

# The Federal Poet



Spring 2003

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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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## Small Slice

New moon standing high up  
the other day, over the sky  
said: "Hey, I'm round, just  
take a look at me."  
And I did, I did. He  
Reminded me of us.  
Such a small slice shown  
To the world. So much potential.  
We laughed and laughed.  
I sped on through the night  
Looking at the round moon.

*Pam Blehert*

## Beyond the Cringe

There are things I've done which,  
when something makes me think of them  
(showing up fresh as life after years  
of sleep in some enchanted cave),  
make me cringe, ashamed even to think them  
in a large room by myself, not wanting  
to know this could be me.

I'd tell you about these things  
if I thought they could be understood  
(these things I REFUSE to understand),  
by you who assert your likes and dislikes  
as if saying with every you-shaped breath:  
"This is the sort of person I am!"--

you who have done nothing  
that could make you cringe.

*Dean Blehert*

## Visitation

*For J.R.*

*The experiences that are called apparitions, the whole so called spirit world; death, all these things that are so closely related to us, have through our daily defensiveness been so entirely pushed out of life that the senses with which we might have been able to grasp them have atrophied. Rilke, Letter to a Young Poet*

When it happens, you show up  
out of nowhere, arriving in an idle  
brain, an idle time, most likely when  
I'm pulling weeds or staking tomatoes,  
or driving somewhere. I don't believe  
in ghosts as such, but you appear to be  
quite near, and I do believe in you.  
You seem curious to me, and a little idle yourself,  
not pushy, but inquiring. I believe you've come  
to see how life is going, how my garden grows.

You appear from nowhere, like the blue heron  
standing at the edge of the pond, while the  
piper  
played the Skyeboat Song, and all of us  
at your memorial service smiled and pointed.  
Reed-slender, blending with the grass, at first  
we could hardly see him. Like an apparition  
in November frost, he paced the shore.  
Up and down he strode, bobbing, listening  
to the bagpipes with us, a presence  
arriving out of nowhere.

*Ann Rayburn*

## Exodus

They carry a world in their eyes. In their bodies  
history takes shelter, a cyst in the gut, a living  
blossom embedded in brain.

Pear trees, apricots,  
their blossoms uncounted, on fire. The marriage  
photos, the marriage bed, birth beds,  
deathbeds, on fire. Roofs and outbuildings,  
animals and fields, windows and doorways,  
on fire.

Shots, orders, fire.

The winnowing of men, herded like beasts  
to the harvest. *But my father's beasts  
were not beaten, not shot as they ran, not slashed  
again and again.*

Shots, screams, silence.  
*Then we heard laughter, the joyous triumphant  
laughter of those who came that night  
with weapons and masks, with armor  
and laughter. Yet some of us knew  
voices among them, the man who drove  
the late bus, the boy from the baker's stall  
who counted our coins.*

\*\*\*

The hundreds, the thousands,  
the hundreds of thousands, shapes of dust  
on the roads.

The rain, the thirst,  
the cold. The dazed man without shoes,  
the red-brown mud caked on his socks.  
The father's father, his face caved in,  
his tooth glass knocked to the floor as he fled.

The children who do not look up,  
the children who look without seeing.

The slow ones with only their slippers,  
the ones who are carried or dragged,  
the ones who must not be lost.

\*\*\*

In the days, the winnowing of women,  
the young ones who do not come back.  
The two who came back, rivulets of blood  
on their feet. The shame of those who saw  
their bent heads.

The woman in black  
holding her belly. The woman who dropped  
at the side of the road, emptying the child  
from her belly.

*Sometimes there was bread, hidden  
or given.* Water wherever, the flushed cheeks  
and blank eyes of the children, the worn  
animal faces of women holding the hands  
of children.

The women down on their knees,  
scooping the ditchwater, streamwater, snow.  
The women tending the children  
in darkness, sharing a basin of water,  
*look, stars you can drink.*

\*\*\*

She says *there were twelve in her family, before.*  
Tonight they are counted as nine  
of those who are lucky, they have reached  
the dark field of a country where oranges  
and bottles of water, blankets and bread  
will be given.

