

# The Federal Poet

Winter 2004



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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.

**THE FEDERAL POETS**  
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## Horses in October

The mare and foal put their big heads  
over the split rail and sniff my shirt  
hard, looking for sugar. I like the way  
a horse insists on firsthand information.  
But what do I know about horses? Only  
what my neighbor might tell me. I don't  
know why the foal takes my hand and doesn't  
bite, or why they tolerate my hands even  
after it is clear there is no sugar.  
What do they know? How long I've stood here?  
Or why? The mare likely cares no more for me  
than for the fence post she scratches against.  
I don't believe horses are only accidents  
in the long history of a dumb planet.  
They are big. Gravity likes them more  
than me, will make more of their death.  
Walking away, I glance back. The horses  
are watching. They see me disappear forever  
in the shadows and the falling leaves.

*Mark Dawson*

## Pathways

1

Breath held, I have thanked in my heart the fox  
crossing the wetlands, who stopped in his tracks  
and gave back my stare, as if he would trust  
one smelling of houses but carrying no weapons.  
As if, far back, we were something akin.

I have thanked the deer with two fawns, who waited  
long moments, flanks quivering, then lowered her head  
to browse, letting her newborn come nearer.  
And the snapping turtle, heavy with eggs,  
who saw me coming into the garden, swivelled  
to face my bare shins, then let me retreat.  
I watched from a window while she scraped her nests,  
two false and one filled, under the chard.

And the small jeweled snake stretched out in the juniper,  
who eyed me, deciding, slowly flowed on.  
And the skinny, blue-black wasps in the attic,  
drowsily leaving their nest while I waited  
to seal off their opening. And so many others—  
bees cruising on the compost, hawk on the car roof  
waiting for prey—I give thanks for their curiosity,  
their courage, their wordless patience with us.

2

Even the yellow jackets who claimed the boxwood  
beside the front steps let us come and go  
that summer, let the old cat drowse on his cushion  
under their nest. Let me trowel and plant  
while they came and went in the dappled light.  
Once, when I dropped the toolbox, a few workers  
came buzzing, not stinging; they let me sit back,  
then mulch the last of our flowering border.

Till the day when the lawn-care mower came roaring too close to their flyaway, spraying green clippings under their nest. I was off in the wetlands, avoiding the noise; by the time I came home the mower was roaring next door. Disgusted, I reached down to slide the mess of cut grass off the cat's bed. They had to attack. It wasn't their fault. No one knew I'd react.

After the shockwaves, the ER, the doctors, I called the expert, a gentle-voiced guy who grows organic apples and plums. *Sorry, there's no way to smoke them, no, you can't drive them out with a hose.* I watched from the window as he sprayed the poison through a twenty-foot tube, then beat the nest with a rod for stragglers.

3

We moved the boxwood, planted things that don't bloom  
or hold nests by the entries, soaped the doorframes where mud daubers had built their grey tubes. Now we check  
for new nests by the mailbox, the trash cans, the car.

They still let me watch, with my gloves and sting kit, as they fly in and out, gold wisps in the sunlight, small blurs in the shade of the driveway laurels. It isn't their fault when I phone for their deaths.

This year new wrens feed from our sill while outsize machines take down the trees on the edge of the wetlands. Fox, deer, scalebearers still share their pathways with us—in need, or ignorance, or something like trust.

*Judith McCombs*

## **Cicada Haiku**

Cicadas wriggle  
free with krill-like legs. Only  
fly, sing, mate and die.

Cicadas chirring,  
softly mating above bright  
fireflies, the footlights.

Cicadas mating  
emit a rapid ticking:  
a love bomb countdown.

Awkward fliers lurch  
through steamy groves, persimmon  
eyes dimmed with love.

Cicadas mimic  
spacecraft their ancestors heard  
countless emergences ago.

