

The Road Not Taken:

a Journal of Formal Poetry

Winter, 2010

- **Joyful Holidays**

A very Merry Christmas and God Bless us all, everyone. (Spoken by Tiny Tim in *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens)

As I write this, it is Christmas Eve, to me a time of great hope, a time for peace, a time when the Earth is touched by the divine and all the world is silent.

The sun has reached it's southernmost point of travel and begun it's slow return northward. Shortly, I'll kick-back with a glass of eggnog and enjoy the rest of the evening. Despite the 30 degree temperature outdoors, it's warm in my study and I am content with the past year.

In honor of the extreme cold (single digits) we here in the Pacific Northwest recently endured, and the winter storm currently sweeping the nation, I herewith present one of my favorite cold weather poems by one of my favorite poets, Robert William Service. May you never be as cold as Sam McGee. If you would like to read more of Service's poetry, visit our index of classic poets we have made available here, and click on his name to read "The Shooting of Dan McGrew."

- **[Robert William Service \(January 16, 1874 – September 11, 1958\)](#)**

Robert William Service was a poet and writer, sometimes referred to as the Bard of the Yukon. He is best-known for his writings on the Canadian North, including the poems *The Shooting of Dan McGrew*, *The Law of the Yukon*, and *The Cremation of Sam McGee*. His writing was so expressive that his readers took him for a hard-bitten old Klondike prospector, not the later-arriving bank clerk he actually was.

In addition to his Yukon works, Service also wrote poetry set in locales as diverse as South Africa, Afghanistan, and New Zealand. His writing has a decidedly British Empire point of view.

The Cremation of Sam McGee
by Robert William Service

There are strange things done in the midnight sun
By the men who toil for gold;
The Arctic trails have their secret tales
That would make your blood run cold;
The Northern Lights have seen queer sights,
But the queerest they ever did see
Was that night on the marge of Lake Lebarge
I cremated Sam McGee.

Now Sam McGee was from Tennessee, where the cotton blooms and blows.
Why he left his home in the South to roam 'round the Pole, God only knows.
He was always cold, but the land of gold seemed to hold him like a spell;
Though he'd often say in his homely way that he'd sooner live in hell.

On a Christmas Day we were mushing our way over the Dawson trail.
Talk of your cold! through the parka's fold it stabbed like a driven nail.
If our eyes we'd close, then the lashes froze till sometimes we couldn't see;
It wasn't much fun, but the only one to whimper was Sam McGee.

And that very night, as we lay packed tight in our robes beneath the snow,
And the dogs were fed, and the stars o'erhead were dancing heel and toe,
He turned to me, and Cap, says he, I'll cash in this trip, I guess;
And if I do, I'm asking that you won't refuse my last request.

Well, he seemed so low that I couldn't say no; then he says with a sort of moan:
It's the cursed cold, and it's got right hold, till I'm chilled clean through to the bone.
Yet 'tain't being dead — it's my awful dread of the icy grave that pains;
So I want you to swear that, foul or fair, you'll cremate my last remains.

A pal's last need is a thing to heed, so I swore I would not fail;
And we started on at the streak of dawn; but God! he looked ghastly pale.
He crouched on the sleigh, and he raved all day of his home in Tennessee;
And before nightfall a corpse was all that was left of Sam McGee.

There wasn't a breath in that land of death, and I hurried, horror-driven,
With a corpse half hid that I couldn't get rid, because of a promise given;
It was lashed to the sleigh, and it seemed to say: You may tax your brawn and brains,
But you promised true, and it's up to you, to cremate those last remains.

Now a promise made is a debt unpaid, and the trail has its own stern code.
In the days to come, though my lips were dumb, in my heart how I cursed that load.
In the long, long night, by the lone firelight, while the huskies, round in a ring,
Howled out their woes to the homeless snows — Oh God! how I loathed the thing.

And every day that quiet clay seemed to heavy and heavier grow;
And on I went, though the dogs were spent and the grub was getting low;

The trail was bad, and I felt half mad, but I swore I would not give in;
And I'd often sing to the hateful thing, and it hearkened with a grin.

Till I came to the marge of Lake Lebarge, and a derelict there lay;
It was jammed in the ice, but I saw in a trice it was called the Alice May.
And I looked at it, and I thought a bit, and I looked at my frozen chum;
Then Here, said I, with a sudden cry, is my cre-ma-tor-eum.

