



The Road Not Taken

Summer, 2018

The Road Not Taken: A Journal of Formal Poetry

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Carter Davis Johnson

They Speak Spanish

Poet's Corner

Welcome to the summer's issue of *The Road Not Taken*.

I am very proud of this issue. As you read, notice the wide variety of subtle and fluid forms reflecting the chaos of life contained (however precariously) by the fragile harmonies of human existence. Sentences spill over, but rhyme unobtrusively balances them. Rhyme suggests a pattern, slips out of it, and circles back. The cadence of common speech slips in as blank verse and helps us hear the underlying rhythms of language almost obliterated in the random ping-pong of everyday life.

Heavy form makes it all seem easy – and balance is not remotely easy. At the same time, tumult isn't art. Which is why I am so proud of the poets in this issue. The writers in these pages write everything from couplets to broken pentameter or carefully patterned off-set blank verse. At times, lines of different length drop embedded off-rhymes. Never in this issue does form leap out and hit you on the head, in other words. But it's there; it's always there.

Kathryn Jacobs
Editor
Road Not Taken

Terence Culleton

Feature Poem

Terence Culleton lives and teaches in Bucks County PA. He has published poems in *The Amherst Review*, *The Birmingham Review*, *The Cumberland Review*, *Edge City Review*, *Janus*, *The Schuylkill Valley Journal*, and various other magazines and journals; and he reads in both the Philadelphia area and New York City. His recent books of poems include *A Communion of Saints* (Anaphora Literary Press, 2011) and *Eternal Life* (Anaphora Literary Press, 2015).

Dune Cottage

It hunches slantwise in the wind,
the crazy kitchen door flies open, shuts
again slamming on some message dinned
into the buckled shingles as to what's
ahead for it -- ahead for anything
at the verge like that, teetering on its sill.
Time's claim is tidal, so its settling
is nothing but a braving on until
the whelming sure to come. It isn't song
just to stand the brunt of such a fury
keeping shuttered council all along,
and neither, strictly speaking, is it story,
because it knows no plot. It will not rhyme
but only hold together for a time.

Terence Culleton

Beach Development

The eye looks past fences and lawn toys for less:
myrtles nestled there among the dunes,
unimpeded swaths of ocean cress,
seagrass wagging where the wind maroons
itself and whispers to itself and sighs,
and everything becoming what it is
for good, unmindful -- though appraising eyes
might place a speculative emphasis
on what the mind could take all this to be.
The ocean spreads itself across the sand.
Up here the sand rises, you can see
the way it comes alive in storm light and
is tossed wide in the wind, as love might toss
itself away -- for profit or for loss.

Terence Culleton

Fisherman

The spangled red-gold vasty deep wet dream
spread out before him lures his sky prone pole
down toward it, so it arcs, as it would seem,
over the spring tide shoving in to roll
and gush and shudder on the foam-glossed sand
and then pull surely back with a feral hiss
as if taking the spunk out of the land
forever and for its own purposes.
Even his line sags in the afterglow
of sunset. Buckets of chunked bait deployed
behind him make an unconvincing show
of more work to be done. A gull hangs buoyed
above the breakers, then sheers away to cry
anti-climactically up in the sky.

Peter Branson

Editor's Choice (Rachel Jacobs)

Peter Branson's journals include *Acumen*, *Agenda*, *Ambit*, *Anon*, *Envoi*, *London Magazine*, *The North*, *Prole*, *Warwick Review*, *Iota*, *Butcher's Dog*, *Frogmore Papers*, *Interpreter's House*, *South*, *Crannog*, *Shop*, *Causeway*, *Columbia Review*, *Main Street Rag*, *Measure and Other Poetry*; 'Selected Poems', 2013; 'Hawk Rising', 'Lapwing', 2016; shortlisted Poetry Business Pamphlet/Collection competition, 2017.

