

Winners of the 2020 Northeast Texas Poetry Contest



Above: Katelyn Lester, Nallely Gutierrez, Hilda Rodriguez, and Carolina Alcocer-Salas

The thirteenth annual Northeast Texas Poetry Reading occurred in an NTCC-sponsored Zoom Room, 4 September 2020. The student and adult, upper-division winners were also announced. **Katelyn Marie (Cox) Lester**, Northeast Texas Community College’s third Dr. Jerry Wesson Scholar won \$400 and placed first among students with a poem that featured a dialogue between two State-of-Texas symbols, the pecan and the mockingbird. **Nallely Gutierrez**, an entering Presidential Scholar from Mount Vernon placed second, winning \$300 with a poem entitled “Las Manos de un Trabajador.” Third- and fourth-places also went to freshmen honors students. **Hilda Rodriguez** won \$200 for reading her poem, “Creo.” **Carolina Alcocer-Salas** won \$100 for her poem, “Mood Swings.”



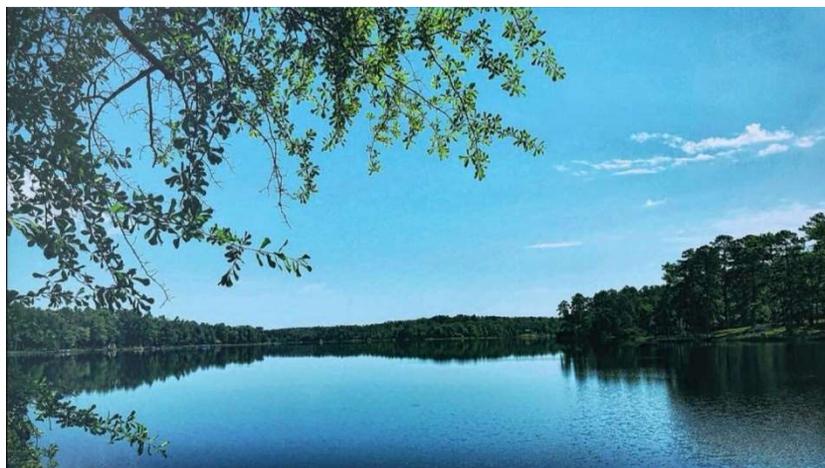
Winning Upper Division Poet Joe Dan Boyd

In the upper division, **Joe Dan Boyd** from Winnsboro again appeared in the winner's circle, now for the third straight year. The former East-Coast journalist's winning, \$100 poem, "Pandemic in Northeast Texas: Thanatopsis Revisited 2020," was a brilliant summary of the astonishment, new-found sobriety and accommodations that characterized the local response to the coronavirus. **Jennifer Buckley's** "Hope for America," an interrogatory poem, took second place, and also attested to an introspection awakened by recent events.

The contest also featured the third Northeast Texas Image Contest. Whereas the poem rubric challenged authors to reflect the life, culture, or history of Northeast Texas, the photographers had to capture winsome sights in the area of Texas between the Red and Sabine rivers. This year, the winners in this category located scenes of especial grandeur. In first place in this category, winning \$70, was James Buckley's "Sunrise over a Wood County Lake."



In second place, winning \$20 below, was Hannah Barnes' photograph of a Cass County lake:



Finally in third place, winning \$10 was Cade Bennett's view of an evening sky in Morris County.



Two novel developments in this year's poetry contest related to both the pandemic, and the rise of top poems that included fragments of the Spanish language. In Joe Dan Boyd's words, the pandemic came to us, "invisible as a China breeze," on "little cat's feet." For some, it caused "sorrow" . . . "comforted only by the Word." Hilda Rodriguez's third-place poem described the onslaught of COVID-19 in her own family: Her parents had "worked the line" at Pilgrim's. They were called "essential workers." But "they got COVID, we all got COVID. . . . still in all ways we say with no fuss: we must . . . "In God we trust." At the same time a few poems reflected the richness of expressions in the Spanish language. With Hispanics about to become the largest ethnic group in Texas in 2022, the Northeast Texas Poetry contest for the first time included some remarkably impassioned poems from a Hispanic perspective, with Spanish phrases to heighten the intensity. One poem that wowed all the judges was the poem by Nallely Gutierrez about the hands of her father, who has had a series of outdoor jobs in Northeast Texas.

They have bled. They have been bruised.

They have been blistered. They have brought blessings upon this family.

Que Dios te cuide. May God take care of you,

As those same hands make the sign of the cross.

