

The Federal Poet



Spring 2003

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THE FEDERAL POETS
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Introduction

THE FEDERAL POETS is the oldest continuously active poetry group on the Washington D.C. area. First convened in 1944, it is a nonprofit organization open to all poets without regard to race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, or political affiliation.

Members of **THE FEDERAL POETS** meet at the West End Public Library in Washington, DC, on the third Saturday of every month to read, analyze and discuss their poetry. Visitors are always welcome. Members and visitors who are planning to attend should bring 20 copies of a recently written poem for distribution to those present. The poem will then be discussed with a view to enhancing its chances for publication.

The chief aims of this organization are to improve the members' poems by the exchange of constructive criticism and to increase their exposure through publication and readings.

The Federal Poet, containing the best poems written by members, is published semiannually. Local and corresponding members receive it and may submit poems to the editor for consideration and publication.

THE FEDERAL POETS is a chapter of the **National Federation of State Poetry Societies** and the **Academy of American Poets** and is also affiliated with the **Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines**.

For membership information, write us.

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Small Slice

New moon standing high up
the other day, over the sky
said: "Hey, I'm round, just
take a look at me."
And I did, I did. He
Reminded me of us.
Such a small slice shown
To the world. So much potential.
We laughed and laughed.
I sped on through the night
Looking at the round moon.

Pam Blehert

Beyond the Cringe

There are things I've done which,
when something makes me think of them
(showing up fresh as life after years
of sleep in some enchanted cave),
make me cringe, ashamed even to think them
in a large room by myself, not wanting
to know this could be me.

I'd tell you about these things
if I thought they could be understood
(these things I REFUSE to understand),
by you who assert your likes and dislikes
as if saying with every you-shaped breath:
"This is the sort of person I am!"--

you who have done nothing
that could make you cringe.

Dean Blehert

Visitation

For J.R.

The experiences that are called apparitions, the whole so called spirit world; death, all these things that are so closely related to us, have through our daily defensiveness been so entirely pushed out of life that the senses with which we might have been able to grasp them have atrophied. Rilke, Letter to a Young Poet

When it happens, you show up
out of nowhere, arriving in an idle
brain, an idle time, most likely when
I'm pulling weeds or staking tomatoes,
or driving somewhere. I don't believe
in ghosts as such, but you appear to be
quite near, and I do believe in you.
You seem curious to me, and a little idle yourself,
not pushy, but inquiring. I believe you've come
to see how life is going, how my garden grows.

You appear from nowhere, like the blue heron
standing at the edge of the pond, while the
piper
played the Skyeboat Song, and all of us
at your memorial service smiled and pointed.
Reed-slender, blending with the grass, at first
we could hardly see him. Like an apparition
in November frost, he paced the shore.
Up and down he strode, bobbing, listening
to the bagpipes with us, a presence
arriving out of nowhere.

Ann Rayburn

Exodus

They carry a world in their eyes. In their bodies
history takes shelter, a cyst in the gut, a living
blossom embedded in brain.

Pear trees, apricots,
their blossoms uncounted, on fire. The marriage
photos, the marriage bed, birth beds,
deathbeds, on fire. Roofs and outbuildings,
animals and fields, windows and doorways,
on fire.

Shots, orders, fire.

The winnowing of men, herded like beasts
to the harvest. *But my father's beasts
were not beaten, not shot as they ran, not slashed
again and again.*

Shots, screams, silence.
*Then we heard laughter, the joyous triumphant
laughter of those who came that night
with weapons and masks, with armor
and laughter. Yet some of us knew
voices among them, the man who drove
the late bus, the boy from the baker's stall
who counted our coins.*

The hundreds, the thousands,
the hundreds of thousands, shapes of dust
on the roads.

The rain, the thirst,
the cold. The dazed man without shoes,
the red-brown mud caked on his socks.
The father's father, his face caved in,
his tooth glass knocked to the floor as he fled.

The children who do not look up,
the children who look without seeing.

The slow ones with only their slippers,
the ones who are carried or dragged,
the ones who must not be lost.

