

A photograph of a dirt path with metal handrails leading up a hillside, surrounded by dense green foliage. The path is made of dirt and has several metal handrails installed along its length. The surrounding area is filled with lush green trees and bushes, creating a natural, outdoor setting. The lighting suggests a sunny day, with shadows cast across the path and the surrounding vegetation.

The Road Not Taken

A Journal of Formal Poetry

Spring, 2019

The Road Not Taken: A Journal of Formal Poetry

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Poet's Corner

Welcome to another issue of imaginatively flexible forms.

Let me say from the start that I am very proud of this issue. *All* of the poems featured here play with recognizable forms: pentameter, tankas, blank verse, and rhyme in all shape and fashion. Some of the poems in this issue set up blank verse, only to play variations on it. Still others vary line-length in a way that seems superficially free, while maintaining an unobtrusive rhyme-scheme that establishes a bulwark against chaos.

None of the poems in this issue follow rules just for the sake of it, but none of them ignore them either. Violation of traditional form happens, but only for a reason. Conversational enjambment is normal but always, it disguises an underlying pattern.

Poets featured here are neither rule-bound nor ignorant. All of our poets are keenly aware of the cultural and linguistic patterns that have established themselves over the centuries—and they play with them at will. In short, "free" is not a dirty word here —provided it is not used in ignorance. **NONE** of the poets in this journal are "free" of form. On the contrary, they absorb it, play with it—and always, always, they are keenly aware of it.

Dr. Kathryn Jacobs
Editor, Road Not Taken
Texas A & M - C

Ron Singer

Feature Poem

Ron Singer (www.ronsinger.net) has been influenced by his grandson's interest in Mathematics. Singer has published hundreds of stand-alone poems. *Look to Mountains, Look to Sea* (River Otter Press, 2013) a collection of his poems from Maine, won an award and was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. In 2020 and 2021, Unsolicited Press will publish two new books: *Gravy*, stories about life after 70; and *The Promised End*, a mixed-genre collection about aging, age, and the thereafter.

Exit in Unum

Among a myriad of night worries
is the fear my wife will predecease me.
Whose hand would I hold, even in sleep?
Who would read, each evening, even as I read?

Near the end of our prime, facing decline,
a romantic homicide-suicide
leaves us both cold, which makes soloing on
the likely option –a bad one, alas.

Nor is meeting in “Heaven” on the cards,
for I cannot be called a “believer.”
The term, “unbeliever,” I also resent,
as if scoffing at the group fantasy

of a power-mad, white-bearded *senex*,
or his hippy son, Age of Aquarius,
leaves me out in the spiritual cold,
to be hurled down, discus-like, to Dante's ice.

Nor would I make Nature my goddess,
bowing my head to fickle omnipotence.
No, instead of prayer, I choose to wish,
or hope, for two deaths in quick succession.

I direct this hope to you, Dear Reader,
or Readers: hundreds, millions, more. (Why not?)
“For there's strength,” the cliché goes, “in numbers.”
“And Two,” you know, “is the only even prime.”

Mark Burgh

Editor's Choice *(Rachel Jacobs)*

Mark Burgh has published many poems, holds an MFA in Creative Writing, and a PhD in Film, American, Literature and the Works of William Shakespeare. He lives in Fort Smith, AR, where he teaches.

Steinway

The piano arrived in '68 to replace
the Baldwin console against the wall.
Steinway, serious black pine face
reflecting rows of keys in the waterfall
you created as you played Chopin, Liszt, and Rachmaninov.
The music boomed louder than father's rages.
I'd crawl under the legs, I'd lay dreaming of
green fantastic worlds, translucent pages
of the books that I would write someday. The power
of your playing transported me to a garden land
where I walked without fear or father for a hour,
where I did not feel his belt or angry hand.
But, if you played when Dad was watching a television show:
"Quiet, bitch," and my green world would go.

James B. Nicola

James B. Nicola's poems have appeared in *TRNT* five times, as well as 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). His fifth is forthcoming: *Quickening: Poems from Before and Beyond*. sites.google.com/site/jamesbnicola.

