

A photograph of a cave interior, likely a tourist attraction. The cave walls are covered in numerous stalactites of varying lengths and shapes, some hanging from the ceiling and others growing from the floor. The lighting is warm and focused, highlighting the textures of the rock formations. A walkway with a metal railing is visible in the foreground, leading into the cave. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and ancient.

# The Road Not Taken

## A Journal of Formal Poetry

Fall, 2023

# **The Road Not Taken: A Journal of Formal Poetry**

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## Poet's Corner

**Welcome to the Fall 2023 issue of *The Road Not Taken***, a gloomy issue if ever there was one!

Granted, not EVERYONE who submitted this season was feeling grim, as witness the poets appearing here in our third section, **Its Not All Bad**. Overwhelmingly though, our fall contributors — both those whom you read here, and the many many poets who almost made it — were "in a mood," as the people in my family call it. Maybe it was the Ukraine war or the Middle East, maybe it was the political scene or something else entirely, but there is no question about it: the poets who submitted to us were anything but cheerful.

They were honest though, no question about it: again and again the poets who submitted to us this fall tackled **What We Don't Acknowledge**: the truths that keep cropping up, whether we want to face them or not. Those of you who have been reading *Road Not Taken* for years now know that the editors of this journal read contributors with no preconceived themes in mind: we want the best poems, period. It is YOU, our contributors, who determine our themes. Only after we send out acceptance notes do we review what our poets have in common. Often (let us be honest) this is a difficult process. Not all the poems we accepted fit together gracefully. This season however you made it easy for us; the poems virtually grouped themselves.

Which bring us to **Evoking The Past**. Overall, the poems in this section resemble those of **What We Don't Acknowledge** in that they criticized the status quo, examining modern life without pretense. Unlike the first group of poems though, they looked back to a past which (whatever its imperfections) preserved virtues we lack. Thus while these poems may not idealize the past, they do nevertheless look backward to find what's missing. In the process they suggest that what we lack is at least *possible*; anything that existed before (however imperfectly), may yet be recovered.

And the proof of all this can be found in the last group, *It's Not All Bad*. Contrary to what you may think, these are NOT "bouncy" or "fluffy" poems; the editors of *The Road Not Taken* have no interest in anything "fakey." What these poems *do* tentatively promise is **balance**. Imperfect as this world is, there is still beauty in it.

So here it is: another issue. Thank you, contributors, for all your honesty and hard work. And thank you, Rachel, for providing *me* the balance and perspective we all need, wending our way through this universe.

Enjoy --

Kathryn Jacobs  
Editor  
*Road Not Taken*

# **What We Don't Acknowledge**

## **Carl Kinsky**

Carl Kinsky is a country lawyer who writes sonnets from his home in Ste. Genevieve, Missouri. His work has appeared in *The Lyric*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, *Grand Little Things*, *Lighten Up Online* and elsewhere.

### **Battle Scars**

A sneeze, a bullet whistles past his ear.  
A revelation of God's providence  
or serendipitous coincidence?  
No atheists in foxholes – so we hear.  
So many converts when gunfire's near,  
but is survival really evidence  
prayer worked? Are dead friends of no consequence?  
Both skeptics and believers think it queer,  
when granted leave for well-earned R & R  
and seeking penance or enjoying sin  
to be alive while better soldiers are  
sent home in body bags. Thus guilt begins  
attacking wounds before scabs turn to scars,  
infection slowly poisoning from within.

## Steven Kent

Steven Kent is the poetic alter ego of author and musician Kent Burnside ([www.kentburnside.com](http://www.kentburnside.com)). His work appears in *251*, *Asses of Parnassus*, *Light*, *Lighten Up Online*, *New Verse News*, *Pulsebeat Poetry Journal*, *Philosophy Now*, and *Snakeskin*. His collection *I Tried (And Other Poems, Too)* was published in 2023 by Kelsay Books.

### Thoughts and Prayers

My Congressman, surveying last night's carnage  
while searching for some way to prove he cares,  
claims *I can't pass a law;*  
*the vote would be a draw.*  
*Instead, I offer all my thoughts and prayers.*

He says this every time we have a shooting  
(and some days killings come our way in pairs):  
*The problem's not the gun,*  
*so nothing can be done*  
*except to offer all my thoughts and prayers.*

No matter how much blood is shed, his "sorrow"  
is notable for all it never dares:  
*These abstract rights, my friend,*  
*we never, ever bend,*  
*but I can offer all my thoughts and prayers.*

One day perhaps I'll find his house is burning  
and see him at a window, trapped upstairs.  
I'll shout out from the street,  
*The circle's now complete--*  
*here, let me offer all my thoughts and prayers.*

## William Doeski

William Doeski lives in Peterborough, New Hampshire. He has taught at several colleges and universities. His most recent book of poetry is *Venus, Jupiter* (2023). His essays, poetry, fiction, and reviews have appeared in various journals.

