



The Road Not Taken

A Journal of Formal Poetry

Spring, 2021

The Road Not Taken: A Journal of Formal Poetry

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Poet's Corner

I have never received as many submissions as I received for Spring 2021: if there is one thing the editors have agreed on this year, it's that we were exceedingly lucky to hear from so many fine poets. In short, choosing poems was unusually difficult this year – but we welcome the problem.

This year the poems we accepted fell into three rough groups: **Replies, Family, and Closings**. Let me explain that when our editors begin reading, we have no thematic preferences. After accepting poetry however, certain themes tend to emerge – and we think it contributes to the poetic community to present a collection of voices that make a collective statement of sorts, however tentative: in short, to present a body of poetry as more than the sum of its parts.

Some of the poems we offer up here are written in pentameter and tetrameter; others poets have chosen to write 9 syllable lines, or to present rhymed poems of varying line length, with internal structures of their own. We hope you enjoy them as much as we did.

Kathryn Jacobs
Editor

Rachel Jacobs
Associate Editor

Road Not Taken

Replies

Literary

Epistolary

Musical

Leo Ayles

Leo Ayles; 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; performed in theatres, universities, schools, Britain, North America, Africa, in Albert Hall, St Paul’s Cathedral, Round House, New York night clubs, to 4000 Zulus in open air amphitheatre. 3 solo shows. American nationwide TV (CBS),

A Nightingale for Keats?

“Thou wast not born for death, immortal bird?”
No. Thou *wast*. These oaks where thy song was heard
for centuries by emperor and clown
are now about to be smartly cut down;
their timber sawn, stacked, trimmed, made into doors,
cupboards, and paneling for fancy floors,
and all the dead leaves burnt — oak leaves, the best
place for a nightingale to hide her nest,
and every hummock soft with fern and moss
bulldozed flat, while a bulging-bellied boss
bellows at laborers, yells “More concrete!”
Forest footpaths tarmacked into Main Street.
Houses built, each with a green paling fence:
homes designed by the Ministry of Defense,
with two-car garage, all mod cons, broadband,
a Tesco and an Asda near at hand,
plenty of spacious car-parks, and a neat
play area for the kids, plus an oak seat
or two for grans to sit and watch, or doze.
Soon telly sound will rumble from windows
where through the oak tree twilight every spring
nightingales back from Africa would sing.
No charmed magic casements to open now,
no soft incense to hang upon a bough
scented with melody. No pouring out
of shy brown souls in ecstasy ...

“Without
nightingales, you can still use your smart phones.
You’ll still have parking meters, traffic cones,
New Year sales, council tax. Tot up the cost.
Without those nightingales, what have you lost?”

...

Does death wait for thee then, immortal bird?
Hasn’t the whole human race not yet heard
doom-bells booming? Planet Earth’s atmosphere
needs trees, and without trees may disappear
into the suck of empty outer space.

Imagine Earth like Mars, a dry, burnt place
of deathlike ice-cold red desert, where no
more nightingale oak trees will ever grow.
Where there will be no poets and no odes
to nightingales, no towns, shops, houses, roads,
no bars, cafés, government office blocks,
just infinite rubbish heaps of crumbled rocks.

Martin Elster

Martin Elster, who never misses a beat, was for many years a percussionist with the Hartford Symphony Orchestra. His career in music has influenced his fondness for writing metrical verse, which has appeared in numerous literary journals and anthologies in the US and abroad. A full-length collection, *Celestial Euphony*, was published by Plum White Press in 2019.

Bout-rimés

Down the beach I approached a small man standing where
the breakers dashed onto the shore. I said, “Why
have you snatched up that starfish to fling through the air
and into the waves?” Under brilliant blue sky

he picked up another. “They’re all on the brink
of dying,” he told me. The sweep of the white
hot sand stretched forever. Into the drink
he lobbed yet another. As day fell to night

the man carried on. “To the ends of the earth
there are starfish!” I said. “I have really no words
but: You can’t save them *all!*” Then he said with much mirth,
“Saved *this* one!”—his voice like the cry of sea birds.

