

LOUDOUN COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY

Poetry Contest



Poetry Contest *Adults*

2026 Anthology



LOUDOUN COUNTY
PUBLIC LIBRARY

Thank you to our guest judge and speaker:

Leonor Alvim Brazão

International poet/artist

Thank you to our generous sponsor:

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Subject to Change

Tara Hashagen

I live in the margins between
finished and fine,
between patient and person,
between the version of myself
who carved plans into stone
and this one who measures time
in three-month intervals.

The word *remission*
sits in my mouth
like a coin I'm afraid to spend,
valuable only because
it might disappear.

Friends speak in future tense,
booking next summers
with the confidence of people
whose cells have never betrayed them.

Meanwhile, I've grown fluent
in the conditional:
if the scans remain clear,
if nothing bright appears
where brightness shouldn't be,
if microscopic rebellion
isn't already unfolding
in chambers
I cannot see.

This is the part
no one prepared me for—
Not the diagnosis.
Not the poison or the blade.
Not waking up

stitched flat
with surgical drains
looped at my ribs
like grotesque jewelry.

It's this afterward.

Citizenship in this
suspended country
where everyone expects gratitude
to behave like closure.

As if survival were a
you walk through once
rather than a hallway
that keeps rearranging itself
behind you.

I'm learning a new vocabulary:
surveillance instead of *screening*,
monitoring instead of *routine*,
watchful waiting replacing
the old luxury
of ignorance.

Some mornings
I forget for half a second.
Then the mirror catches me
mid-motion,
my body revised again
by light.

I'm told eventually
this vigilance will soften,
that I'll stop cataloging
every ache and appetite,
stop treating each clean scan

like a temporary visa
renewed at the last possible moment.

Maybe.

But there is something honest
about living this way,
like standing barefoot
beneath a chandelier
you know could fall.

Everything gleams harder.

The woman handing me coffee.
The pulse fluttering
beneath my wrist.
A shirt warming on my skin
fresh from the dryer.

I move through the world now
like someone carrying
a bowl filled to the edge,
careful not to spill
a single shining thing.

Don't Stare at the Fire

Ayal Assana

There's a fire outside the house.
Negligible to anyone except the owner.
They rush to quell it, but it outruns them.
The owner pleads for help,
but the fire swallows that too.

Across the street, the neighbor watches.
Beady-eyed, apathetic.

"What should we do?" I ask.
I'm waved off.
They say it's none of our business;
let the owner deal with it.

Tomorrow arrives.
The fire has grown teeth,
gnawing into the backyard,
fed by a rising wind.

The owner is still there,
sweat carving into tears along their face.

"Are they alright?" I ask.
The neighbor sighs this time.
They say it's not for us to care.

Cold water presses into my hand.
A chair pulls out.
I stare—the fire too bright to ignore.
But my gaze is pried away.
We speak of the weather,
their dog,
the recent game.

I listen.
I nod.
I do not turn back.
Another day.
Another house claimed.
Two owners now fight the monster,
throwing water and dirt to drown it.
It makes no difference.

“Should we help?” I ask.
The neighbor bristles at my question—irritated.
They have enough on their plate.
Inside, they show me the couch,
torn apart by their dog.
This must come first.

I stand in silence,
Knowing it does not,
yet saying nothing.

Tomorrow arrives as a horizon of fire.
The wind billows in laughter,
feeding the fire’s hunger
as it takes the rest of the street.
Screams fill the air,
but vanish inside it.

On the porch,
The neighbor trims their hedge,
scolds their dog.

“What should we do?” I ask.
They hesitate,
surprise crossing their face,
wondering when the fire grew so big.
Still, they take me inside,

tell me to ignore it.

The TV flickers on with a comedic show;
something easier to swallow.
Laughter fills the room,
sharp against the screams outside.

They do not hear them,
Or do not want to.

When I return,
The owners are silent.
Flames curl where voices once were,
A monstrous grip with nothing left to hold.

I stand there longer this time.
Then I go back.

The neighbor is no longer calm.
They run in circles, their dog barking in panic.
They point to their hedge;
the fire has reached them.
“How did this happen!” they cry.

