

# 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](http://prattlibrary.org/poetry-contest).

## The 2026 Poetry Contest Winner

2026 — ["At Calvert Cliffs" by Christina Daub](#)

## Winners from Previous Years

2025 —

["The Day After I Started This Poem, David Lynch Died" by Greg Sevik](#)

["Why I Like Richard Diebenkorn: Ocean Park #94 \(1976\)" by Marna Williams](#)

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2023 — ["Chang'e Thinks of Houyi on the Mid-Autumn Moon" by Anne Rong](#)

2022 — ["Watershed" by Caitlin Wilson](#)

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2020 — ["After 'Blade Runner 2049' and Anton Webern 'Piano Variations'- Op 27 / Ruhig, fließend" by David Eberhardt](#)

2019 — ["Phillis Wheatley questions the quarter" by Jalynn Harris](#)

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2016 — ["Charlotte Darling" by Sandra Rose Maley](#)

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2012 — ["If Mamie Till Was the Mother of God" by Joseph Ross](#)

## 2026 Winner, Chosen by *Poet Lore*

### **At Calvert Cliffs**

by Christina Daub

K says she likes seeing the native art  
through my eyes, did not know about the festival  
in her own town. I nod. One never really grasps

a place till someone comes to visit. We laugh  
at lunch, at Neruda who, after forty years,  
said he had no idea who his wife was. I think

of Poe's Purloined Letter: how the most hidden  
thing is always in plain sight—your loss  
of weight, exhaustion, sudden aches—your skin

turning a drift-log-gray. How quickly everything  
shifts when the life force begins to fade,  
shrivels like blackberries no one picks.

K's lost a dear one too. I always knew  
you'd leave first. That I'd have to paddle  
through. No one said cancer though, no one

foretold this craggy shore, eroded headland  
where I stand, fog-shrouded, missing you.

## 2025 Co-Winner, Chosen by *Little Patuxent Review*

### **The Day After I Started This Poem, David Lynch Died**

by Greg Sevik

1.

Headlights wind through Beverly Hills.  
A terrible accident on Mulholland Drive.

I have no idea what is happening,  
though this is one of my favorite films.

One thing we do know,  
*Llorando por tu amor.*

The film is exactly like life. Who knows  
what the hell is going on?

In the real world, Los Angeles is burning.

2.

To the sounds of a swing band,  
the kids twirl each other.

There's a stranger waiting inside your house.  
She cannot remember her own name.

A rumpled bed with blood-red sheets, a man  
who hides behind the diner. He's the one doing it.

I have to get rid of this god-awful feeling.

3.

Betty is blond and wide-eyed.  
Her dream is to be a great actress.

Diane is slumped in her bed. You can tell right away  
that she's dead. She couldn't cut it in Hollywood.

I guess that's how my mother looked  
when my sister found her in her room.

4.

It's been a very strange day.  
And getting stranger.

In the real world, the day after I started  
this poem, David Lynch died.

A metallic-blue box, a metallic-blue key.  
All it takes is a turn to another universe.

Betty's Doppelgänger inserts the key.  
Falls into the blackness of an open blue box.

In the real world, in my teenage years,  
I watched as my mother fell and fell into the dark.

5.

Betty is in her bathrobe. Her names  
are Jealousy, Lust, and Diane.

Her names are Smiles  
and Lipstick-Smudges.

Someone is always knocking on the door.  
*No hay banda Il n'y a pas d'orchestre*

There is a universe in which my mother  
doesn't take those pills. A universe

in which she sobers and learns to live.  
David Lynch knows our only universe is this one.

6.

There's a stranger waiting inside your house.  
She cannot remember her own name. She slumps

in her bed so you know right away  
that she's dead. In a theater,

in the middle of the night, Rebekah del Rio sings  
*Llorando*. It's so beautiful, everybody weeps.

In the real world, I weep too,  
but I cannot tell you why.

7.

Old age chases Diane into her bedroom,  
hands outstretched like predatory claws.

There's no way out, and Diane puts the gun  
into her mouth. Her pill is a bullet.

Meanwhile, in an empty theater,  
a woman whispers *Silencio*.

Her hair is bold metallic-blue, the color  
of the key to another universe.

## 2025 Co-Winner, Chosen by *Little Patuxent Review*

### **Why I Like Richard Diebenkorn**

#### ***Ocean Park #94 (1976)***

by Marna Williams

I approach *Ocean Park* at the Cantor Arts Center  
As you calmly step out of the painting.  
“This is impossible,” I think as I circle the room.  
Looking back over my shoulder,  
I shift from left to right as if reading a book.  
Then you walk over and invite me  
To step into your canvas.

Together, we choose a place in the upper left corner  
Where a patch of blue  
Drifts like an ocean breeze.  
We enter a space between colors.  
I sense myself awakening  
In a pool of reflection,  
Thought upon thought  
That lengthens to further thought.  
A world without edges.

Now I don't know where I am  
As I dive into angles  
Juxtaposed against each other:  
Opposites seeking synchrony,  
Conflict seeking balance.  
Somehow, I emerge from a panel of grey,  
Swimming into the present,  
My eyes opened and cleansed.

Then you turn away from me.  
You close your hands together

And move into a dark recess of the canvas,  
A night only you can understand.  
You, Richard Diebenkorn, step back in your painting.  
Like an actor after the last round of applause,  
You bow to me and wave good-bye.  
I see you disappear behind a trace of blue  
To wait for when another in your audience  
Will find you walking around the museum  
Shaking hands with visitors.

## 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, fließend**

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.