

The Federal Poet

Spring 2010



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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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Julie's Lament

I am having and want to have a bad day
Today if I could make a friend, I wouldn't
Today if I could write a book, I'd write all curse words—
Publish it, then tear them to pieces
If my mouth happened to move in an upward direction
I'd slowly but surely move it down into the depths of
depression.

Julie Kritzer

Fatslug Meets a Funnyman

It was so brief, it was almost
subliminal: Fatslug, on the Down escalator
in his office building, saw going Up
a funnyman.

Not a superstar comedian, mind you,
but famous enough: a talk-show darling,
Mr. Anything-for-a-Laugh.
A make-animal-noises, doff-his-toupee,
dance-crazy-to-Spike-Jones-records type.

To this day Fatslug doesn't know
why he did what he did. He wasn't
a particular fan of the funnyman,
rarely even gave him a thought. Perhaps
it was the surreal juxtaposition
of funny fame and him,
perhaps a conditioned response
to craziness that made him crank up his face
in a silly grin, wave and call out
the name of the crazy funnyman.

Except
the funnyman, in person, didn't act crazy.
He reacted the way that Thomas Mann
or Igor Stravinsky might have reacted:
iced Fatslug down with a cold blue stare,
then hid his face in his mink collar.

Did Fatslug learn a lesson? Only this:
that it is good to be funny
and crazy. Then you can afford mink collars
to hide your face
from the unintentionally funny and crazy.

Miles David Moore

Fatslug Meets a Funnyman appeared in *Buddha Isn't Laughing*
(Argonne House Press, 1999)

The Dance

Words and more words tumbling down
the mountain page past rocks
and crevices, words tripping over
themselves: *traipse* and *tangled*
and *swash*, words with prance
and strut, the swagger of love, words
leaping like a frog, croaking presence
on the page, the page filled with
the slant of off-rhyme, the rant
of polished polemics, Iroquois
spirits whooping past the bare
line to finish the dance before
the fire dies, the warriors
unfazed by quiet, the bowl
of water still rippling.

Mary L. Westcott

White People Vote Black

It matters not how black the skin
Obama is the soul
He is the captain of his fate.
He is the master of his goal.

Hunter Alexander

Why My Deserving Talent Will Never Make It to the Big Leagues

Recently I got a printed letter from a student interne at Washington and Lee, saying that my wonderful talent deserved to be represented in the new collection of Virginia poets they are creating — and eventually they might even have funding to PAY poets for their work. So would I send them, please, all my published books. In the margin a handwritten note — looking just as personalized on each of the 200 letters (or 1000 or 10,000) sent out — says that it would be great if I'd autograph them too.

I was tempted. But I wondered about a, no doubt, form letter from someone who'd never read a word of mine (I suspected), yet began by telling me what my talent deserved. I wondered too if I was obligated by my address to become a "Virginia Poet."

The letter included an e-mail address (for questions), so after letting the letter ferment for three days (not a word of it changed), I e-mailed her. Why? Must have felt embarrassed at my cheapness, felt a need to justify. I said thanks, but I'd given away hundreds of copies of my books and never, that I knew of, had that expanded my audience; that I found people willing to pay for my books, who then actually read them; that I'd written my books to be read by people, not archived, but that I'd be glad to sell them as many copies as they pleased to buy. (I mentioned two other universities that had purchased my work.)

The response, next day, was from the professor —
(I must have been too much for the interne.)
It said:

Thank you for your thrifty and candid response.
I'm certain your decision is the best one possible
for all concerned."

(I could hear the gentle nudge on "all".)

Ooh, that venomously genteel snideness —
I remembered why I'd hated faculty meetings
during my brief academic career.

I thought of a dozen sharp answers,
but knew that ANY answer would just
make it worse. The whole exchange
stuck in my throat until, thinking of
Monte Python, I evoked an answer
so good that I didn't need to send it:

Dear Professor [name],
Thriftyly
and candidly
I fart
in your general direction.

Cordially, etc.

Will this get to him somehow, perhaps
by spiritual telegraph? With what professorial
rapier thrust will he respond?
I am waiting for the other silken stocking
to drop.

Dean Blehert

The Clay Sculptor

She pulls, pushes,
and pats the clay's mass,
her thoughts wandering
with the ball of earth,
wet and wedged,
that surrenders itself,
malleable in her hands.

She moves with the clay
to a medley of hummed tunes
step by step making
one shape that morphs
into another one
until an immature form
quicken and takes the lead
in its own creation
using the sculptor's hands.

