

A photograph of a dirt path winding through a field of yellow wildflowers and cacti. In the background, there are several bare trees under a cloudy sky. The text "The Road Not Taken" is written in white cursive across the top of the image.

The Road Not Taken

Spring, 2020

The Road Not Taken: A Journal of Formal Poetry
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Contents Spring 2020

Poet's Corner

Rolf Parker At Least A Mile Into the Birch Forest
Saving an Abandoned Ramirez Guitar

Mary DeCoste Lilacs
To My Mother

Gilbert Allen The Visitation

Michael Steffen Crows on the Beach
Arboreal

James B. Nicola At a Restaurant Lined with Fish Tanks, Trying to Read a Newspaper

Susan McLean Labyrinth
Mind the Gap

Allison Elliott Temp

Russel Winick Denigration
Perfunctories

Todd Jackson Odysseus' Afterwards

Judy Koren Neverland

Dan Campion At Seven

John Gao Two Kinds of Illiteracy

Faith Thompson Sonnet for a Man

Jonathan Kinsman In the Kitchen

Joe Hart Elizabeth, Night Manager at Denny's

Carmine Di Biase The Forest Cabin

Jay Wickersham Partial Eclipse

John Barton Melittology

Editor

Feature Poem

Editor's Choice

Poet's Corner

Welcome to the Spring 2020 Issue of *The Road Not Taken*.

As I write this, much of our country is still on lock-down because of Covid-19, people are afraid to approach each other, and ordinary life is upended. Poetry however is a constant: it breaks through the artificial boundaries and speaks to us directly, without artifice.

The poems in this issue fall roughly into three categories. A number muse on the society we have withdrawn from with gentle satire. Others turn to family relations with differing degrees of love and pain. And yet others learn about humanity by seeing ourselves reflected in the natural cycle.

I seriously considered dividing the poems included into these three groups. Ultimately however I decided to emphasize transitions instead of differences. The poems in this issue therefore start and end where we all do, in the natural world. Enclosed between those two bookends are poems that are in turn, satirical, personal, or both. I hope you enjoy them.

Before I go, let me welcome the Guest Editor for this issue, Britt Beatte.

Yours,

Kathryn Jacobs
Editor

Rolf Parker

Feature Poem

Rolf Parker lives in Brattleboro, Vermont, where he works as a math, science and writing tutor, and a tobacco educator in the local elementary schools. He also writes three columns for local publications: one on STEAM topics (science, technology, engineering, art, and math) one on local history, and a cryptogram column with clues to treasures he hides on hiking trails.

At Least A Mile Into The Birch Forest

This place does not curse nor pardon.
This is not your home,
this is your secret garden.

Trees and friends fall to loam;
only some drop down with grace.
This is not your home.

Nothing below but leaves and a trace
left by a father who dropped his seeds.
Only some drop down with grace.

Birches are bones, cold lovely weeds
not tended, not planted,
left by a father who dropped his seeds.

You stand, a tree, bent and slanted
under winds and weights of snow,
not tended, not planted.

No matter what you did, or know
this place does not curse nor pardon.
Under winds and weights of snow
this is your secret garden.

Rolf Parker

Saving An Abandoned Ramirez Guitar

Lift the lid, release the mold
and let it float in the air.
Count to thirty, lift, hold.

Sand, scrape, and lightly tear
this soundboard of spruce dust,
and let it float in the air.

Polish the frets of green rust
corroded by now dead fingers that once drummed
this soundboard of spruce dust.

Remove the brittle strings, strummed
snapped, plucked, picked, damped,
corroded by now dead fingers that once drummed.

Wipe clean the brittle blue label stamped,
“Concepcion de Jeronomia”, below the strings
snapped, plucked, picked, damped.

In this rotting barn of abandoned things
lift the lid, release the mold,
“Concepcion de Jeronomia”, below the strings
Count to thirty, lift, hold.

Mary DeCoste

Editor's Choice
(Kathryn Jacobs)

Mary-Michelle DeCoste is an Associate Professor of Italian Studies at the University of Guelph in Guelph, Ontario. She has published a book on Boiardo and Ariosto (*Hopeless Love*, University of Toronto Press, 2009), and articles and book chapters on Dante, Boccaccio, and other topics in Italian Studies. Her poems have appeared in *The Lyric*, *Mezzo Cammin*, and *Shot Glass Journal*. In 2016, she was a General Contributor in Poetry at The Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. She lives in Guelph.

