



The Road Not Taken

A Journal of Formal Poetry

Fall, 2016

The Road Not Taken: A Journal of Formal Poetry

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Poet's Corner

Think of this issue as the distillation of Fall on the extreme edge of winter: an austere and minimalist season of dry leaves and bare branches. Accordingly, the poems of this issue are self-examining and self-aware: they listen, they circle back, they celebrate. This is the season of villanelles and unobtrusively reaffirming rhymes, a season that returns to old forms with new sounds because at some level we need to be reminded that on the far verge of winter there is always that mysterious rebirth, Spring.

We thank our many many contributors and well-wishers. We are humbled by the quality and sheer number of submissions we've been getting; it's getting harder to choose from among you every year. Thank you for reading. And please, tell your friends about us.

Yours,

Kathryn Jacobs
Managing Editor

Rachel Jacobs
Associate Editor

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Feature Poem

John Grey

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident. Recently published in New Plains Review, South Carolina Review, Stillwater Review and Big Muddy Review with work upcoming in Louisiana Review, Cape Rock and Spoon River Poetry Review.

Honolulu: Chinese New Year

The chopsticks, silken robes, are mass produced,
The ceramic Buddha's made in Japan,
So's the ivory ceremonial fan,
It's still Chinatown, its mystique induced
By lillikoi, coconut, sage air juiced
With star fruit, green onion, there's no nose can
Resist fried rice sunning in searing pan;
The emperor's naked, I'm still seduced.

And then the sky explodes, the unwary
Are swept up by light and smoke and din,
Street smells like inside an apothecary,
It looks like a red popping toothy grin;
Don't argue with fireworks in February
If they're convinced a New Year must begin.

Robin Helweg-Larsen

Robin Helweg-Larsen was British-born but Bahamian-raised. His poetry has mostly been published in the UK (Ambit, Snakeskin, etc), but also in The Road Not Taken, The Rotary Dial, The Lyric, The Hypertexts, etc. He lives in his hometown of Governor's Harbour on Eleuthera.

The Self-Aware

Most insecure are those, the self-aware:
for all their acts are pointless and they know it,
scurrying like ants on an éclair..
the universe, indifferent, looks askance.

This insecure mode breeds defensiveness
and therefore arrogance, not least in poets
who know their work especially valueless...
even to other ants.

We Dreamed

We dreamed we could fly to the moon
with six grey geese pulling our sleigh.
We dreamed we could fly to the moon –
we can, but not in that way.

We dreamed we could see round the world
with a magical mirror display.
We dreamed we could see round the world –
we can, but not in that way.

We dreamed we could live forever
by doing whatever gods say.
We dreamed we could live forever –
we can, but not in that way.

Lisa DeSiro

Lisa DeSiro's poems have been published in various print and digital formats, and have been set to music by several composers. She has an MFA in Creative Writing from Lesley University and she is also an accomplished pianist. She lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts and works for a non-profit organization.

Confined

She worried about her garden.
Who would tend the yard?
Gave my father permission to hire
landscapers. Later, I showed her
photos on my computer: see
how beautiful, all in bloom.
I wrapped one of her lap quilts
around my legs, chilled,
sitting so long. Outside the room,
sunlight filled the parking lot.
She watched the window, not TV.
Wanted the air-conditioning.
*Are you still talking to God,
Mom?*

Mostly listening.

Learning *Winterreise*

This morning's piano lesson:
Let the key lift your finger up.

I practice, with the noon sun
my spotlight, counting step by step
across a field of frozen snow
as if it were an empty stage.

And later — when, upon the page
of unfurled evening tinted pink,
the bare trees, with indigo ink,
sketch a silhouette staccato —

I'll hum a Schubert tune, bound
for home, my breathing rhythmic,
body almost metronomic,
supported by the ground.

Scott Edward Anderson

Scott Edward Anderson is the author of *FALLOW FIELD* (Aldrich Press, 2013) and *Walks In Nature's Empire* (The Countryman Press, 1995). He has been a Concordia Fellow at the Millay Colony for the Arts and received the Nebraska Review Award.

