

“what poetry can do and how it can do it”:

An Interview with *NCLR*'s Poetry Editor,
Jeffrey Franklin

by James Smith



Over the Hill, by Charity Jules Valentine

Brushing Out the Tangles

by Jeffrey Franklin

Only because her mother is out of town
and she refused to wash her hair last night
and so has wakened with a chiseled frown,

her head a fishing-filament-bird-nest fright;
and, too, because she could not be content
inside her body yesterday, the spite

crackling off her tongue not what she meant,
the hauteur mimicked from some Hollywood diva
too tightly fitting after her second rant;

and because her father sometimes acts Jehovah –
judgmental, mirthless, and, worst of all, unlistening –
and she responds in kind as destroying Siva;

and because, today, her mother *still* is visiting,
she shakes her head at my offer, pauses, frowns,
then says, “Okay,” I may brush her hair to glistening.

Jeffrey Franklin was Assistant Professor of English at East Carolina University from 1996 to 2000. In 2000, he moved to Denver and the University of Colorado, where he now holds the position of Associate Professor of English and teaches Victorian literature and creative writing. His current scholarly project (seven years in the making) is a groundbreaking book on the shaping and reception of Buddhism in Victorian England. It is under final revision with a major university press, and Franklin hopes to see it into print within the next year. His first book, *Serious Play: The Cultural Form of the Nineteenth-Century Realist Novel*, came out in 1999 from the University of Pennsylvania Press.

For the Lost Boys, his first full-length collection of poems, was published last year by Ghost Road Press. A manuscript of formal verse, “Refugees of the New Age,” is currently in circulation. His poems have appeared in *Hudson Review*, *New England Review*, *New Orleans Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Shenandoah*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Third Coast*, and others, as well as in *Best American Poetry* (2002). Since 1999, Franklin has served as poetry editor for the *North Carolina Literary Review*.



Jeff Franklin with daughter Emma
on Merchant's Mill Pond in Gatesville, NC, 1998

Although he now lives in Colorado with his wife and two children, Franklin grew up in Chattanooga, Tennessee. He received a BA in English and Religion from UNC-Chapel Hill, an MS in Science and Technology Policy from Georgia Tech, and an MFA and a PhD from the University of Florida. His connections to the South and to *NCLR* are strong, as he explains in the interview.

Franklin and I conducted this interview by way of email (and at one point, by way of fax when email would not cooperate) over a period of almost two months. Writers and editors both, we enjoyed writing our "conversation" one piece at a time, allowing for reflection and revision.

With humor and intensity, Franklin examines his background, his connection to Southern Appalachia, his poetry, his academic choices, his Buddhism, the rigor he brings to his role as poetry editor for *NCLR*, and the satisfaction he finds in that work.

James Smith: *What in your background attuned you for the role of poetry editor?*

Jeffrey Franklin: I've been reading poetry both with passion and with critical fascination since I was fourteen or fifteen years old (thanks initially to passionate and critical high school English teachers). I'm now fifty-two. I've been writing poems for the same amount of time, and I've been working at being a professional poet for around twenty years. Like most poets, I've struggled mightily to swallow regular rejection and still keep my heart in the game – I know well how submitting authors feel.

I have an MFA in poetry and a PhD in literature: one for the creative right brain, one for the critical left-brain. I'm a very close and analytical reader (at least of other people's writing), and I'm one critical sonofabitch. I subscribe to and read a dozen literary journals, despite the fact that seventy percent of the poems I encounter there seem to me to be inattentive to language, not interested in the poetic line,

"Emptiness is emptiness of the ego, the little needy, grasping self that sees everything and everybody as a projection of me/my/mine. The self works every instant to fill entirely the screen of the movie called *My Life*."

emotionally self-indulgent, emotionally sterile, or just plain boring. For a given poem, I can explain exactly what I believe its limitations are.

That having been said, I've never stopped loving poetry, and I read with the same thrill of that fifteen-year-old whenever I come across a really good poem.

As a poet starting out, did you have experiences with editors that were defining moments for you, encounters that made you think, "I would never be that kind of editor" or "I would hope to be that kind of editor"?

I cannot recall any formative negative encounters. A few times editors have held on to a submission for over a year, and then rejected it – that's what my momma would call bad manners. Several editors did give me much needed hope early on by choosing to publish a poem of mine – Stephen Corey (before he joined *Georgia Review*) and, especially, Fred Morgan, whose support at *Hudson Review* was very valuable to me.

I wonder about that left-brain/right-brain template that you propose. Before I went off to graduate school, a poet friend encouraged me, mightily, not to go. She worried that I might never write poems again, and the truth is, for a long time, I didn't.

Did "higher education" slow you down any as a poet? Of course, graduate school, ultimately, made me a better poet, I think, but I sometimes wonder what kind of poet I would be now if I had not gone that route. You?

Yes, me, too. In truth, I think I went on for the PhD in part because I did not have the full courage of my convictions as a poet. When I finished the MFA, I