

The Federal Poet

Spring 2009



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Vol. LXVII, No. 1

THE FEDERAL POETS

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<http://www.blehert.com/TheFederalPoets>

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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Subscription (U.S.) \$10.00 (2 issues)
ISSN 1041-4886

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Publication design and typesetting: Words & Pictures East Coast
Published by THE FEDERAL POETS

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A Thought

Words I
Throw
through time
I'm
Aware of
Shimmering—
light shallow
minnows—
Just ahead.

Pam Blehert

Apiarian (Not Urticarian) Words

Symphony, amethyst, crystalline, chrism,
peristalsis, harpsichord, celestial, cerulean
chthonic, chrysoprase, prismatic, Kaleidoscopic...
hive-words, a tree's elaborate basket
of branches, words as cellularly complex
as a bee hive - is it their sounds or their
significances? Both. They are clusters
of little sounds (and how narrow it feels
to crowd big "y" into cramped "thyst"
and "cryst"), snowflake-crisp with consonants,
multiplicity of precisions,
yet suggest a brimming symphonious sweetness.

And their meanings - the complex coordination
of many into unity (symphony), the jeweled
translucent purple clustering
of amethyst, the many-edged symmetry of crystalline,
complex rhythmic motions of peristalsis, spider's web
of notes the harpsichord weaves, celestial's angelic
hierarchies, rank upon rank, like organ pipes.

And the many-threaded lightning
that treads the intricate stair cases
of "cumulo-nimbus." Grandeur is noble,
but singular; grandiosity less haughty,
more populous, but has a hollow center.
Splendiferous wants to be a hive word, but
is too full of itself to hold anything else.
Myriad, an old smoked-out hive, no, a nest,
once busy with a billion ants, if not bees.
Quintessence, there's a honey. Evanescence,
close, but missing the airy precision of "Quint"
melting to complex, subtle flow.

Continued

Cathedral, your meaning demands expansiveness,
but your un-echoing sound is analytical,
an old scholar's glasses slipped down
over his nose, far less sacred
than Cellophane: For all your long vowels,
I can see right through you, ah, cellophane,
diminutive cell, sweet cello and sacred fane,
home of *phanein*, a Grecian revelation, oh
cellophane, cellophane, cellophane!

Dean Blehert

cellophane is a 1912 trademark name for product made from regenerated cellulose, coined by the inventor, Swiss chemist Jacques E. Brandenberger (1872-1954), probably from cell(ulose) + o + phane, from Gk. phainein "to appear."

The Good Fight

(for my mother)

The English Channel surged below you,
its waves licking American bones.
It was D-Day Plus Fifty, Utah Beach,
and all five-foot-three of you
with a thousand other nurses, helmeted,
full-field-packed, clambered down
the rope ladders swaying against the ship.
The transports were children's toys
bobbing below. *Don't look down,
don't slip,* your commanders told you.
Your pack will drag you straight to the bottom.
The Norman fields boomed in the distance
as the waves moaned their hunger.

Sixty summers distant from France,
the explosion was in your brain.
You take lessons on how to lace a shoe,
how to walk with a cane.
Your voice, musical as always,
lilts over the nursing center's phone:
*Honey, I'm going home today.
Can you call my mom and dad
and tell them to come get me?*

Mother, you ascend a ladder now.
The sky is hazy above you,
a fog of dreams and memories.
The decades are your backpack now.
Please don't look down. Please don't slip.
You fight the good fight, now as then.

Miles David Moore

"The Good Fight" was first published in the anthology "Poetic Voices Without Borders 2," published by Gival Press.

Papaya Morning

I'm standing in the kitchen
when you call and half a skinned
papaya drips ripe from my
outstretched hand, paring knife
skewers seeds, glutinous, black,
with the sticky phone pinned
between my shoulder and ear, and

when I tell you this, you persist
in talking about William Burroughs'
hotel bill in Tunisia – room, meals,
so much; boy, so much more;
which leads you to quote
the Bedouin saying:
For company—women;

but for pleasure—a melon;
as papaya juice sprawls down
my forearm and the cat rubs
against my legs, I am content
to hear you out as you plunge
ahead, declare you love me
more than any mango—or melon.

