Hello and welcome to the panel “Not-So-Lone Stars: A Reading by Texas State University MFA Faculty Poets.” My name is Cecily Parks, and I teach poetry writing at Texas State. During this session, permanent faculty poets from the Texas State University MFA Program in Creative Writing will read their work.

The Texas State University MFA Program, one of the oldest MFA Programs in the state of Texas, boasts a poetry faculty whose poems showcase a variety of forms, themes, and aesthetics. All four poets on this panel came to Texas from elsewhere and made Texas a permanent home as part of their commitment to teaching, writing, and publishing poems.

Unfortunately, Kathleen Peirce, one of our readers, was unable to attend the AWP Conference this year. I will be taking her place, joining Steve Wilson, Roger Jones, and Naomi Shihab Nye. Each of us will read for about 12 minutes. After that, we would love to take questions from the audience.

We will read in the following order: Steve Wilson, Cecily Parks, Naomi Shihab Nye, and Roger Jones. I will introduce each of our readers.
1. STEVE WILSON: Steve Wilson has published hundreds of poems in journals and anthologies nationwide. He is the author of five collections of poetry, the most recent entitled *Lose to Find*, published in 2018; and *The Reaches*, published in 2019. He teaches in the poetry program at Texas State University.

**The gar**

Fronts that whip-saw of teeth –

Drifts beneath the green cabomba, a skeleton –

Looms near the shallows –

Undulates like a snake, reverberates against ripples –

Grays, as if an abandoned shadow –

Offers its silvery skin to the sunlight –

Lazes beside currents, deeper waters –

Endures even beyond the chill nothingnesses of winter –

Asks nothing, gives nothing, settles and quiets –

Brushes against the submerged cypress trunks –

Coaxes its fellows from the darks within
the reed banks –

Stills, then
stills again --

Reminds silt
of its sifting –
Extravagance
– for Robert Creeley

like a numbing thumb,
the moment dulls until it tastes
complicity. Of worry

then the craving gnaw – to eat and eat is all,
is all. I've stored long
loss upon some kitchen shelf.

A jar that rounds along
the night. Worry words: that works
us sure, the way

a nightbird sure – through shadow sure
its call. At least
this once. This one, at last.
The Beauty of the Village

-- after a painting by Theodore Clement Steele

-- along the hills,
the broadening crowns
of maples. Autumn,

and a few leaves
early gone.
Even to the edge of sight,

the sky worries its moments
of blue and white,
bluewhite, green.

The valley, barns
and their dark houses –
therein happens some old concern:

thought now, it settles,
a shadow,
in some farther room --
The Supernumeraries

Offstage, they’ve seen it all before, the final scene that calls them from their friendly game of cards.

Someone will be murdered tonight. The count, foreign-born, sings of a dream: a woman,

alluring behind her green mask, offers wine to her secret lover. It is a persuasive shade of red.

When he drinks, nightjars scatter for the forest. It is an omen the count cannot ignore. Who will believe?

Who will take from his hand jewels bound in a kerchief that would save the beautiful soprano? He thinks the watery curve of her whispers is a revelation. Curious, how his life is mirrored in music. A light from somewhere in the wings, upon the swells of violins. The morning he feared would arrive.

That growing tide of chord upon chord. . . . Yes, someone will be murdered – there’s a dagger in the folds of the diplomat’s cloak. Done since Act Two, while voices swirl like leaves the courier clowns in his Stetson stage left, signaling beers all round. The coachman places his bet.
Articulated Tram

By basement filigrees, the intricate particulars of passageways. 
By looklongs in bank lobbies that lead to suspicions unresolved. 
By alleys, lumbered with their Chinese restaurants, hung ducks, trouble-me packets --
instant noodles. 
By the dressmaker who sells stolen watches from her balcony because. 
By the gypsy family who work the sidewalk where scents last, linger -- ginger, Turkish 
coffee -- just past opera crowds. 
By a roman face surprised in the wall of a house. The butcher used the stall downstairs
until police last summer roughed him up. His hands knew. His hands revealed
sinews sublime with design. 
By cocktail seminars -- down-shops, really -- where argument keeps seeping along the
hallway. 
By apartment blocs, whose weariness charms -- think of such intrigues of the
window-frame as it crumbles, its little cracks the cracks tracing through an old woman's
memory. 
By accidents, held to one's self, the suggestions. 
By the equestrian statue luring, revolutions that finally won't matter. 
By bookstores whose shelves display confused appliances. Toasters from Singapore.
One curling iron. Leon Uris' monolithic Trinity. 
By yellowgreen or purple houses -- the elaborate wooden gates -- still sobering under the
sun. 
By a briefcase and Italian suit. 
By the ruins, remade. That stone, is it a widow's shawl? Her shadow looms still like the
breath of a gesture.

