



The Road Not Taken

A Journal of Formal Poetry

Summer, 2023

The Road Not Taken: A Journal of Formal Poetry

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Poet's Corner

Summer 2023 fell naturally into three themes: **Journeys, Lost and Hidden, and Small Perfect Things**. Honestly, picking the themes of an issue is often one of the harder editorial tasks. Obviously it would be much easier if we simply announced themes in advance. This strategy however, while convenient, excludes any fine poems that happen *not* to fit into preconceived themes, and *Road Not Taken* wants the best possible poems possible (metrical and/or rhymed poems). To avoid that, the editors of *Road Not Taken* generally pick poems regardless of subject matter, and then see where they lie. Sometimes that's a difficult process, but not this summer: read and enjoy!

Rather than talk further about the poems we have chosen to highlight then, *Road* editors would like to talk about the many fine poems that (for one reason or another) fell between the cracks. What happened to the many poems *not* featured this season?

First of all, there are the poems with absolutely fabulous beginnings that go nowhere. It's painful to reject these poems. Sometimes the first quatrain is *so* promising -- and then it dwindles off into elegant variations. These are skilled poems, but the insight is all in the beginning.

Then there are the poems full of wonderful sound and punchy lines -- but they don't hold together. There's an insight here and a wonderful metaphor there, but when we finish the poem we are no wiser than before: these poems lack UNITY.

Finally, there are the poems that might be excellent choices for another journal, but they're misdirected. There are *great* free verse poems in the world: I had one on my office door for years when I was teaching at *Texas A & M -C*. Fortunately, poems like this will have no problem finding another forum. *The Road Not Taken* was founded to give a forum for poems engaging external form. They may tweak traditional forms or create nonce forms, but they strive for a natural sound, and they are written in modern diction. The editors of *Road Not Taken* firmly believe that many of the best contemporary poets grow up listening to poets through the century -- and then innovated. And more power to them --

Kathryn Jacobs
Editor

Journeys

Hilary Biehl

Hilary Biehl's poems have appeared in *Able Muse*, *Blue Unicorn*, *Autumn Sky Poetry Daily*, and elsewhere. She lives in New Mexico with her husband and their son.

The Drive

The car labored up vertical streets, imperiled
by each red light or stop sign, and I, dreaming
against the window, saw a manhole steaming –
an obvious entrance to the underworld.

I sat up straighter, sure that Cerberus
was more than those three yapping dogs being walked
beyond the chain link fence. My mother locked
the doors – this part of town was dangerous.

If I had been Persephone I would
have uprooted a scraggly dandelion
from a sidewalk crack, and Hades, drawn
by neighing shadows, and in love with childhood,

would have sprung up from that hole – the reason
why she locked the doors was something like that.
She drove on, past a dirty laundromat.
I rolled my window down to let the breeze in

and whatever our actual destination was
makes no real difference now – the steam is only
steam, and Hades isn't very lonely,
and I'm the one who locks the doors because.

Hilary Biehl

Visiting Switzerland at Seventeen

The window-boxes bleed geraniums.
The Alps smooth their kilometers of green.
Even the cows are bronze and burnished, straight
out of a fairy tale, and pretzel crumbs
taste better to the pigeons. Nonetheless,
people must be the same in any place:
they curse from bicycles, feel desolate
in church, get drunk. It seems as if they should
be constantly intoxicated by
the altitude, as if height might have bred
away the doubts under their fingernails,
the inner dinginess, the snow-capped lie.
But people are people, still, in fairy tales.

Robin Helweg-Larsen

Anglo-Danish by birth but Bahamian by upbringing, Robin Helweg-Larsen has been published in the *Alabama Literary Review*, *Allegro*, *Ambit*, *Amsterdam Quarterly*, *The Road Not Taken* and other international journals. 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.