Bonnie Naradzay

"Papaya Morning" was published in the current Delmarva
Review

Autumn Leaves

The autumn leaves have all but gone away,
One last tall iris stiffens with the cold.
What changes wait outside my door today?

The hummingbirds are gone, the sparrows stay,
Squirrels scamper, surefooted and bold.
The autumn leaves have all but gone away.

Black walnut limbs are bare, the bamboo sways,
The air is crisp, a chill within its hold.
What changes wait outside my door today?

The children are no longer free to play,
They sit at desks and do as they are told.
The autumn leaves have all but gone away.

This season too will pass, as each new day
Arises in the waning of the old.
What changes wait outside my door today?

The mirror shows my hair is turning gray.
The season's turning always is foretold.
The autumn leaves have all but gone away.
What changes wait inside my door today?

Edna Small

Whiteout at the Bus Station

Alone, white crust at the heels,
I walk to the bus, up slush
covered steps, down the aisle
to the end of the green seats.

No one is inside the station
except a bored cashier
floating in a dirty lake
of trackless snow. I eat
trail mix, read *Time* magazine,
look at my watch seven times.

When the trip starts, I turn
around to see if any cars
crawl behind us. Nothing
breaks the morning whiteout.
Flakes hit nobody's face.
The town holds its life in.

Donald Illich

Poets on the Fringe

Just one at first,
then many
facing each other
dissecting our words
finding the heart
hidden in layers
of delicious parts
we dared to taste
sometimes dark
often sweet
always
mind flowing
bare...

Pamela Passaretta

Living Moments

A thousand splendid “now”s
 hum and dart between us.
Wings of thought, iridescent
 beat time to stop.
A breath,
 nectar drunk, and the earth shifts
reeling backwards;
 and onwards;
 to nests still undone.

Rani A. Bhattacharyya

Connections

You
have to find
the connection,
the important thread
to the network.

Once you are in,
you will be
either
spider or web.

Be prepared
for
all the consequences!

Ingeborg Carsten-Miller

Love or Truth of Airy Thinness Beat

I reach for what I think is love
Or truth and find I am still separated
By the airy thinness of gold
Sunsets. Even our finest
Aesthetic moments
Involve perception.
The poet's plaint
Is words on a page.
Is truth communicated in such stuff?

Pam Blehert

Nocturnal Creatures

They come from a factory, nightshift workers,
Where fluorescent strips flare all night,

And ears grow numb to machinery;
Going home to working wives just leaving,

To cooling beds at breakfast time,
Undressing fatigue from their skin like clothes;

Later to wake at four and taste teeth
Soft as fur in their mouths.

They live in a dislocation of hours,
Inside-out like socks pulled on in darkness,

Waking when the day is over.
They are always at an ebb,

Going out to work in darkness,
Not much sunshine in their lives.

Alec McRae

Games Master

I make up new inhabitants
for each room my adventurers
enter: a priest who hates the king,

a princess who knows how to fight
when given a sword, a pair
of ignorant bugbears fooled

by my friends, who pretend to be
guards rushing to warn the captain
of intruders. I'm the master here,

brain running at maximum speed,
powered by chips and caffeine.
No bathroom breaks, no pauses to plan

what's ahead, no second thoughts
or bad decisions. With my voice
I hypnotize the game players,

so they forget they're band geeks
and debate team members. Swinging
axes, they knock into the table,

moving in to slash the wizards.
They shoot rays out of soda bottles,
their wands destroying the dragon,

spraying fizz all over the carpet.
I can keep us up way past dawn,
rolling dice on pizza boxes,

yelling commands through cracked lips,
filled with enough worlds to dispel
the exhausted light of this one.

Donald Illich

The Goons of August

Andy Rooney and Condoleezza Rice
Could not think of anything nice
To say about Vladimir V. Putin
When he sent his tanks into Tbilisi shootin'.

Hunter Alexander

Subway Girl

She found me wanting—
wanting her that is—
and not wanting me back
or me front
or any part of me,
“Stand Back,” she said,
“Doors Closing.”