The artist acquiesces,
to the sculpture's demands
as it grows and embodies
its final shape,
which in turn,
molds and transforms
the midwife-sculptor.

Elizabeth Black

Sweet Day

We are happy steel turned
into cookie dough. Rockets
melt down into greasy taffy.
The world decides to eat candy
rather than destroy each other.
Now we can concentrate
on playing Monopoly, paste
each other's faces to Baltic
Avenue instead of buying hotels.
We pay each other air money,
which is invisible, a threat
to no one's shaky finances.
Suspending each other over
lava pools and razor blade pits,
we don't fear we'll drop
our friends, because sugars
in the sweets will grab them.
They've learned to speak,
are great humanitarians,
even to cowboys who tie them
into fruit loops and licorice lassos.
One day we fear jellybeans
might become bullets again,
crème filled will puff themselves
full of anger, lollypops will
jump from the mouths to run
into jeeps, tanks, and jets,
be chomped by the enemy's teeth,
shattering into glossy pieces
so someone else has to pick up
burning orange and sticky red.

Donald Illich

Bombers

Why do young men litter?
Because they can.
It is their show of importance.
It comes as easily as a twisted smile;
and because it is a smile,
it will always be.

Why do young men bomb?
Because they can.
Surely, though, suicide bombers are different.
Is it because they lack poetry
or have too much?
Is it anger
or a deep need to weep?

Of course, their self-annihilation
we must applaud.
We are saved from their collective breath —
from its rant and rancor.
We are spared their CO2.
Our planet is a little less like Venus.

But why the tantrum,
why the need to weep?
Do they hate because they ache,
or ache because they hate?

Lee Giesecke

Giving Up Skin

It wasn't hard at all. Our teachers clapped erasers together and we turned into skeletons. We didn't have to worry about prom anymore.

No tuxedo store would sell to us, no boutique would deliver dresses to our minimalist bodies. Instead, we rolled our bones down grass hills.

We evaded dogs as we took walks in the park. The entire definition of school slipped from our minds, traveled to dream depths, never to be

seen again. It was easy for us to pose for doctors for extra money, many who wanted to view the insides of teenagers. It wasn't difficult

to disassemble as a jigsaw puzzle for bright kids who always felt as if we left one piece out, our gentle joke. We decided it might be best

to fade away. We scared children and adults, even on Halloween, and there was a safe place we could go where we wouldn't feel different.

Our new neighbors were very quiet, and we tried to stay very still, so someone could look at us and believe that we were one of them, the undead.

If we stayed long enough we'd become as cold, forget our ages, let time tell us we're old.

Donald Illich

The Day

Wears stretch pants
tucked in high top boots.
Kicks me in the shins.
Gets its heels caught
in the teeth of the escalator.

Carries a gym bag,
texts all the way to work,
wears buds in its ears,
drums so loud, they reverberate.

The day beats me to the seat.
Takes it up, all of it,
snacks on cookies,
falls asleep and snores,
wakes up to devour the news
as if it's the last supper.

Nancy Allinson

Climate Change: the Original

The goose launches off the ground
circling the pond once with wings stretched--
tips cupping in descent.
Its leathery feet flare hard,
bracing to skid through iced shallows;
slender neck turning to target
my presence on the trail.

A single honk welcoming,
another warning:
 Spring is here; do not tread.
The skunk cabbage unfurls
a mottled green and white sash
to cordon off January's chill.

I step off the path
head bowed in deference,
to the murmur rising up
from under the leaves of earth.
Its resonance buzzing my feet,
curls my toes –
and ricochets against
the plane-angled surfaces of sheltered snow.

Rani A. Bhattacharyya

Fatslug on Ice

It's the Olympic skating finals, Fatslug.
Never mind you've never skated before.
Never mind you were brought here under false pretenses.
Never mind your hands are tied behind your back
and you're wearing roller skates.
The spotlight shines on you, Fatslug.
The program calls for you to begin
with a triple-Salkow and double-Lutz,
whatever those are.

The friends who told you this was just for fun
are the judges. They sit
immovable as Aku-Aku, lights
refracting from their glasses like sun from glaciers,
pencils sharpened to stiletto points.

The crowd is sending up a chant
which is either, "Fat-SLUG! Fat-SLUG! Fat-SLUG!"
or something far less pleasant.
The judges, with ostentatious flourishes,
write zero-point-zero before you even move.
"The Flight of the Bumblebee" squawks through the
P.A. system
as you take your first step and fall full forward
to meet your old friend ice.

