



The Road Not Taken
A Journal of Formal Poetry

Fall, 2024

The Road Not Taken: A Journal of Formal Poetry

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Poet's Corner: How to Get Published.

Welcome to the Fall 2024 Issue of The Road Not Taken. The submissions to this issue were impressive, folks: I have rarely had so many difficult decisions, or turned down so many skillful poems. This time however the quality of the poems we ended up rejecting led me to analyze more closely how we came to make our decisions. In short, before we post this issue, I'd like to give a few pointers.

The best poems that we reluctantly let go showed an unobtrusive manipulation of form: an ability to influence readers with meter and rhyme (for instance) without hitting them over the head with it. Some of them also used alliteration to reinforce images. The writers of these poems are not new at their craft; they have trained ears. When they fell short then — if they fell short; personal preference is always a factor — they generally fell short in one of two ways.

The first might be summarized as "no new twist;" a variation on a traditional theme needs to be more than skillful: it has to offer something at least mildly new or surprising. Otherwise it's like proving you qualify as a journeyman in a guild: significant and praiseworthy, but not in itself a reason for other people to read it.

The second one comes down to the "so what" question. People in this category are generally quite good at description, but they don't *lead* us anywhere: an arresting description leads to elegant variation instead of progressing. Poems like these are like promises left unfulfilled.

On the positive side, these are wonderful problems to have, which is why I make so many comments on our rejections. Most editors avoid comments, because any comment at all risks an "argument" by the author. No editor wants this. For one thing, poetry editors are almost always unpaid, squeezing a labor of love in between working for a living. And those of us who are retired have no resumes to pad. If the work gets too difficult, we simply quit. And when we quit many journals fold; it isn't easy after all to find a skilled successor who will work for nothing.

This has not of course stopped our editors from making comments. Editing a journal is a bit like teaching: you want to make a difference in the world. I would however ask our would-be contributors to think of this, and be gentle.

Kathryn Jacobs
Editor, Road Not Taken

Arts and Authors

Barbara Lydecker Crane

In 2024 Barbara Lydecker Crane won the Kim Bridgford Memorial Sonnet Crown Contest, Modern Sonnet First Prize in the Helen Schaibel Contest, and Honorable Mention in the Frost Farm Poetry Contest. She has twice been a finalist for the *Rattle Poetry Prize*. *Able Muse* recently published her fourth collection, *You Will Remember Me*. She lives near Boston with her husband and enjoys art and travel.

When Someone Stopped for Me

“Late in Emily Dickinson’s life, the story of a romantic relationship with Judge Otis Phillips Lord is supported in her correspondence with him....Some passages seem to suggest that she and Lord contemplated marrying.”

--Emily Dickinson Museum, Amherst, MA

Because I could not go to him
He must have sent for me—
His Emissary at the Door—
In Anonymity.

“Name’s Mort,” said he to empty Air—
behind the Door I lurked—
“Pray tell, who sent you here?” I piped.
And Mort replied, “Lord’s work.”

I leapt to think he was employed
By my adored Judge Lord—
And so, on arm of black-clad Mort,
I leapt and stepped aboard.

His Buggy was a Rattletrap—
That Buckboard held but Two
Would that I perched beside my Dear—
To banter and to coo.

Every Amherst house we passed
Was fixing Panes on me—
Their clear and icy Tone implied—
“A Hussy, that Miss D.”

I turned my back to window eyes.
“How are the Lords?” I asked.
“Ain’t there—only One?” said Mort.
So Mrs. Lord—*had passed?*

My dearest one, Judge Otis Lord—
At last was Free to Wed!

Then how I beamed and hotly blushed
At all that lay ahead—

A hundred miles down the Road,
In Salem, by the Sea—
I'd live in his imposing Home—
His private Chamber—*me*.

Since Others lust—why cannot I?
To that I do confess—
With Father senseless in the Ground,
I'm left Censor-less.

Darkness further heated Thoughts
but Sleet berated Skin.
Mort impressed into my Hand—
A dingy Flask of Gin.

Gin and Gale—Horse and Hail—
no house or Light in Sight.
Torrid Thoughts—frigid Limbs—
A wild, riled Night—

Until that moment Mort intoned—
“The end of the Road, Miss.”
He led me down to granite Stones—
a Chapel Graveyard, this.