Villanelle on a Line Hated by Auden

"We must love one another or die,"
The poet instructs, though doesn't believe it.
"We must love one another and die."

Revised to inclusive *and* on another try,
Then repudiated the poem, banning it.
He who must love another or die.

"Ours is not to reason why,"
Another poet said with the soul of wit.
Ours is to love one another. We die.

Changing a word makes meaning fly
To the far reaches of our minds and sit.
Must we, really, love one another *or* die?

Can we exist without knowing why--
Knowledge straining at the bit--
Until we can only love each other and die?

When we live without love, we die.
At least, those of us who desire it.
We must love one another or die.
We must love one another and die.

Brandon Thompson

Brandon Thompson lives in a rural suburb of Chicago with wife, kids, and—very recently—fewer chickens thanks to a pesky (and possibly psychotic) raccoon who can untwist chicken wire like a brain surgeon. Brandon teaches composition courses at (usually more than one) local community college(s).

Postcard from Purgatory

This place reminds me of that dream vacation
we never took: a strip of dirty sand
sandwiched between lagoon and raised foundation
condominiums in pastels, landside.

We passed the day riding crowded surf
our bodies like driftwood tanned and stripped smooth.
The water stung and flung us live birth-like
ashore, over and over. Back in our rooms

we watched lemniscate silhouettes of fish
pass beneath the balcony. What we thought
were German Shepherds dipping in and out
on the far edge of the inlet were brackish

crocodiles, black bodies like iron filings
magnetized to a lone sunbather, arm over eyelids.

Ash Wednesday

My dearest Persephone, when he said,
“to ashes you shall return,” you giggled
and having just learned to walk
who could blame you? You smear
black beans and apple sauce on your forehead
nightly. The changing states of matter
are not solemn realizations but occasions
for delight. Change is funny. The mess
of decay should be squished through fistled
fingers and dribbled over freshly-mopped
floors, bone dust whipped into devilish
winds, because mingled with sunlight through
windows it glitters in dizzying refraction, before settling.

Dan Jabe

Dan Jabe studied English and history at the University of Michigan and then law at Harvard Law School. His poetry reflects his interests in literature, history, art and nature. A Michigan native, Dan is a civil litigation attorney practicing in Columbus, Ohio.

The Multiverse

I cannot bend my mind to a multiverse
of infinite worlds in an endless expanse,
where the poets have written every verse
and the wheel of fortune leaves nothing to chance.

Where there cannot be a road less traveled by
because, at each fork, both the roads are taken,
and where the flapping wings of the butterfly
have become, in effect, trivial again.

Where all the fortuities of falling in love
are preordained – another *fait accompli*,
and where the magic of shooting stars above
is debased to mathematical certainty.

Richard Merelman

Richard Merelman is Professor of Political Science (Emeritus) at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. His *The Imaginary Baritone* (Fireweed Press, 2012) was his first volume of poetry. In 2016 Finishing Line Press published his chapbook *The Unnamed Continent*. Individual poems have appeared in *Measure*, *Stoneboat*, *Loch Raven Review*, *Main Street Rag*, *Common Ground Review*, and *Blue Unicorn* among others. Poems are forthcoming in *Stoneboat*, *Starline*, and *Common Ground*. He and his wife live in Madison, WI.

FDR Resorts To Poesy

*The only thing we have
to fear is fear itself.*
President Franklin Roosevelt
March 4, 1933

The man could stand if others held him up. Braces were **Only** crutches, pushing pain to shoulder blades, pain the **Thing** that felt alive. Below was mainly numb, although **We** later learned he'd limp a bit by dint of grit. Did he **Have** the urge to voice his plight? Maybe. And **To** falsify the Depression, as if a national epidemic of **Fear** had fostered unemployment, eviction, penury? **Is** poetry a trope for political paralysis? Must poems cry **Fear**, and stifle progress? No. His New Deal created change **Itself**.

