

Nineteenth Annual Northeast Texas Poetry Reading



Student Winners of the 19th Annual Northeast Texas Poetry Contest in the Order They were Announced: Sky Bass—4th, Johnathan Ventura—3rd, Stephany Fuentes—2nd, and Sabrina Otero-Svirska—1st.

The nineteenth annual Northeast Texas Poetry Reading occurred on 4 September in the foyer of the Whatley Center for the Performing Arts. Again, student poetry prizes, in the amounts of \$400, \$300, \$200, and \$100, were bestowed thanks to the generosity of the donors of Honors Northeast. Each of the four winning students read their poem. The three winners of a Northeast Texas image contest explained their submissions, and two adult winners explained their poems. The Honorable **Jerry Boatner**, former Mayor of Mount Pleasant for twenty-two years, and **Dr. Chuck Hamilton**, online professor for Texas A&M—Central Texas each spoke, Boatner on the founding of the college, and Hamilton, about poetry. Honors Director, **Dr. Andrew Yox**, introduced the reading, and NTCC

Honors Coordinator, **Cade Bennett**, presented the prizes. Finally, a new type of award recognized excellence of another type. Stevenson Awards of acting, at \$200, \$100 and four for \$25, determined by the director, lead cinematographer, and unit production director of the summer honors film initiative were announced, and given.

Like the readings before it, the poetry and the images conveyed something of the values of local residents, as well as top students at NTCC. Students often dream of attending schools in big cities, and many adults crave the amenities of bigger cities. But the infatuation with nature through nineteen poetry contests, all of which might have focused on other things, alerts us to an interesting ambivalence. The nineteenth annual Northeast Texas poetry reading, like the majority of the others, attested to a love of rurality--open spaces, trees, and unimpeded nature. This, in turn, again points to an appreciation of what our region of school-and-church towns, fields, and lakes has to offer. There are various ways in which this connection takes place. First-place student winner, **Sabrina Otero-Svirska** conveyed the wonder of nature's intersection with time. Our lives speed by. We grow old. But nature seems to retain its ancient prestige, an unerring capacity for beauty, a knowledge so much greater than our "recipes written in fading ink." The first-place adult winner, **Melissa Brunson**, from Winnsboro, in *Opening Day*, connected nature with a more spiritual dimension. In her work, the hunter forgets his gun, but glories in the handiwork of the Creator. For second-place student winner, **Stephany Fuentes**, the soothing mien of nature amounts to the "Mockingbird's advice." "Everything will be just fine." Here, nature is respite, a step back from frustration, a comfort amidst life's demands.

The top two images also played on these themes. In first, was **Sky Bass's** remarkable portrait of lightning in Franklin County against the backdrop of a purple sky. In second, **Dr. Maryna Svirska Otero's** festive color mélange of a rural scene, combining twilight with a school bus, and a field of wildflowers.

One highlight in the contest compared with other years came with the passionate reading of Sabrina Otero-Svirska. Otero-Svirska, fluent in both Russian and Spanish, also exuded a fluency in evoking scenes by the lilt in her voice. Her demonstrative, emotional reading vivified the images in her poem in a way that few students have matched over the years.

Third- and fourth-place awards in the student poetry division went to a 2025 winner, **Johnathan Ventura**, and a 2026 image winner, **Sky Bass**. Ventura's poem travels along a series of impressions from a stay in a coffee shop to a car ride, ending with an all-out bout

of laughter. Bass's poem was a calligram in the shape of a dragon that detailed an exit from reality.

Several of the winners have appeared before in earlier readings or represent an interesting point of continuity with previous contests. The third-place image prize winner, A.J. Chilson, from Winnsboro, has placed second in the adult poetry division in 2022, 2023, and 2025. Second-place poetry winner in the adult division this year was Rev. Dr. Wayne Renning. In 2025, he placed third in the image contest; in 2024, second in poetry. Finally, Melissa Brunson has again shown how Winnsboro poets have dominated the adult entries. First the now deceased Angela Wylie, and then Joe Dan Boyd went on unbroken skeins of first-place awards. Brunson's best friend was Wylie's daughter.