Religion 3: He stood draped

He stood draped to the nines and sang and doled
out magic in white wafers from a gold
cup. Brass, in fact. He said Take This And Eat
and as I took I felt both warm and cold
at once. Strange high—and low. I couldn't get
enough of it. But when I brought a friend
she asked me, "Are you sure he washed his hands?
And I'm not sure I like the way he stands."
And that was the beginning of the end.

I still go, now and then, and hear a lecture,
but from the back row, far more circumspect
of white things to be swallowed down with scripture
and rote. Old friends call me a "part-time fixture"—
though certain rites I find I can't reject
and, entering or leaving, genuflect.

Michael F. Gray

Michael F Gray was born in Salford, England. An inveterate hill and mountain walker, he eventually settled in the hills of Derbyshire and took early retirement from his profession in the U.K. Civil Service, which he combined with voluntary work in the community. He has been writing all his adult life, mainly poetry. Previous work appeared in *Envoi* and *Candelabrum* (U.K.) *The Eclectic Muse* (Canada), *Mobius* and *The Road Not Taken* in the U.S.A. and the current issue of *Marble* in the U.K.

The House Across the Street

The house across the street has empty windows
and eyes that only open to the night,
and gloomy gardens where a lonely wind blows
beneath a sky that never knows moonlight.

No light within its walls is ever shining.
No movement stirs the empty air within.
Yet somehow there pervades a silent pining,
a waiting for a Something to begin.

No visitors approach its doors in daylight,
though silent shades move guiltily at night,
and shadows from a weirdly unseen fey light
seem to be fading in and out of sight.

And sometimes I am woken from my slumber,
hear a child in anguish crying out to me,
see an unborn face at an empty window
and a phantom future that can never be.

Melissa Huff

Melissa Huff returned to her love of writing after fifteen satisfying years making one-of-a-kind jewelry, which can be seen at www.melissahuff.com. An award-winning poet, Melissa enjoys exploring both metered poetry and free verse, and loves to perform poetry aloud. Recent and upcoming publishing credits include *Brush Talks: A Journal of China*, *Origami Poems*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, *Halfway Down the Stairs* and *Red Eft Review*. She currently serves as secretary of the *Illinois State Poetry Society* and is delighted to be a member of the *Plumb Line Poets* of Evanston, Illinois.

A Son's Activities Have Come To Light

It's not that I don't think you're old enough,
it's just that I don't think you understand
the subtleties. I know you studied this
in school, at least the body parts, the how
and when and why—well maybe not the why—
and that's my point, you see, for can you tell
me what will give a woman utmost joy?
And I'm not speaking only of technique
but something infinitely more. That's why
I'm asking—can you hear her voice beneath
the roaring of your blood? And can you sense
the depth of what the eyes communicate?
Does your desire spring from knowing who
she is and not just from your fired-up flesh?
And do you measure closeness by the inch
or are you clear it's really more a matter
of the soul? I want to know you see
the bigger picture—how your conversation
yesterday affects how intimate
you'll really be tonight. Just find the link
between your body, your emotions and
your mind. And while you're at it, don't forget
to learn the aphrodisiac of words.

Melissa Huff

She doesn't know I wrote this poem for Her

She's having both her breasts removed today,
a fact that I am not supposed to know.
To spread the news or not is hers to say—
she's having both her breasts removed today.
So no one treats her differently she'll play
this just the way it pleases her, and so—
she's having both her breasts removed today,
a fact that I am not supposed to know.

Elaine Wilburt

Elaine Wilburt loves quilting, reading Jane Austen, and baking bread and other treats for her family; she lives in Maryland with her husband and children. Her poems have appeared in *Foliolate Oak Literary Magazine*, *The Cresset*, *Wales Haiku Journal*, and *Gyroscope Review*, among others; devotionals, in *The Word in Season*. Forthcoming poetry will appear in *Edify Fiction*, *The Avenue*, and *bottle rockets*.