### Indian and African Elephants

You're aware of the elephant  
in the room, but how about  
the big one poised in our driveway?

The indoor elephant is tame,  
a willing worker from India  
who washes dishes, sweeps floors,

and otherwise earns his keep.  
The outdoor elephant is fresh  
from Africa's broad savannah.

He thinks all people are poachers  
and has come to stomp us flat.  
Don't go outside. Let our mild

mannered Indian elephant  
negotiate with the other one,  
whose ears flap like stormy canvas.

On this windy afternoon the light  
filtered through heaving pines falls  
on the gray hides of elephants

like chatter at a cocktail party.  
You see? Our Indian friend  
has calmed the big guy, explaining

that we're shocked by the ivory trade  
and won't harm fellow travelers  
on this somewhat wobbly planet.

The outdoor elephant waggles  
his rubber trunk and wanders off,  
maybe to crush our neighbors.

Our own elephant watches him go,  
perhaps with a touch of regret.  
To appreciate his diplomacy

we should allow our elephant



a little more freedom. Maybe  
our rooms are too small for him,

maybe domestic chores mock  
his strength and loyalty, greater  
than any human can provide.

Far off now, the African  
elephant trumpets, his tusks  
gleaming in a gust of rain.

## **Sam Hendrian**

Sam Hendrian is a lifelong storyteller striving to foster empathy and compassion through art. Originally from the Chicago suburbs, he now resides in Los Angeles, where he primarily works as an independent filmmaker.

### **Island of Interrupted Dreams**

He didn't recall the bullet pass through  
nor even remember the sound it made ,  
just that he wasn't quite sure what to do  
other than think of his mom's lemonade.

Well, he had wanted to be a writer,  
or at least something resembling Shakespeare,  
telling his doubtful mother he'd fight her  
until he realized her logical fear.

Now that was off the table forever,  
shattered on a battlefield somewhere west,  
unsure why God had to pull the lever  
when he was nowhere near ready to rest.

Yet before his feet graced heavenly plains,  
he suddenly found himself on an isle  
where tears were replaced by shy April rains  
and he was invited to dream awhile.

All the typewriters he could dare ask for  
marched into his hotel suite on the sand  
complete with publishing offers galore  
plus lots of grammatical contraband.

He was not alone in his second chance  
as was proven by distant baseball bats  
on top of bar exams and ballroom dance  
and a jockey exceeding gambling stats.

Still it was done right after it begun,  
merely a brief glimpse of what might have been,  
lobbying God for a parallel sun  
under which boys could have died as full men.

## Donald Wheelock

Donald Wheelock's poems have appeared in many journals that welcome formal poetry. His publications also include two full length books of poems, *It's Hard Enough to Fly* (Kelsay), and *With Nothing but a Nod*, the latter due out next spring from David Robert Books.

### An Awkward Meeting

She saw him coming, and he'd seen her too;  
he'd recognized her with a modest wave.  
Escaping to a side street would be rude,  
and he would follow her. She'd just be brave,  
invent a meeting she must soon attend—  
she would be late! "So good to see you, Jack."  
(To lie was better far than to offend  
a man she'd dropped the hammer on.)

Sad sack

he was, and still is by the looks of him.  
"And how are *you*?" he asked her, as if nothing,  
*nothing* had transpired between the two—  
"Great to see you but I've got to go,"  
he said, and left a kiss or two mid-air,  
as he walked off and left her standing there.

## **Tom Vaughan**

Tom Vaughan currently lives and works in France. His poems have been published in several magazines and anthologies, and in two HappenStance Press pamphlets. His poem Beltway Blues was set to music by Sir Stephen Hough as one of his Songs of Love and Loss, premiered in the Wigmore Hall, London in January 2023.

### **Grim Tale**

The children are dumped in the forest, to die.  
Their stepmother's a bitch, and food is short.  
Dad's just obeying orders – he doesn't ask why.

But the striplings are wily. They don't cry  
or blame their begetter who, though distraught,  
ditched them alone in the wood, to die.

They sleep up an oak tree. For snacks, they try  
eating berries, like birds. But then they're caught  
by a witch – yes, a woman. I wonder why.