Wanderer, or Odin/Merlin in the 21st Century

It isn't money, power, or (really) sex;
it's wisdom, knowledge, understanding, truth,
the motivation from my earliest youth.
So now I watch as all our dreams turn wrecks,
as statesmen bluster, muscles bulge and flex,
economists forecast but can't say sooth,
and life extension folks are thought uncouth--
they hoard possessions, but can't save their necks.
I wandered, ragged, with a missing eye,
patched so none knew my implant's extra sight,
seeking her who'd save from oblivion
the things I've found; for I see I must die,
and I'm now summoning the acolyte
who'll carry knowledge on. Come, Vivien.

J. Simon Harris

J. Simon Harris is a poet, translator and scientist from Raleigh, North Carolina. He has authored a translation of Dante's *Inferno* in *terza rima*, the rhyme scheme of the original Italian; and he maintains the website *Dante's Afterlife*. He has also translated Pablo Neruda's *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*.

Le Deluge

Look at him. Fucking idiot. Still banging
on that boat like it's gonna save his life.
You know, I called him out. But there's no changing
an old man's mind. I feel bad for his wife.

Day in, day out, she has to hear that shit.
End of the world! he says. Our time is come!
So fucking loud, oh god, I wish he'd quit.
As if god gives a shit 'bout what we done.

I feel bad for him too, for what it's worth.
Damn drunk. You believe he believes that shit?
What kind of fucked up god would drown the earth?
We ain't doing a thing. Keep them fires lit.

Live life, fill your belly, defend your blood,
and don't you worry 'bout... well god damn, it's raining.

M. Brooke Wiese

M. Brooke Wiese's work has appeared in *The Raintown Review*, *The Orchards Poetry Journal*, *Sparks of Calliope*, and in *Poem*. Her chapbook, *At the Edge of The World*, was published by *The Ledge Press* in 1998, and her sonnets have been taught by poet Billy Collins to his college students. After a very long hiatus she has been writing furiously again. She lives in New York City and has worked in education and nonprofit social services.

Demeter, Persephone

She picked out a nice dry Cave, instead of a heap of wet leaves, to lie down in; and she strewed clean sand on the floor; and she lit a nice fire of wood at the back of the Cave; and she hung a dried wild-horse skin, tail down, across the opening of the Cave; and she said, "Wipe your feet, dear, when you come in, and now we'll keep house."

— Rudyard Kipling, *Just So Stories*

My mother tells me I am beautiful.
But she is the beautiful one, a goddess –
really. Because of her the crops are plentiful;
the farmers love her and she has a fondness
for them. They call her "Corn-Mother."
I call her "Corn-Mother" too, in jest.
My father is Corn-Mother's brother,
Zeus, and he is rarely at home. It's best
that way, my mother says, and I can see
her point. I know he loves me but he's difficult,
especially around her sacred mysteries
for women only – which he calls a cult.
My mother loves me fiercely... More than life,
she says. Her arms, like tendrils, wrap me up;
sometimes it's just too much. Get a life,
I think. If only someone would abduct
me, take me far away from her,
here, I mean. I'm ready for a grand
adventure with a young and handsome lover
who will take me with him underground.

Arthur Powers

Arthur Powers went to Brazil in 1969 as a Peace Corps Volunteer and lived most of his adult life there. He and his wife now live in Raleigh, North Carolina. Arthur's poetry has appeared in *America*, *Apple Valley Review*, *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, *Christianity & Literature*, *Dappled Things*, *Hiram Poetry Review*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *Roanoke Review*, *South Carolina Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Southwest Review*, *Sou'wester*, *Windhover*, & many other magazines & anthologies.

Miles to Go

“Death wish,” my sister said,
speaking of Frost’s poem.
She was seventeen
- so ‘phisticated –
but, of course, all in her head
- distant as Rome –
no idea of what it means
to wish to be dead.
I was ten –
fed up with Freudian stuff
(even then I’d had enough).
But that was then.
Now, at sixty-four, I know
the gentle darkness mingled with that snow.

Lost and Hidden

Holly Woodward

Holly Woodward served as writer in residence at St. Albans, Washington National Cathedral, and was a fellow for four years at CUNY Graduate Center's Writers' Institute. Woodward enjoyed a year as a doctoral fellow at Moscow University. She also studied at Leningrad University and has an MFA from Columbia.