The Veteran

You're new. Can always tell. You take a cup,
a plate. Eat lots of bread to fill you up,
'cause no soup kitchen's open after two,
you know. Can't eat till after that; if you
eat fast, can get three meals. No, no, I don't
take bread except to feed the birds. It won't
last. Lists of kitchens? Over in the square
by city hall, "the mayor," he's right there
in line, gives 'em out, sleeps by the Record Room
on Charles. Past five o'clock, street's like a tomb,
so still. First came to Baltimore, well, I
just slept on benches till I met that guy.
Without him, why, he showed me what to do,
and where to go. I sell some papers few
days a week. Don't pay much, gets me a place,
a little food. Just look at her, her face.
I hate to see her like that. She's a whore;
I seen her out on the street. Gets beat once or
twice a week. See. Disabled. I'm waiting
even though I got my card. I'm still waiting
for benefits to start. Need help? You can
have mail sent here; you just talk to that man,
Matthew. Be careful, though, can be a pest,
prying about your fam'ly and all the rest
of your business. Can't stand that, it's rude, you see.
I'm a V-V-Vietnam vet, and well, me,
after the war, no one to come home to.
You stick with me; I'll show you what to do.
The garbage goes in here. See that old, gray
building? Can get some money there today
if you need it. You have a place to go?
You do? You sure? Well, you never know, so
remember, women's shelter, next street. Take
a right at the corner, go a block. I'd make
a stop soon, fills up fast. I'll take you there
if you need me to. No? Sure? You take care.

James Owens

James Owens's most recent collection of poems is *Mortalia* (FutureCycle Press, 2015). His poems, stories, and translations appear widely in literary journals, including recent or upcoming publications in *Adirondack Review*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *The Honest Ulsterman*, and *Southword*. He earned an MFA at the University of Alabama and lives in a small town in northern Ontario.

The 52nd Summer

The mail is junk, as expected.
I walk back to the house, alone.
Blue chicory begins to fade
along the road, in dust and sun.
A starved cornfield flows in the wind,
a noise of water gathering ruin
and relief to rush the arid ground –
though not today from such frail sky.
The heat is weight. A room of shade
dims like childhood's far darks.
I think, *another July*.
Jarflies hammer at the locks.

William Marsh

William Marsh is a retired man who has written poetry all his life but never attempted publication. Now, with his new freedom, he is undertaking a quixotic encore career as a poet.

The Dark Lady Speaks

The Earl is the prissy, handsome kind
and Will is always a sententious bore
who would not "... to the marriage of true minds
admit impediment." I am their whore.

I feign passion looking in their eyes
and I service their insistent lust.
I jolly them along to believe my lies
and I endure their after-fuck disgust.

And still I deliver infinite variety
tediously while I stale and wither.
And Lord, I have had aborted longings in me.
Not know me yet? No - not know me ever.

While the Earl belabours his perfections
and Willie makes jokes about his erections.

Craig Kurtz

Craig Kurtz is the author of Wortley Clutterbuck's Practical Guide to Deplorable Personages, illustrated by Anni Wilson. Recent work published by Rattle, Orbis and William & Mary Review. More content at <https://kurtzandwilson.blogspot.com>.

The Roaring Girl

(Based on Middleton and Dekker's Play of the Same Name)

A roaring girl I once did court,
I loved her swaggering comport;
my wooing she did countenance
but bid me to have better sense.

'Pshaw, I'll have no married life,
do I look like a proper wife?;
my hips aren't shaped for children, sir,
they're more for a sword, I demur.'

Her verdure I admired so
and how she handled a crossbow;
the verve in which she rode posthaste
evinced a pith that was well-placed.

'I'll not be mending to your clothes,
I'd rather tweak rogues on the nose;
I'll not be sweeping up the floors,
'cause I'm a person, sir, who roars.'

I was inspired by her mien
and how she wasn't epicene;
and since she loved to duel and drink
like me, I said that we should link.

'Nay, sir, your good will's good, but skewed —
for which of us would cook the food?;
come morning time, you'll want breakfast,
but I doubt from a pugilist.'

A roaring girl's fun like a dude
but, after hours, looks great nude;
the perfect crony, so I thought,
but she mentioned one caveat.

'Aye, brawling's swell, so's tossing dice,
but when hung over, who makes nice?;
we'll both want what we can't provide —
a sweet wife at the fireside.'