I ask what I should do.
They tell me to get help,
but there is no one left to ask.

They send me next door.
The neighbors sit outside,
Beady eyes fixed on the flames.

“Can you help?” I ask.
I’m waved away.
They tell me it’s not our business.
The owner will deal with it.
I understand them.

I did before.

When I return,
The fire has reached the house.
“No one is coming,” I tell them.

They curse the others,
calling them selfish.
They rage at the silence,
at the absence,
at the indifference.

And I stand there with them,
watching it burn,
knowing—

We saw the fire earlier,
did we not?

Exoskeleton

Alex Chapple

Daddy, what's this? she asks
and shows you the husk of some long-gone bug.
You don't know where she found it,
but you don't know where she finds most things
she delivers to you. Like a crow,
she comes in bewildering kindness.

An exoskeleton, you say.
A bug wanted to get bigger,
so he had to trade in his clothes for new ones.
She laughs at that, Like when Mom
got me a new raincoat?
You eye her feet that have doubled in size again.
Yes, like that.

Then you laugh, too,
at yourself
because you can't get bigger
like those bugs.
Become a new you,
maybe with hair on your head again
or a set of powdery, vibrant wings.

You can keep your crow, though,
and the gifts she brings you:
ghosts of what was,
whispers of what will be,
and other useless things
that contain the universe—
expanding, ever-bigger,
with no need for a new raincoat.

The Gift of Carrying A Little One

Kirstin Tatagiri

The night sky is dark like charcoal,
and country music plays
from the car speakers.

Sun-kissed and sprinkled with sand,
my baby sleeps in his car seat
next to me.

His hand jolts up
and I reach over and close
my fingers around his.

Lightning flashes in the sky
as my husband pulls the car
in the hotel parking lot.

I click open the car seat buckles
and pull his squishy skin close.

As I carry him from the car
into the first floor hotel room,

I remember –

me, a nine year old girl
sitting in the third row
of the blue Toyota Previa van
on the way home from a trip to my grandparents.

Eyes bleary from sleep,
I look out the window
and see the stars, twinkling like white sprinkles
on dark chocolate frosting.

My dad pulls into the driveway,
the car engine stops,
and my two younger brothers
sleeping like puppies in the middle row.

“I’ll take Sam and you take George,”
my dad whispers to my mom.

I squint my eyes, yawn
and whisper, “Daddy,
how come I don’t get to be carried in?”

His eyes smile as he looks at me.

“You’re growing up, sweetie.
Mom and I will carry the boys,
but you’re a big girl now, so you
get to walk.”

I smile as the memory fades
and I gaze at my baby laying
on the hotel bed.

He stirs and I pat his head
as he slumbers on,
murmuring content sleepy sighs.

I lay my hand upon his back,
watch as he breathes
in and out, in and out.

And I marvel that now,
it’s my turn to
carry a little one
as he starts his journey
in this big, wide world.

Is This A Haunting

Lindsey Thomas

(For Debra Marie Thomas)

Ever since my mother died
She visits me nightly
In my dreams.

She opens the door,
spreads her arms
and welcomes me inside them -
She does not seem to remember
that she is dead.

I give her offerings -
crystal shavings
old scarves
bits of advice
She smiles but
her mouth is underwater.

She asks me
where have I been
am I eating enough

do I want to go to the store
with her -

I take her hands and trace
veins around her knuckles
the outline of her wrists
over and over again.

I smell her hair and
I forget how to breath and
what breathing even is.
I can't tell her when it's time
for me to go home.

Does this count as a haunting?
Or have I created a house for us
In the lonely hours?

Family Annihilator

Gabrielle Heinze

After Saturn Devouring His Son by Francisco Goya

Look into my eyes.

See that I do this because

I love you.

Let the milk in your bottle slowly cool.

It will be okay.

I will smear the blood dripping down your nose into your mouth.

Don't spit it out- that's disgusting- on my carpet, on my floor.

I love you.

Your forehead is soft, the skull still forming.

From under my teeth, I can feel it.

