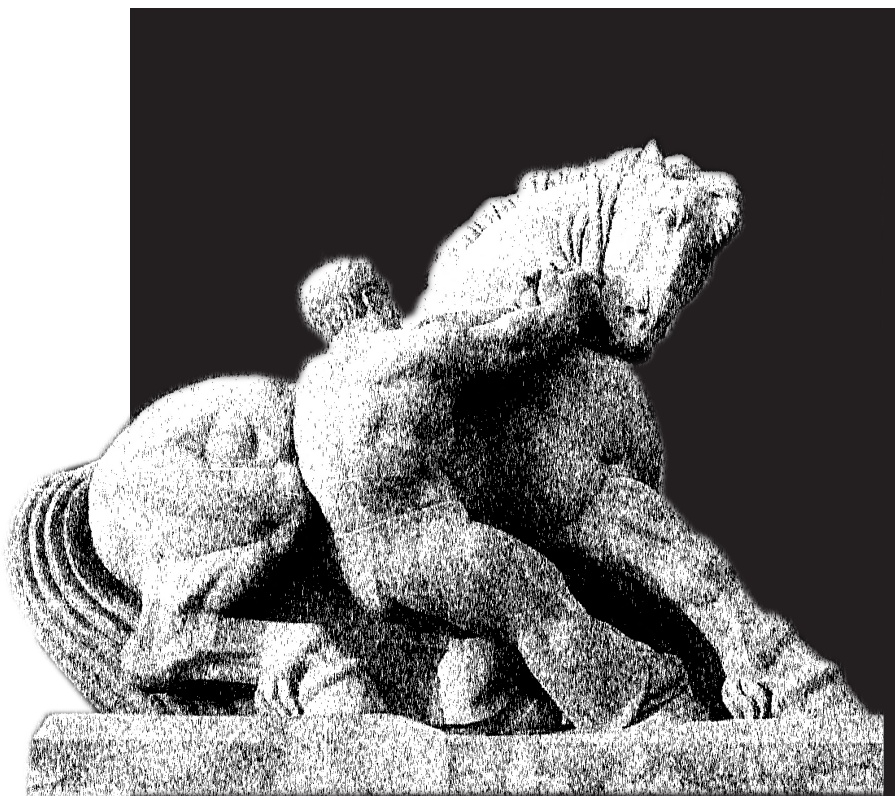


# The Federal Poet

Spring 2005



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Vol. LXIII, No. 1



## 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.

### **THE FEDERAL POETS**

9039 Sligo Creek Parkway #1409, Silver Spring MD 20901  
Web: <http://www.blehert.com/TheFederalPoets/poetindex.html>

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

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Published by **THE FEDERAL POETS**

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## The Summer Woman

Sprawled on the mountain's flank, half-hidden  
under apple leaves gone wild, she watched  
the osprey hover above the cedars,  
wheel and glide home. Squinting she saw  
the tinfoil gleam of the fish it had carried  
from the glittering inlet, miles below.  
Closing her eyes to the sun, she felt  
the skulls of the nestlings thicken, warm  
as an infant's skull under her hand;  
she felt her own skull lift in the sun,  
the layers of calcium thin out in the steep  
bright air.

Over the osprey's nest  
the fronds of the cedars roused themselves,  
stirred and subsided; she waited to feel  
her own skin stir, hairs drift, as the invisible  
wind descended, riffling the meadow  
and its fringes of bracken around her, lifting  
the low apple leaves, carrying and losing  
the voices of the men she'd borne, husband  
and sons, far echoes absorbed by the forest.  
Alone with the mountain, she breathed the wind  
and the chill it bore from the cedars' darkness;  
saw beyond seeing the packed mold shift  
in the path they were building, the felled trees twist  
out of their lines, the unnameable beetles,  
cells, root hairs, devouring their work.  
She had done enough.

Sleeping or waking,  
the brightness slid by. She felt in her head  
the mountain moving its haunches towards winter,  
the meadow lie cramped under the drifts  
of approaching snow, the cedars stiffening  
in a brittle air, the talons of ice  
clawing their trail and giving it back  
to the mountain.

