

The background of the cover is a photograph of a long, narrow tunnel. The tunnel is lined with a series of arches supported by columns. The lighting is warm and yellow, creating a sense of depth and perspective. The text is overlaid on the upper and lower portions of the image.

The Road Not Taken  
A Journal of Formal Poetry

Spring, 2015

# **The Road Not Taken: A Journal of Formal Poetry**

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## **R. Bremner**

R. Bremner lives in Glen Ridge, NJ, with his beautiful sociologist wife, their brilliant son, and their excitable puppy Ariel. He's a regular contributor to [poetsonline.org](http://poetsonline.org) (the last 12 issues), and has appeared in International Poetry Review and Passaic Review, among others. He likes you to visit him at [http://www.pw.org/content/r\\_bremner](http://www.pw.org/content/r_bremner).

### **Stopping by whores on a crowded street**

Whose whores these are I think I know.  
His home is in the Village though;  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his whores fill up with dough.

My little cab must think it queer  
To stop without a red light near  
'Tween bums and junkies on the make  
The hottest evening of the year.

It gives the engine quite a shake  
To ask if there is some mistake.  
The only other sound's the sweep  
Of pimps a-counting up their take.

The whores are lovely, dark and deep.  
But I have promises to keep,  
And bucks to earn before I sleep,  
And bucks to earn before I sleep.

## **K.E. Duffin**

K. E. Duffin's work has appeared in *Agni*, *Bellingham Review*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Harvard Review*, *Kestrel*, *Louisville Review*, *Pleiades*, *Ploughshares*, *Poetry*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Sewanee Review*, and other journals. *King Vulture*, a book of poems, was published by the University of Arkansas Press.

### **Rainbow Lorikeet at the Zoo**

Prism sprung from foliage, like striped candy  
or Egyptian glass spun in jungle sun  
slatted by fronds, you land—Ta Da!—like a dandy  
at regimental try-outs, flashing your citron,

a gaudy minor official who expects applause,  
or at the very least, a circus. You have no fear.  
Portly in your dark cummerbund, your claws  
vise my arm as you sip cold nectar

greedily, cup after cup, growing heavier, muscles  
packed beneath your finery of red,  
yellow, blue, green, your tapered tail  
a scissored chromolithograph, your head

cocked toward the sky, your eye inquisitive.  
Slaked, you lunge and fold yourself within  
the greenest part of summer's lingering spectrum,  
to mull over your fate of sated captive.

## **Gregory Palmerino**

Gregory Palmerino's essays and poems have appeared in several journals and literary reviews, including *The Road Not Taken*. He teaches English at Manchester Community College and writes poetry in Connecticut's Quiet Corner.

### **Against the Shore**

We'll walk, then, alone  
    with our memories,  
where the waves atone  
    our soles in spaces  
of sand—dividing  
    the shore between those  
who are not living  
    and ours soon to close.

Past love fades away,  
    true love yet to dark  
that undiscovered day,  
    and each indent marks  
our parallel paths  
    speaking silent rhyme—  
Love cuts the one swath  
    that conquers all Time.

## **Imagination**

An expedient rise—this viewless voice—  
the foster child of heart and hand arose  
when folks were searching for clearness and truth  
(those dying proofs of civilization);

when nymphs and naiads frolicked without care  
and the world was less with us, less forlorn,  
by virtue of placing that which means most,  
the now fading link, once master of hosts.

Indeed, our captive youth was not wasted  
on prodigal brains but flowed quite facile  
despite healthy fears of “primitive” souls:  
spirits unknown may be spirits unkind.

I hear nothing but me. Your antique song,  
which grows from our own steppes of sorrow,  
relieving the endogenous weeds  
pent up in crowded inner climes, is mute!  
The time having come, cast us back in fire  
lest your vigor soon forgets its return.

## **Roger Sedarat**

Roger Sedarat is the author of *Dear Regime: Letters to the Islamic Republic*, which won Ohio UP's 2007 Hollis Summers' Prize, and *Ghazal Games* (Ohio UP, 2011). He teaches poetry and translation in the MFA program at Queens College, City University of New York.

