

A photograph of a forest path. The path is made of dirt and is surrounded by lush green ferns. In the background, there are many tall, straight trees with thick trunks, likely redwoods or sequoias. The sky is visible through the canopy of the trees.

The Road Not Taken

A Journal of Formal Poetry

Summer, 2024

The Road Not Taken: A Journal of Formal Poetry

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Poet's Corner

Welcome to the Spring 2024 Issue of The Road Not Taken. This was a *sober* group of poems, folks: not universally of course, but the weight of "foreboding" and anticipation of the end was palpable. And this wasn't true simply of the poems we selected (in which case, it might simply be editorial bias). In short, the weight of the world was definitely on a lot of shoulders, this time around. Even the poems we gathered under the Spots of Time umbrella spoke of time and ashes; Fraley's voice was a rare exception.

No wonder then if we gathered the second and third groups of poems under "Warnings" and "Closure" (we considered "Endings" and the like in lieu of "Closure," but opted for the more comprehensive term). "Spots of Time" is of course a reference to Wordsworth's *Prelude*: all these poems seemed to us "recollected in tranquility" as Wordsworth recommended: these are poems that have been *mulled* over.

Before I leave you to enjoy the poems themselves, let me thank all of you for your patience this summer. I was ill for a while and Rachel was on vacation, but I heard no murmurs from any of you, and we DID get it out before summer was over, so it's only a little late. And well worth waiting for.

Kathryn Jacobs
Editor

P.S. I don't talk about covers much in the Poet's Corner, but some acknowledgment is due, and people sometimes ask. The covers then are all modifications of photos taken by my husband, Frank Miskevich. This time I was torn between a trail with a dead tree slashing dramatically across, or these ambitious redwoods. I love redwoods though
, so they won...

Spots of Time

Deborah H. Doolittle

Deborah H. Doolittle has lived in lots of different places (including the United Kingdom and Japan), but now calls North Carolina home. An AWP Intro Award winner and Pushcart Prize nominee, she is the author of *Floribunda* and three chapbooks, *No Crazy Notions*, *That Echo*, and *Bogbound*. When not writing or reading or editing *BRILLIG: a micro lit mag*, she is training for running road races, or practicing yoga, while sharing a house with her husband, six housecats, and a backyard full of birds.

James Boyd's Song for the Bog Candle

Down where the stream ebbs and flows
and soaks the edges of the field,
no plow will go. These wild ones grow
abundant, greenly self-fulfilled.

Out there the trajectory of time
holds still. The man, the mule, the plow
caught up in the cosmic pause must climb
out of the sinkholes they have somehow
made for themselves. The reverie,
the brevity of their time on earth,
extended for a long moment, flees,
and they are all pulled back to work.

The late sunlight flows below the leaves
and branches of the trees and casts
a glow on the tapers as if a breeze
has lit a memory that will last.

Joan Mazza

Joan Mazza has worked as a medical microbiologist, psychotherapist, seminar leader, and is the author of six self-help psychology books, including *Dreaming Your Real Self* (Penguin/Putnam). Her work has appeared in *Poet Lore*, *The Comstock Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The MacGuffin*, *Atlanta Review*, *Slant*, and *The Nation*. She lives in rural central Virginia.

The Scent of Memory 8

My Ex's breath stunk of ashes and smoke.
Because he loved his cigarettes and I loved
him, smoke scent forever after held
me in its power. Wood smoke, campfire smoke,
hovering gray of rooms filled with after-toke.
The morning after a party, cloak left
behind. Smoke rings like halos bereft
after foolish angels have fled in fear.
Grass fires and wildfires propelled me near
to Africa, a tent, safari's last
day. Something shifted with west winds' hot blast,
grit in our hair. Smoke house scent that lingered
for years. As if in its own language it spoke
of old times, cabins, those we called kinfolk.

