

LOUDOUN COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY

Poetry Contest



Poetry Contest *Adults*

2025 Anthology



LOUDOUN COUNTY
PUBLIC LIBRARY

Thank you to our guest judge and speaker:

Holly Karapetkova

English professor at Marymount University and the Poet
Laureate Emerita of Arlington County

Thank you to our generous sponsor:

Loudoun Library Foundation

Table of Contents

Free Verse Category:

Winner: Ava Ghods, “The Civilized Remain Seated”	Page 4
Runner-up: Kelly Gondek Renshaw, “Just Me Against the AI”	Page 7
Honorable Mention: Ayal Assana, “I Woke Up”	Page 10
Honorable Mention: Ginko Bergel, “23.7.2024 (Lay Me Down in the Silken Grass of Spring)”	Page 14
Honorable Mention: Isabelle Rollins, “Skin Hugger”	Page 15
Honorable Mention: Robyn Witt, “The Poet’s Proposition”	Page 17

Poems that Rhyme:

Winner: Anne Paquette, “Tissue and Glass”	Page 20
Runner-up: Julia Saba, “She’ll Never Know”	Page 22
Honorable Mention: Brendan Heavey, “Puke in the Popcorn Bucket”	Page 25
Honorable Mention: Gerhard Jansen, “Margot & Earl”	Page 28
Honorable Mention: Tyler Anderson, “At My Best”	Page 30
Honorable Mention: Zeid Carbillon, “The Rope and the Reason”	Page 32

Spoken Word:

Tie for Winner: Brian Amaya, “Nadine”	Page 36
Tie for Winner: Sahar Choudhury, “Campfire Story”	Page 37

Free Verse

Winner: Ava Ghods, “The Civilized Remain Seated”

Runner-up: Kelly Gondek Renshaw, “Just Me Against the AI”

Honorable Mention: Ayal Assana, “I Woke Up”

Honorable Mention: Ginko Bergel, “23.7.2024 (Lay Me Down in the Silken
Grass of Spring)”

Honorable Mention: Isabelle Rollins, “Skin Hugger”

Honorable Mention: Robyn Witt, “The Poet’s Proposition”

The Civilized Remain Seated

Ava Ghods

by one who learned some stains don't show on velvet

There was smoke on the horizon,
But the curtains were drawn.
It was, after all,
a terribly bright afternoon
for concern.

Someone mentioned unrest
in that place,
the one we never pronounce correctly.
A place with too many syllables
And not enough invitations.

The hostess nodded.
She had heard something too-
“a flare-up,
a necessary storm,
an unfortunate difference in option.”
She stirred her tea.

Across the table,
a gentleman in perfect cufflinks remarked
that people do tend to bring
their misfortunes
upon themselves.

Someone laughed-
a polite, uncertain sound,
like a violin string
slipping out of tune.

The papers arrived,
but only the headlines were read.
One mustn't start the day
With photographs.

In time,
screams were folded
into policy,
The fire into architecture.
The dead into margins.

We held discussions.
We made statements.
We lit candles
in cities that never went dark.

And the world,
that old archivist of regret,
took notes
in very fine ink
For a future apology:

We did what we could.
Eventually.

The conversation turned,
as all things do,
to poppies, fashion, and the fate of empires.
No one noticed the hour grow late.
No one asked who lit the fire,
only whether the smoke
might stain the drapes.

And History,
polished and punctual,
took his usual place among the guests-
raising a glass
to the silence
that lent such a tasteful red
to the wine that touched his lips.

Just Me Against the AI

Kelly Gondek Renshaw

How can I compete with a perfect machine

To write poetry or create art?

The machine never had a broken bone,

Or depression,

Or anxiety.

The machine doesn't worry

If it's a bad mom,

Or if its child will survive

The current and future hellscape

Where humans toil and work to death

So the machines can create

The art and beauty,

When we were promised the opposite.

Surely the AI has seen the Alhambra,

That moved me to tears of awe

When I was nineteen.

Each space was more beautiful

Than the last;

Garden, fountain, ceramic wall,

Carved ceiling, pool, flowers everywhere.