Stars she can name  
bloom through the clouds, hunter  
and prey.

Shots, orders, fire  
at her daughter's home where she lived.  
Shots, orders, fire at her brother's house  
where she fled.

In her arms she cradles  
the drowsing child of her second daughter,  
the one who stares and won't speak.

Roads, paths, woods,  
roads. Her toe has turned black.  
She says *it is hard to walk up a mountain.*

*Judith McCombs*

## Magician's trick

You didn't think you could go on  
And pulled the old magician's trick, left us  
Holding the bag.

Time falls, drip, drip, a linear map, a lie,  
and you have fallen for it, so are dead.

Look, suppose that I said:

You are not dead,  
can be forgiven, really, if  
you find it hard to speak beyond the grave.  
But clearly, life in all its forms  
is waiting your return.

You are not dead, but ageless,  
the angel, the seed, the fiery phoenix.  
You are not dead, just pretending.

You find yourself in other circumstances,  
Stunned by the remembrance.  
We know you are waiting in the wings.

*Pam Blehert*

## How to Eat a Computer

First, a salad of the keys,  
and to indulge myself a little,  
an extra ampersand, but only  
one, they go right through me.  
A bland affair? Not with the  
extra finger grime on “insert”  
and “delete,” sudden, not subtle,  
surprising, like unfamiliar spice  
when eating Indian.

Open

And discard the shell.

Then

pause a moment — intermezzo? —  
to contemplate the innards:  
delicate, complex, without peer  
in nature.

For second course,  
I wouldn't touch those grayish belts,  
tough leaves that dieticians say  
one can't digest and even may do  
harm. And unlike those lungy  
parts of crabs one tries hard not to  
eat, these are discrete and thus  
can be avoided.

Connecting wires  
of red and green and white could  
do for spaghettini *tricolore* or  
better still as garnish for a festive  
presentation.

And finally we reach  
the inner delicacy, the *buco* in the *osso*,  
or vice versa — the hard drive. This  
takes some work:

We filet

the filigree of circuitry from its  
metal bed. Then down the gullet

just like tiny tentacles of cuttlefish  
(that no-no on the Chinese menu)  
washed down with something fine  
and French, the California stuff  
won't do.

The hard plate itself's  
another matter. Those sharp edges  
could be trouble at the other end.  
Perhaps a crucible could melt it to a  
chocolaty dessert — in a soft asbestos  
wrap.

Feeling satisfied?

No need  
to count the grams of fat, or other-  
wise constrain your joy with  
pettifogging strictures.

And if,  
later, when looking for a word,  
eleven letters for *Bogie's*  
*mortifying ailment on the Queen*,  
you hear your gut begin to squawk  
and groan, don't think that something  
disagreed: that's your imbibed  
processor at work.

Behold!

A bubble rises up your spine.  
Upon your retinal screen the word  
appears: *borborygmus* — by God  
I am the damned machine.

*Wells Burgess*

## The Limitations of Aesthetics

We ache in different ways  
in different places.  
So your perfect masseuse  
is not mine.  
Nor is yesterday's perfect  
so perfect today.  
We may agree on a perfect blue  
or a perfect chocolate,  
but we need not.

I like the way morning  
lifts out of the fog:  
the rise of the hill,  
the solitary cow bell,  
and the way the fence line  
ends in mist.  
Could it be improved?  
Maybe,  
but it's a silly question.

People who like Malamutes  
like our guys:  
their respectful distance,  
the small pleasures in their own agenda,  
and their friendly concern.  
That their play is less over-the-top  
(and less in-your-face)  
is the complaint of others,  
not us.

But people who like a certain music  
keep coming back.  
That we can say.  
Though I'll take my Vivaldi  
to your Mozart,  
that's all I can say.  
It is not the secret virtue  
I sometimes suppose.

