

A photograph of a swampy forest. Tall, slender trees with thick moss hanging from their branches dominate the background. Sunlight filters through the canopy, creating a warm, golden glow on the moss and the ground. In the foreground, several large, spiky palm plants are visible. The overall atmosphere is serene and mysterious.

The Road Not Taken

Summer, 2022

The Road Not Taken: A Journal of Formal Poetry

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Contents

Summer, 2022

Poet's Corner

Retakes

Paul Buchheit
Enriqueta Carrington

Jane Blanchard
Barbara Bazyn

All Too Often

James Ryan
Rolf Parker Houghton
Robert E. Tanner
Don Carlson

John Creekmore
Richard Merelman

Balance

Richard Jordan
Barbara Bazyn
Hilary Biehl

M.E. Goelzer
James Scannell McCormick
Joan Mazza

Little Stone
James B. Nicola
Dan Campion

From The Editor

Blake's Tyger
To Lucasta, Going to the Barres
To Her Tardy Student
Reader's Response
Some Souls Select a Whole Society

Refugee
Undrowned And Set Out On My Friend's Table
A List of Ships
Notes from the Anthropocene

Some Were Lonely
Voir Dire

The Art of Topwater Fishing
Green Mountains Drinking Song
Library After Lockdown
The Beach House
Triptych
In "Unprecedented Times"
Sestina for Drawing Class
The Scent of Memory 24
What Is To Be Taken
I know someone who loves you
The Prompter's Bow

Poet's Corner

Welcome to the Summer 2022 issue of *The Road Not Taken*. This issue is a few weeks late, for which I apologize: my mother died after a painful last illness, and the clan gathered to say goodbye. We did manage to post this before Labor Day; under the circumstances I count this a win.

I think when you read these poems you will find them well worth the wait however, both individually and as an interactive whole. This season the editors have organized our poets' contributions into three "approaches" or "takes" on the human experience. We call them **Retakes, All Too Often, and Balance**.

All the poems in **Retakes** interact in some way with poets and/or traditions of the past: they look back and tease, tweak, cajole, and variously reinterpret our common poetic inheritance. In effect, Retakes functions as an inter-generational dialogue between past and present.

Which brings us to the second section, **All Too Often**. The poems in this section focus on tragedies and compromises of modern life: on suicide hotlines and war refugees, fish farms and jury duty. Like the poets before them however, they bring to the present the expectations trained into us by the past – and all too-often the discrepancy is jarring.

If however the poets of the second section focus on the tensions and asymmetries of our lives — the ways we are "disconnected," to the past or to our own ideals — then the poems of **Balance** restore that equilibrium by reconnecting us with something constant. We may find this constant in nature (rain, spiders, pears) or art (books, drawing) or human activity (fishing, hunting). Ultimately though all these are poems of reconnection and participation.

Kathryn Jacobs

Retakes

Paul Buchheit

Paul is an author of books, poems, progressive essays, and scientific journal articles. He recently completed his first historical novel, *1871: Rivers on Fire*. His poetry has appeared in *The Lyric*, *Illinois State Poetry Society*, *Poets & Patrons of Chicagoland*, *Maria W. Faust Sonnet Contest*, and other publications. His poetic rendering of *Alice's Adventures* will be published in 2022 by *Kelsay Books*.

Blake's Tyger

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
sorry if I'm impolite:
What immortal put a hand
to verse we'll never understand?

Face it, face it, Mister Blake,
'Tyger' was a big mistake.
What good reason could there be
for rhyming 'eye' with 'symmetry'?

Can a poet e'er endure
by changing his tetrameter
from trochees to iambic feet
before a stanza is complete?

What the 'hammer,' furthermore,
has shaped your awkward metaphor?
Furnace, anvil, hammer, chain?
Whatever ale house soaked thy brain?

Masterful, in your defense,
your other Songs of Innocence;
but Tyger should respect my plea:
Did he who wrote "The Lamb" write thee?

