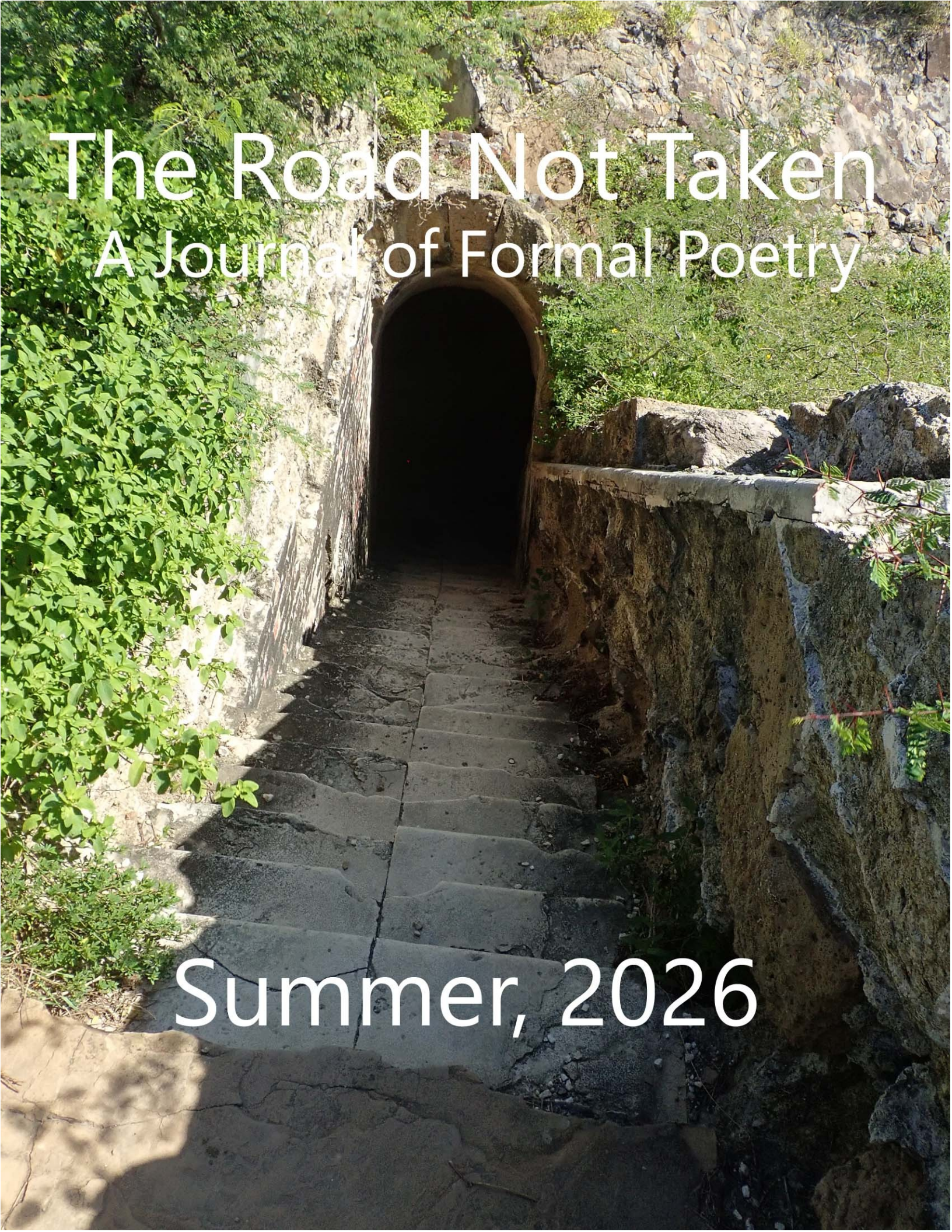




The Road Not Taken

A Journal of Formal Poetry

Summer, 2026

The Road Not Taken: A Journal of Formal Poetry

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Poet's Corner

Welcome to the belated Summer 2026 edition of *The Road Not Taken*; I was on a cruise ship in Hong Kong, and didn't realize they block gmail. Welcome as well the new member of our team, Daniel Kemper. I was particularly grateful to have him join us this season since in our submissions continue to swell; in short, you kept us busy. I'm proud of the results however, and I think you will be impressed with our contributors, whose poems we have grouped under three headings: **The Art of Survival, A Touch of Humor**, and **Personal and Confidential**.

