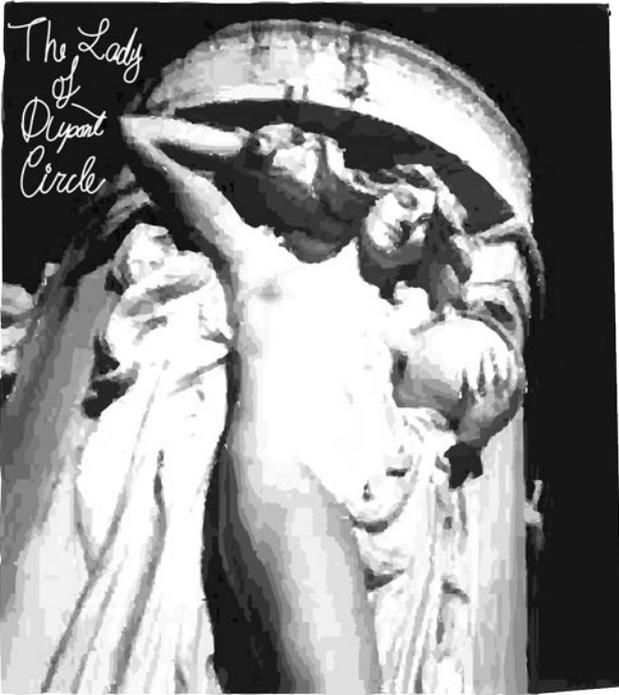


# The Federal Poet



Fall 2003



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Fall 2003

Vol. LX, No. 2



## 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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## The Friendship Club

People are hard on each other. When I was 8, I wanted to start a friendship club. Everyone who joined would get to be a friend of all the others who joined, especially me. What we'd DO. . . I never got that far, thinking if I could just get a bunch of other kids to join a friendship club, the rest would take care of itself (but when I thought of it, all I thought of was me talking, explaining my ideas to friendly ears).

I persuaded just one kid, Tom Conner, a tall, smiley, slow-talking, geeky kid who agreed with everything I said (something I hadn't yet learned to distrust), so we were going to have a friendship club, but before we could find a third, he got busy playing with this weaselly kid who shared his interest in old cars and who liked to walk up to me and punch me in the face, until one day I walked into his punch and grabbed him and wrestled him to the ground (being bigger), after which he left me alone, but so did Tom. Would you like to be my friend?

*Dean Blehert*

## Lunas

Months after it happened, someone said  
a butterfly attending the hands  
means someone you know's returned,

so was it you  
or only the cabbage white  
here for juice left on my finger

stayed five entire minutes  
once at the beginning and once at the end  
of that summer?

And now this morning—three lunas,  
more than I've seen in my life,  
and each one large as a hand,

each one as if two  
pale green bodies  
curved toward each other

or two ethereal ears  
listening without sound.  
Bright angels,

rapt all night by the porch light  
I forgot to turn off,  
you're pinned to the screen

with dozens  
of your ordinary earth-toned cousins.  
I don't know if you're alive.

Somewhere  
a whole town may have died.  
Somewhere a family.

That time I turned to you  
when my relatives turned away—  
you listened, I almost couldn't

believe it. You gathered me.  
I said *thank you thank you*.  
Then left.

One day you turned half-  
paralyzed. I came back,  
calmed your troubled head in my hands.

Now I take one rare moth down,  
it tilts like an open book,  
dead-weight, light in my palms.

Then put it back.

Next morning the whole tribe is gone.

*Rosemary Winslow*

## Fairland Care: Voices, Doors

*Put the dirt where dirt belongs  
You sweetie pie you hear my song  
You didn't see me long and long  
Go away where you belong!*

An old woman's voice—is she alone?—  
coaxes and taunts; her singsong carries  
from one of the many open rooms  
to the corner of the home's long hall,  
where I scan an oil-spill *Geographic*  
and watch the door of one shut room.  
Behind me, in the blue-green lounge  
TV plays on, too loud, the lulling  
boombox of the old, who are wheeled  
to watch, or drowse, or dream. I wait  
in the hall, so Esther won't be lost  
when she leaves her sister's private room.

