

The Road Not Taken

A Journal of Formal Poetry

Summer, 2016

The Road Not Taken: A Journal of Formal Poetry

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Poet's Corner

Welcome to the summer 2016 issue of *The Road Not Taken: A Journal of Formal Poetry*. I am particularly proud of this issue, mainly because the submissions were so good. You gave us lots of difficult choices, folks. Many people who didn't quite make the cut were so good we might have taken them in another season. In short, thank you, enjoy the issue, and keep submitting!

This was a more traditional issue overall: a number of sonnets, a villanelle, and lots of skillfully unobtrusive rhyme. This did not stop us from taking several poems that stretch the definitions of formal of course. We are a metrical journal; rhyme is optional. As you read this issue though, I think you will find craftsmanship of all sort to satisfy and delight.

Last issue we gave an account of the founding of *The Road Not Taken*. In doing so we neglected to credit Dr. Donald T Williams of Toccoa Falls College in Georgia. This journal began when Jim Prothero and Don Williams made up their minds together to start an online journal of formal poetry. All credit and thanks to both men.

Now, one gentle reminder before I go: we would greatly appreciate it if our contributors would submit poems in the body of their emails. So far we have opened attachments despite our policy, but this puts us at risk of viruses, and there is nothing like a whole host of separate attachments to discourage a hard working editor. We would also very much appreciate it if contributors would put their poems in single spaced Times 12 without extra spacing above or below their lines (click on Format, then Paragraph, then Spacing). As it is, we spend a great deal of time just regularizing the form of each issue.

So much for boring details. More importantly by far, The Road Not Taken has a new email address. Please submit all submissions to **TheRoadNotTakenJournal@gmail.com**. We will keep reading both addresses for the next few months but are transitioning the gmail address.

Finally I would like to add my personal thanks to my fellow editor Rachel for her hard work, her detailed comments, and her much needed balance.

Yours,

Dr. Kathryn Jacobs
Editor
The Road Not Taken

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Feature Poem

William Cordeiro

Will Cordeiro received his MFA and Ph.D. from Cornell University. His work appears or is forthcoming in *Copper Nickel*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Harpur Palate*, *Raintown Review*, *New Madrid*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *Unsplendid*, and elsewhere. He lives in Flagstaff, Arizona, where he is a faculty member in the Honors Program at Northern Arizona University.

Once

You're only young but once, or so they say,
but no—the years mean nothing to the mind—
you're young forever in an aging face;
all summers are a childhood away:

slow sunlight streaming through the tops of pines,
clear water that reminds you of the taste
from playing in a river long ago...
Or yesterday. Each moment is the same,

and new. Yet only through each one you know
that everything has changed except your name,
and no amount of time can now undo
the wrinkles that such water's given you.

Dear MacArthur “Genius” Grant Committee:

I'm begging you to give my work a hand
-out, like every other novelist or seer,
each egghead hatching schemes who thinks she stands
a chance, each scientist or sonneteer
who tinkers solo for so many years
upon the yo-yo of slow-ups and downs
where hangs the making of a whole career.
All paupers brood their genius will be found.
Since words are free, I undertake alone
obscurities I bury with my labor
between assembled lines. My wit's homegrown.
No dabbler or crackpot I, therefore,
renounce all jackpots and windfall renown
and offer you one thankless poem, uncrowned.

Editor's Choice

(Rachel Jacobs)

Michael Getty

Michael Getty is a writer and educator who lives in St. Louis, Missouri. His first published poem is about to appear in *The Healing Muse*.

First Sonnet for Planet Nine

I think of you out in the brittle dark,
in your cold, candle-lit ellipse. You learned
pity, I imagine, watching far-
off, whiplashed, dervish fever dancing, gleaned
shameful secrets from the way my eyes
closed when my back was turned in retrograde,
saw tired relief and sensed the airless sighs
I let escape into the black. You would
remember my pummeled childhood, recall
each closed fist, every gale of anger, know
how long I've circled, blistered, bloodied —
It would crush me to know indifference,
or, God forbid, guilt, caused your silence.

