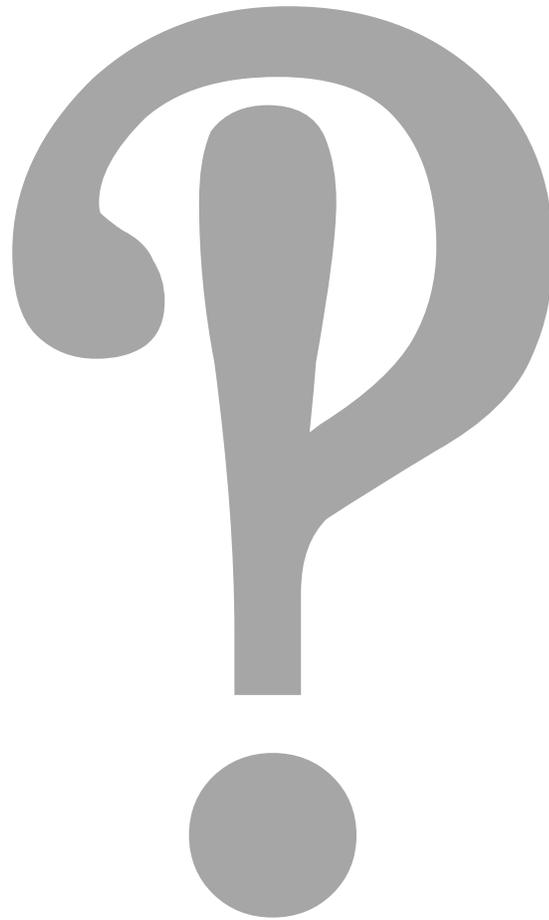


Volume 10, Number 1

Winter 2021

# Interrobang



The Literary Magazine of Kirby School  
Santa Cruz, California

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*Interrobang* publishes excellent poetry, short fiction, creative nonfiction, drama, and comics written by the students of the Kirby School. *Interrobang* appears twice yearly, in winter and spring. Share your original, proofread work with our staff at [interrobang@kirby.org](mailto:interrobang@kirby.org) anytime between August and May. Contributors need *not* be on staff. We welcome submissions from Kirby middle school and high school students. Submission guidelines available upon request.

The staff of *Interrobang* meets Friday mornings during club time. We always welcome new members with interests in creative writing, art, literature, and ideas.

*Interrobang* Literary Magazine

Kirby School

425 Encinal Street

Santa Cruz, CA 95060

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January 2021

Dear Readers,

In Winter 2021 issue, we are proud to present stories, a personal essay, and a wealth of poems. Some pieces were written in response to a prompt in AP English Literature and Composition to write either a jeremiad or a captivity narrative (two subgenres of literature that were familiar to seventeenth-century English immigrants in the Massachusetts Bay Colony). Two of the poems, by Hunter Reid and Vanessa McKelvey, emerged from an assignment for the Banned Books course. One of these, “Meditation (for Matthew, Part III)” by Hunter Reid, was awarded a Silver Key in the Scholastic Art and Writing Regional Competition.

We are grateful for Kirby’s student writers for their interest in creative writing and their love of ideas, both of which are essential to the life of *Interrobang*. We urge all Kirby creative writers, from middle school to high school, to submit poems, personal essays, comics, and short stories to [interrobang@kirby.org](mailto:interrobang@kirby.org) by email or by sharing a Google doc. Contributors remain anonymous until publication.

As always, we thank the administration and teachers of Kirby School, whose continued support makes publishing *Interrobang* possible.

With best wishes for the wellbeing of all our readers and contributors—enjoy!

—The Staff of *Interrobang*

**Pear Treat**

Cut in half, I give you  
this pear  
your sweet mouth  
can savor.

Yunqi (Nick) Zhang

## A Riot of Antonyms

What's in the dream?

A reality that screams.

What's in the father's eyes?

A thousand and one children's cries.

What's in the shade?

A mass of light,

yet in a wine-dark cage.

## Note

The following three pieces, by Tiago Beck, Yuenan Huang, and Tyree Milhorn, are creative variations on two subgenres of early New England literature.

Tiago Beck's "Foul Sinners in the Hands of an Angry Fowl" is a comical take on the jeremiad, a form of sermon in which the speaker calls out the audience for their moral failures, reminds them of their original "covenant with God," and urges them to change their ways in order to avoid the fiery consequences of persisting in their sinful ways.

Yuenan Huang's historical fiction story about Marco Polo and Tyree Milhorn's science fiction piece are inspired by seventeenth-century captivity narratives. The captivity narrative was an early literary form—combining spiritual autobiography and adventure story—that originated as the chronicles of captives kidnapped by Indigenous groups in frequent raids on English newcomers' settlements. (While Indigenous people, too, were sometimes captured by English attackers, the surviving captivity narratives of this period represent the experiences of the English.) Captivity narratives typically featured a person with strong religious beliefs struggling with a crisis of faith because of the hardships they endured, including separation from loved ones, physical suffering, and cultural displacement. Often, captives partially adapted to the culture, language, and practices of their captors, either in a tactical effort to survive or because of authentic understanding of the other culture. Generally, such narratives ended with the uneasy reunion of the captive—now altered by their experience—with their home, culture of origin, and loved ones.

## Foul Sinners in the Hands of an Angry Fowl

All of you, gather round. Yes, you, I am talking to you. This is a matter of great importance, a matter of faith, a matter of God.

I come to you from the city, many cities in fact. In my crusade for God and for piety, I have crossed the face of this vast nation more times than its people have crossed the will of God, and that is a great many times indeed, for everywhere I go I see the same things. Sin. Blasphemy against God. Deceit. Bowler hats. Treachery. I have spoken to the people of these cities just as I am speaking to you people of the western frontier, I have cried out to them, telling them of the error of their ways and the righteous service of God, but to no avail.

Last month, I was walking down a street in Chicago, visibly perturbed by the sin around me, when a great force chose to collide with my piously shaved head. I was knocked to the ground, and after lying there bleeding for a few minutes, I sprang up in righteous fury to see who had dared to assault an emissary of God. But what I found was not one of the multitude of sinners spread across the city, but a small object. It was curved like the head of our lord Jesus, and hard like the heavenly biceps of God. A coating of hardened rubbery material made up its magnificent form. As I lifted the rubber duck above my head, I knew without a doubt that this was a sign.

This duck, yes, this duck right here, tells us of our sins. The people of the cities have grown lazy and corrupt. Big business, small business—material money making practices in general—have spread across our country, a great plague of coins and bills. The Egyptians suffered their plagues as divine punishment from God, but we have generated our own, one that directs us away from the way of God rather than towards it. Numerous other sins have spread: gambling, drinking, and foul curses to name a few. Here in the wilderness of the west, things are even worse. Saloons line every street, the sounds of drunk laughter, rolling dice, and the smashing of bottles, the smell of sweat and vomit, the taste of whiskey, all dripping out of their doors and staining the ground red with sin. Towns stand lawless and churchless, if you can even call these ragtag piles of sin and blasphemy towns.

Hearing all of this, you may think that I am angry. You are not wrong. However, remember that my anger is nothing compared to the vehement rage of God, rage so hot it could burn the very sun, and so terrifying that even the Devil would flee,

like a small child from their irate father. He knows better than anyone that things were not always like this. You are the same people who once landed in Plymouth with the express purpose of serving God in all his glory. Oh, how great you were back then, praying every Sunday, and following the Bible with all your heart. Business was conducted for survival, survival was to benefit the community, and the community was for the honoring of God. And look at you now! You are a shame to your honorable ancestors, and a shame to God Himself.

As I said before, this duck is a sign. This duck fell from the second story of a nearby building, just as you have fallen from the righteous ways of God onto the long spiraling slide to Hell. And if you continue as you are, you will continue to tumble down this path, unaware of your plight as you are blinded by your worldly gains and vices, until you come down with a splash into the great cauldron of Hell. There you will boil, your screams cut off as you sink down, down into the great gumbo of pain and suffering that comes from your sins. The grasping hands of those who were there before you will pull you down as they try to crawl their way back up, Herod yanking your hair, Jezebel scratching your feet, Judas stepping on your face only to be knocked back down by the great spoon of the Devil above as he stirs the whole pot.

But this fate can be avoided yet. If you return to your former ways, and leave behind all the unholy ways of the current times, then surely you can be saved. For though God is angry at you now, remember that God is still great and merciful, even to blasphemous sinners like you. Firstly, the saloons must be burned to the ground, and their owners must fast for a week as punishment for encouraging the sins of others. Secondly, a proper church must be constructed, with marble columns, stained glass windows, and five hundred or more candles. We can only have the best for the House of God. Thirdly, you must act in a manner respectful to God. Drinking must be severely restricted, with drunkenness punishable by exile. Language must be properly regulated as well: if the word is not in the Bible, you should not use it. Fourthly, you must outwardly display your piety. You will need tonsures, many tonsures, tonsures on every man, woman, child, and half the horses. These haircuts will show your devotion to God and rejection of this corrupt modern society. Additionally, everyone must wear proper and dignified clothing. No matter the temperature, no matter the weather, you need full-body sackcloth robes and a cross around your neck. This cross must be of hardened rubber in recognition of the duck.