*You've loved each other seventy years,  
I used to say as I held her hand  
to guide her past the doors, the aides,  
the visitors who look like friends.  
Last week our comfort words broke down—  
she didn't nod or smile, till I changed  
to *all your lives*, then *a real long time*.*

One sister's smart, but left the world  
for a voice that rules through her alone.  
The other's sane, or used to be—  
a therapist, in the years before  
Alzheimer's moved into her head.  
On good days they can patch a visit:  
the smart one smiles and shares her food,  
the sane one brings the other out  
to meet her friends in the corridor.  
On better days their visits last

till Esther wants to leave. On worse,  
the imperious voice won't let her in—  
or calls for Esther, then casts her out.  
Worse or better, the present slips,  
and Esther can't say where she's been—  
just that we need to find Elaine.

In the hall the voice from a farther room  
resumes its taunting schoolyard rhymes:  
*Go take the key go lock the door*  
*You take the cake I can't take more*  
*Put the hurt where hurt belongs*  
*Go away where you belong!*

Did I hear *dirt* or *hurt*? The door  
I watch stays shut. Disasters, weather,  
pleasures blare from the TV.  
In the hall, as in a street, the helped  
and helpers pass. I find a *Digest*,  
thumb its comfort tales of heroes,  
risks, and brave enduring love.

*Judith McCombs*

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First published in: *Prairie Schooner* 76:1 (Spring 2002):136-37.

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(Ed Note: "Heron in Shadowed Waters" was reprinted in the last Federal Poet from *Prairie Schooner* 76:1 (Spring 2002):135-36)

## The Way Things Ought to Be

On good days, our mother was elegant  
as a spray of tulips  
in a silver bowl,  
nodding slightly toward the sun.  
Her monologues at dusk  
glowed of cigarettes and scotch,  
amber like her hair, reflected in the glass  
that rolled across the linen table cloth

as if to join the smoky jars, the scent  
of roses on her dressing table.  
In good times, we loved the weekly ritual  
of the changing of her purses,  
shaken out above the bed,  
coins, hankies, powder, combs.  
Polished fingernails brushed tobacco flakes  
from counterpane to floor.

We understood the goodness of sharp corners  
on freshly sheeted beds, of notes  
with monograms, pleats beneath hot irons,  
herbs arranged by alphabet. In matching  
pinafores and blouses, we set out  
her shoes, lined them up  
like soldiers on the floor, waiting  
for their next command performance.

*Ann Rayburn*

## Dali World

(for Grace Cavalieri)

Ants weep from the wall.  
The crack of the eyelid widens  
across the length of your room.  
God help you if it opens.

You look at your reflection, forgetting  
there's no such thing as a gentle mirror.  
Tigers in full blood rage  
leap from your pomegranate head,  
revealing your soul as the bare soles  
of Christ as He ascends to Heaven  
still nailed to His cross.

Your watch melts on your wrist.  
You feel it burn into your veins:  
the poison of time, the folly  
of trying to cage memory in gold.  
You choose to leave your room,  
to live madly in public,  
to tell the bourgeoisie balancing  
fur-cosseted teacups on their knees  
that it's all just a circus,  
that you control it utterly  
with a flick of your whip mustache,  
while ants weep from the closed eye  
that grows in your wall and waits.

*Miles David Moore*

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(First published in *Minimus*)

## Remembered Greatness

A lady from a local paper interviewed me  
(doing “something about poetry”).  
Her last question was Who among current poets  
will be remembered as great (ME! ME! ME! -  
TEACHER, ME! ASK ME!),  
and I said I didn’t know.