Michael Waterson

Michael Waterson is a retired journalist originally from Pittsburgh PA. His career includes stints as a forest firefighter, San Francisco taxi driver and wine educator. He earned a BA from San Francisco State and an MFA from Mills College. His work has appeared in numerous journals, including California Quarterly, Cathexis Northwest and The Bookends Review. Here is poet laureate emeritus of the Napa Valley where he resides.

Old Poet's Lament

(In Poetica Non est Argentum)*

"Yeah, and what did it get me?"—Allen Ginsburg's reported reply to a compliment for his lifetime contribution to poetry.

It's sad to hear old poets grouse and groan,
when time has slammed the brakes on youth's momentum.
Heed well the ancient maxim carved in stone:
In poetica non est argentum.

Be careful what you wish for, what you choose;
those idle songs of youth, you may repent them.
Keep this in mind before you court the Muse:
In poetica non est argentum.

While garish prints and paintings dubbed fine art,
routinely sell for Croesus' wealth and then some,
A poet's pay is tendered in the heart.
In poetica non est argentum.

Those witty tropes and measures will not ease
the mounting aches of age much less prevent them.
Accept the bitter truth of this reprise:
In poetica non est argentum.

The laurel wreathes bestowed for lyric poems
that percolate with sonorous invention,
must light a little fire to warm old bones.
In poetica non est argentum.

*In poetry there is no silver (money).

Monica Carly

Monica Carly is a retired English teacher, living in Croydon, UK, and enjoying having the time to engage in different forms of creative writing. Most recently she has been exploring various forms of poetry, two of which were accepted by *The Westward Quarterly*. She has also won a poetry competition run by the local Library.

My Unfavourite Things

(With apologies to 'The Sound of Music')

Iphones and Ipads and Smart-tech devices
driverless cars at ridiculous prices
Amazon packets delivered by drones
these are a few of my favourite moans

Robots and Chatbots and Apps on each topic
squinting at screens till my eyes go myopic
emails demanding my time straightaway
these are the things that do NOT make my day

digital streaming and cybernet hacking
losing my files as the backup is lacking
holiday trips that will fly me in space
here's why I feel I am losing the race

when my pad pings
and my phone texts
and I'm feeling bad
I try to remember the days of my youth
before the whole world went mad.

William Conelly

After military service, William Conelly took a Masters' Degree in English from UC Santa Barbara.

Unrelated work in research and composition followed before he returned to academia in 2000. The Able Muse publishes a collection of his early verse under the title *Uncontested Grounds*, and it may be reviewed at their website or via Amazon. Retired from teaching as a dual citizen, he resides with his wife in the West Midlands town of Warwick, England.

Dear John

before the war

Conceived for barking-new Third-Class cadets,
Fort Benning taught a gung-ho summer school—
a short course testing us for abstinence
on battlefields imperfectly foreseen.

Dropped in a week, we learned from jump school vets
to hold our knee and ankle joints half-flexed
while swinging down; to roll despite the harness;
pop free of cords; fetch, ball and hide the silk;
look to our own—and others'—first defense.

Who drones to what war jumping from a plane?
I stayed aloof from that abstract, distance
increased by longing for a girl back home,
remembered cunning in the silken dress
I'd pinned left of her heart that Winter's Ball.

Sharper the point a martial summer whets:
my wound came at mail call, the pin returned
pierced through her note: she couldn't bear pretense.
She'd erred. She'd taken my esteem unearned.
Where we'd land next was anybody's guess.

Robert Donohue

Robert Donohue's poetry has appeared in The Raintown Review, Better Than Starbucks, Grand Little Things, The Ekphrastic Review, among others. He lives on Long Island, NY.

Ski Music

There once was ski music; it was like surf,
but skiing was its theme. It had no hits,
not just because it ran to novelty,
(surf, too, was novel in its day) it failed
for deeper reasons.

Reasons such as what?