I am turning the rest of this Poet's Corner over to Daniel. Before I do however, please ask your friends to remember that *The Road Not Taken* is devoted exclusively to the metrical tradition. There are many wonderful free verse poems written in the world, and no shortage of journals to read them in. *Road* however is a formal journal, so while our poems need not rhyme, we do make meter a prerequisite to publication. KJ

Why the Sea is Salt and Why the Sonnet Has Fourteen Lines

You'll be skeptical. But is it crazy to think the number fourteen isn't arbitrary? What about the sonnet's etymology as merely little song?

Imagine this: At bars, birthday parties, and all manner of social events, people tell jokes—always limericks—and sing. Among the many quatrain types (Long/Short meter, Ballad, Elegiac, Rubaiyat...), Rubaiyats (iambic pentameter, rhyme scheme AAXA) catch your fancy. You weld the limerick to the rubaiyat, making a new form. Limericks have some variations, but they're always five lines long; quatrains necessarily have four. Voilà! Your new song must have nine lines (5 + 4).

So the sonnet came to be. Strombatas, eight line Italian folk song stanzas, were combined with sestets, six line stanzas. The sonnet is only little because it's a song in a single stanza. It's a song because it was made from songs. Fourteen lines is fixed because its parts are fixed lengths (8 + 6 = 14). True: experimentation happened, especially when the form initially entered English, but fourteen returns again and again with surprising robustness and this is why.

There's more to say about subsequent variations, but even so-called free-verse sonnets, which dispense with virtually all other characteristics tend to cling to fourteen lines. There's more to say, too, about the criticality of other structures, but that's for another Poet's Corner, perhaps. The sea is always salty; the sonnet always has fourteen lines. DK

The Art of Survival

Arya Gopi

Arya Gopi is a bilingual poet, translator, and academic working in English and Malayalam. whose English collections include *Sob of Strings* (2011) and *One Hundred Lines of Discords* (2023). Recent poems have appeared in *Guernica Magazine*, *Ultramarine Literary Review*, and *149 Review* (USA), among others. In 2025, she served as Resident Fellow of the Poetic Frequencies Residency under the UNESCO Cities of Literature Programme at Heidelberg University, Germany.

How I Stayed

I survived. At the time, nothing declared
itself as such — the gate opened each dawn,
chalk dust, attendance, corridors prepared
for ordinary feet to walk upon.
The steering wheel knew my hands. At red lights,
breath continued without being asked.
Some lines waited at the desk; some nights
refused. The mirror held what daylight masked.
Sex was not fantasy — just bodies, tired,

imperfect, necessary, close, and true.
The kitchen, courtyard, tea shop — all conspired
to show that staying was a form of proof.
I did not escape. I stayed inside—
and small, stubborn imagination was my guide.

Arya Gopi

Residue of the Year

This year did not leave clean; it stayed behind
in traces caught beneath the fingernail,
in half-done conversations, in the mind's
long pause before I am fine learns to prevail.
I crossed the distances that maps made bright—
through stations, book fairs, churches bruised by war,
held myself carefully, as if the flight
were some exam I hadn't studied for.
There were rooms that measured, trimmed, and pressed
for softness where I needed to be clear.
I kept my back straight, hunger unexpressed,
did not ask entry, did not disappear.
What stays is not the mileage or the name—
I travelled far, and still came back the same.

Roz Ottery

Roz has been writing poetry since 1958. It was not until 2019 however, that she 'came out of her Poetry Closet.' Roz was the Winner of online 'NORTHERN POETRY' group competition in 2020 and 2021 and this was the confidence boost she needed. Since then she has enjoyed success sharing and publishing her work in several anthologies and as a valued, invited guest to poetry gatherings across Northern England. Roz has an illustrated poetry book with a publisher called, "MY SOUL IN YOUR HANDS" coming out in Christmas 2026.

Total Erosion - Marriage

The sea defences were not maintained
As they could have been
The weather worsened through the years
as the waves and tides moved in.

Steep cliffs held care like soft rich earth
that, with no fuss or din,
Crumbled slowly, as we fought
and the waves and tides clawed in.

Our view obscured by salt and tears
We could not halt it; win.
The storms were elemental, strong,
and the waves and tides crashed in.

Its nearly over – no land left.
Stripped bare we are wasted, thin.
And the waves that surge upon the tides
Takes us down and in.