Jerald and Mary Lou Mowery, and other patrons of *Honors Northeast* graciously covered the costs of the Texas-sized student prizes this year, as well as a lunch that followed the reading. The Whatley Employee Enhancement Fund grant process played an important role in the process of securing aid. Other friends and patrons of *Honors Northeast* covered the image prizes and adult poetry prizes. The poetry judges again this year were **Dr. Anna Ingram**, Vice President of Instruction, **Mandy Smith**, Professor of English, and Division Chair for Communications, and **Jennifer Sparks**, Instructor of English, and Director of Sigma Kappa Delta, the honorary English society on campus. **Mileah Hall**, Associate Professor of Art, again judged the image part of the competition.

The winning poems and images are as follows:



Sabrina Otero-Svirska with Cade Bennett

1. Student First Place: “What does the Land Remember” by Sabrina Otero-Svirska

What does the land remember when no one is listening?

Does the pine remember the hand that planted the first seed, or only the years of rain that
taught its roots to hold?

Does the old road remember every wagon, truck, and pair of footsteps that crossed its dust,
or does it simply keep stretching forward, asking nothing of those who pass?

I wonder about these things when the highway gives way to trees.

Loblolly pines rise against the horizon. Sweetgum leaves shimmer in the wind. Dogwoods
bloom beneath the forest canopy, magnolias open their white blossoms, and bluebonnets
scatter across the roadside like pieces of sky fallen to earth.

How many seasons can a place hold before they become memory?

How many sunsets before one becomes history?

Texas has always seemed too vast to belong to a single story.

Perhaps that is why the land feels like a universe

Its fields remind us of possibility. Its rivers remind us that nothing remains still. Its ancient
oaks teach us endurance, while a Yarrow blooming for only a season reminds us that
something need not last forever to leave an impression.

What do we inherit when we inherit a place?

A name?

A house?

A recipe written in fading ink? The sweetness of a peach from Efurd Orchards? Jam spread
across warm bread at a kitchen table? A photograph tucked inside a drawer?

A story told so many times that no one remembers where it began?

Or do we inherit something quieter the responsibility to remember what existed before us?

There are beautiful things here.

The still waters of Bob Sandlin holding the evening sky. Pecan trees stretching over old yards. Jefferson's brick storefronts standing where generations once gathered. Fireflies rising from the grass as the last blue of daylight disappears.

But beauty has never been the whole story.

Beneath the flowers are roots. Beneath the roads are footsteps. Beneath the new buildings are foundations laid by hands we may never know.

And so I wonder:

Can we admire the sunset without wondering who watched it before us?

Can we love the land without forgetting what it has witnessed?

Can we inherit something beautiful and still acknowledge all the lives that shaped it?

Maybe that is what Texas has always asked of us.

To look beyond the horizon.

To understand that a place is not merely what stands before our eyes, but everything that came before them.

The land does not speak in dates or names or monuments.

It speaks in seasons.

In rings inside a tree. In rain returning to the same fields. In old brick warmed by afternoon sun. In seeds carried farther than their roots. In generations growing, leaving, and becoming part of the soil.

And perhaps we are not so different.

We, too, are temporary.

We arrive. We grow. We leave something behind.

A story. A kindness. A memory. A place made better because we were here.

So when the evening sun turns the fields to gold and the pines become silhouettes against the sky, I find myself asking one final question:

Years from now, when someone else stands beneath these trees, walks these streets,
watches the light disappear across the lake

what will the land remember about us?

And what will we have remembered about the world that came before us?