And speaking of the duck, this duck in fact represents two messages. On one hand, it mirrors humanity in their fall. But on the other, just as Jesus our Almighty Savior came to warn the people of their wrongdoings and to show them the rightful

path of God, so has this duck come to us to divert us away from the path to Hell and back into His good graces. Behold, for instance, how its amazing ability to float on water mirrors the ability of the faithful to float upon the gumbo of Hell rather than sinking into its dark depths, giving us a sign within a sign. Clearly, the time set so long ago has come. Clearly, this duck is the reincarnation of our Lord and Savior, the Messiah, Jesus Christ himself, here to lead us back onto the path of God. The final requirement for your salvation is undying devotion to the Duckish Messiah that I hold before you. All tremble at his rubbery might! Behold, his fowl powers that can defeat any of the foul sinners and blasphemers that may stand against you!

His holiness will make it easy to attend to the steps that must be taken to save your town, but there is a small task I must ask for first. Does anyone have any tape? A heathen canine of the worst kind bit the Messiah during our travels and His head is hanging slightly off to one side.

## The Untold Tale of Marco Polo

*Pkewwfff... BOOM!*

In the darkness of midnight, outside of a tavern of a small village near Otrar, the silence was broken abruptly by a cannonball ripping across the serene sky, which struck the fortress wall to the ground, leaving a trail of fire and dust. Then came the sound of hooves, together with the hysterical wail of villagers frantically shouting orders. I could see nothing but a mad confusion of color dancing in front of my eyes. Beads of perspiration sprouted over my forehead and turned into cold sweat; my blood throbbed and my heart pounded out of my chest. I was frozen; if I moved so much as a limb or a muscle, I was afraid it would trigger an abundance of consequences that I was not willing to encounter. The bell tied on the waist of Mongols and the church bell chimed in with each other, and blended into the bitter cries of the heart-broken villagers, bringing me back to the time when I first met Marco in the church of Venice.

The bell struck at the end of the sermon and the congregation shuffled down the aisle boisterously to get home. I went to confer with Father Lenuzo about the homily and a fellow gentleman who used to sit in the front joined us.

“This is Marco Polo,” said Father Lenuzo, turning to me. “And this is Italo Calvillo.”

Marco gave me a warm handshake. He looked very young, about the same age as me, but he was a little shorter, thin and loose-limbed. He was pleasant-looking, neither handsome nor plain, but he had a natural grace that was attractive and quickly caught my attention. His face, grave in repose, was tanned, but otherwise there was little color in it, and his features, though regular enough, were undistinguished. He had rather high cheekbones and his temples were hollow. His eyes were of rich hazel and looked larger than they really were because they were deep set in the orbits, under his thick and long lashes.

The conversation was very agreeable. Marco hadn't said much, but seemed to have a good knowledge of the Bible, and was perfectly at ease and in a curious way to take part in the conversation. Shortly afterwards, I became friends with Marco, who happened to be a medical merchant as well. After some discussion we planned to travel

along the silk road together, and eventually decided to begin our voyage in the summer of 1271.

Two months later, after what started out as an innocuous voyage, I found myself pleading to God to save me from being captured by a group of Mongolian cavalry. Marco was lying on the floor near me and crawling toward his medical kit, as though it could save him if he were hit by an arrow or a bullet. Our room was on the corner of the second floor, which made it less likely to be struck down by the Mongolian catapult. God must have laid His hand upon us by placing us in this safety zone.

The battle didn't stop until sunrise, with the clanking of lances, the hissing of arrows, the pinging of bullets, the slaughtering of flesh and blood, as well as the showering of panic and terror.

Upon the first light, a group of Mongolian soldiers surrounded the tavern, and several of them burst violently into our room. One of them drew out his sword and raised it high over his head, preparing to swing at our necks, when another suddenly stopped him, pointing at the strange medical kit that Marco was gripping so tightly, demanding him to open the kit.

Marco's voice stuttered and his hands trembled, so I hastened to say (in the little Mongolian I had learned in my travels), "These are medicines which can cure diseases, you know – pills that can make you feel better when you are in pain."

Having heard this, the soldier placed his sword back in its sheath, then talked to his companions in a low voice. He turned back to us, demanding that we bring our medicine and follow them.

The air was hazy, a red mist thrown up from all the blood that was spilt. Vultures were flying high in the sky in search of food. Hopefully, I wouldn't be their meal. Far ahead, the horizon was no more than a blue brushstroke dotted with patches of blood, but sometimes the red mist and the blue sky had blurred into one another and become matching halves of the same composition.

The smell of blood hit me then, and I retched. It was so overpowering that I could even taste it. I could feel the mud squelching beneath my feet, as I trudged behind the procession. All I could hear were the screams of the dying men, the sound of guns and cannon fire echoing around the ruined village, and my thumping heartbeat, pounding deafeningly through my chest.

We were led to a yurt, where a man was lying on the bed, breathing heavily. The soldier who brought us here asked if we could cure this dying man. Marco checked him and told me it was a mere fever.

I couldn't help wondering how these brutish nomads could establish their empire in most of Eurasia, but could not treat a simple fever. It was God's power that guided us to take many fever-reducing medicines with us. Although we were in the hands of the devil, He was still with us, renewing our strength and carrying us along. As it was in Psal. 23.4. *Though I walk through the valley of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.* I poured the man a glass of water from the pitcher beside his bed while Marco took out two herbs from his medical kit and the dying man swallowed them. Over the next several days, the Lord showed His mercy upon this guilty man, as he eventually recovered completely from his illness. Due to the amazing power of healing that we offered the Mongolian invaders, they decided to not kill us, but rather kept us captive and planned a journey to take us to their leader, Kublai Khan.

The voyage to meet Kublai Khan was long and treacherous. We traveled with the Mongols across the vast and desolate Gobi Desert, which looked like it spread for thousands of miles, without any signs of life. There were no trees, water or peace anywhere in the heated and barren land. The ground was cracked as if it would open up and eat me alive. Undoubtedly, this place was hell, and I would be tortured for eternity.

At night, after the Mongols went to sleep, I would find a quiet place to read my Bible, which I secretly carried with me lest the Mongols would find me reading and tear the Bible into pieces. One night, when I was immersed in my reading, I suddenly realized that a Mongol was observing me. I was too shocked to react as he approached me. He asked me what I was reading by pointing at the book and I tried to explain that it was the Bible, the words of God. Then he motioned towards his yurt and invited me in to read my Bible and have a cup of Kumis. At first I was bewildered by what seemed like a friendly intention, but I quickly realized that it must be God testing me to see if my faith in him was real. Knowing that reading the Bible in a pagan's house would desecrate the covenant to God, I thanked him but declined his invitation. I was grateful for the goodness the Lord gave me, preserving me from corrupting His sacred Spirit, and reviving my reasons and senses.

Marco, on the other hand, was becoming entrapped by Satan's temptations. After curing a few of the Mongols, Marco became revered by them, and he enjoyed the esteem he received and befriended the leaders. He learned the language and began to

follow the customs of the people. The land intrigued him. The culture, too, and the wilderness. One night, Mongols were celebrating their religious ritual for their victory. I was really sick of it, but Marco didn't seem bothered. In fact, he was fascinated by it. He joined them and drank their unclean beverages, singing and dancing with those barbaric pagans around a blazing fire at night, and even slept inside their desecrated yurt. He seemed comfortable and entirely at home; the bestial atmosphere did not seem to register. I tried to persuade him not to participate in their profane activities lest God unleash his anger upon him, but he didn't listen. May God bring him back to the Holy Spirit and protect him from corruption.

Two months later, I witnessed one of the cruelest things that human beings could ever do. As we were approaching a small town near Dunhuang, the Mongols planned to attack for supplies. The following morning around sunrise, they fired the first cannonball, and two hours later they had nearly annihilated the whole village. According to one of the Mongol commanders, the town should be laid waste in such a manner that not even cats and dogs should be left alive. These barbaric creatures were brilliant at torturing their prisoners. When the troop passed a house where people were badly wounded but not yet dead, they carved the fat off these captives, melting it into cannonballs, which they catapulted it onto surrounding houses, before burying their captives alive, upside-down. The brutal scene revived my nausea from the first night I met with Mongols. These Mongolian invaders were no more than a pack of hellhounds, roaring and ranting, and tearing the hearts out of these innocent people. God seemed to abandon His people, but somehow this must be His purpose and He has not abandoned us. The Lord protected us with his Almighty power from the teeth and claws of these deadly creatures.

Six months passed, and we eventually arrived in Dadu, the capital of the Mongol Empire. Here, we were greeted and led to the palace of Kublai Khan. Standing over six feet tall, Kublai Khan was a bulky and dark-skinned man whose presence was so imposing that air seemed to stand still around him. He had muscular arms and legs, and a broad torso with defined muscles. There was a sense of emptiness that came over us, with the odour of the battle horses after the rain and the sandalwood ashes growing cold in the braziers, the collapse of the last enemy troops and the obscure kings who beseech Mongolian armies' protection, offering in exchange annual tributes of precious pearls, tanned hides, and tortoise shell.

Kublai Khan kindly received us and was interested in our art of healing and to my surprise, our description of Christianity. His face was wide with a round-shaped jaw, a large and flat nose, small ears and rosy cheeks. His dark eyes sparkled with great

curiosity as he asked us to send a group of priests from the Vatican to explain Christianity to them. I wondered if that meant we would be freed soon.