Steven Knepper

Steven Knepper teaches in the Department of English, Rhetoric, and Humanistic Studies at Virginia Military Institute and edits *New Verse Review*. He has published poems in *The Road Not Taken*, *First Things*, *The Alabama Literary Review*, *The William and Mary Review*, *Pembroke Magazine*, *SLANT*, *Ekstasis*, *Pennsylvania English*, and other journals.

Facial Recognition

Cecilia, months old, smiles at every face,
including googly eyes glued on a gourd,
decapitated doll heads, rowdy boys,
a stranger buying six packs at the store
who winks at her, turns back, selects six more,
plush features of a sloth whose arms embrace
her car seat bar—yet ultimate reward,
the smile denied to all these lesser joys,
elation growing from a knowing smirk,
belongs to Mama coming home from work.

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*, *WestWard Quarterly*, *Light*, *California Quarterly*, *Pennine Ink*, *The Lyric*, *Miller's Pond*, *Blue Unicorn*, and *The Road Not Taken*.

Many Voices

If everyone that breathes began to sing
 In harmony, acknowledging their choice
 Of life and liberty with lifted voice,
Imagine how the air itself would ring.
Now add to this a chorus of each tale
 That's told to captivate all those who read,
 Or passed by word of mouth to those who heed;
The surge of merging voices could not fail
To raise the spirits of those trusting ones
 Who go through life untarnished by the grime
 Of this long-suffering and care-worn earth.
Again the wind rises, the swift deer runs;
 And those who look inside themselves, see time
 Become the midwife to a mystic birth.

Warnings

Donald 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 most recent book, *Tweeting Dante*, was published by Wipf and Stock in 2022, under their Resources imprint. His Substack “Declined” can be found at donaldcarlson.substack.com.

Lost Time

The day was almost gone when I came to.
Sunlight, thick and well-aged,
covered the wall in glaze like honeydew.
I woke up feeling addled, disengaged,

the webs of dreams still clinging
in higher corners of my brain.
A constant high-pitched singing
in my head shrouding the refrain

of afternoon music—the neighbors
working in their yards, the wittering
of juncos plying their labors
in the feeder, pecking seed and chittering

at the larger dove muscling them aside—
overwhelmed me with a feeling of lost time
from which—no matter how I tried,
I couldn’t find relief. Not in reason, not in rhyme.

Daniel Kemper

Daniel Kemper emerged as a formalist poet in 2023. Published in *The Blue Unicorn*, *Amethyst Review*, *Rat's Ass Review*, *Formalverse*, *Literary Hatchet*, and many others, he was a national presenter at PAMLA 2023 and now presides over its poetics panel. He's been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and has featured at multiple venues. He earned a BA, an MBA, and is pursuing his MA in poetry at Cal State, Sacramento.

Marley's Ghost

"I wear the chain I forged in life. I made it link by link..."

He liked his Harleys most, of all the things
he had to quit to marry, well, "The one."
He swigged his Busch to clear his throat and shun
a feeling now, but still, I saw. It rings
as good as true, his list, and then he brings
the rest, the cliché rest, of what was done,
not done, undone, a pick-and-pull begun
as blissful chrome, reduced to dents and dings.
His ring still shines and girls don't catch his eye.
He doesn't notice. *Still in love?* He grunts--
of all the things, he liked his Harleys most--
his list was meant as evidence. I sigh.
I'm twice divorced, what can I do, but once
I speak, he looks at me like Marley's Ghost.

Stephen M. Dickey

Stephen M. Dickey has published poems in various small journals over the years, and has translated some major 20th century writers of prose and poetry from the lands of the former Yugoslavia.

The Philatelist

Thousands of stamps, not counting duplicates.
He revels quietly in that still horde,
and can sit for hours without getting bored
with what would drive most other people nuts:

surcharges, watermarks, anaglyphs, ghost
tags, fugitive inks, frank stamps, occupation
issues, grilles, cinderellas, parcel post,
dead countries, overprints, blind perforation...

Lingering over the spread in his study,
he's absently caught off guard by the thought
that he can't recall the last time he got
a letter in the mail from anybody.