Some planks I tore from the cabin floor, and I lit the boiler fire;
Some coal I found that was lying around, and I heaped the fuel higher;
The flames just soared, and the furnace roared — such a blaze you seldom see;
And I burrowed a hole in the glowing coal, and I stuffed in Sam McGee.

Then I made a hike, for I didn't like to hear him sizzle so;
And the heavens scowled, and the huskies howled, and the wind began to blow.
It was icy cold, but the hot sweat rolled down my cheeks, and I don't know why;
And the greasy smoke in an inky cloak went streaking down the sky.

I do not know how long in the snow I wrestled with grisly fear;
But the stars came out and they danced about ere again I ventured near;
I was sick with dread, but I bravely said: I'll just take a peep inside.
I guess he's cooked, and it's time I looked; ... then the door I opened wide.

And there sat Sam, looking cool and calm, in the heart of the furnace roar;
And he wore a smile you could see a mile, and said: Please close that door.
It's fine in here, but I greatly fear, you'll let in the cold and storm —
Since I left Plumtree, down in Tennessee, it's the first time I've been warm.

There are strange things done in the midnight sun
By the men who moil for gold;
The Arctic trails have their secret tales
That would make your blood run cold;
The Northern Lights have seen queer sights,
But the queerest they ever did see
Was that night on the marge of Lake Lebarge
I cremated Sam McGee.

- Now we've returned from our walk in the winter woods, let's curl-up by the fire with a hot drink of choice and enjoy listening to the fine poetry served up by our newest contributors.

- **Ron Arnold**

I am a freelance writer of poetry and fiction. My poems have been published in the following magazines:

1. *Blueline* – Blueberry Patch and In the Wake of the Whiteout (spring 2009, Volume 30)
2. *Capper's* - Bluebirds (January 20, 2004), What I miss (November 9, 2004), Unwrapping Our Hearts (December 2007)
3. *Illya's Honey* - Vacancy in Shangri-la (spring/summer 2007)
4. *Nomad's Choir* – Islands of Wildness (spring 2009)
5. *The Poet's Pen* - Morning Gold and Still Life of a Scarlet Macaw (winter 2005), Backwater Pond..., My Babbling Brook, and Winter Pageant (fall 2006), Shenandoah Sunrise (summer 2008)

Reign of Innocence
by Ron Arnold

Stepping through a tangle
of broken branches and crumbled crowns
in a grove of red oak that once rose like kings
i am surprised to see

Liquid gold pouring
through gaps to lift up wildflowers
and frame swallowtails floating and gliding
in a surreal fantasy.

For the kettledrum roll
of clouds colliding and lightning's leap
is all I recall as Nature's roaring
breath blew about debris.

So now I rise above fear
and leave behind heartbreak and pain
to be renewed in this moment knowing
i am a blessed refugee.

- **John Grey**

I have been published recently in the *Georgetown Review*, *Connecticut Review*, *South Carolina Review* and *The Pedestal*, with work upcoming in *Poetry East* and *The Pinch*.

Taking Her Cure
by John Grey

“Look” she pointed, in crisp night air,
“Be still as stars,” as if star’s glow
Were ever still, its far light show,
And twinkling fire, just memory where
In darkling sky, we hail it there,
Burned gas, a million years ago
Now reaching us, and apropos
Of filling in for hope or care.

Why not stare at the creaking mill,
Find sympathy in supermart,
Or bloodshot houses on the hill
At sunset, then hear someone start
On how the stars come down, instill
Their bright cures in the sick of heart.

Diary in the Attic
by John Grey

The diary pages curl like onions dried,
Stored as they are in darkness twenty years,
They crackle in the flash-light, in the tears
That gather in their cracks, moist, undented,
Like lint to wounds, still lovingly applied
To moments and their ghosts, to ancient fears
Of failure, briefest triumphs, unchecked cheers
At one small gift or sweet glance or aside.

Outside the room, snow falls unheard, unseen,
It stows the house in trunks of purest white,
Annuls the landscape slowly and serene,
Its soundless binding shuttering the night
Like fodder that our times have always been
For all our futures’ bright inquiring light.

- [Leticia Austria](#)

Native Texan Leticia Austria is a former operatic coach, pianist, and would-be nun. Her childhood love of writing poetry was rekindled while in the monastery. She now cares for her parents in San Antonio and continues to hone her poetic craft. Her work has appeared in printed journals such as *The Lyric*, *The Eclectic Muse*, *The Storyteller*, *WestWard Quarterly*, and *Time of*

Singing, and in the online journal *The Road Not Taken: A Journal of Formal Poetry*. She will be the featured poet in an upcoming issue of *Decanto*. Ms. Austria has also won top prizes from The Laurel Crown Foundation and Utmost Christian Poets.