Does it know

That the Alhambra is beautiful like that?

The AI has seen a million sunsets,

And though I have lived for thirteen thousand,

I haven't watched each one like I should.

But I saw one on the Jersey Shore once

And took a picture I have still,

Where the sky was pink and blue

And a seagull flew over the jetty just so.

Does it know serenity like that?

The machine has seen the stars,

But does it know that

Every fall when Orion rises,

I greet the three stars of its belt

By the names of three friends

Lost nearly twenty years ago

When we still thought we were invincible?

Does it know grief like that?

And the AI doesn't know my daughter,

Named so she may never know

Her mother's sadness and despair,
All bruised legs and toddler lisp,
Speaking of Fla-mangos and Pananos.
Or maybe it already knows her
Because of some stupid thing
I posted on Facebook.
But does it know joy like hers?
Does it know love like mine?

As it steals the beauty and joy
From those who create,
Does it feel anything at all?
And I wonder if the only thing
To convince you that a human wrote this
Is that this stupid poem doesn't rhyme?
But then the machine
Probably already learned that, too.

I Woke Up

Ayal Assana

It was a peaceful morning,
The sun blessing us with its warmth.
My mother made me a warm breakfast,
Her tea scorching my throat usual.
But what's a little pain compared to
The sweetness that follows?

It was far more pleasant than the heat
In that cramped cell I once shared with others.
The stench, the dampness,
That had our empty stomachs reeling.

This morning, the sun was warm on my back to school,
As I took in all that the world could offer me.
I counted down the days till graduation;
When I could make my parents proud.

Back then, I counted different days-
The endless ones spent trapped in that cell.
Watching our lives wither away,
Our prides crushed,

Our minds broken,
And the future shattered.

Classes ended, and I went out with my cousins.
We ran around the streets,
Laughing like children again.

No longer did I glance over my shoulder,
Waiting for arms to grab me,
To slam me down and drag me under.

We brought ice cream,
Hung around the park,
Our legs dangling on the monkey bars,
Twisting and turning like acrobats.

The cool metal didn't remind me anymore
Of those days,
Where my arms are tied,
Feet dangled in the air,
While fists rained down on my broken body.

When night fell, I returned home.
My mother sat on the couch beside my father,
The perfect pair.

She kissed my cheek,
And I couldn't help but smile.

It was an emotion foreign in that cell,
Where the air was thick with fear and sorrow,
Where prayer were the only words spoken,
Where I learned death was kinder than man.

I told my mother about my day,
The lessons I'd learned, the things I'd done.
It was freeing.
Joy spilled from me,
Filling the room with laughter and light, with hope.
My parents listened,
Their smiles wide and patient
Until I ran out of words.

But the day came to an end.
They hugged me goodnight,
And I felt an unnatural warmth-a shield,
Wrap around me.
I asked my mother for tea in the morning.
Hot, of course.
And I crawled into bed,
Laying in a bed so soft and warm.

It was unlike the cold concrete floor of that cell,
Where we took turns sleeping,
Heads resting in bloodied laps,
Taking shifts like soldiers,
Fearing the next breath might be our last.

But I was no longer there.
I was home.
My family was downstairs.
No one watched me throughout the night.
My stomach was full.
My body was warm.
And I was happy.

A smile spread across my face,
As I thought of tomorrow-
My mother's laughter,
Her tea burning my throat,
My father sat silently at the table,
Happy to be with his family.

I shut my eyes.
Praying for peaceful dreams,
For a better tomorrow.
And then.....