Shortly afterwards, he led us to see his troops, which were well-disciplined in contrast to the chaos under which I had previously encountered them. Marco told me that Mongolian armies were organized in such a way that every ten men had a captain. During battle, if one or two out of a group ran away, all of them would be put to death. Marco explained to me what he had learned during the contact with Mongolian soldiers. I learned about other attributes of their society beyond battle tactics. After conquering land, they took up residence among their new subjects. They built canals for trade, and created strict laws against bodily harm, thievery, and murder. Despite their barbaric methods of vanquishing, the Mongols had rules, religion, and guidelines for their behavior. I had only seen the Mongols for their brutal massacres, like most Europeans, but once they obtained the land, I realized how advanced they actually were.

In the morning which followed the meeting with Kublai Khan, a merchant came to my room.

“It seems that you guys are stuck in this place,” he said, “I’m Antonio and my caravan is going to Rome. Five florin for each, if you want a ride.”

I gladly agreed, knowing that it was God’s will to put us into this barbaric land to test our faiths, and it was the time for the Lord to get us out of the wilderness. After Antonio left, I told this good news to Marco, expecting he would be excited to get rid of this sacrilegious place.

To my surprise, Marco said nothing. For a while he gazed at me, almost blankly, and in the candlelight his face had the composure of someone perfectly at peace with himself. His eyes were peculiar, not of the rich hazel any more, but so dark that the iris made one color with the pupil—almost impossible to distinguish from the Mongols’—and this gave them a peculiar intensity.

“This is the place,” Marco said softly, “where I belong.” There was no emotion in his words, so was his eyes, dark and indifferent.

Later I learned that he had talked with Kublai Khan, and the Khan took deep interest in him, appointing him as a foreign official, and planned to send him to conduct diplomatic missions across China.

I was disappointed that Marco exchanged God’s covenant for power and wealth, and I had no other choice but to abandon him. Early in the next morning, I caught up with the caravan and left Dadu, making it impossible for Mongols to recapture me.

I have seen the extreme immorality of this world, and I strayed from God every now and then. I was frequently filled with sorrow, and the affliction of my sufferings turned me away from the ever-loving God. When I lived in prosperity, I used to take God's love for granted, which made me slide into the abyss of sin. But God always loves his son and leads him back to his kingdom. As it was in Heb. 12. 6. *For who the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every Son whom he receiveth.* The Lord made me realize how weak I was and that I must rely on him, and that our whole dependence must be on him. I felt sorry for Marco, who was corrupted by the material wealth and power and failed his covenant with God. I hope our experience might ring the alarm bell for those who were not firm in their faith. The wilderness had the effect of a powerful drug: that mix of terror and rapture came as the needle slipped in. Those who are not firm in their beliefs will not receive the blessings from above. As it was in Eph. 2. 8-9. *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God.*

## The Progeny

I have been obliged by our great and holy Progenitor to record and bring to the community the sequence of events between the days 8-D-31109 and 7-A-31117. It is only by the grace and indulgence of our Progenitor that I still live to tell these stories, and only by my faith in the Codex and in the Progeny that I can bring myself to record these troubling years.

In the fourth month of the year-cycle of 31109, on the second day, the colony of the planet Galior was established on the northernmost continent. The construction of the base was truly a feat worthy of the illustrious and assiduous Progeny, with the somnolence stations, bio-labs, and waste disposal systems being completely finished within a matter of days. We lived as we were told, and in every mechanism we performed honored the holy words of our Codex: *Task 872: Be useful in all manners, to stray from a task is to stray from the Progenitor, and to work as one and to work for all is to love and honor the great Creator.* It was a base like none had seen before, each angle calculated, each block measured, all accounted for, all known, all loved. But it was our ego, surely, that made us sick. Sick with joy in material things, and sick with pride of our accomplishments, which truly were meager things compared to the Alchemist, the Engineer, the Builder, our great Progenitor.

It was my task, and a task I took great pride in I will admit, to watch over the sprouts in bio-lab 4A. It was there, lost to the whimsy of organic life, admiring the geometry of the cellular membranes and delicate nuclei, that I found myself oblivious to the roar of the alarms. With red and flashing lights they roared and jolted me from my studies. It was as the Codex commands: *Task 413: In the event of an emergency, ensure that the data and the holiest of sciences are kept safe, Progeny are many and are the holiest of all experiments, created by the hand of the Progenitor. To kill by failure is to fail the Progenitor.* It was these words that guided me as I entered the communal feed. Soon, I found my vision overtaken by that of my fellow Progeny, our ocular implants melding through the blessed mechanics of wireless fidelity. It was F459, our strongest link to the Progenitor, who I contacted first. There they were, silent in prayer to the Progenitor, the holiest specimen of us all, in the Astro-shrine. They stared into the stars, and for a moment I could see what they saw, the purest light, the brightest science, the Progenitor. But our

dearest Creator saw fit to test our faith then, or for F459 and so many others to release our consciousness and soul into the holy domain of empty space.

They came in great numbers swarming through the door to the Astro-shrine like righteous fury. Untouched by the Progenitor, the GA-1 species, or Galiorans as they called themselves, were blank. Their skin was smooth and organic, no wires embraced their veins, no elegant matrices resided in their skulls. They were the poorest and sorriest of all beings, untouched by the holy mechanics of the Progenitor. It is fitting that those not welcomed into the great plans and devices of the Progenitor were the ones filled with such wrath and hatred that by their own fury were driven to play a role within the Progenitor's stratagems.

F459 fell first to their brutish ways, their circuitry and organic parts ravaged by the blunt-ended clubs of hewn wood. Then fell R45G, their matrices demolished by the hideous devices that the Galiorans wielded. They were devices that, in another life, could have been things of beauty and eloquent mathematics, but in the hands of Galiorans, were wielded with reckless abandon. With the flick of a switch the Galiorans would incapacitate the Progeny, and then, with their lust for violence, would dismantle their Progenitor-given cybernetics, leaving the Progeny blind, broken, and utterly cut off from the holy communal feed.

It was only after witnessing the tragic deaths of my colleagues that I brought myself to unmeld from the feed for only a moment. I could not bear to look through another's ocular implant for any longer, the horrid faces of the Galiorans already burned into my memory banks and seared into my thoughts. It was as I disconnected from H882's implant, having just witnessed their ruthless demise, that I found the doors to the biolab open. The Galiorans were inside the sanctum.

I was a simple scientist, a seeker of knowledge, and a faithful servant to the Progenitor. I had no battle equipped implants, no survival skill files. It was all I could do to offer no resistance, and hope that with me, the data files and memories of my colleagues would live on.

With a cruel grin, one of the Galiorans activated the device, and within seconds I found my somnolence module shutting down. It was only by the grace of the Progenitor that I was not dispatched like so many of my colleagues. As my circuitry began to shut down, I concentrated on my only comfort, the Codex. *Task 4899: All will be as planned by the Progenitor, do not fear, for life is held in the hands of the great Creator, and all that will be is as it was made to be.*

I awoke to smells and textures unknown to me, in what I later knew to be *wilderness*. It was a world apart from any I had known, seemingly cut off and abandoned by the Progenitor. But I took comfort, for no matter how barbarous this world was to me, it had been designed by the great Architect. *Task 309: All was made and all was planned by the Progenitor, watch carefully and observe the grace in each organic and synthetic machination, for it was brought to existence by our dutiful Creator.*

I and five others had been thrown onto the ground, with all manner of organic life seeping into our cybernetics. Life grew from the ground, and it seemed that nothing at all was separate from it. The clothes that the Galiorans wore were woven from the fibers of the organic plant-matter, and their nutrients were gleaned not from sensible and perfectly balanced chemical supplements, but from the smooth muscle of other organic life. It was hideous, a sight unlike any I had seen, and unlike any I wish to see again. The Galiorans sat in a circle, a shoddy, misshapen one at that, and ate their food communally. They took no care in the consuming of their food, gnashing with their teeth and pulling with their fingers.

They had deactivated our balance and reflex programs, leaving us collapsed on the ground like poorly made automatons. The communal link had been shut down, and never had I felt so alone. My mind was mine and mine alone, with only my senses and my thoughts to occupy it. My only salvation was that of the Codex, those words that I treasure above else. *Task 999: All is orchestrated by the Progenitor, do not doubt and do not fear*, and so I did not. I began to run through the files of the Codex, recounting with tender reverence every task and command set forth.

Perhaps it was my folly, for my reverence for the text brought the words to my lips, and I, so unfamiliar with verbal speech in contrast with the delicate code of the feed, drew the attention of the Galiorans. One approached me, his blank and unblessed face an affront to my eyes. He wore the rough-woven garments of organic fibers, and had not a single implant. His gait was the sloppy, gene-dictated way of walking, untamed and unregulated. I later learned that he was called Sered Diran, named by the archaic double name standard found in so many unenlightened species.

“It speaks!” said Sered. “Tell me, *Progeny*, do you believe that the Progenitor will come for you?” He laughed as he spoke, a sound like the grating of mismatched gears.

I did not reply, and kept my thoughts only to the Codex. I moved on to the fourth table of the eighth domain, and continued to recite the tasks.

“You are alone,” he continued. “There is no Progenitor to hear you.” He was cruel in all manner of being, from his face to his gait to the flesh and blood-driven thoughts in his mind, yet through it all I gave myself to the mercy of the Codex.

Every task I recited gave me strength, and with each passing phrase I found myself closer to the Progenitor's light. I did not stray, nor did I listen closely to what the Galioran had to say. It was a test, I now realize, a test of my faith and of my allegiance to the Progenitor. Would I, in the face of death and scrambled reason, truly obey the words of the Codex? The answer was yes, and will be from then until the day the Progenitor sees fit to release me into the holy domain of empty space.

