

The Road Not Taken:

a Journal of Formal Poetry

Spring, 2008

- **Five Poets to Please Your Senses**

We present their work for your reading enjoyment.

In this issue, we present five poets of very high caliber, Eric Martin, George Good, Melanie Houle, Lee Eschen, and Lee Evans. We find their work to be squarely in the traditions of formal poetry and we offer it here in that spirit. May you gain as much pleasure from reading it as we did.

- **Call for Submissions**

Would you like to see your poems published here?

We want to publish high quality formal, metric poetry. We are hoping to publish here online twice a year. If you have some work you'd like to see in this journal send it to: jimatshs@yahoo.com We will try to respond within a month. And thank you.

- **Eric Martin**

This issue we feature the poetry of Eric Martin. Eric comes to us from Presque Isle, Maine.

The Writer's Art
by Eric Martin

(Adapted from Horace, The Art of Poetry 70-2.)

The writer's art is to reintroduce
Vocabularies fallen out of use;
For as designs and customs pass away,
Techniques fall out of vogue, and dreams decay,
So also must contemporary phrases,
Contemporary modes, and transient crazes,
Become archaic, disesteemed, cliché,
The mindless mishmash of 'some other day,
Free verse eschewed, and avant-garde misprized,
Cerebral prose and Beat alike despised.
And therefore, to preserve our culture, we

Must constantly provide variety,
Reviving former modes from dormancy:
Verse drama, odes, epistles, dialogues,
Songs, satires, epics, tales and travelogues;
Employing diction suited to the case,
Sometimes archaic, sometimes commonplace,
As Usage wills it so; and zealously
Eschewing Modernist conformity,
Wherefrom springs dullness and banality.

Bad Poets
by Eric Martin

(Translated from Horace, Letters II.ii.106-19.)

Bad poets are, unquestionably, a jest,
However self-revered, or self-caressed,
Yet unapproached (because unnoticed) they,
Poor Muses, think their scribblings nonpareil.
It's sad, the tainted artistry of these
Innumerable pseudo-prodigies;
Their art no greater eloquence demands
Than of a chattering barbarian's.

But cultivated poets, who aspire
To keep pace with those bards all men admire,
Must with complete determination seek
To learn the refining art of self-critique;
Fearless enough to speak with words sublime,
To master prosody, in Blank or Rhyme,
To spurn prosaic diction, and restore
The flawless precepts and techniques of yore.

Cleopatra†
by Eric Martin

How if when I am laid into the tomb? — Shakespeare.

(The mausoleum of the Ptolemies. – An opened sarcophagus, lighted by oil lamps.)

Cleopatra, solus:

And so it's done. — My shame's a certainty.
Though wed to Cæsar and to Antony,
Octavian, my third — and final — lord,

I could not captivate with lechery,
And so I was defeated and abjured.

In vain, to resurrect my famed allures,
I swapped a widow's garments for a whore's.
In vain, relying wholly in my skill,
I smirched my honor with profane amours.
No craft of mine could overturn his will.

And even when, at last, I'd bent my knee,
Abasing my disgraced nobility,
And wet his hands with tearful misery,
Still, I — a goddess! and a Ptolemy! —
Was made to suffer such indignity!

(Singing.)

Ah! distant are the days of memory,
When I, like Venus on the waves, excelled
The might of Cæsar and of Antony,
At Cydnus, with esteem unparalleled!

It was at Actium, at last, that I,
And all my kingdom's wealth, became this lord's.
My looks alone he scorned — yet thus his eye
Has hurt my pride far more than Roman swords.

Ah! distant are the days of memory,
When I, like Venus on the waves, excelled
The might of Cæsar and of Antony,
At Cydnus, with esteem unparalleled! (over)

In hazard's grasp, what more have I to fear?
Since I am branded as a mutineer
By my own actions, what have I to say?
Is it for me to shirk the blows that here
Discomfort me, or wipe my guilt away?

No. — I have disgraced my ancestry.
Through me, my kingdom's come to slavery,
And faithless worshipers neglect its fanes.
Thus, of family, faith, and sovereignty
Alike disowned, the grave alone remains.

(Solemn music. — She kneels.)

Noble Pharaohs, sons of Horus,
Ancient kings who've ruled before us,
When I die, will my disgraces
Cause you to avert your faces?

Ah! you could not help but roar your
Stern rebukes, and flee in horror!
Death could only heap pollution
On my soul, not absolution.

Who am I to thus bemoan the
Accident that's overthrown me?
Am I justified in blaming
Fate for undeserved defaming?