Peter Schmitt

Peter Schmitt is the author of six collections of poems, including *Goodbye, Apostrophe* (Regal House). He lives and teaches in Miami, Florida.

"Victory Girl," Nashville, 1943

Her mother sews parachutes on the late shift;
her father drives rivets into battleships;
her boyfriend last wrote from Guadalcanal.
In her best dress, each wrist hinting of Chanel,
in the grand lobby of the Andrew Jackson
where the Air Corps crews in their crisp new khakis
saunter past, if she's lucky there'll be dinner,
a movie... Other girls wait, like blood donors.

She catches the eye of a young lieutenant.
Afterwards, in the dim room, as he straightens
his tie, she presses back into his hand
the twenty, asks if she might see him again.
Dispatch orders in his pocket, they both know
if he could answer he would tell her so.

Veronica Tucker

Veronica Tucker is an emergency medicine and addiction medicine physician, mother of three, and lifelong New Englander. Her writing explores the intersections of medicine, motherhood, memory, and the human experience. A Pushcart Prize nominee, her work has appeared in ONE ART, The Berlin Literary Review, and Rust & Moth, among others. Her debut chapbook is forthcoming this spring.

Identification

I enter, state my name, the role I hold,
my badge a small authority displayed.
He nods, then asks when I will fetch the “real”
one meant to speak, as if I have delayed
some larger presence moving through the room.
My words return to me, unused, unkept.
I chart, precise, the data I assume
will stand when what I am is overstepped.
A nurse stands near, a man addressed as “Doc.”
They grant him title without pause or proof.
I measure out each sentence like a clock,
each consonant a tightening of the roof.
If naming made it so, I would be heard.
Instead, I practice saying one more word.

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).

Margaret Eriksdatter*

My father says I may take all my dolls
and that the Bishop's prayers will keep me safe.
I must not be afraid; queens should be bold,
though little. Fear makes even monarchs slaves.

And I am feared to leave all I have known:
the tongue I drank down with my wet nurse milk,
the fjords and folk and firesides of my home.
Norse linen suits me. I don't want fine silk.

Alas, no female in this world is free.
I'm treble-travelled, by age, sex and blood.
Forced in frail wood to cross the foamy sea,
to rule a land whose soil I never trod.

For Norway's Maid is Scotland's regnant Queen,
though the North Sea be fifty fathoms deep,
and full a hundred stormy leagues between,
to murder infant monarchs in their sleep.

By royal blood I'm last of Scotland's line.
That blood decrees I wed young Edwardsson,
make Scotland his as he'll make England mine.
Our two contending states shall be as one.

Together we'll rule all that foreign island.
I trust and pray he prove a friendly boy
who grows into a kind and gentle husband
that we two may reign long, in peace and joy.

*Margaret, the Maid of Norway (1283-1290), was daughter of Erik II of Norway. Her mother, who died when she was born, was daughter of Alexander III of Scotland. At age 3, while still living in Norway, Margaret became Queen of Scotland in her own right, though she did not survive to be crowned. She was promised in marriage to the boy-heir to the English throne (later Edward II). At seven the child-queen was sent to Scotland but a storm drove the ship to Orkney, at that time Norwegian territory, where she died. Had she lived and married Edward, there would have been a United Kingdom in the thirteenth century.

David Anson Lee

David Anson Lee is a physician and poet whose work explores memory, perception, mortality, and the places where science and imagination meet. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in Still Point Arts Quarterly, Plainsongs, New Contrast, and other journals. His first poetry chapbook, *The Body Keeps Its Inventory in Shadow*, is forthcoming from Kelsay Books.

The Lens Grinder's Apprentice

before the machines replaced the wheel,
he learned the glass by turning it by hand.
the slurry hissed; the sandstone began to feel
like something living under patient sand.
he watched the master test each blank for flaws,
a breath held still against the turning light,
as if the smallest error in the laws
of curvature could fracture what is right.
“you do not force the lens,” the old man said.
“you listen for what shape the glass will take.”
he marked each edge where failure might be bred,
and taught his hands the discipline of break.
years later, when the room grew quiet, thin
with dust and absence, not a wheel remained.
he stood where every turning had once been
and felt the ghost of pressure in the grain.
a patient craft survives the hand that learns;
the world grows sharp in proportion to its turns.

