

A photograph of a cave interior. In the foreground, a dark walkway with metal railings curves through the space. The walls and ceiling are covered in numerous stalactites and stalagmites, illuminated by warm, yellowish light. The text "The Road Not Taken" is overlaid in white at the top.

The Road Not Taken

Fall, 2020

The Road Not Taken: A Journal of Formal Poetry

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Poet's Corner

Welcome to the Fall 2020 issue of *The Road Not Taken*.

The poems you sent me for this issue were a sober bunch, let me tell you: some exceptions, but I think Covid is hitting people hard. There were poems of distance and separation, poems of loss, poems of Edens lost and Edens that never really existed — and, finally, poems that step back and try to achieve perspective of one sort or another.

After some thought therefore, I have divided this issue into three sections:

Far Away and Out of Reach

Not Quite Home

Stepping Back

I was very impressed with the way the mood of these poems fit together; good as they are individually, I think that they are even better, taken as a whole.

Enjoy, and please, **Stay Safe.**

Kathryn Jacobs
Editor
Road Not Taken

Far Away
and
Out of Reach

Deborah Doolittle

Feature Poem

Deborah H. Doolittle has lived in lots of different places but now calls North Carolina home. Teaching at Coastal Carolina Community College, she is the author of *No Crazy Notions*, *That Echo*, *Floribunda*, and *Bogbound* (forthcoming in 2021).

When Ulster is So Far Away

Never thought they'd miss the burns
and hedges that edged the crofts,
the gorse, over a dozen
different kinds of heather.

Never thought they'd be walking
city streets, missing the peat
smoke leaking from the chimneys,
as light as a lark's feather.

Never thought they'd miss the lark,
the lapwing, wagtail, and wren.
Never thought they'd miss the mist,
and all that rainy weather.

Never thought how bitterly
they'd feel this way forever.

Neil Kennedy-Lyons

Editor's Choice
(Kathryn Jacobs)

Neil Kennedy is a poet and librarian. A collection of his work is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press.

The More or Less Convicted

A bird before an audience of men,
invited to plead his side of the case
in exchange for innocence, even grace,
first asks to hear the list of crimes again.
He is told the usual transgression
and offered another chance to efface
either his crime or himself in its place,
whichever he thinks might be forgiven.
The court record being many pages,
he is asked to keep his testimony
brief. Inside is cage, between hand-cuffed wings,
he finds what men keep in other cages.
He finds what to say, addressing only
the more or less convicted. Then, he sings.

Kimber Rudo

Kimber Rudo lives in California, where she writes, photographs, and, until a few months ago, recreated historic social dances with Bay Area ensemble The Academy of Danse Libre, of which she is the artistic director.

The Nether Side of Narrative

A story:

In Baltimore a salesman died young,
Abandoning three sons amidst Great Wars
And Great Depressions. Up and out they hied,
Into a world that met them stride for stride,
So sons could wealthy walk where fathers climbed,
And grandsons might so lofty live they must
Look down to see a world well conquered.

And so it was.

But also:

One hundred years ago, a woman raised
Three boys. The house, we're told, was small but had
A staircase, demonstrating where she'd like
To go from here. Beyond that, it seems
She generated spontaneously,
Pasteur be damned, upon the stoop, in time
To birth three sons, who then she loosed upon
An unsuspecting world in the manner
Of Pandora. We must assume, somewhere
'Twixt Kennedy and Carter, she retired
To the nether side of narrative, because
The rest is silence.

Still, she endured within the warp and woof
Of masculine existence, between sons,
As they strive, and the daughters that those sons
Deride, to the sons of sons who walk
With girls crawling, sick, behind, to the grandsons
Looking down, should they ever bother
Looking down, upon the subastral realms

Of the family's disregarded.

One hundred years ago, in Baltimore,
A woman's husband died. He left behind
Three boys, and a set of stairs not meant for her.
She raised her sons accordingly.

The rest is

Kimber Rudo

Fire Season in California

When August births September parched and spare
amidst the bronzing of the chaparral
look west. Look west, for there hibisci burst
in canker reds and oozing pinks from beds
where once reclined the stars, while down below
the algae echo bloom for crimson bloom
across a warming sea. For flowers do
as flowers do, no matter how waters
divide: they blush and thrive, consume and die,
in parasitic loop. If in the east
their grasping roots reduce their host to ash,
and September wanders mad amongst
the oaken ghosts of August past, look west.
Look west to where the flowers bloom and ask
what price hibiscus.