Pam, I could promise to remember you  
if you’ll remember me - as a great. . .  
a great you and me?  
But I can’t imagine you ever reduced  
to a memory merely. You will always stand  
in the way of memory of you  
just as I am always here to interfere  
with my memory of myself -

and who remembers whoever  
wrote the works called Shakespeare’s -  
Who can see more than  
the vaguest outline through all that  
blinding light?

*Dean Blehert*

## A Folk Tale Set to Music or a Swan Named Gottfried

In an opera Wagner wrote  
a white swan small and tame  
must pull a heavy boat.  
Most don't recall its name.

In this opera Wagner wrote  
a lady faces shame  
when comes on stage afloat  
some guy to save the dame.

This hero's come by boat  
and has a massive frame  
which any swan who'd tote  
would win 'mongst swans great fame.

He's from some place remote.  
This sets her heart aflame.  
Soon both with love are smote  
which they in song proclaim.

The guy takes off his coat.  
She begs he give his name.  
He won't. This gets her goat.  
She weds him just the same.

Then some villains who would gloat  
prod her to learn his name.  
They're nasty types who dote  
on evil, shame and blame.

To that march which Wagner wrote  
to bed the wed pair came,  
but love's not antidote.  
The villains win their game.

So he who'd come by boat  
tells name and whence he came.  
He leaves on a high note.  
The swan wins no acclaim.

*Harlan M. Kelly*

## MUSIC

I'm pregnant with music.  
I hope it'll be a philharmonic orchestra or a  
jazz quartet complete with a cool girl singer.

Music is what I'm pregnant with.  
The Doc told me, "Forget the orchestra.  
Forget the jazzy quartet 'cause it's twin  
Mahogany Stradivarius violins you're carryin."

*Averille E. Jacobs*

## You Move Me

It's hard to resist the urge I have  
To retaliate in kind.  
Your attacks are swift, so cold, so neat  
I nearly lose my mind.

And I don't like who I become  
Whenever you're around.  
Your misery infects and spreads.  
It lingers and surrounds.

You move me with offensive ease.  
Your hatred coats and stains,  
'Til all that I can think or want  
To do is cause you pain.

*Jessica Laguerre*

## Twelve Reasons Why I Know There is a God

because Darwin could not explain organs of sight.  
because stomachs do not digest themselves.  
because gene mutations are hardly ever beneficial.  
because of the Second Law of Thermodynamics.  
because the sciences that contradict the Bible are the least  
    scientific of the sciences.  
because people only use 10% of their brains.  
because there are Jews.  
because Jews are a taunt, and a byword everywhere.  
because Israel is a nation again.  
because the Bible describes nuclear warfare.  
because sinful man could have never invented a pure god.

*Dorcas Tabitha*

## Twelve Proofs that There is No God

Because there is suffering.

Because it doesn't go on long enough—  
life, that is, not the suffering

Because there is evil

And because parasites are really,  
really disgusting

Because God's an excuse for hate

Because if God were God,  
why would He ever make us?

Because men made gods in their own image,  
and "God" is cut from the same stone

And because consciousness grasps the finite—  
something the infinite cannot do

Because ethics is hard-wired, mostly,  
so no God is needed

Because of Occam's razor—  
no unneeded entities, please

Because is is  
and always was

And because the beauty of the world  
is profound

*Lee Giesecke*

## Things Left Behind

Through the window, a landscape  
after rain. The black and white cat drinks  
from a puddle in the street, while I look up  
from my book to wonder  
if she tastes some essence of the bird,  
who washed and preened there just an hour ago.  
We stumble into these encounters daily.  
Last week a scientist told us how,  
according to his calculations, each of us

has inhaled molecules from Caesar's last breath,  
the very ones released as he cried *Et tu, Brute?*,  
which some might say explains our taste  
for war and mayhem. Zen masters speak  
of the shapes of things left behind, the outlines  
of a world of illusions: the matted grass,  
for instance, when the lion rises from his sleep.  
Or your gloves, lying on the chair,  
their remembered shapes of absent hands.