Betsy Littrell

Betsy Littrell is a whimsical soccer mom to four boys. She is working on her MFA in creative writing at San Diego State University, where she was recently awarded the Sarah Marsh Rebelo Scholarship for poetry. Her recent publications include *The Write Launch*. In addition, she is a journalist at KGTV and volunteers with Poetic Youth, teaching poetry to underserved elementary students.

Elegy to the Queen of Hearts

Mechanically, you circled
out of the garage, the same
one you parked in Monday through
Friday for the past 25
years. When you reached the exit,

you couldn't remember which
way to turn to make it to
the same house you lived in for
19 years. That's when the doctors
discovered the tumor.

I saw you just two months
before as you taught my
3-year-old son how to play
online poker, and I watched
talk shows in bed with you, no

clue that a growth threatened to
steal those memories. I saw
you next at my dad's funeral,
wearing a hat because the
wig was too itchy. You

stumbled and fell on the plane,
your sister explaining that
you were ok despite your
bloody knee — you just sometimes
lost your balance. I tried to be

strong when I saw you, but I
lost it, collapsing, crying in
your unsteady arms. You still
were able to dry my tears.
I was 5 months along with

my next son and you parked your
hand on my belly — the only

thing you wanted was to feel
the new life growing inside
of me. And you did. That was

the last time I saw you
until your own funeral,
and I brought the baby that
had lived in my belly, the
one you told me I needed,

and I nursed in a room next
to your casket. Nearly
500 people showed up
to say goodbye, and my son
wrapped his hand around my finger.

Betsy Littrell

On a Field, Sable, the Letter A, Gules

Her head beneath a darkened hood,
creeping quietly, parting air,
haunting the boulevards unseen—
always in moonlight, never in sun.
this town has been so cruel to her,
slamming doors and not whispering.
She tucks her beauty, eyes and heart
in pockets always empty now.
She wishes shame could be scrubbed off:
exfoliated with sugar,
rinsed down the drain.

Phil Huffy

Phil Huffy writes early and often at his kitchen table in upstate New York. Acceptances for 2019 include *Hedge Apple*, *Sheila-Na-Gig*, *Halcyon Days* and *Magnolia Review*.

Beholder

The eagle is blasé and unimpressed
by scenic views her steely eyes survey,
though mountain tops in mist serenely dressed
are something to be seen most any day.

The eagle is not thrilled by sunny skies
or cobalt lakes reflecting there below.
Her interest is in matters otherwise
when she regards a forested tableau.

The eagle in her tree has not the means
to ever be aesthetically inclined.
Appreciation of grand woodland scenes
is seldom something she has on her mind.

And so though nature's treasures may abound
the eagle sees few pleasures to be found.

Kate Ravin

Kate Ravin spent most of her career as a copywriter in educational marketing before retiring to be a blissful dilettante. She began writing poetry in the early 2000s but has waited nearly twice the Horatian nine years before sending out her work. Her poem “Weaving” recently appeared in *The Lyric*.

Defying Gravity

“Don’t run! You’ll fall!” some stooped Cassandra warned,
an augury no sooner heard than scorned
when, five years old, I skimmed along the gray
uneven walk. And so I sped away,
sure, with the airy hubris of the young,
this earth-bound creature had to be dead wrong.
How could she bear to drag her heavy feet
laced tight in brogues, bear not to feel as fleet
as any darting bird? Now, years are gone
and I am moored; my weightlessness has flown—
Unless I see, beside her plodding mom,
a child who’s prancing to no other drum
than hers. And then I laugh in sympathy
as if a ripple ran from her to me
the way a tiny kite cavorting high
above can tug, and link us to the sky.

Kim Waters

Kim Waters lives in Melbourne, Australia, where she works as an English teacher. She has a Master of Arts degree in creative writing from Deakin University. Her poems have appeared in many poetry journals including *The Shanghai Review*, *The Australian*, *Verge*, *Antithesis*, *Offset 16*, *Communion 5* and *Tincture*.

Gravity

You were never one to hold memories close.
Your searchlight gaze always beamed forward
skimming the accumulated objects of our past
with a fast shutter speed and a low aperture.

I was the one who clung to the decades
of Leonard Cohen vinyls, crocheted rugs,
retro canisters and John Fowles novels,
as though by keeping them near they'd provide

an alibi, a sample of our joint DNA,
a time capsule to be opened at a later date
in a radiant freeze frame. A frame
you neither cared nor dreamt about.