Lee Giesecke

The Masks

We are the known, the knowable,
the honored, the displayed:
masks of pigment, metal, shell;
masks of cloth and clay.

We flaunt your species' chosen shapes
of goddess, beast, or kin,
as we protect from human gaze
the gods and beasts within.

You in your masks of flesh and bone
may stare: may partway see
how skin conceals, or glance makes known
your hidden pit of needs.

It is your shaping hands we use,
your other-seeing sight:
through which our shapes and shadows move
with tearless, staring eyes.

Judith McCombs

The Terror

Tenderly the light descending
candles turning
woven strands
her upturned hands to hold the flow
a mother's tears.

She lit the flame
remembering morning songs
when children played
on blue-rimmed beaches
of a dream,
their casting pails
and castles bravely holding
back the tide
relentless tide
relentless time,
until

Hearts were Frayed against the Cutting Edge
Another Cause Another Slaughter
Burning Dawn when Suns Descending
Burst the Dream to Fiery Shreds

to light these candles

now.

She never dreamed a healing flame
might one day hope to mend the sun,
might one day hope to bring the children
Home, to stay.

Cary Kamarat

The Aged Poet

He sits upon a post
his head propped upon a cane
his face grooved and old
like the road.

And like the road
he waits
with his eyes closed.

Suddenly a girl runs by
her hair in the wind
like a stream flowing behind her.

And his eyes open
quivering

a smile pulls at his lips

as slowly
he lifts his head
from his cane.

Unnoticing she runs on
passing him

and his head drops back
upon the cane.

And again
slowly
his eyes sink back
into his head

as small pools
sink into the road
after rain.

Charles DuBose

St. Mark's Hospice

Through St. Mark's big picture window
we watched the ferry leave Plymouth Harbour.
My little sister, Helen, looked down in anger
at her body, "It's just a useless piece of rubbish.
If I had a pill to put me away, I'd take it right now."
"But a lot of people love you," I pleaded. "Yes,"
she sighed and sank deep into her wheelchair.

She still had her thick red hair, but now her bones
were fragile as sticks of chalk. Cancer was
eating her bones as we sat there—dissolving them
to clog her blood with calcium. I saw the bright shine
of death in her eyes. She wanted to go home—
but her bones would break. "There are always
miracles," her dying roommate chirped weakly.
Helen smiled and looked away to face the mystery alone.

Alec McRae

Enoch Dillon

The next poem is by Enoch Dillon, economist, Army vet and member of the Federal Poets for many years, who died at the age of 82 on August 18, 2008. He retired in 1980, then wrote two books, “The Bicentennial Blues: 200 Years of the American Presidency,” 1988, and the poetry volume, “Love, From the Ends of the Earth,” in 1990.

The Federal Poets salute him for his enduring love of the written word.

Parkinsonians

We shuffle, shake, and slur as if we're drunk
and hunching over find that we have shrunk.
We give instructions to once nimble fingers
and wait awhile as our brain malingers.
We cannot bend or reach to tie our shoes—
our faces freeze in constipation blues.

We dress while drooling tiny waterfalls
from heads that jut out like Neanderthals
whose guilty ego often urges hurry
so we will fumble buttoning with worry,
for we will be embarrassed when our host
will have to help us cut our dinner roast.

It may be poisons from deep-water wells
led throats to low and lower decibels—
now treatable with pills that are emetic
our tremors might be also found genetic,
but fifty years ago our stance was green
when we began to lose our dopamine.

We practice what we can of smiling strides
and stand upright, self-pity's suicide—
and if our writing can't be helped by tutor
we try composing on our son's computer.
Remember that it's our own soul we curse
when frowns and quits anticipate the hearse:

instead we thank our God we're somewhat spry
to exercise despite our alibi
in hope that reason in us older farces
will keep our aching muscles off their arses—
for now let palsy swing with levity
and daily mine our mind's epiphany.

Enoch Dillon

"Parkinsonians" was first published in MEDIPHORS, Fall-Winter, 1996

The Prostitute

At noon
in a darkened room
behind a wicket window
she waits
silently

knitting as she waits.

On the street of wicket windows
men pass peer in and pass on.