*Blair Ewing*

## Neuendorf Transport Company

There's not much you can tell  
an over-the-road driver, engine running,  
rig loaded, ready to roll, tapping  
your window for freight bills. Not much,  
that is, except "here." At three we went  
to work inside our billing shed, my fingers  
starting a nightly race over the keys.  
On those hot afternoons the sun melted  
our loading dock driveway asphalt  
to mush. Mack cabs fueled, a dozen  
trailers were backed into bays. All day,  
sweating city pickup drivers dropped  
their freight, piling the dock ceiling high.

My freight bill typing pace had to be  
jazzy quick. We sent John Deere parts  
to Janesville, Ray-O-Vac batteries  
to Chicago and electrical switches  
to Milwaukee—and they had to get there fast.  
Typing into the night, wrists aching,  
I could hear the hum of forklifts, feel  
the dock around us shake. At eleven,  
the last truck gone, we swallowed cold beer  
in the darkened lot. Summer constellations  
above, our freight was rolling down  
all the night highways, time capsules  
speeding onward into an expanding universe.

*Martin Dickinson*

**Wave of your joy**

You can carry someone on the wave of your joy  
but beware.

If the swell subsides, they will lie,  
a fragile dying thing,  
    on the bright beach.

*Pam Blehert*

**Twilight**

*(after a painting by Maria Somogyi)*

They pose for their ten thousandth silhouette  
As day fades once again. These trees have seen  
The sky dissolve to rose and violet  
More times than they have leaves, than there  
have been  
Children to play beneath their lacy shade.  
The broad years die before them and are gone.  
The children, sated with the games they played,  
Move on to other scenes. The trees stay on.  
For there are those who must stay in one place,  
And those whose lives are roots rejoice in roots.  
The study of one ever-changing face  
Is all the world for those who send out shoots  
To plumb equivocating light, and learn  
The vast ascendant wisdom of the moon.

*Miles David Moore*

## Kalypso

### I

All rituals of the living earth  
are born of that dark head  
bending above a loom.

All life draws close to her:  
the very gulls forsake their nests by the sea  
and build in the trees  
nearest her lovely cave.

Only Odysseus dwells apart  
on the rocks at the island's edge—  
his eyes scanning the sea,  
his heart fixed upon stony Ithaka.

### II

A portion of her island is bare now,  
its stumps of olive sticking bleakly above the earth—  
for Odysseus has put to sea again  
upon a broad raft with a mast of fir.

Dawn renews itself upon her hearth;  
the forests spread from her tranced fingers  
upon the loom— and birds build  
in the intervals of her song.

And each day she visits the rocks beside the sea.

Deep within her cave an altar stands  
built by a goddess for a mortal man  
whose axe still leans against her cavern wall.

How could she,  
a goddess who sustains the birth of all earthly things,  
whose song sustains the very springs of Ithaka  
and the patient weavings of Penelope,  
have known that the touch of living flesh  
begets a heart vulnerable to mortality,  
engenders an ache  
no lover among the gods can assuage—  
and that mere human loyalty to an aging wife  
would bind a man  
more than promise of eternal life

*Charles Gerald DuBose, Jr.*

## **Preparation**

Tucked below a quilt of clouds  
where the sun's rays  
slice the ground into stripes of light,

the monarch butterfly rests,  
opens and closes its wings  
warms its body for flight.

*Nancy Allinson*

## Calendar

In the kitchen  
I stare at the birthday calendar  
the invariable one  
whose admonitions  
I variably remember  
and forget.

It came to me from my mother  
its file of ledger lines  
one per day,  
railroad ties  
hurrying off  
to destinations as yet unknown  
its names,  
migratory birds  
resting on telephone wires  
ready to take flight.

Sometimes the birth date  
is followed by a death date  
the line, coffin-shaped  
suddenly snapped shut  
by death's legerdemain.

Yet here and there  
new names appear—  
saplings  
under the old gnarled trunks  
of their sires.

