

Enoch Pratt Free Library Poetry Contest Winners

This annual contest is open to Maryland residents age 18 and older. For more information please visit prattlibrary.org/poetry-contest.

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2024 Winner, Chosen by *Little Patuxent Review*

A Few Blocks

by Marc A. Drexler

This is the smell of a magnolia in bloom. It is upwind of me, more than a block away, stronger as I approach. It is a sweet scent, with a hint of decay, though even the fallen petals are fresh. If it were a color, it would be chartreuse. If it were Chinese food, it would be sweet and sour pork.

This is the smell of a juniper berry. I picked it from a hedge and crushed it. Gin is made from junipers, but this is nothing like gin. It is an acrid scent, with a wisp of pine. It smells just like it looks. If it were a color, it would be deep teal. If it were a style of architecture, it would be Tudor.

This is the smell of fresh earth. They are rebuilding a block of the road and huge swaths of soil are bare. It has a touch of mushroom, and is a rich, flat smell, and moist. If it were a color, it would be jet black, even though this dirt is brown. If it were a kind of bird, it would be a pelican.

This is the smell of anise. I don't know where it comes from, because I am in the middle of a parking lot. It is the back lot for several restaurants, but the smell is still a surprise. It is both sweet and sharp, and unpleasant, though in its faintness it is more like fennel or caraway, and tolerable. If it were a color, it would be orange. If it were an appliance, it would be a space heater.

This is the smell of ink. Not real ink, made for ink pens in the 18th century. Ball point ink, from my ball point pen. Sometimes when I write I get blotches, which I can smell. It is a strong smell, cloying and deep, with a suspicion of poison. I enjoy it for a few moments, then cannot stand it. If it were a color, it would be yellow. If it were an article of clothing, it would be a beret.

This is the smell of air after rain. It is a clear smell, with earth and ozone and iron at its edges, but it contrasts with these rather than being composed of them. If it were a color, it would be a very pale blue. If it were a letter of the alphabet, it would be the letter O.

2023 Winner, Chosen by *Little Patuxent Review*

Chang'e Thinks of Houyi on the Mid-Autumn Moon

by Anne Rong

I cut ten slices into the pomelo skin,
careful to keep it in one piece,
before peeling the smooth rind from the pulp.

Then, I wear it on my head and think of you.

*Chang'e, quit it with my hair. I don't have much left and I won't be so handsome when I'm bald.
Chang'e, I'm stuffed. I'm already too round to fit the nice green coat you bought for me last year.
Chang'e, don't kiss me yet. I'm sweaty and sour from work. I'll shower first—we've got time.*

Before long,
the juice drips down my scalp,
singes my raw eyes with citrus tears,
and blurs your face from memory.

Still, my mind fruitlessly clings to your phantom.

Your lips would put this globe of pink, wet flesh, embalmed in bitter moon dust, to shame.

And yet, I eat it anyways,
piece by piece, with that jade rind
still sitting on my head, desperate
to savor what's left of you.

But try as I might,
the peel lifts from my scalp
like the moon helplessly drifts
from its faithful orbit around that bald, round, green Earth—
ever sweet, and
ever waning.

2022 Winner, Chosen by *Little Patuxent Review*

Watershed

by Caitlin Wilson

“The Chesapeake Bay is surprisingly shallow. A six-foot tall woman can wade through over 700,000 acres of the Bay without wetting her hat.” — A rest stop factoid between DC and NYC.

She finds herself walking—sediment
kicked up in a cloud, bay grass curled
like slippers around her heels, nettles

sharp and ghostly. Hat like a feather
on the water, without dampening.
There with the lonely herons.

