong
one us humans could never create

the seasons change and color dries
but a new found feeling warms the heart
a chilly breeze and orange hue
covers the town for a different view

and when the leaves start to fall
a different painting the earth calls
white is scattered across the streets
while green is no longer to be seen

the months are long and dark
but the sound of love sings in the air

as Christmas fills the downtown square
laughter and family is special here
a secret haven for those we hold dear

while we cannot make the flowers grow
we shoot our fire and compel our sky to glow
time ticks and the cold sleeps
as the icy trees begin to weep
it marks another year to contend
it's time for the painter to paint again

Joe Dan Boyd, First Place Adult
Love at a Northeast Texas Ice Cream Social



Their names were Dolly and Dan,

20th Century Children they were,

with roots in Wood County land;

Seven years separated their dates of birth.

They were my parents and never should have met:

Age difference alone should have kept them apart.
She was my family's baby, beauty, dark-eyed brunette,
With protection from brothers far off the chart.

Times were hard, they came of age
with the New Deal of President FDR.
Depression rampant on every news page:
Work and wages were rarest of the rare.

Dolly was still in Winnsboro High School,
To which she walked three miles each way:
There, she was a scholar and a cool
basketball player, first in her family to graduate.

A "social" was the "mixer" of that cultural paradigm,
held at host homes with open invitations to any and all.
Dolly hosted ice cream supper socials in summertime,
at least one of which attracted "Dangerous Dan" Boyd.

Older than Dolly by those seven years,
Dan was known for his short fuse:
Willing to fight with his fists, hard to scare,

even willing to take a drink or two.

It was Bad Boy meeting Good Girl
on a hot summer northeast Texas eve.

Dolly danced the Charleston whirl
as Dan came courting, heart on his sleeve.

From attractions of opposites and hopes,
during a summer of ice cream socials, hit and miss,

Dolly and Dan soon decided to elope
across the line to Arkansas for wedded bliss.

Kept secret until Dolly's high school senior year:

Her 1932 diploma revealed a married name,
Dan hitched freight rails to West Texas: hobo on boxcar.
His cotton-picking wages posted for Dolly to claim.

Their abundant differences may help explain
this unlikely meeting, marriage and bearing of offspring fruit,
with little or no semblance of purpose or plan:
Life partners are often chosen with no rules absolute.

Their first child, Nelda June, died very young,

without ever having her picture made.

For Dolly that was a soul song left unsung:
Never again likely became her photo crusade.

Nineteen Thirty Four, The year I was born:

"Eleven-cent cotton and forty-cent meat,
how in the world can a poor man eat?":

Song lyrics that sent Dan to FDR's Civilian Conservation Corps,
his CCC camp in Colorado, far from home.

In the harsh winter of Nineteen Thirty Six,
Dolly was pregnant again at the Tinney Home Place,
where pneumonia clouded Dolly's health matrix
For which Dan was granted a furlough from his CCC base.

But Dan contracted the pneumonia as well,
before Dolly gave birth to my younger brother.
Dolly was gone in just seven days: death's knell,
preceding Dan's own passing by eighteen months.

Their names were Dolly and Dan:
Came of age and died during times hard-pressed.

Their roots were firmly in the land
of Northeast Texas where both are laid to rest.

A. J. Chilson, 2nd Place Poet

No One Thought

No one thought I could attend classes,
Make good friends, or get educated;
No one thought I would be a poet,
Win at slams, or get publicated;
No one thought employment was to be,
And that I would hold onto a job;
No one thought having an apartment
Was possible, that I would be robbed
Of so much, due to a circumstance
That impacted me as a young boy,
And that the most I would ever have
Were guidance people, and a few toys.

Oh, I've got quite a few toys, all right;
They're called children's books, and the reward?
I wrote them; I published them; and now,
One of those books has won an award!
So many awesome things no one thought
Would come to me has, well, come to me;
And by the way, I don't require
Babysitters wherever I'd be.
No, I go about my daily life,
Doing the things that need to be done,
All on my own, never complaining,

Always trying to be the best son.



Image Winners: Skylar Hodson, 2nd, Alison Majors 3rd, and Monse Rivero, 1st

Monse Rivero, First Place Image. See Above.

**Skylar Hodson, Second Place Image
The Road Home**



Alison Majors
Overgrown



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