And now we're here on the cusp of change
and you're travelling light, like someone who's
foregone gravity and can walk about the moon
without a space helmet or coiled lifeline

while I stand in the spaceship doorway,
watching you float by, untethered, unafraid
of the volume of the darkness into which
you are pulled, full-knowing and ready.

T. M. Moore

T. M. Moore is Principal of The Fellowship of Ailbe, a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition (www.ailbe.org). He and his wife and editor, Susie, make their home in Essex Junction, VT. His poems have appeared in various journals, including *The Formalist* (RIP), *Penwood Review*, *Books and Culture* (RIP), *The Society of Classical Poets*, and *Theology Today* (Princeton Theological Seminary).

Back Yard

On joyfully surrendering to the inevitable

We have decided we will not require
this yard to stand in uniform array,
each blade of grass like all the rest - the way
the lawn care ads say we should all desire
our yards to be. We seek instead some higher
objectives. We insist that it must stay
both green and neatly clipped, that it obey
its borders, and wear suitable attire.

But uniformity is not our aim.
So welcome, scarlet pimpernel and chick
weed. Teach us of your Maker's glory! Tell
His praises, clover, and declare His fame,
you as-yet-unknown friends! Grow strong and thick
and verdant, and we'll get along just swell.

Todd Copeland

Todd Copeland's poems have appeared in *The Journal*, *High Plains Literary Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, *The Adirondack Review*, *Sewanee Theological Review*, and *The Texas Observer*, among other publications, and he was the recipient of *descant's* Baskerville Publishers Poetry Award in 2018. He lives in Waco, Texas.

The Poet Contemplates an Eclipse

He stands in the yard watching the winter solstice
draw Earth's shadow across the moon. Feels the blur
of time. His masterpiece of self-pity has been years
in the making—an *ars poetica cum cri de couer*.
Has the hour arrived? Rehearsed quatrains glissade into place;
only the couplet's twist left to choreograph.
He apostrophizes his forty-two years:
How could it have come to this? Unsure what his life
means in the penumbra of early middle age.
Rhyming "dark" and "heart." His heart is dark as night.
He goes inside. Seeks comfort on a blank page:
moon-white confidant, its width and height
soon eclipsed by his shadowy, colossal thought.
Foresees time's hand erasing what he wrought.

D.R. James

D. R. James has taught college writing, literature, and peace-making for 34 years and lives in the woods near Saugatuck, Michigan. Poems and prose have appeared in a variety of journals and anthologies, his latest of eight poetry collections are *If god were gentle* (Dos Madres Press) and *Surreal Expulsion* (The Poetry Box), and his microchapbook *All Her Jazz* is free and downloadable-for-the-folding at the Origami Poems Project. www.amazon.com/author/drjamesauthorpage

Early Morning Love Song

Despite the moon, nearly full, gliding
six inches above the western horizon
where that faint line of a Great Lake lies,
my couple of cardinals
amidst the etched gray of sunrise
say it's morning,
and all the little birds believe them.

Despite me, nearing fifty, holding
two inches before hitting the midway
in a life as long as it ought to be,
my tired, allergic eyes
below a gray sketch of wild hair
see it's morning,
and all the giddy cells believe them.

Despite this near-miss at late love, that the
last quarter-inch could not have slid down
like a pane shattering for joy,
my old sorrows roll over
in their fetching gray failure,
sigh, "It's morning,"
and all the silly feelings believe them.

Jonah Piscitelli

Jonah Piscitelli, aged 22, writes poems in a small room in Somerville, Massachusetts. He attended St. John's College in Annapolis, where he studied the idiosyncratic New Program and his work appeared now and then in the school lit-mag.

The Family Plot (O'Brien's Villanelle)

Greeny hills, which I shall lie in,
men of checkered names have striven
with some others called O'Brien

on your shoulders. Come to die in
war, they rise now through a sieve in
greeny hills—which I shall lie in

too—in shape of dandelion,
violet, daisy, lightly given
to some others called O'Brien

by their lovers. How shall I in-
sist that it is *I* who live in
greeny hills, though I shall lie in

them and doze all evening? Why in
any name should I be driven
with some others called O'Brien

to this windy peak and Zion?—
Foreign home, sweet, unforgiven
greeny hills, which I shall lie in
with some others called O'Brien.