She drools at the thought of them both in a pie  
seasoned with banewort and washed down with port . . .  
Still, the cheeky young things have no wish to die –

they shove her in the oven, turned up high,  
and slam the door shut, without a second thought.  
So the witch's goose is cooked. The sly

kids forgive their father, who says goodbye  
to the temptress who led him astray. And we're taught  
that though men are wimps, leaving their offspring to die,  
the 'weaker' are the wicked sex.

Any idea why?

## David Howard

David Howard is the author of *Rāwaho: the Completed Poems* (Cold Hub Press, 2022) and the editor of *A Place To Go On From: the Collected Poems of Iain Lonie* (Otago University Press, 2015). Poems from his last four volumes have appeared in *Best New Zealand Poems*. His personal website is: [www.davidhowardpoet.com](http://www.davidhowardpoet.com)

### The Fact of the Matter is

‘Hell is not interesting, it is merely terrible’  
said Robert Musil. Then it resembles every country.  
With our consciences for passports, we can freely  
holiday in Hell. Of course, costs are infernal -  
we can hardly afford the departure tax.  
It was always difficult to accept facts;

when we were adolescents, they seemed less intractable  
but as the ensuing decades have brought more certainty  
there’s less consolation. Now we are elderly  
the persistence of guilt has become critical -  
every act causes unexpected setbacks.  
We can’t paper over Paradise’s cracks;

we can’t manage the gravitas of a Greek tragedy.

# **Evoking The Past**



## Carey Jobe

Carey Jobe is a retired attorney who has published poetry over a 45-year span. In addition to being a prior contributor to *The Road Not Taken*, his poetry has also appeared recently in *The Orchards Poetry Journal*, *The Lyric*, *Sparks of Calliope*, *The Chained Muse*, and *The Society of Classical Poets*. A native Tennessean, he now lives and writes near Tallahassee, Florida.

### The Sunken Cherokee Towns Along the Little Tennessee

Sequoyah, spell this word.  
Blue farms yield frogs. The woods are wet  
stumps roamed by fish, not deer. The mockingbird  
hears a cry too gruff for its throat:  
a droning motorboat  
drags its broad V above the council towns  
like a new alphabet.  
Fishermen cast for bass where the past drowns.

## David W. Landrun

David W. Landrun's poetry has appeared in many journals and anthologies--once, some time ago, in *The Road Not Taken*. He has published two collections of poetry, *The Impossibility of Epithalamia* and *Tawney Grammar*.

### Old Farm

A few cows grazed in a meadow out behind  
the house. A stock pond where the cows could drink  
sat further back. When the wind blew, the stink  
of cow manure wafted. Each time we dined  
we sat at trestle tables. A wood stove—  
enamel white and cast iron—was the place  
where our food would be cooked. It had the grace  
of its antiquity. In an alcove  
next to the kitchen/dining room a well,  
stone-lined, with a hand-pulled bucket, was a thing  
of wonder and amazement. It would bring  
us to another time, into the spell  
of things long past—the “coal oil” lamps that burned  
to light the house; whetstone in the back yard;  
beans, cornbread, and potatoes fried with lard;  
the past before us, marvelously returned.

## **Carl Kinsky**

### **Seasonal Changes**

The summer's dry spell means there's less fall color;  
still, the Virginia creeper's turning red  
as is the staghorn sumac, only duller  
than in years past. Parched trees begin to shed  
their leaves in August, green becoming brown  
beneath a sky whose piercing blueness hurts  
our eyes. The temperature starts trending down,  
but though old almanacs predicted first  
frost here by Halloween, now Veterans Day  
appears to be more accurate a date,  
and while for sweet nostalgia's sake we pray  
for Christmas snow, it's seldom seen of late,  
the changing seasons having changed so much  
we must adapt, but mostly we just watch.

## Isabel Miles

Born and raised in a Scottish mining village, Isabel Miles is a former scientist, turned writer, who lives on the North Yorkshire Moors. Her poems and short stories have been published in *Green Ink Poetry*, *East of the Web*. *Shooter*, *Northwords Now*, *Alchemy Spoon*, *Anomaly*, *Acumen*, *The Road Not Taken* and *Dreich*, among others. She is the author of a poetry pamphlet, *Spent Earth*, (Mudfog Press) and a novel, *Chosen*, (Kindle).

### The Nine Ladies of Stanton Moor \*

The old gods glowered when the grey priests came,  
The watchful gods, whose blood is green birch sap.  
Their green eyes flickered in the summer leaves.  
Their green eyes glimmered in the winter wood.