Enough. The warm bracken leaned  
its fronds towards her; the meadow retreated,  
root by root, from the invading wilderness;  
the cedars rejoiced, green among green.

About her the ponderous slope of the mountain  
wheeled and fell in its silent arc  
away from the sun, bearing her breath  
with its burdens, carrying the trace of her warmth  
headlong in space, a chip on the surface,  
wheeling and falling.

*Judith McCombs*

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"The Summer Woman" appeared first in *Prism International*  
and is reprinted from *The Habit of Fire: Poems Selected & New*  
(Word Works 2005).

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## La Nieve Sobre El Volcán Illimani y Secretos De Niñas Colegialas

A la doñita de La Paz le gustan las Vírgenes, los Santos,  
Y el pescado de mil huesos, que compra en la avenida Maine cerca al río,  
Cuando ella negocia el precio, pidiendo una rebaja con los  
pescadores tatuados que no  
Hablan español, quienes tampoco conocen Los Andes con sus campesinos  
y sus llamas.  
El precio esta bién, dice ella, y yo creo que ella entiende,  
Porque habla con los muertos.  
Ella sueña con el descuartizamiento de Tupac Katary realizado con cuatro  
caballos  
Y la nieve sobre el volcán Illimani mirando abajo a la ciudad dormida.  
A veces en la noche ella murmura en quechua con mi esposa,  
Compartiendo sus secretos como dos niñas Colegialas y no como madre e hija.  
En las mañanas ella enseña a mi hijo, su nieto, español, acerca de la Raza  
de Bronce.  
Cuando regreso de mi trabajo, la cocina esta caliente con un aroma a sopa  
de mani y máte  
La doñita de La Paz dice “barriga llena corazón contento”  
Y yo creo que ella entiende porque habla con los muertos.

## The Snow on Illimani Volcano and Schoolgirl Secrets

The lady from La Paz likes virgins and saints  
And the thousand bone fish she buys on the Maine Avenue waterfront  
Where she barter in Spanish with tattooed watermen who speak English,  
And who don't know the Andes or campesinos or llamas.  
The price is right she says, and I believe she knows,  
Because she speaks with the dead.  
She dreams of Tupac Katary torn to pieces by four horses,  
And of the snow on Illimani Volcano, looking down on the sleeping city.  
Sometimes in the evening she whispers in Quechua to my wife—  
They share secrets not like mother and daughter, but like schoolgirls.  
In the morning, she teaches her grandson in Spanish about the race  
of bronze.  
I return from work to a kitchen warm with the aroma of peanut soup  
and máte.  
The lady from La Paz says a full tummy makes a happy heart,  
And I believe she knows because she speaks with the dead.

*Kevin Michael Reilly*

**In Emily Dickinson's Garden**

*Amherst, Massachusetts*

Walk here after hours  
when no one's around and you get  
let in on the place's little secrets.  
As minutes slide by, the sky's canvas  
takes up orange, then purple.  
Towering delphinia and foxgloves  
sway blue and pink in the August  
evening. As the soundtrack of cicadas  
starts up, you can just make out  
the plain house that hid mysterious  
treasures—it took her death  
to reveal them. The asters wink  
as if they knew all along.

*Martin Dickinson*

## Story

She was twenty when she discovered the ability to levitate. She didn't credit it at first, and when she'd had a chance to confirm it, in private, held it like a guilty secret.

She tried to find out if any of her friends had the ability. "Marilyn," she'd ask, for example, "do you ever feel — ah — lightheaded?"

She took to researching the Internet on paranormal activity, hanging out at Barnes and Noble, finally came to the conclusion this was a talent.

"Useless," she mused. "What can I do with the ability to levitate? It's not like a job skill, not like being able to predict the outcome of the races or tomorrow's stocks."

When she finally did come out and tell the world about her 'talent,' the most amazing thing was the lack of affect.

It was as if she'd announced the ability to pour milk. Everybody went on, quite uncaring.

So, since there wasn't any use for it, she forgot it.