2. Second-Place Student Winner, Stephany Fuentes



The Mockingbird's Advice

The sun rises, flooding the sky with its golden glow

I observe from the branches of the pine trees

I watch them reach toward the sky, trying to get a touch of the sun

I hear the wind whistling its tune

Recounting what summer has been through

I sing along, imitating like a shadow from behind
I see the bluebonnets covering the ground like an indigo carpet
Their little faces trying to catch a glimpse of the sun
Their arms dancing to the wind
The sun embraces the world in a tight hug
As golden as a drop of honey
As sweet as a fresh-baked pie
The sky paints a portrait
Filled with life and bright colors
Reflecting the history of the land
The lakes remember stories of the past and share them with the sky
They reflect on the changing seasons
The heavy rains and the droughts
The outcome always the same
Nature prevails
Look around
The sun is shining
The wind is blowing
The water is reflecting
The flowers are in bloom
Take a step back
Do you feel the warmth of the sun?
Do you see the colors of the sky?
Do you hear the ripples of the lake?

They all tell me
Everything will be just fine

3. Third-Place Student Winner, Johnathan Ventura:



Little Longhorn

The air feels colder up here.
Leafless trees stood over yellowed grass.
People moved in groups beneath heavy coats,
hands wrapped around cups of hot chocolate.

Shop signs swayed along the street.

I sat by the window of a coffee shop

and watched the cars pass outside.

Another shop sat a few doors down.

I walked over.

Inside, shirts covered the walls.

A Texas flag hung above,

and a soft orange longhorn sat on the shelf.

I picked it up and felt the fur beneath my thumb.

It's over 80 degrees at night somehow.

Crickets chirp while my AC fights.

The kitchen light is still on.

I'm ordering food.

Did we always sit at this table?

We must have been there a while.

There are no headlights behind me,

none ahead.

Then two miniature suns fill my rearview mirrors.

I'm lying on the floor,

staring at the ceiling fan.

Cattle fly past my window under the sun
as farm machinery crawls along the road.

Somewhere along the way
the shopping cart stopped rattling.

I can't remember what we were laughing about.

I just remember not being able to stop.

4. Fourth Place Student Winner, Sky Bass



“Breath, Let’s Escape” by Sky Bass

Th ere
 is a land that I ru n off to forget rea
 lity and take a break from onsibilities. There is a
 castle that is carved from obsid ian, but not just any obsidian; this tower
 was carved from dragons' fiery breat. This tower sits at the highest peak, catching the sun's
 rays, trying to reflect off the obsidian, but no luck. Magic is in this land. Magic was the breath of the
 universe, filled with whispers and wind. This magic is an invisible force that lingers within oneself, waiting to awaken.
 In this land, mythical creatures exist. On days strolling through the stalls, you see the sky filled with red, green, purple, and black
 and realize they are dragons, dragons filled with scales. A rush of wind will rattle the stalls and treetops like a storm. A
 scent of smoke passes through the kingdom, lingering on your clothes longer than you wanted. This land has
 fairies; despite th eir small, delicate frame are actually mischievous, devilish creatures hiding in the forest
 with wings that catch light like spun glass. When they flutter, they leave a trail of glitter
 Hig hlight i ng the sparks of magic hi dd en in ever
 y come r of this world. This is
 my world that I run o
 ff to, but like ev
 erything, it has an end,
 and I co me
 back t o rea lity
 filled w ith pr omi
 ses and respon
 sibilities and not magic.
 Once again

First Place Adult Winner, Melissa Brunson

Opening Day

There's a quiet hush over an empty field
 On this crisp November morn
 Our hunter enters the scene full of hope
 And camouflage adorned
 Walking to his stand, he settles into his seat
 Bows his head and thanks the Lord
 While trying not to fall asleep

In the still, dark hours before the sun appears

To begin this new day's story

A curtain of fog conceals the mystery

Surrounding nature's glory

And then, as if on cue, the day breaks

As the sun sets the stage

Like the Creator of the World

Just licked His finger and turned the page

Illuminating moisture on every blade of

bermuda, bahia and switchgrass to be found

Revealing that not a living breathing creature

Has yet to step foot upon this ground

Drops of dew like Christmas lights

Decorate every branch and vine

Twinkling in the morning sun

Like they were hung there by design

Then the cardinal and the sparrow,

The mockingbird and crow

Begin to sing this morning's song
With a melody that only they can know
Squirrels are busy chattering
As up and down the oaks they go
Hurriedly collecting each acorn
That has fallen to the ground below