### **Playing the Older Gregarious Italian Who Always Seems to Win**

Most players wouldn't play with him again.  
He talks through games, and he's so passionate  
His strong accent connects to every hit:  
"I shoot 'a 'da skeet. You know...clay pigeon!"  
(He fires a forehand winner down the line).  
"Next week I take 'a you to the Catskills.  
(He comes to net). "You have a gun?" (And kills  
My soft return). "If not you use 'a mine."  
(When he attacks an overhead): "Let's a'  
Suppose that ball, it was 'a 'da' target.  
You take 'a the aim with my Beretta  
And "Bang!" (the ball shoots by like a bullet).  
"So I win 'da first and second set a.'  
Do we play best a' five a'? I forget..."

## **Injury Report**

Herman's out with a sprained elbow  
And Daniel broke a rib.  
Wes says his foot hurts, but I know  
That he's been known to fib.

Bill M's a proven warrior,  
I've seen him serve through pain  
That paralyzed his right shoulder  
And not even complain.

I saw an orthopedist  
For some new knee troubles.  
"You're old," he said, and I got pissed.  
He told me to play doubles.

By far my greatest injury  
The only time I've cried  
(On my way home; No one could see)  
Was over my hurt pride.

## Chris Wise

**Chris Wise** is a poet and novelist. He has been published in various poetry anthologies and small press literary magazines such as *Nerve Cowboy*, *Blue Collar Review*, and *Writer's Bloc*. He has been a featured author in *Cowboys and Indians Magazine*, and has made several radio appearances on KPFT's *Living Art*, KH-TV.com, and the Word Around Town Poetry Tour. *Colliding With Orion* (a collection of poetry, short stories and essays on craft) from Absey & Co. will be released in the fall of 2016. He is a veteran of the US Army, earned an English degree from Texas A&M, and currently lives in Houston, TX.

### **While the World Decays in Bright Confetti**

While the world decays in bright confetti  
We charge it confidently unrehearsed  
We'll break ourselves long before we're ready

Armed with our comforts and obesity  
We shove our neighbors so we might be first  
While the world decays in bright confetti

We trick ourselves out for the least money  
Then reeling, wonder why we've been so cursed  
We'll break ourselves long before we're ready

Some crack cold ones while the rest fall sweaty  
Shouting at a roar how they've earned their thirst  
While the world decays in bright confetti

Our exhausted cuss the drunk as lazy  
And attack the work week at heaving bursts  
We'll break ourselves long before we're ready

Gasping on whiskey or rosary  
The hourglass stands for better or worse  
While the world decays in bright confetti  
We'll break ourselves long before we're ready

## **Iophon Speaks**

Thank you for the writing lessons, Father.  
My plays have gotten so moral and tragic  
only Euripides can best me.  
Admittedly I took some of your themes,

but I did them with a more modern feel.  
I shuffled *Iliou Persis* and ran it.  
Who needs plot or rhyme, I make tragedy!  
I set trends. My friends are the “it” crowd.

But you, Father, are getting so old.  
*Oedipus at Colonus* will not last...  
enough with gods, love and fools humbled!

And all that money you hoard should be spent.  
I’ll take it now and say you’ve lost your mind.  
Why do you cry old man? I am the future.

## **Karen Greenbaum-Maya**

Karen Greenbaum-Maya, retired clinical psychologist, German major, two-time Pushcart Prize nominee and occasional photographer, no longer lives for Art, but still thinks about it a lot. "Real Poem" received Honorable Mention in the 2013 Muriel Craft Bailey Memorial Competition. Her poems and photos have appeared in *Sow's Ear Poetry Review*, *Off the Coast*, *Lilliput Review*, *Blue Lyra Review*, *Measure*, *Conclave*, *Women's Studies Quarterly*, *B O D Y*, and *The Centrifugal Eye*. Kattywompus Press publishes her two chapbooks, *Burrowing Song* (2013) and *Eggs Satori* (2014). Find links to photos and poems online at: [www.cloudslikemountains.blogspot.com/](http://www.cloudslikemountains.blogspot.com/).

