

The Federal Poet

Fall 2009



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THE FEDERAL POETS

9039 Sligo Creek Parkway #1409, Silver Spring MD 20901

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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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To Begin With

I'd make death a real door,
The kind that leads to a private eye's office
In an old building, the kind that has a large
Frosted window in it. I'd have the dying open
The door, walk through, and say, *Grandpa!*
Mom! Buster! And I'd have us see figures
Rush up and embrace the newly dead,
And I'd have us hear them all laughing,
And see them through the window
Getting smaller, and as they disappeared,
I'd have them call back to us,
I'll see you later, Honey. Better yet,
I'd make it so that the door stayed
Open, and the dead lived
Just across the threshold where we could see
What they were up to when we wanted.
We could talk to them and even touch them —
As long as we did so inside of the door frame.
Better yet, why not get rid of the door altogether?
We could come and go. It'd be a field trip
For second graders. *Hold hands, boys and girls,*
I don't want anybody getting lost in here.
And even if somebody did get lost,
That would be OK because they would have forever
To find their way back to life. In fact,
They wouldn't even have to come back,
If they didn't want to. Better yet,
I'd just make us all dead to begin with.

Doug Wilkinson

Sister Saint Thomas Aquinas McGraw

As I strolled through an old Catholic graveyard one day,
On a cross stern and plain as a soldier's I saw
A name like a clarion that sneered at decay,
A name full of magic, of...*je ne sais quoi!*
It was "Sister Saint Thomas Aquinas McGraw"!

Ah, she was a strong-minded sister, I'll bet,
Who knew stronger curses than "Mercy!" or "Pshaw!"
And when she choked back her most apt epithet,
You could see how it stuck in the leathery craw
Of Sister Saint Thomas Aquinas McGraw.

None dared chatter or natter in this Sister's classes,
And if you forgot, it was "Out with your paw!"
She was fierce with the lads, more fierce with the lasses:
With the sting of her straight-edge, she laid down the law
Of Sister Saint Thomas Aquinas McGraw.

Like a tall stately ship, full-rigged in her habit,
Down the hallways she'd sail without roll, pitch or yaw,
But if something she spied out of order, she'd grab it
By its earlobe or nape: None could dodge the swift claw
Of Sister Saint Thomas Aquinas McGraw.

On her good name no scoffer could find the least dimple,
A chaste and obedient nun without flaw,
From the chill in her eyes to the starch in her wimple —
Even Mother Superior held her in awe,
Good Sister Saint Thomas Aquinas McGraw.

But what do we know of this nun after all?
Was she once a young girl? Every spring did she thaw
To see the first buds soft and sticky? Each fall
As she crunched through the leaves, did a sharp regret gnaw
At Sister Saint Thomas Aquinas McGraw?

continued...

All these thoughts crossed my mind in the graveyard that day
'Neath a bright wintry sky with the breeze a bit raw.
Ah, Sister, I'm sorry to meet you this way,
Where bare branches creak and a few hoarse crows caw
For Sister Saint Thomas Aquinas McGraw.

Dean Blehert

How Could I forget!

Do not send out
too many thoughts
at the same time!

They might
cause a traffic jam
in your already
overloaded brain.

Those thoughts
could even
delete each other
for
your sake!

Ingeborg Carsten-Miller

ANGEL, A COUNTRY SONG

for my daughter

I will make you an angel
from all the patches of my days
and all the scraps of my becoming.
I will take the bare, honest cloth,
denim to organza, and the rare silk,
all the crazy quilt patterns of my life.

I'll sew its doll shape simply,
stuffing it with tender things for love
and sturdy things for courage.
I will give it wings like harps
and eyes of burnished buttons
to catch all love's light.

Its brows will be arched and spirited,
the nose flared to take in the breath of life,
its mouth generous for kissing loved ones.
I will embroider it with my distractions
and hope its seams rein in my lapses.

Crook it in your arm and it will snuggle;
loose it high in the air like a falcon,
and it will hover there,
vigilant.

Judy Neri

"Angel, A Country Song" was displayed in the Poet's Gallery of the Montgomery County Executive Building, Rockville, Maryland, November 22, 1999 through February 6, 2000; it was published in the (online) Innisfree Poetry Journal, March 2007. "Angel, A Country Song" is from Neri's book, *Always the Trains*, New Academia Publishing, 2008). This is available from Amazon.com.

RAPTOR

We had seen death alight,
a wounded sparrow's plight,
the red-tailed hawk regain the height,
fanned by the wind and freshness of its flight,
soar swiftly out of sight.

Cheeping and fluttering and sweeping so ended,
and into the sun a killer ascended.