Luke Perera

Luke Perera is a poet from Gibraltar, who has also lived in England and is currently living in the Philippines with his wife and son. He was included in the Anthology of Contemporary Gibraltar Poets (2019).

Time

I saw a body on the stair
reduced to bare and hoary bones
as cold and grey as lifeless stones
with neither hide nor hair.

I saw a creature squatting there
which gnawed upon those ancient bones –
it heard my footsteps on the stones
and turned back with a glare.

It scrambled from that crumbling stair
and left the dry and pock-marked bones –
and then I saw they were my own
though lying cold and bare.

James B. Nicola

James B. Nicola, returning contributor, is the author of eight collections of poetry, the latest three being *Fires of Heaven: Poems of Faith and Sense*, *Turns & Twists*, and *Natural Tendencies*. His nonfiction book *Playing the Audience: The Practical Actor's Guide to Live Performance* won a *Choice* magazine award.

Epiphany IX: Kristallnacht/Kristalltag

Our leader was a liar, we now know,
and lyncher, since his followers were, too.
You knew before, but I'm a little slow

and listened to the hype from hell (although
it seemed a little luscious, if untrue).
When leaders turn to liars, we now know,

we feel that we have nowhere else to go
and do precisely what we should not do.
You knew before I knew, no? (Am I slow

or what?) Not till the day that glass was broken
did I start to see what we'd come to
because our leader lied. And now we know

that loyalty to liars is the lowest
virtue, even vice—which at last you
admit, though you are not the least bit slow.

You knew from the beginning? Even so
you're only one of many liars who
are lynchers for our leader who, we know,
like Hitler, lost, but is a little slow.

Closure

Charlels Weld

Charles Weld's poems have been collected in two chapbooks, *Country I Would Settle In* (Pudding House, 2004) and *Who Cooks For You?* (Kattywompus, 2012) and a full-length collection, *Seringo* (Kelsay Books, 2023.) A retired mental health counselor and program administrator, he lives in the Finger Lakes region of upstate New York

Duet with Emily in the Key of O

After I'm dead, I'll miss shoveling snow,
especially the wet stuff that drifts down from Lake Ontario
in March, and slides off my shovel like bread dough,
slick and flat where the blade's shaped it. An oratorio—
100 redwings shrieking behind the house—and presto!
the day's perfect, even before I wave hello
and say a few words to neighbors who are also
outside doing what I'm doing. *The Love a Life can show
Below is but a filament, I know,
Of that diviner thing.* But enough this morning to bestow
a sense of fortune to the partaker, the memo
from Amherst making the filament glow
bright enough to burn through the dark shadow
of two wars and news that drives chill to the marrow.

Eric Beidel

Eric Beidel has worked as a reporter, night janitor, editor-for-hire, speechwriter, and bureaucrat. He recently published two poems in Verse-Virtual. A native Midwesterner, Eric now lives in Tucson, Arizona.

Homecoming

I will come to rest under the red oak,
in the shade at the end of the dirt road.
Between the corn and the factory folk,
they saved me a place according to code.
I have washed these stones with soap and water,
stopping to trace the names with my finger.
I have been away yet still they offer
to let me lie with them here and linger.
Who will remember the name you carried?
Blood will run and dry but never transgress
upon the ground where its past is buried.
Their offer is order, my answer yes.
When the harvest returns with the reaper,
lay me down and let me be the keeper.

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.

Lines After von Hofmannsthal

And from the porches, children's voices cry
before they go to sleep, protest a while.
and the sun dives down deep behind the firs,
and one last motorboat goes round the pond.

And ordinary children will be dreaming
mysterious and otherworldly dreams.
Perhaps they are surprised -- adults are not --
by miracles that shut the darkness out.

From dusky lawns their parents watch the sky.
The elms protect them from immensities,
They pull their cardigans closer. Plastic chairs
Aren't proof against the damp midsummer airs.