A ski bum is a dilatant; he has
his comforts, down to artificial snow,
so why should anybody sing of him?
A surfer is a rebel; he takes on
the sea with nothing but a board to hang
on to.

Yet there are snowboarders.

There are,
but they have only brought it to the slopes:
it all began out there, against the waves.
Brian Wilson, who doesn't love the beach,
(but does the water) says the ocean is
like music, moving back and forth upon
itself.

So ski is false, surf music true.

That's it!

I wonder why you care so much.

Charles Southerland

Charles Southerland is a farmer, a dreamer, a Believer. He writes about everything. He will publish a book of poetry this year entitled: "The Rube," Stay tuned.

The Mount Olympus News

Corruption exposed in the end

Byline by: Uranus

You'll never get this past the Cyclops eye:

The Centaur has an issue with his tail.
It broke off in the freeze and without fail
exposed his ass to all the gods—*Stand by*—

Reporters on the scene, (The Harpies), pry
for details of the incident, the veil
of secrecy intact, the puckered trail
of woe behind him, caught up in the rye.

They found her in a stall, the filly bruised
and unresponsive to their quests for truth
or dirt on him to cut him down to size.

He was a politician and he prized
his power—poled her in the voting booth.

But Oreithyia would not be used.

Robin Helweg-Larsen

Robin Helweg-Larsen's poems, largely formal, are widely published in the US--including *The Road Not Taken*--the UK and Canada. Some favorites are in *The HyperTexts*. He is Series Editor for Sampson Low's "Potcake Chapbooks - Form in Formless Times", and blogs at formalverse.com from his hometown of Governor's Harbour in the Bahamas.

Zippori Story

Context, people, context! Remember that
Herod was building his new royal city
Zippori some four miles from Nazareth
when Jesus was a child. And Joseph would
have walked there, worked there, daily; Jesus too.

When Judas of Galilee raised his revolt,
captured and burned it--Roman legions came,
defeated him, cast him in the Sea
of Galilee, a millstone round his neck,
and crucified two thousand rebel Jews.

This was the year that Joseph disappears
from Gospel narratives, all unexplained.
When Jesus chased two thousand Legion pigs
over a cliff into that selfsame sea,
think retribution; think guerrilla strike.

Family

Marriage

Children

Resistance

Peggy Landsman

Peggy Landsman is the author of a poetry chapbook, *To-wit To-woo* (Foothills Publishing, 2008). Her work has been published or is forthcoming in numerous anthologies and journals, including *The Muse Strikes Back* (Story Line Press), *Breathe* (C&R Press), *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/>

No Marriage Is a Simple Matter

No marriage is a simple matter.
Each one's a tricky mix of two
egos unprepared to shatter.

My best advice: Prevent disaster.
Don't count on dreams to all come true.
No marriage is a simple matter.

Commitment's hard. Some would rather
avoid the pain they're going through,
their egos unprepared to shatter.

Though friends are always quick to gather
to hear the "Do you?" and "I do,"
no marriage is a simple matter.

There's never been an easy answer.
No human being has a clue.
With egos unprepared to shatter...

Remember Alice, the Mad Hatter?
No need for any big to-do.
Unmarriage is a simple matter
for egos unprepared to shatter.

Vadim Kagan

Vadim Kagan writes poetry and prose in English, Russian and, occasionally, in combination of both languages. Vadim's poems, bringing together traditions of Russian and English metered verse, have been put to music and performed by local and international artists. Vadim lives in Bethesda, MD, where he runs an AI company providing advanced technology capabilities to Fortune 500 companies and government agencies.

Lost

It was a desperate, long,
Meaningless, winingless fight.
I was quite possibly wrong;
You were, quite possibly, right.

Neither of us had a clue;
Who had invented this plot?
I was quite possibly true;
You were quite possibly not.

Tired, alone, and apart,
Having undreamed our dreams,
We were quite possibly smart.
We lost together, it seems.

Lily Prigioniero

Lily Prigioniero graduated from University of Michigan and moved to Florence, Italy, where she was hired by the Pitti fresco restoration team to work on some of Tuscany's greatest masters. She has taught writing and art conservation in study abroad programs for NYU, Brandeis, and Florence University of the Arts. She lives with her family in the hills outside Florence.