Truly, truly, Mister Blake,
face the facts, for heaven's sake.
For no one else's work of art
could twist the sinews of my heart.

Enriqueta Carrington

Enriqueta Carrington has published several books of poetry translations and received a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. Her poems in English and Spanish have appeared in several journals and anthologies, most recently in *Better Than Starbucks* and *The Road not Taken*. She is Senior Poetry Editor of the journal *US1 Worksheets*.

To Lucasta, Going to the Barres

With insincere apologies to Richard Lovelace

Tell me not (Hon) I am a Jerke
that I wash no Disches;
I must leave now or go berserke,
dynnere was dylycious.

True; a new Mistresse now I chase,
the first Swigge at the Barre,
and with a stronger Fayth embrace
a Game, a Beere, a Carre.

Yet this Inconstancy is such
thou shalt not say it stynks;
I would not love thee (Deare) so much
could I not have my Drynks.

Enriqueta Carrington

To Her Tardy Student

With groveling apologies to Andrew Marvell.

Had we but world enough and time,
this slowness, student, were no crime,
you could sit and think and think
and never spill one drop of ink.
Your vegetable exam should grow
vaster than empires and more slow;
a thousand years should go to write
your opening line and get it right;
three thousand to page one of the test
but thirty thousand to the rest;
an age at least to every part
and the last age should show your heart.
Then, to finish your degree
deserts of vast eternity.
For, student, you deserve this state,
nor would I grade at lower rate.
But at your back you now must hear
Time's wingèd chariot drawing near;
the grave's a fine and private lair,
and yet few books are written there.
You might find answers at long last,
but now the allotted hour has passed.

Jane Blanchard

Jane Blanchard lives and writes in Georgia (USA). Her work has recently appeared in *Tar River Poetry*, *Third Wednesday*, and *Two Thirds North*. Her new collection is *Sooner or Later* (2022).

Reader's Response

to Act 3, Scene 1

Shame on you, Hamlet—such dishonesty
With fair Ophelia—after all of your
Sweet words, fine forms, rich gifts, and maybe more
Than shown or mentioned in this tragedy.
Perhaps you were as innocent as she
Until a ghost whom you could not ignore
Made you responsible for going for
Revenge within a rotten family.
Your statement “I did love you once” is rude,
But less so than “I loved you not.” A lord
Should never hurt a lady who has done
No harm. With madness as an attitude,
You manage to wield language like a sword
Against one disinclined to be a nun.

Barbara Bazyn

Barbara Bazyn's poems have appeared in *The Road Not Taken*, *The Literary Review*, *The Cresset*, *Blue Unicorn* and various other little magazines. A retired English instructor, she lives in rural Iowa.

Some Souls Select a Whole Society

Many of us practice
a quite selective kindness
while half-suspecting we are blind
to kindness of another kind:
a sunlit grace above disgust,
a steely love that cannot rust,
a radiance that pays no mind
(and truth be told itself seems blind)
to grievances that fester
to table manners not its own,
to an annoying neediness,
or even polyester.

All Too Often

James Ryan

James Ryan is the author of *Shakespeare's Symmetries: The Mirrored Structure of Action in the Plays* and is a recipient of a New Jersey State Council of the Arts Fellowship in Poetry.

Refugee

We see her walking west out of Ukraine,
scarf on her bent head, hunched in a brown coat,
pulling a rolling suitcase.

We see an "IDP," "displaced internally,"
one among acronymed millions driven
to the shelter of the sky.

We see her huddled in an overcrowded boat
desperately dreaming of Lesbos.

We see her, scarf against the sun, walking out
of Syria, walking from Rwanda,
from Myanmar, from Yemen.... We see her
as a child in Vietnam, fleeing napalm,
running naked toward the camera.