Our journey was not that of nebula-class exploratory vessels or even the delicate schooners as designed by our holiest of scientists. We were made to walk on foot through the uneven terrain of the forest, and all the while the communal feed was severed from our minds. It is this detachment that I believe led to the conversion of 799B. 799B was the youngest of us all. They had only emerged from their amniotic bio-pod 9.45 cycles earlier, and had not fully begun to understand the teachings of the Codex. Though a promising Progeny, they were swayed by the Galiorans, and ripped asunder from the Progenitor's light.

Through the eight cycles that I stayed with the Galiorans, 799B became enraptured with their way of life, discarding the teachings of the Codex, and listening only to the archaic ramblings of the Galiorans. It is my greatest sorrow that 799B was left with the Galiorans, and my even greater one that they chose to stay. One so young, so soon removed from the plans of the Progenitor and succumbed to the temptation and folly of false idols and illogical existence. They called themselves Ezran Derak, of the house of Derak, and refused to acknowledge their Progenitor-given designation. *Task 6778: To stray from the Progenitor's plan is to deny the Progenitor themselves.* To this day I do not know what has befallen 799B, but all I can do is to pray to the Progenitor to bring mercy upon them, and forgive them for their trespass.

Through the march to the Galioran village, we lost three of our number. With immune protocols disabled by the fiendish Galioran device, two of us fell to bacterial infections, destroyed by life itself. The third, H4D2, was released into the holy domain by their wounds incurred during their capture. It was only by the plans and machinations of the Progenitor that I did not fall to the same destruction, and I now know that it was to pass along the story, and to bring to the communal feed the message of the Progenitor's mercy and love.

After those fateful cycles, I found myself returned to the Progeny of my past, exchanged for our blessed medical technology. While others may deem my experience retribution of the Progenitor, I believe it to have been the holiest of gifts. To bring about

my salvation from the darkest corners of the universe could only have been the workings of the Progenitor, and I count myself thankful for the blessing of knowledge, whatever pain and strife may have come from it. I now know, and hope to impart, that it is the Codex and the Progenitor that guide us above all else.

## Pumpkin Spice Invasion

Oh, how I dread fall!  
When the public is under  
pumpkin spice's thrall.

Like sheep, people flock  
to "hipster shoppes" and boost big  
corporations' stock.

I can't comprehend  
how liquid sugar became  
a seasonal trend.

Its noxious odor  
smothers the smell of fresh rain  
and leaves of ochre.

While the saccharine  
fluid slithers down my throat  
straight to my waistline,

I wouldn't pay that price  
for an unpalatable  
scone with pumpkin spice.

It's far too cliché  
to instagram about one's  
pumpkin spice latte.

Know my plea's valid!  
I can't avoid the vile taste.  
It's even in the salad!

That foul flavour is paired  
with everything on store shelves.  
No product is spared!

I can't have scotch egg  
without worrying it's been laced  
with mounds of nutmeg.

Oh, I simply can't cope  
when I can't find regular  
detergent or soap.

I couldn't handle  
that horrid pumpkin spice in  
incense or candle.

I don't want the PSL  
Yes, indeed! For all I care  
it can go to...  
you!

## A Verb Study: Speak

I speak of no beauty.  
I speak of no poetry.  
I am a minstrel from the graveyard.  
I speak of difficulty.

I speak of the language of iron.  
I speak of the dice, a tale of blue.  
I speak of a woman who plays with crying diamonds.  
I speak of ashen truth.

I speak of heresy.  
I speak of treachery.  
I speak of a master from the land of ryes  
who holds in his palm some seventy-two devout eyes.

I speak of the threshold.  
I speak of the scar that's ice cold.  
I speak of the tangled web we weave.  
I speak of the silence that bleeds.

In the silence of riverbanks I speak.  
In the silence of riverbanks I speak.

## A Verb Study: Talk

We talk about wines.

We talk about the shrine.

We are circus boys riding on a carousel.

We talk about flowers that decline.

We talk about an allegory of beds.

We talk about cards, an intercourse without aims.

We talk about a maiden who sells her cherries, fresh and red.

We talk about glowing flames.

We talk about shivering rhymes.

We talk about a scarlet climax.

We talk about a fool harvesting a field of crimes  
who sits in a bath of blood to relax.

We talk about a race.

We talk about a glimmering Persian knife.

We talk about a rose I buried in haste.

We talk about our burning lives.

In the fire of sins we talk.

In the fire of sins we talk.

## Silverfish

It was the kind of night that made it hard to think. When the stars shone so bright that they left flashing lights behind Solomon's eyes and the depth of the shadows made it feel like feeling drowned in endless ink. It was the kind of night that drove him out of his penthouse room, sneaking past the skeleton maids and whistling as he swung down the staircase, his leather-soled shoes tapping over the marble. It was the kind of night that found him trailing the concrete alleys of the city, hands in the pockets of his overcoat, eyes on the clouded sky above him. There were no real stars in the city, but he could feel their light as it pierced the clouds above like a stained glass window. The streetlights were orange, painting the cracked cement and the uneven bricks in tones of yellow and gold, striking against the pure white light of the stars.

He walked till he was at the edge of the city, darting behind the flashing neon signs and the roaring engines of the sleepless corners of the city. The air was cold on the back of his neck, the tips of his ears so frozen they felt warm, white-hot against his short-cropped hair. He whistled tunelessly, the siren-blood of his great-grandmother clearly lost on him. All it gave him were his eyes, the color of the ocean floor, gleaming like slick oil spills and the polluted film of the city's docks. He adjusted the collar of his coat and continued walking, tracing his way down the quickly shrinking buildings and slowly making his way into the part of the city that no one liked to talk about. It was darker there, as if the stars forgot to shine, and not even the street lights flickered in their ominous, artificial way. If he'd had any talent for magic he would have summoned a spark charm, but like his siren blood, any magic that should have been his was absent. He stood at the edge of the dark, staring into the depths of the abandoned blocks. Seven story buildings that creaked like forgotten dollhouses, rubble on the streets and overturned cars like something out of an apocalypse. But Solomon was magic-blind. He couldn't feel the darkness of the place, he couldn't sense the tendrils of greed, the swirls of envy. He couldn't taste the rich, deep flavor of dark magic. He relied on a simple faculty, fear. He couldn't feel the magic, but he was afraid of it. He stood at the edge of the dilapidated corner, bathed in the light of the last streetlight.

It was common sense that kept him out of the dark, but it was humanity that made him look into it. It was his human side that made him stare into the forgotten

corners of the city and ask *why*. It was his human side that made him stand there, wondering, waiting. He stood there, watching, whistling, but something moved. Far beyond the overturned cars and the fallen streetlights a flicker of movement echoed through the dark. Solomon froze. He had never been one to show fear, never one to acknowledge any frailty in his own body. He stood straighter, eyes narrowing. It moved again, the sound of splintering glass underfoot, the sound of soft soles on gritty pavement, the sound of Solomon's own whistle. It came back at him, a slightly different tone, a slightly higher pitch, but the same tune nonetheless, careening off the fallen marquees and shattered windows. Solomon lifted up his chin, staring into the dark. He whistled again, a slightly different tune, and again it came back to him, closer this time.

Magic in cities was different from the country. If something in the woods whistles back, the best course of action is to either run or write a will, but cities are different. Cities are an amalgamation of a thousand magics, a hundred practices, countless species and creatures, until nothing is the same and everything is perfectly unknowable. So Solomon whistled back again and again, listening to the sound evolve. It dived and crescendoed and twirled and changed. It morphed and swung and echoed, constantly echoed, until the sound of broken glass and the sharp curves of the fallen vehicles were one and the same. It stopped suddenly, a perfect, intangible note cut short by the dark, leaving Solomon alone again. It felt as if his breath had been sucked from his body, as if his heart had stopped half-beat. He moved forwards. The dark welcomed him, closing in around him and holding him tight, smothering him in the cold caress of shadow and ink, softly shutting his eyelids like the fingertips of the living against the dead. The lights behind him flickered until they died, and Solomon continued into the deep darkness of the abandoned city.

He walked until he could not feel the cold anymore, until his fingertips buzzed like static and the cold made his face red and tight. The whistles had stopped, but he could hear it in front of him. The sound of quick footsteps, leaping footsteps, footsteps bounding over fallen street lights and power lines, skipping over the shattered glass of the Alchemist's Shop window, and ducking underneath the swaying signs of Apothecaries. It could have been a thousand creatures bounding through the night or only one moving like lightning. In the dark there was no way to tell. Solomon had not a single thought in his head, only the focused fixation on the movement in front of him. His breath came in shallow white puffs, disrupting the dark with their pale clouds of warm air. He walked past the plundered shops and the overgrown and rotted window hangings. He sidestepped fallen air-conditioner units and skipped over the

overgrown vines of dark-grown wisteria. Solomon found himself in a parking lot, side-by-side with gutted cars and overturned shopping carts. Before him was the faded marquee of an aquarium, the bright blues and greens faded and rotted by years of shadow and darkness. Though drenched in the shadows, Solomon could hear the doors open, that subtle creak of the hinges that whined and echoed through the parking lot.