Spot Me Not

The childhood game that molded me was hide-and-seek. The goals, you know, are racing home, eluding pursuers. Why had I despised the first, embraced the last? An urge to roam?

Evil parents? Hardly. I'd observed captivity become the dreary lot of every boy. Rapture requires nerve and vanishing acts. I've practiced *Spot Me Not*;

perhaps you've played it. I have disappeared in plain pale light behind a glance, a lie, a joke. My expertise created years of victims scarred enough to vilify

me. Now it's only I in search of me, as if I'll shed invisibility.

John Stanizzi

John L. Stanizzi is the author of the collections *Ecstasy Among Ghosts*, *Sleepwalking*, *Dance Against the Wall*, *After the Bell*, and *Hallelujah Time!* His next volume, *High Tide – Ebb Tide*, will be out in 2017, and he is at work on another volume called *Chants*. John's poems have appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *American Life in Poetry*, *The New York Quarterly*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Rattle*, *Passages North*, *The Spoon River Quarterly*, *Poet Lore*, and many others. He teaches literature in an adjunct capacity at Manchester Community College in Manchester, CT and I live with my wife, Carol, in Coventry.
www.johnstanizzi.com

So Jah Seh

*for John "Terry" Ryan
July 12, 1946-July 4, 2015*

Terry would joke that hanging out with me
was just as good as being all alone.
And I agreed. We could sit for minutes
neither of us saying a single thing.
I always took that kind of ease to mean
that we were comfortable enough to
not find it necessary to speak a
word, some small talk used to break the awkward
silence. That's just it; the silence wasn't
awkward. It was as easy as being
all alone, looking out at the vast hills,
not even acknowledging their presence,
but knowing they were there, and that they'd be
there, your loyal friends waiting by your side.

Crazy Baldhead

*East Hartford, Connecticut
1963*

Frank Cassone would warn me every time that
my old man would send me right back to him
if a single hair contacted my ears
and still it always took at least two times
to get it short enough to satisfy
my father who would never have a son
as dirty or as shabby as a Stone.
As long as I lived in his house I'd be
Joe College or I could live on the street.
But I wanted to look like Mick or Keith,
so I'd tell Frank to leave it a tad long,
then I'd go home hoping he wouldn't see.
But he always did, and sent me back to
Frank who'd say, *What'd I try to tell ya, Kid?*

F. E. Sterling

F. E. Sterling is a retired Behaviorist who, late in life, turned to expressions of a less scientific, data-driven focus and found in poetry a natural medium for addressing subject matter Behaviorists do not typically allow themselves to talk about. Since then, he has been published in *New Voices In Poetry and Prose*, *Mobius*, *The Lyric* and *Louisiana Literature*.

Years After Fate's Onerous Decree

Though we've become long distant friends, I vow
that's not what I once thought we could have been.
Had we but wed, we'd be much closer now,

and could disclose to true enquirers how
to keep love's depth and breadth and height pristine.
Though we've become long distant friends, I vow

there is no rule that mandates we kowtow
to fate, and not surpass the common mean.
Had we but wed, we'd be much closer now.

Though dearer loves preempt near space, allow
no greater distancing to intervene.
Though we've become long distant friends, I vow

had we but shared life's whole: grief's deepest sough;
great mirth; been one, companions grown serene,
had we but wed, we'd be much closer now.

Although denied that state of grace, somehow,
I still believe we've remnant joys to glean.
Though we've become long distant friends, I vow
had we but wed, we'd be much closer now.

Michael Fraley

Michael Fraley is a contributor to *The Road Not Taken*, *Plainsongs*, *The Lyric*, *California Quarterly*, and *Blue Unicorn*. M.A.F. Press published his chapbook *First-Born*. Tamafyhr Mountain Press published his e-chapbook *Howler Monkey Serenade*. Michael is a graduate of the MA in Writing program at the University of San Francisco. He lives with his wife Gail and daughter Bunny, and four cats, within walking distance of the San Francisco Zoo. Besides reading, Michael also enjoys hiking, photography and vintage cameras.

