

The Road Not Taken

A Journal of Formal Poetry



Fall, 2021

The Road Not Taken: A Journal of Formal Poetry

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Poet's Corner

As most of you know, we don't have "theme issues," though we discussed the idea more than once. There are advantages to theme issues, from the readers' point of view: it is both fun and thought-provoking to compare and contrast different creative approaches to the same prompt. Ultimately though, we haven't wanted to risk eliminating fine poems, just because they don't happen to fit a given issue's theme. Instead, we chose to examine what the poems have in common *after* accepting them on quality alone.

In the last several issues, this has resulted poems grouped under three thematic headings. We are in no way married to groups of three; future issues may choose two or four themes or choose a different organizational principle altogether. So far though, a couple of themes have stood from the get-go: in this case, "Poems of Place" and "Artistic Reflections." Probably there are other ways these particular poems might have been grouped. The current editors however were struck by how many of the poems submitted this time around focused on a particular location, or reinterpreted the work of other artists, so we grouped them accordingly.

The poems in our third group are probably less obviously connected, at least at first. On further examination however, these poems are all taken from what we have chosen to call *The Neighborhood*. After all, none of us exist in isolation. On any given day we may meet someone on the stairs, read the news or pause to question our own adherence to ritual, and why we do it – but in each case, we are examining our function in the larger human community. Our third theme therefore, both in this issue and in the ones preceding it, tends to focus on the poet's relationships with the larger world around us.

So much for organization. Beyond that, I can only say that I am immensely proud of the poems featured in this issue: believe me when I say that the competition was fierce, and we hope you enjoy them.

Kathryn Jacobs
Rachel Jacobs,
Editors

Poems of Place

Location, Location, Location....

Charles Weld

Editor's Choice (Rachel Jacobs)

Charles Weld's published *Country I Would Settle In*, in 2004, through Pudding House Press, and Kattywompus Press published a chapbook, *Who Cooks For You?*, in 2012. Partially retired, he works for a non-profit agency treating youth that face mental health challenges in the Finger Lakes region of upstate New York.

A Yankee In Maryland

In Maryland, in 1844, my uncle was loath to admit
he'd milked a cow for money. The children he taught
did no chores. No sweeping floors, no wood to split
and carry in, no feeding hogs, no dishes to wash.
Raised on a New Hampshire farm, he hadn't thought
such leisure possible. *High minded*—meaning posh
and pampered—is how he describes his employers
and neighbors in a letter home. Connoisseurs
of clothing. *You know that a fine coat pleases fools*,
he complains to his brother, but, as his small school's
future depends on meeting southern norms,
he protests privately to family and conforms,
naming slavery a *misfortune* and railing at the naiveté
of New Englanders who think it will wither and fade away.

Earl Carlton Huband

Earl Carlton Huband is the author of *The Innocence of Education* [Longleaf Press, 2018] and *In the Coral Reef of the Market* [Main Street Rag Publishing, 2020]. The latter received the 2021 Peace Corps Writers Award for Poetry. Both are based on Huband's experiences as a Peace Corps Volunteer in the Sultanate of Oman.

A Double Take on the Middle East

*The utter self-revealing
Double-take of feeling* – Seamus Heaney

I. An American Tourist's Dream

I stood . . . I stood in old Jerusalem,
on top of the eastern wall. Looking down,
I zeroed in on an Arab child — a slim
waif of a boy, clothed in a ragged gown —
digging amid the rubble, mound after mound
with bodies broken, buried — piles so high
they might have raised him up. Turning around,
he saw me standing here against the sky;
and stooping, grabbed a stone and let it fly
straight at my face. I twisted. It didn't miss.
He turned and ran, ignoring my wounded cry,
zigzagging through the mounds, shaking his fist,
cursing me — in English! Why did he aim
at me? at me? — As if I were to blame.