Jonah Piscitelli

Skybreak

There is no world beyond the file of junipers. There is a sun that sets, and sets the sky-boats sailing, sets them throwing nets of golden thread to catch a fish of a moon,

but though there is a lake, there is no place out past the junipers. Although the grass lifts long ears from the slab of soil, and tasseled cloverheads nod cleverly and trace

spiderweb arguments, and finches fly, this world does not imply a wider one, and you could walk right off, into the sun-

lit lake the sun is, with the canvas sky drifting away behind, the ship abandoned, fluttering, beyond the sight of land.

Ryan Underwood

Ryan Underwood, who was educated at St. John's College and Columbia University, lives and work in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and has published poetry and translations in a number of journals in the U.S. and abroad, including *Candelabrum Poetry Magazine*, *Asheville Poetry Review*, *Caveat Lector*, *Measure*, *American Poets and Poetry*, and *Frogpond: International Haiku Journal*. His awards include citations from *Modern Haiku* and *The Formalist*.

An Awakening

The sky today is--well, I haven't seen.
Instead, one done in the faint richness of oil
comes back to me, corrected, finally
into a medium not really eternal
but slower, more deliberate and sane.

In that unsteady cloudscape I discern
not quite in words, but in light watched and worshipped,
the shining casual smiles of youth, the heavy
heart on the sleeve for all to see. Within
it, though, one sees just how this world was shaped:

traces of sable drag their ghost strokes over
what a mind saw, embodying nothingness.
Meanwhile, from the curtain still pulled to
a sky's flat blue enamel leaks and leaks,
impossibility that will not waver,

that will be taken in whether looked at or not
to be discovered by a later self:
see it, the lids half lowered, the sun's wild wash
covering all in the gold weight of waiting
as though we could discover what we are.

Leslie Lytle

Leslie Lytle has published poems in *The Carolina Quarterly*, *The Georgia Review*, *Literary Review*, *New England Review* and elsewhere. She works as a reporter for the *Sewanee Mountain Messenger*, the community newspaper of Sewanee, Tennessee, home of the University of the South.

Betsy Littrell is a whimsical soccer mom to four boys. She is working on her MFA in creative writing at San Diego State University, where she was recently awarded the Sarah Marsh Rebelo Scholarship for poetry. Her recent publications include *The Write Launch*. In addition, she is a journalist at KGTV and volunteers with Poetic Youth, teaching poetry to underserved elementary students.

How to Tell the Virgin There Will Never Be Enough

My pot bound Aechmea has leaves too long
like my hair. She leans lopsided toward her wish
for a rain forest, not knowing what she wants,
not knowing what a rain forest is
or that rain forests even exist,
only knowing she dreams water dripping
into the needy place where her leaves erupt
from her crotch like the spread legs of a wanting
woman who knows there will never be enough.
My too long hair no longer flatters my face,
pulls the creases in my skin toward the earth
content to hide with the worms and other
groveling kind who know it's okay
to be less. But the Aechmea begs for a flower.

Ann Halvorsen

Ann Halvorsen, a New York native, relocated 40 years ago to San Francisco for doctoral study in disability. Research and inclusive schooling were themes of prior publications. Now a Professor Emerita, she has time at last for poetry, including poems published in *Broken City* (Toronto), *Writers' Cafe Magazine* (UK), and the upcoming *Wordspring's After/Ashes* anthology.

Night Flight

Manhattan is a toast point from this height;
through the jet's dense glass that storms have flayed
soundless glimmers slant off gunmetal gray
and butter the slow fade of winter light.
Deeper in the diamond mine of night
and absent context cues of sound or place-
but for the engines' roar and meager space-
we adopt common routines for the ride
but dread a future ceaseless, circling flight
puerile hours with strangers, lost leaden days
where names, desires and selves hold surface sway
yet matter little to the coming night.
Beyond bare hope that love and wit survive
unbroken, this: We are alive, tonight.