One More

Breathe out, breathe in your fill of willful air.
Now that the meds are gone, you're free to go
but hold your ground for one more breath, one more

act of defiance. Make death wait its turn
on pins and needles for a change as you
breathe out, breathe in your fill of willful air --

deep, sudden, hungry gulps, each one a dare,
your wasted body boasting it's not through,
will hold its ground for one more breath, one more.

Your eyes open. You smile. I smile. Hello there,
I'm dying, you say. I hold your hand. I know,
breathe in, breathe out my fill of clear-eyed air.

This must be the time to finally share
my secret -- I get all my strength from you,
to stand my ground for one more breath, one more

day and face down half of what you do, bare-
knuckled, bleeding, defiant, razor-tongued. You
breathe out, breathe in your fill of willful air
and hold your ground for one more, one more, one more --

True Skin

I've passed your winter skeleton before
but never understood your nakedness
is an act of storytelling, the way you bare
your scars, your growing, the points when you said, this
way, not that; here, not there. Now. Not now.
And this is where the beetles ate you alive
one hot, dry summer, long ago. See how
the flesh spills out, barked and bulbous. You survived
a lightning strike (right here) and mastered pain
to live a life split into two, one rich
with joy and irony. Your truth is plain
this time of year. How could it not be? Such
true tales I'd tell if I, like you, could bare
my skin, and all the memories written there.

Robert Beveridge

Robert Beveridge makes noise (xterminal.bandcamp.com) and writes poetry just outside Cleveland, OH. Recent/upcoming appearances in Chiron Review, Riverrun, and Folk Horror Revival: Corpse Roads, among others.

Sonnet to Beauty

after Allen Tate

beauty is a prostitute,
a whore of no real mention.
There is much dissemination
on this point, but I think beauty
is a whore.

She has her price,
time and youth, which she steals
from those who pursue her. Her appeal
escapes me still.

How nice
it is not to worry about it!
Beauty, I turn away from your lamp, lit
on a hill for all to see. I have no need
of your avarice, the devious greed
with which you choose your victims. I
believe, as many profess, you're in my eye.

Your Silence Against My Shoulder
(after Carruth)

I am not so old as to need
to hear speeches to pass the time
of day. I'd rather bleed
cockroach shit than tread the grime
of politicians, lawyers, those
who forever speechwrite. Let me,
then, after love enclose
you in my arms. Rest your head
on my chest; don't speak.
Let this moment be blessed free
of tongue; let it rest, meek,
in silence, sanctity, instead.

The Window

Every day I walk past the window
(minding my steps, to be sure) of her room.
I look up and see curtains drawn, or gloom
lying past the panes, a burning dark. Though
yet I walk and look, still it seems that I
cannot speak. It seems to me I am mute
oh, but how I would like to scream your beauty
peel away the flap of skin that hides
each screaming mouth that aches to define you.
Galloping across my mind, fantasies
race. I kiss you. You, in turn, invite me
every night, in my dreams, to your room.
“Enter the gloom beyond the panes of glass.”
Right. And to even think these thoughts is crass.

Drew Marshall

Mr. Marshall works as a Program Assistant, in the mental health field. His poetry has been published in various online and print journals. He is currently working on a collection of short stories. When not cemented to his desktop keyboard, he enjoys; walking, playing guitar, water colors and practicing Tai Chi.

Bagels for Dignity

Bagels for dignity
Bagels for self respect
Most people like their bagels toasted
Burnt to death
Quickly disposed of
The remains cover the earth
With a ghostly stench

Some bagels cover themselves with butter
Cream cheese or lox
For most bagels
It's an uncertain boat
To hold on to
Let alone, to rock

James Croal Jackson

James Croal Jackson is a writer, musician, and occasional filmmaker whose work in film and TV in Los Angeles led to a rediscovery of his love of poetry. His poems have appeared in magazines including *The Bitter Oleander*, *Lines+Stars*, and *Columbia College Literary Review*. He lives in Columbus, Ohio. Visit him at jimjakk.com.

Lawnmower / Guitar

Lawnmower string / guitar heart—
pull, strum, start then stop the song.