### **Estate Sale**

An ecru beaded top, and champagne furs,  
the score of Lakmé with the Bell Song marked,  
twelve coral linen napkins: these were hers.  
The neighbors come to peep. Cars throng to park.

I see her, sporty silver pixie hair.  
The kitchen's ivy-papered, open plan,  
and yellow Caution tape marks every stair,  
each startling drop from where your steps began.

I think it was her husband who went first.  
No books of his except the PDR,  
2003. Been years since he was versed  
in pulmonology and beating par.

There is no moral here to apprehend.  
Someone cleans up. The world is without end.

## **Robert Lavett Smith**

Raised in New Jersey, Robert Lavett Smith has lived since 1987 in San Francisco, where for the past sixteen years he has worked as a Special Education Paraprofessional. He has studied with Charles Simic and the late Galway Kinnell. He is the author of several chapbooks and three full-length poetry collections, the most recent of which is *The Widower Considers Candles* (Full Court Press, 2014). Two poems from this newest book have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize.

### **The Journey to Lubeck**

Young J. S. Bach, it's known, traversed deep snow,  
Drawn by reports of Buxtehude's playing.  
When silence fell again, he rose to go;  
Finding himself entranced, he wound up staying.  
Today, raised on recordings, we forget  
How rare a pleasure it must once have been  
To hear a rondeau or a minuet  
Performed by virtuosi seldom seen.  
High in the organ loft, thick, clustered chords  
Must have seemed palpable enough to hold;  
Today, no digital podcast affords  
Encounters so immediate, so bold—  
As stunning as a windswept coast might be  
To someone who had never seen the sea.

## **Watching The December Rain**

Here, in this climate where there is no snow,  
Gunmetal skies sob like a rag wrung out;  
Precipitation brings relief from drought,  
But something in the weather lays me low.  
I started dreading Christmas years ago:  
A season not of faith, but nagging doubt,  
Gifting no miracles to sing about,  
No plausible salvation that I know.  
Heaven's neglected, an outworn conceit;  
The season's neither sacred nor profane,  
Its promises withdraw on plodding feet.  
So I stand watching the December rain,  
A weak gray drizzle sizzling on concrete,  
A damp hosanna in a rusty drain.

## **Craig Kurtz**

Craig Kurtz resides at Twin Oaks Intentional Community where he writes poetry while simultaneously surviving the dream. Recent work has appeared in *Aerie Literary Journal*, *Conclave: A Journal of Character*, *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, *Danse Macabre*, *Festival Writer*, *Penumbra*, *Red Fez* and *Wilderness House Literary Review*.

### **Jonson Variation: A Toast to You**

Drink to me only with your eyes  
and my intoxication shall be wise.  
I will not stagger, nor regret  
a surfeit of caroused duet.  
Let us quaff a mellow kiss  
and I'll be worthy, I promise.  
I will not reel, inebriate,  
as spirits roister, tête-à-tête.  
I shall laud, with verse, with mirth,  
your honor, health and day of birth.  
Should you wish another toast,  
I'll festinate a fain riposte.  
'Tis not the juice I seek in sips,  
'tis the allusion of your lips  
that I homage, raising a glass  
which is the spouse of yours, dear lass.

## **Ann Keith**

Ann Keith's poems have appeared in various journals (Orbis, Acumen, Eureka, Byline and over 80 others) as well as in a number of anthologies.

### **Patience And The Gods**

To the architects of our distress  
    How little signifies  
A pain the more, a pang the less!  
    Our sufferings in their eyes  
Must vary each from each no more  
Than grains of sand upon the shore.

And that is why I do not pray  
    To them -- What should I ask?  
A better fate? A brighter day?  
    A less exacting task?  
To change for my sake their decree?  
Why, they would only laugh at me!

Or else the courage to resist  
    Their scourges and stand fast,  
To bear their burdens and persist,  
    Outstay them and outlast?  
That strength they placed within my heart,  
To draw upon it is my part.