Twelve dance before them at the new year's turn.  
Midnight will bring the new god's holy day  
Of silent prayer. And so we must return  
To sleep in Christian beds. Three creep away.

We nine dance on, to whet the stirring corn.  
As new growth quickens in the spinning earth  
I hear the tolling of the midnight bell.  
I feel the birch sap thickening my blood,

staying my breath. I slow, I crystallise,  
My heart becoming jagged amethyst,  
Chalcedony my brain. Lives flicker past  
As fleeting as the little lives of birds.

The village and its church fall to decay.  
My dance's measure now is centuries.  
My pulse beats with the circling of the stars.  
I dance to please green eyes that watch and wait.

\*A Derbyshire stone circle reputed by local legend to be nine women turned to stone for dancing on the Sabbath.

## **Justin Hare**

Justin Hare is a native of Pittsburgh, PA where he writes and works a day job in the social work field. His interests include rock climbing and listening to jazz. His work has appeared in *Uppagus* and the *Ulu Review*, and is forthcoming in *Jerry Jazz Musician*.

## **Imagining Synge**

I shall return to Inis Mór  
to see the cliffs and sea and shore;  
where curraghs stand about the sand,  
and dúns of stone atop the land;  
where jagged rocks are piled high  
in sea-fresh air where seabirds fly;  
where men mend nets and gather turf  
to lend their humble homes some warmth,  
and gather to the crackling hearth  
those sea-born folk in flannels swathed  
to lend the tales they've lent before:  
those splendid tales of Inis Mór.

## **Hannah M. Jones**

Hannah M. Jones is a librarian who lives and works in Baltimore. Although she has been writing poetry since childhood, she is relatively new to publication: her work has appeared in print once before, in the journal *WestWard Quarterly*.

### **Invocation from Ferndean**

If, when the swells of hell do overflow  
as they do now, I feel the glimmer gone,  
I charge the heavens (who are like to know)  
to say where went that light that lately shone.

If she be by, I charge her now to speak,  
To tell me where she sleeps - where she abides,  
If she be living, whither I may seek,  
If she be extant, where her heart resides.



## Paul Willis

*Paul Willis* has published seven collections, including one of formal verse, *Little Rhymes for Lowly Plants* (White Violet Press, 2019). Individual poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *Light*, and *The Road Not Taken*. He lives with his wife, Sharon, near the old mission in Santa Barbara, California.

[www.pauljwillis.com](http://www.pauljwillis.com).

### One Day

*after Edmund Spenser*

One day I drew our names upon the sand.  
They were in cursive. With my other hand,  
I wrote them in Times Roman, twelve-point font—  
and that was quite a trick, one you will want  
me to repeat when the Pacific tide  
erases what I've done. But, side by side,  
for now we'll soak our feet where our names lay  
and contemplate the waves. The salty spray  
will coat our glasses so we cannot spy  
the heavens part where, someday, you and I  
will look down on this beach with deep regret,  
remembering our love that was all wet.

**It's Not All Bad**

## **Scott Darrington**

Scott Darrington is a small-town Nevada escapee who has always enjoyed the rugged beauty of the high desert and the strange ways nature and civilization intersect. He currently lives in Utah and, besides poetry, enjoys cats, board games, and pickleball.

### **Control**

Babies are good at opening and closing,  
at on and off, up and down, fully clothed  
and buck naked. But anything not so neat  
they flail at like a tipsy octopus.

My baby nephew's in my lap. We're dozing,  
though still attempting picture books he loathed  
two months ago. My back aches and my feet  
twitch, but we have to see if Platypus

swims safely home. The black words at this stage  
still mean nothing to him, but he turns one page  
at a time, one page at a time, one page...

**Scott Darrington**

**Medium-rare**

The best kind of poetry is depressing  
like a huge steak: deep grill lines free of dressing,  
charred on the edges, juicy at the core  
with just the right amount of blood and gore.  
Post gorge, heat drains from fingernail and snot  
to wrap the heavy ball of slashed mashed thought  
sinking in acid with updrafts of spice  
as the belly breaks down the sacrifice.

Though no one eats a T-bone every dinner,  
unless they're rich and unwise, or destitute  
and none the wiser. Light food keeps you thinner,  
like poems gently grown from seed to shoot  
to fruit, apples with red-green skin so thin  
the first chomp floods sweet juices down your chin.