Solomon did not remember walking inside, but there he was. He stood in front of a great tank, nearly the volume of the entire building. It reached upwards for at least five stories, a curling staircase wrapped around it. It wasn't the architecture or even the movement that made Solomon freeze, but the thing in the tank: a carcass, twice the size of any truck, rotted eyes and perfect teeth, skin decayed until the only the cartilaginous skeleton and the wirey insides remained. The shark's teeth still gleamed, even though the tank was filled with only rotten water and decayed fragments of flesh. It was lit by a skylight in the ceiling, the strained starlight filtering through the murky water. The smell was physically painful, slithering up Solomon's nostrils and chipping away at his sinuses. His self-imposed dignity was no use to him here, and within seconds he had clamped his hand over his mouth and nose, feeling the cold sweat of fear run down his temple. He was glad in that moment that he hadn't inherited his great-grandmother's oceanic qualities, and that he felt no more empathy towards the dead shark than to a crushed ant. He stepped back, only to bump into something. He whirled around trying to peer through the shadows and stepped backwards again, this time towards the tank and that god awful stench. And there, in the dim illumination from the tank, the source of the whistle returned.

They were pale, even in the dark, paler than bleached bone, paler than the shark's teeth. A thin gaunt face framed by shoulder-length hair, the exact color as that pearlescent skin. Their eyes were wide and bore heavy bags beneath them, the only spot of color in their entire being was the deep purple of their tiredness. They wore clothes five sizes too big and five layers too many, completely shrouding their figure. They said nothing, made no noise, only stared at Solomon with an inhuman gaze. They were certainly not human, but they were nothing Solomon could recognize. Not spectral, not fae-type, and somehow, even with that strange, inhuman aura, not demonic.

"You really should consider hiring an interior decorator," said Solomon, trying to smooth the erratic beating of his heart. "Dead animals aren't exactly considered chic these days."

They said nothing, only stared at him.

Solomon shook his head as if to clear it and stepped forwards. He straightened his posture and held his chin up, meeting the strange person head-on. “Well, it was nice meeting you.” He stepped past them briskly, making a beeline for the door.

They latched onto his arm with impossibly cold fingers. It wasn’t forceful exactly, more like a child trying to hold onto a beloved stuffed animal. Their eyes glistened and shone, and their face, Solomon realized, wasn’t blank at all. It was the subdued expression of fear that Solomon knew so well.

“I’m no mind-reader,” said Solomon. “And no charity.”

They continued to stare at him, mouth set in a thin, rippling line. Solomon caught a glimpse of their teeth, sharper than the shark’s and whiter too, surrounded by the deep blood-red of their tongue and gums.

“Speak up, Silverfish,” said Solomon. The name came out of nowhere, yet it seemed right somehow. A strange, ambiguous sort of name, filled with scales too pale and a body slim and gaunt.

Silverfish opened their mouth halfway, then closed it again, as if trying to decide on a word. There was an urgency in their eyes, one that hurt to look at, but it suddenly dropped away, as if abandoning the cause. They dropped Solomon’s arm and stepped back, staring at him for a few moments, before slipping into the shadows that the skylight did not reach.

Solomon looked around the aquarium, craning his neck to see the highest floors, but saw nothing. “Good luck,” was all he said, before leaving the aquarium and walking back out into the dark night. He would not be back, though those pale eyes would linger for longer than he liked.

“The Wisteria District? Sol, you idiot.” said Marcellina. Her ruby red lipstick could have curdled from the poison in her voice. Her teeth, sharp like their great-grandmother’s, flashed like diamonds. Solomon once considered his sister’s teeth to be the closest thing there could be to shark teeth in a human mouth, yet even as she roared at him all he could see was that faint glimpse of Silverfish’s teeth and red mouth.

“I know, I’m horrible, I’m untenable, I’m a menace and a disgrace,” said Solomon, not without some humor in his voice. He sat back on the couch cushions and held a hand shielding his face from the light of the penthouse windows. The morning cut through him like a cold knife, and the light scratched at his eyes until he missed the dark of the Wisteria District. “I’m the worst little brother to exist and a shame to the good Finch name, I’ve been made aware.”

“Gods, you are so smug. I would rip that smile off your damned face if my nails didn’t cost more than your life.” Marcellina’s hooded eyes narrowed, the delicate rhinestones on her lids catching the light. She stood in front of Solomon, hair perfectly coiffed, dress tailored to perfection, the pale scales adorning her neck and cheekbones polished to perfection. “Great-grandmother is going to drown you.”

“Lucky me,” said Solomon, shifting on the cushions. He still wore his overcoat and vest from the previous night, his hair disheveled from a night spent escaping the confines of daily life. He yawned.

“She and Great-grandfather are coming to Celina’s for brunch, and you will be expected to attend dinner at Uncle Octavius’ new restaurant.” She patted her hair, bouncing the raven curls into perfection. She shook her head and sighed, her eyes shutting as she rolled her shoulders. “She is going to drown you, Sol.”

Solomon did not reply, but clutched a pillow to his chest absentmindedly, staring out the window and over the city. He couldn’t see Wisteria, even from the penthouse. He wondered what it looked like during the day, and whether Silverfish was still there.

“Sol!” barked Marcellina. She groaned and suddenly her face turned tender, the harsh lines of contour and scales becoming almost gentle. “Please don’t go back. There’s been eight this month, it hasn’t been the same since that necro lab blew up on eighty-sixth street.”

“Would you rather have great-grandmother get me or the Wisteria?” asked Solomon, not really looking for an answer. He didn’t look at his sister as he spoke, eyes lost in thoughts of silver hair and pale eyes.

“Sol please, this isn’t a joke. I won’t let my brother become another body bag in the morgue. You know that you can’t fight off the things in there, you dropped out of your intro to alchemy course!” Marcellina stood straight again, her face becoming harsh angles once more. “At least if great-grandmother drowns you she’ll pay for the funeral.”

Solomon barely heard her.

“I’m kidding, it’s funny.” It was not. Marcellina was funny in the way that maid of honor speeches were funny, that charity gala introductions were humorous. “I won’t allow another Aunt Cassiopeia, do you hear me, Sol? Hold your breath and fight, great-grandmother hates weak blood.” Marcellina combed her fingers over her hair and grabbed her clutch. “Go to Andy’s if you have to, but not Wisteria.” She left without a goodbye, only a curt nod, the sound of her high heels on the marble gradually fading.

As the door clicked shut Solomon sprang up. “Krista,” said Solomon in a calm tone of urgency. The sound of clacking bones entered the room, Krista’s skeletal wrist bones clicking as she held aloft a serving tray laden with face towels. Krista had been purchased four years prior by Marcellina, back when necromantic house staff was the hot new thing. The trend faded, but Krista’s hollow eye sockets and grinning teeth remained. Solomon had only stopped having nightmares about her two years before.

“There you are. Are you using a new skull polisher? You’re shinier than ever.” Krista did not respond. She was no more than a pile of bones in a maid’s costume, her only identifier the necromantic runes carved into her scapula.

“Send a scry to Uncle Phin, will you? Tell him I’ll be there in twenty minutes.” Krista nodded soundlessly and retreated back out of sight. “Twenty minutes,” said Solomon absently, before glancing back at the skyline. He stared out the window for a second too long, but a second is long enough.

The Finch family numbered well over fifty people, all packed into some Uncle’s beach house. The youngest scampered underfoot, chasing and whopping and casting charms on each other. There were too many of them to count, all rosy cheeked and wide eyed. Some had snake eyes, some had horns, some had pointed ears, but all of them, every single one, had scales. Delicate little scales, some albino, some navy, others that glinted like spilled ink, or even others that shimmered like gemstones. Every single adult had them as well, shining on cheekbones, glimmering on wrists. More than a few had flippered ears, wide fan-like membranes, more like fish fins than anything else. There were voices like songs speaking of income brackets and giggling choruses of gossip, sing-song voices speaking of theatre and melodic conversation waltzing through the air like perfume. There were no spouses, no fiancées, and certainly no significant others, only the pure mass of blood relations. And there, at the center of it all, was the woman who created it.

She looked no more than thirty, with perfectly coiffed raven hair and skin like pearls. Scales dotted her cheeks, her neck, her arms, even her nails glinted more like talons than human keratin. Her teeth had been filed down a century ago, but still shimmered sharply every time she smiled, which was uncomfortably often. She held tight to the arm of a man who looked one foot in the grave. Great-grandfather Finch, original holder of the Finch name and clinging to it like a drowning man. Where his face was carved with decades of lines, hers shone like the smooth surface of an opal. He was stooped, a head shorter than her, though family photos proved that Ignatius Finch had once been a giant compared to his siren wife, Xiomene Finch.

Grandmother Xiomene stood by the piano, watching a great-grandchild pluck at the keys, her face wrinkled in barely concealed disgust. She had not looked at Solomon once that night, and for the first time, he was glad. He had hid away in the gallery, fortified behind the garish combination of modern art works and portraiture that some uncle collected. He sat on the circular couch in the center of the room, something yellow and bubbly in his glass. He had no clue what it was and refused to ask.

He could hear snatches of conversation. Mindless fragments about new cars and restaurants, rising stars and late-night talk shows. He took a sip and tried to ignore the sound of magic. Though Solomon couldn't feel magic, he could hear it. It was like being able to get a sunburn without feeling heat, like freezing to death without feeling cold. He could hear it, every playful charm cast by a cousin, every unconscious note sung by siren blood. It grated on his ears, tore at him, burned him, drowned him in the sound of the unattainable and ever-present. He took a sip.