## Casey Robb

Casey Robb's careers have included physical therapy and civil engineering. Her poetry has won awards and been published in a variety of journals, including *The Classical Outlook*, *Ekphrasis*, *The Edge City Review*, *The Comstock Review*, and *The Lyric*. This poem was inspired by a monkey she encountered while traveling in northern Thailand. Her short stories have also appeared in the *Menda City Review* and *Fiction on the Web*. Casey is a Texan who lives in Northern California with her two adopted daughters.

### Monkey on a Chain

In thickest jungle, deep in Asia's jaw  
I hiked with tourists from the Chiangmai train.  
We stopped at a hut to rest—and there we saw  
a solitary monkey on a chain.

I watched the monkey watching us, and knew  
that I knew nothing of her missing home:  
not species, nor how many or how few  
of tender young this mother could have known,

nor ancient rhythms, early primal land  
where, in extended family, she was fed.  
She begged a bit of bread from a tourist's hand  
and then climbed up his arm to groom his head.  
But when the tourist tried to resume his trek,  
she wrapped her spider arms around his neck.

## **James Hamby**

James Hamby teaches courses in English literature and composition at Middle Tennessee State University, where he also serves as the Assistant Director of the University Writing Center. His poetry has appeared in *Collage: A Journal of Creative Expression*.

### **The Death of Hector**

Now Hector sees Achilles' flashing eyes  
And feels his sword drop to the blood-soaked plain.  
Still conscious as his foe victoriously ties  
His new-made corpse that will be dragged in train  
Nine times round the city.

Nine times round

The sacred city, for which he fought in vain—  
Nine times the champion's blood will soak the ground,  
Nine times his corpse a trophy dragged in train.

Astyanax? Was that your shrieking cry?  
And as your father draws his final breath,  
Resigns himself in vanity to die,  
Does he live to hear his own son's death?  
Hector, in vain you fought, in vain you died,  
In vain you thought your family safe inside.

## **The Ninth Hour**

And when the gray-haired men beheld the gore,  
Dark red, frothing beneath the darkling sky,  
They turned to home, forsaking hill and shore  
And left him in that cursed place to die.  
The ninth hour came. The faithful sat and wept—  
They little hoped to see their lord again,  
For even though a careful watch they kept,  
The host despaired, presuming death would win.  
Yet little did they guess that far below  
He battled the foe that only he could fight;  
And soon he would return to them to show  
That they no more should have to fear the night.  
What joyous sight befell their wondering eyes  
When they looked up and saw their lord arise!

## **Jim Prothero**

James Prothero teaches high school English and college English in Santa Ana, California. He is the author of the novel *The Sun is But a Morning Star*, and until recently co-editor of *The Road Not Taken*. He has also published the scholarly studies, *Wordsworth and Welsh Romanticism* and *Gaining a Face: the Romanticism of C.S. Lewis*. He lives in San Juan Capistrano with his wife, and paints watercolors.

### **Thoughts on a Photo of My Father**

You stand there, Dad, while waiting for the shutter's  
release, your hair still black and not much older  
than I am now. There is a question in  
your eyes. You lean a bit off balance there  
beside the cluster: Mom, little brother,  
big brother, me, the cat. We're frozen, still  
as life or death, in nineteen seventy-five.  
Time's tissue, ripped, brief, delicate, and faded  
is framed and silent, needing to be dusted.  
And forty years along I find myself,  
again, breath held, awaiting the release.

I would almost die myself to have  
a chance to speak with you a naked hour,

by the fireplace in your studio. But I'm left  
with your drawing board, pencils, brushes, paintings,  
this aging photo, vainly hoping that you'll  
walk in from the next room, make a cup of coffee  
and sit down.

## Sujata Iyengar

Sujata Iyengar teaches Shakespeare, Writing, and Book History at the University of Georgia, Athens, GA. Her most recent books include the co-authored scholarly guide "*Not Like an Old Play*": Love's Labour's Lost *de Shakespeare* (Paris: Fahrenheit, 2014) and the edited collection *Disability, Health, and Happiness in the Shakespearean Body* (Routledge, 2015). "Froward Violet," her remixed version of Shakespeare's only 15-line sonnet (99), appeared in *Upstart*, in the special issue *Out of Sequence: The Sonnets Remixed*, edited by Will Stockton and D. Gilson.