The judges, which for poetry included NTCC Associate Vice President, Anna Ingram, Professors Mandy Smith and Jim Swann, and for the images, Art Professor Debbie Strong, dismissed many entries this year as subpar. But the top poems and images achieved some of the best scores of the contest's history. Notable in the student category were two startlingly imaginative poems: the "Texas Symbol Love Affair" by Katelyn Lester, and "Mood Swings" by Carolina Alcocer-Salas. Lester's work pulsates with a spirit of love awakened as the mockingbird and pecan tree discover the remarkable qualities of the other. The verbal economy of this poem's expressiveness, and emotional power in the interplay of its words mark it as one of paragon works in the series of these contests. Alcocer-Salas, meanwhile, conflated the feelings of a love affair with attitudes toward local weather patterns. Rapturous happiness gives way to rage, and a "gentle bright light," becomes a "lustrous sage."

This year, Winnsboro again was overrepresented in the winner's circle. It provided the contest's highest number of top contributors as Joe Dan Boyd, and James and Jennifer Buckley all hail from Wood County. Katelyn Lester and Nallely Gutierrez both reside in Mount Vernon. Hilda Rodriguez is a graduate of Mount Pleasant High School, and Carolina Alcocer-Salas, of Chapel Hill. Hannah Barnes hails from Marietta, and Cade Bennett from Naples.

The winning poems of previous years can be viewed at <www.ntcc.edu/honorspoems>.

The text of the poems are provided below:



Katelyn Lester

Texas Symbol Love Affair

The Pecan speaks:

Fly to me, my little bird
Adorn me
Crown me with your smoky figure
Haunt my being by sun and by moon.
When you go, I cannot follow
Rob me not of your nearness
Flutter, return, I ache in your absence.

The Mockingbird replies:

My shade, my nest
A balm against the bitter heat
I shelter in your tresses
And arise early for your closeness.
Your embrace is strong and sure
Like the roots that run deep beneath,
Run into me.

Pecan rhapsodizes:

My lover speaks in silvery song
Her words a sweet refrain.
Hold still, listen close,
Her throat a garden spring.
Rejoice in the melody,
Bathe my boughs in the heavenly notes.

Mockingbird closes:

I blush in your adoration

A welcome warmth in spite of the fever
This land washes us in.
A kiss of honey, of butter,
Every taste a delicate reminder
He remains mine, and I am always his.



Nallely Gutierrez

Las Manos de un Trabajador

Those hands that you may see,
Those palms that you may feel,
They bear with them so much.
Behind every callus, every scar
Every scratch and every line,
There is a story.
A story that not everyone knows.
A story of a hardworking, hispanic man---a son, a brother, and a father.
From feeling the fresh, early morning breeze
to wiping off the sweat on his forehead,
Those hands have felt it all.
The rays of the hot, blazing, Northeast Texas sun;

The mildew that forms on the grass in the fields;
The smoothness of cattle hides as they try to tame the animal;
The roughness of the barbed wire fences that line the ranch;
Those hands have felt it all.
From driving a bright blue, New Holland tractor under the Texas sky
to holding the hand of a loved one,
Those hands have done it all.
Those hands have helped plow and plant fields;
Fields that stretch for miles on the rolling Texas landscape.
Those hands have helped bring food to a table;
A table where a family gathers to feast
on the riches those hands have provided.
Those hands have done it all.
They have bled.
They have been bruised.
They have been blistered.
They have brought blessings upon this family.
“Que dios te cuide.”
May God take care of you,
As those same hands make the sign of the cross.
No matter how rough they may get
Or how tired they may be,
Those hands that you see are
Las manos de un trabajador.



Hilda Rodriguez

Creo

Got here in 01.

Out of the Mexican sun.

With shades of ambition,

A brand new ethnic edition!

Couldn't dictate where we would reside.

Only God would provide.

But we came to Northeast Texas!

Here we are.

We are following our star.

Creo. I believe. Therefore here I am!

Haven't thought of leaving

To the green pastures and still, clear waters cleaving

Great old Lone Star, in you believing.

We moved around a bit

Life got painful. We couldn't quit.

My parents, working at Pilgrim's couldn't make time for prayer.

Hence:

They got covid.

We all got covid.

Our great Savior has disciplined us.

That firm hand opened our eyes.

Still and in all ways, we say with no fuss:

We must. . . .

"In God We Trust."

Now maybe we are through

With the Flu.

And better for it?

Behold, mothers call the shots in *La Familia*.

And grandmothers hold the blessing,

And they all said:

En Dios Confía!

And so here we are, alive.

