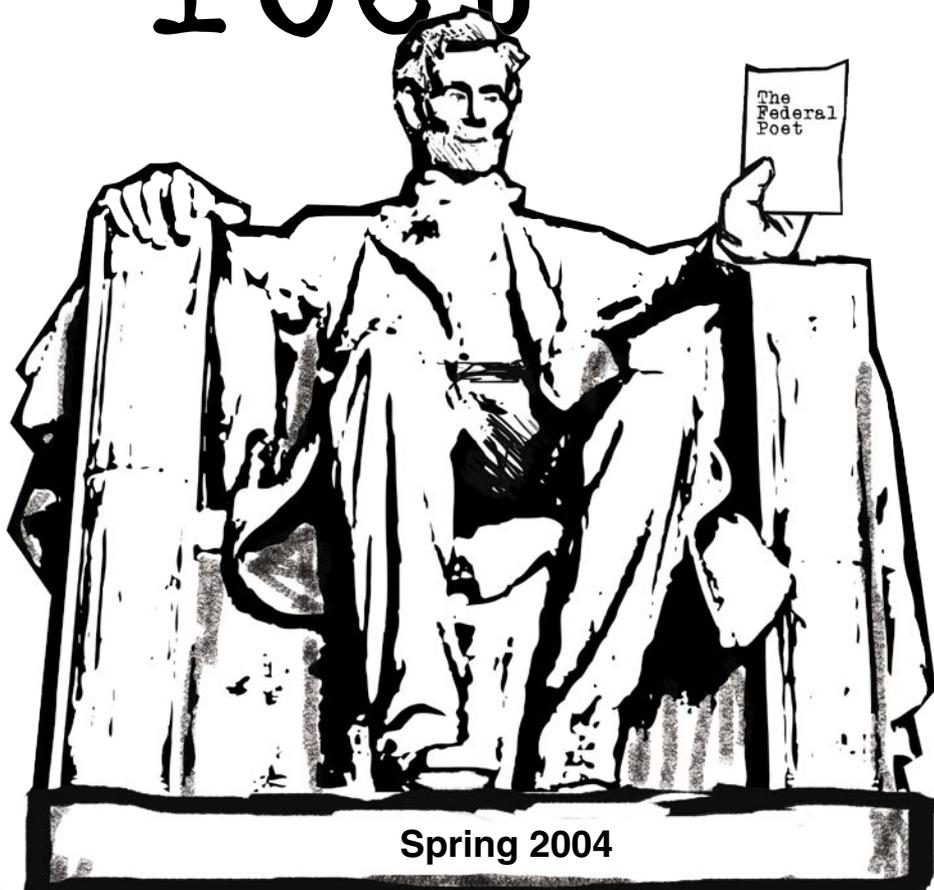


The Federal Poet



Spring 2004

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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.

THE FEDERAL POETS
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In memory of
James Maina Lee
1942-2004

James Maina Lee was a member of the Federal Poets for several years. His poetry was widely published in venues such as the *Arkansas Review*, the *Journal of African Travel Writing*, *Afrocentric Anthology*, and the *African American Review*. The following poems appeared in past issues of *The Federal Poet*.

Laughter

(For Bill Cosby)

Can not laugh
Until sadness melts in your eyes
Pain drips from your face
Laughter is your business
But your heart has wilted
Silencing your progeny
By murderer's bullet was real
We watched in horror
Cried with your relations
Happy to see your tears
Shows passion
You are family
Have been with us
All these years
The show goes on
In time will easier
To laugh again.

James Maina Lee

(The Federal Poet, Fall 1998)

Radio Made Me Listen

During summers when there was nothing to do
we sat around mother watching the radio.
No one moved until the final seconds of *Our Gal Sunday*
became a whisper and *This is Nora Drake* attended
her last patients then headed home.

Mom often looked away from us into the distance. We
didn't know
if we had displeased her or if problems on the stories
caused her grief. Sunday was her favorite and
she marveled
at the beauty of her life at Black Swan Hall.

She told us one day she would go to California to meet
the lady from the little mining town in the West
who was married to Lord Henry Brentthrop.
We believed mom would go and return home
and tell us about the lives of our beautiful friends from
the air.

When it was nearly time for dad to come home
Mom disappeared into the kitchen while we played
with whatever games were available.

Cold beer waited as he walked through the door.
Billie Holiday and Howling Wolf alternated belting their
mean blues.
My father took his old guitar and played along with them.
He closed his eyes and said he was leaving in the
morning
'cause his woman had done him wrong. We wondered
if he was
leaving mother or us too? In our dreams we wished daddy
would get rich from his singing so we could live big
like the families we heard everyday while he was working.