*Lee Giesecke*

## Labor Day Champ

We all took turns at pitching,  
his dad and granddad, his uncle too.  
It was no easy matter  
to aim right at the bat.  
The batter in this game was not yet three.  
At times the whiffel ball collided with the bat.  
The batter then to neighbors' cheers  
ran wildly through the yard  
beneath the clothesline draped with bathing suits,  
and rounding home he'd give his waiting mom  
a proud high five.

*Harlan M. Kelly*

## The Tao of Desire

First,  
The attraction, then  
The open regard, then  
The regard returned, openly, then  
Fear, then  
Withdrawal, then  
The furtive regard, then  
The fault detected in the regarded one, then  
Lust in safety, then  
Emptiness.

*Wells Burgess*

## Childless

The sheep's nose pokes  
the boy's tufts of blond.  
Small yet bulky he tumbles  
over. His head almost rings  
as it hits the concrete.  
I search for concern in a mother  
busy with her cats and horses.  
(I worry if this is the right place  
to find a cat for my niece).  
His mother tells me he has done this  
before and I wonder whether he  
will be mad or stupid when he grows.

I stare at the boy's face  
flushed and tear stained;  
we watch swirls of cats  
black, tawny, gray – many more cats than I can  
imagine  
feed on dollops of mush  
that the boy's mother throws from tins.  
She pours milk into buckets.  
Cat hunger sounds are endless.

Smells devour the air  
once fresh:  
the sour of sheep's wool,  
a gamy odor in his hair,  
wet dirt on his hands  
as he pushes me away from him,  
it is so natural for me to want.  
He sits down with the cats  
and they continue feeding.

These scenes linger and leave.  
What I cannot have  
seems like a string of smoke  
rising from the chimney  
of another farm house.  
The animals find their sleeping places,  
the boy stops crying.  
It is quiet and cold out here under the sunset,  
the clouds turn dark and move rapidly.  
I must go home.

*Nancy Allinson*

**Portrait of the Infant Giovanni De'Medici**

*(after Agnolo Bronzino)*

Fattened with *latte, bomboloni*,  
and the pride of his august parents,  
*il bambino principe* smiles sweetly  
even when laced into a silk doublet  
and made to sit still for the nice painter.

You would smile too, as sweetly  
and unreflectively as little Gianni,  
if your life were as brightly colored  
and docile as the bird he holds in his hand--  
something that will sing, but not fly away.

The baby's mild, wide eyes see visions  
of groaning tables that stretch without end.  
His lips part, ready to eat again.  
Life is good. Life is easy.  
It will not get any harder.

*Miles David Moore*

**Patchwork**

A patchwork of emotions  
form the garment of the day,  
a tatter of jagged shapes,  
with threads dribbling down,  
a hole-full coverlet that fails  
to keep the drafts out  
or a fragile warmth in.  
What garment is this  
that I will wear today,  
familiar in the feel  
of failing to cover all?

*Mike McDermott*

---

"Childless" first appeared in *Minimus*, Volume 7, 1997



## The Landing

The wind brings its news  
of the sea. It carries the whine  
of a gull, mutterings of sand  
scratching the shore.  
No messages to be found here,  
on the papers battered  
and crosshatched by wheels,  
splayed in ditches. The wind  
pushes us across a bridge of canvas  
sails, brine-stiff, onto alien rocks.

We search new faces, reading  
them like clocks: what time  
is it in the land we have left?  
We are exiles, caught between  
gray walls, resentful of  
the natives' churlish optimism.  
We cannot find beauty  
in the old man's wispy hair,  
lifting and falling in the wind's wake.  
We step over flotsam, walk  
single file to the edge.  
Across the flat page of the sea,  
a ship, winking its lights, waits.

*Ann Rayburn*

## Coffee Shop Curse

Why must I always turn the table  
in hopes all legs will touch the floor?  
When three or five legs would be stable,  
must table makers just use four?

Do they believe each habitat  
has floors smooth as a window pane?  
Or do they think the world is flat  
and old Columbus sailed in vain?