The Cat

for Janine the Queen

With slipstream ease, she moves the same
As wind and water smoothly play
Around whatever blocks their way.

Her nature is not wholly tame;
With deadly skill, she stalks her prey—
The fearful mouse, the careless jay.

The art of grooming brings her fame;
A tongue of pink beyond compare
Transforms her fur with utmost care.

As active as she is, she still
Finds time each day, surprisingly,
For sleeping quite contentedly.

Mealtime provides a special thrill
When she approves the choice we've made;
She's quick to judge what makes the grade.

The cat is independent, true,
So *very highly favoured* you
Will feel when she selects your lap
To curl up in and take a nap.

Neilson Vuong

Neilson is a graduate of San Jose State University's Creative Writing program. He enjoys playing speed chess and folding Origami.

Late Letters to Wintoncester

Dear Tess,

I carried out your final wish—
I said "I do" with your sis Liza-Lu,
But yet I only felt a fever pitch
Of love throughout the time I spent with you.
Why did our happenstance in May at dance
Not spark the true inception of our love?
If only then I seized my single chance
To woo you Tess, you wouldn't be the dove
That impaled Alec d'Urberville and left me
Depressed, debauched, destroyed, and almost dead.
Those dusky evenings when we once were free,
I will remember still on my deathbed.
I beg you, grant me this unholy prayer—
Let me have an affair.

Yours, Angel Clare

J. Stephen Rhodes

Poems by J. Stephen Rhodes have appeared in over fifty literary journals, including *Shenandoah*, *Tar River Poetry* and *Texas Review*, as well as several international journals. Wind publications has published his two poetry collections, *The Time I Didn't Know What to Do Next* and *What Might Not Be*. He has won a number of literary awards including two fellowships from the Hambidge Center for the Arts and Sciences, and selection as a reader for the Kentucky Great Writers Series. Before taking up writing full-time, he was the Co-director of the Appalachian Ministries Educational Resource Center in Berea, Kentucky, where he helped prepare seminarians for ministry in the Appalachian region.

Dreams

Just once I want the dragon to be on my side,
the one that chased me around our back yard
and then to the top of the branchless tree,

another time becoming a white wolf
I tried to kill with an axe until it turned
into a crying boy that looked like me.

The first time it arrived, its shadow
tracked my every turn, quickened each time
I rushed away. I heard its feet, its breath.

Though I could make out nothing in the dark,
I knew it had a face. It had eyes.
They say you cannot see God, at least

before you die. I wonder if you can see
your own deepest face. If you can, just once,
I want the dragon to be on my side.

Ron Hodges

Ron L. Hodges is an English teacher and poet living in Garden Grove, CA. His previous publication credits include *Ancient Paths*, *Time of Singing*, *The Road Not Taken*, and *The Society of Classical Poets 2015 and 2016 Journal*. He won the Society's 2016 poetry contest.

Average, But Good

Parents dream of superior children,
Little marvels to display like trophies,
Parade as proof to the world they have won
The game of parenthood—that all the fees
For sports and music lessons and test prep
Have earned an excellent rate of return.
They want to walk each superlative step
As if it were their own. Oh, how they yearn
For validation! I pray that's not me.
Remind me while not all kids can be great
(Few will), each can be rich in decency,
And isn't that a more meaningful fate?
My sons may not be all I think they should—
Please make me thankful for average, but good.

Ross Moyer

Ross Moyer, born and raised in Virginia, went on to receive a B.A. from The University of Georgia in 1987 and an M.M. from The New England Conservatory in 1992. Since then, he's composed many works for both chamber ensemble and orchestra some of which have been performed and/or recorded. Mr. Moyer is also an author of a number of plays both short and full length. His poem, Safe Space, was recently published in the September issue of The Rotary Dial. He lives in Cambridge, MA with his wife, two kids and a dog.