The Turf Cutter 'The Turf Cutter' (an Irish slip jig)

For Luke Kelly, 1940 - 1984

You straighten up from turning turves to dry
to arch your back and make the craic beneath
a vast and blazing August sky. Your face
the text and tincture of the earth itself,
you say you are my age. The air is sweet
and heady with the hum of drowsing peat.
Same taste in music too, it seems. I'm on
a rambling holiday out west. How strange.
Luke Kelly fan, you call to mind *The Jug
of Punch* in Brum - the one night I went there.
You're building English motorways with this
place in your soul. That's weird as hell. "Not felt
the urge," you pause, "to stray again." You grasp
your pitchfork, shaman-wise, then turn away.

Peter Branson

The Doll Collector

I ask her what she needs, to justify
an hour of private carer's wage her son,
an only child, will pay.

She questions why
I'm there. At 91, with Parkinson's,
she's sparky, marbles all in play.

I've checked
she's sound, the sole task specified.

She frowns
from space-age button-push reclining chair:
"Suppose I'd better get my moneys-worth.

Take all my dollies from the pram," she points,
"and place them on the sofa over there.

But first I need my sandals putting on:
I think I left them by the bed upstairs."

I find no trace, just boxes everywhere
all filled with dolls somewhat the worse for wear,
like babies in old tissue-papered tombs.

I lay those in the lounge on the settee
in single file.

"They're valuable antiques!"
she states.

Like jurors at a murder trial,
they stare, some limbless, others blind black holes.

One has its lolling head near severed like
a faded photograph of violent death.

Another's made of leather, "Very old,"
she thinks.

Acquired them since her husband died
quite young, made dresses, undies, brushed their hair.

"I swore I'd get them mended. Haven't yet,"
she sighs. "Suppose I never will."

She sits
a quarter of an hour, her eyes damp smiles.

I have to place them back, strict order, wrapped,
exactly as before.

“The black one goes
right at the bottom - first.”

Unusual,
I ponder that.

She checks.
I stack the rest,
like coffins in a plague, lost souls jam-packed.

Stewart Hadley

Stewart Hadley holds a BA in Creative Writing from the University of Houston. A former Robertson Prize winner in poetry, his poems have appeared in *Glass Mountain*, and he has read on KPFT. He lives and teaches high school English as a Second Language in Houston, Texas.

We Took Our Cues as Childhood Actors Do

We took our cues as childhood actors do.
Upon a playground stage, the wedding play
Was set; our classmate playing bride for you,
And I the part of groom, outside that day.
Our extras grouped in youthful congregation
And broke from play onto the splendrous set;
Around the wooden fort we stood with patience
As the boy who played the planner dashed and sweat.
But were some vows performed? I don't recall.
I simply know my starving method act
Had led to theft; the prop had seemed so small:
Some golden earrings false as this contract.
At times in youth a foolish actor speaks,
But age reveals no need for blushing cheeks.

Stewart Hadley

Although Long Distant, Death and I Relate

Although long distant, death and I relate
Along a family line. At times we'll hear
The closest blood's begun to gravitate,

And join together on a somber date
To say "hello." The years will disappear,
And though long distant, death and I relate

Like schoolboys closely playing with a mate
Important games, and in our cause sincere.
The closest blood's begun to gravitate,

And with it hopes our meeting up could wait
Another year, a longer stay on fear.
Although long distant, death and I relate

As feuding siblings, ever in a state
Of feeling how the other interferes.
The closest blood's begun to gravitate,

And like a strange old kinsman coming straight
Up to me with a visage so severe,
And though long distant, death and I relate.
The closest blood's begun to gravitate.

Catherine Fletcher

Catherine Fletcher is a poet and playwright. Recent poetry has appeared in *Entropy*, *The Offing*, and *Bird's Thumb*, and she has performed at venues in the United States, Mexico, and India. She is currently a TWP Science and Religion Fellow at Arizona State University. For more information, please visit <http://cafletcher.blogspot.com>.

Sea Sick

And so the sea stopped churning
and in the darkness unveiled
scores of soft bodies crawling
from the surf, tasting our world
through their brown, mottled skin.

Exposed in exile, had these travelers
become uncompassed by senescence
or by a surge of changing tides?
U-shaped pupils gazed at us, alien
to one another, in silence.

We cradled them in bins and buckets
in skiffs took to the waves.
In a desperate mission
we sailed through the night to return
them to their waters of origin.