Rolf Parker Houghton

Rolf Parker is one of the principal historians for the Brattleboro Words Project. He is a free-lance writer who has published articles on history and science and math education. His day job responsibilities include gathering technical information for the Vermont Department of Health. He also collaborates with his wife, Cynthia Parker-Houghton, to create humorous and historically themed puzzlers which reveal treasures hidden on local trails. Rolf lives with his wife and 15 year old son, in Brattleboro. His poems have previously been published in this journal.

Undrowned And Set Out On My Friend's Table

This salmon in front of me
swam long cold miles
in some unknown sea.

Was he netted near the Aleutian Isles?
Did he hatch in a Russian stream,
swim long cold miles,

feasting on caddis flies and baby bream
many months after his mother dropped her eggs?
Did he hatch in a Russian stream?

Did he dart between a brown bear's legs,
tumble down the falls,
many months after his mother dropped her eggs?

Probably, he was farmed in plastic sheet walls
and never had to risk death
no tumble down the falls.

Pulled out, unwilling, like a man's last breath
from some unknown sea.
He never had to risk death,
this salmon in front of me.

Robert E. Tanner

Robert E. Tanner is a writer no longer living in Brooklyn. His liberal translation of Alexander Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* was just released as *Ambivalent Souls* from Poets and Traitors press.

A List of Ships

This is a war without the glory.
How can one write the *Iliad*
without the pride of Hector's story,
without Achilles raging mad?
How can one write when there's no glory,
when there's not yet an inventory
of ships, of men, of those we've lost—
when we can't see this holocaust?
While heroes' tales are revelatory,
we oft forget the common folk,
those good, those bad, those rich, those broke,
those caught within the hero's story.
Remembering now this hoi polloi,
I conjure souls from pre-war Troy.

Don Carlson

Donald Carlson lives in Texas. His poems have appeared in *Better Than Starbucks*, *Ekphrastic Review*, *Blue Unicorn*, *The Road Not Taken*, and more. His collaborative volume of poetry, with Timothy Donohue and Dennis Patrick Slattery, is *Road Frame Window*, published by Mandorla Press. His most recent book, *Tweeting Dante*, has just been published by Wipf and Stock, under their Resources imprint.

Notes from the Anthropocene

Take the threadbare myths
you've worn since your youth
and stuff them in the plastic sacks
from the grocery store, which you never
could quite bring yourself to toss.

After all, would it be such a loss?
You didn't think that they would last forever,
did you? They can cover other backs,
but wearing them yourself would be uncouth.
They've grown, they've shrunk, and nothing truly fits.

John Creekmore

John Creekmore is a native of Norfolk, Virginia, and a graduate of the city's Old Dominion University. He served for 27 years as a crisis counselor, case manager and education specialist for Norfolk Community Mental Health Services. He and his wife Carolyn currently live in Suffolk, Virginia.

Some Were Lonely

Some were lonely,
Others depressed,
Still others heard voices
Unheard by the rest,

So I let them speak freely
And gave scant advice,
For empathy would usually
More than suffice,

But one I remember,
Though decades have gone,
Who called at the stirring
Of the first rays one dawn,

And said it was finished,
He could bear it no more,
And the gun at his temple
Would settle the score.

"Give me a reason," he said
In a rasp, "why I shouldn't,"
As I stifled a gasp,

And that was the start
Of an hour's debate,
As I strove to convince him
It was still not too late.

"You guys know nothing!"
He suddenly said,
Then screamed, "Screw you!"
As the phone went dead.

I finished the shift
And went home and to bed,
Unsure if my caller
Was living or dead,

But I never found out,

For he didn't call back.
The guy left me hanging,
Like meat on the rack,

But I ended up wiser,
If you get my drift,
For that's how it was
On the midnight shift.

Richard Merelman

Richard Merelman has published four volumes of poetry, the most recent of which (*A Door Opens*, Fireweed 2020) received an Outstanding Achievement in poetry from the Wisconsin Library Association in 2021. He and his wife, Sally Hutchison, live in Madison, Wisconsin.

Voir Dire

 ("to speak truth." The process
 of selecting jurors.)

