

Eleventh Annual Poetry Reading Features Diverse Viewpoints about Northeast Texas



The Eleventh Annual Northeast Texas Poetry Reading at the Whatley Foyer of Northeast Texas Community College on 7 September manifested a noticeable generational divide. With the topic, “Northeast Texas,” the adults delved into nostalgia, and the youth, for the most part, into nature. The Reading featured two of the highest scoring adult poems in the history of the series, as well as the first Northeast Texas image winners, and the stories of three inspirational Northeast Texans—Barbara Conrad, Bill Ratliff, James Whatley, told by Mount Pleasant City Attorney, Kerry Wootten.

The poetry competition was very intense in the adult division this year, as a former Dallas-and-Philadelphia journalist as well as the “Laureate of Northeast Texas” took the top places. The top-ranked poem in the history of the eleven-year series, came this year with Angela Wylie’s “The Trunk.” It was a masterpiece of imagination, seeking to decipher the meaning of a great box left in an old barn, “festooned with spider webs in a cloak of dust laden gauze.” Wylie, a special education teacher in Winnsboro, has now won the adult division of this contest, in 2009, 2011, 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018. The former journalist, Joe Dan Boyd, was also right in the forefront with his poem, “To Kill a Mockingbird: Requiem and Redemption.” It was a story of a boy with a slingshot, of a thrill that cascaded into guilt, and of the tears and prayers that attended the ad hoc funeral of his prey.

Hayden Duncan won \$300 and the student division with a series of poignant outdoor images and a buildup of the refrain, “That’s Northeast Texas to Me.” It was a poem of rare simplicity and perception, detailing a life that proceeds from the “vicious [summer] sun” to the “stars [that] sparkle without a sound.” Duncan was homeschooled, and his parents are Curtis and Shelly of Pittsburg. Karla Fuentes, from Winnsboro, wrote perhaps the most empathic student poem in the history of the series, describing the life of her former calculus teacher. Significantly it too was nostalgic in the vein of the adult poems. Mercedes Collins of Daingerfield and Raegan Davis of Mount Pleasant placed third and fourth, and they again excelled with natural images in the poems, “A Little South of Oklahoma,” and “Texas.”

In the contest’s first image contest, Madison Lee Blood’s “My Home Sweet Home,” placed first. Her photograph taken in Camp County featured a quintessentially Texas



landscape, with a Texas flag painted on a wooden fence, pastures, and a rainbow. Verania Leyva Garcia placed second with a sunset by a water tower in Mount Pleasant, and Daniel Landaverde place third, exhibiting the transformation of a Winfield coal mine.

The stability of the contest and reading over the years has been greatly enhanced by the contributions and support of the three poetry judges of NTCC, Dr. Chuck Hamilton,

Professor of English, Anna Ingram, Dean of Distance Education and Director of Title V, and Jim Swann, Professor of Spanish. This year, Dr. Hamilton served as host of the Reading.

Dr. Andrew P. Yox, Honors Director, thanked the donors of Honors Northeast who have insured the longevity of the series. Yox remarked that “this contest more than others shocked a number of promising adult and student writers who in asking for feedback, believed they had fared much better in the ratings than was actually the case.”

A videotape of the entire Reading with subtitles can be accessed on the web at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xJaj0v6EIII>> . Poems of the winners of this year’s poetry contest as well as those of the contests dating back to 2008 can be found on the Honors Northeast website at <www.ntcc.edu/honorspoems>.