All morning wading through golden
mist, all night moving on the surface
with the Jesus bugs and blue crab’s

nocturnal grazing. James to Rappahannock,
Potomac to Patuxent, Severn
to Patapsco, from Susquehanna

to Choptank. Maybe she launched herself
from a boat ramp, slid down an eroding
bank. Shed dryness to move

like the northern water snake through
the ragged shape of the bay.
The quiet frog song of mile

number 400, 602
pulses in her ears,
from creek to inlet. Punctuated

by the striped bass that leap and land,
 echoes skipping across the river.
Rain tremors across the Magothy,

pebbling the water's skin.
 She shelters beneath a downed tree
along shore, lop-sided in

the current. Mosquitos swarm
 in the reedy mud beneath her knees.
Minnows and blennies

dart in and out of her pockets,
 their bodies a quick, shining language.
Her cry is the cry of the osprey.

Later, sun-dazzled, she bends to the molting
 crabs and oyster shoals beneath the swill
of blue-green algal bloom and poisonous

mahogany tide. The dead zones abrade
 her skin; the fish kills bob
like a crab trap field; cold-blooded

perch scales knock against her neck.
 What water map compels her?
The shore is split. She has two sides.

2021 Winner, Chosen by *Little Patuxent Review*

Body/language

by Steven Hollies

we entered new protocols for our
relationships with patients and colleagues and
physicality itself. not ourselves:
because we must restrain breath,
never touch, rely on instrumentation.
but because darkness is inward vision
we must touch outward
and cannot. and as soon as we learned this,
we became fluent in the language of
the living body, the dying body,
beautifully speechless, cacophonous
words themselves in sudden failure, and merely
memorials to a dream ending,
a reality past. we wanted to wake up *new*.
still, we wanted the old sleep. anything to pause trauma.
in every tired, cadaverous second, in every proximal moment
we risked one unceasing nightmare:
our bodies among the terminal ranks, those
patients straining most to stay alive,
breathless for love, crying airlessly for human intimacy
—that simple imperative— which we denied them.
and so we gave them the machines repeating
the choreography of our heartbreak and
our only gift: our ultimatum.
care with no cure,
in the form of a body that
ghosts, so shrouded we could barely be seen. they
ached, looked to us,
squeezing prayers past mortal lashes
to drip, leaking
to stain masks in the shape of
miraculous need

2020 Winner, Chosen by *Little Patuxent Review*

After “Blade Runner 2049” and Anton Webern “Piano Variations”- Op 27

Ruhig, fliegend

by David Eberhardt

Your code is to sing the following tone row:

Pale grave stones the color of Indian Pipe...

“Soundless as dots on a disc of snow”

The difference, replicants, rogue replicants...

Dial me a veritable woman, a vertebrate woman...

Take me to Iceland, to the volcanic fissures

A pale blue luminous landscape. Scan

The whole field. Type in “Emily Dickinson” enlarge...

Access to my memories permitted, unscramble

The plumbago and pale blues I have knitted.

Dead space between stars, a desiccant,

But I want the real rain that is treasured

Not some hologram rain, interstitial,

To see the world I had to imagine it.

“You are granted

5 minutes with Ms Dickinson and off world papers;

But when you return you’ll be scanned.

Returning from Reykjavik, its hot spring baths,

Report to your memory designer, room 27”.

2019 Winner, Chosen by *Little Patuxent Review*

Phillis Wheatley questions the quarter

by Jalyynn Harris

Who head of the quarter?
Who 25 pennies add 'em up
Who spangle the liberty of in god we founded
Who tie till the black hand

Who wrote founding?
Who indivisible the divisible by 4
Who chew red u.s. of a who chew blue
Who chew white

Who creek the colony?
Who half time times two
Who ridges on the side of the circle
Who meter the black thumb like land

Who fit the coin in the bubblegum slot?
Who white Jesus gather the 13
Who white head white wig white tongue
Who little white lie

Who mount Martha?
Who wrote Latin on the back
Who lying like it can be read
Who changes state like a lake

Who live free or die?
Who pop the coke can with a $\frac{1}{4}$
Who sketch the shack with the mountains in the back
Who vend the womb for a coin

Who set the Old Line and road the island?
Who quartersawn the black road with white ticks
Who made it circle like a too perfect eye
Who slung it like a round wrung rope

Who out of many one?