I'm in the jury pool. The air is stale,
as if to fit the crime: a starter home
invaded, trashed. Ruiz, who's charged, is pale,
spindly, maybe twenty. His hair is combed,
his trousers pleated. Rimless glasses frame
his eyes. He could be anyone's angelic
kid brother. Or, beneath, may burn a flame
of hate from being raised unloved, Hispanic,
hardened. I'm asked the discipline I taught,
my favorite food. I answer *Poli. Sci.*,
fried grits. The prosecutor pauses... caught:
I'm not what she expected. Do I lie?
Ruiz requires justice disabused.
I've told the truth. No matter; I'm excused.

Balance

Richard Jordan

Richard Jordan is a mathematician and data scientist who also writes poetry. His poems have appeared in *Tar River Poetry*, *The Atlanta Review*, *Redivider*, *Harpur Palate*, *Canary-A Literary Journal of the Environmental Crisis*, *upstreet*, on the *Verse Daily* website, and elsewhere. He lives and works in the Boston area.

The Art of Topwater Fishing

Do you ever make the ideal cast,
thread the gap between two lily pads,

then let the popper undulate and settle,
maybe fiddle with your visor, take

a look skyward? Maybe geese float over
without honking. Maybe while you look,

you listen to the snap of bluegills snatching
dragonflies that flutter close. Perhaps

it's warm, but no one's mowing, and the buzz
is the work week's murmur fading from your ears,

by then soft enough that you make out
an osprey calling high above the maples.

Say, a scent like tangerine from sweet flag
is drifting past you, and you may detect

the glandular message a muskrat left behind
for other muskrats. When you finally give

your line a twitch from habit, does the pop-
chug of the lure startle you a little?

Perfect. Take a breath and let the surface
find its glassy state again. Repeat.

Barbara Bazyn

Green Mountains Drinking Song

A summer rain has left its drops
hanging upon the tamaracks.
The drops grow round; they swell and spill;
the easy needles now relax.

Wild oats and bluegrass hold the drops
in rainy strings from root to tip.
They wash your feet to pearly white.
Shrubs hold wet berries to your lips.

There's so much water in the grass
you want to kneel and take a sip,
and if you shake a maple limb,
you'll have a shower or a swim.

Water's the thing that won't stay still,
strong on grace and weak on will.
Still what refreshment it imparts:
this work of water on our hearts.

Hilary Biehl

Hilary Biehl's poems have recently appeared in *Able Muse*, *Light*, *Autumn Sky Poetry Daily*, and *The Lyric*. She lives with her husband and their son in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Library After Lockdown

The air is rich with hesitating rain.
The parking lot is almost full, but when
we enter there is nobody inside
except librarians. Rooms where you played
pre-pandemic have been stripped of toys
and cushions, but the pigeons still amaze
you. Gazing onto the locked patio,
you flap your arms at them and squawk and coo.

Even the books you choose are about birds.
I fumble through the dozen plastic cards
in my purse, find the right one. You insist
on carrying the books against your chest,
checking them out yourself. When we emerge
it's late. The air is dry and crackling, charged
with expectations of a thunderclap.
The sky relinquishes a single drop.

Hilary Biehl

The Beach House

Despite the spiders, thankfully contained
to one straight line, I find
myself returning to those days
as to a sacred site. I visualize
the ragged coast,
clam chowder, books my dad and I discussed
excitedly, the songs
we listened to on repeat, otherworldly things
in pools, the lace hem of the tides,
us shedding sand, collapsing on our beds.
The spiders, green and lightly furred,
could not have cared
much less whether we came or went.
They marched on endlessly, intent
on ... well, I don't know what. But their austere
indifference made it possible to share
a little of the house
with them, as unseen hosts shared it with us.

One night the town had fireworks, or tried.
The rockets, ghostly in the damp, did not explode;
they kept sending them up till they ran out.
We laughed, and left the window. But
I understand now there are tasks one must fulfill
regardless of success, or audience, or skill.