It's dead grass. Its broken neck.

B-chord specks. Shades of saffron.

It's dandelion season—
one reason to sing with blades.

Grass frets yet begins anew.

Rotors drone through spring. Charades.

Cicadas

The cicadas come at night, after you
fall soundly in the trance of your booklight,
buzzing pages. Forget, there's no undo.
The cicadas come at night,

arriving several years apart despite
love's hindwings clung to bark whose heart is true.
We burrow in those pages craving sight

and air and words— we gather in droves to
kiss your hand though you think it is a bite.
We wait years and always return to you.
The cicadas come at night.

Mary Winslow

Mary Winslow has been writing poetry for over 30 years. Her poems have appeared in Avocet: Journal of Nature Poetry and The Antigonish Review. She has an active blog on Hello Poetry where over 40 of her poems can be viewed. She studied poetry with John Haislip in an interdisciplinary program in the 1990's and her poem "Reading John Haislip in Lincoln City" won honorable mention in the Oregon Poetry Association 2016 poetry contest. Her chapbook, "Botanical Riddles" is due out in September, 2016.

The Seventeen Year Cicada

Emerging red-eyed, bites off sound and whirls
it clatters and hums on the roads and curbs
the shimmering cymbals for dancing girls
their feet land and never night's hush perturbs
their rattling noise for pirouettes with wings
makes a pipe organ that hums until it roars
frothing sweat smells of fish and spoiled things
but once their mad joy is launched it soars
and quiet's entreaties drown beneath the clash
they are lost as their jazz eyes go iridescent
and gaze unseeing but move to tempo's lash
mysteriously they begin their descent
from screech to hum to rustle out of sight
the ember cools, so stops the sybarite.

Oconee Bell in Sonnet

(*Shortia galacifolia*)

She peels off the stem for a naked swim
her behind bobs up white as a lampshade.
The dog paddling stamens swirl beneath the brim
eccentric auntie splashed, jumped and played
and flaunts herself past a daisy who behaved
in War Woman woods in Rabun County.
She reaches out for the ground that saved
a sturdy artist not the Bell you scarce see
off her hat, off her nut, a tossed penny,
a haunted flower spilled in the creek
a museum piece eventually.
She's the one who took the risk to be unique
spinning the eddies, clucking in the current
she yearned for fame, poverty's enticement.

Louis Hunt

Louis Hunt teaches political theory at James Madison College, Michigan State University. He has been writing formal poetry for a little over two years. He has poems published in *Autumn Sky*, *The Rat's Ass Review*, and forthcoming in the June edition of *The Rotary Dial*.

The Smile

Don't think she has no soul. Don't let her smile
fool you: It's not a child's desire to please
the grown-ups or a pretty girl's practiced wiles.
Her blamelessness is shown by her unease
when you absurdly taunt her privileges.
As if the confluence of wealth and birth
made less mysterious her beauty's lineage,
which strips your mocking words of all their mirth.
Don't try to staunch her tears - a passing squall,
nothing to do with you or your treacherous
pedagogy. Eyes still bleared she sprawls
in her chair, an unembellished odalisque.
Is that a soul which moves within her breast?
The question is no longer yours to contest.

No Lament for Spring

Do not lament spring's unforeseen arrival.
Its rash profusion of green lawns and gaudy
flowers disturbs the winter's slow recital
of grey on grey. The cold lulls the heavy body,
embraced in winter's promise of dreamless sleep.
We wake amazed to spring's forgotten rites
of wanton life. What cause for us to weep
at arrogant youth or the casual slights
which unripe beauty inflicts on famished age?
Do not lament spring's necessary lesson,
the bitter fact of ending and the rage
to start anew without false calculation,
but dance once more about the living tree
as if green spring still called to you and me.

Varanasi

I came to Varanasi looking for
the usual tourist fix of culture shock
and dysentery. Crooked Brahmin priests
prayed to Ganga at Dashvamedha Ghat,
while insects swarmed the lamps to burn their sins.
Saddhus lounged on the steps and smoked their chillums,
searching for Shiva's artificial bliss.
A pretty girl, American, I thought,
sat in a lotus pose before her guru.
I caught his eye and leered complicitly
at her breasts. Smoke rose from the burning Ghats.
These dead would not return. Their souls would not
put on new bodies like a change of clothes.
The river drowned the ashes of the old.