II. A Revolutionary Charge

Rising before sunrise — unshaven, faceless —
confronting a torn country, he kneels, praying.
An image of his sun — another day —
marks him, irregular in time and place,
war's harvest — the rough stubble, the outrage —
gathering still, spurred by rhetoric, words
lacerating the nation and its wards,
all recipients of the loaded charge:

*We extend to you the olive branch and bomb,
powerful appeals to a people's hunger.
Cultivate the olive. Think of the young.
Ovens of hate consume them, burning stronger.
In indignation weaned, absorbing anger,
the young extend the olive branch and bomb.*

Matthew Curtis

M. Anthony C. received his MFA in Creative Writing (studying poetry) from Brigham Young University, where he wrote a collection of epistolary poetry written in heroic couplets titled "Dear Isa."

To Alberta, Canada

Dear Michael,

You talked about Frost's yellow wood
With those two roads, being misunderstood:
This sentimental triumph, small glories both
The roads he peered down in the undergrowth.
And you're right, the lines fight off themselves,
His sigh unwound already. When he delves
Into the details of the unmucked leaves,
Sees the grass unworn in both, he perceives
Two equally used ways that equally lay
Then lies that he'll return another day.

Yeah, this poem's not his best. It's not "Out, Out"
Nor "Mending Wall," "Directive." It can't flout
Frost's "Birches," "...Snowy Evening," "...Apple Picking,"
"Desert Places," or "For Once, Then, Something."
But my hand's not detached, my neighbor's friendly,
My childhood and trees do not offend me,
Wells don't confuse me, yet, and though I'm lonely,
Those ever-clichéd woods are what affront me.

His journey so trivial, a morning hike,
Mine turns my members violent, wayward, warlike,
Each step I try to make intruded by
A fear so sharp, it bleeds into my eye.
On one path, I see tracks of tennis shoes,
Her wandering gait, which rocks and trees amuse.
The trail's so long, I'll never be so young
As when I start it. Each step my legs are stung
By all the screws on which my hopes are hung.
She's walked a year away, and do I follow
All this time? To obviously wallow
In her unseen face? In her unseen face, I'd know
Her hidden, unheard wants. If I only knew
The manner of her mien, I could pursue
The path her footsteps take—or not.

Thanks, Thew

Deborah Doolittle

Deborah H. Doolittle's recent publications include FLORIBUNDA and BOGBOUND. Some of her poems have appeared or will soon appear in *Comstock Review*, *Ibbetson Street*, *Iconoclast*, *Pinyon Review*, *Rattle*, *Slant*, and *The Stand*. An avid bird-watcher, she shares a home with her husband, four housecats, and a backyard full of birds.

Freeway Malaise

What does it mean to speak Anglo-Saxon
in Los Angeles? With all those pesky

irregular verbs growing like weeds in
Yorba Linda, blooming pretty flowers.

For hours now, the traffic pulses through
the valley, humming to its own wordless

tune, part carbon, part dioxide, sighing
like the waves wandering under the pier

in Santa Monica, like the wind through
cedars in the foothills of La Canada?

What does it mean to have the smog shift like
mist drifting through the lowlands? What must those

hills and dales do to lift their gossamer
veils to keep our conversation going?

Tad Tuleja

Tad Tuleja is an American writer with a doctorate in folklore, scholarly books on vernacular traditions and military culture, and a grant from the Puffin Foundation for his song cycle *Skein of Arms*. His poems, which often echo the Child ballads and the poetry of Yeats, have appeared in *Better Than Starbucks* and *The Five Two* and are forthcoming in *Blue Unicorn* and *Adirondack Review*. On YouTube he performs the songs from his CD *Waters Wide Between* under the name Skip Yarrow.