The next day we discovered
these octopuses punctuating
the strand and rocks, throbbing
with atmosphere, undulating
as their arms curled into question marks.

Catherine Fletcher

Second Avenue Oyster

No sign of tides.
Emerging from a city sea of we
moving now in half-time, I become still, still
to examine, midway down the concrete
an oval of swirling ochre
opalescence exposed:
half an oyster shell.

Ocean ghost, did you fall
from a child's hand
after a day in the Rockaways?
Escape from a drunk lover's bag—
souvenir of happy hours of shooters?
Water sweetener, alchemist
transmuting this moment to summer
I'm diving further into reverie
leaving your pearl behind
for the next subway rider.

Richard Merelman

Richard Merelman, a native of Washington, D. C., is Professor (Emeritus) of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. *The Imaginary Baritone* (Fireweed Press), his first book of poems appeared in 2012. In 2016, Finishing Line Press published his chapbook *The Unnamed Continent*. In 2017, Bent Paddle Press published his *Sensorium*, another chapbook. He has published individual poems in many journals, such as *Main Street Rag*, *Lake Effect*, and *Measure*. He and his wife live in Madison, WI.

Red Strips

The Chevy spews oil
 through the gaps beneath
its crushed overturned
 body, the roof fused
to the fast lane, the
 seat backs smashed, the trunk
mush, the suspension
 twisted, mottled, bare
in the noonday sun.
 Holy hell! The car
could be our car. What
 remains of the grille's
strips resembles ours;
 its red is our red.
The license plate starts
 with DX, like ours.

Clare drives this street to
 her new studio.
Our place is a block
 from here. Where's a cop,
a neighbor, one soul
 who knows what happened?
I run, stumble, pant,
 run some more, skip the
elevator, sprint.
 Our door is ajar;
I glimpse cord, scissors.
 Clare is trying on
a belted jacket
 quilted in red strips.
What a find! she cries,
 flashing the jacket.
Christ, she's so alive.

Kevin Oberlin

Kevin Oberlin is the author of one chapbook, *Spotlit Girl* (Kent State UP, 2008). His poems have appeared recently in *PacificREVIEW* and *Ghost Proposal*. He can't sit still long enough to achieve enlightenment, and that's fine.

Jimmy Buffet and Other Prophets

If you like piña coladas and gettin' caught
in the rain, it's right there, staring them right
in the face, G-8 on the jukebox, a song they'd been taught
to disparage, the marriage of hippie drift and the blight

of Florida. Can you imagine? Every tree
a palm tree? Mother of Christ. And yet these boys,
hovering over the window and neon, feel
that this is sacred, a hallowed machine, not a toy

for them to smash. A-6, "Sweet Home;"
C-3, the Stones. They could be gathered in prayer
around an altar, for blessings, for forgiveness, for condoning
the myth of adolescent need for laying things bare.

"Yo, forget it! Getta move on. Breakey-breakey."
G-7, "Welcome to the Jungle," a bit of fakery.

Robin Helweg-Larsen

Robin Helweg-Larsen's poetry is published in the UK, US and Canada. His chapbook poem on writing poetry "*Calling The Poem*" is available as a free download from *Snakeskin Poetry Webzine, issue 236*. He lives in his hometown of Governor's Harbour in the Bahamas.

Said Poor Mrs. Owen

Said poor Mrs. Owen
To her son Wilfred
Why must you always
Write of the trenches?
Why can't you write
Like that nice Mr. Wordsworth
Of flowers?

Said Mrs. Picasso
To her son Pablo
Why must you always
Paint so distortedly?
Why can't you paint
Like that nice Mr. Monet
Some flowers?

Because we don't always
Create what we celebrate,
Sometimes we model the
Things that we'd like to change,
Things we don't like, or just
Things that we think about -
Thoughts of ours.

Earl Carlton Huband

The poems of Earl Carlton Huband have appeared in journals such as *America*, *The Lyric*, *The Main Street Rag*, and *Visions International*; in anthologies such as *Earth and Soul*, *Heron Clan*, *Kakalak*, and *Pinesong*; and in the textbook *Unlocking the Poem*. His manuscript *The Innocence of Education*, based on his experiences teaching English as a young Peace Corps Volunteer in a remote fishing village near the mouth of the Persian Gulf, won Longleaf Press at Methodist University's 2018 chapbook contest.