In the days, the winnowing of women,
the young ones who do not come back.
The two who came back, rivulets of blood
on their feet. The shame of those who saw
their bent heads.

The woman in black
holding her belly. The woman who dropped
at the side of the road, emptying the child
from her belly.

*Sometimes there was bread, hidden
or given.* Water wherever, the flushed cheeks
and blank eyes of the children, the worn
animal faces of women holding the hands
of children.

The women down on their knees,
scooping the ditchwater, streamwater, snow.
The women tending the children
in darkness, sharing a basin of water,
look, stars you can drink.

She says *there were twelve in her family, before.*
Tonight they are counted as nine
of those who are lucky, they have reached
the dark field of a country where oranges
and bottles of water, blankets and bread
will be given.

Stars she can name
bloom through the clouds, hunter
and prey.

Shots, orders, fire
at her daughter's home where she lived.
Shots, orders, fire at her brother's house
where she fled.

In her arms she cradles
the drowsing child of her second daughter,
the one who stares and won't speak.

Roads, paths, woods,
roads. Her toe has turned black.
She says *it is hard to walk up a mountain.*

Judith McCombs

Magician's trick

You didn't think you could go on
And pulled the old magician's trick, left us
Holding the bag.

Time falls, drip, drip, a linear map, a lie,
and you have fallen for it, so are dead.

Look, suppose that I said:

You are not dead,
can be forgiven, really, if
you find it hard to speak beyond the grave.
But clearly, life in all its forms
is waiting your return.

You are not dead, but ageless,
the angel, the seed, the fiery phoenix.
You are not dead, just pretending.

You find yourself in other circumstances,
Stunned by the remembrance.
We know you are waiting in the wings.

Pam Blehert

How to Eat a Computer

First, a salad of the keys,
and to indulge myself a little,
an extra ampersand, but only
one, they go right through me.
A bland affair? Not with the
extra finger grime on “insert”
and “delete,” sudden, not subtle,
surprising, like unfamiliar spice
when eating Indian.

Open

And discard the shell.

Then

pause a moment — intermezzo? —
to contemplate the innards:
delicate, complex, without peer
in nature.

For second course,
I wouldn't touch those grayish belts,
tough leaves that dieticians say
one can't digest and even may do
harm. And unlike those lungy
parts of crabs one tries hard not to
eat, these are discrete and thus
can be avoided.

Connecting wires
of red and green and white could
do for spaghettini *tricolore* or
better still as garnish for a festive
presentation.

And finally we reach
the inner delicacy, the *buco* in the *osso*,
or vice versa — the hard drive. This
takes some work:

We filet

the filigree of circuitry from its
metal bed. Then down the gullet

just like tiny tentacles of cuttlefish
(that no-no on the Chinese menu)
washed down with something fine
and French, the California stuff
won't do.

The hard plate itself's
another matter. Those sharp edges
could be trouble at the other end.
Perhaps a crucible could melt it to a
chocolaty dessert — in a soft asbestos
wrap.

Feeling satisfied?

No need
to count the grams of fat, or other-
wise constrain your joy with
pettifogging strictures.

And if,
later, when looking for a word,
eleven letters for *Bogie's*
mortifying ailment on the Queen,
you hear your gut begin to squawk
and groan, don't think that something
disagreed: that's your imbibed
processor at work.

Behold!

A bubble rises up your spine.
Upon your retinal screen the word
appears: *borborygmus* — by God
I am the damned machine.

Wells Burgess

The Limitations of Aesthetics

We ache in different ways
in different places.
So your perfect masseuse
is not mine.
Nor is yesterday's perfect
so perfect today.
We may agree on a perfect blue
or a perfect chocolate,
but we need not.

I like the way morning
lifts out of the fog:
the rise of the hill,
the solitary cow bell,
and the way the fence line
ends in mist.
Could it be improved?
Maybe,
but it's a silly question.

People who like Malamutes
like our guys:
their respectful distance,
the small pleasures in their own agenda,
and their friendly concern.
That their play is less over-the-top
(and less in-your-face)
is the complaint of others,
not us.