Day after day
sitting
in the slit-eyed light

until the day
she moves outside
into a booth on the same street.

There under small bags
bulging with toys
she calls out
but no one buys.

When young
she merely whispered
to the men passing her window.

Whispered
and they entered.

Continued

When younger
many came.

And like a priest
concealed
in his confessional

she would listen.

And grant her blessings
to the worthiest.

Now at night
in a narrow booth
with a bulb overhead

she sits

hunched over a counter
tending her little bags.

Charles DuBose

Nursing Home

The last stop is this:
a wheelchair next to a flower bed
where camellias not always bloom,
reality passes by in pale shadows,
screams become common concert pieces
and
family members barely exist.

Where is
my smile,
my comfort,
my mother, mate,
my friend ?

Dreams
hang in windows
that are
blind and closed.

Ingeborg Carsten-Miller

Daphne & Apollo: Meditations

1.

Beneath a hood of leaves, spiced
with new gold, I lean into bark —

Daphne in her escape,
not quite grown—

the jugular body of a woman silent
when Apollo turned his salty body against her,

his fingers
like flies against a window pane.

She stood shuttered, let none
of the writhing slip

to the bark edges,
silenced the river winds,

that no breeze would sound
how her nimble body broke it,

how her pinions grooved the earth
and how she would rise, clean as jasper,

push to new heavens —
a fortress rising with sawed stones.

2.

She noticed first the looseness of the skin,
as if she had given birth,
but nothing, nothing:

never opened, emptied, sutured shut again,
never the raw, open-breathed fissure,
the breaking shoots of the garden.

Continued

She wondered, if she had arms to move,
could they round about a child,
would she warm its body with her own,

would it be more than taking Apollo —
the white-gold flash of him —
into them?...but the blooms about her

tightened, offered nothing;
their stems were stolid as crucifixes;
they touched only in strong winds.

3.

This was the time-edged terror of having it,
a vessel — the snap and snare
of her body opening, the sharp sweep
of recoiling leaves.

But Apollo could only love her;
he wisped his lyre strings with a sliver
of her silver bark, laurel woven
about its sea-wood throat.

The voice was new —
passion raised like the chronic sweat of flowers,
droplets like stones in a boy's tight fist
and dropped, scattering —

and it was not a chase: no lunging cries
or love notes pinned to tree-trunks,
kneeling and nipping a frail hand.
When he left her, she prayed

for a fatal discus to strike him,
that he might bloom beside her
and she would shade him
and his hollow conch-shell voice

which asked nothing.

Donna Lewis Cowan

(Previously appeared in *Fickle Muses*, February 2008)

Sonata in C Major

After a discordant day I listen to Haydn
and feel a simple warmth in my heart.

The music says: *Freedom exists
and no one has to pay the final price.*

I lean back, push my hands down in my pockets
and imitate a person looking on the world calmly.

The Haydn flag is hoisted – it signifies:
We want peace! But we don't surrender!

The music is a glasshouse on the slope
where the rocks fly, the stones roll.

And the rocks pass right through
but each pane stays whole.

Alec McRae

The Horse

Barely a yearling, the horse
parts the high grass to meet us at the fence
that separates the meadow from the graveyard.
Snuffling the wire mesh, he waits
patiently for us to admire him
and stroke his palomino muzzle.

We, who have just left the ashes
of husband, father, grandfather,
are weary of farewells, and turn slowly away.
When we leave the horse, he whinnies—
a sound as lonely as a winter midnight.

Two months later, I return
to mown grass, a distant house and cows.
The flags on the graves snap like whips
in the wind that canters along the fence
and nickers in the trees.

Miles David Moore

The Walking Tree's Message to the Sparrow

Bird bright,
I remember your eyes—
Blink winking inquisitive
high in the heat
of a Balkan summer afternoon;
and also your slate-vacant stare
following the cormorant migration
along Arda's slush-frozen shore.

During their eclipse now
I feel my frayed husk crumbling
and I wanted to thank you
for dropping me, cracked and angry
in this foreign country.

Under the sun's bleaching warmth
and in the red-acrid earth
I send out thin tendrils to leach out
sustenance from everyone I touch
I am rooted now with a self serving purpose.