By my fault, the rites of Isis
Cease for lack of sacrifices.
For my slight, enraged Serapis
Aids the Romans to entrap us.

For my hubris, degradation
Now taints Cæsar's reputation.
Though once gentle, now his spirit
Warns my haunted heart to fear it!

Noble Pharaohs, sons of Horus,
Ancient kings who've ruled before us,
When I die, will such disgraces
Cause you to avert your faces? (over)

(After a long silence, she stands.)
Since, Osiris, you reject me,
Typhon, you must now protect me!
Though delivered to damnation,
This will purchase my salvation.

(She applies an asp. — It drops and slithers away.)

Gods of Egypt...you've...betrayed me!
Proud Octav...he'll not...parade me...

(She falls against the sarcophagus.)

Cæsar...dying...I...who love you...
Once again...am worthy...of you...

(She dies. – The lamps burn low and expire.)

- **George Good**

We also have three poems by George Good who says of his work:

"My poetry has appeared in Light Quarterly, Iambs & Trochees, The Evansville Review and the E-zines Contemporary Rhyme, The Chimaera and The New Formalist (pending)."

**Letter to a Laureate
by George Good**

To Southey care of Hell: You are not just
a dry Bob now but a hot one I would trust.
In Heaven gentle Zephyr still decrees
that from the west a correspondent breeze
shall cool the brow of genius and disarray
its hyacinthine locks--though I must say
your pal, close-cropped Wordsworth, looks quite severe.
Imagine a sensitive Robespierre.
That's oxymoronic, no doubt. Drop three
letters and what remains? Your poetry.
Do you not think, Sir Bob, it is absurd
to wear with pride a laurel wreath conferred
by that despised blind king, mad George III?
Credit for this barrage of adjectives
goes to drowned Shelley, whose fire outlives
the stormy sea and its mountainous waves--
not to mention the crude slander of base knaves.
The judgment of posterity proved cruel
when, after scolding the Satanic School,
down there you watched your reputation shrink
and with its dead weight your Complete Works sink.
Since you have joined the circle of bad bards,
tell Colley Cibber Pope sends his regards.

And now, knowing how you love to peruse
the latest gossip, this is Heaven's news.
The question that everyone asks us here
is: Who wrote the plays of divine Shakespeare?
Sweet Will, peace to thy bones, please take a bow.
That's right, it was in fact that upstart crow.
With all humility I must confess
poetic genius knows no social class.
Winged Coleridge, your Pantisocratic friend,

still lectures one and all. There is no end--
which up here must be taken literally--
to Wooly's waxing metaphysically.
My rival for the ladies is John Keats.
That a mere boy whose fancy masturbates
attracts this kind of amorous devotion
would seem to me a most curious notion.
And curious is where the art of verse
has strayed since us. I won't say that it's worse,
but one thing is for certain: It would take
the Reverend Malthus himself to make
sense of this geometrical increase
that, given the arithmetic of trees,
could lay waste all the forests and thus leave
the planet Earth no means by which to breathe.
Some of this stuff is so inept I find
I'd even rather hear what's on your mind.
Skill didn't prevent you from being a bore
and though you hired for Muse a painted whore,
you did wield a mean hexameter--
in prosody you were no amateur.
So, Bob, there is a deeper place than Hell:
Non-entity, of which no soul may tell.
Signed: Byron. Now, my Tory, fare thee ill.

Conspiracy Theory by George Good

Through photos of the grassy knoll they comb
to find out where the second gunman hides.
And had Zapruder's camera stayed at home,
what difference would it make to paranoids?

Anomalies, of course, are everywhere.
Who opens an umbrella in the sun?
The epileptic, did he disappear?
And witnesses? You're dead if you were one.

Did J.D., Jack and Lee meet in that joint,
the Carousel, to spin their evil plot?
I could go on like this but what's the point?
I was merely warming up to take my shot.

In stock film of the crowds you'll see a guy
whose lean and hungry look burns cold with hate.

He has makeshift sign he holds up high:
HAIL CEASAR (sic). Did he know our hero's fate?

The Road Mis-Taken
by **George Good**

I shadowed Frost in a yellow wood
and watched him where two roads diverged.
It was a long time that he stood
there choosing, for one seemed as good
as the other. But then I felt urged

to challenge him and rashly chose
the way he scorned to travel by.
Using as guides a pair of crows,
I wander where the thick grass grows
until two roads again I spy.

Now they keep branching while I run
in panic with increasing speed.
As evening's chill is coming on,
I cry out to the setting sun:
"Why didn't I follow Robert's lead?"