With your permission, I will rise and note her going.
2. CECILY PARKS: Cecily Parks is the author of the poetry collections *Field Folly Snow* and *O'Nights*, and editor of *The Echoing Green: Poems of Fields, Meadows, and Grasses*. Her poems appear in *The New Republic*, *The New Yorker*, *Tin House*, and elsewhere. She teaches in the MFA Program at Texas State University.

Girlhood

was when I slept in the woods
bareheaded beneath jagged
stars and the membranous
near-misses of bats, when
I tasted watercress,
wild carrot, and sorrel,
when I was known
by the lilac I hid beside,
and when that lilac, burdened
by my expectations of lilacs,
began a journey
without me, as when
the dirt road sang, O,
rugosa rose, farewell,
and ran behind the clipped
white pine hedge into
the immeasurable
heartbreaks of the field.
The Indiana Bats

They’re like little brown handkerchiefs waving goodbye in the sky. Goodbye oaks, dogwoods, ashes and elms. Goodbye, caves. Goodbye, mines and the coal that lit up the night. Goodbye, night that the bats fly by.

The bats fly by twilight, or bat-light, and their bat-flight is full of waltz and veer and feeding in midair. Goodbye, arcane glide over the woodlot. Goodbye, tiny pink tongue that drinks on the wing from the pond with the apricot glow.

The apricot glow fills the carriage window of the overnight train rushing two fields away and then (Goodbye!) it’s too late to ask who’s inside or what they’re saying. The bats hear sumac, nettle, and wild grape when a woman hears nothing.

A woman hears that elves wear bat-fur coats, or witches cook with wool of bat, and goodbye, Dunsinane. Goodbye, the old wives say, believing that when a bat flies into a woman’s hair, she hears voices that remain indefinite, and goes insane.

Voices that remain indefinite reverberate through the cloister of hickories and bounce off the goldenrod and poison ivy. They compose the stream, the fall-flowering anemones, and the mosquito’s wing, indexing the distance between the hawthorn and extinction.

Because the tincture of night is darkened by their goodbyes:

Say another goodbye to the bat hanging in the shower before an adult with a badminton racquet flushes it down the toilet. Say one goodbye to the derelict gabled mansion where signs
warned people never to touch the bats sleeping on the ceiling.

Sleep with me, the bats sing each winter before hibernation. Sleep with me, sings the baby bat to its mother in the roost in the bark of the decaying maple tree. Sleep with me, the maple sings, having said goodbye to making leaves and green twisting keys.
Harvest