At 83, she wondered what life would've been like if she'd been a hero.

*Pam Blehert*

**Hudson: The Car**

No other car's name  
was a river. It was sleek,  
but at the same time  
bulgy. You could see  
your reflection in its hubcap  
where the word "Hudson"  
was written in a script  
that flowed.

Inside with leather  
and wood you felt held  
someplace solid as the world  
went by outside. Elbows  
on top of the back seat,  
I could stretch back and see  
the sky coming along with us  
for the ride.

At night, the moon  
sped up when we did.  
Then it parked above  
when we drove into the garage.  
Some things, like autumn red,  
don't stay in the world long.  
Today there are new Fords,  
Chevys and Chryslers.  
There are no Hudsons.

*Martin Dickinson*

### Car Caresses

Tired of boring Air Bags in your cars?  
For a few thousand dollars, you can replace  
those blunt bags with pneumatic AIR LIPS  
(for the front-end wreck that greets you  
with a kiss) or for more exotic tastes,  
AIR BOOBS or the plump AIR BOTTOM,  
each releasing — as it cushions and embraces —  
the scent of your choice (see aroma options,  
page 8c). You love your car, so give your car  
the chance to love YOU  
when you need it most.

*Dean Blehert*

### Hot Tub Haiku

Sandalwood bath oil  
draws my carpenter husband —  
irresistably.

*Susan Meehan*

**Poem that Includes the Word Orange**

i curse the weather today  
friends call me petty

is an earthquake petty?  
a tornado, flood?

The Red Sea parts  
as I purchase an orange from the deli

around the corner

running to outwit the storm  
wind running in circles

poised.

*Stephen Russell*

## Cornflowers

Stippling the flanks of cracked concrete,  
The violet-blue of daydreamed skies  
Grows from the earth as rooted eyes  
    Where road and farmland meet.

They keep watch on each passing car,  
Bobbing and ducking in the breeze  
That blasts from monster SUVs  
    And smells of melted tar.

The insect-carapaced parade  
Streaks past in steel monotony.  
The children of velocity,  
    Their journeys factory-made,

May see what waves like tiny fans  
Around them, lined against the wind--  
Dream-colored, staring, left behind  
    With tossed-out soda cans.

*Miles David Moore*

## Mittens

Knitted mittens, wet —  
a distinctive smell,  
especially in the warm front hall  
just in out of the snow,  
a dull wet smell with just the slightest edge  
of something sneezy, like the scent  
of dust balls under the bed.

Knitted mittens, frayed  
where tiny cakes of snow  
had been picked or shaken off,  
tugging loose fine threads  
in leaving, wet snow  
becoming cloudy ice, slivered  
with bits of red and blue and green.

We children in our mittens  
(not gloves), flapping our rounded,  
fingerless appendages —  
like cartoon characters drawn  
by a novice, who can't yet handle hands.

After making a snowball out of sticky snow,  
we'd clap our mittens to shake off icy clots,  
such ineffectual claps, muffled by wool,  
getting drops of dirty icy water in our eyes.

Bare hands freezing, but worth it  
to be able to aim a snowball.  
Putting red hands back into wet mittens,  
looking, in vain, for warmth,  
the insides of the mittens feeling  
alien, shabby, little balls of wool rubbing loose  
against the skin — to the half-numbered skin  
feeling as if shreds of skin were rubbing loose  
against the mittens.

Frozen mittens – One can take them off  
and bop someone over the head with them.  
Dull, stupid, solid things. Our hands, too,  
grow dull and thick with cold. Cold stupefies  
matter, slows the molecular motions,  
though childhood remains vaporous  
at very low temperatures, and fluid far below zero.  
Long after our mittens have forgotten how to bend  
and our fingers have gone numb,  
we screech and chatter and boil off  
into the distant blue, slipping between  
interstices in the lace of white-rimmed black branches.