But people who like a certain music
keep coming back.
That we can say.
Though I'll take my Vivaldi
to your Mozart,
that's all I can say.
It is not the secret virtue
I sometimes suppose.

Lee Giesecke

Labor Day Champ

We all took turns at pitching,
his dad and granddad, his uncle too.
It was no easy matter
to aim right at the bat.
The batter in this game was not yet three.
At times the whiffel ball collided with the bat.
The batter then to neighbors' cheers
ran wildly through the yard
beneath the clothesline draped with bathing suits,
and rounding home he'd give his waiting mom
a proud high five.

Harlan M. Kelly

The Tao of Desire

First,
The attraction, then
The open regard, then
The regard returned, openly, then
Fear, then
Withdrawal, then
The furtive regard, then
The fault detected in the regarded one, then
Lust in safety, then
Emptiness.

Wells Burgess

Childless

The sheep's nose pokes
the boy's tufts of blond.
Small yet bulky he tumbles
over. His head almost rings
as it hits the concrete.
I search for concern in a mother
busy with her cats and horses.
(I worry if this is the right place
to find a cat for my niece).
His mother tells me he has done this
before and I wonder whether he
will be mad or stupid when he grows.

I stare at the boy's face
flushed and tear stained;
we watch swirls of cats
black, tawny, gray – many more cats than I can
imagine
feed on dollops of mush
that the boy's mother throws from tins.
She pours milk into buckets.
Cat hunger sounds are endless.

Smells devour the air
once fresh:
the sour of sheep's wool,
a gamy odor in his hair,
wet dirt on his hands
as he pushes me away from him,
it is so natural for me to want.
He sits down with the cats
and they continue feeding.

These scenes linger and leave.
What I cannot have
seems like a string of smoke
rising from the chimney
of another farm house.
The animals find their sleeping places,
the boy stops crying.
It is quiet and cold out here under the sunset,
the clouds turn dark and move rapidly.
I must go home.

Nancy Allinson

Portrait of the Infant Giovanni De'Medici

(after Agnolo Bronzino)

Fattened with *latte, bomboloni*,
and the pride of his august parents,
il bambino principe smiles sweetly
even when laced into a silk doublet
and made to sit still for the nice painter.

You would smile too, as sweetly
and unreflectively as little Gianni,
if your life were as brightly colored
and docile as the bird he holds in his hand--
something that will sing, but not fly away.

The baby's mild, wide eyes see visions
of groaning tables that stretch without end.
His lips part, ready to eat again.
Life is good. Life is easy.
It will not get any harder.

Miles David Moore

Patchwork

A patchwork of emotions
form the garment of the day,
a tatter of jagged shapes,
with threads dribbling down,
a hole-full coverlet that fails
to keep the drafts out
or a fragile warmth in.
What garment is this
that I will wear today,
familiar in the feel
of failing to cover all?

Mike McDermott

"Childless" first appeared in *Minimus*, Volume 7, 1997

Heron in Shadowed Waters

Above the darkened lake, grey sky,
no sun. The darker shapes of cedars
across the silted depths, the duller
shadows of encircling hills.

The heron that you never saw,
grey winter shape.

Your hand in mine,
I helped you cross the narrow stones
to this island overlook, where children
helped us see the swirling, rising carp
that August day. You said this place
was close to home.

Your hands in mine,
you crossed the shifting shallows
of the living room.

Your swollen hand
still warm in mine, those last grey
sunless hours.

Wind lifts and moves
across the darkened waters, a thousand
thousand shapes of light sweep towards us
like a field of glinting grain, a shining
that is here and gone. The heron stirs, and turns
its wind-torn plumage to the wind,
and waits for stillness that will come.

Judith McCombs

The Landing

The wind brings its news
of the sea. It carries the whine
of a gull, mutterings of sand
scratching the shore.
No messages to be found here,
on the papers battered
and crosshatched by wheels,
splayed in ditches. The wind
pushes us across a bridge of canvas
sails, brine-stiff, onto alien rocks.

We search new faces, reading
them like clocks: what time
is it in the land we have left?
We are exiles, caught between
gray walls, resentful of
the natives' churlish optimism.
We cannot find beauty
in the old man's wispy hair,
lifting and falling in the wind's wake.
We step over flotsam, walk
single file to the edge.
Across the flat page of the sea,
a ship, winking its lights, waits.