The grackles plummet down to pierce the lawn

For seeds and fat brown live oak acorns and

Ignore the orange plastic watering cans

My daughters drop in the cold grass, my daughters

Saying, Goodnight grass, as if the blades they’d watered

By hand were their daughters, as if the grass

Were a feeling they’d been feeling, greenly

Reckoning the evening, the ball moss falling from the trees,

The sun circling the crouched shade of the weeping

Persimmon tree as mildly as the knife rounds

The persimmon I bring inside so I can say

Of the pierced skin, Look, this is the color we

Want sunset to be, the color of the plastic

Watering cans shocking the dark that falls

Over the suggestions of footprints in the grass,

The black grackles, and the acorns battering

Our metal roof while I feed my ravenous daughters

A soft dinner that they clutch with grubby hands and gnaw.
Datura

When evening came at the end of a day
that I’d consumed by saying brutal things
to the people I’m supposed to love most,
I fled our home into a night whose heat
so closely approximated my own
that it was as if my body had no
end: I was the dark that lay under all
the live oaks and coalesced at each spine
of the neighborhood cactuses I’d learned
to call prickly pear. If my sweat
poured down the hill to fill the dry creek bed,
I couldn’t see it by the light of the six
mercury vapor lamps that pretended,
from a tower, to be the city’s moon.
Only when a flower spilled its cool white
light onto the hot road that had become
part of my feet did I finally stop
running. Because I wanted the flower.
I wanted it in my garden so that
each night I would have an object to hold
my gaze while I counted my cruelties
and my daughters slept and my husband washed
our wood floors of the crumbs and grease that brought
roaches indoors. Should I have known that love
would make me mean to the people I loved?
I should have known that every gorgeous part
of the night-blooming beauty plant I craved
was poison. I learned later to call it
jimson weed, datura, or thorn apple.
But alone that night I believed I might
be buried alive with that plant and still
love how it broke the darkness to answer
if not absolve my viciousness with light—
the way, I told myself, the owl believes
the moon streaks the night mice silver
for her. I was a new wife and a new mother.
I was in the dirt that grew the flower.
Hundred-Year-Old Window

I wanted the hundred-year-old window
to open, as I assumed it had for many people
before I lived in this house and thought
to put a desk beside it. It was stuck.
Its watery glass gave onto hackberry branches
and thick black power lines, and by way of its delicate blur

of the scene made the eyes turn and
return to it, like a woman everyone
looks at, as if, looked at long enough, she might

be seen through and therefore invisible.
The window did not grant me the permission
I thought a window, no matter how antique,

owed me, which was the permission to have
hackberry-cooled air drift across my desk while I write
the word hackberry, a name I learned after a storm

splintered one of the tree’s limbs and I called
an arborist to saw it off. Because of its crowded
easily-broken branches, the hackberry is trash,

the arborist told me, and offered to remove it
altogether, despite the fact that it cooled the house
and, as I later read, is one of the first trees to grow

on scarred earth. When I called the carpenter
to fix the window I learned that it was operated
by pulleys and ropes with cooperating cylindrical weights

on each end to ensure the closed would open, the open
close, all hidden in the wood frame on each side
of the sash. It seemed cruel and just
that when I learned how the window worked
its workings denied me sight of them, and when
I learned about the hackberry it was an invitation
to destroy the tree. You’ll say I only pay
attention to things when they’re broken, and I’ll say,
Too late. At sunset the window can look
like water a wounded animal has walked
through. Some days I’m
the animal, some days I wound it.
December

It was never supposed to snow here, and yet
it was snowing, big flakes tearing down
over the Edwards Plateau like the sky
had crumbled. My friend and I drank
cold wine while our children played
inside with masks
on a big white bed. Another afternoon,
my daughters sang a song about lords
and camp that I didn’t understand, but they didn’t like me to ask what it meant, and
instead of answering rolled down the hill in their pajamas. Their first secret. Then:

first bright-red manicure, first chipped nail, first note taped to the door saying don’t come in. I went to the museum instead and stared a long time

at the draft on which Anne Sexton had scrawled “At last I found you, you funny old story poem!” and felt a happy envy, happy for her but not for me.

Then: first time on ice skates, chick-chicking around the rink, a string of beads draped over one daughter’s head
and my gold necklace still tangled
by the sink. Snow

rolled over the prairie and held
the fence shadows when we threw
golden hay to the ponies who lived outside
all winter. The black-and-white barn cat
was still alive

and ate nervously in the garage,
where snow chains glittered on the floor. One night
I told a restaurant it was my husband’s birthday
and they gave us a sundae. It was
his birthday, and at this point

we were far from the Edwards Plateau.
I can’t remember when we left for that trip but I know
on the last day of December we had to go home
and in the airport, waiting for the plane, I arranged
our winter coats so that mine
was holding everyone else’s.
3. NAOMI SHIHAB NYE: Naomi Shihab Nye received the Lon Tinkle Lifetime Achievement Award from the Texas Institute of Letters and has written or edited more than thirty volumes of poetry and prose including *Voices in the Air* and *The Tiny Journalist*. Her awards include Guggenheim and Lannan Fellowships.

