

Poems and Images of the 18th Annual Northeast Texas Poetry Contest



Mount Pleasant Attorney, Lance Hinson addressing Audience of the 18th annual Northeast Texas Poetry Contest. Photo Courtesy of Mandy Smith and NTCC's [The EAGLE](#)

In the Poetry Reading on 5 September at the Whatley Foyer of Northeast Texas Community College, the semi-rural vibe of Northeast Texas again proved that it is the lodestone. Like a baby at a family reunion, 'nature' continues to captivate the adult writers and honors students confident, or ready enough to submit poems or images to the annual contest. The winning adult poem in the 2025

contest, written by Jennifer Gardzina, was inspired by a three-legged kitten adopted by her and her husband, NTCC's Director of Plant Services, after their move to Northeast Texas. In Violet's tiny, determined steps, her quiet perseverance, and unguarded joy, they found a reflection of their own journey into a new community, and a reminder that life is not about perfection, but about being loved just as you are. The winning four student poems were unanimous in finding stores of wonder in the pines, lakes, breezes, and the gleam of the sun that oversees swaying fields. The "complicated" life in the big cities, lacking memory, and reprieve, by contrast, seems to suggest, if one may extrapolate a bit from the collective imagination of these poets, something like the ward of an Alzheimer's unit.

One wonders how deprived the young are who are deprived of nature. Or, is it just a matter of growing to like one's life as it is? The student winner, **Adam Richards**, an NTCC Presidential Scholar, spent some of his life in Las Vegas. He was perhaps not as wowed as the other three by the actual region of Northeast Texas. The latter may have the rain for a harvest, he noted, but its summer sun burns it in any case. But Richards found the curtains of pines, and

towns with “finger-counted populations,” alluring for their secrets, their hold on discarded points of the past, and thus their memory. Second-place winner **Johnathan Ventura** reminded hearers that we are literally walking on history. And the regional history is alive with natural encounter, of fishing, planting, and running, where trees and cane breaks still the soul. Perhaps no student poet in the history of our series has better realized the wonder of breezes than **Stephanie Hernandez**, winning third place. Hernandez has already set an NTCC record for one-semester awards in scholarship, but she readily pivoted to poetry. For her, flower-scented breezes, tactile and charming, double brilliant sky combinations. A cooling breeze delivers us from summer. Finally, NTCC’s Russell-Mowery Scholar, **Yahir Garcia** returned to the winner’s circle for the second year in a row with another nature-based poem. In Garcia’s world, clouds confer promises, hearts find their rhythm in the woods, and the sounds of nature distill down to a song.



Student Winners, Adam Richards, Johnathan Ventura, Stephanie Hernandez, and Yahir Garcia.

Photo Courtesy of Mandy Smith and [The Eagle](#)

Garcia claims that nature has a special way of encouraging his pursuit of poetry. With other topics, he admits, he is less inclined to write. Other top student scorers—and there was an abnormal clumping of scores a hair below the winners this year--seem to have a similar reaction. **Emma Mendoza’s** work imagined spheres of virtue in the cattle, the eagle, and pecan trees. **Bree Fite** wrote about the sky as a “canvas of dreams.” **Araceli**

Landaverde has worked through the “summer blaze,” baling hay, and has felt its “shimmering haze.” The third-place adult contributor, **Reverend Dr. Wayne Renning** has an extensive collection of wildflowers around his Mount Pleasant home. Maintained as well by his wife, Emily, Renning found an extensive rainbow of colors all within the variations of flowers that can grow naturally in this region. His visual poem celebrated each one.

The adult winners were more concerned about the social and religious aspects of life. Jennifer Gardzina admired the quiet confidence of her three-legged cat, whose story became a symbol of this community, a place where kindness transcends different and where every life, no matter how small or mended, reflects God’s resilience and grace. **A.J. Chilson**, who returned to the winner’s circle here after also coming in second both in 2022 and 2023, conveyed his “Wisdom from a Forty-Year-Old.” Derived

from a saying of Mickey Mantle who one time noted, "If you want a role model, don't be like me," Chilson recounted in humorous fashion the pitfalls he learned while living wildly as a youth, and the corrections he has made in mid-life.