I can feel it press inwards

as I lay a kiss on you

and tell you that I do this

because you don't understand.

Finish your bottle now, drink it all up.

Don't let your mother's gift go to waste.

I worked so hard getting her this way.

I love you.

You shouldn't cry while I hold you

as if you don't appreciate me.

Red face, raw from letting the world know how strong your lungs are.

Hush. Hush.

I'll pick you up and you can be in a world

where you can live with your siblings, with your mother too,

once I'm done with you.

You can stay here.

I love you.

Inventory of Small Things

Paurush Saxena

There are objects
that refuse to leave us properly.

A bent spoon
kept in a drawer
no one opens
for anything useful.

A receipt faded
into weather
but still insisting
on its own math.

We learn to live
around these residues-
not grief exactly,
more like arrangement.

The way light sits
on a wall at 4 p.m.
without asking
to be remembered.

The way a plant leans
toward a window
it will never name.

Once,
there was a sound
that meant arrival.

Now the house
recognizes footsteps
only as variation.

Even absence
develops habits.

The chair holds its shape
after we stop using it.

The air keeps practicing
how to be empty
without becoming nothing.

We call this continuation.

We call it normal.

Still,
some mornings
the spoon moves slightly
in its place-

as if testing

whether we are still here

to notice.

And we are.

Just not all at once.

Mamá Rosita (Inspired by “Extended Release” by Lesley Wheeler)

Maria Massana

Inspired by “Extended Release” by Lesley Wheeler

Her soft crinkled eyes gazed up at me

for the last time, last May.

Her mind was a carousel, explaining the same stories

over

and

over,

and I just listened.

Listened with no other choice but to listen.

Listening to her stories about her childhood on

her family’s farm, womanhood, the loves of her life,

and her daring adventures as a young girl.

The matriarch, nucleus if you will, of my mycelial family.

Alfredo Espino is on her nightstand

holding hands with a foil embossing

of the Virgin Mary. An usher, almost.

August came.

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And she was welcomed.

I wonder what her parents felt,

and how the tendrils

of family I will never know,

felt seeing her again.

Walking Towards McCormick

Beck Jewell

*walking towards McCormick after picking up my testosterone prescription
from Student Health and Wellness, as the man upstairs claims that the picture
is of him as a doctor, not Jesus Christ*

under brick-summer swelter and cheese-cracker air,
my pores pan for gold, natural and healing and pharmaceutical shimmer.
some debt-dunning and smarmy old man at the top of the stairs
asks, *Are you Going To Heaven?*
lad, I'm lush. I'm verdant. I'm growing myself like a chia pet
and you don't know my
backpack's full of forbidden fruit and lab-grown lifesavers.
I wanna say, *who knows, man? are you?*
better ask yourself, gray as you are.
I love my neighbors and got years left in me,
unless the situation upstairs speeds up
and we all fall back to the '40s.
but I will be lovely today, we will be lovely today.
silky-blue sky, I swear, purple mountains majesty—
and Whoever is watching, and whoever is not,
we *will* all be lovely.

Poems that Rhyme

Winner: Levi Helebo, “Black Boy Sung”

Runner-up: Abinaya Ayyamperumal, “The Original Chatwindow, Currently Unemployed”

Honorable Mention: Amollie Stoermer, “Avarice”

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Black Boy Sung

Levi Helebo

Black boy sing
In the dead of night
Let your voice ring
Do what feel alright

Your heart sung
In rhythm and blues
On the tip of your tongue
A tune, to soothe

Sing it louder
Don't spell it out
It's your power
A twist, a shout

Black boy tell me
What you sang last night
Did they know, did they see?
Did you give them a fright?