Miles David Moore

Wrong Season

(after the deep snowfall, February 2010)

I am not a fox, says the fox.
The wind colors me red and the snow
makes me deep and silent.
The quality of light is hunger.
There will be no warm respite.
Everything has gone to ground.
I can move, the falling white
bounding my wooded world.
But I can't escape.

I am not a bird, says the sparrow.
The light frames me brown and still.
I am cold, not flight. I am caught
in the wrong season. Where
are my friends? Where is my food?

I am not a deer, says the doe.
What can I do in this white world?
I am ghost, fading into the woods,
looking for shelter. I am surprise,
the quality of waiting.

I am not future or past,
say the fox, the sparrow, the doe.
I am now. I am sight, I am hearing.
The quality of light is hunger.
I am caught in the wrong season.
I am ghost.

Pam Blehert

In Crows Time

Crows congregate
flapping thick black wings
into the wet woods
by the beaver dam
where their discordant cries settle
then explode into husky guffaws
when more crows
arrive to socialize---
bright and quick-witted,
they exchange murderous lies.

Close by, a Red-Bellied Woodpecker
hammers on a dead tree
alive with insects
when six crows, like black furies,
surround and threaten him.
How quickly he darts
between limbs---
a fast right, a left jab,
then up and around the tree
until the crows leave
their chase as champions
to light on his tree.

In an instant, the crows rise
like a storm
flying, cawing,
above the gray lace of winter branches
in tens, fifties, and hundreds,
over a thousand strong,
crossing the butter light
where the pale sun drops
in the woods alchemizing
beech leaves to gold.

Who sounded the alarm?
I heard none---
Perhaps the passing hawk

or the Cub Scouts tramping
on the spines of dry leaves
or the crow's internal clock
saying, "Now is the time."

Elizabeth Black

Celibates

Toiling in the garden
of her convent's impregnable shell
a gleaming-eyed nun
sings of the soul that blooms
in her heavenly womb

while a monk in his monkish cell
his skull armored in dogma
and his body damned to solitude
dreams of the word
that will scotch the Snake
that afflicts him nightly
with hellish glooms.

Charles DuBose Jr.

Spring Magic

In spring, as kids, we took a magic walk
winding through forsythia. Each clasping
a pebble chosen with great care, we stepped
into the burst of blooms, chanting our wishes.

Spring greeted me this morning with a dazzle
of yellow forsythia low in the yard,
clusters of white cherry blossoms above,
last week's early daffodils still vibrant.

I marvel at forsythia, its resistance
to restraint. Whips reach up, or out, or cross
each other, curving toward moist earth to root.
Shaping forsythia spoils its sprightliness.
Like wishes made in early spring, it needs
sun, good air, and ample space to flower.

Edna Small

Drawing

An eye,
A circle merely
Crayons cut scribbling satires
Of every elementary
Loved Lost

Julie Kritzer 2010

Getting Off on Gnosis

My separate existence is starting to piss me off.
I'd rather be a fizzy tablet in water; to dissolve!
To abandon this awkward two-legged form, and
to be everywhere and nowhere at all,

everyone and no one, devoid of all desires – and not
one of those shaped like a mandrake root,
not skidding as children do down a slithery slide,
braking with their feet.

Not gazing through blue slits from a sphere of bone,
not craving the air my nostrils draw in,
not whirling on a fiery carousel,
the sunset behind me, stretching always for the dawn.

Alec McRae

Your Mother!!

Did your mother notice
did she happen to see
sparks fly
as you came into my view
did she see them shoot from
my eyes !?
Did she see the smile that encased
my face
did she notice the all to brief
loving embrace...
did she question why I talked
a bit too loud and fidgeted
like a love sick cow...
Did she question you
why I wouldn't move from the spot
to nearest you..
Mothers have a certain eye
notice the things we try to hide
I'm sure she noticed
I was standing
a bit too close by your side
did she question you
ask you why
I hope she didn't notice
I'm a love sick guy
that wants a piece
of the apple of mom's eye

Clyde A. Wray

The First Boy

We had become great friends
Waltzing a minor Romeo & Juliet Summer
Feeling so comfortable together
Your smile meant so much to me
You were the greatest friend I had ever known

Yet it was not so long ago that
Well, boys had cooties
So then I realize
A boy doesn't have a cootie
He has a penis
And well you have one too

The perfect timing in the room
With you, me, awkwardness and a piano
We hear girls and boys in those rooms
Not much sound
So what do they do?