Ann Rayburn

Coffee Shop Curse

Why must I always turn the table
in hopes all legs will touch the floor?
When three or five legs would be stable,
must table makers just use four?

Do they believe each habitat
has floors smooth as a window pane?
Or do they think the world is flat
and old Columbus sailed in vain?

Harlan M. Kelly

Tanka

The rooster was upset
When night came at noontide.
And the light dimmed down.
He almost lost his voice
Calling back the sun.

It is no fun
To be so terribly clever
If no one hears me.
Any frog in the puddle
Can say the very same thing

It was ten to twelve
When the clock struck seven
And registered nine.
It was a difficult choice
And not a moment to spare.

A spider lowers
Down to my open letter..
It doesn't matter.
Whatever he reads of it
He will surely keep quiet.

Jean Leyman

In Love, Approximately

I feel days
when sun-dazzled leaves
leap to heaven
or fingertips.

My hands are in love
with proximate things.
They fly at the sun.
The blood bird sings.

Leaf-vein—my kin—
what can I do but touch, touch...
I cannot reach
heaven
nor him

Rosemary Winslow

Why She Asks Him to Stay

Because she once saw her mother's pale scalp
in lamplight, bowed, waiting for sleep,
taking only her own thin bones for company,
and the late night talk show. Because she met her eyes
above the solitary bowl and spoon, saw the rows
of home canned jellies, peaches, beans.
At night she wants him there among the fallen
ashes, the books and dishes, a messy life
beside her own. The moon is cool, white.
In the darkened room, she needs
his body like a sheltering
bay, on the pale sea of their bed.

Ann Rayburn

The Way Things Ought to Be

On good days, our mother was elegant
as a spray of tulips
in a silver bowl,
nodding slightly toward the sun.
Her monologues at dusk
glowed of cigarettes and scotch,
amber like her hair, reflected in the glass
that rolled across the linen table cloth

as if to join the smoky jars, the scent
of roses on her dressing table.
In good times, we loved the weekly ritual
of the changing of her purses,
shaken out above the bed,
Coins, hankies, powder, combs.
Polished fingernails brushed tobacco flakes
from counterpane to floor.

We understood the goodness of sharp corners
on freshly sheeted beds, of notes
with monograms, pleats beneath hot irons,
herbs arranged by alphabet. In matching
pinafores and blouses, we set out
her shoes, lined them up
like soldiers on the floor, waiting
for their next command performance.

Ann Rayburn

"The Way things Ought to Be" appeared previously in "Frantic Egg", Issue 5, December, 2001

Going Home (St. Paul, 1960)

Biting wind. Waiting for a bus,
I cower in a phone booth, nothing to do
but stomp my feet and shush my thoughts
of minutes, dollars, things not said
to closed faces, cold feet—thoughts
as shrill as tired kids in the back seat
of a too-long trip.

In this cold, thoughts,
like sculpted whorls of smoke
attached to a below-zero chimney,
become solid, slow, slower...

In sudden clarity of winter night
I stand empty, filling up with purr
of repeated muffled car explosions,
white and red lights advancing, receding
in dazzling ice-doubled columns.
BAR AND GRILL flashes green,
then stabbing blue, zips
through twisted threads of glass,
gone before eye can follow.

Lights shatter into stars.
Among smells of exhaust and wet wool
I imagine (or am I there?)
steaming black diner coffee. Senses,
suspended in crystal, waver.

How kind of the world, seeing I must wait
(for what?), to stop for me
here at the frozen crest of things.

The periphery of my vision stands still
while I turn away from my eyes to see.
But one must exhale again: The world
wheels free, eyes take over vision,
nose claims smell, ears sound;
though still
they are icicle sharp,
beside themselves, taut
ears listening to hear who listens, nose
bickering with eyes for a share in color,

eyes finding faces in the faceless:
Tottering cherubic faces gaping
in the high cab lights of wheezing trucks,
earnest innocence of car faces, Chevy
and Ford as distinct as two uncles,

words already auditioning for the poem
that's in the wind, each word, too,
with its spellbound face,
and before mine on the shiny
black phone, the jingle
of "One Dime".
In this thin clear air,
expanding bubble of me rises faster and faster,
motionless,
to burst into its element.