Longevity

I won't be here in twenty years
Perhaps not even ten
Before some number of my peers
I'll find oblivion

How sure am I you may inquire
I'm not I must confess
No portents tell me I'll expire
Indeed it's just a guess

My mother died at sixty five
A cancer suicide
Dear diabetic dad's alive
Though frail I will confide

The actuaries calculate
I've more time than I think
But if I manage eighty eight
Will I be in the pink?

Gary Whitby

Gary Whitby teaches English and Creative Writing at Tarrant County College in Fort Worth, Texas. He holds an MFA from the Iowa Writers Workshop, and his work has appeared in *Slant*, *First Things*, *The Lyric*, *The American Literary Review*, and will appear in an upcoming issue of *The Orchards*. His book, *The Weather of One Another*, was well received by X.J. Kennedy and Bruce Bond.

A Bestiary

The dog said, "Love is what I want."
The cat said, "Well, you'll never get it."
The bird said, "Maybe. Just don't sweat it.
Nothing's as good as a good croissant."

"You're a lecher," said the cat
to the dog, who answered back,
"It's true. I love it in the sack
but not with some old feline bat."

"I knew a man," intoned the bird,
"who slept with females all his life
until at last he slept interred,
his bed too small to swive his wife."

"It goes to show you," said the dog,
"Life's just not the place for love,
not until we pass this fog
of flesh, where swiving's not enough."

Yates Young

Yates Young has been writing poetry for over forty years. He majored in English Literature and minored in Mandarin Chinese at the undergraduate and graduate levels. In addition to writing original poetry, he translates Classical, Tang and Sung poetry. His poems have appeared in *Spitball*, *Bear Creek Haiku*, *The Road Not Taken* and *Ancient Paths*. He resides in Palm Coast, Florida.

The Priest

A little old Frenchman of seventy.
He wears a short cassock
Blacktop boots and a gray goatee.

He is all shriveled up
With red-rimmed watery eyes
And a wrinkled, clean-shaven face.
His hands are twisted and frail.

He knows many languages,
Is probably Alsatian.
He taught for seventeen years in France
Seventeen in Australia
And seventeen more in Fiji.

He likes to engage in conversation
About Shakespeare and Milton
To anyone who will listen.

He was meant for a carnal life
He was sensual and pleasure-loving
Before taking his vows.
Because he loved those things so well
He cut himself off from them.

He thought about taking a lover.
But now he is old
And everything is over.

James 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.

A Perch of Hands

(To my daughter on her 26th birthday)

Your birth for me it was a gift and grace,
A golden flash of love and light so near.
And now you rise and leave to take your place.

You ventured, shy at first, into the world,
Discovering books and art, the human heart,
And now you rise and leave to take your place.

A woman now you are, but I recall
The small, moist fingers in my grateful hand—
Your birth for me it was a gift and grace.

But growing into grace you ventured far,
With love that went around the turning earth.
And now you rise and leave to take your place.

The gift is given in the moment that
It is released; grasping wounds the wings—
Your birth for me it was a gift and grace.

I hold my arms above my head, my hands
A perch—you spread your wings and catch the wind.
Your birth for me it was a gift of grace,
And now you rise and leave to take your place.

Katherine Barrett Swett

A teacher in New York City, Katherine Barrett Swett has recently published work in *Rattle* and has poems forthcoming in *Light* and *Mezzo Cammin*. Her chapbook, *Twenty-one*, was published this fall by Finishing Line Press.

The Winter Light

I wish I could believe that ghosts were true
– a flashlight ready when the lights go out—
that death could leave behind a bit of you.

I pass you on the street, I interview
someone who tosses her black hair about.
I wish I could believe that ghosts were true.

Forget-me-nots return each year in blue;
your brother smiles and something in his mouth—
I think death left behind a bit of you.

I wear your yellow sweater from J. Crew,
or hear a piece you practiced on your flute;
I almost can believe that ghosts are true.

The skin, the voice, the laugh, the it of you
grow daily more and more remote;
death's only left behind a bit of you,

which isn't you. The winter light comes through
your window on a thousand whirling motes.
I wish I could believe that ghosts were true
and death had left behind a bit of you.