

The Federal Poet

Fall 2005



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THE FEDERAL POETS

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Introduction

THE FEDERAL POETS is the oldest continuously active poetry group in 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 or visit our website.

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When I Work

Two dancers, his hands leapt
over the black and ivory keys
of our dining room's old upright.
I loved it when Uncle Goody
came to visit. Each note was clear,
powerful. That room shook like a train
to his rhythms—all from the same
discolored keys I stumbled over
each day for my dreary lesson.

Playing a slow part with little
right hand trills, Goody would thrust
a somber face my way and say: "*That*
is Johann Sebastian Bach." I'd wait
for his next move. Laughing, he'd flow
into bright syncopation, hands striding
up and down: "And *that*," he'd say
"is Hoagy Carmichael's 'Stardust.'"

One day, he showed me his business card,
black on ivory like the keyboard.
Below a silhouetted man in tails seated
at the concert grand were these crisp words:
"Orville Goodrow: When I Work, I play."

Martin Dickinson

Subject: Great Opportunity

Wanted: God to stand watch
over untended forests and maintain
the actuality of sounds that nobody hears.
No prior experience necessary.
Ability to hear each sparrow feather fall
is a definite plus.

Dean Blehert

Pronouns

There are a few every lifetime.
You meet them, invite them in, and,
like “the man who came to dinner”, they occupy
a pronoun (“you” or “she” or “he” or even “I”)
and make themselves at home,
and that pronoun, even years after they’ve
moved on (leaving stains that
won’t come out of the carpet, stale scent
of perfumed or tobacco’d presence,
aura of expected smile or gesture
that hovers about distant figures approaching
or sings like an overture in the
ringing phone), that pronoun
is never the same again.

Dean Blehert

A Short Course in History

He said now you're free.
Then he said gimmegimme.
They asked what do you want?
He said you're disloyal
for having to ask
and slew every tenth man.

He said gimme women.
They offered their daughters.
He said what an honor
to bear my strong children
and took every girl.

He said gimme soldiers.
They offered their sons.
He said what an honor
to die in my service
and took every boy.

They asked where are our children
and may we please see them?
He said they're all mine--
you're trying to steal them
and slew every tenth woman.

He said gimmegimme.
They said we have given.
But where is our freedom
and what does it look like?

His answer: a belch.
So they rose up and slew him.

One said now you're free.
Then he said gimmegimme.

Miles David Moore

Turtle Pond, Crab-apples in Bloom

Why do we find it so easy
to welcome the greening and flowering
forced out of hiding each year,
but watch with unease the grappling
clawed feet and helmet-like shells
tilted belly to belly and gently,
forcibly rocking the waters
of their petal-strewn pond?

Who designed this
slow-motion combat, this primeval
embrace? Why the pale snake neck
arching for air, flopping over,
wounded or spent? and the other's head
lifting from the center of ripples,
wordlessly hissing? Pulled
and repelled, we look elsewhere, trade stories
of sharp beaks slicing into the soft
duckling or swimmer.

Mysterious
and unbeautiful, souls hidden
by shells, the air-breathers rest
side by side in the quieted waters.
But soon they're at it again,
this antediluvian display
and testing of power that is nearer,
much nearer, to our sort of clasping
and grappling than all the petals
that ever there were, floating
like down on this apple-flanked pond.

Judith McCombs

An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion

Even the teacher, who kept telling me
to get up to the chalkboard,
wouldn't have wanted me to,
had she known what the boys in the room knew.
And had I gotten up there, and had she seen it,
she would have quickly gotten me back to my seat,
and have pretended that it wasn't there.

Theism maintains that God, though hidden,
is obvious to those who know where to look.

Atheism wonders why a God
wouldn't just show Himself.

Agnosticism keeps looking, trying to see
if that's God, or just the way the pants are cut.

Doug Wilkinson

Resting Pulses

If the forest were for rest,
it would have two r's.
The forest rests upon the hills.
The shadows spill down.
The breeze turns up
the underside of leaves.
The shadows roll through
like ocean waves.
It is still summer,
but there's a reprieve
from the heat.

If the heart were only heat,
it would not have an "r."
It is a tic of art
that gives the heart its beat.
It's like the tart who teased the heath
with her bounding moves
and taunting speech:
"Eat your heart out, Earth."

The earthen hearth hath
the breath of bread
and brooding kin.
Wherever we go
they are with us,
eating and belching
and sure of themselves.
And on this barren mound,
still here
though 'twere a thousand year.