*Harlan M. Kelly*

### Tanka

The rooster was upset  
When night came at noontide.  
And the light dimmed down.  
He almost lost his voice  
Calling back the sun.

It is no fun  
To be so terribly clever  
If no one hears me.  
Any frog in the puddle  
Can say the very same thing

It was ten to twelve  
When the clock struck seven  
And registered nine.  
It was a difficult choice  
And not a moment to spare.

A spider lowers  
Down to my open letter..  
It doesn't matter.  
Whatever he reads of it  
He will surely keep quiet.

*Jean Leyman*

## In Love, Approximately

I feel days  
when sun-dazzled leaves  
leap to heaven  
or fingertips.

My hands are in love  
with proximate things.  
They fly at the sun.  
The blood bird sings.

Leaf-vein—my kin—  
what can I do but touch, touch...  
I cannot reach  
heaven  
nor him

*Rosemary Winslow*

## Why She Asks Him to Stay

Because she once saw her mother's pale scalp  
in lamplight, bowed, waiting for sleep,  
taking only her own thin bones for company,  
and the late night talk show. Because she met her eyes  
above the solitary bowl and spoon, saw the rows  
of home canned jellies, peaches, beans.  
At night she wants him there among the fallen  
ashes, the books and dishes, a messy life  
beside her own. The moon is cool, white.  
In the darkened room, she needs  
his body like a sheltering  
bay, on the pale sea of their bed.

*Ann Rayburn*

## 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*

---

"The Way things Ought to Be" appeared previously in "Frantic Egg", Issue 5, December, 2001

Going Home (St. Paul, 1960)

Biting wind. Waiting for a bus,  
I cower in a phone booth, nothing to do  
but stomp my feet and shush my thoughts  
of minutes, dollars, things not said  
to closed faces, cold feet—thoughts  
as shrill as tired kids in the back seat  
of a too-long trip.

In this cold, thoughts,  
like sculpted whorls of smoke  
attached to a below-zero chimney,  
become solid, slow, slower...

In sudden clarity of winter night  
I stand empty, filling up with purr  
of repeated muffled car explosions,  
white and red lights advancing, receding  
in dazzling ice-doubled columns.  
BAR AND GRILL flashes green,  
then stabbing blue, zips  
through twisted threads of glass,  
gone before eye can follow.

Lights shatter into stars.  
Among smells of exhaust and wet wool  
I imagine (or am I there?)  
steaming black diner coffee. Senses,  
suspended in crystal, waver.

How kind of the world, seeing I must wait  
(for what?), to stop for me  
here at the frozen crest of things.

The periphery of my vision stands still  
while I turn away from my eyes to see.  
But one must exhale again: The world  
wheels free, eyes take over vision,  
nose claims smell, ears sound;  
though still  
they are icicle sharp,  
beside themselves, taut  
ears listening to hear who listens, nose  
bickering with eyes for a share in color,

eyes finding faces in the faceless:  
Tottering cherubic faces gaping  
in the high cab lights of wheezing trucks,  
earnest innocence of car faces, Chevy  
and Ford as distinct as two uncles,

words already auditioning for the poem  
that's in the wind, each word, too,  
with its spellbound face,  
and before mine on the shiny  
black phone, the jingle  
of "One Dime".  
In this thin clear air,  
expanding bubble of me rises faster and faster,  
motionless,  
to burst into its element.

Stomping into the bus, shivering,  
I fumble for coins, giggling  
in my pocket. The driver's shoulders  
are set in perpetual shrug; his face  
speaks for his shoulders. I wonder  
who is he?

Down the slush-wet black-rubbered aisle  
past a frown (Where's he's taking it?),  
past car-cards selling chewing gum  
that two pretty twins chew  
to double their pleasure in life  
and the U.S. Army, where you can learn  
a trade, car-cards quoting Thoreau  
(Great Thoughts Of) about walking  
to a different drummer, engines  
pulsing at my feet--

I sprawl across a seat  
having it all to myself,  
peer through my face  
at rippled streaks of light and darkness,  
at home here  
going home.