Bells of Sligo

When this cruel war is over
comrades carried home
and the men in ermine robes have had their say
Put a candle in the window
a log upon the fire
and meet me on the road to Sligo Bay

When the last hard word is spoken
In the Land of Heart's Desire
and the dreams of fools and children ring true
With all the bugles broken
and banners in the fire
it's then that I'll be coming home to you

In the field below Ben Bulbin
we'll walk hand in hand
and watch the wild swans take wing
In the shade of Drumcliff churchyard
we will speak of Crazy Jane
and smile to hear the bells of Sligo ring

We will hear the honeyed chimes of peace in the streets of Sligo town
the ploughman with his daily bread the prince without his crown
When the sword has lost its magic and the deepest cut its sting
we will raise a cup of fellowship as the bells of Sligo ring

Cliffs of Donegal

I climbed a hill in Donegal to look out on the sea
where a lean and hungry wind shook its locks at me
The sea swept friendless to the West, salt spray lashed below
yet I saw not rocks nor isles blessed as that wind did blow

But this day's weather's all you have
fair wind or biting rain
Once it's filled the parting glass
will not be filled again

Between a world yet to be born and one that's long since died
we shake like seabirds wreathed in foam above an angry tide
Taste what you can, share what you will with the hungry and afraid
and listen for the piper's trill in the space the wind has made

For this day's weather's all you have
fair wind or biting rain
Once it's filled the parting glass
will not be filled again

Rolf Parker

Rolf Parker lives in Brattleboro, Vermont, where he works as a math, science and writing tutor, a health educator, and a free-lance writer of history. His work has previously been published in this journal.

The Ghosts

The puritans of this country hated the accused.
They built pillories and used them, alongside powder and shot.
Years before 1700, these pillories were America's news.

I have not read or listened to the news
since April of this year.
The people who were shot,
the storm that flooded that country,
the actor who was accused;
I know nothing about them.

I know nothing about them
but all about the news.
Innocent and guilty will both be accused,
and every single year
chaos will swamp someone's country,
and people lined up will be shot.

The first person ever shot,
I know a little about them.
They were in Hubei, a country
from history, not the news.
1132 was the year.
The shooter was never accused.

I know I might be accused
of not caring about those who were shot.
But the people torn open each year
demand that I care for them all
and join ghosts from eons of "news"
from every time and country.

Is it possible to change a country?
to save the falsely accused?
That is the value of news,
not just to tally up the shot
but to prod us to help them
year after year after year.

But I am in my fifty-fifth year
I don't understand my country,
its delight in "us vs them"
and in accusing the accused,
or reading how many times they were shot.
Information is needed, but to hell with the news.

Artistic Reflections

Barbara Lydecker Crane

Feature Poem

(Kathryn Jacobs)

Barbara Lydecker Crane has been a graphic designer and professional fabric artist who now focuses on writing formal poetry. With two Pushcart nominations and twice a finalist for the *Rattle* Poetry Prize, she has three published collections (*Zero Gravitas*, *Alphabetricks*, and *BackWords Logic*). Her poems have appeared in *Able Muse*, *Ekphrastic Review*, *First Things*, *Light*, *Measure*, *Mezzo Cammin*, *Montreal Review*, *Think*, and *Writer's Almanac*, among others. She lives near Boston.

Unspoken

Elizabeth Grant Bankson Beatty (Mrs. James Beatty) and her Daughter Susan, a painting by Joshua Johnson (1763-1824); Maryland, c.1805

I hold some history close, about my birth and youth. In ads I wrote, “I’ve been self-taught, confronted obstacles to test my worth, and am a genius.” This shameless tout has brought good income from my portrait work, and chased away self-doubt.

This client wanted shine—white lace, glass beads, brass tacks—her wealth and taste displayed. She asked if I would stay to dine but I departed at the dinner bell, making mention of my family waiting (no slaves to cook for us). I'd never tell the facts my clients might find devastating: my father was white, my mother a black slave. She gave me strength and schooled me to behave.

Isabel Chenot

Isabel Chenot has had poetry and translation appear in various print and online journals, including *Blue Unicorn*, *Tinderbox*, *Assisi*, and previously, this journal. A poetry collection is in production with Wiseblood, and a fairy tell retelling is forthcoming with Propertius Press.