Stephen Pollock

Stephen C. Pollock is a writer, a retired associate professor at Duke University, and a recipient of the Rolfe Humphries Poetry Prize. His work appears or is forthcoming in *Ink to Paper*, *Live Canon Anthology*, *Poeming Pigeon*, *Buddhist Poetry Review*, *Pinesong*, *Coffin Bell* and *Verseweavers*.

Waning Crescent

I see the usual moon. But my daughter contends,
at age four, that the curved sliver of white
is like her new glasses, focusing light
and sharpening the world with only a slender lens.
“Look, now it’s a fingernail!” she pretends,
which prompts me to scan this deepening night
for the long finger, pointing down from a height
toward circumstance no child comprehends.
I’m sure there are sound reasons her sight is clear
and light and resolved for objects stationed far
away from her, yet blind to things so near,
though truthfully, I don’t know what they are.
I see ... a scythe, and cultivate the fear
its sweeping arc will level every star.

Marjorie Power

Marjorie Power's newest full length collection, *Sufficient Emptiness*, is forthcoming from Deerbrook Editions. Publications which have taken her work recently include *Southern Poetry Review*, *Commonweal*, *Mudfish*, *Evening Street Review* and *Main Street Rag*. She lives in Rochester, N.Y. and can be found at www.marjoriepowerpoet.com.

Fog in Late January

Polkadot leggings pump a swing in the fog.
One child, one father in an empty park.
Polkadot leggings pump a swing in the fog.

Moles keep busy in their dark, in the fog.
Some Christmas lights never go away.
Moles keep busy in their dark, in the fog.

The city doesn't mow in winter in the fog.
This park looks like something that's reached a boil.
The city doesn't mow in winter in the fog.

A continent away a man walks in the fog
alongside a road where he lost a dream.
A continent away a man walks in the fog.

A little boy climbs up a slide in the fog.
One child, one mother in an empty park.
A little boy climbs up a slide in the fog.

Susan McLean

Susan McLean, professor emerita of English at Southwest Minnesota State University, has published two books of poetry, *The Best Disguise* and *The Whetstone Misses the Knife*, and one book of translations of Latin poems by Martial, *Selected Epigrams*. Her poems have appeared in *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *Measure*, *Able Muse*, and elsewhere.

More Light

For Bill Holm, poet and essayist (1943-2009)

The former farm boy who rejoiced in Bach
and books, Haydn and Whitman and Thoreau,
as daylight faded, tried to slow the clock
by wintering for weeks in Mexico
and summering in Iceland, where the sun
shouldered the night aside. Yet its dim twin
advanced in lockstep. Vanishingly wan,
the moon still rang its changes, taking in
the measure of his days. He built on sand
(like all of us) his shrine to deathless art,
immoderate as his ancestral land,
its glacial moonscapes and volcanic heart.

Not Quite Home

Robert Watson

Robert N. Watson teaches Renaissance literature at UCLA. His poetry has been published in *The New Yorker*, *Oxford Poetry*, *Prairie Schooner*, and twenty other literary journals. He's been obsessed with Robert Frost since he was 17, and got to spend one recent summer living on Frost's farm on Bread Loaf mountain in Vermont.

Daughter

She did not become what she'd hoped to become: a ballerina with no toe-pain, for example, or the Queen of the Land of Milk and Money. She rode her unicycle in her school's Christmas show, and met a guy named Michael who would later, the damage done, die ironically in the crash of a rescue helicopter searching the sea for the long-since dead. She laughed at jokes and came home tired and dreamed of not getting anywhere, which she was, mired in a spin-your-wheels career at a nice clean Audi dealership. Her parents, who had liked to make her squeal by pinching pudgy thighs and sniffing shampoo hair, advised by phone, and (as she said) "were always there for me," but she was spared the look her mother gave her father as she told them she had failed to save the chipmunk, or the hundred dollars, or the slip of paper where she wrote that number down. The trip to Egypt was magnificent, but it would die with her, whatever day, and though she kept on trying to forget about it, she was on her own, and never learned to dance, or occupied a throne.

Richard Stimac

Richard Stimac is influenced by 20th century poets who used traditional forms to explore contemporary life. He is also influenced by the local St. Louis landscape of water and stone, dominating metaphors in his poetry for movement and rest and the relationship of time to both. Richard has published poetry in *Sou'wester*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Passengers Journal*, *The Write Launch*, and a scholarly article on Willa Cather in *The Midwest Quarterly*.