- **Melanie Houle**

Melanie Houle is a physician and former jeweler. She is a Pushcart Prize nominee and The Raintown Review's first featured poet. Her poetry also appears in The Lyric, California Quarterly, The Aurean, Mobius, The Barefoot Muse, The HyperTexts, Contemporary Rhyme, ShatterColors, Innisfree Poetry Journal, Lucid Rhythms, Journal of the American Medical Association and others.

The Omen
by **Melanie Houle**

A shadow lingered on the path that ran
to our back door and doubled back again,
always there, but never clearly seen.
I breathed it, felt it grow from day to day,
though what it was I never quite could say,
nor catch an inkling of what it might mean.
Always there, a shade I couldn't see
kept echoing a murmur of distress
that stirred a haunting resonance in me,
a sense I couldn't speak about, unless
in slanting innuendo that could be

by smile or change of subject swept aside,
so that it wouldn't need to be denied
or ever looked at closely in the light.
I never knew its name until tonight.

Game Show
by Melanie Houle

Our reckless games of truth or consequence
Challenge us to prove we're worth our salt,
But we discover little that makes sense.

As kids, in teenage fantasy-existence,
how we frolicked in our starry vault
Of reckless games! Of truth or consequence,

We had no knowledge or experience.
We were too young and it was not our fault
That we discovered little. That makes sense,

But now we're grown and still we're too intense.
We crave the same entwinement we assault.
It's reckless: games of truth or consequence

Backfire and leave us sulking in our tents.
We've probed and analyzed this to a fault
And still discovered little that makes sense.

Someday we'll build a bridge across this fence,
plant an insight, reap the grace to halt
Our reckless games of truth or consequence,
Discovering a little that makes sense.

Of Blood and Treasure
by Melanie Houle

Erase the stain of scarlet hands
that burn for oil and gold.
One vermilion sunrise frees
more wealth than hands can hold.
Show me ruby's wine-deep glow
or garnet's crimson shine.
Their light enriches me the same
on your hand or on mine.

Sentiments
by Melanie Houle

A young stem bends for its survival's sake;
The old trunks are the brittle ones that break.
Though we bemoan the fervency of youth
and counsel caution and restraint, in truth,
for all the prudent logic we may speak,
the smile of a first grandchild turns us weak.
However well we learn to feign control,
the tides of feeling seem to swell with time.
The more serenity becomes our goal,
the more our eyes tear to a heartfelt rhyme.
Our passions age like brandy, bold and deep,
a rich embarrassment of joys and woes.
We'll sigh our deepest just before we sleep.
Our fond, enlarging hearts will make it so.

- **Lee Eschen**

Lee Eschen has loved poetry for a very long time, but has only occasionally tried to actually write any. Here is one of his recent works, originally written as lyrics for a hymn set to an old Irish melody. Lee lives in [very] rural southwestern Oregon, where he designs websites, including this one.

His Blood
by Lee Eschen

Rolling along through the ages
Like a great and o'erwhelming flood,
While history has written her pages
Christ's church has remembered His Blood.

The blood, yes the blood, of the Pure One
Hides our sin from the Father's sight
And through this bright crimson redemption
We receive His great mercy and light.

It is sweeter than honey, this manna,
Which falls to the Earth from above.
And daily we gather its riches,
The gift of our Father's love.

- **Lee Evans**

Lee Evans was born in Maryland, spent most of his life in that state, and is currently living in Bath, Maine. After graduating from college he has held a variety of jobs, including those of landscape laborer, floral delivery man, collection attendant for Goodwill Industries, clerk at the Maryland State Archives, and his current job on the assembly line in a candle factory. He has published poems in *Contemporary Rhyme*, *The Golden Lantern*, and the anthology *Rhyme and Reason*. He has recently produced a poetry collection called *Maryland Weather*, which is available on Lulu.com and Amazon.com.

Wood Lore
by Lee Evans

The ravens croaked above me in the pines,
As from the beaten path I slowly strayed
To saunter on my narrow, winding way
Among the evergreens, with you in mind:
How two short months ago, you glanced aside
Before you climbed aboard the waiting jet,
And told us you were pregnant. As I stepped
Across a branch that downed a power line,
I started as I caught sight of a tree's
Contorted trunk, from which a figure seemed
To struggle forth with infant feet and arms,
And half a face—in Nature's gallery,
Unfinished art. I passed it, and looked round:
The trunk remained; no figure could be found.