Lilacs

As heavy as a pregnancy, as love,
sweet as a child before she's learned to speak,
they hung themselves, the gobs of purple blooms
among the green and glossy heart-shaped leaves,
until he said — The lilacs should be pruned.
All living things grow better when they're cut
from time to time, and now is not too soon. —
My mother bit her tongue, but I could not.
Grandfather laughed at me — They will grow back
whether or not you want them to, in June. —
In June, just a probationary shoot
that swayed a gentle caution, gentle yearning.
I'm grateful that the lilacs sent a warning,
I'm hopeful something's waiting at the root.

Mary DeCoste

To My Mother

That I fight against being dutiful
while duty fills and empties your life
must feel to you like a blow —

I don't know — we can't seem to be truthful,
and I hate your sacrifice.
My allegiance was lost long ago.

Sex, you concede, can be beautiful,
but only as someone's wife.
How much about me do you know?

Is it too much or too little you know?
Are you more than my father's wife?
You concede that sex can be beautiful,

but my allegiance was lost long ago,
and I hate your sacrifice —
with each other, we can't ever be truthful,

and that must feel to you like a blow —
duty fills and empties your life
while I refuse to be dutiful.

Gilbert Allen

A previous contributor to *The Road Not Taken*, Gilbert Allen writes poems and short fiction. His most recent books are *Catma* and *The Final Days of Great American Shopping*. His seventh collection of poems, *Believing in Two Bodies*, will be forthcoming in November. Since his early retirement from teaching in 2015, he has been the Bennette E. Geer Professor of Literature Emeritus at Furman University in Greenville, South Carolina.

The Visitation

Yes, there's something the dead are keeping back.
—“The Witch of Coös”

October 18, 1990: Beech Mountain, NC

At thirty-nine, resigned to childlessness,
we took a holiday that early fall.
A hundred forty miles, four thousand feet
above our home, we stopped in early winter.
Flurries had just begun to stain the streets.
Stunted maples, oaks already stripped,
leaves frozen in the driveway's pothole puddles.
Our so-called cabin, sharpening the wind
seemed specially designed for downdrafts—ashes
filling the room at gusty intervals
while nothing in the fireplace would burn
and I thought what the hell, and closed the damper.

What the hell! We made love in the whirlpool,
the only place above sixty degrees.

That night, the storm kept screaming in my sleep
while you dreamed of my father—dead since June,
sitting a scant six inches from your feet,
his silence filling you with joy and grief.

The next month, when we found out you were pregnant,
and ten days after that, the baby lost,
you swore you knew what brought him to that height
and what you knew now, he'd already known.

Michael Steffen

Michael Steffen lives in Somerville, Massachusetts. David Ferry has described his writing as *so alive...keen with observation, both of what things actually look like...and also of character...* His poems have been published, including in *The Boston Globe*, *Connecticut Review*, *The Concord Saunterer*, *Harvard Review Online*, *Ibbetson Street*, *Poem* and *Poetry Porch*.

Crows on the Beach

On a mid-Atlantic coast, crows on the beach, on a windy late October day, are an unusual sight, conveying something reckless afoot, perhaps transgressive.

—Suzannah Lessard

They're telling you they are not innocent,
not simple hoverers for height's sole sake
like inland gulls. Crows have ever meant
the effort of their flight, the sudden-to-shock
vehemence in their caws, their territorial
collaboration landing in the pines
on a field's shoulder, as if by the call
of a crow spirit. Their dark plumage inclines
more than it clothes, and is not often seen
afoot on the sea's fringe like something reckless.
The more conspicuously they intervene,
these awkward, ominous aerialists, the more
diminished they are by exposure, where their ruckus
is swallowed by the tide and wide winds' roar.

Michael Steffen

Arboreal

If you haven't heard the leaves lament that once
we budded round and firm and full of sex
and savored earth like otherworldly tongues;
we sheltered the kinglet's eggs and sneaked the snakes
into the bowers to devour them; we held
that divine ambiguity, that warmth
to hearten those who lived and those who killed
the living; until, one by one, to earth
we fell, in dollars, in disease, in earned
buttercreams and burgundies; some in
the thirstiest chromes that make whole hillsides burn.
If you haven't heard the leaves, you may still walk
the neighborhood, a mile or two—or ten—
all the way to Timbuktu, a writer's block.