*Dean Blehert*

**Ode to Love**

My love  
loved  
our love  
affair upon eating a love  
apple while fondling his love  
beads as a love-bird  
sang and a love-bug  
crawled across our love-child's  
leg as he indulged in a love  
feast seated among the love  
grass at a love-in  
looking at the beautiful love-in-a-mist  
before giving his girlfriend a love-knot  
ring because she feels love-less  
as she combed her love-lock  
looking love-lorn  
but feeling lovely  
watching the lovelies  
with their dates in love-making  
trying to be strong lovers  
seated on love  
seats as they sway like ships feeling love-sick  
and love-some.

*Averille E. Jacobs*

## The Master of the Universe (and his Wife)

No denying the old man had been around the block a few times.  
I mean, he wasn't a slouch in mathematics or physics,  
Even held down a job at Princeton that paid the bills.  
Still, I believe Mrs. Einstein should have gotten the Nobel.  
First, they say he calculated the general theory of relativity, but he  
didn't even notice  
That when lovers reach the speed of light, time stops.  
Second, it was Mrs. Einstein who taught him quantum mechanics,  
And she did it in the bedroom not the lab, because until then,  
the alchemy of attraction had confounded the old man.  
I admit Einstein was great at explaining why supernovas burn and  
galaxies collide,  
And figuring out how we came to be stardust adrift on the nuclear  
tide,  
But it took a woman to teach Einstein the physics of piano and  
candlelight,  
About black silk teddies and the taste of brandy and cherries,  
And about that tiny moment just before sunrise,  
When time recedes and infinity approaches.

*Kevin Michael Reilly*

### **Status Quo**

War elevates the status of warriors.  
So, of course, warriors war,  
writers write,  
hammers hit,  
salesman sell,  
flowers flower,  
terrorists terrorize,  
and bombs blossom.  
It's all about status.  
We all  
do what we can.

*Lee Giesecke*

### **Laundromat**

It doesn't complain when it takes my smelly socks and shirts  
It gives them back smelling a lot better  
You might even learn  
A little Spanish at the Glebe Road 24-hour laundromat  
No te Preocupes  
Don't worry about it.

*H. Alexander*

## Mail Call

The letter slot bangs  
and she shuffles to the foyer  
and from there to her rocking chair  
on the side porch  
where she rocks the morning away,  
staring through the screen at the dim traffic  
flowing beyond the hedge —  
another circular cradled in her lap.

Bent above an ancient desk,  
she spends the afternoon with a magnifying glass,  
examining the item under a high-intensity lamp —  
occasionally lifting the hem of her dress  
to wipe the sweat from her face.

At night  
she lies on the top of her made-up bed,  
still dressed (“In case someone comes to the door”).

Above her head, in a ceiling corner,  
flakes of paint drop into the crotch  
of an abandoned web.  
And secreted away  
in the lingerie drawer of a dresser  
next to her bedroom’s one window,  
her favorite purse, pearl-studded,  
bulges with handbills.

*Charles Gerald DuBose, Jr.*

**Raft**

We're all stranded —  
shipwrecked here on earth  
you know —  
Wondering what to do  
with each other  
until the rescue.  
You don't need to make  
a name for yourself at all;  
because no one even knows  
what we are.  
Sure, you can wish  
you'd wake up in the morning  
looking fabulous —  
You did, and I loved you for that.  
But, looks aren't everything and  
we're all salmon swimming  
upstream against the tide  
of death inside of us.  
We're beautiful and  
we're all dying —  
and if we can't be nice  
to ourselves and each other  
for just those two reasons,  
I guess no reason  
will ever suffice.  
So make it all up —  
something gorgeous you  
can do while you're here —  
Do that and nothing else.  
Do it so everyone  
feels happier and blessed.  
Do it, because we're all  
at a loss here, we're  
none of us omniscient,  
we're all hurting and  
we all need the beauty  
that is you.

*Susan Beverly*

## On Knowing the Current Darling

I knew you when you wrote bad poetry  
and didn't know which fork to use  
and wore plaid flannel shirts  
with a slide rule protruding from your pocket.

On the cusp of your currency  
we met again  
with immense hugs  
delighted cries  
and rushed to share the life between  
words that didn't come fast enough  
as we sought each other's joys, pains  
and marvelled at the chance to share  
our piebald dreams.