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Survey Stakes After Rain

They come before the heat has learned the field,
and drive their markers down into the grass.
each wooden stake is briefly made to yield
its name to lines that only maps will pass.
the prairie does not argue. it receives
the measured cut, the flag of orange cloth.
a meadowlark moves through the taller leaves
as though the change were nothing more than thought.

by late July the stakes begin to lean;
the paint has faded nearly into soil.
around each base, small asters intervene,
as if the ground were answering the toil.

an elder watching from the fenceline says
the earth remembers every marked intent,
but never keeps it in the same old ways:
it lets it pass, then shapes what has been bent.

when winter comes, the lines return to dust.
the land resumes what no one maps but trust.

Guy Steele

Guy L. Steele Jr. is a computer science researcher, now retired but continuing to volunteer professionally, with a lifelong fascination for language in all its forms. His work has appeared in *Möbius*, *Iambs & Trochees*, and *The Lyric* (which awarded him an Honorable Mention in 2006).

It's a Chancy Profession, Mr. Southey

“My days among the dead are passed; around
me I behold, where'er these casual eyes
are cast, the mighty minds of old”—I prize
the dusty paper jars that, sewn and bound,
preserve their pickled thoughts, vast and profound:
Socrates' games of Jeopardy, Crete's lies,
Euclid's moons and moonbeams. The keen, the wise,
the shrewd and I converse without a sound.
But some are missing from this most august
assembly, haphazard victims of crime
from whom, unread, I have one lesson learned:
ashes to ashes, not just dust to dust.
I mourn those souls who died the second time
when Alexandria was sacked and burned.

Caleb Adams

Strait of Downer Lore

A broken barge
was set at large
on Strait of Downer Lore.
The rumor said
it sailed to bed
upon the ocean floor.

Her love and fate
the captains mate
began to East Timor.
And at his call
she all the while
watched out on Downer Lore.

Through crashing waves
and rotting staves
steadfast she stood to mourn.
The light it shone
on dead man's bone
for which she was forlorn,

and sat in wait
but on her face
a smile rose shore to shore.
The onus care
of beam-ed flares
were kindred to her core.

Yet on the sea
she felt so free
beside her burdened core
and glad he passed,
of any place
on Strait of Downer Lore.

A.D. Fischer

A.D. Fischer is a poet, memoirist and songwriter, living in Arlington, Virginia.

Assateague Island

along the shore the salt winds blow
 across the grassy dunes
and overhead the sky remains
 unmoved all afternoon

each wavelet leaves its shape upon
 the cold and gritty sand
if only for a moment that
 will never come again

and high above the seabird screams
 into the blue abyss
as if alarmed to learn that life
 is this — and only this

Susan McLean

Susan McLean, a retired professor of English at Southwest Minnesota State University, is the author of *The Best Disguise* (2009), *The Whetstone Misses the Knife* (2014), and *Daylight Losing Time*, which will be published by Able Muse Press in 2026. She lives in Iowa City.

To Die For

Petrarch fell in love with death. A blonde,
of course, and married. What can never be
attracts devotion exponentially
because it's free of any fleshly bond
or future. Laura's failure to respond
to his fixation or his poetry
spurred him to gild with more hyperbole
her image carved in words his craving spawned.

Her beauty, doomed to wither from the start,
perished completely in the plague, which only
bound him tighter to her effigy.
Gazing into the mirror of his heart,
he pledged himself to martyrdom by lonely
longing. Perfect is the enemy.

A Touch of Humor

Guy Steele

Guy L. Steele Jr. is a computer science researcher, now retired but continuing to volunteer professionally, with a lifelong fascination for language in all its forms. His work has appeared in *Möbius*, *Iambs & Trochees*, and *The Lyric* (which awarded him an Honorable Mention in 2006).

Greener Grass

There is no English strand, no Irish buirn
one half so pretty—nay, no Scottish loch—
as Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrn-
drobwlllantysiliogogogoch.
But Trefor Gruffydd thought it most unfair,
to send a friend directions or to draw
a map, that "Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgoger-
ychwyrndrobwlllantysiliogo-
gogoch" must be nine-tenths of what he wrote.
At last, fed up to here with writer's cramp,
young Trefor sold his cottage, bought a boat,
sailed west, hiked north by chance, and set up camp—
upon the shore of Lake Chargoggagogg-
manchauggagoggchaubunagungamaugg.