David Atkinson

David Atkinson grew up in rural Australia. He worked for the whole of his career as a lawyer in Sydney, where he still lives. David has been widely published in a variety of magazines and anthologies in Australia, the USA and New Zealand. Favoured areas for poetic exploration include the human condition, nature and wildlife and the rural life of the past.

Villanelle for the Fox Cubs

We found the cubs inside a hollow tree
Such little foxes when I was a boy
The task to kill the cubs would fall to me.
Protecting lambs the farmer's stern decree
The greyhound led us there with no decoy
We found the cubs inside a hollow tree.
The slaughter caused by foxes; all agree
My father's livelihood they would destroy
The task to kill the cubs would fall to me.
I must ignore their cuteness, that's the key
And choose the method I might best employ
We found the cubs inside a hollow tree.
No chance to vacillate; I cannot flee
To be a man sometimes does not bring joy
The task to kill the cubs would fall to me.
A massacre by foxes on a spree
They seemed to slay at random and enjoy
We found the cubs inside a hollow tree
The task to kill the cubs would fall to me.

Elise Hempel

Elise Hempel's poems have appeared in numerous journals over the years. She is the winner of the 2015 Able Muse Write Prize for Poetry, and her first full-length collection of poems, *Second Rain*, is available from Able Muse Press.

Never Said

How many times did I do it – chicken out,
never saying what I'd hoped to say,
always on the verge, too full of doubt
to tell someone the truth. One possibly gay,
one married, another one too young, and I
couldn't see myself at his football games.
Driving home from work each night I'd cry,
knowing I wasn't brave enough, our names
would never be linked. The one who finally caught
me at home that night, caught me off-guard
after a year of his voice on my machine,
that moment I forgot myself, to screen
my calls, picked up the phone and spoke one word.
I married him but kept our names apart.

Waiting at the Beauty Shop

You'd think by now they'd all be gone, these ladies
who come each week to gossip, get their hair done,
who circle every Friday afternoon
for a wash and set, endure each seven days
the rollers, the blasts of spray, enough to freeze
their white swirl through tornado or typhoon,
year after year marching in, their uniform
of thick beige shoes, a sweater in eighty degrees.

But there I am too – frail now, under the warm
hum of the dryer, assuring myself with the same
magazine from last year, its eternal spring flowers, or there –
a widow perhaps, grandchildren grown, still writing
my check, retying my rain-hood, chatting once more
before the weekend, half out the jingling door.

Robert Cooperman

Robert Cooperman's latest collection is JUST DRIVE (Brick Road Poetry Press). DRAFT BOARD BLUES is forthcoming in 2017 from FutureCycle Press.

The Wolves

The wolves are circling; keep the torches lit,
show no weakness, but stare them in the eye;
stand when it's tempting to weaken and sit.

Don't run, but walk with purpose, and don't flit
about like a ragged-winged butterfly,
for wolves are circling, keep the torches lit.

Don't beg for mercy because you're old; grit
in your mouth to confess it with a cry,
but oh so tempting to weaken and sit,

when you must show you're still powerful, fit
as a man the pack wouldn't dare defy,
for wolves are circling; keep the torches lit.

It's tempting to swear at the years and spit,
"It's so careless to let the years fly by
when we were so comfortable to sit

"And think we'd have forever as our gift
by right of being young." But it's no lie
that wolves are circling; keep the torches lit
and fight, though tempting to weaken and sit.

