



The Federal



Winter 2002

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THE FEDERAL POETS

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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.

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World Clots and Skin Hemorrhages

You speak of the paucity of words
to establish understanding
between worlds on both sides
of the skin.

Any world that skin can hold
is none of mine or yours.

We begin by knowing.

Words are either how we avoid
knowing each other or how,
remembering to know, we play.

To bemoan the limitations of words
is to make too much of the fact
that the ball I toss you
is neither me nor you nor
the pleasure I take in tossing it
or you in catching it and returning it.

Much of this we can convey
by artful spins and cavortings
of the ball, but only because
these remind us of what we
already know.

Dean Blehert

*"They used to pour millet on the graves or poppy seeds
To feed the dead who would come disguised as birds.
I put this book here for you, who once lived
So that you should visit us no more."*

*From Czeslaw Milosz' Dedication,
his postwar offering for the dead.*

The Healing Power of Art

But, if you want them to come, set a table
for them in the garden under a potent moon.
They won't mind the snow or summer's heat.
These things don't matter any more.

But they say they miss the kitchen arts.
So scent your verse irresistibly
with thoughts as tempting
as chocolate by the fire in winter.
Chilled fish in aspic and meadow greens
when the coats and boots are put away.

Give them what they've always wanted,
dessert before dinner. To eat their fill
from a tray of elegant reflections.
Musings of fleshy creatures,
fed to them word by exquisite word.

Until dawn's pale lamp lights
the eastern sky, and they must go.
Leaving them hungering for more.

Marlene S. Veach

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

Never

Yesterday

I got a letter from a health club,
telling me I qualified to join
their weight-loss program.
Picture me rowing,
jumping rope, or even tread milling
in bulging spandex!

Picture me giving a damn
about becoming thin again!
NEVER!

Picture me thin as a rail again,
my skin imprisoning a fat person
fighting desperately to escape!

Once I gave a damn and struggled to be thin.
Picture it. Me, lean and mean.
Then I didn't devour whole cherry pies
or down a dozen chocolate chip cookies
followed by beer steins of whipped cream.
Now I eat the rabbit and throw away his food.
Thin? NEVER!

Today I called that health club.
Told the receptionist where to stuff
their weight-loss program.
"I am happy fat," I proclaimed.
"I don't give a damn," I screamed.
"Picture me thin!" I demanded.

"NEVER!" she barked back.

Averille E. Jacobs

He's Wagging His Tail - He's Friendly

Snakes - brrrrr! There's no trusting the armless and legless. They can't be tripped up, tied up, caught by the toe, rendered immobile by hamstringing. They can't be handcuffed. You can't get answers by yanking fingernails. You can't read their palms. You can't hold or shake hands with them or check for lies by holding their wrists. You can't kick them in the knee. You can't tickle their armpits or stroke their thighs. They leave no fingerprints or footprints. And if they are also chinless, you can't even knock them out. I don't know if a snake is all neck, all tail, all rib cage or just a very long mouth, but the completeness of a snake is scary. A snake swallowing itself is an ancient symbol for eternity and also, probably, for the Plumber's Union. To be so complete in so little, such simplicity, is threatening to all our amusing complexities. Look, Ma, no hands!

Dean Blehert

Catnapper on Reno Road

After making eye contact
She squatted down and put down her sack
Patting the cat
Spreading her mat
And speaking softly
She took the cat home
And fed her chicken livers
And slept with the friendly tabby
She loved that cat
Months passed
Even though she knew it was a taking
A misdemeanor in the District of Columbia
Maybe a felony
To alienate the affections of a cat
Someone else's cat
She began to fear
That knock on the door late at night
The questions from the cat police
Questions, questions
She must have been seen
After several months with a contraband cat
She took the mouser back to the house
Alienating the affections of a cat
Is a serious matter
No one is above the law

H. Alexander

Survival Guide

Each of us does what she must.
In the garden this morning,
a praying mantis
bit me, just an inch
from my left nipple,
as I reached to brush dead blossoms
from the azaleas.