### What Should Grow Where

Our neighbor taught me how to weed her lawn  
And how to pull up the sycamore shoots  
By the roots, so they spindled out white and pink.  
In recompense she let me eat my fill  
Of raspberries growing tall on canes  
Between our houses in a concrete bed.

I always hated getting out of bed  
In the mornings, so I ignored the lawn.  
But I eagerly ran to check the first-year's primocanes  
As the sun sent out fragile grey shoots  
Of daylight, until at last the sky would fill  
With wide blue air and chase away the pink.

Don't pick the raspberries, she said, before they're really pink.  
And leave the growing primocanes alone in bed;  
You have to wait until each drupe fills  
With color. They are delicate as lawn.  
Just wait a year, and they'll fall off the shoots  
Into your hand from hard grey floricanes:

Sweet tiny pungent clusters. The bamboo-canes  
Shuddered beneath our fingers, pink  
With cold in early dawn. I pulled up shoots  
Next door and went back to my bed.  
The neighbor on the other side kept children off her lawn  
Except at Easter, when she gave us china egg-cups filled

With chocolate buttons; squirrels filled  
With caramel; kola cubes and licorice-canes.  
But still no children laughed upon her lawn.  
She would ask us questions, pink  
Nose twitching, about our parents' jobs and if we made our beds.  
We had to be polite because her daughter sent out thorny shoots

Of discontent in letters to the council, shoots  
Or shouts of outrage: how the neighborhood began to fill  
With immigrants whose children never went to bed.

Soft, stopped, and stunted like pruned primocanes  
Her friends in creaky dresses and pink  
Faces sat on chairs upon the tidy lawn,

Drank tea, tight-lipped, ignored next-door's shrill shouts across the lawn,  
Praised beds filled with aster, dahlia, and pink.  
Never anything to eat: not a single raspberry cane.

## **Jonathan Simkins**

Jonathan Simkins lives in Ybor City, Florida. He works as a psychiatric registered nurse. His poetry has been featured recently in *Carcinogenic Poetry* and *Stepping Stones Magazine* and is forthcoming in *The Chaffey Review*.

### **In Memoriam**

“ . . . *here we are now, entertain us . . .* ”

Tsunamis of bong water, Pabst Blue Ribbon,  
The summer rains that fill the Florida fields  
With fungi . . .

Your revolution that I yielded  
To, baby faced, sixteen years old, from the crib  
To the cow field, smoke laden wood, back alley  
And barn, took me from suburban lawns to valleys

*Where you reigned over me, and your rage healed.*

I wailed, railed, raged with you against . . . what?  
The cocksure poetry condemned it all,  
Except the condemnation, what *we* rejected.

Buckshot that strikes the brain and stains the wall  
Put me in tears. Your little ones, I not  
The least, still hear your wailing, and your fall.

## **Sean Lause**

Sean Lause teaches at Rhodes State College in Lima, Ohio. His poems have appeared in *The Minnesota Review*, *The Alaska Quarterly*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *The Pedestal*, *Poetry International*, *The Beloit Poetry Journal* and *Sanskrit*. His first book of poems, *Bestiary of Souls*, was published by FutureCycle Press in 2013.

### **The Bird as Essential Reading**

A bird is essential reading  
for those who need to dream,  
for a bird learns wing wisdom  
from a scattering of winds.

A bird is essential reading  
in the text of an escape,  
for a bird knows wall is illusion  
and flight a new way of seeing.

A bird is essential reading  
for the prisoner of plans,  
so he may learn the earth seems bound  
in the kingdom of the blind.

## **Julie Mendelsohn**

Julie Bloch Mendelsohn lives in Israel and Vermont with her husband and six children. Her work has been published in Poetica Magazine, The Poetry Society of Vermont's Mountain Troubadour, Lilipoh Magazine, and the Voices Israel Anthology. In addition to writing poetry, she also works as lawyer for Holocaust survivors, and on pancreatic cancer research.

### **The Secret Power of the Moon**

The moon knows how to shine reflected light.  
She has no need to learn astronomy.  
She knows that she is beautiful and bright.