Suddenly there's a shadowy figure sneaking slowly
And then hints of a silhouette
First one, then two and three does enter the field
None too certain of how close they want to get
Using intricate steps of precision
And calculated choreography
Determining no sign of danger
Into the field they cautiously proceed

Moving comfortably now from right to left
The largest leads them as a pack
Eyes alert and ears revolving
As with each step they hesitate and gaze back
Then the smallest of the three
Begins to pitch and pounce and play
The hunter grins then catches a glimpse

Of what he had hoped to see that day
Or was it? Did he really see what he thought he saw?
Straining his eyes he begs his memory
That sight to recall

When...YES!
There he is, the star of the show, eyes focused,
nose down intently, fully male
The hunter realizes that this single-minded buck
Is interested only in chasing tail
Raising a pair of Bushnell's, he inspects with satisfaction
His potential prize
Now his breathing rapidly increases
And he cannot believe his eyes
That's the one with mass so heavy any hunter would be proud
He struggles to try and count each time as his heartbeat pounds so loud

Now's his chance and he decides
To set him squarely in his sights
At roughly eighty yards away
He'll quickly have him dead to rights

Reaching for his trusty rifle
That he'll use to take this trophy buck
He realizes much to his dismay
That he left his Mossberg in his truck
Letting out a heavy sigh and drawing a deep breath
The hunter looks back out across the field now
It's as if they were never there
All he can do is shake his head
Grateful for this chance encounter shared

The afternoon crawls slowly away
And he waits until after dark
To vacate his seat and exit the field
Empty handedly returning to where he had parked
There behind the seat of his ole Ford truck
Where his rifle should've been
Laid an empty spot, where his gun was not, and he remembered then

He had brought his coffee, cap and coat
His wallet, phone and keys but was there more?
Indeed it seems when you're going hunting
You should never leave your rifle at home by the door

And so upon returning home that night he heard,

“Well, you see anything out there?”

I saw God today came his reply

His fingerprints are everywhere

God is the director and an audience of One

Everything in creation reflects all the good work He has done

Whether the author writes into the story of your life

Some chapters that hold twists and turns

Drama, comedy, tragedy or strife

Always remember who holds the pen

He won't leave you when life causes you to break or bend

God knows better and His ways are higher

Than what we can comprehend

So please don't look upon our hunter

with foolish laughter or pious pity

His heart was warm and full that day

though his freezer remained cold and empty

Our God is a wonderful creator, artist and guide
That is apparent in each and every way
The good Lord put on quite a show
We'd all be calling encore, encore
To have witnessed this opening day.

Second Place Adult Winner, Rev. Dr. Wayne Renning

TEXAS SKIES

Could there ever be
a more beautiful hue
than a Texas sky of blue?
From horizon to horizon,
as far as the eye can see,
a dark blue Texas sky is the best there can be.

But wait! Contrasting colors embellish any hue, even blue.

What contrasts more with blue than white?
On hot Texas days strong air currents stir,

soon white clouds stretch
from close to earth to high in the sky where
upper winds cut off their tops.
Billowing white clouds add life to the Texas blue.

But wait! We don't want any dark gray clouds to
obscure our skies of blue and white!

Or do we?
Texas gets hot; Texas gets dry;
day after day, even weeks after week.
Blue skies and white clouds don't break droughts.
Could the dark gray cloud, forming on the distant
horizon be as beautiful as Texas blue?

But wait! The dark storm clouds have passed.

Their rains have refreshed the ground.
As the sun shines again through the dark clouds
our eyes are treated to, not just to the hue of blue,
but to the rainbow hues of reds, yellows, oranges, . . .
And when the sun rises, or sets, these hues often
add their beauty to the Texas skies of blue.

Texas skies have many hues,
each has a special beauty for you.

First Place Image by Sky Bass:



Second Place Image by Dr. Maryna Svirskia Otero



Third Place Image Winner, A.J. Chilson. "Christmas at the Bowery in Winnsboro"