Now your face is on every screen  
and your words hold our beliefs  
men fight over your thoughts  
and feel proud of scraps  
that they've retrieved.

Some came to me for favors  
of introduction  
desiring to share in the hierarchy of fame  
and I, remembering your open heart,  
took pleasure in  
telling them how to find you.

But you have moved on,  
rushed by today's bright fame,  
guarded by crews who fend off  
those of lesser weight  
in today's pocket change  
unmindful that your bright-plated 15 minutes  
will pass  
and a loyal few will still  
remember you fondly for earlier, golden times  
when you wrote bad poetry  
and didn't know which fork to use,  
and we didn't care.

*Susan Meehan*

## The Habit of Fire

By the wilderness lake I settle my haunches  
in a nest of stones, lean back on a deadfall  
carcass of pine, the only shelter,  
cold but not wet. Behind me thickets  
waiting for nightfall; no openings my size,  
no one's been here. The sun slides down  
over the green-black cones of the mountains  
rimming the lake; the sky flares up  
like a mirror, pearl on the water, glaring  
and greying. Suddenly thinned air, like water,  
wraiths of cold swimming towards me;  
too late to wash up. Grey fire stones and kindling  
readied before me, unlit; deadfall  
enough for hours.

Black mountains, black sky;  
stone shapes changing. I see through a face net  
my personal aura of insects close in,  
signalled by warmth. Things crackling and listening  
behind me; the sky goes *Whoeee, Whoeee*,  
no one I know.

Smell of horses  
from somewhere, then gone; no horses out here,  
anything that big is probably bear.  
New prints today on the logging road,  
in the place where I backtracked for water, bear crossing  
over the prints of my Vibram soles,  
full-grown. While I yawn, the road I will follow  
leans downhill, gullies, lets go; stones topple;  
thickets I broke are healing behind me.  
I don't want to know how the blackness spreads  
under my ribs.

If I died out here  
it would be my doing, not theirs; I smell  
of textiles and fire; even dead they'd avoid me.  
I couldn't live here.

In the blackness a lapping  
of water or muzzle; the air says something,  
gibberish or warning, and quits when I move,  
matches in hand, to strike open the fire  
that stops me from seeing.

*Judith McCombs*

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"The Habit of Fire" appeared first in *Poetry* cxxvii, no. 4 (January 1976): 205-6, and is reprinted from *The Habit of Fire: Poems Selected & New* (Word Works 2005).

### **Ghost Cloth**

Once this blouse was warm  
with my breath  
pressed against you.

Its seams opened  
like lips  
and this cloth passed  
through your fingers  
as if they pressed fire.

Now, left for dead in the bin,  
this blouse fades like bone.  
It lies wrinkled and cold  
like someone else's skin.

*Nancy Allinson*

---

**An Encounter with "Mrs. Richard Brinsley Sheridan"  
at the Metropolitan Museum**

*Gainsborough's portrait, 1785/1786*

There are hills, rocks, and finally  
what I see first — you, Mrs. Sheridan.  
How serene you look, sitting on the rock,  
the dead blue flowers in your hair,  
and your eyes amused -- maybe at the leaves  
on your left, which look a little too much  
like paint, or at the oddly glowing shrubs,  
or maybe your smile is the emblem  
of a decision not to cry.

In the watermelon-colored dress  
with a sash as blue as a *vena cava*,  
you look like a heart, a real heart.  
Does the scarf trailing down your shoulder,  
and across the one, discernible knee,  
and then to your lap suggest a yellow snake,  
tongue flickering in the artificial breeze?  
No! I've returned to your face,  
Mrs. Sheridan, which appears to have arisen  
from the heart. OH, FORGIVE ME,  
MRS. Sheridan, I want to unbuckle your  
buckleless shoes, to kiss every finger  
of your infinitely blurred hands.  
I'm too close now. The painting is only  
textures. Mrs. Sheridan, Stay! stay

*Mark Dawson*

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Statue from the Federal Trade Commission building, Washington DC.