Manfredini

I thought the painting depicted a burning city —
after a plague, I wondered, or burning
after war? In a narrow, smoke-charred alley
a woman knelt over a corpse; and a man half-turning

toward her, half-looked up to a collapsing beam
where a strange figure dangled.
Another hung from a ladder. A third, oddly mangled
draped between.

They were playing the Christmas concerto by Manfredini:
I heard a vertical space between vibrating strings —
and I realised the mangled forms were nativity
angels. Joseph half-turned to see their wings.

Mary was kneeling over a baby on a skeletal
bed of hay. The burning city was a stable,
and the towering flames, celestial
light. It was only an impression of dearth and dark and rubble
around a newborn child on a wing-dazed night.

Leo Aylen

Leo Aylen; born KwaZulu, South Africa. 9 collections; latest *The Day The Grass Came*, (“a triumph”, Melvyn Bragg). 5 prizes (Arvon 2ce; Peterloo 2ce; Bridport). Approx 100 poems in anthologies, 100 poems broadcast; performs in Britain, North America, Africa.

On Tour, Arriving at the Next Theater

Enter. The sounds of silence wrap us round,
Welcome us in. This stage. This place of dreams ...
‘We are such stuff as dreams are made on.’ ... Crowned
Kings, murdered lawyers, fools chasing moonbeams,
Jack-the-giant-killers. We’re to strut and fret
Here on these boards a couple of hours a night
For two months, then be heard no more ... And yet,
Because this stage pulses with ancient ghosts —
Not of people but of performances —
We may live on too, like smudges, almost
Forgotten, till, from one chance audience’s
Mind-store, one gasp from one scene in one show
Pops up like Jack-in-a-box with love’s red rose.

Robin Helweg-Larsen

Robin Helweg-Larsen's poems, largely formal, are published in The Road Not Taken and various other magazines in various countries. Some favorites are in The HyperTexts. He is Series Editor for Sampson Low's "Potcake Chapbooks - Form in Formless Times", and blogs at <http://formalverse.com> from his hometown of Governor's Harbour in the Bahamas.

The Entertainer's Servant

See the violinist
blocking, enchanting passing crowds with his bowing
and watch some ragged child, the very thinnest,
with held-out cap through those crowds coming and going.

Or the organ grinder
haunting the emotions and memories of all,
his songs life's bittersweetness's reminder....
but it's his well-dressed monkey makes the coins fall.

And more: the child's home work handed in
though mostly done by mummy;
and more: the wisecracks bandied in,
seemingly by the ventriloquist's dummy...

This is the poet's story:
somewhere some unseen Maker
wings from a wild wand
magnificence, sadness, glory...
while the mere poet capers,
postures, and holds out a hand.

Barbara Bazyn

Barbara Bazyn's poems have appeared in *The Literary Review*, *Blue Unicorn*, *Seems*, *The Cresset* and various other little magazines. A retired English instructor, she lives in rural Iowa.

In Old Age Mary Bennet Reproaches the Author of Her Existence, Jane Austen

Not witty like Lizzy,
not pretty like Kitty,
I got no second chance.
I never went to Pemberley;
at balls, I did not dance.
Though I admit I often lacked
acumen, elegance, or tact,
given that I was then nineteen,
I find your condemnation mean,
for I had self-respect and grit.
I had a heart, not looks.
I wish I'd been a character
in Charlotte Brontë's books.

Zack Rogow

Zack Rogow is the author, editor, or translator of more than twenty books or plays. His ninth book of poems, *Irreverent Litanies*, was issued by Regal House Publishing. Rogow's blog, *Advice for Writers*, features more than 250 posts. He serves as a contributing editor of *Catamaran Literary Reader*.
www.zackrogow.com

Unseemly for a Poet to Live a Long Life

Unseemly for a poet
to live a long life,
to gather white hair and grandkids,
long-term hubby or wife.

A poet should go young
in a snap and tragic death,
in the drink like Shelley
or an overdose of meth.