The hawk of time thus takes his prey
and scatters us our separate way.

Alec McRae

Autumn in Seoul

I once loved you
many, many years ago
when leaves and trees in our Java city
were green.

I wrote to you after reading a feature
in our local newspaper.
You were pictured as unique,
and sounded exotic.

We exchanged letters.
Not exactly romantic,
but of a respect and friendship.
With at least a week in between,
the anticipation and wait
were not like receiving e-mails,
instant messages and cell phones
in the 21st century.

One evening,
I was pleasantly surprised,
when, after a hard day's work,
I found you waiting for me
in the verandah.
Wow, you managed!

The first time we met,
I was awed beholding you.
You were yellow!
What a glow!!
Was it because you came from the Yellow Sea?
You looked somewhat fragile,
but princely.
A prince from the East,
the Far East, where the sun rises.
I am from the Southeast,
where the sun is at the zenith.
In the West, they would say,
you and I are like

continued...

“The Beauty and The Beast.”
“Kakak!” I exclaimed.
Like the deep river,
I suppressed the currents.
We had a polite audience;
but we knew.
If we’d been in the West,
we would’ve hugged;
but our Eastern tradition bound us.

I cherished that moment,
eternalized by the diary you gave me,
which introduced me to Korea.

The currents might have been too deep
to cause a wave on the surface.
The water above appeared so calm,
motionless.

One day,
I braved the airless stillness
and looked for you.
We then again had a polite audience.
You were yellow
In your glow.

.....
Then I stooped my head deep down,
like the wise geisha,
and ran fearfully away.
I stored you in one of the compartments
in my huge heart.
Securely.

Today,
in your city,
I came to search for you!
When I landed, I offered thanks.
When I got off the bus,
I immediately touched my finger tips
to the Korean soil and whispered your name:
“Kak Haq, I am here.”

continued...

And suddenly,
time became immaterial.

I tried to sift through
the millions of faces
along the streets of Seoul,
framed by rows and rows of
yellow trees and leaves,
blown away by the autumn wind,
although I did not expect
to recognize the you that I knew briefly
world away, centuries ago.

Autumn has fallen in the Far East.
Yellow are the leaves and trees.
Are you still yellow in your glow?
Like in my memory?
“Kak Haq, Ninie is here.”

Ninie G. Syarikin

NOTE: ‘Kakak’ or ‘Kak’ means big brother or older sister in Indonesian and Malay languages. ‘Haq’ is a name, usually from the Muslim man’s name ‘Abdul Haq,’ which means ‘the servant of The Truth (God)’ in Arabic language.

A Canadian Thanks Giving Wish

Tried to count them
my blessings
ones that made me feel good
tried to count the ones
that weren't so hot
they needed counting too
tried to count them all
the good
the bad
wanted to be grateful for every day
I've had
didn't matter whether I was sad
or glad...
tried to remember every foot-path
I walked or ran on
the heights I might have flown
even to the depths that I might have fallen
to acknowledge that life
is the gift
each breath bright and golden...
tried to count my blessings
am grateful for the knowledge of you
may this Thanks Giving
you know the wealth of love
spread a little joy too...

Clyde A. Wray

Two Tanka

The great river flows
unhurried and undisturbed,
while the shallow stream
is always agitated,
upset by every pebble.

Wind howls in the trees;
in the mountain cave, silence.
Our eyes see too much,
but our minds see too little.
In the cave, I see far more.

Ron Vardiman

Double Dactyl

Blithery, blathery,
Ronald G. Vardiman
fancied himself as a
rather good poet.

Writing just doggerel,
wasting both time and ink,
superastonishing
failure to know it.

Ron Vardiman

Deep Hour

What if, when we say *Once upon a time*, the time that it's upon, is *now*? As when we sit for hours at the lake's edge, watching birds and sky

flicker on the brink of dusk. If we asked children what they know of time, before they're taught to believe in clocks, they might complain about

time's corners: supper in a distant room, bedtime a dead end to the day. They might report that they have found out *never*, then dance the shapes

of *forward and backward*, which they learned while rocking in their mother's chair. We imagine their time, loose as sand, endless ripples by

the scalloped edge of the sea. Each day an ocean away. What I ask of time is this: to know the petals of lakeside almond trees will blossom into flames again.

Ann Rayburn

"Deep Hour" received Honorable Mention in 2009 "Passager" contest. It was first published in issue #48.

Clouds

Think of the way a cat
curves around your feet,
rubbing against you,

or the way a flower
turns
to the light,

or the way rain falls:
each drop
with the same speed and slant,
falling
at the height of trees,
following the laws of physics,
yet completely free.