M.E. Goelzer

M. E. Goelzer makes her home in upstate New York,

Triptych

I: Luck

From space the earth is round; down here it's flat
as harvest's aftermath and skating rinks.
The sun floats up, it crosses sky, it sinks.

The cows have milk, the pigs are almost fat
enough to kill. What better time to think
of luck/the randomness that gives a cat
nine lives/the changing shapes of missing links?

Once we were shipwrecked, homesick on a raft.
At sea, the currents pushed us to the brink
of nothing. Now we're back (the reaper blinked);
the cows have milk, the pigs are almost fat
enough to kill. We offer prayers, we wink
at fate, we praise the clouds, our food, our drink.

II: Drought

Too many days without a trace of rain;
the grass is tense and streams have lost their flow,
the lack of moisture cracks the status quo.

What better time to think about the pain
of lacking/what's essential/how the snow
melt feeds our reservoirs? Pale daisy chains
of hope stretch thin, the well is running low.

From space the earth is round; down here our plains'
far reaches fall beyond where native crows
will roam. It's no small thing to pack and go,
to carry children, singing sweet refrains,
to someplace far removed from what they know,
to different clouds, and seeds, and ways to grow.

III: Rhythm

The earth is round, it orbits 'round our sun;
the pulse of breaking days and falling nights
stays married to our spinning planet's flight.

Some loops/some patterned threads are never done

repeating. Darkness alternates with light;
embedded rhythms touch oblivion
again and now, then bounce. Our star hangs bright.

Down here the seconds conga, every one
an unrepeatable event in spite
of ticking uniformity. We might
elect to contemplate how forces run
amok throughout our world—we have the right
to marvel; to resist; to love; to fight.

James Scannell McCormick

James Scannell McCormick writes and teaches college English in Rochester, Minnesota. His third poetry collection, *First of Pisces*, appeared from Kelsay Books in 2020.

In “Unprecedented Times”

(The Legend of St. Eustace)

Oak and jack-pine: year’s-edge sunset just
lighting a lingering scrim of cloud to thin
blue of milk. A sleet-squall is blowing in:
from the north, gusts of ice-grains pelleting crust

of snow. Alone with his bow –“old school,” his wife
always kids (but just by half) – he’s been tracking
this white-tail – a twelve-pointer – through white, racking
cold of hours, of cagey patience. A knife

of dying sun: The stag finally stands
still. Then his chest clenches: What’s that bright
shape between its antlers – some trick of light?
of fatigue? He doesn’t dare to bring his hands

to his face. He lifts an aluminum shaft to his cheek,
draws, and holds. And the stag holds him – awry,
aback – in the flat, fathomless black of its eye.
It waits, as if to ask. As if to speak.

Joan Mazza

Joan Mazza has worked as a medical microbiologist, psychotherapist, and taught workshops on understanding dreams and nightmares. She is the author of six self-help psychology books, including *Dreaming Your Real Self* (Penguin Putnam). Her poetry has appeared in *Slant*, *The MacGuffin*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Adanna Literary Journal*, *Poet Lore*, and *The Nation*. She lives in rural central Virginia.

Sestina for Drawing Class

Bring a pear and draw the pear—
instructions today. Achieve value by hand.
Draw what you see, its soft edges.
Have fun! Don't use your thumb
to shadow. And make it speak
to the viewer. Go for a full form,

not simply shape. I struggle with the form
of these instructions, can't draw a pear
in black and white that speaks
a message. From the closet, add a hand,
the teacher suggests. I take one with a thumb
and bitten nail in plaster cast, follow edges

as in contour drawing, although I'm on edge
when the teacher tells me to see these forms
as dream symbols. That fist and thumb
on a pedestal. At a lower level, the pear
in shadow. Now I'm rattled, my hands
unsteady. Too loudly, these images speak

to me like a remembered dream, words spoken
by my Ex when we came to the ledge
of our marriage and unclasped hands.
His raised fist promised dominance, his form
of coupling like some eighteenth century pair
arranged by parents. Under his thumb

is where he said he wanted me. Two thumbs
down to that. I was twenty-four, spoke
my truth without fear of his pistols paired
with long guns. Now I'm going off the edge
after my associations to these forms,
my fists tight. I shake out my hands.