James B. Nicola

James B. Nicola's poetry has appeared in *TRNT* as well as in the *Antioch*, *Southwest*, *Green Mountains*, and *Atlanta Reviews*; *Barrow Street*; *Rattle*; *Tar River*; and *Poetry East*. His full-length collections are *Manhattan Plaza* (2014), *Stage to Page* (2016), *Wind in the Cave* (2017), *Out of Nothing: Poems of Art and Artists* (2018) and *Quickening: Poems from Before and Beyond* (2019). His nonfiction book *Playing the Audience* won a *Choice* award.

At a Restaurant Lined with Fish Tanks, Trying to Read a Newspaper

The glassed-in fish that stare at every table
along the walls curb some souls' appetite,
the way that beasts or prisoners aligned
in margins behind bars or moats, or chained,
might; other diners feel the opposite

effect. The guppy mawing her own babe'll
become one with it, as the carnivore
or cannibal—or vegetarian—
becomes one with one's dinner. Any man
or woman, for that matter, becomes more

from what's ingested. Since my seat is stable,
I sip my soup secure that I belong
to a more civil race and peaceful age
than this—then flip my paper to a page
where headline after headline proves me wrong.

Susan McLean

Susan McLean, a retired professor of English, has published two poetry books, *The Best Disguise* and *The Whetstone Misses the Knife*, and one book of translations of the Latin poems of Martial, *Selected Epigrams*. She lives in Iowa City.

Labyrinth

At first, there are so many paths to choose.
You peek through one door, close it, try another,
backtrack, waver, search for tracks or clues,
chasing a fading gleam, a swift-heeled lover,
a dream of rest. Somewhere a door clicks shut.
It isn't one you want. Later, you find
some lock when you've stepped through. Disturbing. But
it's not until a deadbolt locks behind
a face you love that you feel stalked by fear.
Suddenly every click sounds like a shot
as family, friends, and mentors disappear,
then words. The doors that open (most do not)
show faces, but of nobody you knew.
One door remains: the one you must go through.

Mind the Gap

Women who wed much older men
may find their roles have been reversed
when he grows frail and must be nursed.
They may be troubled by a yen
for younger men they meet, but then
their spent youth won't be reimbursed.
Perhaps their spouse will not die first,
and if he does, they can't know when.
Of four young second wives I knew,
one got divorced, re-wed, then died
of cancer; one chose suicide;
one flourished, then got cancer, too;
one stayed—yet they lead separate lives.
Each of the husbands still survives.

Allison Elliott

Allison Elliott is a writer and communications professional based in Queens, New York. She has had poems and essays appear in the Hopkins Review, New Ohio Review, and the Adirondack Review.

Temp

Last girl they sent could barely type her name.
What's yours? I hope you drink your coffee black.
No milk, no cream, no half-and-half, no Sir,
we get this powdered stuff; it's not so bad.
And now I'll show you how to use the phone.
Don't open people's mail. Big, big mistake.
That happened once before. Too bad. Nice girl.
Came here to be an actress—plays and stuff.
Or was it soaps? I can't remember which.
And you? A writer? Artist? Let me guess.
I thought I'd be a ballerina, once.
You smile. It's true. I saw them way back when.
The Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo came
to Knoxville, Tennessee. We sat in front.
They leapt so high, all dressed in white and gold,
like angels--I remember thinking that.
What brought that up? I guess we all have dreams.
Now one o'clock is when you take your lunch.
Be sure to turn the phones off when you leave.
I don't expect you to remember this.

Russel Winick

Mr. Winick recently started writing poetry at nearly age 65, after ending a long legal career. Langston Hughes' work greatly appealed to him when he studied poetry in 8th grade, and it remains a primary inspiration to this day.

Denigration

Disparagements implanted
In youthful minds as fact
Can linger near forever
Being brutal to extract.

It's tragic when you realize
Emotions of today
Have origins in ancient hurts
That never went away.

Perfunctories

Two men met in a hallway
And handshakes were extended.
"Hi, how are you?" they both intoned
But that is where it ended.

Two men approached each other
And said "Hi, how are you?"
But rather than give answers,
They both passed right on through.

Todd Jackson

Todd Jackson has published in *Snakeskin Poetry Ezine* and authored a chapbook of poems, *Ouranion*. He lives in Las Vegas. His English degrees are from Clarion University of Pennsylvania and The Johns Hopkins University. "Having taught at Goucher College and Bowie State University, he currently lives the dream as a freelance writer."

Odysseus' Afterwords

Darling Circe, leading me to sin.
As I rest my head between your thighs
Whisper me what beast I would've been.

Ichor pulses cool beneath your skin.
By this deathless blood you mesmerize.
Darling Circe, leading me to sin.