James Maina Lee

(The Federal Poet, Winter 2002)

Summer

I chased your eyes
Through the freshness of sun rays,
Hovering on the edge of summer,
Made them sit in the dark corner
Nurture the memories we shared
During lazy strolls along the lake.

We watched the huge metallic eagles
Rise from green fields in cement,
Adjust their wings, soar
Into clouds, touching vapors.

Songbirds chirped mellow rhapsodies,
Fluttered their feathers in rapid motion,
So we could notice they were in love.

I held softness in your hand,
Kissed the firmness in your lips,
While our passion met in warm arms.

I wanted to hold this season
That brought rapture to our lives.

Love followed the two shadows
That slowly became one as we
Approached the end of sunny days,
Nights that sprinkled us
With fresh dew as we lay under stars,
Blushing from moments of bliss.

We held the summer in our hands,
Squeezed the thoughts of pleasure
We shared in our hearts.

James Maina Lee
(*The Federal Poet, Winter 2001*)

Nzingah, at 3

My hair is braids beyond
my shoulders with beads
of sprinkling whites, yellows, reds.
My favorite color is the one
that surfaces at the cusp
of my mood.
I shake my head,
dance to the rattle of rhythm
flowing from my plaits.

For my debut
I'm a butterfly
small, sassy
I glide through the air,
ride my ball as if
it were my horse—
Make bubbles colorful as rainbows
paint my tongue with gum and candies
so striking, the mirror tells me
a miracle happened.

I am a rushing river,
sit quietly for movies
that interest me.
I am intense, eager,
learn with the effort that spins
in hurricane speeds.
Tomorrow is big,
bright as I dream it be.

James Maina Lee

(The Federal Poet, Winter 2001)

Poems by Current Members

Snowfall

The world is motionless in snow.
We stare at the same suspended flakes
falling forever in place through silent air.

It seems that even the hidden moon
hangs stalled somewhere, that the tides
must hold their breath as we do.

Over and over the world disappears.
The street, the shrub, the porch have lost
their edges. Colors disappear, light grows dense,

washed clean of any pigment.
All day we watch, and then,
at the end of a day and a night,
(Stanza break)

a single star, visible beyond the lace
of limbs, first sign of a clearing sky.
Later we may awake, stunned and stiff,

roused by the scrunch of snowploughs,
that strange rough sound that calls us
back to our gruff lives.

Ann Rayburn

Painting the Autumn Woods

Someday I'm going
to paint
the autumn woods
in sunlight.
It's all done in my mind —
not a hefty woods
of towering oak
with those enormous shafts of light
like you get in the Jesus paintings
not a Disney woods where
cute little eyes
peer out at you and
animals explode in song
from stump and rock.
This will be a Northern Virginia
scrub woods, pocked marked
by sun and shade, flitting into
interstices, negative orange
spaces, dappled ambivalent
yellow and red distance defiers — the kind
you walk into and just
— like that —

disappear.

Pam Blehert

Cicadas

From the newly warming mud
they will emerge no butterfly, no lazy
graciousness of flight, no powdery
and delicate pastels, no intricate rituals
of sex, not them.

Impudent in their neon green, they root
their jalopy bodies to a branch,
saw the air with their sour whine,
crash on their mates in crude coitus
die their death.

Wells Burgess

No more cats

Are there no more cats in my life?
The calico ones have gone,
the gypsy queens, the fancy cats, the toms
who owned the world until
you looked at them, and they
disdainfully, turned away,
the tiny tigers with their crimpéd tails
speaking eloquently, quietly,
a special language.

October, I, walking to a mailbox
in clement weather, wondered
if there would be more cats for me.

November, Winchester,
seeing a small black Persian cat,
I called out. He followed me
a distance till I had to run him off.

You have to think about the cat.
Here you are, hoping fifteen, twenty years
are left, but maybe not,
what of the cat who, one day,
finds you've gone.

Who would care about the cat
after your death?

And yet, around the edges of our lives
the cats curl and prowl and talk,
insinuating, thoughtful,
insouciant.

Pam Blehert

The Letter

I found a letter in the mail today.
It fell from a clutch of bills
And pulpy promos.
I knew it was really a letter
Because even though dirty and crushed
And the stamp obscure,
The ink was real.

I examined it with surprise.
Someone is still writing letters,
Sitting at a desk somewhere
Using pen and paper.
Not just punching out a form
To send to a dozen people
But just to me.

I turned it over as if it were
A newly dead animal, fearing to damage it.
Using an antique paper knife
— All good paper knives are antiques —
I gently sawed it open.
It was written many months ago
By someone named Gladys.