Who quintet the nickel 5 times 5

Who sixpence the land for tails. Now turn it
over, who on who back?

2018 Winner, Chosen by *Little Patuxent Review*

Death in Dubai

by Kanak Gupta

I. Variations on Variations on a Text by Vallejo

I will die in Dubai under the faint drizzle
of a foggy morning,
with buildings rising out of the mist,
growing taller
with the arch of the sun.

Thirteen days later,
I will be cremated—quietly,
the flickering flames and the desert sun
creating pools of water
in the eyes of the onlookers
standing at a distance.
A lawyer will watch,
separated from the family,
yet dressed identically
in white, with a somber expression.

It will be a Saturday like today,
uncharacteristic for the season,
with heavy heat covering
the paved ground like a blanket,
and the air standing
solemnly over the still waters
of the tiled lakes
and the sun reflecting
on the glass towers
in place of rain seeping into them.

And I know it will be a Saturday
because today,
I dug deeper and deeper,
until I broke through my lungs—
trying to find blood in the ink of my pen
only to find ink in my veins instead.

My phone buzzed with a weekly reminder
to call my mother. I ignored it, once again.

Kanak Gupta is dead. The pyre burned,
not in the desert, but solitary,
in a field behind a mall:
the city's only crematorium.
The barren ground stretched
until it reached
the perfectly green grass
from which sprouted the steel giants,
witness to a rare sight.
No one dies in Dubai.

The lazy haze mangled
the metal and concrete around the field.
The broken circle of white
grew thinner until only the family remained,
holding at bay the grey clouds of the season
that took me away.
It stayed, stationary and silent,
long after the droning of the chants faded.
The glass towers loomed above it all,
reflecting the dying embers.

II. Obituary

Two days ago,
Ahmad and I sat in the Dubai metro.
Quietly, he told me,
"A woman jumped in front of my train in Toronto.
I saw her as I left.
'Metro lines would be closed
due to personal injury.' they tweeted.
So unremarkable—
as if it happens every day.
I wonder how many of these closures
are someone's only obituary."

In New York, I had read, subway workers
often share their break rooms
with the bodies of jumpers yet to be collected.
Tossed aside, nameless data points.

“At least Dubai has glass barriers blocking the tracks on the stations. You couldn’t jump if you wanted to.”
(Not that anyone would want to.)
“Toronto and New York need to catch up, it’s that easy,” we joked.

Two days later, driving along the Jumeirah metro line, my aunt clicked her tongue:
“A man killed himself in front of a train today.”

“But the tracks have glass barricades.”
“He must have climbed up one of the service stairs on the flyovers.”
I turned to my phone and in seconds I had it.
A tweet from an hour after the accident:
“Notice: Dubai Metro service is back to normal at Noor Bank metro station.
Thank you for your cooperation.”

2017 Winner, Chosen by *Poet Lore*

True Crime

by Stephen Zerance

In the home invasion, the husband meets the baseball bat. The three women go up with the house. For thirty minutes the police watch, do absolutely nothing. Everyone

wants the outcome to be so different. The case could've been prevented at many turns -- the rape, strangulation, pouring of gasoline. I've been watching true crime, still not afraid

of strangers. The killer is usually family, close, loved, known. When the beauty queen was discovered bludgeoned, garroted, body on stage -- the fingers all pointed

inside the house. I've tried to rationalize abject crime, my fascination. Both have always been around. I love the idea of what is impossible for myself. When I pop the razor

from under my tongue and think it over -- the simplest explanation -- I revolve around danger. Talking to strangers, a white mane grows out my feet -- it's hard to keep

a story straight. The horses want to get loose. In the home invasion, the mother says they're *nice men* to the bank teller. She returns to the rape, strangulation, pouring

of gasoline. The story all at once is pointless. There is a luxury of being alive. In my life there's nothing wrong. I want to light it on fire. I'm a weapon with no safety.

When I enter a room I must go off.