Turning sailors into Otherkin.
Some to ursinate, some leonize.
Whisper me what beast I would've been.

Kiss you up and down your eight foot ten.
Let's again before this morning dries.
Darling Circe, leading me to sin.

Would my sweat bead up a dorsal fin?
Does my tongue inspire butterflies?
Whisper me what beast I would've been.

Now again to taste the light within,
Stir your repertoire of little cries.
Darling Circe, leading me to sin.
Whisper me what beast I would've been.

Judy Koren

Judy Koren has a degree in English literature but has worked for most of her career as a freelance information analyst. She lives in Haifa, Israel. She has written most of her poetry since her recent retirement. Her poems have appeared or been accepted for publication in two *Voices Israel* anthologies, two issues of the annual Israeli literary magazine *The Deronda Review*, the forthcoming issue of *The Road Not Taken* and two upcoming issues of *Lighten Up Online*.

NeverLand

Utopia cannot exist
in light of day
only hidden in mist
or far away
below the Western sea
beyond the furthest star
a NeverLand, where no
humans are.

For humans in Utopia would despoil
its fertile soil,
litter it, poison it, lay it bare,
turn its intoxicating air
toxic, watch its blue skies
blacken before their eyes
its stars disappear
little by little, year by year,
its seas uprise
we humans then would need
a new Utopia to fuel our greed.

Dan Champion

Dan Champion is the author of *Peter De Vries and Surrealism* and coeditor of *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song*, a third edition of which was issued in 2019. His poems have appeared in many anthologies and magazines, including *Able Muse*, *Blue Unicorn*, *Ekphrasis*, *Light*, *Measure*, *Midwest Quarterly*, *North American Review*, *Poetry*, *Rolling Stone*, *Shenandoah*, and *Think*. He lives in Iowa City, Iowa.

At Seven

I might've died in nineteen fifty-six.
Just past a tonsillectomy, I spiked
a fever: measles. Ether'd played its tricks,
and now delirium roamed where it liked.
In many universes, let's say, I
survived; that leaves a lot where I went cold,
including even this one, maybe, my
impression that I lived a ghost's fool's gold.
They kept the room dark to protect my eyes.
How many universes see me blind
from negligence? Not one. My parents rise
to the occasion every time, I find.
For I'm exploring all the outcomes now.
At seven, mortal lessons taught me how.

John Gao

John Gao is a native of Miami, Florida, ex-Texan, and twice expat in China, currently completing his BA in English with a concentration in British Literature as part of a seven-year BA/MD program, and will matriculate into medical school this fall. His poetry has been published by the *Society of Classical Poets*, the *Dial*, and *Coastlines*. Aside from literature, John enjoys piano, Esperanto, and chess.

Two kinds of illiteracy

Big man. Small forebrain. Small like walnuts. Bent
on borrowing his way to the American dream.
No credit score is low enough. Five years
of college means the world owes him a job—
a happy meal that comes with lobster, steak,
a rented iPhone, rented Audi, a house
whose furniture, like its four walls, are lent,
not “bought”— in fact, the only thing that’s bought
is the \$80 Rolex made in China
he proudly cuffs himself with every day
to happy hour, ordering watered cocktails,
three parts booze, seven parts markup and debt,
and then he wonders why, at the age of forty,
the debt’s as high as e’er and he still owns nothing.

“I’m dead but smiling wide. Bespectacled
retirees carve the French roast off their plates.
I scrub off their jus stains and count out change,
handling green bills worth more than my whole youth.
The carpet stain smirks back at me. On fours,
I crawl ashore an atoll in the sea
of student debt— I thought I must have drowned,
choking on last night’s moldy dishwater
that tasted worse than Starbucks, but at least
I earned myself another month to sleep
below the studio top bunk like a corpse
beneath its bier, above the vaults of hell.
But, here, for now, I scrub the carpet floors
with my soaped-up diploma on all fours.”

Faith Thompson

Faith Thompson is a recent graduate of the MFA program in poetry at Georgia College & State University. Her work has been published in *Juxtapose Magazine*, *IDK Magazine*, and *Alba*. She lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and works as a nanny.

Sonnet for a Man

I knew a man of slang and broken bones,
unfettered and well-satisfied with that.
He never learned to speak in undertones,
but murdered silence like a yowling cat
when it was hanging heavy in the air.
His words fell from his mouth like shards of glass,
but how his lips were soft! His eyes were bare
of guile, and blue as blue Elijah grass.
A reckless man who smelled of gin and cedar
who loved to watch the rain come down in sheets,
he was a creature mad enough with candor
to submit to vivisection in the streets,
to submit to being known in every part.
Rough to the touch, but tender at the heart.