What words can I phrase to you—
a bread-crumbs scavenger?
This is the carbon being stored in my memory.

Starch that only through burning
will let each of us grow.

Rani A. Bhattacharyya

Queens in the Garden

*Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden,
The Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.*

The king and queen,
slim bodies of bronze,
perch on a curving bench.
How can they be so weightless,
so unmarked, the queen's slight
nipples the only sign of sex?
Single eyed, they stare into space,
neither sees the other.
They do not deign to speak.

Further down the path

the woman from the Yucatan
is seated on a camp chair, her legs
spread wide under a broad draped skirt,
her massive bronze body at ease.
Her eyes are closed, her face smooth.
She has already loved, given birth,
nursed, grieved. Now she rests.
*When you can, be still, she says.
When you must, be fierce.*

Edna Small

King and Queen, by Henry Moore, 1952,1953
Seated Yucatan Woman, by Francisco Zuniga, 1979

"Queens in the Garden" was first published in Beltway Poetry Quarterly, Volume 10, Number 1, Winter 2009

Smiling Arches

Waking, a picture on my wall—
Monet's Flowering Arches,
A smile reflecting on a stream.

Last night I dreamt of math traumas.
What numbers can be graphed into a smile?

I can draw a frown,
Then draw a smile beneath it.
Yet it is not Monet's Flowering Arches.

A class that does not give me nightmares
I take all books on the subject
Stacking them into three piles
With it a smaller pile in the middle.

They fall over as I attempt to organize them
But I know the music to sing today
As a small piece,
Of each lip turns up.

Today I have constructed a smile.

Julie Kritzer 2009

Las Cintas

It was the *Fiesta de San Agustin*, the 25th of August
in blazing *Andalucía*; *Spain*.

We wore long bright blue, red and orange skirts.

Yellow and cream peasant blouses
jostled our adolescent breasts.

We walked to the *Plaza* carrying our name
embroidered ribbons.

The boys trotted on horses past us thumping their
hooves, imitating

our hearts as we got closer to the race.

We *Senoritas* climbed wooden bleachers cheering
our *Caballeros*,

Charging with a lance to pierce the ring
dangling from a high

wire, winning our wide ribbons.

Then pinning them around our shoulders and tiny
waists, we blushed.

After the *Corrida*, we danced the bright sun away
until kisses in the dark.

Pamela Passaretta

**Las Cintas*: The Ribbons/Banners

**Senorita*: Young Lady/Maiden/Damsel

**Caballero*: Cavalier/Knight

**Corrida*: Run/Race/Tournament

Moving & Grooving Late In the Night

We all dance to music
some like a lively pace
others to a slower groove
some are erratic
all over the place
some so smooth
they dance with style and grace
some dance with lead feet
kind of like a elephant dance
others move
as if they've written a book
on the art movement
or
the art of romance...
some even
dance like politicians
a wiggle and giggle
kind of the way jello moves
not much happens when they settle down
it's all about the blues
others move like your local parish priest
he's kind
but he's got two left feet
has a tendency to double speak
rather be holding a gin and tonic
than doing
a foxtrot or tango number...
some move like hot sauce
all wonder and spice
other dancers remind you of how paint dries
it really doesn't matter as long as we dance
late into the night

Clyde A. Wray

The Virtue of Innocence

To just smile
Take a block
Put one on top of another
Knowing the second after
You could just knock them all down
Finding joy in creating, destroying

Now when things are created
They must be kept
Nothing is as simple
As block upon block
Yet everyday a child seems to ask
When will I be old enough to do this or that?

If only a child could see
The virtue of knowing less
Let it stay for just a second longer

Julie Kritzer

Reply to a Poem about the Many Forms of Love

Practice brings competence,
And, as Milk said (reportedly)
Two men may not make children
“but we keep trying.”
So we keep practicing love
On many levels.
Love with enameled coffers,
Thinly beaten gold, hammers,
Sticky sperm, hate,
The smell of fresh baked
Peanut butter cookies.

Pam Blehert



Cover art: Summer on the Mall, Smithsonian, Coulter, oil