Consumption's a fitting path,
e.g., Keats in Rome,
or smashed in a crash
with glass and steel and chrome;

or like those crystal souls,
say Sexton or Berryman,
who row their own way
to Charon, the ferryman.

And don't forget Chatterton,
"the marvellous boy,"
who glugged down the arsenic.
Oy yoy yoy yoy yoy!

A short life shines bright
as a big burp of lava—
think Rimbaud in Africa,
smuggling guns and java.

I waited too long, though,
for firing squad or goring.
It's too late to die young,
I'll just have to die boring.

The Neighborhood

Donald Wheelock

Donald Wheelock's chapbook, *In the Sea of Dreams*, has been published by Gallery of Readers Press. His poems have appeared in *Blue Unicorn*, *Ekphrasis*, *Equinox*, *Snakeskin*, *The Lyric*, *Rue Scribe*, and elsewhere. In addition to writing poetry, he has composed chamber, vocal, and orchestral music, during a long career of teaching music. He lives with his wife Anne in an old house at the edge of a hayfield in Whately, Massachusetts.

Meeting on the Stairs

"The view from ninety is magnificent."
He was four steps above me when he said it,
I on my way up, he coming down.
His smile was radiant, a testament
delivered in a two-man traffic jam.
His age I couldn't quite imagine then,
or if I could—my memory of him is vague,
thanks to my now being eighty—has left
for parts unknown. His smile was full of teeth,
the kindest teeth I'd ever seen. A friend—
I'd made a friend without a word exchanged.
I stared a moment, not because of who
among the family of guests he was—
I had not read him then, nor heard the myths.
We stood a moment on the narrow stairs
before I must have backed the few steps down
to let him slowly pass. He disappeared
soon after that. "A neighbor," I was told.

James B. Nicola

James B. Nicola, a returning contributor, is the author of six collections of poetry, the latest being *Fires of Heaven: Poems of Faith and Sense*. His decades of working in the theater culminated in the nonfiction book *Playing the Audience: The Practical Guide to Live Performance*, which won a *Choice* award.

News

Though white and black, so much of it is blue,
which is the state I've just fallen into
because today, a Belgian girl of nine—
nine—was assaulted by a band of men

as Nabokov had never dreamt. But I
can only fold up and put down the *Times*
and cry out, where a feeling man should cry.
What about you, when you hear of such crimes?

At least I am politely uninspired
and, in a while, depose a quivering pen,
reach over, turn the light off, and feel tired.
It's almost daybreak. I'm almost human.

Martin McCarthy

Martin Mc Carthy lives in Cork City, Ireland, where he studied English at UCC. He has published two collections: *Lockdown Diary* (2020) and *Lockdown* (2021). His most recent poems appear in the pandemic anthology, *Poems from My 5k*, and in the journals: *Drawn to the Light*, *Seventh Quarry Poetry*, *Poetry Salzburg*, *The Lyric*, *WestWard Quarterly* and *Lighten Up Online*. He has been shortlisted for the Red Line Poetry Prize.

Priorities

for Sarah Marie and Josh

Nothing matters very much,
except the days when I sat here,
watching movies with the kids,
when they were young,
and there was a lockdown,
and death stalked the streets outside.

Nothing matters very much,
except the days when I grew my hair
long, like a sixties guru, and the kids
were safe and strong,
and the world was a ghost town,
and it felt good to be trapped inside.

Mid Walsh

Mid Walsh is a poet, singer, athlete, husband, and grandfather living near the ocean. With an English BA from Yale University and an MBA, he has conducted careers as a carpenter, a hi-tech executive, and a yoga studio owner. His poetry renders his life experiences into the music of language. Mid's poetry is forthcoming or has appeared in *Nixes Mate Review*, *Blue Unicorn*, *Silkworm*, and *Lily Poetry Review*.

Fall

Now the old embalmer
has drained blood from every tree
and I drag out the gritty storms
stow away the screens

and roll up the hoses
dry as a loops of string
place them in the basement
purposeless till spring.