Now here I write, await the End—
Old Mort has left me to it.
His Lord was not *my* dearest Judge—
I rode with Mort, and rue it.

Barbara Bazyn

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

Small Things That Block the Light

As Dickinson knew well,
it doesn't take much to unsettle meaning.
A slant of light can do it -- or a fly,
whose very smallness only makes things worse,
its petty buzzing ruining her death,
her eye for detail suddenly a curse.

After she saw a cock in Africa
bite out the tongue of a chameleon,
Dinesen knew it too:

Small meannesses do more than just annoy us.
Even when truly bird-brained, undesigned,
they can inflict grave trouble on the mind
as if they had been seeking to destroy us.

Gail White

Gail White keeps writing formal poetry in spite of all temptations to get honest work.

Alcestis

I died to save him once. Wouldn't you think
that would shift the balance of power just a bit?
He seemed delighted then to have me back,
but gratitude? There's not a trace of it.

Back to the loom I went. To spin and weave,
to supervise the children and the maids.
He's made it clear, in spite of words of love,
the husband is the master still – in spades.

Obedient, I offer no surprise--
a willing chattel in a world of men.
Sometimes he sees a flicker in my eyes:
I've learned. I wouldn't do the same again.

Steven Kent

Steven Kent is the poetic alter ego of writer and musician Kent Burnside (www.kentburnside.com). His work appears in *Asses of Parnassus*, *Light*, *Lighten Up Online*, *New Verse News*, and other journals. His collection *I Tried (And Other Poems, Too)* was published in 2023 by Kelsay Books.

Owed On A Grecian Urn

"My name is Keats," I told the clerk;
"I'd really like to see that vase."
He drew it slowly from the case
and tried to hide a gentle smirk.
"The cost is rather high, young man,"
he said, as though he somehow knew
my purse was empty. This was true,
but then I quickly formed a plan:
I'd lead him to believe (I thought)
that I could lay my hands on more
than I'd brought with me to the store,
and thus could pay for what I bought.

"My credit's good all over town,"
I most indignantly replied.
He rolled his eyes, then loudly sighed
and said "Enough; please put it down.
You see, I think I have it sold
already to a richer chap
whose bag of silver fills his lap
(he's worth a fortune, I've been told).
So here's the thing—now listen, kid,
you look like the poetic type,
and while you might not buy his hype
or praise the man for what he did,
to pay my bills is quite a task
and so I take what I can get.
I deal in cash--the safest bet--
and he can pay the price I ask.
One day a world may come in view
where those with your artistic soul
have all they need, and full control,
but I can't see that world, can you?"

I left the shop a bitter youth;
it nearly did my faith destroy
since rich men rarely do enjoy
such wealth of beauty, wealth of truth.
In later years I'd sadly learn
what happened once I walked away:
Both clerk and buyer died that day,
and no one knows about the urn.

Aaron Nydegger

Like William Carlos Williams or John Stone, two poets he admires, Aaron Nydegger practices medicine full-time and poetry part time. He lives in Layton, Utah. His work has appeared at *The Asses of Parnassus* and *Lighten Up Online*.

For Robert Louis Stevenson at Harvest-time

I too should like to rise and go, to where the golden apples grow.
A child's book of garden verses
in nursery rhymes rehearses,
tales of storied garden scenes
with apples formed in golden means,
not mentioning the curses.
For many apples I have found
lie rotting on the ground,
and give me pause to ponder then
the wormy fate of fruit and men.
Are nursery stories we've been told,
the one-and-only place for gold?
Or is this something rendered so
by one bad apple long ago?

The Uncooperative Universe

D.A. Cooper

D.A. Cooper is a poet from Houston, Texas. He is an avid collector of degrees. Most recently he has received his MFA from the University of St. Thomas, Houston. His poetry has also appeared in *Autumn Sky Poetry Daily*, *Light*, *Lighten Up Online*, *New Verse Review*, *The Society for Classical Poets*, and *Witcraft*, among others. He enjoys translating dialect poetry from Italy, watching *The Office*, and looking at trees.

A Witty Thief

His excellency, Bishop Ed
was worried for his wealth.
His apprehensions grew each day,
and undermined his health.

No matter where he laid his treasure
he couldn't shake the fear
that some thief would break in and steal it;
make it disappear.

One day a most inspired idea
popped into his head,
"I'll hide it in the tabernacle,
behind the sacred bread."