The winners of the poetry contest, and their poems also appear below:



The Trunk

By Angela Wylie

Rectangle shaped covered in worn metal ridges
Ends holding broken cracked leather handles
The trunk sits in the barn covered by years of neglect
Festooned with spider webs in a cloak of dust laden gauze
Rusted hinges complain as the lid is lifted with respect
Spiders scurry away from movement and light
And the interior is revealed

Faded wallpaper covers the inside
Faintly flaking away into nothingness

The top shelf is intact built to last
Worn on the edges but whole
Holding memories from the past
A delicate faded fold of dark blue cloth revealed
A small hat, so very small so hard to imagine it being worn

A stiffened leather purse covered by the patina of time
The brass clasp gives and opens to nothing
What did it once hold in the dark depth?
Silver coins? World War II ration coupons
When the world was ablaze with war and wept
The cloth gently lifted becomes a delicate silk dress
The silk is decayed and the material falls away from seams

A dress that once a young woman wore
On a Christmas Eve as she stood beside her love
In a pastor's parlor and became his wife.
Having little but each other they started out
Together in the time of depression and strife
Side by side the teacher and the farmer
Made a tender new life

The trunk has travelled to East Texas from Alabama
Jousting in a wagon beside a crate of chickens

A milk cow tethered and plodding along at her best.
A team of mules straining and sweating their leather harness dark brown
As they pull the wagon and the farmers west
Survivors leaving behind a broken land and broken people
Leaving behind drought and pain

Leaving iron ore gravestones with names
Grievingly deeply scratched into them
Barely legible now, unvisited and alone
Saying simply a name – Mary- no last name
Graves and names lost amidst crumbled stone
The Civil war behind them
A new future before them,

They headed West

East Texas was settled by those strong people
People looking for a new life
Farmers from Alabama and Mississippi
Leaving labored worn land and weary strife
Where even peas would not grow
Going to a new land holding the promise of plenty

East Texas - the promised land
The land where peas did grow
Were cotton and strawberries grew as well
Where the young woman raised a family with her man
Working hard all of her life picking cotton to sell
Digging out thistles in the meadow
Riding a tractor for hours

Stealing time to go fishing,
Spending indoor time quilting
Caring for elder kin without pause
She gently laid her blue silk wedding dress in the old trunk
And closed the lid on the girl that once was
Secreting her treasures in the sturdy metal box
As she became a woman of the earth



To Kill A Mockingbird: Requiem and Redemption

By Joe Dan Boyd

A chinaberry tree canopy, glossy in full leaf,
oval-shaped, thinly veined, sharply tipped,
serrated leaves: Each like the blade of a knife;
yet, feathery soft, satiny, gently wind-whipped.

Dense and thick as dark sand in a summer whirlwind,
the gathered leaves yielded welcome song and shade:

Like a giant orb, a complete coverlet of green
obscuring the tree's branches, entirely overlaid.

A hushed rustle of soft, leafy sound,
as into that dark hole of absent light:
Fluttering on unexpected wings of morning,
came the lone mockingbird in solitary flight.

Vanishing into the thick cover of lush leaf,
the bird came to rest somewhere inside.
No sound betrayed its lonely presence:
There was everywhere, yet nowhere, to hide.

The bird neither saw nor sensed the hunter,
a mere boy, armed with stone and sling:
The smooth pebble, powered by rubber strands,
broke the bird's stout heart: death's instant sting.

The hunter's shock was sudden and sharp:
Filled with remorse, guilt and intense grief.
As he retrieved the fallen, innocent bird,
flowing tears were his only source of relief.

With the help of his brother, plans took shape,
to find a suitable mourning box and resting site.
Soon reserved: A small spot under the tree,
a hole to fill with prey and a prayer, contrite.

Fallen to fresh earth, now covering the bird:
Its song eternally silenced, flight forever stilled.
But with the spoken words of repentance, perhaps:
The hunter's redemption may be divinely willed.



That's Northeast Texas to Me

Hayden Duncan

Smell of smoke from a fire burning,
Sat with friends all around,
The night vibrant and alive with our singing,
As the stars sparkle above without a sound
That's Northeast Texas to Me
Bright vicious sun beating down,
Sweat dripping from a workers hair,
Surrounded by the noise of a small town,
as a soft breeze blows softly through the air
That's Northeast Texas to Me
Rolling hills on the horizon,
Cows graze peacefully on the plain
The land peaceful in the summer season,
As dark clouds threaten rain
That's Northeast Texas to Me
Soft glow of a mother's touch,
Kids draped in their parents arms,
Father reading from the book in his clutch,
As evening passes to night
That's Northeast Texas to Me



The Land of My Fathers

Karla Fuentes

Today I rise alone, but surrounded by love.
I rise long before the crack of dawn knowing all too well I won't be back till long
after nightfall.
I don't complain, for this is the life I chose, the life my father chose, and the life I
hope my son will choose.