Stomping into the bus, shivering,
I fumble for coins, giggling
in my pocket. The driver's shoulders
are set in perpetual shrug; his face
speaks for his shoulders. I wonder
who is he?

Down the slush-wet black-rubbered aisle
past a frown (Where's he's taking it?),
past car-cards selling chewing gum
that two pretty twins chew
to double their pleasure in life
and the U.S. Army, where you can learn
a trade, car-cards quoting Thoreau
(Great Thoughts Of) about walking
to a different drummer, engines
pulsing at my feet--

I sprawl across a seat
having it all to myself,
peer through my face
at rippled streaks of light and darkness,
at home here
going home.

Dean Blehert

Antique Brass

6:00am.
Radio clicks on.
"America" plays again
over the waves,
in an antique brass
that seems to weep.
It's a technique
where the notes
bleed into each other, slightly,
like a high school band
only not so bad.
But the effect is like
a lone bugle
playing taps.

Everything weeps:
Van Gogh's flowers in a vase,
fields, streets, starry nights.
Everything weeps.

Lee Giesecke

Why They Lived Happily Ever After

I have a secret weapon:
my secret weapon is me!
You think you're king of the courtyard.
I'll take my clothes off. you'll see!

I'll get the keys to the courtyard.
You'll get the love you adore.
It hardly will take a moment.
I'll lap you off of the floor!

Dorcas Tabitha

To the Scum who Stole my Radio

To the scum who stole my radio,
I hope you go deaf,
I hope you go blind,
I hope you go mute.

To the scum who stole my radio,
I hope the earphones emit electric shocks,
the batteries explode in your hand,
the buttons become hopelessly stuck.

To the scum who stole my radio,
I hope it turns to maggots in your hand,
to mucus in your pocket,
to horseshit in your backpack.

To the scum who stole my radio,
I hope you drop it,
lose it.
I hope, better yet, someone steals it from you.

Averille E. Jacobs

Mr. Muhlenberg

There used to be a pleasant patch of green
which broke the endless high-rise monotone,
some trees and grass, an unobstructed scene
till some folks stuck this head upon a stone.

A head upon stone, you say? A bust,
a wig-bedecked odd likeness of a man
whose deeds aren't worth recalling. Now we must
when passing by ignore him if we can,

or cheer the kids whose skateboards wheel and spin
upon his concrete plaza now for fun.
I'd like to think the builders think this sin,
just as I feel that out here in the sun
is where shade trees might grow or flowers bloom.
I'd hide old Muhlenberg in some dark room.

Harlan M. Kelly

Nights Like This

Early night, the cooling summer sky like a piece
of Nat King Cole's Blue Velvet, pinned with two white stars.
From ranches, men drove into town and parked,
propped their boots on their pickup bumpers,
pushed back their salt-stained hats, and talked.
Like restless moths, we girls flew to boys
who cruised through town from end to end,
beckoned us with suntanned wrists, then took us
riding through the darkened fields.
Broken stars spilled into still canals
that lay like ribbons stretched across the earth.
We thought nights would always be like this,
red neon glowing above the town,
light vanishing everywhere into velvet.

Ann Rayburn

Now the Serpent was more Subtle

Genesis 3:1

It's fun to fool with the serpent,
though thrills you get will subside.
Your luck will not last forever;
he'll fix his fangs in your hide.

Dorcas Tabitha

How are you, Dear?

Will you tell me,
or will you hide
behind fairy tales
and platitudes?

Will you
tell me the truth
or invent
golden ponds
and white lies –
just to calm
my anxiety driven
curiosity?

Will you keep
me entertained
for a healthy
while–
or

Will you
distract–
attract
me?

Fine!

How
are you,
Dear?