This was the safest spot, he thought,
but just to make it safer,
he jotted down a little note
and left it by a wafer:

Dominus est in loco isto^[1].
With these five words displayed there,
he hoped that any pious crook
would leave the dough he'd laid there.

But when next he checked the Sacrament
what he saw made him sick,
nothing was there but a short note:
surrexit, non est hic.^[2]

¹ "the Lord is in this place" (Genesis 28:16)

² "he is risen; he is not here" (Mark 16:6)

Max Roland Ekstrom

Max Roland Ekstrom writes in both metrical and free-verse modes, and his work has appeared in diverse publications such as *Arion*, *Soundings East*, and *New American Writing*. He holds an MFA from Emerson College and edits *The Pierian*, a journal that welcomes formal verse submissions.

Snowplow

My best convenience-store shovel
cracks as I jimmy it against the snow
boulders of graying ice and oil
deposited by the village plow

which returned with a bounty bigger
and saltier than its previous ocean.
I go and fetch my metal ditch-digger—
I tunnel out, the town shoves me in.

In troglodytic rage I heft chunks uphill,
less Cool Hand Luke digging his grave
and more the savage from “Mending Wall”
whom Frost’s sympathy could not save.

Lightning strikes at the small of my spine;
I pause as flakes twist to catch my wind
while frost makes my own limbs foreign—
I mop my brow with Frankenstein’s hand.

Atop the mailbox swells my burial mound.
A failure to communicate. Somewhere
in California, I figure, people pay to pound
sledges under a trainer’s foreman stare.

Ted Charnley

Ted Charnley's verse has appeared previously in *The Road Not Taken*, in multiple issues of such journals as *The Orchards*, *Pulsebeat*, *Think* and *The Lyric*, and in anthologies. His first full-length book, *An Invocation of Fragments*, was released in 2022 by Kelsay Books, featuring two nominees for a Pushcart Prize and a finalist for the Frost Farm Prize. He lives with his wife in a 200-year-old farmhouse they restored in central Maryland.

Rosa Multiflora

Your country was careless to cultivate me,
the obliging rose you brought from abroad
with fulsome flowers so faultlessly white.
I looked humble and harmless, there to help
your farmers at first, to cheaply confine
their livestock on land with a living fence
and to sink my roots, preserving the soil.
I was easy and useful, so you said yes.

Now that I'm here, I'm not held by hedges.
Pastures promise me open plots
where my thickets can thrive, bristling with thorns.
I'll climb and crowd out the claims of natives,
enter their enclaves, end them with mine.
Pruning or poison won't pause my invasion,
for the birds will consume and spread the seed
that carries my young, and your country is careless.

Timothy Muller

Tim Muller discovered poetry rather late, at the age of seventeen, and thought then that poetry was the only adequate response to life he had found. He has written poetry intermittently for many years, but rarely tried to publish. Once he did manage to get published in *The Formalist*, and has poetry forthcoming in *Orchards Poetry Journal*.

Your Schooling

I remember how you loved the birds
and listened then as though you knew the words;
the wrens and robins learn to sing and fly,
and take their schooling in the open sky;
the treetops serve as their academy
and there they seem to learn so easily;
you had your schooling here and not above,
and since your only study was to love,
and since to learn to love our heart are slow,
the schools, you found, are harder here below.

Carl Kinsky

Carl Kinsky is a country lawyer in Ste. Genevieve, Missouri. His work has appeared in *The Lyric*, *The Road Not Taken*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, *Grand Little Things*, *Light*, *Lighten Up Online*,. and elsewhere.

Storms Tonight

Do forecasters exaggerate the odds
of natural disasters just to keep
us wide awake? Have we pissed off the gods
so much the weather's riled so we won't sleep
tonight? The doomsayers for far too long
dished heaps of fear the world would soon collapse
which hasn't happened yet (which proves them wrong),
so we sneak out to hear the thunderclaps
and see the lightning strikes as sirens wail,
imploring us to seek safe shelter now.
Transfixed, we watch the winds begin to flail
and wonder if these prophets – who knows how? –
guessed right. The storm, though violent, quickly passes.
The pessimists can kiss our lucky asses.