My Son's Shoes

Today, when I found my son's shoes,
the ones he accused me of hiding,
I dropped them in front of his toes,
unlaced the tops while chiding –
squatting down I looked up at him,
still waiting for his foot to go in –
then he smiled down at me
with a look of sincerity
at his mother's instinctual ways
of helping him through life's disarray
and I, embarrassed - stood up -
smiling as well at the man
whose shoes I had put away.

Stuart Bartow

Stuart Bartow teaches writing and literature at SUNY (State University of New York) Adirondack. He is also chair of the Battenkill Conservancy, an environmental group protecting the Battenkill watershed on the Vermont, New York border. His most recent works are *One Branch* (haiku) published by Red Moon Press, and *Green Midnight*, Dos Madres Press.

Squirrels, Hypnotized

The squirrels, he told me, are hypnotized.
The little boy explained what he had made,
the eyes he drew, vacant and wild.

So then I had to think awhile
about a child's mind beyond a frame.
The squirrels, he said, are hypnotized.

The picture of a tree with squirrels up high,
a tree with secret doors and rooms,
the eyes he drew, vacant and wild.

What brews inside a child's mind,
what possessed him, called him as he drew?
The squirrels, he said, are hypnotized.

I see bodies all the time fixed and glued,
staring into black devices,
recall the eyes he drew, vacant and wild.

The sky above the trees he drew, the moon
and all the doors beneath the clouds that flew,
the squirrels, he told me, are hypnotized,
their eyes transfixed, vacant and wild.

Ted Charnley

Ted Charnley's work has appeared previously in *The Road Not Taken* in multiple issues of such journals as *Passager*, *Think*, *The Lyric* and *The Orchards Poetry Journal*, and in the recent anthology *Extreme Sonnets*. He lives with his wife in a 200-year old farmhouse they restored in central Maryland.

The Sentry

He stands alone, on duty here to man
his post, a shelf of books with dusty spines,
all full of old adventures, famous wars,
of light brigades and glory on the field.
His comrades, laid in boxes, waited once
to charge in rows and storm the valley floor
that ran across their general's room, in games
commanded by the general after school,
until his mother called *It's time for bed*.

The sentry stands his watch, as ordered to,
his molded base enforcing discipline.
The room is quiet now, without the sound
effects of cannon shells or cheering troops.
Though all his comrades left, in boxes laid
to rest in landfills (none will charge again),
and new adventures led the general off
to other wars (where mother doesn't call
It's time for bed), the sentry guards this place.

Dwayne Barrick

Dwayne Barrick resides in Ohio and works as an independent grant writer. His poems have appeared in *Autumn Sky Poetry Daily*, *Blue Unicorn*, *Kin*, and *Southern California Review*. His long poem *L'avventura*, on the great film of the same name by Michelangelo Antonioni, has appeared online at Ragazine.cc.

Thunder

My father wanted me to work with men
who had coarse hands. My hands were smooth and clean:
The local Coca-Cola bottling plant.
My summer job when I was seventeen.

A man dubbed Thunder, who would soon retire
and hailed from Chattanooga, Tennessee,
maintained the warehouse stacked four pallets high.
No one spit chew more expertly than he.

On my first day the "skyhook" was misplaced.
Some said it's tall while others claimed it's brass.
Then, gently grinning, Thunder set me straight
and said to tell them, *shove it up your ass!*

Soft-spoken otherwise, and always kind,
he counseled that I grow a thicker skin
and not concern myself with harmless pranks
as too much sensitivity is sin.

But I was ready to take on the world,
enroll in college and command respect.
He listened to my plans. He didn't speak,
withholding what I would one day detect.

The summer ended and my hands were coarse.
I said I'd visit him. I glimpsed a tear.
He knew that he would not see me again.
I failed to listen to him loud and clear.

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]. Both books are based on Huband's experiences as a Peace Corps Volunteer in the Sultanate of Oman.