And then there are all those stories
of success
buried in the village
under the stars,
and the resentments and sighs
of what almost came to pass,
but did not.
They weigh heavily upon us
like untoppled tombstones.

In sleep I lie flat
giving gravity fewer angles
to tease-
flat as sheets of paper
on which nothing has been written,
nothing wadded up,
no missed hoops
gathered on the floor.

Will you miss me?
Maybe.
It would be easier though
if you just left.
How can we miss you,
when you are always there
composing strategies
for being missed?
You will need to leave us alone
a little.

Oh, the reach of the sea
and the tide,
drawing everything
away from us,
then returning
fresh,
or sort of fresh,
a sort of original reek, at least.

And after the musk of sex
the beauty of children
breaks your heart.
It is the nuisance of their wills
that explains all the
war and flotsam
that dot our lives.

They are so annoying, these flowers,
pestering us each summer
with their color and fragrance
everywhere.

Lee Giesecke

Make the Elephant Walk Away

First of all, make him.
Make the elephant. Make him
larger, larger than yourself,
capable of dragging logs or
setting up the tent.
Make him big enough to fill the room.
Does he smell? Is he dusty?

Make him walk out the door.
If he's too enormous,
make him smaller, I don't care.
Or squeeze him out the door.
Careful now, don't hurt him!

Make him any color you like
or many colors. Make him dance a jig.
See the elephant dance.
Let him look around. Remember now,
this is close to freedom for him.
Can you see him sigh?

Slowly let go. This elephant needs
his own space. Let him
walk away. If he hesitates,
make a lady elephant.
Let them walk away.

Pam Blehert

The Pebble

It was just
this tiny wave
slowly hitting
the beach,
licking the sand,
caressing the waiting
white pebbles,
reluctantly then
sinking —
disappearing —

The little wave
had come slowly
from the far ocean
carrying a few
foamy stars on
its low back
now
touching the soul
of a lonesome wanderer
whose thoughts clung
to the wave's eternal
coming and going
with in his hand
just this one
pebble.

Ingeborg Carsten-Miller

Harvest Moon

1.

The moon is a lion
all orange and bright.
But the moon is too quiet
can't roar through the night.

2.

The moon is in flames,
I smell smoke in the breeze,
but the moon can't be on fire,
they're aren't any trees.

After I wash my mother's hair

I wrap your head in a towel,
rub your scalp until your hair tangles.
Then I comb it out.
Thin, fine strands fill the metal toothed comb
with light.
Your hair now dry
is the color of the moon.

Nancy Allinson

A Modern Martyr

Blissfully, I awaken
buoyed upon a rippling lake of birdsong,
a cat upon my breast
girding my heart
with her purring.

The sun, unclouding,
illumines my hearth
enshrining her waterbowl
upon the many-colored tiles.

Gradually,
the world-leveling sound of traffic
ices my lake
leaving me
enised
upon a hardening pallet.

I don my clothes
holster a CD player
clamp on a pair of headphones
and veiled in the harmonies of an earlier world
descend the steps from my apartment
and open the door...

and am suddenly at bay--exposed
to the brute hurtlings of the street,
the mortifying onslaught of beetle-like machinery.

The daily Blitzkrieg.

Ho hum,
I enter my own beetle-sheath
and drive to work.

Charles Gerald DuBose, Jr.

The Question

She paused at the question
as she stood by the unvarnished
table where they had shared
so many meals. Perhaps
she had blundered by inviting
him home, this long-ago lover
who had traveled so far to find her?
He sat in the worn overstuffed chair,
quiet, rubbing his chin, stubbled
by a week's growth of whiskers.
She remembered the unkept promises
and relished for a moment her joy
at being unkept. Oh, freedom!
How foolish I was then to believe him,
to think he meant what he said.
She let the silence hang there
until the question, the vastness of it
hit her.

"Did they tell you I have
cancer of the brain?" he asked.

Judy Neri

A Perfect Union

You worship the tenor sax,
dinner is my religion.
Disheveled memories
escape from your
Venus-fly trap brain.
Red-eyed emotions
stumble
through my London fog day.
You hobnob with Hegel
and Heidegger on the beach.
Mae West and June Cleaver
play pool in my dreams.
You're attentive
as an ameba in heat.
I'm stable as a neurotic rainbow.
We're Lucy and Ethel
in a radioactive
chocolate factory.