Claudia Gary

Claudia Gary teaches workshops on Villanelle, Sonnet, Meter, Poetry vs. Trauma, etc., at The Writer's Center (writer.org) and privately, currently via Zoom. Author of *Humor Me* (2006) and chapbooks including *Genetic Revisionism* (2019), she is also a health/science writer, visual artist, composer of tonal songs and chamber music, and an advisory editor of *New Verse Review*. Her 2022 article on setting poems to music is online at <https://straightlabyrinth.info/conference.html>. See also pw.org/content/claudia_gary

On Reading the Encyclopedia

When Dad suggested this, at first she stalled.
Was *that* why he had bought it? Oh, she knew
some kids who claimed to read each volume through,
page after page—show-offs, as they were called—
all boys. Some boys were okay. Most appalled.
Those who inspired her were very few.
Dad was a rarity. What could she do
but take the bait? She started out enthralled,
but soon her curiosity declined
till she devised a game of deftly chasing
cross-references. *See also*, said each one,
and she'd be off to flex her agile mind
on worlds criss-crossing, insights interlacing.
How lucky that her father had no son.

Claudia Gary

Emergency

The phone rings, and her legs turn to spaghetti.
She tries to sprint the few blocks to the train,
then to the hospital. She isn't ready
for grown-up life. Her new husband, in pain,
sedated, hand crushed in a printing press,
is bandaged, hot and numb. She draws the curtain,
feels sorry for herself and her distress.
How can his life and hers be so uncertain?
A mania, a waking dream, enfolds her:
technicians, nurses, everyone in sight
caught in the mozzarella web that holds her
to pizza, marinara, every night.
Her husband's hand recovers. Lost in food,
she fends off thought and clings to attitude.

Deflections

Michael McDonough

Michael McDonough lives and teaches in Salt Lake City, Utah. His poetry has appeared in *Eunoia Review*, in *Utah Life Magazine*, and in “*Consecrate/Desecrate: a Great Salt Lake anthology.*”

Aunt Julie

When you played war with the bigger boys, and they threw
M-80 grenades into your machine-gun nest,
or when you played 'Tire,' and they made you stand
at the bottom of the hill and catch, it was Julie who chased
them off and cleaned your scrapes,

and when you coughed she sliced red onions and pressed
them, stacked and layered with sugar, between two plates
and set the iron on top, Julie, spinster, maiden aunt,
your father's sister, set you on the table, and held the spoon for you,
her baby bird, and you lifted up your face.

David Stephenson

David Stephenson is a retired manufacturing engineer from Detroit. His poems have most recently appeared in *Tar River Poetry*, *Shot Glass Journal*, *The Lyric*, and *Blue Unicorn*. His second collection, *Wall of Sound*, was published by Kelsay Books in 2022. He is also the editor of *Pulsebeat Poetry Journal*.

Pour Robot

In an aluminum foundry, I saw
a little train of boxes full of sand
running on a rail loop in a pit
that passed beneath an overhead robot
all bundled up in gray asbestos pads

which moved between a holding furnace—
where the bucket on its arm was filled
with glowing liquid metal to the brim—
and the pit and rail loop, where it poured
a measured dose into each passing box

as flames and sparks and big billows of smoke
erupted from the vent holes on the top
and cinders hissed and splattered off its pads.
The robot was all scorched and beaten up
like it had been brought back from a world war.

In the forgotten workshops of the past
this task was long performed by human beings
with ladles held between them on long poles,
breathing fire and brimstone, burned and scarred,
and in shadows, I could see their ghosts.

John Davis Jr.

John Davis Jr. is the author of *The Places That Hold* (Eastover Press, 2021), *Middle Class American Proverb* (Negative Capability Press, 2014), and three other poetry collections. His work has appeared in *Nashville Review*, *The Common*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, and elsewhere. His poetry has received many awards over the last 25 years. He holds an MFA and teaches English and Creative Writing in the Tampa Bay Area of Florida, his native state.

Tombstone Weathervane

As if my dead ancestor needs to know
which way the wind is blowing, someone placed
a brass horse with its trademark lettered arrow
in the flower hole atop his settled grave.
Visiting, I wonder if its creak
on gusty nights when winter blusters howl
disturbs his century of confined peace,
and would today he favor North or South?
Though tempted to remove it, I abstain
for who knows when the buried man might need
some sense of air's direction once again
as told by pointed hooves of a greening steed?
Despite such gifts to stick atop a stone,
sometimes memory is better left alone.