A Mother's Place

He could have taken me home to live with him.
Instead, he left me in this pleasant place
with sun-lit rooms and flowers in every vase.

Yesterday — or was it last week — he came
to see me, stayed for lunch, but couldn't wait
to leave. — Does he think I don't know my son?

He joked with me about the meals they make,
how all I have to do is sit and wait
and eat. — Does he want me to stop eating?

These folks are kind. They take good care of me.
But I miss the love of home and family,
the ties that bind me to my hometown church.

And so I walk these halls, praying for grace,
hoping soon to see a familiar face. —
Will someone take me home to live with him?

Yates Young

Yates Young majored in English Literature and minored in Mandarin Chinese at the undergraduate and graduate levels. In addition to writing original poetry he translates Chinese poetry. His poems have appeared in *Spitball (The Literary Baseball Magazine)*, *Bear Creek Haiku*, *The Road Not Taken*, *Ancient Paths*, *The Daytona Beach News-Journal* and *The Caribbean Writer*. He resides in Palm Coast, Florida.

Driving West

At sea, on the plains of Nebraska.
A world devoid of feature.
Empty earth, empty sky.
The line of highway stretching
Horizon to horizon
Like a cue ball on a billiard table.

Wildflowers bloom by the roadside.
Beasts graze at all degrees of distance and size.
Dots on the landscape become wood cabins
As we draw nearer then dwindle in our wake
Melting into their surroundings.

Five miles, nothing.
Ten, and it's like we haven't moved at all.
Twenty, and we are in the midst
Of the same great level.
No nearer to any object within view.
Locked in a motionless dance.
The horizon keeping pace with our advance.

Then night - the stars
An entire sky full
Become our only varied spectacle.

James Hamby

James Hamby is the Associate Director of the Writing Center at Middle Tennessee State University. His work has appeared in *The Road Not Taken*, *Measure*, *Light*, and other publications.

The Plagues: Darkness

The fading of the stars above the darkling
Plain; as twilight waned, a blackness settled
In—something more than night—a failing
Of the light more telling than the rattle
From a final breath—a darkness rushing
Over fearful, trembling peasants like
The tide. They felt it, lord and serf, they touched
The nothing...darkness palpable and black.

Both hearth and taper faltered in their flames;
The stars and moonlight died, consumed. Specks
Sundered by the dark, the people strained
And groped for one another, hoping death
Would judge them kindly, send them on their way,
And keep devouring nothingness at bay.

Jake Sheff

Jake Sheff is a major and pediatrician in the US Air Force, married with a daughter and six pets. Currently home is the Mojave Desert. Poems of Jake's are in or forthcoming from *Radius*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *The Cossack Review* and elsewhere. He won 1st place in the 2017 SFPA speculative poetry contest and was a finalist in the Rondeau Roundup's 2017 triolet contest. His chapbook is *Looting Versailles* (Alabaster Leaves Publishing).

The Roads to 5 O'clock are Roads to War

The tenant of the darkness knows
 what darkness knows,
and wears a little box for clothes.
 He rode the train in socks,
and lost his daughter's laughter once.
His briefcase held it like a dunce.
He spat at war's ambivalence
 and cursed its flowing locks.

He thinks of when his wife was here.
 His wife was here
before the animals and fear,
 he tells himself on board
the boat. Beneath the ruined bridge
no longer mute, he feels a smidge
of passing time. He swats the midge
 where epilogues are stored.

He sees the clocks and roads all twist –
 the roads all twist –
like war is man's ventriloquist.
 Past meadows burnt and stung
by prayer, he drives. The backwards hum
of clumsy time and martyrdom
is luminous. His mother's thumb
 is glass where sand is young.