Tall grass and daisies sway upon the meadows,
And farmers sit and breathe their fragrance in.
A few great cities hum all through the night.
But even there millions will fall asleep,
Some in each other's arms, some all alone
While in the suburbs all the cars come home.
Slowly the lawnmowers cease. Their hum dies down.
Silence in yard after yard, town after town.

Still other grownups play their endless games:
Tennis, softball, golf—in fading light.
Sometimes it seems that games are all they know.
They play on even as the darkness grows.
But finally they stop and say good night,
"Two words through which all grief, all meaning, flow."

Allison Davis

Allison Davis lives in Georgia, where she teaches literature and writing at Kennesaw State University. She writes poetry and creative nonfiction and is a collage artist. Recent work has appeared in *Still Point Arts Quarterly* and *Contemporary Collage Magazine*.

Orison

I brushed the dust from your flowers today –
the dried petals rustled in my hands.
How long it's been since you went away.

It started small, just an X-ray,
before every part of you was scanned –
I brushed the dust from your flowers today

and thought of how I could not stay,
could not bear to see first-hand –
how long it's been since you went away.

Your feet en pointe, a frozen ballet,
first muscles, then organs you couldn't command.
I brushed the dust from your flowers today

and remembered when I used to pray –
show me the pieces, help me understand.
How long it's been since you went away.

Would you answer my questions? What could you say?
In what divine vision would this be planned?
I brushed the dust from your flowers today –
oh, how long it's been since you went away.

Royal Rhodes

Royal Rhodes is a retired educator. Trained in the classical languages, he taught global religions for almost forty years. His poems have appeared in numerous literary journals in the U.S. and the U.K. He resides now in a small village in rural Ohio.

Sonnet 5

I spent my sleep in dreams of losing you --
a trolley missed, a poet's path not taken.
And waking found that it was all too true.
Did I forsake or I the one forsaken?
The vivid landscapes that my mind constructs
in sleep were uncreatively repeated:
school halls, malls, a double-bed that tucks
us in, and speech that left us feeling cheated.
The ancients bedded down in shrines of gods,
who showed themselves in shapes of human beauty
and gave the ill a cure to beat the odds
mortality assigned as if a duty.
Perhaps my dreams of losing you were pure,
immortal medicine -- for love -- the cure.

Karl E Stull

Karl E. Stull writes poems about places, mostly around Los Angeles, listening for their voices and their memories. He has a poem forthcoming in *The Lyric*. His *Sonnet Guide to LA* hopes to become a chapbook. He recently completed *Heliopause*, a one-act play in blank verse. In prose, he writes the *Metaphor Awareness Month* blog.

The Cosmic Hoover

Gravity sucks. The cosmic hoover gathers
motes like us to a massive central bag —
the Sun. Your ruffling hair, a staggering step,
and then you're flying superhero-style,
arms and hands in front, faster and faster.

Planets heave in view, then whoosh behind,
no looking back. There's Neptune blue and frothy,
Uranus (lost his keys) in Long Term Parking,
Saturn feeling blech but looking great,
and Jupiter juggling more than he can handle.
He thinks he's big but hasn't guessed what's coming.
Ahead you see a motel row of worlds —
the rusted Mars, a balmy sea-shored Earth,
and hot-tub Venus, neon-blinking Vacancy.
Zero chance of stopping overnight.

The kernel Sun has popped. Ahoy, it's filling
half your windshield. (When did you get a windshield?)
Now there's nothing else to see but Sun,
and you've been flash-sautéed to crumply crisp
in five arrays of solar radiation,
with not a drop of fat to grease the pan.

Your mass is gas. Your gravity's gone. Farewell.
Your ashes blow away on solar wind.

John Whitney Steele

John Whitney Steele: A psychologist, yoga teacher, assistant editor of *Think: A Journal of Poetry, Fiction and Essays*, and graduate of the MFA Poetry Program at Western Colorado University, John lives in Boulder, Colorado. His two collections of poetry, *The Stones Keep Watch* and *Shiva's Dance* were published by Kelsay Books in 2021 and 2022.