John Blanchard

John Blanchard is a poet and short story writer. His work has appeared in *Santa Barbara Review*, *Southwestern American Literature*, *the anthology Best of the West* and elsewhere. Currently, he is also working on a memoir. John is a member of the California Writers Club. He lives in Oakland and Borrego Springs, California and has two grown children.

In Pinewoods

In pinewoods, in a little house, we bled
into each other for a time.
Outside, the sting of winter in the air;
inside, pot belly stove, a quilted bed;
except for snowfall, silence everywhere.
We kept each other warm, snow falling in the wood,
and tried to find a way to make it last,
despite persistent bogeys from the past.
I couldn't cook an egg or boil tea.
While I watched, both lightly clad,
she made an egg and toast for her and me.
For one moment, nothing mattered,
not the thing I left behind,
nor the one I knew I'd have to face in time.
She played I Ching, the triumph of the small;
she tried to see our future, not with gall.
We rode on little horses, I and she,
shaggy and gentle mounts, Fireball and Lucky,
on a trail that didn't go anywhere,
as far as I could see.

Paula Appling

Paula Appling is an editor and poet from the east coast, currently hanging her hat in upstate South Carolina. When she's not chasing the elusive rhyme, she's hoping to spot the white tipped tail of a red fox on the trail.

Foggy December Morning

Foggy morning apparition
Mother Nature's a magician
Muting woody browns to smoky notes
Bleaching wint'ry silhouettes to ghosts
Turning azure blue to ashen sky
I sense ... a siren's song? a wistful sigh?
Yesterday's falcons ... phantoms today
All life's colors, now shades of grey
Forest gods pleased, their task completed
The bipedal creature, now deleted.

Robert Kinerk

Robert Kinerk's poems have appeared in *The Field Guide to Poetry*, *The Society of Classical Poets* publication, the *Alexandra Quarterly* and elsewhere. More than thirty of his short stories have been published. His most recent publication is *Tales from the Territory; Stories of Southeast Alaska*. Robert is, proudly, the author of the longest-running play in Ketchikan, Alaska, *The Fish Pirate's Daughter*, on stage since 1966.

The Paper Clip

The paper clip's devoid of hope.
Her elbows and her shoulders slope.
Her wire legs are terribly thin.
An oddball cousin of the pin,
She clamps between her slender thighs
Our printed and handwritten lies.
Why that's so, I can't explain.
She spends vacations in a chain.

Jean L. Kreiling

Jean L. Kreiling is the author of three collections of poems; her fourth will be published by Able Muse Press in late 2024. Her work has been awarded the Kim Bridgford Memorial Sonnet Prize, the Rhina Espaillat Poetry Prize, the Frost Farm Prize, the Able Muse Write Prize, and three New England Poetry Club prizes, among other honors; she lives on the coast of Massachusetts.

Stranded

She's stranded here a lot: too many dark,
unloved post-midnights met instead of missed,
her mind too full to float away on seas
of sleep, or else too anxious to embark
on dreaming's moon-mad ship. Her limbs resist
becalming. Clocks tick impotent decrees.

Sometimes it seems to her she owns these shores:
she reads, in noiseless hours, a book that sings;
she sees, in black air, where answers begin;
she writes a list that wrangles doubts or chores;
she scoffs at dimness-dulled arrows and slings;
she wanders through the house that took her in.

Pretending unslept time might be a gift,
she's learned how to accept, adapt, appease
the sea-beast who has stolen all the sleep.
But when sand fills her eyes at last, she'll drift
in tranquil tides, unmoored but at her ease,
not stranded—cradled safely in the deep.

Martin Briggs

Martin Briggs only began writing seriously after retiring from a career in public administration, since when his work has appeared in *Reach Poetry*, *The Dawntreader*, *Areopagus* and *The Catholic Poetry Room*. He feels not constrained but liberated by the demands of form, metre and, when appropriate, rhyme. He lives in Suffolk, England, with his wife and laptop.

Sibilant Necessities

Three sibilant necessities,
continually their shapes emerge
like old friends among enemies
to pacify a war of words.
Curious, how so frequently
their lexical relief confers
its timely truce. In tonic key
their quiet innocence restores
the reading eye to sanity;
amid sophisticated uproar
the injured mind turns thankfully
from discord to three needful words:
Silence, Silent, Silently.