I try to imagine the sound
her mate will hear
when she neatly snaps off his head:
a last metallic click that vibrates
throughout his carapace,
as her mandibles steady his neck.
Thank you for the babies. Now goodbye.

In the shed, it is time to kill
the Brown Recluse spider,
her egg-fat belly
full of progeny.
I apologize for her. We women just want
a place to hatch our young,
and then, a bite to eat.

Ann Rayburn

Stories Waiting to Happen

Kingman, Arizona, 1948

It's Stage Robbers Gulch, I take
the high ledge, guarding my sister,
as the eastbound train with its blazing light
breaks free from the valley's dark ridge
and charges toward us. The pounding rumble
builds to a roar like stampedes,
Hercules squirms and yips
inside my rodeo shirt. Now it's thunder
all through us, the engine and coal car
breathing black fire. Boxcars, ore cars,
flat cars clanking and swaying
below, 22, 23, when I squint
their tops flow together like a snake's
flat back, moving fast over sand.
44, 55, 66, the roaring
rises and falls, 104, 105,
*You're not the shortest, not
the longest, you're the loudest,
we're the strongest.* Then the caboose
trailing lights, and the men waving back
when they see us up high, waving
our cowboy bandannas.

Sometimes after school
a long train will be stopped, so long
we can't see the end. Rio Grande, Pacific,
Topeka, Santa Fe, we cross the great shadows,
watching for trainmen, keeping clear
of the couplings and track. Hercules teethes
on his leash — could he smell out a tramp
in a boxcar? We know the scare stories,
tramps sliced in two, the fugitive
riding the rods under cars
who got bumped by a switch, the two kids
caught on a one-track trestle —
the smart one lay flat between rails,

eyes closed, and was saved as the train
thundered over, but his friend tried
to outrun it and failed.

One day I climb
the steep bolted ladder, hand over hand
to the roof of a boxcar — Colorado,
sealed shut. Bending low like a scout,
clutching the grab iron on top, I can't see
where the stopped train ends — I want
to go striding from roof to roof, arms out
like a hero.

My sister waits, holding tight
to Hercules below — does she see
I'm afraid to stand up? These trains
take forever to get any speed — could I ride
to the sandwash, jump free? The train
humps itself together, couplings clash
and reclang, the boxcar under me
lurches hard forwards, I scramble
down the ladder like a comic-strip coward,
drop off and run. At least there weren't
any boys, at least my sister
won't tell.

Years later, a boy
who was first board in my high school chess
will hitch a ride on a slow night freight.
At the crossroads his two friends jump
and roll clear, but he slips between cars,
the wheels slice his leg at the thigh,
he bleeds to death while they run
for help.

I only danced with him once —
were his eyes blue or brown? In memory
my sister squints up, scared of the boxcars
but ready to do what I said,
stay back or climb on.

Judith McCombs

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 and 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.

Disney got it all wrong

I think I remember Anderson's story
about the mermaid who fell in love
with a prince.

She didn't win in the end, though.
There was another woman, true,
but it wasn't a witch.
And the little mermaid
paid for her limbs with pain,
ended up as sea foam
for eternity.

That's hard to show
on film.
And doesn't fit
the standard happy ending.

Question is: whose point of view.

I was the other woman just
walking down the beach
the day she saved him. I
didn't put a spell on him.
She disappeared.

He
was looking for an excuse
to fall in love.
He just got the wrong
happy ending.

Pam Blehert

San Francisco World's Fair

Subdued by so much splendor
we slumped on the outgoing ferry
watching the heavenly island glide away,
Its neon washed towers fast growing smaller
as we moved outward to traverse the Bay.
An amber carpet trailed behind us,
all else was black; black velvet on satin,
ink on black metal, then grey,
when we soon became aware of another island
rising beside us from the further side,
where a monstrous figure rose up
chained to its rock; faceless, eyeless,
obscuring the beauty of the distant shore
repeating its dull and querulous moan
to the glittering bridges and the unlistening
Bay.
Until that time I had not fathomed
how short is the distance
between heaven and hell.