*Dean Blehert*

## Antique Brass

6:00am.  
Radio clicks on.  
"America" plays again  
over the waves,  
in an antique brass  
that seems to weep.  
It's a technique  
where the notes  
bleed into each other, slightly,  
like a high school band  
only not so bad.  
But the effect is like  
a lone bugle  
playing taps.

Everything weeps:  
Van Gogh's flowers in a vase,  
fields, streets, starry nights.  
Everything weeps.

*Lee Giesecke*

## Why They Lived Happily Ever After

I have a secret weapon:  
my secret weapon is me!  
You think you're king of the courtyard.  
I'll take my clothes off. you'll see!

I'll get the keys to the courtyard.  
You'll get the love you adore.  
It hardly will take a moment.  
I'll lap you off of the floor!

*Dorcas Tabitha*

## To the Scum who Stole my Radio

To the scum who stole my radio,  
I hope you go deaf,  
I hope you go blind,  
I hope you go mute.

To the scum who stole my radio,  
I hope the earphones emit electric shocks,  
the batteries explode in your hand,  
the buttons become hopelessly stuck.

To the scum who stole my radio,  
I hope it turns to maggots in your hand,  
to mucus in your pocket,  
to horseshit in your backpack.

To the scum who stole my radio,  
I hope you drop it,  
lose it.  
I hope, better yet, someone steals it from you.

*Averille E. Jacobs*

## Mr. Muhlenberg

There used to be a pleasant patch of green  
which broke the endless high-rise monotone,  
some trees and grass, an unobstructed scene  
till some folks stuck this head upon a stone.

A head upon stone, you say? A bust,  
a wig-bedecked odd likeness of a man  
whose deeds aren't worth recalling. Now we must  
when passing by ignore him if we can,

or cheer the kids whose skateboards wheel and spin  
upon his concrete plaza now for fun.  
I'd like to think the builders think this sin,  
just as I feel that out here in the sun  
is where shade trees might grow or flowers bloom.  
I'd hide old Muhlenberg in some dark room.

*Harlan M. Kelly*

## Nights Like This

Early night, the cooling summer sky like a piece  
of Nat King Cole's Blue Velvet, pinned with two white stars.  
From ranches, men drove into town and parked,  
propped their boots on their pickup bumpers,  
pushed back their salt-stained hats, and talked.  
Like restless moths, we girls flew to boys  
who cruised through town from end to end,  
beckoned us with suntanned wrists, then took us  
riding through the darkened fields.  
Broken stars spilled into still canals  
that lay like ribbons stretched across the earth.  
We thought nights would always be like this,  
red neon glowing above the town,  
light vanishing everywhere into velvet.

*Ann Rayburn*

## Now the Serpent was more Subtle

*Genesis 3:1*

It's fun to fool with the serpent,  
though thrills you get will subside.  
Your luck will not last forever;  
he'll fix his fangs in your hide.

*Dorcas Tabitha*

## How are you, Dear?

Will you tell me,  
or will you hide  
behind fairy tales  
and platitudes?

Will you  
tell me the truth  
or invent  
golden ponds  
and white lies –  
just to calm  
my anxiety driven  
curiosity?

Will you keep  
me entertained  
for a healthy  
while–  
or

Will you  
distract–  
attract  
me?

Fine!

How  
are you,  
Dear?

*Ingeborg Carsten-Miller*

## Autumn Colors

“Look at me,”  
the year says  
in the autumn:

“This is the  
full beauty  
of your year  
in maple,  
oak, and birch.  
Fill your heart  
with this year’s  
great harvest.

It took me  
months to paint  
fall’s colors –  
take them along  
with you to  
the darkness  
of endless  
winter nights!”

*Ingeborg Carsten-Miller*

## Mathematical Mayhem

Mathematics never liked me.  
All Algebra's expressions refused  
to express anything but distress.