Here I Am

By the Ganges, close enough to smell the burning ghat,
here alone, in hospice care, on this creaking cot.

Running helter-skelter through the woods playing hide and seek—
38, 39, *FORTY! Ready or not, you must be caught!*

A simple man, created in God's image, determined to
transcend himself. Who can disentangle such a knot?

There's no way to escape the stomach-turning stench of rotten
food and sewage from the alley where the beggars squat.

Surf crashing onto rocky shore, waves lap-slapping the hull,
I trim the sails, glance at my dad, proud captain of the yacht.

Mouthing *om namah shivaya, om namah shivaya . . .*
I tell myself, don't stop until your flesh begins to rot.

Forty days and forty nights of rain. No shore in sight.
The last dove came home empty-beaked. Where's Mt. Ararat?

Who or what I am, or where I'm going, I don't know.
I only know I'm breathing, in and out, until I'm not.

Black widow straddled on a silk trapeze, oblivion
behind, oblivion ahead. Not a trace of thought.

When they place my body on the pyre, the priest will chant
for me. The wind will keep on blowing, the fire burning hot.

Rubeena Anjum

Dr. Rubeena Anjum is a retired educator, psychologist, and author of a poetry collection, *My Photo Album*. Her work appears in *The Ekphrastic Review*, *The Bosphorus Review of Books*, *Artistic Antidote*, *UMN Clinical Affairs*, *Corona Virus Anthology by Austin International Poetry*, *Art on the Trails: Mending Chapbook*, *Word City Literary Journal*, *Southwestern American Literature*, and *Writer's Garret-Networks Anthology* among others.

Peanuts

You and I, red-skinned peanuts in a pod
beige fragile shell we shared, then ripped apart
and thrown into a world of forms, scans start
inside a steel bowl—look-alikes as God

made Us— claws sift, we sorted, ranked by bod,
and packed and sealed with stickers; how we part
means shelved in jars, you and I in the mart—
You, okay? Still alive? A stir, my nod.

She pays for you and champagne, bent woman
half drunk, half-mad, your taste, it salts her tongue
forlorn, frail tears dissolving him; her fate—

in moving lines, love mends love, passions tan
the red in tango; timelines are not vague:
Display, discount, discard—expiry date.

Brian Gavin

Brian Gavin is a retired distribution manager with a lifelong love of poetry, particularly the poetry of Robert Frost. His poems have appeared in such publications as *The Road Not Taken: A Journal of Formal Poetry*, *Pulsebeat*, *Snakeskin* and *Form in Formless Times*. His first collection, 'Burial Grounds', was published last year by Kelsey Books, and is available at Amazon.com. Samples of his work can be read at briangavinpoetry.com. Father of 3 and grandfather of 6, he lives with his wife Karen in Lakeport Michigan.

To a Fishfly on My Window

How do you stay so calm - some wisdom, or
do you just take for given that the wind
knows what it does? What are you clinging for?
You hatched two days ago - now at the end
(a flight from lake to glass of forty miles,
my window your last perch) it's time to die.
Strange attitude, considering your trials.
Now me, I'd want some answers, I won't lie.

But I would listen to a story of
ascending from the deep into the mass
of copulating billions, thick above
the egg-stained morning waters, of the bass
and walleye, perch and sunfish, maws agape
with expectation, and of how a gust
upsnatched you to a cloud, to your escape
in tumbling free fall, hurled and upward thrust,

then down again through forty miles of air.
To hear of it might check the pointlessness
of flight, with flights imagined - of despair
at too much thought, with story. I would guess
you learned a thing or two along the way,
somehow, in plunging headlong through the blue,
of which things matter, and which don't. Today -
or half your life - spent pondering the few
more hours, miles and tumbles gained may be
worthwhile, I'd like to think - this glass at dawn
a fit place for such musing, like a sea
at twilight, flat as peace, to float upon.