Patricia Behrens

Patricia Behrens grew up in Massachusetts and now lives in New York City. She is a lawyer and writer. Her poetry has appeared in publications such as *THINK*, *New Verse Review*, *Spillway*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Split Rock Review*, *The Road Not Taken*, *American Arts Quarterly* and *Nasty Women Poets: An Unapologetic Anthology of Subversive Verse*.

Sonnets Riding in Cars

When Alice Oswald says writing sonnets
is like fitting fat riders into a car,
I imagine how her sonnets might sit
in their cars, lounging like men in Daumier
prints—words spread grandly across a seat,
perhaps with croissants or wine to share,
maybe laughing, happy to rest their feet,
enjoying the ride, hoping they'll go far.

Mine are more like taxi riders who dart
in—scrawny, bony, all elbows and knees,
so slightly built they might just jar apart
at any sudden turn, quick stop, or breeze.
They watch the meter, sway at every bend,
are always eager for the trip to end.

Mike Mesterton-Gibbons

Mike Mesterton-Gibbons is a Professor Emeritus at Florida State University. He now lives in England, where he grew up. His poems have appeared in *Current Conservation*, *Light*, *Lighten Up Online*, *the New Verse News*, *Oddball Magazine*, *The Road Not Taken*, *WestWard Quarterly* and other journals. In 2025 he won the Children's Unpublished category of the Eyelands Book Awards with *Flora's Flock and Other Stories to Read Aloud*.

Long Hot Summers

Low-lying cherries tantalize me, out
Of reach, as I lie sprawling on my back—
Neath shade provided by a tall and stout
Gazebo—claiming I'm no idle Jack:
Heat drains me of the energy to rise
Off horizontal, crawl ten yards, and poke
The cherry tree. I fantasise: if eyes
Stared longingly enough, might I provoke
Unsteadily fixed cherries to detach,
Miraculously drop, and roll to where
My outward-stretching hand would gladly catch? ...
Exhausting long hot summers' sultry air
Robs me of all get-up-and-go. So I
Stare on, and hope to will some cherries by!

Mike Mesterton-Gibbons

Murphy's Law of Submission

You've never penned
A greater hit.
For weeks on end,
You've sat on it,
And countless times,
In self-critiques,
You've burnished rhymes
With clever tweaks.
Your poem's sans
Defect: It flows.
It rhymes. It scans.
It's so non-prose,
No redesign
Could better it.
You go online.
You press 'Submit' ...
Then comes the crunch:
Grey cells invent
A better punch
Line than you sent!

Steven Kent

Steven Kent's work appears in Blue Unicorn, Light, Lighten Up Online, The Lyric, The Orchards, Philosophy Now, The Pierian, and The Road Not Taken, among others. His collections I Tried (And Other Poems, Too) (2023) and Home at Last (2025) are published by Kelsay Books.

The Bubble

I'm not on X or Instagram;
I've never had the notion--
Anti-social's what I am,
And anti-self-promotion.

My publisher implores, of course,
That I become more "present."
No, I say (in fact, with force),
It all sounds quite unpleasant.

I get my fill of funny looks
For staying in my bubble.
Maybe I could sell more books,
But why go look for trouble?

Gene Fendt

Gene Fendt is Albertus Magnus Professor of Philosophy at the University of Nebraska (emeritus) where he taught for 38 years. Besides writing on many topics and texts in philosophy and literature, he also published poetry throughout his career. His first book of poems is *Eternal Life and other poems* (Brooklyn, NY: Angelico Press, 2025). It recently won the 2026 Nebraska Center for the Book Prize for Poetry.

St. Augustine stops by the woods

This garden's owner we all know,
His fruit's forbidden to us though;
There's so much there! It's no hard climb!
No climb at all where branch bends low.

My little friends all think it fine
That we should rearrange our time
To shake these trees down for their fruit.
We all agree it is no crime

For us to climb this fence and loot
These well lade limbs. The question's moot!
(There was a question. We'd forgotten.)
We stole the pears, fed pigs to boot.

We are all in sin begotten;
The pears were ugly, small, half-rotten:
There was nothing there for man,
Though we thought different, as we can.

Jim Wile

Born in New York in 1951, Jim Wile began his career as a golf course superintendent. He found his true calling seven years later when he entered the IT world and spent the remainder of his working life as a programmer and systems analyst. A lifelong poet, he began writing fiction in 2016 and has since written many novels, novellas, and even a poetry how-to manual called *How to Write Poetry with Meter*. He lives in North Carolina with his wife and cat. Outside of writing, his interests include golf, bridge, chess, and mahjong.