Beth Houston

Beth Houston has taught creative writing, literature, and composition at ten universities and colleges in California and Florida. She has published six poetry books, nearly three hundred works in literary and professional journals, and two nonfiction books. B.houston.poet@gmail.com

On My Blindness

When I consider how my eyes are spent
Just grading essays for an adjunct's dime,
My talent sapped correcting grammar crime
For those who don't care, much less document...
Darn fragments, run-ons, shifts; it's complement,
Not compliment; and commas—you'd think I'm
The devil one once called me. Life's primetime
With dangling modifiers—*that's* torment.
Just when I think prose can't get any worse,
Some plagiarize, and I'm called back to waste,
Soul-crushing work that's stolen, and I curse
The work sublime I never wrote, with haste
I turn in grades, I dash this formal verse
So after liver, ice-cream I might taste.

Erik Lloyd Olson

Erik Lloyd Olson is a poet who was raised on both sides of the Atlantic, though he now lives and works in Portland, Oregon. He studied poetry at Portland State University as well as at the Attic Institute of Arts and Letters under David Biespiel.

First Impressions

I used to figure first impressions burned
as shooting stars—a sudden flash of fire
whose glow, once spent, can never be returned
to view near half as bright once they expire.
But something stays me past the sandy dunes—
each time I hear aged ocean’s ambient roar
and spy new white-topped waves, the strain attunes
old and awe-striking as it struck before.

I’ve haunted streets the dead of midnight mutes,
where lamps grow dull. In lifeless still I found
a stream whose babel echoes, deep as roots,
beneath a manhole lid: the liquid sound
re-murmurs softly leaked to find me drawn
and lulled no less than when first stumbled on.

G.M.H. Thompson

G. M. H. Thompson was born on February 15, 1990, at about 12 in the morning, in a hospital in Cleveland, Ohio, United States of America. G. M. H. Thompson received a B.A. in History from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign on the twelfth of May, 2013.

Amber Triptych Frigid

I remember the winter the ice came
& froze the copse along the alley cruel—
half to death they were, like glass cellophane:
glacial growths, tombstone stiff, wardens of yule.

With spring's bloom, our axes finished the job—
bent boughs & tortured branches in the mud,
butcher's work, savage, over which none sobbed:
thus are sylvan titans turned to firewood.

In summer's pyre, we forgot our slaughter,
& autumn's leaves recalled not fallen trees,
yet Jack Frost's whip awoke the crimes of yore:
hearth-born heat could not melt melancholy.

Next March, we raised a fence from out their flesh
along the lane where none but stumps were left.

Ron L. Hodges

Ron L. Hodges is an English teacher and poet living in Orange County, California. His publication credits include *Ancient Paths*, *Time of Singing*, and *The Society of Classical Poets Journal*. Just recently, he took first place in The Society of Classical Poets 2016 poetry competition.

Of Soulmates: A Sonnet

The divorce courts are crowded with soulmates,
And lawyers' accounts burst from quixotic love.
The lofty standard modern thought creates
Makes true love seem false; real people aren't gloves,
Made-to-order things, fitted for comfort,
Or air-brushed models on a movie screen.
They hang loose, fit too tight, are stained by dirt—
Despite your laundering, they won't come clean.
Often selfish, they argue, yell, and pout
Until someone accedes to their demands.
It's no shock then, when a "soulmate" opts out
Of messy love, eyes fixed on fairy lands.
Our love is fated, not due to the stars,
But because we embrace each other's flaws.

James McKee

James McKee and his wife live in New York City, where he enjoys failing in his dogged attempts to keep pace with the unrelenting cultural onslaught of late-imperial Manhattan. His poetry has appeared in *The Raintown Review*, *The Rotary Dial*, *Saranac Review*, *The South Carolina Review*, *THINK*, and elsewhere. He spends his free time, when not writing or reading, traveling less than he would like and brooding more than he can help.

In the Tanneries

From a high rooftop terrace, tourists look down
On this cubist jumble of pits, its white-tiled grid
Manholed by poppy-red and henna-brown,
Saffron and lead-based black. A few workmen sit
Chatting amid the miasma of pigeon shit
That wafts, even up here, an assaultive smell
Which the mint-leaf nosegay you clutch cannot wholly dispel.

A natural source, says your guide, of ammonia, guano
Scrubs goat-reek from hides and scours off their wool.
You nod. Makes sense. Yet you wonder why there are no
Implements to plumb each opaque basinful
Less precious than limbs. As you feel some scruple pull
Your wakening outrage up short, the glass of tea
Just served you tastes of a breach in solidarity.