Your vile voodoo

Your wicked wit
Your telling taboo
Not a radio hit

An audience
Whether sneer, or jeer, or
cheer
Is an opulence
Not a thing to fear

Black boy singing
Till their ears are ringing
This black boy sung

Because his brother was hung
They stomp

Their feet
And clap
Their hands
Sink in
The peat
The shifting
Sands
They call him Chief, and Boss,
and King,
Give him roses cause this negro
can sing
The castles are built
The stage is set
Feet stuck in silt
Not there yet
The words
Are dark
They drip
Like tar
Like birds
The lark
A trip
Too far

Black boy sang
On a stage, alone
He wanted to reap
The seeds, all sewn

Black boy sang
Of flight and things
That could escape the fangs
Like feathered wings

The Original Chatwindow, Currently Unemployed

Abinaya Ayyamperumal

Once, people borrowed me
for difficult art —
love letters, resignations,
dramatic texts typed in the dark.

I was magnificent then.

A single line
could consume an hour.
Humans stared at ceiling fans
like grammar held power.

One word too cold.
One word too kind.
Half the night wasted
editing the mind.

Now?

One prompt.
Two clicks.
Three sparkle emojis

and everyone's Rumi on LinkedIn posts and reels.

The same fellow who once wrote
“hpy bdy dude”
now sends paragraphs sounding
like a monk from the Himalaya.

Very suspicious behavior.

Even apologies have changed their tone.

Nobody says,
“I acted like an idiot. Leave me alone.”

Now it's:

“I acknowledge the discomfort caused
by my emotionally unavailable phase.”

Aiyo.

At least break down properly
while constructing the phrase.

The funny thing is this:

for years humans said
writing was easy,
poets were dramatic,
and overthinking unhealthy.

Then a machine wrote one decent poem
and suddenly civilization panicked beautifully.

Now everybody worships
“authentic voice” and “human style”
after outsourcing their personality
one caption at a while.

Still, I am not worried.

Machines may write clean,
but only humans can draft a message
like it's a crime scene.

Write. Delete. Rewrite. Pace.

Open the chat.

Close the chat.

Lose dignity without leaving the place.

That trembling?

That chaos?

That unnecessarily emotional spiral at night?

That was the entire point of writing.

Ah yes.

Before I forget.

I am the human brain.

Recently shifted to the layoffs division —
still retained for password recovery,
imaginary arguments during showers,
and remembering embarrassing moments
with cinematic clarity
at 2:17 every morning.

Avarice

Amollie Stoermer

When Vincent Montgomery, a man of great age
Knelt down in his garden for basil and sage
He spotted a bottle from down below,
Where only the scaggiest weeds could grow.

Inside this bottle was something much stranger,
A written account of a man's brushes with danger.
Perilous fights, then a shipwreck most violent
That left he alone the good grace to survive it.

Deeper in the letter, this man confessed,
He'd pulled from the shipwreck a treasure chest.
And towards the bottom, to Vincent's surprise,
He revealed the location of this kingly prize.

But before he ended his detailed report,
He left a warning—not sweet, nor short.
“This treasure's been stolen not once, but twice:
And both robbers have paid the ultimate price.

The first who stole it, a man called Jack,
Was slain by his brother in a savage attack.

He stole Jack's ship and then stole Jack's crew
And now rests with them all 'neath the briny blue.

But whatever evil that guards o'er this gold,
Won't claim this sailor's poor, miserable soul.
For I leave here as penniless as the day I left
on this foolhardy, reckless, lamentable quest."

Vincent, who'd somehow forgotten to breathe,
Collected himself and stood up from the weeds.
He was born on that land and knew every inch,
So he swiftly set out to begin digging a trench.

Though his back deeply ached and his arms grew sore,
He was soon four feet down and was digging some more
When to his surprise, there rang out a great THUNK
As his shovel had pierced through an old oaken trunk.

What spilled from the earth made him fall to his knees,
As he scooped up gold coins, gold bars, gold rings.
He filled up his pockets with such blinding speed
As he dreamed of the life these new riches would bring.

But soon the sky darkened and night closed in,
And a bracing breeze prickled at the old man's skin.

He knew that his pockets, his hat, and his boots,
Would not be sufficient in transporting his loot.

So with a great groan and all of his might,
He dragged the chest up and set out in the night.
The wind had picked up and so did the rain,
But Vincent endured through the mud and the pain.

The world was pitch black by the time he got home,
But he knew every tree and knew every stone.
He trudged to his door and heaved his wealth inside
As fierce lightning bolts streaked through a churning sky.