*Mediterranean Blue*

If you are the child of a refugee, you do not

sleep easily when they are crossing the sea

on small rafts and you know they can’t swim.

My father couldn’t swim either. He swam through

sorrow, though, and made it to the other side

on a ship, pitching his old clothes overboard

at landing, then tried to be happy, make a new life.

But something inside him was always paddling home,

clinging to anything that floated – a story, a food or face.

They are the bravest people on earth right now,

don’t dare look down on them. Each mind a universe

swirling as many details as yours, as much love

for a humble place. Now the shirt is torn,

the sea too wide for comfort, and nowhere

to receive a letter for a very long time.

And if we can reach out a hand, we better.
**His Love**

Gene Wesley Elder
leaving his life
wrapping household goods
kitchen cups
spoons
tiny tablecloths
grandma’s china plates
in rumpled wrapping paper
snagged with ribbons
brown grocery bags
distributed to friends
ordering no memorials
give your money to an artist
who needs it
give my money to artists
just call my lawyer
get the money
take time
arrange things under trees
sit with them
make constellations of
cast-offs
till beauty rises
no I’m not scared
I’m just doing what we all do
sooner or later
lucky I had time to savor
think about what I lived
parcel things out
I wanted the windows and doors
left open
long last days
quiet filters
a few opera songs
deleted my emails
after writing a final one
THE END IS NEAR
ARTIST GOING UNDERGROUND
remember me but even more
remember you
Every day was your birthday

For the grandmothers of Palestine

If light fell gently onto the windowsill

If no one you knew was teargassed

If the children came home from school
swinging their bookbags

and sat laughing
books in laps
to do the work
you had never learned
how to do

that was a good day

Sitti placed a cut onion to her face
to temper the fumes
whispering

Tell this to the soldiers
I was born in the sliver of time
the smallest eye of the apricot
the ripple of days one to another
cast upon wind in a far place
Don’t know its name
Maybe 5 kilometers from here
There was a well my mother drank from
on the night I was born

I think there were horses
If you want to celebrate me
Start everywhere
Big Song

Under the bridge at Washington Street

a man with acoustic guitar

was plucking and singing again in Spanish

always only in Spanish

once I would have called him an old man

before I got old now no one is old

his voice amplifying thanks to the bridge

shivering off iron girders echoing concrete walls

becoming so huge as if through a megaphone

but sweeter rich and round giant sugar cookie

of a voice traveling to our side of the river

my three year old walking partner

twirled in place that sounds big

never asking why would a man be singing?

near our chattering ducks

who never lose hope we might one day
defy the signs and *feed them*

river reeds  blooming yellow bells of Esperanza

only a few hours distance  from camps of wire and concrete

thin mattresses  aluminum foil sheets

sisters and brothers whose stories we can’t really know

whatever we think about them  what happens next

how hard it has been

who is this man?  so many years

singing in winter  summer  no cup beside him

not asking for anything  people run past with their dogs

ears plugged  their own music

I don’t know where he lives

secret stories under the bridge

all these years of echo

boy raising his arms

dipping and stepping

singer  nodding his head
glad to be heard

raising one hand to both of us twirling

solamente por que?
siempre por que?

Naomi Shihab Nye
4. ROGER JONES: Roger Jones has degrees from Sam Houston State University and Oklahoma State University. He has taught at Texas State University since 1987. He has several collections of poems including Strata and Are We There Yet? (Texas Review Press), Familial (Finishing Line Press, 2015), and Goodbye, a chapbook collection of Japanese haibun poems published in 2017 by the Snapshot Press in UK.

**Government Bridge**

Old as the town the iron swing bridge
was a dreadful, cantilevered relic with bars,
pulleys, and a deep fearful air
of the mechanical sublime. It rattled me
as a child, hulking
impersonally across from its bank
on the island like a rustling dinosaur --
far more frightful at night, Hi
when the wide river ran past town
in darkness, a constant *shirr* one couldn’t unhear,
making us see it even more vividly inward.