Well. with us
A duet of heart and soul
Connecting in a song
I play a song
Then you
A kiss
A touch
But it didn't feel quite right
It just didn't

In PG-13 movies
Kids don't kiss
Then play a duet of heart and soul
But I'm glad my first kiss was at a piano
I'm a musician after all

Julie Kritzer

The Violin

and the Lady in Black

This is their film noir.
He—half naked playing the violin.
She—dressed in a black evening gown.

She tries listening, but falls asleep
to his tremolo, his crescendo.

He plays the violin as if it were she
and she's jealous of the other woman—
the violin— that he plays like he plays her.

In this film noir, she is the vixen,
the temptress like the devil in Cocteau's
Orpheus—a woman in a black evening gown.

And he wants her this way.
But she doesn't want to be his muse,
his vixen, but rather HER muse.

And she cuts and splices the film
to capture the man she fell in love with.

The finale is when he climbs into bed with her,
and she pretends to be his violin.

Marjorie Sadin

Friday Night

They sniff their watches,
thinking time has a scent.
Or, they call their spouses,
it's like having a snack.
There's popcorn for those who work hard.
Their stomachs bulge with ambition.
Consumption lies flat on its back
while the workers sponge the spine
of the week clean,
leaving Friday night plus a beer
to rinse what is left down the drain.

Nancy Allinson

Bill's Ballad

There is a bottle of dry white wine
cold and chilled in a spring.
It dangles from a hempen vine:
a tug will reel it in.

My life is wispy as a cloud
whose aimless paths I follow.
I might stray from bubbly springs
but now I want a swallow.

Within a grove of cherry trees,
a basket waits for me.
It holds fresh bread and soft white cheese
and the wine I drink with thee.

Mary Westcott

Senior Fare

On the bus
the woman next to me stares
straight ahead. A man stands
nearby, never glancing my way.
A young woman works on a puzzle.
A man with white wires looping
from his ears keeps his eyes closed.

On the bus
a man talks on a cell-phone.
A high-school student moves
his lips as he reads. A mother
points out the sights to her toddler.
Teen-aged girls gab non-stop.

When I get off, I trip
on a broken curb. A man waiting
at the stop steadies me.
Do be careful, he says. I thank him
for the help, and silently, for proof
that I am not invisible yet.

Edna Small

Just Age

It is Age you paint
in all your pictures now,
not the fresh curiosity of youth.
You write the dark
colors of knowledge,
the grey paint of experience.

The green of hope
seems forgotten.
The red of passion —
where is it?
Even the yellow
of envy and greed
is gone.

There is
the veil of forgiveness,
the softness of rest —
no edge of torn awareness,
only the dark thread of reality.

Yes,
it is Age
you are painting.
Acceptance
of
the inevitable.

Ingeborg Carsten-Miller

Notes from a Journey

I

Now, in that country of summer, we have climbed
the mythic ruins where carving and glyph proclaim
harvests of blood. At lesser sites we have come
from sun to dark through doors of the unnamed
descending god, the diver whose legs are braced
against skies, whose oval encircling arms bear flowers.
Now, where thousands were killed, more thousands laid waste,
a few like us fall from the heights each year.

Caught by the camera in that foreign light,
we are framed mid-climb in our children's images:
hands taut on the rope, a man with a beard as white
as your father's was, looks up with your changed face;
a grey-blond woman, pretending to catch her breath,
waits with you on the steep uneven steps.

II

In the winter just past, in a room of great stillness,
we sat with our best-loved cousin a while,
our hands over hers.

The pull of her breathing,
the struggle and lull, struggle and lull.
Your hand over mine, over time.

Then I saw
the steady pulse in her neck go flat
and heard the clock on the wall start ticking
and knew her breathing would not come back--
as if a door had opened, or shut, she was gone--
that opening, as after sex, when the sounds
of the wind, the house, the traffic come back,
and you are breathing steadily beside me.

You have held me more than half your life.
I have held you more than half of mine.

Judith Mccombs

Parting

The pickup stopped at the bus station
and for a moment stood absolutely still.
The doors slammed, two people emerged,
embraced, said goodbye forever.

A package dropped, the moon dimmed,
the doors slammed again, even louder
and the pickup started up slowly
and vanished in the darkness like the twentieth century.

Alec McRae

Forever Gone

“Wait a minute!”
I called
and meant
to stop the time.