Vagabond

The rain always gets locked outside,
wan hands streaking down the glass,
then clutching at trash in his slide
to the gutter while people rush past.
Too proud to beg, too weak to stand,
he fingers the asphalt's rough Braille,
invisible as a blind man
searching, while we dine, through the garbage pail.
Rain can't drown himself in drink
as some castaways have done.
All night he keeps wandering—
hear him tap long after he's gone.

Holly Woodward

What to Take from a Burning House

What to Take from the Burning House
In my dreams I keep losing things,
work, money, love, direction, homes,
children, family, land and rings,
much I wasn't aware I owned.
I beg for aid, but no one helps—
in my own fantasies, it seems
the others are wrapped in themselves,
pursuing their own private dreams.
In real life, I'm losing things, too:
all the friends I fail to call back,
good pens, innocence, time, chances, you—
so many gifts I'm losing track.
Dreamtowns, souls, archipelagos
dissolve behind me as I pass,
trying to teach me how to let go—
a concept I can't seem to grasp.
I maniacally collect more junk,
though everything has two costs,
the price I pay in cash up front,
the greater penalty, when lost.
"You will have to lose all you own,"
the armed thief in my dream said.
"But to your heart on fire hold on,
lose your dreams, you'll know you're dead."

Van Anderson

Van A nderson is a retired English teacher whose writing life began in 2nd grade with a story about Amos the mouse, who haunted the White House and was swallowed by President Eisenhower's wife. His poems, essays and articles have appeared in a number of journals, newspapers, magazines and educational publications. North Star Press published a collection of his poems, *Tending the Garden*, in 2013.

The Key

I searched the house again for the lost key,
the one that starts our car, the one that lets
us move about and touch our family.
With flashlight in my hand, I opened desks
and drawers and closet doors and rummaged once
again and hoped my light might make the key
appear where I had looked before; an ounce
of magic was my prayer—alas, no way.
It may have fallen, so I thought to peer
below the hook where it had hung upon,
in apron pockets' pouch and then between
the radiator fins—alas, unfound.
Persistence finds the key that opens doors,
so I've been told, but blind luck's just as sure.

Hilary Biehl

Her Broad-Brimmed Hat

protects her from the sun and people's eyes.
Yes, strangers, but especially those she knows.
She puts it on: she may be brutal, wise
or witty, it won't matter. Nothing shows.

She wears its shadow at a slant. She tells
her friends that she's allergic to the light.
Perhaps they have their own straw citadels
arranged just so. Perhaps an anchorite

inhabits each of them as well – or not.
She smiles from underneath the tilted weave,
and visits the adjoining room, where thought
is cloistered. "Shy," they mutter, "odd, naive."

Edward Fisher

Edward Fisher taught high school English in Uganda as a Peace Corps volunteer, and worked for 30 years as a play therapist and adventure-based counselor with special needs children. He holds a bachelor's degree in Literature and the doctorate in Psychology.

The Myth of Myself

In the myth of myself, on a blank white page,
Death-by-the-numbers, took center stage

My shadow, my changes, redacted in black,
My grandiose ego: a play in one act.

The clockwise, mechanical world winding down,
The moon come to ruin, the gods run aground

Ticking toward chaos, my runaway brain,
Emptied of anthems, my cells rearranged

The mind's microcosm, that held up the sky,
Timelessly turned in the wind like an eye

A whirling inertia, my dark-side revealed
A living personae asleep at the wheel

My nobody body, sloughed off in a dream,
Unmasking the myth of the world that was me.

Small Perfect Things

Dan Champion

Dan Champion is the author of *A Playbill for Sunset* and *Peter De Vries and Surrealism* and a coeditor of *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song*. His poetry has appeared previously in *The Road Not Taken* and in many other journals and anthologies.