Out of dense night air and eternal pulse
of river, a plaintive horn
would signal, a red light
appear in the distance, and the bridge
would go into its clanking, clattering
motion, a dirge of metallic scrapes
along unseen tracks, lopsided pulleys,
as half the bridge soon stood alone
across the way, and the nearer half
swung broadside to the flow. Soon

the dimly-lit passing craft – barge
most often, or riverboat – would glide
noiselessly through. From a bank
we could see the other side
of a severed highway in darkness,
a few lonely sprinkled lights suspended
there, the road itself
like an abruptly-halted thought,
a sheer drop in space to the unseen abyss

below. We held our breath
in fear of non-endings. But in time the inhuman
creak and iron shudder of the retracted side
would commence again, in reverse;
the intersected commerce
of road to road, to the island itself,
would resume its duty, while starless night
and river, joined, surged on.
Juke Box

A dime, I recall, kicked off
the methodical buzz-clunk-chunk
as the chosen music
selected from a horizontal stack,
whisked nimbly upward, flipped
flap-jack-like, and sat down on the turning spindle,
upon which Elvis crooned “Love Me Tender”
Pat Boone sang “Moody River”
or Connie Francis warbled “Where the Boys Are”
and road songs mixed with platter-clink and semi
back-brake somewhere down fallen Highway 82
along one especially ruinous
sparsely populated basalt gypsum stretch
beyond Dallas,
the other side of the Caprock.

We’d finish our plate of BLT, or over-easy eggs
and blueberry pancakes, then one more
song for the road – Rick Nelson “Travelin’ Man,”
Nelson Riddle “Theme to Route 66” –
and we’d leave a half-drunk cup of ace-black coffee
and a quarter tip for the waitress,
head again down that long straight narrow,
aimed at a burning star,
and follow hot road stripes
spearing miles through our eyes,
while we hummed tunes of open space,
robotic, endless and easy.
A Church in Shiner TX

Truly a finely built old edifice, all gray stone and mortarwork, redolent of eighteenth century rationalist piety and simplicity, the plain, parsimonious and practical certitudes of our Protestant forebears. Just right for two people to stand in sweet, suffused candlelight and hush, to say their vows forever. The groom fumbles, forgets his lines, but recovers. He’s weeping, can hardly finish. His bride coaches him on; the minister murmurs his lines circumspectly, then cracks a wry smile. A wave of relieved chuckling ripples out over us all, and the couple turns to be announced. Years from now they will look back and laugh at the glitch in an orderly service. And will time have proven sturdy their love, wise and well-crafted as this building, with its broad beams, bright stained glass, hewn stones fitted expertly one on one by some unnamed master’s hands?
My Grandmother’s Visits

Always from her suitcase, a sigh of diesel from bus stations, the breezy gust of arrivals and departures. She'd settle in to her room, then direct us down some stray, neglected highway -- hillsides, pastures, cows, hedgerows, hayfields. Buckling exhausted houses. Acres of cottonfields no different than when she'd gone down them as a child, dragging a heavy sack. Glades fell open. Each direction wrote its name, and whole histories dropped out of the patchwork counties. Beside her, I dreamed back places she'd mentioned, a scent of tobacco on her old breath. She'd sit quiet for a moment, then spot some house and start all over: sumac, dogwood, sassafras. . . . My father wheeled her past the stiles of fences, taking first this direction then that, while she breathed the heady acres, and Back There trundled behind us like a faithful wagon.
Fishing on Lake Rayburn

Ghostly morning mist seeps up
this way on the gray water at dawn.
The boat ticks and hums, the swish-
ripple of lake water along the gunnels
as we paddle to tie up on a tree stob
like a finger in the center, gone
last year when floods rising all over
left no landmarks. Sitting on water
this still, watching trees sift out of fog
and dark, I’m reading a slow book
of the world, gathering knowledge.
Somewhere across the water,
a heron sends its rust-hinge cry,
Scrreeck!; a woodpecker types
its name in the top of a pine.

Last night’s nail-thin crescent
still tilts above the treeline just
over the cove, and on the other shore,
the old retiree who haunts this lake
every morning poles his boat
around the bank, sweeping minnows
into a net. He waves at me as I
send my first cast singing off
and feel the chop-churn of buzz-bait
chew the top water towards me
just before the bass rising
sends up my arms that jolt,
true, hard, and sudden
as June’s hook of lightning.