James B. Nicola

James B. Nicola's poems have appeared in *TRNT*; the *Antioch*, *Southwest* and *Atlanta Reviews*; *Rattle*; *Tar River*; and *Poetry East*. His nonfiction book *Playing the Audience* won a *Choice* award. His four poetry collections are *Manhattan Plaza* (2014), *Stage to Page: Poems from the Theater* (2016), *Wind in the Cave* (2017), and *Out of Nothing: Poems of Art and Artists* (2018).
sites.google.com/site/jamesbnicola.

Sappers

The king's two sons were reared to look amazed
at nothing, never show a thought, and count
on hired help. The peasant's two were raised
to count on nothing but try to amount
to something, managing without the aid
of cook, valet, or even a day maid.

One day the kingdom suffered an attack.
When one peasant youth enlisted, the other
enlisted too to watch his brother's back.

The royal sons each bought a high commission.
They had no interest in serving together
so each commanded a remote division
enjoying epaulets, the honor guard,
claret and high-stakes gaming after hours
to get to know the other officers.

The peasant boys were sent to the front lines
where they learned to deactivate land mines
and dig. The work was dangerous and hard.

One day the elder prince came to inspect
the troops. He wore a cock plume in his casque.
The sappers, glad to interrupt their task,
stood up to cheer the royal prince by name.
He strutted past and seemed not to react.
Next day the younger royal did the same.

During the heat of battle, adjutants
went searching frantically for either prince
and found them sipping brandy with their wives.

The peasant brothers saved a lot of lives.

James B. Nicola

Gibbous

He does not stay up all night, but will share
some daytime with us, since the honeymoon—
the full, that is—is over. Where you are,
can you see him? If we were to combine
the gibbous you see with the one I see
and overlap them, as we used to be—
Oh we can do it, but we must act soon—
the two would make, I think, a valentine.

Jeffrey Essmann

Jeffrey Essmann's prose work (essays/creative nonfiction) has appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and numerous magazines and literary journals; his poetry, in *America Magazine*, *Dappled Things*, and on the website of the Society of Classical Poets. He lives in New York City.

Nativity

In midnight fields we eating, bleating sheep
(and some asleep) pursued our ovine way
as shepherds rudely passed the time till day
its shining rays above the hills should peep,
when of a sudden in the sky so steep
a thing with wings all shiny silver-grey
so frightened us we nearly ran astray
and lo, our watchers cowered all aheap.
A human babe was born the wing-thing said
and singing wing-things through the night sky swam.
Our shepherds being practicable men,
brought us to see: a manger for a bed
it had and smelled, the ewes said, like a lamb
that's taken off and never seen again.

Ron Hodges

Ron L. Hodges earned his Bachelor's Degree in English (creative writing focus) from San Diego State University; he attained his Master's Degree in English Literature (19th century concentration) from CSU Long Beach. After an extended break from creative writing, Ron began composing poetry just a few years ago. His work has thus far appeared in *Ancient Paths Literary Magazine*, *Calvary Cross*, *A Time of Singing*, *The Road Not Taken*, and the 2015, 2016, and 2017 *Society of Classical Poets Journal*. Ron took first place in The Society of Classical Poets 2016 poetry competition. He lives in Orange County, California, with his wife and two sons, and currently works as a high school English teacher.

Miranda

"How many goodly creatures are there here!"
The Tempest, Act V, Scene 1

I wonder how you could be so amazed
At the sight of such godforsaken men.
By what human standard could they be praised?
Yes, they wore the finery of kings when
You first saw them, but these garments were soiled
With shattered leaves and island smut, so they
Looked like savages. If you had recoiled
At the sight of this herd, what could one say?
Yet you chose to see "beauteous forms" there,
Ironic enough, blind to their mischief,
Which was so great a death sentence seemed fair;
A dreamer alone could spot noble stuff!
Oh, were you a fool, or somehow more wise
To view our base world through innocent eyes?

Elisabeth Bassin

Elisabeth Bassin recently returned to writing poetry after a long hiatus, during which she pursued a legal career, raised a family, and wrote fiction. She holds an A.B. from Princeton University and a J.D. from Harvard Law School. She won the Goodreads August 2017 poetry contest and received Honorable Mention in the Women's National Book Association 2018 Writing Contest. Her work has been published in *Oberon* poetry magazine.