Sprig

The lilies-of-the-valley bloom each year
without our interference. They sprout up
along the northern wall in their own time,
and soon their florets, each a tiny cup
translucent as fine Haviland, appear.
Not one has ever felt the sun. At prime
and through the day, the lily bed's in shade
along the wall and underneath the eaves.
Reflected light is all they have. Why grow
has never been an issue. Roots, stems, leaves,
and chalices thrive though we've never made
an effort to weed, water, feed, or sow.
We'll snip some for the bud vase, just a few,
spring passing faster than snows can renew.

Frances Rosenblatt

Frances Rosenblatt is a retired college counselor and freelance writer whose poetry and short stories have appeared in “Poetica” and “Response” magazines. Early in her career, she taught English at a number of colleges and universities in New York. She has a particular fondness for Renaissance poetry, and has never read a sonnet she didn’t love.

For Ben Jonson and My Children

Ben Jonson was right. Unquestionably,
My children are my finest poetry.
"Write your lives," I tell them, "in rhythmic tunes,
In lays and madrigals, in hymns and runes."

But grand, aspiring epics they compose
For themselves, with imagining that goes
Well past the dreams I craft for them at night--
Beyond the rhymes that I would have them write.

Sons of my soul a perfect couplet form,
Unrestricted by convention or norm
Prescribed by mothers, or poets, or we
Whose careful, measured verse is not so free.

Who'd have thought a Renaissance poet could
Know so much about modern motherhood?

Joshua Coben

Joshua Coben is the author of two books of poetry, *Maker of Shadows* (Texas Review Press, 2010), winner of the X. J. Kennedy Poetry Prize, and *Night Chaser* (David Robert Books, 2020), a finalist for the Vassar Miller Prize, the New American Poetry Prize, and the Donald Justice Poetry Prize. A St. Louis native, he lives with his family near Boston and works as an elementary school teacher and librarian. Visit him at joshuacoben.com.

Looking at Work

I like work: it fascinates me. I can sit and look at it for hours.

Jerome K. Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat*

The plasterer draws a knife
along the wall to skim
it smooth, rubbing the rough
dough flush and sleek and plumb.

The roofer lays down coarse,
close-fitted shingles, shoots
in short, nail-gunning bursts
an inch above her boots.

They've taught their hands to keep
strict forms—straight wall, slant roof.
Work works when it holds up,
lies taut, shunts rain, stands proof

against the idle fool
below who likes to gawk
at toil but wields no tool
more cutting than a book;

it pricks the over-proud
who make mere metaphor
of an exacting trade
others risk dying for.

John Masella

John is a graduate student and poet from northern New Jersey. Influenced by Philip Larkin and many of his contemporaries, his work employs stark imagery, observation, and accessible language to explore themes of impermanence and loss.

Old Books*

Faded bindings of muted earth tones rest
on the slightly sloped shelf, gathering dust,
each old work perhaps the late author's best.
Inside the flaps, musings on what's unjust,
what's honorable, wretched, righteous, wrong.

You bought them in earnest; resolved, headstrong.
We'd dive in, together, some December,
never-started evenings around the fire.
But plans fade; in separate rooms, we tire,
and years fade past books I don't remember.

*Previously published in The HyperTexts

Diane Dickinson

Diane Dickinson, originally from Detroit, now makes her home near Mt. Hood National Forest in Oregon. She has published in *The MacGuffin*, *California State Poetry Quarterly*, among others.

Little Tub Bakery, Tobermory

I barely find it in the morning rain.
Set off from the two lane
road, Little Tub emerges,
a luminous mushroom on the edge
of browns, gray skies,
and one white birch nearby.
Black fists of flies
top the pines.

Sandhill cranes, in sparse critiques,
rummage the ground with their beaks.
The blue-eyed woman at the bakery
turns out rhubarb and berries
nestled in thick pastry, stacked
next to cinnamon buns in packages
of six.
What to pick?

Easy for me as I hop out of my car,
to forage their breakfast repertoire.
But it's a hard place, this alvar peninsula,
like everywhere in nature.
I see that, looking back at the bakery
obscured by rain and windshield wipers,
as Little Tub blurs and fades,
its OPEN sign a flickering façade.