## Steven Monte

Steven Monte is a professor in the English Department at the College of Staten Island (CUNY). He has taught at the University of Chicago and at Yale University, from which he received his doctorate in Comparative Literature. His scholarly writing is mostly on Renaissance, Romantic, and modern poetry, including his books *The Secret Architecture of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (2021), *Victor Hugo: Selected Poetry in French and English* (2001, 2002), and *Invisible Fences: Prose Poetry as a Genre in French and American Literature* (2000). He has also published verse translations and his own poetry in a variety of journals, including *The Paris Review*, *The Boston Review*, *Literary Imagination*, *Think*, and *TriQuarterly*. He lives and runs marathons in New York City.

### October Passing

*for Richard Wilbur (1921–2017)*

A layer of frost (not much)  
covers the world this dawn  
and with its ghostly touch  
softens the colors on  
the autumn leaves and grass,  
turning them to pastel.

The scene's about to pass:  
already you can tell  
that the lawn's darker hues  
will spread out like stains;  
the whitened leaves will lose  
their edges and veins.

But for now all of this  
remains as if it is  
not meant to go away—  
a stillness not in warning  
but transitory play  
before dawn turns to morning.

**David W. Landrun**

**Beorn**

*(Bilbo Baggins Reminisces)*

Beorn's land—there we never tasted flesh  
but dined on bread and honey, curds and milk.  
Beast-friendly countryside it was, as fresh  
as brimming bowls of yogurt, smooth as silk.  
There bees as big as birds flew—and a sting  
from one of them would be your final fling.  
Hard to believe Beorn—Bear-Man, Man-Bear  
came violent and huge into the fight  
between the orcs and us, to crush and tear  
the goblin-king and put his troops to flight  
(though Gandalf said they'd driven him away  
and had he vowed he would return someday).  
No, mostly when I knew him, he had been  
a gracious host, there in his rustic home.  
Hospitable, he took our whole lot in,  
all of the dwarves and me. On honeycomb  
and wheaten loaves we dined and never thought  
he would be the Deliverer we sought.  
Harm would not come to any beast he knew.  
The hunter's skill, the taxidermist's trade  
were topics that were properly eschewed—  
not talked about down in Beorn's glade!  
But from such peace he rose up, scattering  
the goblin horde, foot-soldier, knight, and king.  
And when the bear returned into the man  
(still shaggy and ferocious as a beast  
but man-like for the most), then all began  
as it had been before—the simple feast  
of bread and curds, of buttermilk and maize,  
cakes from the fire, hearth-hot, with honey glaze.



## Mark F. Stone

Mark F. Stone worked as an attorney for the United States Air Force for 33 years and is retired. He began writing poems in 2005, as a way to woo his bride-to-be into wedlock. His poems have been published by *The Society of Classical Poets*, *Light*, *Whatfinger News*, and *The Ohio Poetry Association*.

### Probing for the Problematic Polyp

Bob was testy yesterday.  
A fractious, famished fellow.  
You would be, too, if all that you  
consumed was juice and Jell-O.

He downed the colon cleansing drink.  
The consequence was troubling.  
The gaseous gurgling wouldn't stop.  
His whole inside was bubbling.

The joy of colon cleansing! Ah,  
there's no way to mistake it.  
The sprinting to the toilet bowl  
in hopes that you will make it.

The doc began the protocol.  
Bob's tush was fresh as clover.  
He bared his ass, inhaled the gas,  
and blink! The job was over.

Now, please excuse me if I get  
too personal and pushy.  
But when you're older, you must let  
the doctor check your tushy.

Procrastination can produce  
a searing, psychic wallop.  
Dawdle and you might induce  
a problematic polyp.

The gastroenterologist,  
in truth, is your best friend.  
They'll snip your troubles to prevent  
a sad, untimely end.

They're tactful and professional.  
Permit me to remind you,  
they're loyal to their patients. They  
will always stand behind you.

## Michael Fraley

Michael Fraley finds a creative community in the many voices of the poetry world. Michael and family live in San Francisco near the beach and zoo. He has contributed to *The Listening Eye*, *Blue Unicorn*, *California Quarterly*, *Light*, *Pennine Ink*, *The Lyric*, *miller's pond*, and *The Road Not Taken*.

## The Gopher

The gopher is industrious—  
while digging at a steady pace,  
he seldom stops to show his face.

He digs his tunnels under us  
without a thought for what we think,  
as in the ground we slowly sink.

The pocket gopher stores his food  
in fur-lined pouches on his cheeks;  
the choicest roots are what he seeks.

It's hard to praise him when he's rude,  
consuming all your garden greens;  
your lettuce, carrots, beets, and beans.

But though he can be hard to take,  
there are some things he does that make  
your garden grow more easily,  
stirring up the soil—breezily.