Rules of Engagement

She's too easily frightened by women
In groups. Never learned the rules
Of engagement. Are there schools
That instruct in rejoinders for when

They verbally flay the friend who's not there
The face to deploy when they talk about who's
Doing what? When she leaves will they choose
To eviscerate her? Why can't she not care?

In every window she sees her reflection
A deer in the headlights of childish fears
Since high school she's lived through twenty-five years
But has yet to master the art of deflection.

Gordon Kippola

Following a career as a U.S. Army musician, Gordon Kippola earned an MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Tampa. His poetry has appeared, or is forthcoming, in *The Main Street Rag*, *Slant: A Journal of Poetry*, *Stoneboat Literary Journal*, *Third Wednesday Magazine*, *The Courtship of Winds*, *Southeast Missouri State University Press*, *Young Ravens Literary Review*, *The Raintown Review*, and other splendid publications.

More Than a Couple of Couples Couplets

I've wished you might love me. I know you: you won't.
We say things we don't mean: we're mean when we don't.

We've jack-hammered through fresh-laid pleasure; we're bored,
two cookie-cut snowflakes adrift in hell's horde

of deluded consumers of candies and cards,
blood diamonds, betrayals. Our past loves are shards

I'll stab into you as you slash into me,
while mumbling our wishes: encoded for free.

We're generous people, except to the one
we con every morning, while cursing the sun

that lights up the sets of our film noir for two.
Slink off into shadows, what else should we do

but cringe, lick our wounds, gird our loins to defend
(like Sherman "defended" Atlanta, dear friend)?

I'll whisper I'm sorry, you'll mouth the same lie
while sending a text to your next perfect guy.

I served as your fantasy, babe, you were mine;
subtract informed judgment: denial plus wine.

You're revealed to be you: a horrid offense.
Of course I was me all along! Are you dense?

Sweet Stranger, please pardon my romantic rant.
I've wished I might love you. I know me: I can't.

Andrew Szilvasy

Andrew Szilvasy teaches British Literature outside of Boston, and has poems appearing or forthcoming in *CutBank*, *Smartish Pace*, *Barrow Street*, and *Think Journal*, among others. He lives in Boston with his wife. When not reading or writing, spends his time running, brewing beer, and coaching basketball.

Monday at Slanted Pines

At 10, some high school kids are volunteering
and padding résumés: uncomfortable
laughter all around. They'll place some *Scrabble*
tiles while avoiding eyes and fingering earrings
in the Spring Room where the only flowers
are reproduced mechanically on walls.
I'm sure the kids mean well, but youth's appalled
when face to face with what time has devoured.

They'll leave at 5 with existential dread.
Those left behind have free time until 7,
when we'll host a talk on the comedian
Jackie Gleason. Then they're off to bed,
but not before the evening forecast. It's bleak:
clouds and rain fill all the coming week.

Blake Campbell

Blake Campbell lives in Boston and works as an editor. His poem “Bioluminescence” won the 2015 Alike Perroti and Seth Frank Most Promising Young Poet Award from the Academy of American Poets. His work has appeared on poets.org and in the *Emerson Review*.

Across the Creek

We’ve found the forest no more destitute
For summer’s end. The birch’s leaves flavesce
And fall with their expected loveliness
On death-white mushrooms clustered at its root.

I grasp an oak, long felled, by one tough knot
And overturn it. Salamanders squirm,
Glistening, over moldered wood. An earthworm
Startles and retreats into the rot.

Our sojourns here remind us not to search
For resurrections. Even after frost
The sleeping earth retains her tiny lives,

And even stripped of leaves, the paper birch
Subsists on what has been and what is lost,
But what in other living things survives.

Carter Davis Johnson

Carter Davis Johnson is an English major and cadet at the Virginia Military Institute. He grew up in Roanoke, Virginia where he developed a great passion for literature and began writing. Mr. Johnson has been published several times in *The Society of Classical Poets*, and writes both poetry and prose.

They Speak Spanish

Spanish rattles like Flamenco.
It dances with quick happy steps;
It twirls off the strings,
And sings from the chest.

Dance palabras dance;
Swirl and sway in bliss.
Smile those teeth of white,
And from your eyes a kiss.