All the knowledge in the world can't make it right,  
and sometimes it's the best that you can do.  
The moon knows how to shine reflected light.

It never seems to be quite worth the fight  
to challenge the great sun's authority.  
She knows that she is beautiful and bright.

She is the queen in every dreamer's sight.  
No one dare say her light is not her own.  
The moon knows how to shine reflected light.

Defiant child--she steals the show at night,  
when the sun despite his power can't protest.  
She knows that she is beautiful and bright.

Though people cannot see the sun at night,  
his presence is reflected in *her* glow.  
She knows that she is beautiful and bright.  
The moon knows how to shine reflected light.

## **Caged Bird, Free Bird**

A sparrow hopping on the rail,  
searching for his morning meal,  
stopped and eyed my parakeets  
pecking at their store-bought treats.  
I wonder if that caged pair ponder  
what life is like in the great yonder?  
Or what *he* thinks, the one outside  
about the two so tightly tied.

Bird in a cage, bird on a wire-  
One is trapped, the other on fire.  
Freedom is striking out on your own,  
flying into the great unknown,  
catching the wind and soaring high,  
and struggling to stay alive.

But some behind the bars are free,  
because they do not need to see  
the wider world or flit about.  
Bars give safety, comfort, rote.  
Nothing there can do them harm,  
safe from danger, full, and warm.

You may pity them for their state,  
but which is truly the better fate?  
In the world of birds and people too,  
there are many paths to choose.  
High in the sky or close to home,  
there are different kinds of freedom.

## Andrew Periale

**Andrew Periale** is an Emmy-nominated artist, and has toured throughout the US as an actor and puppeteer. He is the longtime editor of *Puppetry International* magazine, His poetry has appeared in *Light Quarterly*, *Yellow Medicine Review*, *Entelechy International*, *Burnt Bridge* and others.

### Why Poets Write

Across the café, pretty girls sip tea.  
A lurid simile lurks in his gaze—  
Desire and age have drifted out of phase.  
A prisoner of his biology,  
He'd carve initials in their family tree...  
His curly hair is thinning as it grays,  
But he eats well, is at the gym most days  
To battle time, his mortal enemy.

He shakes it off, unsheathes his fountain pen,  
Recalls a maxim from his student years:  
"The good times," Goethe wrote, "*kehren nie wieder*"...\*  
He settles in, a writer once again:  
*The poet's lonely, but he has no peers—  
Is loved by his imaginary reader.*

"are never coming back..."

## Cardinal

It gives the outward show of dignity  
That silky vestiture of deepest red  
And matching square cap on the aged head  
(A privilege granted by the Holy See).  
The incardinated appointee  
Will never have a wedding nor elope.  
Accused, he answers only to the Pope  
For acts of moral impropriety.  
Named for the cardinal's scarlet choir dress  
The namesake songbird takes a single mate,  
Raises his brood, though she will incubate  
The eggs. I love that color, I confess—  
A sunny day, perched on our garden gate,  
So pure a hue it seems to luminesce.

## Bluebird

So pure a hue it seems to luminesce,  
A blue that is like nothing else—not sky,  
Nor sea, nor flower, nor lapis lazuli  
Reserved by Titian for the Virgin's dress.  
My mother showed the bird to me: *look, look,*  
She whispers, as the cobalt thrush appears.  
And then thereafter, oh, what joy I took  
To see it (in the Eisenhower years).  
But then for decades it is gone! We learn  
Of eggshells made too thin by DDT—  
False promise: "Better life through chemistry."  
When Carson's *Silent Spring* expressed concern,  
A worldwide ban reduced toxicity.  
O feathered thing, I welcome your return.

## **Kim King**

Kim King was born and raised in Lockport, New York, and she has a B.A. and M.Ed. from the University of Buffalo. She lived and studied in France before becoming a high school French teacher in Central Pennsylvania. Her love of poetry led to a MA in Writing Poetry Concentration at The Johns Hopkins University. Her poems have appeared in *Prompted, An International Collection of Poems, River Poets Journal, Stone Mountain Review, Wild Onions, Outside In Literary and Travel Magazine, Point Mass, In Gilded Frame, Poetic Bloomings: the first year, and Literary SEXTS*. Kim's poems appeared recently in *Potnia: A Devotional Anthology in Honor of Demeter* and *The Midwest Quarterly*. She lives and writes poetry from her home in Hershey, Pennsylvania.