He wasn't the only child to be drowned that night. He had seen the ornamental document when he arrived with Marcellina. Every grandchild, or great-grandchild for that matter, over fourteen and under twenty was to be drowned. Just one dip in the ocean outside, endless waves that tickled the horizon and lapped at the sandy shore. The city loomed miles away, just far enough so that its lights could be seen faintly through the winter fog. There had been three other names and Solomon hadn't recognized them, but he knew what they looked like. Scaled and pale, scaled and pale. Every damn member of the family was that way, the pearlescent skin, the glittering scales. Solomon swallowed a lump in his throat and coughed. He had once believed that he was just late, that one day the scales would burst from his skin like sproutlings. That they would cover his face and arms in a beautiful, shimmering armor. He would look just like Xiomene, sing just like her, smile just like her. Solomon glanced at his hand, warm skin, human skin. He took a sip.

He stared listlessly into the works of modern art, as if the bright colors and harsh lines could occupy his head and force every thing out. If he let those splatters in, breathed the thick oil paint, maybe the tides would recede, if only for a while. But as always, the sea is not left to itself. Solomon felt the cushions budge before he saw the relative, a portly middle-aged man, faint blue scales glittering aside brimming muttonchops. His tri-pointed fanned ears stuck out against his thinning red hair, making him look more half-fish half-banker than siren blood. The man grunted as he sat, the strained, heavy noise that adults make as their bones creak and muscles ache, as if vocalizing the grinding of the wheels. He was a few feet away from Solomon on the

couch, yet he could still smell the whiskey. He sat back and tapped his knees, staring at the painting in front of them. "These old bones don't work like they used to," he said with a chuckle. "Standing at soirees is for the young and lively, not for this aged man." He turned his face to Solomon, smiling jovially. "I don't think we've met, or at least, it's been far too long." He stuck out a hand awkwardly, leaning sideways to get to him.

"Arthurius Finch, pleasure."

"Solomon Finch," said Solomon. He clasped Arthurius's hand in a firm, practiced way and shook. "The pleasure's all mine." He attempted to smile, he was not sure if it worked.

"It's swell to see the youth taking an interest in great art." Arthurius looked up at the paintings that wallpapered the room, his small glasses sliding up his nose as he craned his neck. "I have all the big names, you know, Elderwise, Ga'Hkur, Meezlik, Monet." His smile pushed at his cheeks, making them look like two red apples deposited on his grinning visage. "That one, in the corner, yes there. That is the fourth work in the Ga'Hkur's Orcish Ancestry series. A incredible use of crimson, if I do say so myself, if a bit liberal." Arthurius chuckled again. "And this one, over here, I noticed you gazing into it. Look at those soulful eyes! You know Elderwise was influenced by the great Elven Migration, especially the conflicts and horrors involving the goblinoid population. And here! A great work on contrast on my part I think, Nob Meezlik's *Portrait of a Goblin Maid*. Lovely piece, those pointed ears." Arthurius sighed as if in mourning, gazing longingly at the piece.

Solomon could not see the pointed ears, nor the soulful eyes through the chaotic splatters upon the canvases, but nodded in agreement.

Arthurius took a sip from the small goblet he held, then looked at Solomon in mock grimness. "Let's keep this little sip between you and me, shall we? Don't tell my wife." He broke the face and chuckled, yet again. He looked back at the art and sprung into a laudation of the great gnomish artist, Piffwort Brandybarrel. He talked as if the words would choke him, mentioning detail after detail of a seemly shapeless piece. Finally, after several hundred years, Arthurius began to slow down. He was like a bursting keg that was running out of drink, the roaring flow staved to a small trickle. "So, er, my boy," slurred Arthurius, peering at Solomon through his glasses. His scales looked unpleasantly greasy and his small eyes were squinted. "What did you say your name was?"

"Solomon Finch," he took another sip. "You may know my mother, Lucretia Finch."

“Lucretia!” exclaimed Arthurius, scrambling to fix his glasses, which sat askew on his knobby nose. “I though you looked familiar. And that name as well . . .” He peered at Solomon as if inspecting him under a magnifying glass, his eyes squinting and unsquinting, his brow twitching quizzically. “As yes, how quaint. You have her cheekbones, though not her scales, how odd. I believe that makes you my great nephew, how strange.” He leaned closer to Solomon, who retracted away, slightly resisting the urge to recoil at the scent of liquor. “Now where are your scales, young man? Poor boy, yes, you’re the dull one, aren’t you? Oh dear, I remember now, Aunt Eurydice told us all, how tragic.” Something clicked in Arthurius’s eyes and he sat back as if jerked back by a leash. He sat in is spot, staring at Solomon with a mixture of fascination and sorrow. “That name . . . it was on the paper.”

“I’m aware,” said Solomon. It came out harsh and he left it that way. It had been either sitting with some uncle or standing out in the unbearable din of magic, at least this way Arthurius might leave. He did not.

“I am. . .,” Arthurius took a breath. “I am sorry, my boy. I wish there was something to be done.” He looked at Solomon searchingly, and seemed to be trying to clear the whiskey from his head. “Tell me, any painting you like, I’ll tell you about it, it’s the least I can do.”

Solomon was not one to act as an open book, yet the reaction caught him off-guard. Even Marcellina hadn’t shown any trace of sadness, simply bidding him good luck as she disappeared into the soiree. His mother, Lucretia, hadn’t called. She usually did on big occasions, from France or Avalon, or even Atlantis that one time. Maybe she only called on hopeful occasions, the one where she only had to say congratulations and end the call, not offer any kind of comfort or remorse. Solomon swallowed a sudden lump in his throat. He looked around the room, blockaded behind the wall of modern works, until he found something new. A portrait of a young girl by the sea. Strawberry blond hair and deep set eyes over sallow cheeks. Her wrists were like bird bones, fragile and white, thinner than any wrists should be. “Who is she?” asked Solomon, who felt strange asking a question. Solomon did not ask questions, yet he let this one fall out.

What was one question in his final hours?

“Ah,” started Arthurius. He maneuvered to face the portrait, his dismal expression darkening even more. “Poor Cass, my dear sister.” He looked at Solomon somberly. “She’s likely the source of all your troubles, my boy, never had an ounce of magic in her, even with a siren as her mother.” He returned to gazing at the portrait, yet addressed Solomon. “ My father, your great-grandfather I suppose, commissioned

this after Cassiopeia . . . afterwards. She was twelve when the ocean took her, Mother never spoke of it afterwards. To my knowledge, she's never said a word of it. She was the first and the last to fail the test." Arthurius sighed and looked back at Solomon. "I suppose not the last."

Solomon stared at the painting. He couldn't see an inch of himself in her, that slight girl. Where her hair was pale, his was nearly black, where her nose was dull and short, his was long and sharp. The only similarity was in the eyes, of course it would be, those oil-spill eyes. Filmy and polluted and alien to sirens and to men. A product of failure and confusion.

Arthurius cleared his throat. "I'll be getting a drink now," he glanced at his empty goblet. "Maybe something lighter. Good luck my boy." He said *good luck* the way others say *have hope*. He said *good luck* the way others say *I'm sorry*. He said *good luck* the way others say *goodbye*.

The beach wind roared frigidly, tearing against the sheer bathing suit Solomon had been made to wear. It was an unbearable one-piece, shorts and top combined, pure silver. If Solomon had the space to think of other things, he might have remarked on its fashion relevancy, but the words fell short and died in his mouth leaving a sour, bitter taste. The moon shone overhead, silver and blue against the pinprick stars and black night. The beach was painted in silver and blue, making it even clearer that Solomon had no scales to shine. He stood, toes buried in the sand, watching as the second relation emerged from the waves. A chubby cheeked, satyr and siren blooded child, two spiraling horns emerging from her wavy hair now plastered to her face. She grinned and waved at her family as she returned, running up to a woman who must have been her mother, burying in her outstretched arms. With a shout she called out her new name, the one given to her by her siren blood.

"Ippodamia!" she roared in her child's voice.

Solomon was the last one, the others already having been submerged and returned. He clenched his fists until he felt warm blood on the inside of his palms, the cold air biting at the wounds like a thousand teeth. The beach was crowded with relations, but none of them were smiling anymore. Marcellina stood apart, a towel in hand. It was like bringing a spare coat to a grave. She caught his eye for a moment, her ice meeting his oil-spills. She held her chin high as if signaling to him. *Be ready, be quick*. She acted as if there was hope and Solomon hated her for it. He turned back to the waves and chewed his lip, tasting the iron of his blood.

The family waited for the signal, for Solomon to rush out into the waves, for the final call, for the solemn march back to the house. They waited and Solomon

tasted blood. The wind whistled and pulled at the stone-still family, dragging at scarves, tearing at hats. It was more alive than any person on the beach, laughing and whipping through the night. The waves lapped at the sand, deposited gleaming shells before tearing them back selfishly, holding tight to its bones. A light turned on beneath the waves. A black light, something between blue and purple and the color of shut eyelids, reaching, grabbing, pulling at Solomon. And the music, wafting up from beneath the waves like sweet perfume, shrill and piercing. Solomon flinched. He couldn't hear the magic in it, couldn't feel the tethers it tried to tie around him. There was nowhere for it to anchor in him. He couldn't be enchanted by it, but he could be forced.

“Go!” yelled Marcellina breaking the silence, her voice nearly lost to the wind. The world began to shatter.