2016 Winner, Chosen by *Little Patuxent Review*

Charlotte Darling

by Sandra Rose Maley

Was an Ink and Paint Girl in LA
Worked with a quill
Tracing cartoon lines onto cels
For less than three bucks a day—
Bit her lower lip at the start
Of every frame—*5,000 cels to go—
Maybe 10! Aaaaahh—men!*

She'd crack a joke
About the guy she was seeing,
Adjust her gooseneck lamp
Put her head down and draw—

At Warner Bros. she inked Buddy,
A Looney Tune who took on
Mickey Mouse—Buddy's run
Was short, but Charlotte's pen
Got Buddy out on his first date
With Cookie in 1933.

She worked for Disney, too,
And Hanna-Barbera—
A sharp dresser, her hat dipped
To one side—she was the first
To sign up for the Cartoonists Guild,
Went Red for a time,
Collected pennies for the cause.

Years later she was called
Before the HUAC—
*I only wanted more money for us gals,
All those frames!*
She named four names.

2015 Winner, Chosen by *Little Patuxent Review*

Sole

by Inga Lea Schmidt

Sole: a flatfish,
small fins, small eyes,
small mouth, it looks
like a tongue. Also
a shoe's solid base or
the undersurface of a foot,
a calloused pillar where
the weight of a person
is carried, where the one hundred
and forty eight pounds of
blood and bone and brain
and too much thought and fear
rest. An adjective:
having no companion: solitary.
A card game I can win
in two minutes and
seven seconds. From the French
seul, meaning only, as in,
being the only one, as in,
am I the only one? Sole:
having no sharer. Sharing
with no one. Use it in
a sentence: I make a sole cup
of coffee, sit at the window,
and wait.

2014 Winner, Chosen by *Poet Lore*

Responsibility

by Mya Green

We cleaned
our houses. Moved, sometimes before dirt
collected. My mother, with a Taurus
.357 magnum tucked under her arm at the grocery store—
or rather, the food pantry—galley kitchen in back
of Holy Spirit. The real reason I still follow
the catechism. Because I know what it's like
to be truly hungry. Calm sea, startled
ocean. It is The Man who is to blame, too—
meaning Boss Man meaning Ku Klux meaning
stocks and bad investments. My mother just
as many hundreds of thousands of dimes in debt
as I am. We are double loops in an unending chain:
child beggar, gold-star report card. Six kids to bathe
in one outdoor tub. Granny making the Frank House
clean. Maw Maw dipping snuff. Ms. Johnson tells me
I can always pick cotton. Feel my lips, Mom would say,
my small hands pressed against her throat and mouth.
Feel the vibrations, she'd say. Deep South extracted
from my throat before it could root. We are not of the tribe,
we are a nation: fifteen burials at every stopping place,
sickness with each mile. Little Wolf says
the shaman woman walks in front of my mother
carrying a woven blanket, white. That I am late,
that I am never late.

2013 Winner, Chosen by *Little Patuxent Review*

To the Bird That Wakes Me

by Lori Powell

Beyond my window,
a stairway floats in the trees.
Three notes up, three down:
your song at first light
climbs to unlock the morning.

How long I've followed you
up these stairs and down,
grateful to put one foot
before the other.
Then this morning
you change your rhythm,
add a flourish of notes;
a finial at the end of your stairway.

What do you mean
by this sudden Baroque turn?
Have pity on me,
wedged in this skin of reason,
finger tracing circles in spilt coffee,
while the world shifts
within its speckled egg.

2012 Winner, Chosen by *Little Patuxent Review*

If Mamie Till Was the Mother of God

by Joseph Ross

If Mamie Till was the mother
of God
one of the ten commandments
would forbid whistling.
No one would wear cotton
clothing, every cotton field
would be burned in praise
of fourteen
year-old boys
and their teeth.

If Mamie Till was the mother
of God
every river would be still
so nothing thrown in
could travel downstream;
barbed wire could only be
worn as a necklace
by senators.

If Mamie Till was the mother
of God
every coffin lid would be
glass, so even God could see
how baptisms are done
in Mississippi.