— Dear Old Chum — it began.
— I hate to tell you this
But George died this February.
You no doubt remember him.
He always thought a lot of you,
And I remember what a funk
You went into when he went East to college
And came back married to Betty the Boop.
We all thought he had found her in bed with him
But the marriage stuck
And she looked great at the funeral,
Drooping between the children and grandchildren.

Have to admit she looked
Good in black, even at her age.

— He made a generous will
But the creditors showed up
And took everything so old Betty
Is reduced to some petty
Economics which should send you
Into spasms of pity.
Well, enough of Betty.

— You know, I still remember
How you were mad at him somehow
And went with someone else
To the Senior Prom, and how he looked
At you all evening from the stag line
Like a whipped dog, while you carried on
And ignored him completely.

— Well it's a long time ago, isn't it?
Write me sometime and tell me
How you are. I'm good for a while yet
But don't count on it.
Get your cards out early.

Much Love, Gladys.

I am wildly curious.
I don't remember any George in whom
I had even a passing interest.
In fact, I don't even remember a Gladys,
Unless she was the girl I knew
As Penny who was the friend of
My girlhood, sharer of dark and
Giggly secrets and party to
An endless number of silly pranks.

No, impossible. Penny is dead.
I do remember several fellows
With whom I might have gone to the ball
Some of whom were bitter to lose out.
But I went with Paul, whom I later married
And later regretted.
It was the beginning of an expensive education.
Penny went to Hawaii for a job
And never returned. She married an army sergeant
Who was killed in Viet Nam, developed cancer
And died at Tripler at the age of forty. No children.
So who was Gladys? The envelope is so smudged
I can't make out the return address.
Perhaps it is misaddressed.
But no, that's my name on the front
And my address too.

George...I flip through
Mental pictures of my classmates.
Most of them pretty sad specimens.
Some of them died in accidents
Tragic or silly,
Like Tim, the would-be trapper
Who caught his foot in one of his traps
And a bear got him.

Some died in various peace actions
A long way from home.
A few disappeared from our mental screens,
Some to great success, and a couple of those

To our sorrow, went to jail somewhere.
The girls, except for one or two who went on the stage
Or became head nurses, stayed anonymous
And married some of the promising youngsters
Who outlived their promise.

I am flattered that some George cared about me,
That my scorn could cause such misery
To a nice kid, and that I could
Cause him to marry unhappily
And below himself, like a sort of suicide.
But I never even knew it.
Well, another grisly trophy on the wall.

If only I could get a picture in my mind
Of him and me and Gladys together
In a time that no longer exists.
Or perhaps never did.
Whatever happened, it happened to someone.
Perhaps to me. Certainly to him.
I wish I hadn't hurt you, George, believe me.
But it's too late now to say so.

Jean Leyman

1930's
White as Bed Linen

Bless its heart
The child was born
White as bed linen.

The momma died
One day later
Lying in the bed on
The same white linen.

They buried her
In the church yard
Up the red dirt road
Near to the swamp.

At the funeral
The old church ladies said
"Folks shouldn't be mixin in.

Miscegenation's why that girl died,
In the big four poster bed
On that white linen."

But the ghost of the lady that died
Whispered through the trees.
"Oh my, we were so in love,

And look at what our love
Brought forth,
A beautiful beige child.

Who I pray will always
Sleep in comfort
In a big bed made up
With the purest of linen."

Isabella B. Gelletich

Lost and Found

Words begin to fail me, become hard to find —
not that at 56 I'm fading fast, but I notice
because I'm so used to having words come easily,
anticipating my needs, mobbing me with possibilities,
synonyms, interconnections. Words are my oldest friends.
When they hesitate or frown even slightly,
I notice. Thus already I can watch in slow motion
the "dreaded ravages of age," and this pleases me,
this slow fading of known brain cells, because

it confirms that this dying brain is not what
I am, as I hang here waiting, KNOWING the word
I cannot quite catch the tail of, waiting as one
waits with swatter or cup for a fly to alight
on a cold window, waiting for this flit of knowing
to hold still long enough to be seized, waiting
for a word to arrive, no doubt by long labyrinthine
alternative nerve-pathways that by-pass ruined,
blasted cells — here I am suspended, knowing (but
unable to voice) what the brain refuses to
give me — THIS is the divine frustration, this

tip-of-the-self-ness, this certainty (even now
I can't find the word for it), this knowing that
I damned well SHOULD know and DO know what persists
in remaining a total blank: It's like looking
in the mirror and finding no reflection, this
hanging between knowing and data, this simple
knowing (here separated out for purest scrutiny)
that, spoiled by long reliance on brain gadgetry,
is at last of necessity coming to know itself.