## **The Barbell Man of York**

*"An American Roadside Stop in Pennsylvania"*

The Barbell Man of York greets those who cruise  
along route eighty-three, his one knee bent,  
the other leg outstretched—Olympic giant  
with barbell raised above his head, a muse  
of strength who mocks the drunks who fail the booze  
impairment test by cops below. "Repent,"  
the billboard near that spot reveals the slant  
of earnest holy groups, but it's a ruse  
to scare the types who pray for us despite  
their own transgressions. Passing daily near  
that spinning man, who wears his singlet taut  
on muscled fiberglass, I crave his tight  
athletic ass — my Atlas whirls that rear,  
and there's no sin in wicked plastic thoughts.

## Ron Singer

Poetry by Ron Singer ([www.ronsinger.net](http://www.ronsinger.net)) has appeared in many publications. His recent collection of Maine poems, *Look to Mountains, Look to Sea*, has won two awards, and his eighth book, *Uhuru Revisited: Interviews with Pro-Democracy Leaders* (Africa World Press/Red Sea Press), has just been published.

### ***KENYA: Matatu Mzungu (White Man on a Mini-Bus)***

“Those matatu drivers are so horrible! They are so wonderful!”  
--Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, Kenyan writer (in conversation with Ron Singer).

1. In Nairobi, at first, I took the bus.  
“Beware of pickpockets!” warned my squash coach,  
a dreadlocked youth from the Kibera slum.  
Whereas I trundled like an elephant,  
Coach Morisi ran like an antelope.

He described their modus operandi:  
“A big one gets in front, blocking the door.  
Another, behind, pushes you forward,  
while a nimble boy extracts your wallet,  
dropping it into a portfolio.”

A few days later, thanks to Coach’s tip,  
I thwarted the crew. Grabbing the boy’s hand,  
I warned him, “If I shout now, they’ll beat you.”  
I doubt that I saved him from a life of crime.

2. Traffic soothsaying is impossible  
in “Nairobbery.” Getting anyplace  
from anywhere can take you anything  
from half a minute to half a day. Weather,  
accidents, sinkholes, palaver, roadblocks  
manned by venial, underpaid police.

Scared off the bus, I opted for matatus,  
ten-passenger vans often packed double,  
with respectable matrons, sardine-like,  
forced to sit on the laps of lucky men.

Meanwhile, music, American export,  
shakes the matatu --gangsta video.  
The lyrics are, “Fuck fuck shit, fuck fuck bitch.”  
For this mzungu, a Dantean touch.

3. Of course, there are also compensations.  
One matatu was blessedly quiet.  
 (“Sound system bust,” apologized the driver.)

That day, I enjoyed a conversation  
with a fellow passenger. Middle-aged,  
he sported a three-piece suit, red Kangol cap,  
mirror-shined shoes, and fat yellow ascot.

Although he looked like a small-time tycoon,  
he turned out to be a hospital clerk  
on the way home from visiting a friend.  
What did we talk about? Politics, drought  
(which made me eat dust, while others starved).  
This friendly man offered, "Let's meet for a drink."  
Just a gesture, though. The drink was never drunk.

4. Once, good luck gave me the passenger seat.  
Squeezed next to a matron of my own,  
for a while we breezed along, heavenly.  
But then came the mother of traffic jams.

Bless our crazy matatu driver, who  
managed to circumvent a massive snarl  
of motorcycles, cars, matatus, trucks.

He made his way around them by bumping  
into a ditch, then hopping like a huge,  
ungainly steel grasshopper through a field,  
and back onto the tarmac, traffic-free.

The matatu made alarming noises,  
but it limped along to my transfer point.  
Minutes later, matatu mutandis! Home!

--adapted from an essay by the author in *New Maps*, 2013.