We live in different skin bags, you and I,
separated by walls of cells.
We are vulnerable to penetration.
Unremarkable things
can pierce us,
or swell up inside us.

Like the changing shapes
of clouds,
we may leak away
or disappear completely —
so many wisps of cirrus.

When the wind blows
a limb bends,
a leaf falls;

and when the wind blows
we can see ourselves
in a parade of clouds.

Lee Giesecke

"Clouds" was previously published in *Psycho-poetica*, 2008

Small Talk

We are not the only lovers in the world,
nor even the best (if “best” makes sense,
judges viewing our embraces and holding up
nines and tens), but here we are, my love,
right now [well, not as I write, but
SOME now], and it is what it is,
and we’d have no other now.

We are not the only poet and reader in the world,
nor even the best of either (and for this,
there are all too many judges, too many ratings,
too many reviewers and ignorers of poetry
and teachers who assign grades for one’s
“readings” of poems), but I am here,
and you, too, are here (Dear Reader, I presume),
and this time now DOES mean “as I write this”
(one of the many “nows” that are now), and
we’re talking — and it is what it is,
a safe place and time for communication,

which may not seem to have much to do
with love, but, me, I’d rather talk to you
here, where the physical connection, (via
this time warp between now-I-write and
now-you-read) could slip through the eye
of the finest needle — rather talk than press
nakedness to nakedness as a short-circuit
to by-pass the elaborate masks we wear
that cannot speak our own words.

But this isn’t about love or lust or even communication
(if I have anything to say about what I’m saying,
a doubtful proposition, once a poem has reached a reader).
It’s about not having to be perfect, not having to be

continued...

the greatest, about being more than adequate
for a specific purpose, about how words like “great”
can conspire to starve us to death, about what a bore
it can be to carry with us our own personal panels
of judges and score cards, about talking
to enjoy a lively talk.

Dean Blehert

Just a thought

You turn to see
the sun coming in and find
dapples of light on your jacket.
Suddenly it is cold, colder than you like it.
But the yard has been planted for spring.
The furnace and lights are working.
People get up and go to work
in the morning, in the pale light
of dawn. There has finally been rain.
You think it's winter, but perhaps
it's just another thought.

Then it's raining for three days.
three days the rain's been muting
the sound of geese flying south,
the whoosh of traffic on the freeway.
Rain teardrops the trees until
your regret mirrors rain
and you think you are mortal
and cold. But maybe
it's just another thought.

If you thought “sun,”
would you be shining?

Pam Blehert

Long Coastal Highway

(Ocean City, 2009)

smooth jazz
summernight drive,
whistlin descant to *easy jams*
my own
Hound-o-Heaven just,
ridin shotgun ears flappin
howlin
judgments like biscuits,
to all them pretty
round turistas,
smilin grinnin
easy jazz;
listenin,
I just can't handle them judgments,
all them dawgy biscuits just
fline
right out the
summertime winda.

The hound's browns lookin over,
lookin right through me
like he's
Trying to Eschew Me
now *he's* whistlin
bristlin,
joyin the jazz
we are:

smooth jazz
summernight drive,
whistlin descant to *easy jams*
the hound's
smooth
jazz
summernight drive
(whistling descant to *easy jams*...)

Cary Kamarat

Sonnets at the Grocery Store

Grandfather

Again I'm told to "Have a lovely day,"
with over-practiced voice of teenage hire.
As if this youth in sloppy collared gray
could lift my mood with vague franchised desires.

"I wonder, do you care about my day?
Your dead-eyed retail species always feigns
around your boss." Or so I start to say,
as he hefts his mop to wipe up soda stains.

But think, he'll clean the aisles and stock the store
and clear each filthy backed-up toilet plug.
Another sweaty pawn who works the floor
his mandatory smile upon his mug.

Their manners naught but managers' commands,
they rise each morn to meet my dull demands.

Grandson

No more content with guards, the grocery store
employs detectives—Look! They're all around!
I sneak to buy the beef the sleuths abhor,
But damn! I'm seen! I drop the Angus ground.

Beneath their watchful gaze I choose correct:
organic, fairly traded, vegan food.
With X-ray eyes they stare at what I've picked,
then smile, but keep their view upon me, glued.

But the urge is always there—it gnaws my mind
to swipe some oil-burning monster car
and barrel through the country mad and blind,
just eating God knows what and spewing tar.

I'd push the pedal down and cast away
my moral chains to fall on whom they may.