23.7.2924 (Lay Me Down in the Silken Grass of Spring)

Ginko Bergel

Lay with me in the silken grass of Spring
That I may know you
In the same fullness as the trees

Each star marked on your body
Your arching back, the waning moon
Each kiss as fleeting as a comet
But burning just the same

Let us hide beneath the velvet sky
And dream in a world of our own
Or stroll out in the open day
Hands intertwined

That shyness of new lovers
Sheds like leaves
And blankets beds of wildflowers

Love becomes what it always was
Ancient, slow, eternal
And I become what I always was
[Yours]

Skin Hugger

Isabelle Rollins

See me rot within this beating red flesh
Heart pumping with disease and veins blistering with vanity
Watch me slither through thin sheets and cushions plush
See what creature emerges from within the fluff
Hungry, yearning, arms ready for embrace
Leave me with nothing
Leave me needing
Leave me huddled in self pity
A bundle of pale folded skin and cold bones
Barley breathing, hardly stirring
Looking out from within my white branches
At a desolate forest that has no meaning to me
Appear here and I will smother you
Tear into you
Dig a hole inside your warm body and crawl deep within
My ear to your crying heart
Your blood drenches me like a boiling christening
I feel now
I push my grubby hands through the meat of you
Extending them into your limbs
I feel your touch from the outside, your fingertips sensing mine from within
A singular layer of matter keeps us apart

Your heart beat is gone, and it's been my own in my ear this whole time
Beating rapidly and ravenously
My stomach churns, behaving as if I've satisfied nothing
All in which I've taken from you was never enough to sate me
I retreat
Your ruined body slips off me
I am birthed as a red sky filled with white stars
My eyes loom over you one final time
I cannot bear it
Bear what I have done
I claw at my sheets, digging myself another hole
But nothing feels the same
No heart to hear but my own ugly gushing of fluids
I want to throw up, but there's nothing to come out of me
No warmth can match yours
Your blood smears off my body
Leaving me
I huddle over myself
This birch forest of me consumes all of your scarlet
Let the fog entrench me
Let it make me forget
I tug at these blankets and toss the sheets
I push my eyes into my pillows
Let me forget the sight of my own sins
Oh how I miss you
I'm so sorry that I miss you.

The Poet's Proposition

Robyn Witt

Hear me out, reader,
Let's do a trade: If I exchange these poems
For the bread of your patronage,
I could write more of them
And from a wider breadth of experience.

Say I gather enough loaves
To make writing my day and night job:
I'd go traveling. I'd rent a car,
Sleep at truck stops and shady motels.
Along the way, I'd write sonnets
For the sunrises over the sighing freeway
And ballads for the bedbugs

I'd go out to Nevada
And smell the stale smoke
Of the ruby-lit casinos,
I'd drive into the Mojave and learn
Whether desert sand shifts
Any differently through the fingers
Than beach sand.

Hear me, reader, I'll write the most
Beautiful cactus poem
You ever saw. It'll be as if
You were there with me
Watching it baking, upright
And defiant.

Poems that Rhyme

Winner: Anne Paquette, "Tissue and Glass"

Runner-up: Julia Saba, "She'll Never Know"

Honorable Mention: Brendan Heavey, "Puke in the Popcorn Bucket"

Honorable Mention: Gerhard Jansen, "Margot & Earl"

Honorable Mention: Tyler Anderson, "At My Best"

Honorable Mention: Zeid Carbillon, "The Rope and the Reason"

Tissue and Glass

Anne Paquette

All I thought I wanted

was a smaller waist.

Unless I looked wasted away,

I would not be satisfied.

Then I was a bride

And brimmed with pride,

But a part of me died

When I considered the eyes-

Every pair of those eyes-

On my waist legs and thighs

In a white dress.

Please could I look less

So I could feel like more.

I starved and lifted and I ran and I ran,

When it began,

All I thought I wanted

was a smaller waist,

But maybe I was running

from the fear of being a waste
or taking up space
or losing an ounce of control of my place...

In any case,

I got pregnant.

And every inch I grew was a loss and a win

and a learning to love more of me

because it meant more of you-

And I grew to know you more every day

and you kick-kicked away

and every time I felt you, I felt myself

falling in love with you,

and falling in love with everything that made you and sustained you

and so, all the sudden, I was falling in love with me for the first time.

And then

you were gone.

Wet tissue paper skin and glass bones.

25 weeks

Nearly full grown

25 weeks

Of me, for once, never feeling alone...

Gone.

I swear I could still put my hand on my chest and press exactly 1 pound 14 ounces.

For a moment

The whole world was 1 pound 14 ounces

And it was dead in my hands.