Ole Blue

Ole Blue the locomotive on the Great Southwestern Line
attracted little work for he was way beyond his prime.
See, Blue he ran on steam like many others through the years,
but then those wretched diesels came, confirming all his fears—

that he was obsolete, and out to pasture he was put.
No longer could he bother folks with all that noise and soot.
They stuck him in the yard where ancient engines go to die,
and left him there to rust away, for time had passed him by.

He used to be the workhorse of the Great Southwestern Line.
He steamed from Tucumcari west to Tucson in his time.
And Blue was proud that he could haul about a hundred cars
all day beneath the searing sun, all night beneath the stars.

He steamed along majestically, Sonoran Desert-bound
and passed the great saguaros who, with reverence, bowed down.
Then chugging into Tucson with his whistle screaming loud,
Ole Blue the locomotive never failed to draw a crowd.

But now, with only memories of splendid days gone by,
he sat there rusting in the yard, but he refused to cry,
for gentle voices came to him that whispered on the air
and told him he was useful still and chased away despair.

They told him, “Blue, you never know when problems may evolve,
that, lacking any choices, they may call on you to solve.”
So, Blue perked up and held out hope they’d call on him once more
and promised he’d be ready for whatever was in store.

That time came soon enough, for there was trouble down the line:
A train sat stalled upon the tracks with very little time
to push it to a siding lest another train come through.
With not a single diesel near, they had to call on Blue.

Of course, it took some time to get his boiler going strong,
and by the time he’d built some steam, he hadn’t very long

to reach the stranded cars before a freight came rumbling through
to cause a great collision. Better hurry now, Ole Blue!

Finally, he reached the train, came up to its caboose,
and coupled to its coupling, then pushed hard to bust it loose.
So little time was left, a freight was speeding from behind,
but Blue just kept on pushing hard and put it out of mind.

It looked like he would make it to the siding, seen at last.
He had to really strain now, for the freight was barreling fast.
They reached the siding, and the train he pushed was now okay,
but Blue'd exhausted all his steam, he still was in the way!

The collision was spectacular. For miles and miles around,
folks heard the huge explosion—what a dreadful, awful sound!
It's said that parts of Blue rained down for days and days to come.
This hero's sad misfortune is enough to make you numb.

Ole Blue had done his best that day, his bravery it seems
was not enough to save him being smashed to smithereens.
He'd given up his life, a daring rescue was his fate
to save another train but not himself at any rate.

We must admire Blue, though, for his can-do attitude.
Despite that he'd been pulverized, we owe him gratitude.
A voice assured him of his worth, and told him not to quit,
but use his great experience, his fortitude, and grit.

If you should happen on this site in Arizona land,
you might hear voices on the wind, lamenting what was grand.
Ole Blue remains a legend, and it's certain that he should
because he'd come back from the dead, then died again for good.

John Milbury Steen

John Milbury-Steen has published in more than 30 online and print journals. Now retired, he has been Peace Corps Volunteer in Liberia, an artificial intelligence programmer on a text adventure game played in Latin to teach that language, and an ESL teacher. His work is obsessional with front and back vowels, as explained and shown in www.aei-our.com.

Monotheism

Mono-Thee in ism, Lord, Thou art,
the one and only god to be adored,
but poly-dude-i-cal am I in dude.
I never was a one of mono mood.

As I am sage or sot or lewd in lust
or in a fighting heat, I channel-surf
Apollo, Bacchus, Venus, Mars, and such.
In gods I trust -- the old Greek Cable stars.

When I feel guilty to the crookèd core,
depraved at heart, and rotten to the bone,
Thee I need and nothing more, and vow
I will adhere to Thee alone for good,

but other me's about me in the crowd
harass my guilt and exorcise it booed.