Dean Blehert

We All Know the Type

He's just the kind of guy
who, had he been aboard the Titanic,
would have found a way to have one of the lifeboats
lowered for his individual use.
And not only that, he would have found a way
to have the other nineteen boats lowered empty
so he could change between them at his whim
to get a better view of the Arctic sunrise.
And not only that, but when the Carpathia
finally reached him, he would have found a way
to have the passengers and most of the crew
put off on the Titanic's boats, retaining
only the captain, the navigator,
enough stokers to keep the boilers fueled
and sufficient staff to serve his caviar stuffed with *foie gras*,
steam-clean his toenails, and polish his underwear.
And not only THAT, but when the Carpathia
docked in New York, he would have found a way
to make the press, public and police believe
he was the real hero, staying alive
only by dint of extraordinary courage,
while the Carpathia's remaining crew
used all the victims for unspeakable experiments.
And not only THAT, but while the crowd
was lynching the Carpathia's captain and crew,
he would have found a way to abscond unnoticed
in search of an elegant bistro that served
filet of widow, orphan, infant, and dog.

Miles David Moore

(First published in WordWrights! Also published in Buddha Isn't Laughing, Argonne Hotel Press, 1999.)

Of Tatting and Gears

Betty's hands dance with the tiny steps
of tatting, tat dancing she jokes
to Fred as he ham-hands the gears
of the ancient pick-up towards town.

They are going in for the week's
supplies and visiting and he's thinking
of what he'll say at Mabel's coffee shop
about the rain having been so heavy lately.

"Could be a sign of the end of the world,"
Fred says to Betty as her fingers move
in punching counterpoint to his swaying truck.
"Maybe. Maybe not," she says, considering

the answer while tying her tiny knots.
"It'll be something to discuss at Mabel's
over coffee." Fred nodded in agreement
and licks his lips in anticipation.

Mike McDermott

New Love

Your jacket hangs in my closet
next to my things.
I take it off the hanger,
as if I were going to put it on;
and hold it in my arms,
smell the cloth,
kiss the collar,
open the pockets,
as if to
look for something
I am not supposed to find.

Nancy Allinson

Fore Shadow

Looking into the future,
through pages of newsprint grayly
I see the death of civilization,
drugged savagery and electronic tyranny
by high priests of a new psycho-mystery.

So why write these poems?
Who will be left to read them?
I am a child talking to imaginary animals
in the nursery.

But I notice I am speaking to you,
and you are as far into the future
as I can see, so there must be something
of civilization that will survive.

Or perhaps I create you
in order to write to you,
and thus poetry populates
future civilizations.

Dean Blehert

Last Night

Last night I dreamed weatherman Al Roker
and I went out to eat.

Magically, he inhaled 12 donuts.
Without magic, I downed 8 cheeseburgers.
We ate, and ate, and ate throughout the dream.

Guess what?
When it finally ended,
I woke up, fat again.
What a night.

Averille E. Jacobs

Andrew

I love a person who tunes pianos.
He runs in races, and loves the Lord.
The crown of his head is swan white with wisdom.
Like a bald eagle his home is the rock.
Seeking Jesus, seeking Jesus
his heart glides off to distant stars.
Everything in him is made for gliding.
His eyes are doves that mourn in the night.

Dorcas Tabitha

Bananas

“Bananas,”
I told him,
“I am going bananas!”

“Never in all my life
have I been surrounded
by so many bananas
inside & outside
my stomach!”

“Bananas
are good for you:
provide you
with
calcium,
potassium,
are nourishing,
healthy, soft, yellow,
tropical.

Well,
bananas are
very good for you
and if you want
to go bananas,
nobody will stop you:
go ahead!

Bananas are good
for you
at
59 cents
per pound!”

Ingeborg Carsten-Miller

Dismalscience

Dems deficit dogs defeat diligently
Durgan, Dayton dither, discuss deny.

Hunter Alexander

Ovaloid

Congressman Waxman of California
Waxes his bald head
waxes wroth
Looks into the C-SPAN camera
ridicules Dan Burton
Who keeps on
With seminar on Lotus Notes
While investigating 5,000 missing missives
In Bill Clinton's White House
Win One for the Groper,
thinks Waxman
Burton bobbles
Barr blusters
LaTourette dances
Around
But Waxman continues to wax
His head
Still the shiniest in cyberspace.

Hunter Alexander

Jump

Plastic bag, plastic bag,
water bag, skin bag,
body bag, water balloon,
fruit with skin, fresh fruit,
fruit with flesh, dropped sound,
fruit with pulp, plop sound,
ripened fruit, squashed tomato,
rotting pumpkin, smashed potato,
open melon, juicy fruit,
liquid river, bleeding liver,
spasm, quiver, lights out,
history dumped, words disturbed,
liquid lump, speeding meat,
meets concrete, sudden stop,
a junked hunk. Final sound:
plump thump.

Lee Giesecke