Family Reunion

– Newspaper Photo

Looking out at us,
the skull is lacking
the whole lower jaw.
Even so, the mouth
seems open, as if
trying to cry out.
All of the upper
teeth appear intact,
in mint condition.

The little fingers
of a woman's hands
are almost touching
two of the skull's teeth.
Her chin on its head,
she holds the skull close,
cries. She is missing
many of her teeth,
mouth open, eyes shut.

Closings

Socky O'Sullivan

Maurice O'Sullivan, a former professor, teamster, pub owner, and jail guard, is an award winning teacher, writer, filmmaker, and columnist.

The Villages Coffee Klatch

Every time we get together,
Once we've talked about the weather
why must every conversation
focus on an operation?

Someone always starts to vent
about his new bare metal stent,
wondering why it wasn't coated
(and why his belly feels so bloated).

As I listen, smiling, bored,
just hoping now to be ignored,
I wonder for what awful sin
I must hear about Anne's skin,
which leads Mathilde to reminisce
about her new psoriasis.

Constantly in competition,
Jimmy brags he's in remission
but doctors think his melanoma
might prove worse than his glaucoma.

Never willing to be bested,
Fred now tells us he's been tested
for necrotizing fasciitis
(which makes it even hard to piss).

With that, discussion quickly shifts
to all our grandkids' special gifts.
The Kellys' Pre-K Einstein twins
(those boys with odd receding chins)
prove no match for Noah Levi's girl
now dating a minor British Earl
or even Stefan's boy, a whiz
at sabermetric analysis
(but, oddly, only turning three).

As the bluster nears its apogee,
my wife, who always loves this show,
at last admits it's time to go.

Lionel Willis

Lionel Willis was born in Toronto in 1932. He has been a mosaic designer, portrait painter, watercolorist, biological illustrator, field entomologist and professor of English Literature as well as a poet. His verse has appeared in many literary periodicals over a sixty year career and in two books, *The Dreamstone and Other Rhymes* (The Plowman, 2003) and *Heartscape, a Book of Bucolic Verse* (EIDOLON, 2019).

Circe

She turned them all to boars so they could feel
Their pain and pleasure flayed of muffling thought,
But with their leader made a little deal.
They never knew how short the end they got:
She turned them into swine so they could squeal
To find how similar beasts were to men.
The lure to stay that way was very real,
Though they would never hug their sons again.
Only the hero held the lucky card:
She gave him everything that he would need.
(His constancy would find its own reward.)
She taught him tenderness and how to breed.
She changed him to a hero who loved home
And cursed him with a nagging urge to roam.

Julie B. Mendelsohn

Julie Bloch Mendelsohn lives in Israel. Her first book of poems is entitled “Travels to Ourselves” (Poetica Publishing, 2015). Her work has appeared in *The Road Not Taken*, *Poetica Magazine*, *The Mountain Troubadour*, *Lilipoh Magazine*, and the *Voices Israel Anthology*. In addition to raising a family, writing poetry, spinning and weaving, she also works as lawyer for holocaust survivors, and studies archaeology.

Archaeology

It's very romantic to excavate
pyramids, palaces, city gates,
scarabs with seals, and silver jewels,
ivory beads and copper tools.
With luck you'll find a golden ring
belonging to a famous king.

But mostly what we diggers find
are cooking pots and jugs for wine,
the vessels of our every day,
the ones we make and sell and trade.
Those things we have, we need, we *must*—
they break, and end up in the dust.

Insightful archaeologists
can see beyond the clay and grits
and find the life force in each thing,
the ancient mind's imagining,
devotion shown to friends and kin,
not matter but spirit within.

How will they judge what we did here
when they dig us up in a thousand years--
the things we thought, the homes we made,
the wars we fought, the prayers we prayed,
the words we chose to carve in stone
to speak for us when we are gone?

Lucy Mihajlich

Lucy Mihajlich lives in Portland, Oregon. Her first book, *Interface*, was chosen for the Multnomah County Library Writers Project, where it appeared on the list for Best of the Library Writer's Project 2017. Her first poem is due to be published in the next issue of *Oxford Poetry*.