Descending stairs plush with scrap-drifts, you stand
Among the vats, and nod to a man hastening by
Who bears, in either bleached and puckered hand,
Thick sheaves of goatskins dripping deep green dye.
This is how ‘hand-made’ is made. And though you try
Not to shrink too plainly away, you despise
The poorist you saw him see before you lowered your eyes.

Here the pelts dry. Yes. Here they are shaved smooth.
And here the drone of a treadled sewing machine
Evokes a nostalgic sweatshop air, as you move
About this otherwise Bosch-ready scene.
Tour’s over. Further sights pall, pinched between
Where, given what you are, you do not belong,
And what, given who you are, you cannot doubt is wrong.

Later, in a café, a strange boy joins
And charms you, riffing in the dozen languages
He has cadged from accosted travelers like coins,
Until, asked what he will be, young Omar says
“In the tanneries,” and that’s it, for you, for Fès.
They’ve brought your check. You’ll be in New York again
In a few days. Stick to monuments and museums till then.

Twixt

Twixt is the mononym-onym of Peter Specker; he has had poetry published in *Margie*, *The Indiana Review*, *Amelia*, *California State Quarterly*, *RE:AL*, *Pegasus, First Class*, *Pot-pourri*, *Art Times*, *The Iconoclast*, *Epicenter*, *Subtropics*, *Quest*, *Confrontation*, *Writers' Journal*, *Rattle*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Tulane Review* and others. He lives in Ithaca, New York.

Though The Sea

Though the sea's an inner resting subject,
clouds may give whey, and it will repuddle
with a wicked grim on a smuggy day,
along coasts may play miniature gulf,
presenting its surface Gaudi gaudy,
belying its quiet more simple self.

The sky's a yellow-green, or its disguise
as far as can be seen is yellow-green.
Many trees feel at home in it and purr.

I wobbled in the soft airspace I used,
chock full of chuckles and polished ideas,
I drank in the false waters of mirrors
until I was drunk.

Robin Helweg-Larsen

Raised in the Bahamas, holding four passports (Canadian, British, Australian and Jamaican), Robin Helweg-Larsen has been living in Chapel Hill, NC, for the past twenty-five years. His poetry has been published in 14 by 14, Ambit, The Lyric, Poetry Porch, Rotary Dial, Snakeskin, The Hypertexts and the "Phoenix Rising" sonnet anthology, among others.

Walls of Work

With walls of work that never wear away
My house is halfway hilled above a plain;
Ghosts of unwritten books moan and complain;
I step out on to scree, sloping and gray.
I've tried for thirty years to build up high,
Raising five kids free of smog, vice and town;
The treacherous slope of scree slips, I fall down,
Am shown – kids grown and gone – more work's a lie.

Now I'm spread-eagled on the eager shale,
Not daring move, gripping at slipping fears
Of sliding down to sneered-at country vale
Where poor folk pick, don't buy, fresh fruit from trees
And I could go, unknown, to known warm seas,
Run barefoot on the beach of my ideas.

Steven Knepper

Steven Knepper teaches American literature at Virginia Military Institute. His poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *The James Dickey Review*, *Modern Age*, and *Farming Magazine*.

Baby Doll

When visiting my great aunt's nursing home,
My daughter shies from slouching, wheel-chaired forms
In sweaters doubled up to keep them warm.
They smile at her, their faces flecked with foam,

Or stare away indifferent as we pass
At carpet patterns, doors, or slippared feet.
One slyly nibbles on a hidden treat.
Another watches fish behind the glass.

One woman whispers soothing, song-like words
And wraps her arms around a baby doll,
As if to calm it from a sudden fall,
Old memories of children reassured,

I guess, from fifty years ago or more,
Still clearer now than what she had for lunch,
At least that is this parent's aching hunch,
Though of particulars I can't be sure.

My daughter's forehead furrows into lines.
She grabs my hand but does not shift her gaze.
She senses this is not the game she plays
And tries her best to read the solemn signs.