I find your comments in this book you left,  
pencilled in the margins. My finger traces *Yes!*, or  
*This could never be*, as if it were following  
the curve of your smile, which lingers  
in the corner of my vision  
just as your thoughts do on the page.  
Tonight you'll be back with your warm skin  
tasting of spices. Meanwhile I am like the cat  
circling the rain puddle, circling her yellow saucer,  
waiting for the taste of fresh cream.

*Ann Rayburn*

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## Love Note

I formed and dressed a loving thought  
In robes of shining radiance  
And tied it with a lover's knot  
Of silk embroideries.  
Then with a final secret kiss  
I tossed it to the breeze.

And up it went to the opal skies  
On its joyous way to you.  
You caught it with a practiced hand  
And plucked it to the core.  
"Is this all there is? You asked,  
"Is there nothing more?"

*Jean E. Leyman*

**Now You See It...**

Milky mist boiling out over the bay  
lifts and briefly unveils  
the Golden Gate Bridge,  
behind it a mosaic of sun-washed rose  
and pearl houses crowding the hills,  
then resettles, swallowing up the sun.

Lightning seizes a landscape in its flash  
of daylight, etching every blade of grass  
onto the retina, then loses it to starless night.

Love, in the play of glittering eyes,  
reveals vast futures, instantly lost  
in the next blink of doubt.

The suddenness estranges us,  
not that we can't still see it—  
we can't UNsee it—  
but that we can't believe we ever saw  
what still we see.

*Dean Blehert*

## Care For Me

Doctor, will you see me now?  
I'm in a lot of pain.  
Please don't rush me, brush me off,  
Assume my stress inane.

Look at me. Please see me here.  
I'm saying something's wrong.  
Tell me; test me. I don't want  
To suffer overlong.

Doctor, please examine me.  
My fear's at fever pitch.  
Care for me as though I were  
White and male and rich.

*Jessica Laguerre*

## OOPS

once I met a man with a pacemaker  
he said he couldn't get too excited  
so we tried  
blew out his battery  
and he died

*Averille E. Jacobs*

## Tears

Put  
your  
tears  
on  
paper  
to  
let  
them  
cry  
out  
their  
woe.

*Ingeborg Carsten Miller*

## OBL

Among the taller wood with ivy hung  
bin Laden plays and dances round his young  
He sniffs and barks if any passes by  
And swings his gun and turns prepared to fly  
The horseman hurries by, he bolts to see  
The Captain sees them and Turk goes by  
And gets a knife and prods the hole to try  
They all get still and lie in safety sure  
Come out again when everything's secure  
And start and snap at choppers overhead  
Who've come to render Osama bin Laden dead.

*H. Alexander*

## Triolet

The squirrel is an acrobat  
On the ground or in the air.  
Amazing to the little cat  
The squirrel is an acrobat  
Whatever can one think of that  
Who can only sit and stare?  
The squirrel is an acrobat  
On the ground or in the air.

*Jean E. Leyman*

## Leap

Cyberbanking, cybertrading and cyberspeculation  
Can be scary  
If you play  
puts and calls against the box  
Contemplating hedging and  
Now is the August of our being absent without leave  
When the London Interbank Offered Rate  
is holding steady  
and the gold fixing is cancelled  
because of lack of interest.

*H. Alexander*

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## Headlands, from the Post-Concussion Journals

Inside the head  
a landscape shirts, goes under.  
In a Netherlands a great sea floods  
across the waking dike, where tourists drive,  
floods past the inland sleeping dike,  
where farms lie safe, and past  
the inmost dreaming dike, all bulwarks  
broken through and flooded deep.  
Stubs of earthworks, pathways gone.  
A North Sea cresting, curling, an endless  
glittering reach of muddied salt  
where tides wash through the cared-for fields,  
the small tree-shadowed homes.

A ladder floating, pale wooden  
rungs, no hands, no cries.