Fake It Till You Break It

A model plane will never crash.
A dollhouse will not burn to ash
from an electrical fire,
for its walls are without wires

I chose to make myself less real
with the intent I would not feel.
I hitherto had hair extensions
and fake nails, not to mention

an artificial christmas tree,
sweetener, and a fake ID,
I Can't Believe it's Not Margarine,
and artificial intelligence.

Alas, my plan I must forsake;
It turns out I'm already fake.

Bart Sutter

Bart Sutter, the author of nine books, is the only writer to win the Minnesota Book Award in three categories--poetry, fiction, and creative non-fiction. His most recent collection is *Nordic Accordion: Poems in a Scandinavian Mood* (Nodin Press, 2018). He has had four verse plays produced, and he often performs as one-half of The Sutter Brothers, a poetry-and-music duo.

Why Swedes Are So Stiff

When rains drenched the fields
and the crops all failed,
winter came on anyway,
winter kept coming, and stayed.
We ate the potatoes, we slaughtered the sow,
we devoured the bread, we butchered the cow.
We had no wheat, we had no rye,
it was clear the children were going to die.
Our prayers to Jesus did no good.
At last we got up off our knees
and asked the forest gods for food.
Desperate, fugitive, shy, ashamed,
we stripped the rough bark off the trees,
peeled away the sweet membrane,
ground it into fragrant dust,
then baked and ate that dry breadstuff.
It's true. In those days we ate wood.
And though we often wish we could
be more spontaneous, loud, and bright—
at least less cautious, less uptight—
we still have that stiffness in us.
We have to ask you to forgive us.

Dan Champion

To Dwell by Water

A heron flies as level as a line
stretched taut between unspooling reel and hook.
No stunts or yaws, no hovering divine
above mice cowering. Just by-the-book
maneuvers, steady as a pilot gray
with many hours aloft on routine routes
whose passengers have never had to pray
while impact warnings played their thousand flutes.
A heron flies as level as a prayer
that knows exactly where it's going to:
one wetland from another, when it's there,
to ask for nothing. That's not why it flew.
A heron's purpose is to live, not ask,
to dwell by water and to ply its task.

Gregory Palmerino

Gregory Palmerino is a former contributor to *The Road Not Taken*. His prose and poetry has been previously published in numerous print and online journals. He lives in Connecticut's Quiet Corner, where he gardens and writes poetry.

Life in the Garden

What started it? The renewed haste
 of digging, the raking away
of scorched leaves lolling in waste
 during early spring, each blade

a kind of winter's inverse birth
 aflake with darkened nerves
smoldering atop the earth;
 what dark rotations, what turns

of rusty spades yielding hills
 of sleepy tubers now waked
from shallow graves, careful
 their eyes are set to cultivate

the light, while angel-hair roots
 shudder below, a final stand
of resistance, before they shoot
 skyward, set off by soiled hands.

David Melville

David Melville's recent poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Atlanta Review*, *Water~Stone Review*, *Rhino*, and *The Lyre*. His work has also been anthologized in the college textbook *Listening to Poetry: An Introduction for Readers and Writers* (2019). He lives in Portland, Oregon.

The Ones Who Walked

— In Memoriam Ursula K. Le Guin

They walked away from Omelas,
red roofed with fruit-hung trees –
yes, left a golden paradise
never to be seen,

forsook that bright-towered city,
thinking they were being kind.
They sped so far from Omelas
to leave its glitch behind.

They chose to go from Omelas –
gulped down that bitter pill.
To walk, they thought, was medicine,
though the child lived there still.

Miles unknown from Omelas
still haunted by bleak cries,
the filthy hole in Omelas,
the child left inside,

they knew the price of happiness
was what the hole concealed;
round they turned for Omelas,
facing what was real.

Back they walked to Omelas –
sniffles, wretched cries –
to feel the hurts the child felt,
and heal the heart's divide.