Whatever this instruction has handed
me, I take it, noting my opposable thumbs,
how graceful shapes make changeable forms.
I'm free to say no, say what I want to speak

through art. Creativity takes me to an edge
where I must go alone, raw, pared

down. It's a class. Forms can lead me to know-
ledge of myself. Around my neck, no pair
of hands. I drive home, thumbs up on the wheel.

Joan Mazza

The Scent of Memory 24

What is that combo scent of mid-April
in Virginia, that tells you it's spring
without opening your eyes? Maybe maples
leafing out, first red before the turning
green. The daffodils are wilting, dying,
stepping aside for bursting bearded iris
beneath the petals of dogwood, vying
for center stage, while moles, nearly eyeless,
are resolved to dig tunnels in new grass.
Red buds bloom in purple, and the purple
finch is red. It's spring, don't feel embarrassed
when you yearn to inscribe a perfect circle
on the lawn with cornmeal. It's tradition.
Accept this season's fragrance and condition.

Little Stone

Little Stone is a nomadic poet of Mesoamerican, Irish, and Austrian ancestry. His poems have appeared in *Measure*, *Able Muse*, *Raintown Review*, *The Allegheny Review*, *Pluck! Journal*, and elsewhere. He received his MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Michigan, where he won a Hopwood Graduate Poetry Award and was awarded a Zell Fellowship.

What Is To Be Taken

Don't expect to keep your teeth forever.
The hands that made the fieldmouse made the owl.
The market rises like a holy banner
and falls into the shadows with a howl.

You who made me love me from a distance.
I don't expect to keep my teeth forever.
The owl becomes inanimate and listens
for signs of life that only stone could sever.

James B. Nicola

James B. Nicola's seven full-length poetry collections include *Fires of Heaven* (2021) and *Turns & Twists* (2022). His poetry has received a Dana Literary Award, two *Willow Review* awards, one Best of Net, one Rhysling, and eight Pushcart nominations. His nonfiction book *Playing the Audience* won a *Choice* magazine award.

I know someone who loves you

I know someone who loves you. He or she
is not your type; nor are you hers or his.
I'm varying the pronouns because this
tale tolls beyond the realm of you and me,
or pairs of mismatched sex or age or race
or those unblessed by chance proximity
to accommodate the course of destiny
and triumph over situation, place,
and time. In heaven, differences fall
away, though. And souls, being androgyne,
transcend gender, person, hue, number: all
is one, and you are I. That's the Divine,
where prejudices die as all unite
and bend, bound as all the bands of light.

Dan Champion

Dan Champion is the author of *Peter De Vries and Surrealism* and coeditor of *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song*. His poems have appeared previously in *The Road Not Taken* and in many anthologies and magazines, including *Able Muse*, *Blue Unicorn*, *Light*, *Measure*, *Poetry*, *Rolling Stone*, *Shenandoah*, and *Think*. A book of his poems, *A Playbill for Sunset*, is being issued this summer: <https://icecubepress.com/2021/10/01/a-playbill-for-sunset/> He lives in Iowa City, Iowa.

The Prompter's Bow

Their backs are bent—low ceilings and high stress—
already, so when prompters leave their box
they're spared the onstage cast's need to address
the audience with courtesy. "A pox
on thee" to "Allons-y," the dialog
just melts away, and prompters yawn and stretch
like drivers after steering through a fog.
For now, no cues to feed or lines to fetch.
The prompt book's left behind to warm the bench
until the next performance. There it sits,
relaxing too, outside the nervous clench
that gripped it through the fits of gulls and wits.
A spider strides across it, finds its mark,
and makes a tiny curtsy in the dark.