I had not finished
what I had
in mind
to do.

But Time
did not stop -
the clock went
on ticking

What I had
need to do
was lost
in time!

Ingeborg Carsten-Miller

Bathing in Benares

The sinking sun glints off the backs
of water buffalo, sleek from plowing

monsoon paddies in the heat. Along
the pilgrimage road at dusk, Sanyasi wrapped

in saffron cloth intone their Sanskrit prayers,
hold out their begging bowls for rice. Here

death's unveiled in the ash-strewn air
with marigolds, and jasmine twining the hair

of penitents who flow in crowds to ghats
to bathe and soak, while buzzards circle Parsi

funeral towers. Harijans paste sandalwood
on their fly-encrusted dead. When fires lick

the corpse that floats away on its pyrrhic boat,
flames illuminate the drifting, fragrant smoke.

Whole generations silt these waters.

Wade in with me.

Bonnie Naradzay

Paddleboat Dreams

Paddleboat dreams
that ply the golden foam,
keep time, roll on
like softly churning wanderlust,
each turn of the showboat wheel
bathing time
in its wake—

From where she watched, ashore,
her soul awash in memories she loved
but never had,
the churning silt flowed
past the grand verandas.
A sometime Southern Belle
that somehow never tolled,
she could just see them now,
she could just daydream now
plantation greens and
Scarlet,
past the elegant lords and ladies
fair and gallant,
to each other,
past the levees where the darkened lives
beneath them sang
and danced their pain.

When she came down to the river
nursing dreams,
she neither knew nor had more
than the mud between her toes.
She meant to glide her forgiving heart
beneath her broad-brimmed summer hat,
but passion pinched her poetry.
And crinoline was only for verandas
and the prom;
so she wore her plain-weave best,
with baubled gypsy flair
that brought the Middling Sea

far from its home.
She bore her olive foreignness
among the fair, among the black,
magnolia sweet
and needing to belong to all of these;
all these she loved.

Half-porcelain—
on her mother's side—
she never told them of her need;
she never bought a ticket,
never jumped aboard,
never danced among the ribboned tambourines,
waving at the barefoot lads that cried,
"Showboat's a-comin'!"
on another shore
deep in her mind.

She never stopped spinning
her paddleboat dreams, watching
her boat,
from the riverbank—
from an earthbound shore
where hopes and fancies danced quietly,
unsung,
deep in her heart.

Cary Kamarat

House on the Patuxent River

Reading Elizabeth Bishop

Leaning back on wheezing chairs,
we prop our feet, eat apple cake
With raisins soaked in rum, and read
aloud in turns from Bishop's poems.
Shapes of otherworldly firs emerge,
anchored in the ghostly fog.

We enter dreamy divagations in a bus
and pause to slide the glass doors open
for the cat, fur slick from spats of rain,
mewling back inside to claim a seat.
The driver's a local who stops for moose.
The sky is darker than the water now.

Torrential rain arrives and surges through
a brake of reeds. The Riverman is here.
Winds raise the spirit-level, and water
overflows the pilings. The bulwarks
are submerged, cattails sway in choppy
waves, and crab traps clang against the pier.

Bonnie Naradzay

Curtain Call

Soon shall the curtain rise again;
then players come, you actors speak,
the stage, the lights, the set, the play,
the call is irresistible.

I long to cast my voice once more
in ringing tones across the footlights,
speak the poetry of Shakespeare,
the wicked wit of Shaw or Wilde,
and play the wise man, fool or villain.

The many ghosts of characters past
who lived but briefly on the stage
still haunt the boards of this good hall.
Once more we actors must become
someone we never knew before,
yet try to find within ourselves.
So listen close, the play's the thing
to raise the mirror to our souls
and fill imagination's wings.

Ron Vardiman

Old Tradition

Not being
a traditionalist
I love the Saint John tradition
of speaking:
“good day”
“good to see you”
“top of the morning to you”
“what’s up with you?”
that’s the way of the morning
the way
I like to start a morning
to rid myself of the morning blues
most times
the night before
I went to bed
with the worst and most horrendous tales
of the world’s news
tight shoes
enough bills that might make anyone
sick enough
to get a deadly case of the flu
and a huge sense of emptiness
to give me
a severe and almost deadly
bout of the blues
so when I speak to you in the morning
speak to me
civility is good news
you’ve got nothing
to lose
it’s an old tradition
The Old Port City of Saint John
shouldn’t lose!

Clyde A. Wray

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