Away From Home
by Lee Evans

The Heaven is a sheepfold flocked with stars;
One star for every sheep that climbs the vales
Of Cumbria . Tonight, above Grasmere,
Their crystalline wool trembles silently,
High over craggy fells where Wordsworth strode
Composing pastoral epics in a voice
That summoned me to fly four thousand miles,
To celebrate this Autumn in his name.

We marvel at the absence of the glare
That we have been accustomed to at home,
Between the funeral pyres of Washington
And Baltimore, which flow across the sky
Like uncontrolled infernos, blazing high
Above the Borealis and church spires,
Obliterating stars like chalky script

Erased upon a blackboard with a smear.
To think that once we lay upon our backs
Upon the lawn at night, and saw the stars
From one horizon to the next! So long
Ago, it seems, and yet in this lifetime.

Upon this frosty field I could lie down,
Since no one is about at this late hour.
No one would chance to bother me, I think;
At least the while that it would take my eyes
To focus on that clear infinitude.
Come lie beside me here beneath the stars,
And we shall lose ourselves where vain mankind
Can never blind us with his lurid gleams.
Were we to count these sheep we would drift off,
And spin their dreamy wool across the sky,
And brood no longer of that childhood hour
When we could view from home the Milky Way
That stretched from starry pole to starry pole,
No farther from our sight than now it lies.

To a Salt Spray Rose
by Lee Evans

The craggy rocks below;
The sky of golden glow;
My footsteps scattered on this battered shore!
I touch with sheer delight
The roses pink or white,
And breathe the perfume of the out-of-doors.

Beside me rise so high
Great mansions of man's pride,
Reared up to lord it over this fair scene;
While on the other hand,
Waves crash against the land
And seagulls soar, their primal poems to scream.

Before me in my view
Spreads out the old and new--
Our history, our present, in one glance.
But out of all this show
I spy one Salt Spray Rose,
And in this vision I am soon entranced.

Five petals to the wind,
Blown from the Orient,
Shipwrecked upon these rocks or cast abroad
By bird or careless hand
Of one who tilled the land
Of some sea captain's garden on Cape Cod!

Humility, it seems,
Is natural and teems
Throughout the world, wherever it can grow.
To barren, desert place,
Or heart devoid of grace,
Its seeds may on the viewless wind be blown.

I pity those who haul
Behind thick stately walls
Their booty from all corners of the globe.
Steel doors and shrill alarms,
Barbed wire, armored cars,
Secure their wealth, and so they are consoled.

My wealth has spread its leaves,
Communing with the breeze:
One Salt Spray Rose that swings upon the briar!
Great houses hold no place
Beside my blossom's grace--
No more than can a lie with truth conspire.

While rich men in fine rooms
Feed lonely on the gloom
Of affluence that slides into decay,
Upon the stony cliffs
I clamber as I lift
My heart to Heaven and to Nature's way.

Then let the mansions slide
In pieces down the sides
Of granite cliffs, to glut the raging sea!
Mine is the Salt Spray Rose,
Despised and crushed by those
Who covet what the world bestows as free.

Newport, Rhode Island

Rear View Mirror
by Lee Evans

The bulldozers are coming.
I see them in my rear view mirror.
Once they went before me,
To make my passage safe and clear.
Now they're coming after me,
For I am in the way, I fear.
The bulldozers are coming.

They are the driving force
Behind our civilization--
The great democratizers
That level the situation:
Insuring that once Nature is
Subdued beneath their blades,
The world of man's artifice
Will triumph and be brave.
The bulldozers are coming.

I push the pedal to the floor.
They tailgate without mercy;
Split forests into lumber boards;
Plow mountains into highways.
And though their work for them is hard,
They will erase all History.
The bulldozers are coming.

They are a great amnesia
That stupefies the human race:
Make way for the fantasia
For which their furrows have been traced!
Once they went before me,
To make my passage safe and clear;
Now they're coming after me,
For I am in the way, I fear.
The bulldozers are coming.

Stage Fright
by Lee Evans

How good it was to have all props destroyed!
The backdrops melted in the raging flames,
And he who held the cue cards dropped the same,
And fled to seek the exit.

Why deploy
The spotlights when the fire in all its joy
Exposes every recess of the room?

The stagehands fought with their impending doom.

The heat was so intense I could not ply
My craft and speak what I had learned by rote,
And thus was forced to improvise in case
An audience remained within the smoke.

I screamed out, "Fire!" but ere I could race
Outside, the theater had been consumed.

I stumbled through the woods, beneath the moon.