C.M. Pickard

C.M. Pickard is a self-proclaimed late bloomer, living in Melbourne, Australia. Her poetry was shortlisted in *The Letter Review Prize for Poetry* and *SWWV's Kathryn Purnell Poetry Prize*, appeared in *Soul Poetry, Prose & Arts Magazine, The Raven Review*, and elsewhere (<https://cmpickardwrites.site>)

My Friend Claire

You came to me, an uninvited guest
at ease within a single woman's home,
you kept a vigil when I sank to rest,
and joined me while I sipped the coffee's foam

unlike a puppy, never did you roam
your quiet presence not like childhood's pet
a squawking gala, made a lamp shade home
or feline sprawled across my tete-a-tete

in contrast, crouched aloof, no need to fret
I prattled to myself, and you inched near
to listen—I vowed never to forget
that beauty lay beneath your rough veneer

a visit causing others to despair
for you're my friend, the spider I named Claire.

Personal and Confidential

William Barklam

William Barklam- Has had poems published in theatre newsletters. Wrote both book and lyrics for musicals "The Picture of Dorian Gray" and "Nelson". Self-published "Sonnets & Snippets" anthology in 2023.

Some Day Soon

Some day soon the sun will rise.
You will not dream with tear-gleamed eyes
About the vision of her face
That clouds your mind and inner space.
Some day soon you will awake
And judge your love a bad mistake.
You'll notice flowers in the glade
The month that misery must fade.
Some day soon, the heavy heart
Won't be your default a la carte.
A lap dissolve will shift the frame
As if you'd never heard her name.
Some day soon you'll hear a joke
And may join in like other folk.
There'll be contentment and a peace,
A letting-go, a slow release.
Some day soon, the path is swept
And with it all the times you kept
Your love a secret unexpressed,
A shy and uninvited guest.
Some day soon bright attitudes
Will maybe, maybe lift these moods.
Some day soon you will forget.
Some day soon, but not quite yet.

Savannah Duplissea

Savannah Duplissea is a Los Angeles local, film maker, stop-motion animator, and comedian. She is an NYU Tisch alumna and has returned to poetry after ten years of focusing predominantly on horror and coloring. She recently has been first published in "Half and One" and is excited to submit and write with more talented and introspective artists.

I Wish I Remembered

I wish I remembered my Grandmother's voice
before the world had tamed it
when orange trees made concrete red
and angry neighbors blamed it

I wish I remembered my best friend's smell
when we got our ears pierced at Claire's
how fake pink liquid soaked our necks
though boys could never tell

I wish I remembered the first time I swung
off the tree with a droopy branch
how dirt filled lungs with yellow breeze
and the hollowed redwoods danced

I wish I remembered the first time I spun
in verdant summer parks
with Fourth of July fireworks
with gold and purple sparks

I wish I remembered the first time I swam
in blackened oceans briney
It's hard to believe that he's still dead
when he swam just right behind me

I wish I forgot my Mother's friend
who touched me as a joke
Our memories in life are always the ends
of its parasitic yoke.

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.

Active

Startlingly, hospice staff will euphemize
a patient's final stages with the term
"active," in tones sympathetic though firm,
as if demeanor might well euthanize

a next of kin's burst of grief. The surprise
sort of works, chokes in many men the germ
of grieving (a helpless way to affirm
life?), as the dams behind their women's eyes

ready to break. Maybe this helps us through?
absorbing that unfeigned, engaged restraint
like doses of morphine. And in the morning

we're each on watch and staving off anew.
When the jugular's pulsing fades past faint,
it leaves us wraiths of hours on end for mourning.

Cyrus Gajatraj

Born in Dharan, Nepal. Cyrus Gahtaraj writes poetry in English and Nepali. He is currently a computer applications student, writing alongside his studies. He is the author of the self-published poetry collection *Ill Knowing*, available on Kindle.

Darkness

Oh, do not call my love a light that shines
for any passing stranger to admire
It is no lit room, open, full of signs,
But shadow, standing just behind the fire

A candle dies before a fiercer flame
In light, I shape you to the thing I feel
A borrowed shine the sharper sun can shame
I close my eyes, stop seeing, and you're real

You are the one I show my darkness to,
not light, which any stranger's eye may share.
What's rare is not the blaze that burns straight through,
But darkness that I'd trust to you to bear

My love is not a fire to be displayed
It is the room in which a room is made.

Ginny Brown

Ginny spent over three decades navigating the American legal system, serving as a meticulous documentarian of family, criminal, and civil proceedings. After a career spent distilling complex human experiences into the rigid confines of the official record, she now focuses on the narratives that exist between the lines. Her work has appeared in *Ivey Leaves*, *Tidal Lantern*, *South Florida Poetry Journal* and *After/Thought*.