In the image contest, natural scenes, and even a little play with nature again dominated the winning circle, and the submissions. **Andrew Perez** caught a magnificent sunset of Lake Bob Sandlin for first place. His sister, Neida, a former scholar had a different but also formidable Sandlin Sunset two years ago, though it did not place. It is uncanny how a lake can, along with the sky, improvise ever more originally, evening colors. **Andrew Higgins** came in second. Once driving his younger sister to her boyfriend's house in Franklin County, he espied an unusually developed canopy of leaves and branches covering the rural road. He went back to the site, got the picture, and entered it.

Finally, **Reverend Dr. Wayne Renning** won third place with an image of himself, elongated by the setting western sun. At the reading on 5 September, he noted, “I have always wanted to be taller.”

The speakers, attorney **Lance Hinson** of Mount Pleasant, and professor **Sarah Whitfield** of NTCC both highlighted regional strengths and resilience. Hinson was an apt college anniversary speaker. He began his journey in higher education at NTCC as the college opened forty-years ago. His career, in some ways has paralleled the entire history of the college. Initial uncertainty gave way to resolution, and Hinson went from having to plow through western literature at Baylor to a law degree at the University of Arkansas, and a successful local practice. Hinson held out to the students the promise that their education here has opened to the door to opportunity anywhere. Professor Whitfield recalled the floods and

isolation of her husband's ancestors in Marion County, but also their tenacity and forbearance. For all its imperfections, Whitfield views Northeast Texas as a society with a moral foundation, based on a candid recognition of our own failings, and a trust in God. The youth of our area, by and large, have a worthy inheritance.

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:

Adult First Place Poem: “Itty Bitty Kitty,” by Jennifer Gardzina.



ITTY BITTY KITTY

PROLOGUE: When we first arrived in Northeast Texas last September, we were not sure how we would be received. But then we adopted Violet, a three-legged kitty from Mount Pleasant. Through her, we discovered a truth in our own journey: that when you are seen and loved as you are, you belong. In her small steady steps, we found the reflection of our own steps in this community - welcomed, accepted and celebrated. Like we embraced Violet, we found ourselves embraced by this community. Her story became our reminder and a representation of the culture of Northeast Texas that isn't about perfection, but about love.

My name's not purple.
My name's not blue.
My name's a combination of the two.

My name is Violet.
My mom thinks I'm pretty.
I'm a three-legged itty-bitty kitty.

I hop along and play just fine.
Keeping up with my siblings, right in line.
I may not jump or run the same.
But I'm confident and don't complain.

I'm quite a talker; I love to converse.
Telling you about my adventures on this earth.
I'm a creature of God, made perfect in his sight.
Just like all of us, yup, that's right.

We are all made perfect, exactly how we should be.
Four legs or two, one, none or three.
God created us special, each and every one.
To love each other until our time here is done.

So remember on tough days when it's hard to press through, of what even an itty-bitty three-legged kitty can do.

By: Jennifer Gardzina

Adult Second Place Poem: “Wisdom of a Forty-Year-Old” by A. J. Chilson.

I have just turned forty years old,
Which makes me a middle-aged man.
When I was young, my mind was filled
With juvenile fantasies
That "Unruly Me" acted on.

"Oh, I just want to go out and
Run wild, be adventurous,
Do lots and lots of crazy things."
But those are the things youngsters do
(That is, if they wish to live life
By their own rules, and not others).

Now that I am forty years old,

I have arrived at my senses
That whatever I used to do,
It's better for me to avoid,
Since those are the things youngsters do,
And I can't keep up with youngsters.

Because when you reach middle age,
As I have, your body says things,
Like "I can't take this anymore,"
Or "You know so much better now,"
Or "This will get you in trouble!"

The night life might suit young people,
But young people never stay young.
Take it from me: in time, that life
Will take a toll; it will bite you
Real good, when you least expect it.

At forty years old, you'll want to
Start going to sleep every night,
Take care of yourself in the day,
And try your best to stay healthy.
Because if you don't stay healthy,
Then you're going to pay dearly.

Trust me, I'm paying for my years
Of being carefree and reckless.
The "This is my life" attitude
Has reaped painful rewards, as I've
Got ailments that won't be reversed
If I won the big lottery.