Daniel Grubaugh

Thunder

God Says “Boom Boom”
Comcast says “Sorry for the service disruption”
Today Verizon said “Boom Boom”
Comcast said “Sorry for the service disruption”
Oh God, you’re getting a bit too technical

Julie Kritzer

Amateur Algebra

Algebra Class is tough as usual
Until Professor talks about the area of cones
Ice cream? Length times width? That’s for me

“No! an ice cream cone without the ice cream”
Just a cone? That pale part that nobody eats
For a second there I thought, well maybe
I could make a mathematical career of ice cream

Math is tough

Julie Kritzer

The Snake Man Explains

The humane way to capture
a resident four-foot
black snake that was recently
climbing the furnace wall
and vanishing over the ceiling
ducts to somewhere unknown:
*It's easy. Just pin it down
behind the head with this right-
angle molding—I'll leave you
this piece—then you grab
the tail quick with your free
hand, so it can't whip around,
don't worry, it can't choke you.
Then you get a good
grip at the base of its skull
with your hand, it's not
aggressive, if you get
the right place it can't bite.
But if it does don't
worry, they're not poisonous,
it's not like a dog bite, or human,
you just wash it out good
with soap and warm water. Don't
worry if some of its teeth
come out in the bite,
they're harmless, like fish
teeth, they fall right out.
Now I'll leave you this blue
laundry bag—it's just cloth,
so the snake can breathe—
you hold the bag open, drop
the snake in, tie up the drawstrings
and give us a call. Your snake
will be fine, it'll just sleep.*

continued...

*I'll come back, soon as I can,
and take the snake to a woods
where we set things free. The snake'll
make a new life for itself,
don't worry—you'll hear it moving—
it's got a nest somewhere
in the ceiling or attic—you'll get it.*

Judith McCombs

*"The Snake Man Explains" appeared first in *Nightsun*, then in
The Habit of Fire: Poems Selected & New.*

Style

They found a style
in wartime clubs:
Big Bands, Big Headlines
streaming out the door
through smoke and glass.

He wore a film-noir hat
that helped him
See
Things Clearly.

She combed a white gardenia
to a jaunty peak just beyond her gaze,
and painted lips and nails to match
sweet passion's dream.

Their shoulder pads
could dance them to the floor.
He led.
She followed.
Followed well,
her backhand resting
fingers Spanish-poised
against his pinstriped cloth
they stepped,
and stepped,
and stepped again
as though they
Owned
the right to scheme

their future?
Anyone's guess,

for style was all.
It clung to them
through days and worlds
without end.

continued...

And when their lives had run them down
to the Seven-Eleven for beer and chips,
she let her whiskers grow,
and grow,
her own grey garden just to spite
that film-noir hat she almost loved
and would not live

without.

Cary Kamarat

Drink Up

“...as bright and full of promise as moonlight
in a martini.”

--John Patrick Shanley, *Moonstruck*

Heaven is yours inside a tall stemmed glass,
An Eiffel Tower inverted on its tail.
A million opportunities may pass;
This is the one to grab, this Holy Grail,
This glass of moonlight shining in the dark,
Bright as a Bombay sapphire. Like the eyes
Of new-found lovers, its prismatic spark
Halos the room as if to canonize
The speared and tonsured olive.

Never mind

That maybe you have had this drink before.
You threw up, saw pink hippos, staggered blind;
The angry barkeep bounced you out the door.
Never let on you really wanted beer—
This is your chance. Drink up, while it's still here.

Miles David Moore

"Drink Up" appeared originally in *Light Quarterly*.

Life Can Be Sweet

You learn to love,
endure each pain,
live for another experience.

Should each child
be cushioned forever,
man forgiven - ?

Life is black and white
with many shades in between,
sweet - sour - bitter.

Find your place
on the planks
covering all waters.

Sweetness is
a beautiful bird's song
heard when listened for.

Ingeborg Carsten-Miller

The Poetry Bar

One afternoon I called for my muse,
“Come join me at the Poetry Bar;
Some verse should help me chase the blues.”
So we sat down on the vernacular.

“The menu has many wonderful words;
I see some marvelous metaphors,
assonance like you’ve never heard,
fabulous rhymes that are just to die for.

“Would you like to play a little pantoum?
Some heroic couplets could be a relief,
Or, the Saxon style could be resumed,
an alliterative aperitif.

“Why don’t we start with a little light verse,
or a double dactyl for you and for me.
Then sip on a sonnet while we converse;
iambic pentameter makes us agree.

“The villanelle here is a little too venturous,
but I think you would savor a complex sestina
and I’m sure we could get the waiter to serve us
a bodacious ballad of frozen saga.”

Tossing off some odes and elegies,
I tried the terza rima too long.
A surfeit of free verse put me in jeopardy
of losing my meter and scansioning wrong.