Ingeborg Carsten-Miller

Autumn Colors

“Look at me,”
the year says
in the autumn:

“This is the
full beauty
of your year
in maple,
oak, and birch.
Fill your heart
with this year’s
great harvest.

It took me
months to paint
fall’s colors –
take them along
with you to
the darkness
of endless
winter nights!”

Ingeborg Carsten-Miller

Mathematical Mayhem

Mathematics never liked me.
All Algebra's expressions refused
to express anything but distress.

Geometric figures gagged me with
pollutions instead of solutions.
The Exponents' Laws found my flaws,
turning my no. 2 pencils to dust and my
mind into mushy disgust.

Trigonometry tricked poor, unmathematical
me by locking away its functions and throwing away
the key.

Addition addled me;
Multiplication mutilated me and saddled me
with principles and rules more complex than
the other principals — those fools that rule the schools.
The Order of Operations was so out of order,
I felt like running for the border.

I was angered by Angles, tangled in triangles,
and rattled by Ratios as they danced "The Cool Jerk,"
forcing me into moves that wouldn't work.

Naughty Negative Numbers purposely traded their powers
with their repulsive Positive cousins by the dozens for
hours and hours and hours and hours.

Polynomials pulverized me, Trinomials terrorized me,
and fractions fractured me mercilessly,
making me weak, making me squeak like the chalk
when I performed at the board while my classmates
roared.

Though I tried evasions,
Second Degree Equations gave me third degree palpitations.

I think it's clear that Mathematics never cared for me.

Averille E. Jacobs

When Grandfather Died

she cried, You
are too true,
my life

drips like gold
honey globes
from white

hexagonal cells. It soaks
this bread. She could not eat.
Rain was all through April

dew, tasteless, clear, washing death
from the bedroom, the scent of him.
The pale wallpaper was slipping down.

Carnelian hollyhocks grew a fence of six-foot pikes
around our house. His thrilled bees tore
the liquid from their blond throats. She wouldn't
speak.

She put salvia in her hair, roses and peonies
in crystal vases, old beer steins, anything
that he had loved. The empty place

(once the barn, some calves, his horses
gone in a fire,
alchemized to spilled black stars)

became a melt
of white-pink phlox
behind the house beyond the fence. She flooded

all our rooms with flowers
till bees hummed about our ears
far into the evenings in the parlor. She let

the clicking pendulum, his violin,
saturate the night. She would say
nothing, nor weep. And heavy afternoons spread
tendrils

wet on her neck, water clung
brackish in the steins. Fruit rotted. Then
the frost came. One morning

we found her, a winter stem,
cold and stiff in the bed where he left
her. We spent Christmas snowed in,

watching the moon put a glaze on
the thick drifts,
as we'd watched her,

memory's fatal light,
that cold diffusion,
distilling as we looked and looked

and could not reach her.

Rosemary Winslow

The Blessed Virgin of Voice-mail

I see her Jane Wyman-like in *Stage Fright*,
that frank and open look, the cheek bones white
and glowing, a pure symmetry, eyes wide,
but now in business garb, gray suit, a single
strand of modest pearls, and when she speaks
her voice flows out in pearly grayish tones
of steady modulations, nothing
to disturb or vex, or hint of sex, a blithe
neutrality, demure yet strong. One could
not call her supportive, or even warm,
but there's that slightly higher pitch at close —
is it an invitation to return
and let our sweaty ears be cooled again
by blessed's prim and icy lullaby?
Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye...

Wells Burgess

Rayburn Building Cafeteria Scene

He drinks Diet Coke
Eats mashed potatoes
White male about 30
Five feet 10 inches 250 pounds
Glasses
Bearded
Eats big pieces of potatoes
Rubs nose
Retrieves message from pager
Eats more potatoes
Reads congressional testimony
Black shoes
Shoves food onto fork
Wipes his face with napkin
Drinks Diet Coke
Eats alone
Nods to an acquaintance
Writes himself a note
Tabasco bottle unused
Studies papers
Looks into the middle distance
It is 1 :45 pm April 10, 2002
Finishes Diet Coke
Cocks his head
Admires what he has written
resembles Reps. Ackerman, Wynn and Nadler.

Hunter Alexander

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