Did I make a wasteland

of myself?

It was yesterday I held and felt

every tiny rib and finger, and smelt

the bloody, sterile, hospital air: my perfect son-

And how dare the sun shine that morning,

That morning when your finger was on my finger

And then I thought

all I wanted

Was my waist

and my world

still yet bigger.

She'll Never Know

Julia Saba

I remember those hands that would tremble and shake,
A whisper of presence I knew was fake.

She smiled through a fog I could never define,
And mothered in absence, like she was offline.

I thought she was weary, just quiet, just worn,
Not broken by pills before I was born.

The doctors had promised relief in a jar,
But stole her away and left shadows, not scars.

My toys sat in silence, my drawings unseen,
My questions unanswered, my body unclean.
I learned to stop knocking on doors that stayed shut,
To bottle my hopes and to silence my gut.

But time taught me truths I was too young to know,
Mothers don't vanish into Jane Doe.
Addiction had taken the wheel from her hands,
And drove us through years I could not understand.

Now I am the arms that my daughter runs to,
With tears in her lashes from laughter that's true.

She's got your blue eyes, but they shine in the light,
And sometimes I wonder, when did yours lose their fight?

I show up each morning with nothing to numb,
No bottles, no silence, just stories and sun.
Her joy is a fire I tend without end,
And I love her the way that I needed back then.

I don't curse your name, but I won't call it right,
You faded too early, you gave up your fight.
I stopped listening for echoes of what might have been,
And choose to be present, again and again.

You taught me what not to become,
And now I am steady, I hold, I don't run.
The cycle is broken – I laid it to rest,
She lives in a world where love is expressed.

Puke in the Popcorn Bucket

Brendan Heavey

I've always loved baseball games, and I don't mean to get all sappy,
My Dad used to bring me as a kid and it always made me happy.

So last July late I pulled my kids off their screens,
I bribed them to get in the car with cookies and jelly beans.

Our little family rolled up to the ballpark, the sun still high,
Kids buzzing around like bees from their sugar high.

I forked over fifth bucks for more snack and drinks,
“Worth it!” I lied to myself, my wallet on the brink.

Hot dogs in hand, nachos stacked high with cheese,
Our seats had a view with a hint of summer breeze.

Then came the crack of the bat – play had begun,
And my oldest son Jack whispered, “Dad...I don't feel fun.”

Strike one! the ump cried, the crowd gave a cheer,
My kid started to turn green – it was clear chaos was near.

With one eye on the game and one on my eldest boy,
“The popcorn!” I thought: the bucket I could deploy!

A fly ball soared towards the stadium’s lights,
As Jack hurled in the popcorn bucket with all of his might.

Double to center! The crowd’s on their feet!

A splash hit my shoes – it was chunky, not sweet.

The mascot danced, a t-shirt cannon popped,
The retching continued, it never quite stopped.

A steal of third! He’s safe by a toe!

Napkins came flying at us from three rows below.

I kept one eye on the field, the other on the growing mess,
A mom nearby launched a Wet Wipe in obvious distress.

Two outs, bottom fifth, runners on base!

A man two rows over gagged loudly and fled the whole place.

Vomit cascaded like Niagara Falls,
While I clapped along with the stadium calls.

Home run! A three-run blast! This game is tight!

“Is that kid okay?” asked a fan next to us in fright.

Jack was muted but proud of his puke-filled pail,

“That’s my boy,” I said, “He’s tough as a nail.”

The janitor passed and gave me a glare,

But nothing could ruin that night’s grassy air.

We lost by ten, but the memory stuck –

Of popcorn and puke and unshakable luck.

So here’s my advice if your planning a trip:

Bring extra Wet Wipes, napkins, towels.... But the nachos – you should skip.