I was getting high, and began to guzzle;
blank verse was flowing like gin and tonic.
I recklessly thought of trying a ghazal,
and dreamed of writing a thousand line epic.

continued...

I was drunk on words, and made a gaffe:
I let out a terrible limerick!
My muse decamped with a scornful laugh,
while I was embarrassed and shamefully sick.

It clearly was over, but words wouldn't stop;
I could write only doggerel, sounding bizarre.
Too late I learned, don't go over the top,
but imbibe with restraint at the Poetry Bar.

Ronald Vardiman

Last Survivors AD 2150

A gaunt outcast
his quaking loins clad in fur
gazes at gauzy pictures
of a whitening wilderness.

Another squats
on an abandoned island
lugubriously restoring boons
from the sea
and splitting husks
in hidden adversity.

Charles Gerald DuBose, Jr.

Night Scope

Letting night work happen,
the STARLITE scope brings
men into lethal range.

Lords over loneliness, with lowered
heads, winding like coral vine through
sandalwood and lotus. We own the night.

The rushing river under Krai Bridge,
just for a second, drags your soul away,
like the Water God riding his dragon.

Now silent on the other side,
we see, but are not seen
by those we came to search for.

There the enemy, smoke-colored, moves
under our eyelids. Shadow-men
lift shadow-loads onto an oxcart.

What looks like one step into the trees,
they're lifting crates of ammo and
sacks of rice, swaying under their weight.

The brain closes in to cross the distance.
Caught in the infrared,
what are they saying?

Are they talking about women
or are they badmouthing us?
"Shi Bao; Ma Fan; Feng Zhu; Wu Gou."

One of them is laughing.
You want to place a finger tip softly
to his mouth and say, "Shhhh."

continued...

You try reading silent talk
on their lips. They chorus,
“*Ju-Ju Shang*,” lifting as one.

This one, old, bowlegged,
you feel you could reach out
and take him gently into your arms.

You peer down the sights of the
ENFIELD L42 and lock on,
seeing the full moon resting on an oxcart.

Alec McRae

Line 7 --The *Kelantan River* which is habitually in raging flood during the Monsoon season.

Line 24 -- In *Pidgin Cantonese*, a common hybrid language used between different peoples of South-East Asia: *Shi Bao* = excrement eaters; *Ma Fan* = mother violators; *Feng Zhu* = crazy pigs; *Wu Gou* = dirty dogs.

Line 30 -- In Pidgin: *Ju-Ju Shang* = up, up we go.

The Young Air Conditioning Repair Man

An open smile
totally unexpected
in my basement.

“Do you speak German?”
"Oh, no —
only Nepalese and English!"

So far away from home
his talent and smile
in America!

Yes,
even a lottery
can bring a young man here!

Ingeborg Carsten-Miller

Gathering Together / Holding Firm

Can it be true? My time of obstruction
is passed, says the Oracle.
The obstacles were so many,
an avalanche of stones
each holding its separate peril.
Having survived them,
they become the mountain
of my strength.
I will turn each over to learn its secrets,
and from the combat
of the devils and angels within it
I will try, at least try
to learn stillness and grace
the power of a stone at rest.

Judy Neri

“Holding Firm” is from Neri’s book *Always the Trains*,
New Academia Publishing, 2008, available from Ama-
zon.com.

Feeding a Squirrel

When I extend my hand
towards him
with a peanut,

He comes up
warily
cocking his head to the left
and to the right,

Getting a bead on me
with each eye
in succession.

And then,
anchoring one hind foot
to a bit of turf,
he stretches towards me—
his whole body straining
at the tether
of the anchored leg.

His prize safely snatched
(from my fingertips)
he pops back
upon his haunches

and begins to juggle
the nut
in his tiny paws
touching it to his mouth
as it turns
to feel, for a certainty,
the rattle of a kernel
upon his lips.

continued...

And when he does,
clamping the nut
between his teeth
and looking up
at me,

Eyes, nose, protruding nut
all agog.

Then grasping the peanut
in his wickedly-interlaced, gnarled claws
and with his tiny ears dancing
upon his gnawing head,
he strips away the husk.

Until a kernel
lies exposed
in the cup
of the half-shucked shell.

Finished,
he peeps down the hole
in the bottom
of the cup,
and then proceeds to gnaw
a new cup
lower down.

Behold!
another succulent kernel
daintily propped
upon the half-shell.

Ah, the delights of the double-
and triple-scooped nut!

Charles Gerald DuBose, Jr

Cover art: *Rock Creek in Winter*, oil, detail, by Coulter