Before It Begins

The courthouse holds its breath before the doors
swing open to the shuffle of shoes,
before the lawyers hum their practiced lines
and call them “spontaneous.” I came in early
to catch the building in its quiet state,
before the record started—when the truth
had not been pressed into shapes of ink
to outlive every memory of the fact.
For thirty years I lived within the gears,
a master of the structure and the stamp.
I turned the chaos of a human life—
the grief of mothers, the white-knuckled fear
of fathers at a table—into files
that judges read as evidence. I thought
my role was neutral. I was just the hand
that kept the great machine in steady turn.
But midlife isn’t marked by any date;
it settles slowly, like a rising fog
across the choices we once called our own.
I saw the gaps where silence had been kept.
I saw how polish passes for the truth
while messy lives are left outside the door.
The record is a cage of formal words;
it only holds what we allow inside.
So now I leave the safety of the form.
I do not want the exhibit or the proof,
the tidy narrative, the polished lie.
I’m learning how to hold the jagged parts—
the stories that refuse to fit the page,
the things that are not law, but closer truth

R.H. Nicholson

R.H. Nicholson is a professor emeritus of English and the author of the novel *Justice House Shadows* (Main Street Rag Publications), the Chickasaw Writers Project prize-winning play *The King and Queen of Foggy Flats*, the children's novel *The Snow Wish*, the short story collection *Children of Light*, and the poetry collection *Man in an Airtight Box* (Bridge House Publishing). He and his wife live in a small Ohio River Valley town with their Russian Blue rescue cat Steinbeck. A sample of his work is available at www.thecountyquirk.com

The Summoning

When the fog rides on the ridge
And the moon swallows the sun,
When trees have shed their summer wares,
The mutation has begun.
Then mellow autumn breezes
Amalgamate with frost
While mystics conjure specters
In woods of slumber lost
A whistle pierces through that night
A howling overhead,
A beckoning of otherness
Summoning the dead.
The scent and essence of the damned
Meander in the air
And wrap around the vulnerable
In intermingling despair.
And as the muster of this mire
Descends upon the fey,
It brands in smoke and frothy fumes
The mark of Cain conveyed.

To the fraternity,
As incantation to the source,
Of mortal culpability
Comingled with remorse.

Tusher Sen

Tushar Sen is a writer from Bhoiwada village in India. His poetry has appeared in The Mathematical Intelligencer(Springer-Nature), The Orchards Poetry Journal, The Deronda Review, Flora Fiction, New Verse Review, Writers Resist, Ecological Citizen, Afrocritik, Sortes, 4LPH4NUM3R1C, SpecPo Verse, Infocalypse, O:JA&L, The Gilded Weathervane and Military Review.

Unfurl the Sails

The river merges with the sea,
it asks not what its end shall be,
it only sings along its way,
it only knows it cannot stay.
The sky leans low with quiet light,
the stars drift soft into the night,
no voice commands, no chains are cast,
yet all are carried, swept and passed.
If you should pause beside the shore,
and dream of stillness evermore,
the current laughs in silver tone,
and leaves you there, and moves alone.
If you stand still, the paths will stray,
and turn their silent gaze away,
who crossed the flood became the song,
who lingered there was pulled along.
Unfurl the sails to that vast sea,
and walk where you are meant to be,
beyond the dark, beyond the foam,
the moving world becomes your home.

Michael Fraley

Michael Fraley finds a creative community in the many voices of the poetry world. He lives in San Francisco with his spouse and daughter nearby the beach and zoo. Michael has contributed to *Blue Unicorn*, *California Quarterly*, *Iconoclast*, *Light*, *The Lyric*, *millers pond*, *Better Than Starbucks*, and *The Road Not Taken*. M.A.F. Press published his chapbook *First-Born*. Tamafyhr Mountain Press published his e-chapbook *Howler Monkey Serenade*. Michael received his MA in Writing from the University of San Francisco.

Morning Rains

The morning rains do not delay;
They never hesitate to fall
In answer to the earth's firm call.

The rains are eager to repay
The earth with kindness, sending down
Relief for hillsides wrapped in brown.

New growth brings vibrant, vivid greens
To shroud each hill in such display
As brings new glory to the day.

The good imparted by such scenes
Is more than merely happenstance
For those who spare a second glance.

The hardest heart may be restored
When tenderness is not ignored.
The gentle rains may bring a calm
Surpassing any healing balm.