Jonathan Kinsman

Jonathan Kinsman is 8th grade *Provocateur de Litterature* & Grand Grammarian, 3rd Degree Master of the Revels & Singular of Nouns

In the Kitchen

SHE writes me notes,
those little things
that bless and lift the day
above the base and mundane sort
to fragrant vistas faraway.

SHE sends me news
of great import,
my heart resounds and sings –
missives mixed among the berries,
lines wrapped around the wings,
and, all Love brings

are little notes,
the moment's news –
noted manifest of the day:
frenetic coaxing curlicues
calling to me – let's run; let's play!

Joe Hart

Joseph Hart has a BA. He has had poems published in small magazine and was twice nominated for a Pushcart. His favorite poets are Keats, Millay and Joyce.

Elizabeth, Night Manager at Denny's

The pretty woman holds
Two jobs. She doesn't rest.
The diner is a bark adrift at sea.
And midnight now enfolds
The heathen and the blessed
Where she sat and visited with me.
Very like a dream
She walks throughout a sleep
Where sit the bumptious, drunken, loud and vain.
She makes the diner seem
A talisman to keep
When you're alone and standing in the rain.

Carmine Di Biase

Carmine Di Biase has written on Shakespeare and modern English and Italian literature. His translation of *The Diary of Elio Schmitz: Scenes from the World of Italo Svevo*, appeared in 2013. His most recent poems have appeared in *The South Florida Poetry Journal*. He writes regularly for the *Times Literary Supplement* and is Distinguished Professor of English at Jacksonville State University in Alabama.

The Forest Cabin

That morning from the fire tower we saw
One roof top amid the forest below.
Whoever lived there would have come to know
The coyote's shrill night cry, the raven's caw.

It happened there that day, up high, that kiss
That took us through the wilderness of life:
The warm, teeming hills, the dark vales of strife,
The flaming hearth, the dreaded cold abyss.

Today I found a thrush's yolk-stained nest
In tatters on the path. Then, near that lone
Cabin, a young buck's carcass, stripped to bone,
Unforked antlers in its own hollowed breast.

And the cabin empty, the rock that broke
The glass still there, inside, like some grim joke.

Jay Wickersham

Jay Wickersham's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Agni*, the *William & Mary Review*, the *Formalist*, *The High Window*, *Vita Brevis*, *Yankee*, and the *Harvard Review* (an essay on having Seamus Heaney as a teacher). He is a member of the Powow River Poets in Newburyport, MA, and recently studied with Craig Morgan Teicher at the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center.

Partial Eclipse

The TV and the papers gave us warning:
today the moon would swallow up our sun. He'd
stick in her throat, a too-large lump of candy,
and be spat back up. It didn't seem alarming,
to lose our sun. We talked of it while we sat,
then settled to work. The phones rang. Visitors came
for a meeting, stayed through lunch. The sky turned black
and thundery, splattered the glass with rain.
"What a storm," we said. "So dark – it looks like nightfall."
Headlights burrowed through the roadside gloom.
So dark, so dark inside our narrow room.
Only when light's return made day less doubtful
did we begin to wonder: was this sun
still ours, or another, lesser sun?

John Barton

John Barton's twenty-six books, chapbooks, and anthologies include *Polari*, *For the Boy with the Eyes of the Virgin: Selected Poems*, *Seminal: The Anthology of Canada's Gay-Male Poets*, *We Are Not Avatars: Essays, Memoirs, Manifestos*, and *The Essential Douglas LePan*. In 2020, he will publish *Lost Family* with Signal Editions and *The Essential Derk Wynand* with Porcupine's Quill. Born in Edmonton and raised in Calgary, he lives in Victoria, B.C.

Melittology

Melittology

The swelling down, the doctor said no sting
if one this paltry hadn't killed me, could
my sensitivity misunderstood
as always, despite my taste for walking

in shorts through tall breezy fescues waning
at the city's underfed margins, woods
hectorated by wasps and free-wheeling bees, good
boots and argyle socks not enough to bring

surprise to heel, the first grassy stumble
I recall making me, a child, humble

the hankie Mum knotted about my thigh
a tourniquet cinched tight to stem the pain's
righteous spread: when undone, what caught my eye
were violets the stinger stitched through muslin.