Geometric figures gagged me with  
pollutions instead of solutions.  
The Exponents' Laws found my flaws,  
turning my no. 2 pencils to dust and my  
mind into mushy disgust.

Trigonometry tricked poor, unmathematical  
me by locking away its functions and throwing away  
the key.

Addition addled me;  
Multiplication mutilated me and saddled me  
with principles and rules more complex than  
the other principals — those fools that rule the schools.  
The Order of Operations was so out of order,  
I felt like running for the border.

I was angered by Angles, tangled in triangles,  
and rattled by Ratios as they danced "The Cool Jerk,"  
forcing me into moves that wouldn't work.

Naughty Negative Numbers purposely traded their powers  
with their repulsive Positive cousins by the dozens for  
hours and hours and hours and hours.

Polynomials pulverized me, Trinomials terrorized me,  
and fractions fractured me mercilessly,  
making me weak, making me squeak like the chalk  
when I performed at the board while my classmates  
roared.

Though I tried evasions,  
Second Degree Equations gave me third degree palpitations.

I think it's clear that Mathematics never cared for me.

*Averille E. Jacobs*

## When Grandfather Died

she cried, You  
are too true,  
my life

drips like gold  
honey globes  
from white

hexagonal cells. It soaks  
this bread. She could not eat.  
Rain was all through April

dew, tasteless, clear, washing death  
from the bedroom, the scent of him.  
The pale wallpaper was slipping down.

Carnelian hollyhocks grew a fence of six-foot pikes  
around our house. His thrilled bees tore  
the liquid from their blond throats. She wouldn't  
speak.

She put salvia in her hair, roses and peonies  
in crystal vases, old beer steins, anything  
that he had loved. The empty place

(once the barn, some calves, his horses  
gone in a fire,  
alchemized to spilled black stars)

became a melt  
of white-pink phlox  
behind the house beyond the fence. She flooded

all our rooms with flowers  
till bees hummed about our ears  
far into the evenings in the parlor. She let

the clicking pendulum, his violin,  
saturate the night. She would say  
nothing, nor weep. And heavy afternoons spread  
tendrils

wet on her neck, water clung  
brackish in the steins. Fruit rotted. Then  
the frost came. One morning

we found her, a winter stem,  
cold and stiff in the bed where he left  
her. We spent Christmas snowed in,

watching the moon put a glaze on  
the thick drifts,  
as we'd watched her,

memory's fatal light,  
that cold diffusion,  
distilling as we looked and looked

and could not reach her.

*Rosemary Winslow*

### **The Blessed Virgin of Voice-mail**

I see her Jane Wyman-like in *Stage Fright*,  
that frank and open look, the cheek bones white  
and glowing, a pure symmetry, eyes wide,  
but now in business garb, gray suit, a single  
strand of modest pearls, and when she speaks  
her voice flows out in pearly grayish tones  
of steady modulations, nothing  
to disturb or vex, or hint of sex, a blithe  
neutrality, demure yet strong. One could  
not call her supportive, or even warm,  
but there's that slightly higher pitch at close —  
is it an invitation to return  
and let our sweaty ears be cooled again  
by blessed's prim and icy lullaby?  
*Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye...*

*Wells Burgess*

## Rayburn Building Cafeteria Scene

He drinks Diet Coke  
Eats mashed potatoes  
White male about 30  
Five feet 10 inches 250 pounds  
Glasses  
Bearded  
Eats big pieces of potatoes  
Rubs nose  
Retrieves message from pager  
Eats more potatoes  
Reads congressional testimony  
Black shoes  
Shoves food onto fork  
Wipes his face with napkin  
Drinks Diet Coke  
Eats alone  
Nods to an acquaintance  
Writes himself a note  
Tabasco bottle unused  
Studies papers  
Looks into the middle distance  
It is 1 :45 pm April 10, 2002  
Finishes Diet Coke  
Cocks his head  
Admires what he has written  
resembles Reps. Ackerman, Wynn and Nadler.

*Hunter Alexander*

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