The Rain Lily
by Leticia Austria

Beneath this crusted soil I shall await
the rain. Beneath the weight of withering roots
of weeds, I'll bide my time. It is the fate
allotted me. Inert yet resolute,

I have the shell of unremitting trust
in which to sleep, the pearl protection of
the waiting yet to rise, of those who must
depend upon the water from above

to fall and break the drought. For it shall fall
someday, as surely as this ground is dry:
it is the compensation for us all.
The day will come when I shall see the sky.

- [John Byrne](#)

I live in Albany, Oregon and I write formal verse, short stories and puppet plays. In another life, I worked as an attorney for labor unions and employees. You have been kind enough to publish some of my work in the past. Other poems have appeared in *Umbrella Journal*, *Lucid Rhythms* and *14 by 14*. Recent work is also scheduled to appear in the next issues of *Literary Bohemian* and *Centrifugal Eye*.

Each Day
by John Byrne

Each day, with hand in hand, he walks her home.
They kiss and murmur secrets by her door
Until she walks him back half-way or more
To kiss again, then finally walk alone

But not without a thousand turnings back.
All this I know because their to's and fro's
Occur in front of me. I'm older, so
Invisible — but while it's true I lack

An innocence of love, I'm not so old
To not remember when a gesture made
Or broke an afternoon and not so cold
I cannot feel the hand that would persuade
Another lingering and not so bold
To not appreciate the one who stayed.

- **Joan M. Howard**

I am a teacher who studied English Literature at the University of Georgia, and I have been published in *The Lyric*. I currently reside on Lake Chatuge in Hiawassee, Georgia, the inspiration for this poem.

A Ride in the Boat
by Joan M. Howard

Beautiful waters' black diamonds
Traced golden, dawn's cross currents form,
Flow under and over all surface;
Lapped cradle on sun crystals borne.

So soft, no hand could sense it,
So clear the transfixing breath,
So swift descent into silver
One intricate, infinite death.

- **C. B. Anderson**

C. B. Anderson was the longtime gardener for the PBS television series, "The Victory Garden." His poems have appeared in numerous print and electronic journals, most recently *Blue Unicorn*, *Nassau Review*, *Innisfree*, and *Lucid Rhythms*. His e-chapbook, *A Walk in the Dark*, is posted on the website of The New Formalist Press.

Perspective
by C.B. Anderson

Depending on the way you look at things,
that wholesome face you stroked then later kissed
repulses or attracts you. Squinting brings
into fine focus tiny flaws you missed

in the first flush of love. If longing lets
your gaze go soft again, those faults you're sure
you saw when lust had simmered down are debts
forgiven, as this quick and painless cure

for borrowed trouble lends new light. Your stone-
cold scrutiny, perceiving feet of clay,
will surely mark the graves of chances blown
if warming words remain unspoken. Pray

that memories of the way you were beheld
on blind and boundless evenings when you chose
and were the chosen (How contentment welled
those nights!) will now remind you to compose

a few short lines of steamy prose for one
who sought to overlook your gaping cracks
while lilac music chased the setting sun.
Command your pressing pupils to relax.

The Night after Christmas
by C.B. Anderson

You better not cry.

"Deplorable" might be how best to put
it, just to underscore the gravity
of chores that border on depravity,
begriming Santa's uniform with soot.

a chimney's not an option for the Chosen
if any other path is close at hand,
and empty hearths are not the Promised Land
when toes and fingers are completely frozen.

If nothing else, he's been a model martyr,
a sacrificial icon with a gift
for giving freely — not a slave to thrift,
an Indian giver, or a man to barter.

St. Nicholas (or simply Santa Claus)
is most admired when he's successful entering
without the breaking, admiration centering
on voidance of both Man's and Nature's laws.

It's hard to say how long he has to live —
his tenure spans so many generations —
but everyone from all the Christian nations
should mind his moral to forgive and give.

Like him, the rest of us are aging fast —
but lack for words or deeds of simple kindness,
received or duly paid. We feign a blindness
to how each deed and word might be the last.

When all is said and done, and we're too old
to wonder if there really is a Santa,
it's time to sit the children down and plant a
belief in what will help them stand the cold.