Leeward Nights

Bougainvillea wakes me
rustling against stones, like
the sound of a taffeta dress,
nights in the city.

In the bar a woman says
*When she walks by
men hear the sound
of satin sheets*

I have taken down
my mirrors, let your eyes
design me. Our bodies
touch, two bolts of folded silk.

Ann Rayburn

Rush

The moon has come and gone
since your touch.
But there is no rush.
Like moonlight on stone
I could listen to the wind
all night long.

Can you hear it—
in the ripple of leaves
a swelling rush?
Can you feel it?
The wind is a feather,
yet the bending limbs
groan.

Lee Giesecke

The Nice Thing about the Theory of Relativity

As when I am standing in the train,
And the train next to me begins to move,
And let us say you are on that train,
And I at first think it is my train that is moving,
And then realize it is the other train,
 your train, that is moving;
At such times it is comforting to recognize
That even if I were to factor in
The rotation of the earth,
The movement of the earth around the sun,
The movement of the solar system if it does so,
And likewise with the galaxy,
And even the exploding—or is it
 contracting? — universe,
My train, relative to your train, would still be
stopped,
And yours would be moving.
And yet it is possible, even likely,
That I have a complete misunderstanding of
 these matters,
And by reference to a frame I'm not aware of,
And cannot even imagine,
Your train is standing still, and my train,
My train is moving away.

Dream Faster!

Dreams are elusive. They slip away
if they think you're listening.
All day I eavesdrop on my dreams
by pretending to be awake.
Except with you I don't have to pretend.
You are my waking dream, your elusiveness
satisfied by your eternal escape
from my words? Or by my willingness
to touch only the surface? Passionate love,
we call it, like swimmers a few feet from shore
who are yet swimming in the ocean.

You ask if you are who I think you are,
an important question. Must my dreams
be tentative? Can they not include you
unless I take you to the fitting room
to try on each piece?

No, you are the you I think you are
and no other. I think, therefore, you are.
I contain you. The proof is that even as I write
these lines, I have your voice in my head
denying every word of it. But
it's Friday the 13th today: I will dream
very cautiously. Our bodies can no longer take
unruly deep-water dreams. Sagging skin
and hairy moles converge on us. Sharp dorsal
fins
circling. I didn't think sharks ever came this
close
to shore. . . shore? Love, what happened
to the shore?

Star Map

Fields of stars: we lie all night long,
blankets of stars holding us together.
A sea of stars: we float our dreams,
buckets of stars: we drink until dawn.
Forests of stars: we walk plucking leaves
that flame in our hands, that burn under our feet,
boats of stars: we pitch and roll,
we make love over an ocean
filled with luminescence and dolphins,
planes of stars: we fly higher and higher
never quite leaving the earth's atmosphere, still
safe,
still sound, still willing.

The October after. . .

Up past Stumptown the corn
is drying four feet high,
but you cannot hear its whispers.
Burning Bush flames (the) driveways,
streaks through the changeling oak
and sycamore. And the dogwood
is in deep blush, knowing
that, again, she will not resist
winter's embrace.

Cows barely move in their scatter
across the meadow, savoring
its green in the bright fall air.
An ebony cadence of rail fencing
smartly lines the hills. Small flags
snap from each telephone pole,
a hand's reach up from the ground.

It is a time of perfect peace
and innocent respite
from the worries of war.

Still, there are its reminders
in re-stoned houses, cabins
re-caulked in just the last century.
Modern siding covers homes
with high front porches
where women waved goodbye,
silently watched the ragged lines
of men come home at last.

Their walls of rock still stand
that once crawled the land
with the blue and the gray.
And ponds, ponds everywhere,
gleaming with unshed tears.

Marlene S. Veach

Fairfax Hospital: Weekend of the Full Moon

It must be the full moon, the nurse
said swabbing a wound while
checking her charts. Emergency
room, terminus of the frantic
flight from the scene, ambulance
siren, choppers landing, teams
running to appointed places pulling
survivors out of carriers, caring
at full speed to stop the bleeder
pumping non-stop onto the floor,
the full moon pulling the blood
from shattered veins, laughing
at the insanity of so many life-
or-death gurneys stacked up
around the corner, waiting for x-ray,
waiting for the doctor, waiting for . . .