I don't know what my future holds;
Chances are, I might be worse off

Later on than I am right now.

What I can do is impart to
All the young people this wisdom:

Live right, and make the best choices;
To quote a great baseball player
Named Mickey Mantle – who lived life
The way he wanted, and died from
The consequences, "If you want
A role model, don't be like me."

Student First-Place Poem: “Northeastern Pine
Curtains,” by Adam Richards.

The sun held high burning the harvest
As the sounds of wind carry weight
The cows clash with the whispers of wind
Yet past the curtains of pine only silence await

Towns of fortified communities lie awake

Inter-webbed and stretched across the trees
Beyond the highways lies the history of many
Yet past the curtains of pine only silence await

From the bottom of the lake spurts a tree
Children disrupting the monotonous lake
Pellucid ripples echos across the forged ponds
Yet past the curtain of pine only silence await

A harmonious blue wash repeats itself
Only to be disrupted by streaks of cotton
Hiding towns with finger counted populations
Yet past the curtain of pine only silence await

Outside the unnerving pine standing tall
Cities bustle with life and complication
Yet past the curtains only a hymn of blue repeats
As within the curtain of pine only surprises await

Second-Place Student Poem: “Community Park,” by

Johnathan Ventura.

Beneath our feet. Native Americans stayed,
And countless other families unnamed,
Though not here, their memory remains,

The lands they shaped we must sustain.

The towering trees still give back,
They calm the park and shadows are cast,
As a gift for those who tend its land,
The way they did for generations past.

The fish still swim and the frogs too,
In the place where families fished for food,
The better life they pursued is why,
Future generations can fish for fun,
And spend time with those they love.

On lands that poverty forced children to toil,
Playgrounds now lay for kids to run on the soil,
Their only worry: where their friends are hiding,
A future that hard work is unwinding.

The joggers run along a path worn down,
Families rest in this peaceful part of town,
Children run around, scream, laugh and play,
The fishermen reel back their line and prepare their bait.

Though the founders are gone, a legacy remains,
On land where ancient camps were laid,

Future families will know this place,
We live in the home that past generations made.

Third Place Student Poem, “Bluebonnet Breeze,” by
Stephanie Hernandez.

Beneath the warm southern sky,
The rooster wakes up the day with a cry,
As the sun peaks into view,
It reveals a sea of indigo blue.
The bluebonnet breeze, soft and gentle,
The wind rustling against its petals,
Sings the song of springtime come,
Bringing a farewell to the summer sun.
Now the land is bathed in purples and blues,
Covering the canvas with vibrant elegant hues,
Colors that are bold, wild, and free,
Painting the hills blue like waves on the sea.

The bluebonnets bloom where the sun and sky kiss,
Each petal enchanted with its own wish,
A symbol of Texas, proud and tall,
Bringing life to the lone star.

**Fourth-Place Student Poem: “Echoes of Our
Roots” By Yahir Garcia**

In a town where the sun greets the day
Somewhere in Texas, where the fields sway.
A mix of life, where memories stay
With laughter and stories that light up the way.
Hands work in gardens, tending the ground
As clouds gather softly, a promise profound.
The sounds of nature, a song all around
With storms that awaken the quiet, unbound.

In the shade of tall pines, where secrets are shared
The scent of the earth blends with the air.
Each step through the woods, a journey declared
Where the heart finds its rhythm, and spirits repair.
But where do we live? Is it just here, this spot?
Or does it stretch out to the world far and wide?
From the heart of our town to the places we've sought
In the heartbeat of nature, we all share a plot.
From rivers that wander to hills that rise high
In every small village, where dreams never die.
We find our connection, our reason to try
In the fabric of life, we are woven so spry.
So let's remember, as we wander and roam
That this land is our cradle, our heart, and our home.
Together we grow, together we thrive
In this beautiful world, we are truly alive.

First Place Image: “Sunset on Bob Sandlin Lake,” by
Andrew Perez.



Second Place Image: “The Road Less Traveled,” by
Andrew Higgins.



Third Place Image: “Big Man in the Western Sun,” by
Rev. Dr. Wayne Renning.