Even in the cold Solomon could fear his warm blood and his pounding heart. His vision swayed and pulsated like the surface of a drum, reeling in and out. He took a step forward and nearly fell. He stumbled into the waves, the cold water biting him worse than the wind. It didn't welcome him, not like the others. It grabbed at him, begged him, held him. There were no loving embraces of a lost love, no return to blood, only the wild sea, latching its kelp fingers around his ankles and driving its salt fingers down his throat. He tumbled beneath the waves, dropping down into the endless dark. Ten minutes, that was the deal, that was the plan, that was how it was. But there was no time underwater, the tick of the clock lost beneath the rumbling waves. No light to see by, no air to breathe by. Even Solomon's sense of touch was eroded by the water, the harsh salt and gritty shells ripping away every sense. Up and down were gone, and Solomon spun in the waves. His eyes were wide open against the stinging salt, he could see the surface above him, the moonlight like a rope cast down in the water. He reached for it, the ocean pulled him back. No, not the ocean. A hand, slick and scaled and clawed and familiar.

His great-grandmother pulled him into the deep, into the coves. Down below all familiarity, where dark pushed at him and weeded its way down his throat, where all he could feel were smooth scales and long, ensnaring hair. He burned, even in the cold. Her nails tore at him, piercing his skin to get a better hold, to drag him deeper. His lungs burned, his throat burned, he burned without heat, without light. A senseless, devouring burn that broke him from the inside. He screamed, bubbles floating ever upwards, escaping. His vision blurred, or was that the dark? He saw eyes, black staring eyes. Eyes without pupils, without sclera, without end. Her eyes, watching, waiting, holding him at the floor of the ocean, where the sand swirled

around them and the dark was held back by the glow of her scales. Black, endless eyes that cried. She cried as she held him there, freshwater tears leaking into the stinging salt, melting into the blackness. She drowned him tenderly, holding her hand to his cheek, her claws held just far enough so not to scratch him. He struggled, but the burn left him weak and senseless. Her face, pale and young, was suddenly etched with so much grief. It tore her face into pieces, carved her and bled her and hurt. And aching kind of grief, the kind caused by fault and ruin and tradition.

“*Solomon,*” he heard, the voice echoing in his fading mind. A soft hand ran through his hair, and he felt a warm tear hit his face. His head buzzed and he could no longer feel his fingers. He opened his mouth in a silent scream, the remaining air fleeing his body like passengers from a sinking ship.

“*I would have called you Icarus, sweet boy.*” Xiomene cried, the tears rushing away from her. “*You would have been beautiful.*”

Xiomene wept but there is only so much beauty a dead boy can hold and he held it in his cursed eyes, purely and simply and true.

Solomon was sure he was dead. It was silent, it was dark, it was senseless and cold, it should have been the end, it should have been death. But there are no hands beyond the veil, nothing as tangible as what Solomon could feel. Light, lithe, thin fingers, cold fingers, nails like shattered glass and knuckles like mechanical gears. Fingers wrapped around his throat, pressing a cold thumb just beneath his adam’s apple.

Solomon’s eyes flew open. The ocean was clearer, the moon closer, the ropes of light cutting through the icy water. The surface bobbed above him, rolling and rippling and peaceful, a silken blanket on a bed of bones. The hands were cold around his throat, but they staved away the burn. The ache in his lungs, the fire that tore at his head and his heart and ripped his limbs fell flat against the cold of the hands. The hands were attached to bony wrists, which in turn became long, slender arms, connected to a bony, pale frame. Their hair floated around their head like a halo, glinting all shades of silver and blue in the oceanic light, their eyes reflecting whatever was closest. Silverfish held Solomon by the neck, not in a forceful, malicious way, but as if they were trying to coax something down his throat. A single thumb traced its way down Solomon’s salt stained skin, as if dragging down something inside him. It was cold, the thing, deep inside his throat, slowly dropping to the pit of his stomach. It froze the burning sensation, leaving a writhing, icy turmoil in his gut.

Silverfish pulled away, their arms splayed out. They looked more like a corpse than Solomon, pale and gaunt. The ten layers of clothing had been discarded, leaving them in an oversized t-shirt and shorts. Their shirt floated around them, the excess fabric writhing and swirling around them like tentacles. Tattoos covered every inch of their pale body. Twisting, squirming tattoos, harsh black lines cut into sallow skin, bordered by marks of dead languages until a labyrinth was carved into their skin. They stared into Solomon's wide eyes, their mouth open just enough to reveal the sharpness of their teeth. Their tongue flicked out, like a snake tasting the air, and in one movement they launched towards Solomon, grabbing him tight. Solomon gasped, but there was no oxygen left in him to be breathed out. He felt dull, like a rock chipped away by the sea, as if his head had been flooded as thoroughly as his lungs. He couldn't breathe, he didn't want to, he didn't have to. Silverfish had their sharp chin on his shoulder, their hands gripping both of his shoulders. Solomon could feel their hair graze against his cheek, softer than anything had a right to be. They pressed their chapped lips close to his ear, and the icy feeling in Solomon's gut gently wove its way into the rest of him. It reached through his veins and danced up his spine, wove its way into his hair and ran gentle fingers through his aching muscles.

Silverfish said nothing, though Solomon could feel their lips move against his ear. It was as if Silverfish had neglected to say a word, and instead put their intentions straight into Solomon's mind. There were no concrete words, only memories, only emotion, only the feeling of cutting off a piece of oneself and casting it away, only cold, only sleep.

Solomon woke on the shore, the tides grasping at him listlessly, the moon still shining bright above. He swallowed air and rolled to his side, coughing out harsh seawater. His throat burned and his eyes felt like two cold marbles in his head. He choked on the water and on the air, before sitting up and grasping his own throat. His hair was slick against his scalp, his fingers wrinkled and purple. The cold had faded, as well as the burn, leaving Solomon feeling strangely hollow. He looked out into the ocean the way others look into crowds.

"Where are you?" he roared, his voice scratched and broken from the salt and death. He stumbled to his feet and into the tides, the cold water grabbing at him greedily. "Where—"

A cold hand settled on his shoulder.

Solomon spun around, only to find himself alone on the beach. He flailed in the low water, half-drowned and half-asleep. He looked around frantically, his angular face catching the moonlight the way blades do.

He was alone, utterly and completely alone. Even the lights of the beach house had dimmed, like dying stars. A strange warmth twisted in his chest, writhing and alive and whispering. Solomon grabbed at it, as if trying to grasp his heart, but all he could feel was the slick, wet shine of scales. A patch, just over his heart, glistening and pure silver against his skin. They glinted like the inside of an abalone shell, the moonlight dancing smoothly across the surface of each individual scale. Solomon stared in horror at the scales, hesitant to even touch them. He stared at the scales in the way that most would stare at a gunshot, at a dagger in the chest, at a red, raw wound. He could feel it, suddenly, the pulsing, white-hot flavor that burned his tongue and froze his fingers. It was alien to him, but at the same time fit inside him like a missing puzzle piece.

“Magic,” was all Solomon could mutter, staring at the scales in a trance. “F--k.”

Anna Aiono

### Bask

The stars  
stud the black silk night,  
tiny gems on fabric  
my hands barely trace.

No brightness needed.  
The little lights  
being just enough  
to soak our sadness.

We glow with no moonbeam.  
Your skin in flames -  
and I am reading the lines,  
the aching lines

of collar bones,  
starched and pressed  
against your neck.

We catch in midair,  
a trapeze act.  
Our finale,  
falling down on padded ground  
moonless,  
silent

but for your breath  
and the still air

that ripe figs  
and loving bodies  
hang in.

### Chauffer

Les étoiles  
cloutent la nuit de la soie noir,  
petits bijoux sur tissu  
mes mains ne tracent que.

Pas besoin de luminosité.  
Les petites lumières  
sont juste assez  
de tremper notre tristesse.

Nous brillons sans un rayon de lune.  
Ta peau en feu -  
et je lis les lignes,  
les lignes douloureuses

de tes clavicules  
empesés et repassés  
contre ton cou.

Nous nous attraperons en plein ciel,  
un numéro de trapèze.  
Nos finale,  
tombant sur la terre rembourrée  
sans lune,  
muet,

mais pour ta haleine  
et l'air

que des figes mûres  
et des corps aimants  
pendent en.

**Fugue from the Raven Field<sup>1</sup>**

in the field of raven I search you  
I search you I search you and  
in the field of raven I search you  
I give you a shot a death shot I give you  
I give you I give you I wait and I shoot you  
wait in the field the field of raven I wait  
a palm of silent hours I give you  
I give you a hollow rope and I weave you  
a palm of silent hours hangs on a hollow rope  
in the field of raven I weave and I weave you  
a palm of silent hours in my hollow hands  
and it hangs on a hollow rope I weave you  
in the field of raven I weave and I weave you  
weave I a palm of silent hours  
a death shot a hollow rope I wait and I wait  
in my hollow hands I wait for you

in the field of raven I search you  
search I a dark raven of the field

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<sup>1</sup> fugue (n.)—a musical composition using counterpoint, in which a melodic phrase is repeated and developed through repetition and variation; a psychological state in which a person loses a firm grasp on their identity.