Shall we be deprived?

My parents were called “essential workers.”

While others stayed home and bickered

Their breath of life flickered.

They had worked the line

Their tired body aching

Their own safety breaking . . .

But the line was never problema alguna

In the whole scheme of our fortuna

Everyone has to eat.

And keep the beat.

Why not help.

Without a whelp.

We kept working

HAVE WE EARNED YOUR RESPECT?

O standoffish state

We have tolerated your hate

Here we are.

We are following our star.

Creo. I believe. Therefore here I am!

Haven't thought of leaving
In you O Hostile State, still believing.



Carolina Alcocer-Salas

Mood Swings

Your early morning smile is breathtaking
You are a sweet gentle bright light in my day
At noon you are an amber burning flame so beautiful
You have a way of giving life to everything with your charm
Your bubbly personality brings you to tears of joy
And as I wipe them off your face
I think to myself
You are beautiful
I love you the way you are

But there come times when I cannot stand your anger
You snap and turn ablaze
And yes, I admit
sometimes I do get burnt by the symptoms of your rage

You have this thing you do when you are mad
you passive-aggressively show me your love
Your hugs do not even feel like you are trying to comfort me anymore
But burn me
And I think to myself
I hate it when you are like this

But you have a way of changing your colors that make my heartbeat
Not only can you be a gentle bright light,
an amber fire,
and a lustrous sage
you are also passionate and hearty
You are my beautiful place of rest
Your tranquility puts me at ease
You have this thing you do when you begin to sing
The cool lullabies of your song puts me to sleep
And I think to myself
Can this please last forever?

But then your cold countenance brings me back to my senses
Your warmth becomes a distant reality
In times like this, I long for your warm hugs
Even if they do burn
But you have this thing you do when you smile
Your pearly white smile leaves a new type of burn on my cheek

But this chilly bite is a special kind of present
It makes it feel like Christmas
Chills run through my spine whenever I feel your touch
And I think to myself
Is this the type of love that fairy tales talk about?

But no matter how it much it hurts or burns
I can always love your smile
I can always stand your heat
I can always love your song
I can always stand your cold
All of this because
You are my home.



Joe Dan Boyd

**Pandemic in Northeast Texas:
Thanatopsis Revisited 2020**

Invisible as a China breeze, it fluttered into our life.
On little cat's feet it crept into our country and state.
Corona virus it was first called, and then Covid-19.
Death was its stern message and our potential fate.

Masks, social distance and please wash your hands:
Keep safe, avoid crowds and just stay home.
No movies, no concerts, no indoor church service:
Against both science and superstition, death comes.

Death: Are you avenger, angel or bitter avarice?
Swiftly you transformed my young life,
Galloping away with my mother: I was only two.
Will she know me in a divine afterlife?

Speedily as well, you carried my father away,
When I was a lad barely past the age of three:
All this after the death of my sister, Nelda June,
Only seven months old: Before any thought of me.

Your legacy so harsh: Strong like virulent ash.
In my boyish dreams, you were never far away:

Lurking here, there, unseen, yet surely everywhere,
Lying in wait for me, shrouded in mist of gray.

Not until I was thirty, my father's maximum age,
Did I cease to fear your dark presence, foreboding:
That it was not, in fact, my fate to die young.
Brightening my fitful dreams: My life emboldening.

Still, memories recall to me the preciousness of life:
A funeral service for an accidentally slain mockingbird.
Endless tears for Poochie, dog love of my lengthened life,
Sorrow at a brother's funeral, comforted only by The Word.

Grief at the tragic death of a close college friend.
I still tell the story of his exemplary life:
At Aggie Musters I recount his bravery,
Integrity, loyalty, character, in both joy and strife.

Covid 19 reminds of other pandemics and plagues:
Polio, agonizing killer from days of my childhood,
Spanish Flu, a virus from the generation of my parents,
Bubonic Plague, black death of Europe's somber mood.

Five Million Covid-19 cases in US by August, 2020.

Death's bitter hour to 176,000 unsuspecting souls.

World-wide pandemic in 2020, and all 50 US States.

Not even Northeast Texas would be spared whole

Now mature: Some call me sad-eyed ancient,

I treasure the flickering wind we call breath.

Comprehending not, the motivation of anyone

Who ignores precautions, encouraging death.

May we so live that when comes our own clear call

To become one with rocks, rills and peaceful streams:

There we explore realms unknown, moving with

Grace and trust to slumber in purposeful dreams.

--A tribute to lives lost to Covid-19 in Northeast TX