Infinite Limits

The rails confined my home. The trainyard guards
patrolled the right of ways and swung their jacks.
At night, my parents crashed, beyond the tracks,
the chain link fence, cracked concrete, brown, bare yards,
the shattered dreams sown like sharp beer bottle shards
from last night's drunk, alone, I'd hear the Amtrak's
sad invocation, the train's clicks and clacks,
the accented meter sung by ancient bards.
My borders made an infinite expanse.
Imagination defined my small earth.
I knew, without reservation or doubt,
I didn't deserve, by action, or by chance,
by law, decree, or chart, or by low birth,
these limits. I would work my own way out.

Charles Southerland

Charles "Charlie" Southerland has been published in some pretty good journals: The Journal of Formal Poetry, Measure, The Lyric, The Hypertexts, Trinacria, The Pennsylvania Review, First Things, Blue Unicorn, The Orchards, The Dead Mule, The Amsterdam Quarterly and a bunch of others. He is grateful to all of them. He loves the quiet farm life and will publish a book of poems next year called: "The Rube."

In Split

You're out there on the Adriatic shore,
a selfie of your feet, as bare as cliffs
and Dover white. Instead of albacore
you order sea bass grilled, hieroglyphs
in Croat from the menu where you point
and shake your head and laugh as if you knew
the lingo—always had, in every joint
you travelled to—I wish you'd make your stew.
I hope you find your way back home, our house
in need of spirit, flesh, instead of freeze-
frames frozen on a cell phone text I douse
with tears. I'm getting sloppy and the leaves
are falling over one another late,
and all of them are searching for a mate.

Stepping Back

Steven Knepper

Steven Knepper teaches in the Department of English, Rhetoric, and Humanistic Studies at Virginia Military Institute. His poems have appeared in *The Road Not Taken*, *Pembroke Magazine*, *SLANT*, *First Things*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, and other journals.

Uzzah and the Ark

What sparked within the Hebrew soldier's heart
when Uzzah saw the Ark begin to slide?
"We should have used the poles and not the cart."
"Should I just watch it spill onto its side?"

Perhaps it was reaction without thought
like when a daughter climbing in a tree
falls out and in her father's arms is caught.
Perhaps, like Cain, there was impurity.

Perhaps it was an act of adulation,
to match the monarch's reckless adoration,
submission to the point of immolation.

John W. Steele

John W. Steele is a psychologist, yoga teacher, assistant editor of *Think: A Journal of Poetry, Fiction and Essays*, and graduate of the MFA Poetry Program at Western Colorado University, where he studied with Julie Kane, David Rothman, and Ernest Hilbert. John lives in Boulder, Colorado and loves hiking in the mountains.

Downward Facing Hero

When Krishna tore the veil from Árjuna's eyes,
Árjuna watched Krishna swallow time and space.
Then he swooned and fell down on his face
begging for mercy, ashamed to have been so blind.
When Moses tried to look God in the eye,
God said, *No man can see me and survive.*

When you kneel down, forehead on the floor,
buttocks on your heels, arms stretched forward,
is this a form of ritual devotion,
surrender of your ego to some notion
of a power higher than yourself,
a way to calm your mind, soothe yourself,
or are you only resting your sore back?
What if, seeing God's face, you collapsed?

Richard Helfer

Advice

There's no good news and there will never be.
Keep cool. Accept it. Learn to do without.
Enjoy each dawn for its peculiar light
but don't pretend that anything will change.

When there's no steak, esteem the taste of toast.
Savor the nuance of the subtle crumb
until you tell yourself it's just as good.
Why want it otherwise? You're better off.

Admire how cleanly you can see your state.
Focus on the clarity, and not the facts,
as when you went out on the balcony and saw
-- as clear as Tokyo when monsters stomp --
the gaping hole within the silver tower,
the cavernous black mouth with flame for teeth.
Keep cool. Don't let it throw you. Simply note
how absolutely crystalline the air.

Peter Venable

The writer has written both free and metric verse for decades. He has been published in Windhover, Third Wednesday, Time of Singing, The Merton Seasonal, Society of Classical Poetry, and others. He is a member of the Winston Salem Writers. His fascination with rhyme and meter began in college, absorbing Donne, Milton, Blake et al. In addition, he finds lyrics in anthems and especially hymns edifying.

Prayer Team

On Wednesday nights, we read each soul's request—
Now many years. Their pleas enshroud the room.
A blood smeared slide showed cancer in Jill's breast.
A drive-by shooting stole Alexis' groom.
Bill, in his easy chair, suffered a stroke.
Dan broke a hip and is in ICU.
Sue's son is on the streets, speed balling coke.
Jane's bound in bed last week with type B flu.

We read and pray through every person's list
And feel the weight of sorrow on our chests.
It is a wonder how such souls persist—
Amid their weary days and countless tests.

Many cascade down life's relentless slopes.
We pray for God to lift their fragile hopes.