And the storm that followed was historic they say,
When the winds and the rain and the waves hit the bay.
Uprooted were trees and washed away in the floods,
And smashed were the windows of stores and pubs.

But nothing was hit harder, the locals all swear,
Than a rickety old cottage that's no longer there.
And Vincent Montgomery, swept away and drowned,
Left behind basil, sage, and a gold coin on the ground.

Fathers Day Minus One

John Burnham

Next year I will be on the other side of this Day,
Now in countdown 'til I enter that fray.
I went to visit my Dad today
floating under Assawoman Bay.

I did and didn't feel alone
as I bicycled past the large, comfortable homes
with ample porches to survey
deer living in the field today.

Past the homes, past the golfers in their paces,
I pedaled through the preserved spaces,
past the tall grass and the reeds,
to visit my dad with no more needs.

Benches were placed along the path to wait and observe
grass and other things growing and dying in the preserve
and the birds coming to and fro,
but not trapped here, free to go.

Along the road through fields and woods
thinking through the wills and coulds
to the pier where we said goodbye
to the caring man who helped us fly.

Last year his chil'ren gathered 'round
to bid farewell as without a sound
Dad drifted away to join again
the water, fish, marsh and sand.

This year it was just me
and looking 'round I could see
families, friends and lovers,
all of us skimming along the covers

of the bedding for all of our dreams,
our perceptions preserving only what it seems,
while things live and die beneath the folds,
knowing not what the future holds,
just like us, but without the worry,
no sleep lost to long-term hurry.

My dad has joined them in their lives
and I believe his soul survives,
smiling at us from another place,
and knowing the world beneath its face.

My Whole Life Through

Cyllan Martini

I look for God in the robin's nest
as she sits a fortnight through-
sun, then moon, then sun again, but still no peak of blue.
Life emerged beneath her rusty breast,
born blind, but still they knew:
instinct breeds ambivalence.
When it was time, they flew.

It ended rather quickly,
what I spied the whole spring through.
The questions left on branches had me counting what I knew.
My heartbreak swiftly escalated,
climbing steps in twos.
The answers in my footprints left me with a fractured view.

I want to curl up against my mother's chest
and cry the whole night through,
then wipe my nose on her cotton sleeve
and wish away the blue.
I want to hear that "it's okay" and hear an "I love you."
But that's a problem when you're far away
And a child of 32.

I Saw You

Julia Saba

I saw you,
A glimpse of you too good to be true.
I remember that smile, that joke, that presence,
The version of you that could finish a sentence.

It's been a while old friend of mine,
15 years - it feels like a different time.
I've lived a life you wouldn't know,
Watched seasons change, watched children grow.
You look the same, but hollow-eyed,
Like something beautiful has died.
Your clothes are worn, your face is thin,
As if the world won't let you in.

You cracked a joke, the same old line,
Like we were kids, still doing fine.
But your laugh was slow, your hands were twitching,
Your mind half-gone, your story glitching.

I burned and bloomed, I build and broke,
I wept through storms and danced through smoke.
I found some peace in daily things,
In wedding bands and baby swings.

But you - you're caught in loops of pain,
That circle back and start again.
Still chasing highs that never stay,
Still singing lines the same old way.

I wanted to scream, to pull you through,
To show you all that life can do.
But I saw your eyes - they weren't quite there,
Just shadows flickering in a stare.

And yet, I'd be a liar still,
To say I don't recall the thrill.
The way you'd shine, the way you'd speak,
The fire in you before the break.

I loved you once, the real, whole you,
Before our worlds had split in two.
Before the pills, the glass, the game,
Before you lost your own name.

I saw you, friend, I really did,
Not just the shell addiction hid.
You looked right at me, almost through,
And life continued, without you.

Performance Poetry

Winner: Sahar Choudhury, “Wolfpet”

Runner-up: MB Gayle, “Espresso”

Wolfpet

Sahar Choudhury

YouTube Link: [Wolfpet](#)

Espresso

MB Gayle

YouTube Link: <https://youtu.be/l1LyngcjeUI>

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



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