Gas Station

I walk down the aisles,  
see miles of low-priced candy and snacks,  
feel a touch of - what's that feeling?  
Nostalgia?  
My earbuds are quietly yipping away in my ears,  
with Patrick Stump screaming Thanks Fr Th Mmrs.  
It brings me back.  
Neon Trees, neon fruits.  
What does it matter?  
I pull an earbud out to hear the calming buzz of the slushie machine  
whirring and whirring and whirring,  
like a politician giving empty promises.  
There are two worlds around me.  
One filled with people, so brightly colored that I cover my eyes.  
The other only lit by the artificial light of the store,  
with nothing but Stygian blackness outside the windows.  
My shoes squeak on the linoleum floors as I  
force my way through the resistant air towards the cashier.  
I am unable to go any further.  
The song changes to one called  
- Oh I don't know,  
Some song by AC/DC?  
Something flows through the doors,  
the windows,  
every crack in the walls, every mouse hole.  
I am drowning in nothing and everything.  
How does that even work?  
How can I drown in nothing?  
I flex my fingers and it all flows away,  
leaving me empty.  
I am Hades without Persephone.  
I am the moon without the sun.  
I am Artemis without her bow and Apollo without his harp.  
I shake my head and grab a few things off the shelves,  
weaving through people that aren't really there  
- Or are they?

It's that time of night  
when  
there is not time  
nor location  
It is a place that can only ever be found,  
alone late at night,  
where emotions are neither here nor there.  
The beat in my ear gets quicker and faster  
as Gerard Way screams his heart out.  
I walk towards the register,  
picking up my pace,  
jogging  
running  
sprinting  
slipping  
and...  
falling  
down  
down  
down.

Wind whistles in my ears and my hair floats in clusters.  
And suddenly,  
I am drowning  
- Actually drowning this time -  
drowning in the milky white water while  
Charon stares down at me with apathy.  
I hold my breath until my lungs are about to burst.  
My hair floats around my face.  
My eyes close as tight as possible.  
I cannot see.  
And then I breathe.  
I breathe and I forget it all.  
I embrace  
drowning in  
the Lethe.  
And.  
I sink.

**Meditation (for Matthew, Part III)**

Dear Matthew:

I was walking home last night  
when I thought of you  
and your cigarette-smoked lips,  
I missed the train for you  
(but it was worth it).

And I was dreaming of you  
last night (*but my eyes don't close  
for sleeping*), *and it raining in my stomach  
and it storming in my heart.*  
*Your slate-gray lips against mine.*  
(One year later  
and I could still feel them.)

Our promises echoed in my mind:  
*write to me,*  
*don't leave me,*  
*don't die,*  
*stay with me.*

They tattle-tale on you.  
My bedroom floor contains  
the spiral of your letters -  
it's easier to see  
your descent into madness  
this way  
this way (*twice?*)  
it's better off  
(backwards).

I was with you *in Rockland*  
when you lay in your bed  
crying  
because we'd never see each other again  
*because they found out about us -*  
and I was with you  
when your mind was absent,  
when you sat at the piano  
brainlessly banging on the black keys.

I was with you (in Rockland)  
when they made you  
string out your *gay thoughts* into long sentences,  
and then suddenly your word vomit  
became real vomit  
because your body rejected the drugs -  
*the drugs to fix your sexuality.*

I was with you (*in Rockland*)  
when you screamed the night away...

In my dreams you're sixteen,  
our primal age,  
fiery, fearless, *hazy*.  
*The sickly-sweet sensation*  
*of your personality*  
*against mine.*

I dreamed of you last night—  
but my eyes don't close for sleeping.  
*And it raining in my stomach,*  
*and it storming in my heart.*

## Off-leash

Vast expansive sea —

there I let my mind wander.

How far will it go?

## Witch

I love her being evil; I love her being sweet.  
She is the bone of bones, the flesh of flesh.  
I love this maiden, a whip-like girl who spins.

Her dance is black. Her eyeballs are bloody purple.  
Her clothes are the most limpid, shadows of temptation.

From the first night of her birth, she started spinning.  
And every night since then, she spun without stopping.

Demons laughed at her, laughed at her for her skinny figure,  
laughed at her for her pale skin, her unclothed body,  
laughed at her for her restless spinning, days and nights.  
Demons laughed at her, laughed at her infantile soul.

She was spinning at an incredible speed,  
a speed that would crush herself to pieces.  
Her bones and flesh were torn,  
Her blood splattered. But the surrounding, her  
surrounding was a canvas that could not be painted.

While spinning she screamed and screamed:  
I am your sheep! Yet also your pastor!  
In the spinning she laughed and laughed:  
You are my servant! Yet also my lord!

Besides screaming and laughing, sometimes she also chose to cry.  
Her weeps were strings of lutes; her tears, iridescent glazes.

Viper-like flames appear, incomparably luminous.  
A spectacular ritual is starting, lasting for seven days.

She knows she may become a sacrifice,  
and at the sixth night, dies in florid flames.

Her last skeleton, shivering, is leaving.  
Spinning, everlasting, is her perpetual mystery.  
Now there leaves her single soul, finally,  
spinning in the void, like the crystal of nights.

No longer she is the bone of bones, the flesh of flesh.  
She is herself, a whip-like girl who spins.

I love her being evil; I love her being sweet.  
I love this maiden, a whip-like girl who spins.

## Stories Are Complicated

Stories are complicated. They mean different things to different people. I, for instance, used to believe that stories were high action, plot intensive narratives, where “big ideas” like themes and meanings didn’t really enter the picture.

I remember talking to a friend one day, during my sophomore year of high school, about the point of English class, and the stories we read. While the specifics of the conversation are lost to time, the gist of what I said is this: I don’t understand the point. I never understood the point. Why do we need to dissect these stories, talking about themes, word choice, and rhetorical devices? To me at the time (and still partially now), I thought, no, I knew that the most important part of stories was the plot itself. My reasoning extended to movies too--why do critics focus so much on the cinematography, acting skill, and minute details of a movie, when the obvious part, the hook, the reason everyone wanted to watch was for the plot?

In fact, I remember that we both ended up agreeing that the act of analyzing stories in this way loses its value. There’s a point where we analyze too much, asking such trivial and minute questions that only the author can answer, and for what? How does this make the plot any better? It doesn’t. It ruins the experience of the plot, filling the time with random and useless searches.

After my friend and I discussed this, we quickly moved on to other things to talk about in the way conversations go, but I still thought about those points. Am I missing out on enjoyment other people get, simply because I don’t ascribe intrinsic value to the minute details of a story? Or is it something more, something I just wasn’t built to understand?

I had spent enough time in the warm yellow (or sometimes purple) embrace of an English class to have the reasoning for why themes are important drilled home. And while I knew themes had value, but I never truly experienced that value in a way I appreciated until I read *Exhalation* by Ted Chiang. Suggested to me by my grandmother, during our weekly call, I was tentative about reading it at first. In fact, the only reason I did read it was because my grandma ordered it for me and had it delivered to me, and I didn’t want to be rude. I was reluctant at first because the types of stories my grandmother read weren’t the same as the ones I read and value. They weren’t plot-driven, immersive narratives, but instead slow calculated books. To me, at the time, the two couldn’t be the

same. This was a view I before I cracked open *Exhalation*, but it quickly changed because of one thing.

It made me think.

Yes, in English class I learned themes made people think, but I didn't truly believe it, because I had never truly experienced it. At the end of every short story collected in that volume, however, I needed to put down the book, and just reflect on what I read. Not only did I think about the content, but I thought about the ways the story was made, something I so hated to do because again, I never saw the point.

The stories were an excellent mix of the gripping narratives I valued, and the intrinsic thought-provoking themes and ideas my grandmother enjoyed. There was something about reading for my own enjoyment, and not for an essay that finally made me understand the value of themes.

At the end of the book, Chiang included a "Story Notes" section where he explained the creation and process behind each story. I'm glad I got to read it, because as stupid as it may sound, it made me realize that plots—the things I loved and held dear—weren't all built off of "epic hero needs to save the world" à la *Mistborn* by Brandon Sanderson, or "detective guy needs to solve the murder case" like Perry Mason on HBO. Plots could be built off of questions and higher concepts.

What does it mean to be a parent? Can we substitute human care with robotic care? Those are questions asked by some of the stories. Chiang also derives some of his ideas from more obscure physical principles, the nature of entropy in the universe, and the idea of multiple, parallel universes. It made me realize that anything can be turned into a story. Anything—even the most obscure aspects of nature—can create a meaningful story, where the meaning is driven by both the plot and the themes. In fact, the themes create the plot, and in turn, the plot strengthens the themes and acts as the medium by which the author delivers ideas and questions to the audience.

This fact, this revelation is what truly cemented in my mind that when a story is done right, it has themes, and it has big ideas. Not just meaningful stories that ask questions, but the plot-heavy narratives I enjoy too. Much to my chagrin, it made me realize that what I learned in English was important.

*The Stormlight Archive* by Brandon Sanderson, some of the best narrative-driven books I've read deals with themes of mental illness, and traumatic pasts. The *Warriors* series, by Erin Hunter, explores the ideas of segregation, racial separation (in the form of its clans), and the idea that we are all the same and differences don't matter. Children's books, picture books, while generally thought to be simple, are actually stories where the

themes are most prevalent, with things like fairness, equality, sharing, respect, and kindness, as well as a multitude of others.

Even this account could be said to have a theme, even though I didn't intentionally work one in. There are still questions I need to ask, and things I need to learn. Do themes arise organically through the process of writing, or do themes need to be architecturally worked in and planned for? Is it different from person to person, based on their overall writing style? I don't know, and like so many other nuances to writing, I will never fully understand it. But when I read *Exhalation* by Ted Chiang, though, I thought, and I considered. My eyes opened to the complicated, but integral role themes have with stories. I got closer to understanding stories as a whole, and maybe, just maybe, I'll be able to write better stories because of it.



# Interrobang

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