I wake at two or three or four  
each night, stars, moon, blackness  
sealing grey. Inside the head  
the tilting neuron paths, the reptile  
brain set free. In easier times  
I seem to stand aside and watch  
from some safe place while giant seas  
spill through, the deep obliterating  
waters claim their own, the crests  
of foam play out. A curious pleasure  
as the flood breaks through this life  
I've built, as join and tie give way,  
it's gone, I'm carried, free.

\*\*\* \*\*

On the long drive home from Stratford, when my head  
could not process or screen out the lights and sounds  
and vibrations of travel, my daughter took the back  
roads mostly, so she could find green, quiet places for

us to stop and walk, safe from jolting changes, until I could go on for another hour or so. She was the able one, the comforter. Once, just inside the New York state line, I saw a sign for a something dam, and had her turn onto a wooded hillside road along a creek. Paradise Road, the sign said, just before the asphalt ended. The gravel Paradise wound up past scrubby trees, the unseen creek on our left, small chained-off tracks to unseen hillside cabins on our right. No cars or trucks came by. As the way got narrower she wanted to turn back. We've come this far, I said, can we give it another five minutes? Then a curve, a long slow rise, and at last across the valley a huge earth wall, the dam. A dam that held, with a glittering lake beyond. At the side a small white building, almost windowless, no one in sight, Keep Out.

The top of the dam was a gravel road, Keep Out, chain fence with barbed wire strands. My daughter pulled over and got out, waiting in the shadow of the car at the side of the road, while I walked sideways down the slope, across the bulldozed flats of clay and scattered stones, where small brown weeds could hardly grow. In the dry spillway beyond, low shrubs took hold, no trees. In the levelled valley where I walked for a long, long time, dry clay and red-brown split-off stones were everywhere, a host of shards flung here and there. At last I looked for a stone to take, to remember this still safe place, but each shard I picked had in its shallow curving underside a spider's nest. White threads, small life. I put each back, carefully. The huge wall held. The waters safe behind, the valley safe below. My daughter, keeping watch. The ordinary blue-grey sky above. Another chance.

*Judith McCombs*

**He was so well loved**

It used to be enough  
to steal a loaf of bread  
to have your head  
claimed by the better man.

We go on killing in the auspices  
of the food god.

You might say of the fleet  
antelope  
that he was so well loved  
by the lion  
that the lion  
(being the fleeter)  
just went ahead  
and made the antelope  
a part of him.  
Ergo,  
he ate him up  
*malgré tout ses efforts.*  
If you find yourself half-eaten,  
look for the lion,  
the vulture, the hyena  
lurking in the tall grass  
loving you.

*Pam Blehert*

## **You'll Have Known it All the Time**

*(Italicized lines are from Grace Cavalieri's poem, How to Obtain)*

*It'll happen when you least expect it*  
Suddenly you will understand  
the inner and outer loops of the beltway  
as your car veers into the rain-glazed night of a  
Saturday alone  
you'll be headed finally in the right direction  
without hesitation, with truth.

*When you're telling a friend what you think,*  
the police officer who gave you a ticket on a Friday night,  
who accused you of making an improper right hand  
turn on yellow  
will knock on you door and give you back  
the point you lost.

*When you're playing crazy eights,*  
your high school guidance counselor will interrupt  
your game  
waving your IQ in her hand  
and you'll grab it from her  
before it comes an impostor  
tattooed on your arm in blue.

*You will notice it*  
the wave in your hair that asserts itself  
no matter how long you roll it out.

*You always knew it.*  
Your voice and its language  
will play a duet on the stage  
where lights are friends, applause is heard first  
inside the brain.

*You will start seeing it*  
in the same way you see the fall colors drape your window:  
you'll open your heart to the crimson mansion,  
you'll open your arms to the chartreuse stairway  
you'll hold onto the bannister of rain soaked tree trunks  
that go deep into the earth and push into the clouds  
    all at once,  
And of loving *you will say*  
*"Is this all there is to it"*  
*You'll have known it all the time.*

*Nancy Allinson*



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