*Judy Neri*

## Unbalanced

Before our final session,  
my hands dampen on the wrapped box,  
and my clenched jaw aches.  
The quiet sound of my name  
calls me through the locked door  
you hold open.  
Our silence is new  
when you lead me down the hall  
to the end,  
where your office door requires a firm shove  
to keep it closed  
and all of me, within.

I slip into my usual chair of faded gray:  
the one with the wooden arms  
rubbed smooth with oil and grief  
and nearest the box of tissues.  
“How are you?” you ask,  
casually as always,  
head cocked to one side, pen idle,  
hands calm in an ample lap.  
Perhaps, though,  
you mean more this time,  
knowing me as you do.

My gaze fixes on your framed diploma.  
Dust softens the bottom edge,  
but the glass gleams uncracked.  
I startle at a laugh outside the window  
where two women, arms linked,  
bend their heads and whisper.  
I turn away to stop the tears.  
Clearing my throat, I answer,  
“I’m shaky—resigned, yes—but very sad.  
Partings are still hard for me.”

You simply nod and smile,  
your brow unlined, breath rising evenly.  
My gift waits unopened at your feet.  
I wonder yet again,  
*not* knowing you as I do,  
if I will be  
remembered.

*Mary Sullivan*

**Metro**

The shining dragon  
hurled itself into the station  
Stopping it spit out  
what it had chewed up earlier  
faces at the windows  
look sad

*Jean Leyman*

## Two Cats, No Ice

Even in a time of war,  
sub-themes emerge  
from the steady march of clouds,  
the evergreen's firm salute.

At the poles, ice-milk spills  
into the saucer of the seas  
but no cats appear  
to lick it up.

On every continent, words  
struggle up sheer ice-cliffs,  
seeking purpose, restful heights,  
perpetuity.

In high winter on moonless nights  
the air holds still and a pair  
of ice-cats come stalking.  
The days flee in panic, like prey

*Blair Ewing*

## Confessions of the Umbrella Thief

The umbrella thief goes  
To the Lost and Found  
In the Richard Russell Senate Office Building  
Claims to have lost his umbrella  
on a rainy afternoon

And picks up one  
To keep his head dry  
on his way home in August.

*H. Alexander*

## Bodies Killed in the Movies

They fall so sweetly, the  
Bodies killed in the movies.  
They never seem to battle with their future  
Or their past.

When Billy the Kid  
and his outlaw band  
ride roughshod into town, do they think things?  
Do they pause at the edge of town  
to make their entrance?  
Do they hurt  
when people don't like them?  
Do they ever go to the bathroom  
or get a splinter in their thumbs?

When the hit man is pushed from the roof  
Does he ever think oops?  
Or wish he'd followed his mother's advice  
and become a CPA?

If I got bopped over the head  
I wouldn't pick myself up and woozily take a slug  
of whiskey  
before getting back on the horse  
and pursuing the bad guys.  
I'd say no thank you  
and go home! and have a nice hot bath.

All this thoughtless discomfort  
pain, sleepless nights, pursuit,  
What universe do these people live in?

They fall so sweetly, the  
bodies killed in the movies.  
They never seem to battle with their future  
Or their past.

*Pam Blehert*

### Advice to God

Lord, why save me?  
Do you crave me?  
Will you keep me  
In your closet?  
Must I be  
Your bank deposit?

Do I pay  
Interest? May  
I be spent  
Or be lent

Does my girth  
Gauge my worth?  
If I'm fatter, will  
The collateral  
Fill your vault  
When loans default?

Why, O Lord,  
Must you hoard?  
Is there dearth  
Of souls on earth?

In my innerest  
Self, invincible,  
With no interest  
But principle,  
Please let me burn,  
For I'll not earn  
A single cent.  
What one can save  
Goes to the grave.  
Let me be spent.

*Dean Blehert*

## Here's the Steeple

Sneezing on Jeesuz  
awed by Gawhd  
Sunday morning radio

The evangelist  
speaks pompously  
of humility

while little hands  
soft as rose petals  
unfold a cathedral

*Lee Giesecke*



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