Kathi Wolfe

Something about the Wind

It was the wind
thrumming through the telephone wires
that defined the beach that one year,
not the surf's low pound, no, those
damn telephone wires
and the traffic on the road
outside the small apartment
that we let for a week
of rain, and pallid sand and sea
green sounds.

It was the sound of eternity:
The strident ringing telephone lines
and being bored, being nubile, wanting
something but not knowing what.

Our cousins visited,
we had barbeque and I fell in love
with WD, tall teen cousin
and took long walks on the damp beach
underneath the roiling sky
and along the puddled sandy street
to something nearly a boardwalk.

During the rainy afternoon, mom
tried to paint my portrait. I
have it yet. Half-done portrait,
bored teen reading
in a small apartment in
Bethany Beach. Subdued light,
missing only the roar
of the telephone lines.

Oh, it was summer, eternal, young,
even though there was no sun.
Even though the noisy wind
disturbed my sleep.

Pam Blehert

Waves

My brother said those waves
would be great for surfing
if there weren't so many people
in them being thrown all over
the place. Then the TV
changed and I said, This
jungle would be cool to
visit if so many guys weren't
hacking each other's limbs
and building them into
corpse log cabins. Then our
screen went blank, a quake
ripped our legs apart, the
Repo-Man of fate collecting
on past due bills, and a dude
across the world watching
for new disasters nudged
his sister, It'd be awesome
to go there, if only . . .

Donald Illich

Uh...uh...uh

This poem is bio-degradable: Left
in a landfill, the words soon break down
into syllables, then consonants, vowels,
then faint whispers, hints of sound
and meaning, labials and glottals
mingling with the bottles, maggots,
mashed newsprint, coffee grounds,
inarticulate, uh...uh...uh..., squirming
microbes of meaning, harmless, offending
nothing that lives.

Dean Bleher

If She Ever Comes Back

Does the phone go in the ground
or in the electrical cord?
Where are all the fiber-optics?
Are they good for your diet?
Do they make you less alone?

I don't know legally
if it was a bar or restaurant,
whether you could smoke
or if she'd ever come back.
It wouldn't be a problem
if she forgot.
I had everything plugged in.
I had it under control.

Donald Illich

Derring-Do

Cindy Cindy Cindy Lou
Love my poems more than you
You used to be my rhyming queen
Now I love my M-16

Hunter Alexander

Army marching cadence quoted in Karlyn Williams *Love My Rifle More Than You*, Norton, 2005. Williams was an Arabic linguist in the US Army in Iraq, 2004

The Hellivator

Elevator elevator
Slipping up and down
Elevator elevator
Too often breaking down

Hunter Alexander

Dedicated to Elish Graves Otis (1811-1861), safety elevator inventor

Sunset Vignettes

each a separate snapshot in a series on the setting sun

Bolts flash
In the dusk-ridden sky
Black and white photographs
Will tell of something slipping



The tide hauls in dusk
As gulls shriek holes
Through beach house garbage bags
Chicken bones fly
And the dying rays scorch the past



Drip-drop
From on top
Currants bleed
Towards nighttime
Coagulating at the horizon



In lizard latitudes
The sun glows green
Slips through matted trees
Those will pad my dreams

Christine V. Oblitas

Inherited from the Other Martin Dickinson

Small by today's standard,
made of cracked, blackened
leather, held together
by faded red canvas lacing,
a mitt with a baseball-shaped
steel button imprinted
"Spalding, Patent, June, 1908."

On a green and yellow ribbon,
a tarnished bronze medal
showing the fortress at Veracruz
with the words
"Mexico, 1914."

Manufactured by Israel
Bernstein, Brooklyn,
a sword engraved
"To Lieutenant Martin Dickinson,
Gunner, USN, 1916."

A photo of himself
aboard the U.S.S. Chauncey,
destroyer, just before she was
lost on night-convoy duty
110 nautical miles west of Gibraltar,
November 19, 1917,
with 22 dead, including
his own replacement.

A 14-karat-gold
tie clasp with a brilliant
black stone—like new.

A love of radio.
A sense that all of life
is an ocean.

Martin Dickinson

Rock, Water, Root: A Short History

Rock blocked water:

Water fought rock.



Water brought root:

Rock lodged root.



Root caught water:

Root broke rock.



Water naught.

Root stopped.

Rock.

Judith McCombs

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