Mike McDermott

Psycho

At the poetry workshop we heard:

My life leaked away in small drops
like the shower scene in *Psycho*.

“The shower scene?” we screamed.

“Those weren’t drops.

That was a river,
a continuous flow
down the drain.”

“Yes,” he said, “but
each drop was precious,
and the drain, a metaphor.
Life is leaking away
into a black hole.”

And who knew of
black holes in 1960?
But not matter what we said,
he held his view.
We wrote down comments,
scratched our heads,
and looked at our watches.

Lee Giesecke

1974

Mother died abruptly
Three years earlier —
Father around only
Because we lived
In the same city.
I was fourteen.

My friends had families,
Memories, play —
Every day, they had
Portions of food, love.

I had rivers of emptiness,
Hunger flowing.

Coming from school,
I wanted to run, run, run,
Drive the loneliness down
Under my footsteps.

I dreamed of gardens,
Hungered for rice, broccoli,
Wheat and tomatoes.

One Thursday afternoon,
I walked across
The Calvert Street Bridge,
Something swelled in me,
Trees swayed underneath,
As cars rushed by
I wanted to leap
From my troubles.

james maina lee

The Small Water of his Voice

Desperate, I reach out to someone
with my fear. He notices only
that I am ugly, doesn't notice
my panic. How can I grow old,
when I am still a child?
How can I mature, when so many
assume I am old?

I remember that phone conversation
as if it were a shrill wind
blowing across a flat dry plain.
His voice was the only water,
and he wasted it.
And I'm sure he didn't mean to.
I'm sure he didn't mean to.
How can he grow old,
when he's as young as the stars.

If I can only remember
we are all simple in concept,
starting each moment
like a new line of poetry . . .
there will be hope

like the small water of his voice
after a flat dry plain.

Pam Blehert

She Takes the Fellas For a Ride

The trinkets of a bogus love
are lavished on the biker.
Though she believes it isn't true
they really do not like her.

Excuses, Excuses

If you want to excuse a behavior
say everyone does it.
Everybody can't find time to read the Bible
daily.
Everybody is nasty when mad.
Everybody buys things on the black market.
Everybody sleeps around.
Everybody gets drunk and does drugs.

The list goes on.
Moses said do not follow a multitude

Contention

Mother, she had motherwit.
Tried to give me half of it.
She would curse at me and swear.
She would rave and tear her hair.
If she tried a gentle touch
she would never grieve so much.
Insults do not make us grow
so be sure your voice is low.

Dorcas Tabitha

#174,465

So who invented the telephone?
I'd known all my life it was Bell alone.
When the Germans named Johann Philipp Reis
I looked at that sign and I read it twice.
The Deutsche Museum, Munich's pride,
(one rainy morning I spent inside)
cited Reis at first, then mentioned Bell,
but who did what they didn't tell.
I hope you can sense my astonished rage
which can scarcely be held to the printed page.
"They've tumbled my hero," I wept, I screamed.
"Could they ever belittle one more esteemed?"
My whole day in Munich was ruined. I cried.
I shunned the exhibits and rushed outside.
Alexander Graham Bell, I'd long sung his praise.
"Come here Watson. I need you" that famous
phrase,
the opening statement in telephone history.
Now Bell is demoted! A baffling mystery.
Flying home on the plane with the clouds below
The question kept haunting. I had to know.
So I read up on Bell and I read up on Reis,
who, it's true, once invented an odd device
and he called his contraption a telephone
but it only transmitted sound tone by tone.
It only transmitted one pitch at a time,
not the kind of invention to get my dime.
Since speech is complex it just wouldn't serve,
and to call it a telephone took some nerve
So there is a sweet end to this shameful tale
where American know-how is seen to prevail.
Bell's telephone patent will long survive
Patent 174,465.

End Notes

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