As I walk out the chipped wooden door, I hear its soft creak so familiar to my ears.
It fills my mind with memories and my eyes with tears.
My father used to be the cause of this noise, and now I take his place.

The warm summer air brushes against my skin carrying the fragrance of our freshly
cut hay along with the subtle scent of manure.
I inhale deeply not necessarily to fill my lungs, but to somehow fill this hollow left in
my heart—I'm flooded with memories.
Every day, without fail, my father would walk through this green, lush land to the
weary looking barn and to milk the cows.
He would plow the moist heavy dirt, seed the rows, and feed the farm's livestock.

Ever since I could recall, my father never once took a day off, but that isn't to say he never made time for his family.

On the contrary, he was a man of faith—a preacher at our local Christian church. He put in countless hours on our farm, late nights in school board meetings, yet he always managed to be right there when he was needed most.

The harsh conditions of the East Texas land made his exterior callous, but it was the faded words written on the fragile, weathered, yellow pages of his Bible that kept warmth in his heart.

His handshakes were firm, his tone strong, his laugh hearty, and his smile genuine as well as uplifting.

This close-knit community gave him a family, and this rich, bountiful land allowed him to provide for that family.

Although seemingly uncompromising at times, this land has always been plentiful. He learned to love it just like his father did—just as I have.

I stand here alone, among the flat, grassy plains, breathing in the memories of his past while watching his same sun rise.

I feel the seed of his love sown into this land and, in that same moment subtle, warm, prideful tears flow slowly down my cheeks.

I am alone, but surrounded by love.



A Little South of Oklahoma

By Mercedes Collins

Faded blue denim blend into the sky that can quickly change,
into rolling clouds of smoke whose tears beat against the world below.

Bahia grass grows tall and wild, dancing with the wind,
rising again and again no matter how many times it is cut down.

Trees of pine rise as if to embrace the heavens,
Their needles rain down to form a thick blanket on to the earth underneath.

Thundering waves of land create the rolling country side,
Pastures, country houses, and small towns litter the knolls of North East Texas.

Seas of grass separated only by strands of braided wire on metal post,
An array of cows and a splash of other animals call the plots of land home.

Decent amounts of air and earth separate neighbors,
Structures composed of wood or brick form single or double story houses.

Small towns sprout up like flowers in between concrete,
Veins of roads create the only ways to the outside world.

It might seem like a simple place,
To me as well as many others it is the place we call home.



Texas

By Raegan Davis

Where stillness and silence make the earth seem like its' holding its' breath.

Where the sunset lights the sky on fire with colors of orange, red, and yellow.

Where the sudden eruption of cheers slices the silence like a knife to kick-off Friday night lights all over Texas.

Texas

Where a pigskin oval brings citizens from every variety of background together cheering on the hometown high school football team.

Where blood, sweat, tears, and heart are embedded into every player and blade of grass on the field.

Where the bands' blaring fight song is a battle cry of encouragement as if the players were soldiers at war.

Texas

Where family portraits are taken in fields of wildflowers and senior pictures must include the beautiful bluebonnets.

Where the strength of a family comes from the love between them and the memories they make.

Where the smell of mom's hot, homecooked dinner beckons children in from playing outside.

Texas

Where yes ma'ams, no ma'ams, yes sirs, and no sirs are instilled in every child at a young age.

Where young gentlemen are taught to work and provide for the family, and young ladies are taught to take care of the house and children.

Where the undeniable sound of a child's cry during the preacher's sermon is happy music as it brings hope for the future.

Texas

Where weather is unpredictable, and shorts are worn ten months of the year.

Where summer break is spent at the lake with friends from sunup to sundown.

Where neighbors are friends and friends are family.

Texas is home

And this is what it means to me.