Margot & Earl

Gerhard Jansen

In the crook of my right arm
My newborn daughter cries
While at my left hand's fingertip
Pulse fades, my grandpa dies

I am caught between the two of you
Neither able to avoid
Like Scylla and Charibdis
Hungry mouth and swirling void

Where's your bottle, little one?
I know you must be fed
Between his pills and nebulizer
Useless now he's dead

There, there child, drink your fill
It's ok, don't fret
You won't remember him at all
Though he killed you thrice and wept

Look at you, my darling girl
So small and soft, so sweet

Next to a corpse that used to be
Someone I'd hope you'd meet

Frail beings human babies are
And frailer still old men
Yet I am not much stronger
I can barely hold this pen

That's why your family gathers 'round
This body not yet cold
And prayers for strength to cherish him
and all those tales he told

Bless you, tiny squirming thing
One day you'll bury me
Life's short and strange and full of pain
I love you, as did he

At My Best

Tyler Anderson

There is a side of me
My family will never know –
A side teeming with
Bravado, passion, and show.

For 3 hours a day,
I talk, I perform, I correct –
I teach.
The real me there,
But shadowed,
Muted,
And difficult to detect.

I've devised a persona,
Hinged on passion and energy,
That I strive to live up to,
To conceal the irreversible
(yet harmless?)
Duplicity.

It's a daily premeditated course of action –
I aim, innocently, to deceive,
To thrive as a proud imposter
Who exists in countless memories.

(Un)fortunately, my character is confined,
Rarely appearing in the haven of our home.
Like a shadow
Outracing the crimson flares of dusk,
It struggles to find footing outside of school,
In the realm of the unknown.

Truthfully, I'm not sorry for the character that I've crafted,
Or of the man I am off the classroom stage-
Reticent, enamored, and fiercely infatuated
With the family that I've made.

The truth is, I live a lie,
Comfortably and unconfessed,
Which is, when I'm in the throes of teaching
I'm truly at my best.

The Rope and the Reason

Zeid Carbillon

I searched for meaning since I first could feel,
A child with wonder, a soul yet to heal.
From high school halls to college days,
I asked the stars in silent gaze.

I gave, and gave, said yes to all,
While letting my own spirit fall.
I broke, stood up, then broke again,
A cycle carved in smoke and pain.

The scent of herbs, the drink, the flame,
A mask for sorrow, guilt, and shame.
But numbness only deepens grief,
No drug could ever bring relief.

Two years ago, the darkness came,
My mother's voice, cancer's name.
Stage four, the words that tore me down,
My guilt grew loud, I nearly drowned.

Was it my smoke that lit the fire?
Did I help build her funeral pyre?

I saw her write, her screams at night,
Her stomach clenched, her soul in fight.

Three times she fell, her breath gone thin,
Three times our dog pulled her back in.
Shiro barked through silent walls –
The only one who heard her calls.

I chose to stand, to wear her pain,
To be her strength, through cold and rain.
I worked, I broke, withdrew once more,
Locked myself behind a door.

The herbs returned, the rope was tied,
I watched the seconds slowly die.
Nights uncounted, mornings blurred,
The echo of a dying word.

Yet one day came, I reached, I spoke
Through tearful eyes and spirit broke.
In chaos, I found others there,
With broken hearts too raw to bear.

And then she came – my mother, weak,
With winter's kiss upon her cheek.

In jacket thick and bonnet tight,
She came to bring me back to light.

She, who should've stayed in bed,
Held me close and kissed my head.
No strength left, and still she came,
And I have never felt such shame.

I smiled, pretend I was whole,
But sorrow rotted through my soul.
Until that day, I drank it all,
And prayed before the final fall.

But I awoke, and Spring had come,
And in the sun, I felt someone.
Her love, relentless, brave and true,
Gave me the strength to live anew.

She fights for breath; I must for mine.
In her love, I found the sign.
The rope is gone, but not the scar –
Her love remains, my northern star.

Spoken Word

Tie for Winner: Brian Amaya, "Nadine"

Tie for Winner: Sahar Choudhury, "Campfire Story"

Nadine

Brian Amaya

YouTube Link: https://youtu.be/p2j046RK9YA?si=Vy2XGipgSq-v_vWy

Campfire Story

Sahar Choudhury

YouTube Link: https://youtu.be/1ObEd_2dClS

*Thank you to
everyone who
participated in
our competition
this year.*



LOUDOUN COUNTY
PUBLIC LIBRARY