Those leaves have soaked up too much sun
and spilled out all the color
Have them rot in the coffin of the compost pile;
by spring they may be duller.

As gauzy old autumn promenades
in neon pumpkin hues,
I lack the sap to celebrate
this turning of the screw.

Michael Sandler

Michael Sandler is the author of the poetry collection, *The Lamps of History* (FutureCycle Press 2021). His poems have appeared in scores of journals including *Arts & Letters*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, and *Zone 3*. Michael lives near Seattle; his website is www.sandlerpoetry.com.

Kippah

As religious array, it doesn't feel essential:
I don't count myself among the devotees
of orthodox rite, more a peripheral
member of the tribe. I'm with Maimonides
who saw animal sacrifice as "a gracious ruse"
for ancestors who'd have been at sixes and sevens
if stripped of the then-familiar—like the pose
of a religion today with no prayer, no heaven.

Like him, I prefer a creed of intellect
that divines what can't be known of transcendence
and moves on—to think, not genuflect.
Yet, my heart tells me thought has complements
in sacred theater, the garb and paraphernalia.
I drift in-between: at times I'll sheepishly assent
to cover my thinning hair with this wrinkled kippah;

other times I *insist* on it—an agelong
reflex or inkling that something stirs beneath?
Maybe it's an urge to show I belong
to a history and, if preservationist, a bequeathing;
or, God forbid, a primeval voice that longs
for a fable, one commending my dread
to some comfort in the cosmos, placing the world's wrong
in moral orbit—a myth that goes to my head.

Jacqueline Kudler

Jacqueline Kudler lives in Sausalito, California and teach classes in memoir writing and literature at the College of Marin in Kentfield. Her poems have appeared in numerous reviews, magazines, and anthologies. Her first full length poetry collection, *Sacred Precinct*, was published by Sixteen Rivers Press, San Francisco, in 2003; her second, *Easing into Dark*, in 2012. She was awarded the Marin Arts Council Board Award in 2005, and the Marin Poetry Center Lifetime Achievement Award in 2010.

The Hive

Today they came to take the bees away,
who'd staked a claim down on my lower deck,
burrowed deep beneath the eaves to protect
their sweet sovereign. An amber cadre
its ranks swelling as each August morning rose
in a blur of wings, each evening lowered in a deep
drone of desire, so that even in my sleep
I could hear an other-worldly hum that dozed
just under my waking dreams. But when
a wayward few gained entry, buzzed my berries
at the breakfast table, I summoned the squad to ferry
them off to exile, Jerusalem lost. But then
this is my hive, after all, and in the end
hospitality has limits, even among friends.

Peggy Landsman

Peggy Landsman is the author of two poetry chapbooks, *Our Words, Our Worlds* (Kelsay Books, mid-December 2021) and *To-wit To-woo* (Foothills Publishing). Her work appears or is forthcoming in many anthologies and journals, including *Nasty Women Poets* (Lost Horse Press), *Mezzo Cammin*, *The Orchards Poetry Journal*, and *Scientific American*. She lives in South Florida where she swims in the warm Atlantic Ocean every chance she gets. <https://peggylandsman.wordpress.com/>

Talking It over with Myself

I'll learn to live and love by letting go
the foolish fiction I am in control.
Since all things change, what can I ever know?

Remember Heraclitus. Rivers flow...
The Earth's a ball I balance on and roll.
I'll learn to live and love by letting go

the urge to push the world when it spins slow
and I'm in haste to reach some distant goal.
Since all things change, what can I ever know

that nurtures me and helps my whole self grow?
Perhaps I'll find it with a kindred soul.
I'll learn to live and love by letting go

those fears I failed to tackle long ago
when each new dawn required its patrol.
Since all things change, what can I ever know?

So many contradictions. Yes and no.
Such awful violence to becoming whole.
I'll learn to live and love by letting go
each moment as it changes what I know.