

VOICES of BHC



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A Big Bad Wolf Looks Back

I huffed and I puffed
I'm sorry to say,
but that was me in the younger days.
They lost their places,
I paid my dues, but,
Honestly, they were pigs....

All the better to eat her with.
Yes, it was true.
But now, with my new teeth,
I can barely eat Hansel and Gretel stew
She and her granny had a bad day,
but me, I had a family to feed.
Who considered that?

I get a bad rap.
But, it was never me who 'cried wolf'
I was just out doing my job.
Time and time again the same, sad story is true,
It will always be me that people see
taking advantage,
but my conscience is clean.

—Brittney Sardi

A Silent Redemption

Frustration seized me as I looked at the dozens of different types of tomato sauce sitting on the shelves. I knew I didn't need the family size; it was just me at home. I knew I didn't want the kind with meat already in it; it never tasted fresh.

As I stood there slowly narrowing my options inside my head, I began to hear a rhythmic thump of something falling on the hard, white tile. The store wasn't full so it was easy to see a small boy at the other end of the aisle knocking cans of soup off the shelves. As I watched him I could tell the boy was not doing it to be devious or mean, for his head was turned slightly upward and to the right, not watching his hand go from one can to the other, knocking each to the floor.

I stood there watching him. He was alone and certainly not at any age to be so. As I shifted my weight to turn and walk toward him, a middle-aged employee appeared from the end of the aisle. She was a very large woman and her pants were too tight. A look of absolute repulsion and annoyance mingled within the dips and creases of her face. She waddled over to the boy and took his hand off the next can that was about to drop. I waited to help, I waited to rescue.

"No, no don't do that. Hey, stop doing that," the employee said with a stern voice. His hands began to shake violently in front of his chest as if he was wringing them out. I no longer found myself facing the tomato cans but swiftly walking toward the boy and the woman.

"Hey, what are you doing, stop that. Can you understand me?" Her voice was getting heavier and louder. I ignored her as I dropped to my knees at the side of the boy. He was tall enough to be maybe six years old, but his baby face gave him away as being only three or four. I took him by the shoulders and turned him toward me. I smiled as wide as I could. My stomach dropped into its own pit of Hell as I relived a nightmare. His hands did not stop moving.

"Is this your kid? Look at what he just did here," she stated in a hostile tone.

I looked up into her cruel eyes and replied, “No, he’s not my child. He’s trying to tell you something.”

“The kid hasn’t said a damn word this entire time so I don’t know-” My anger was beginning to seep through the pores of my skin. I knew she didn’t understand but I couldn’t help be furious that the woman was far too ignorant to see he wasn’t a normal young child.

“In sign language.” I removed myself from the curt conversation and brought my view back upon the boy. I took my hands and formed them into the letter “O” against my chest. I then dropped them away from my body and brought them palm-down with my fingers spread.

“Lose. You’re signing the word ‘lose.’ As in you are lost, honey, who are you here with?” The boy’s head was still turned to the right and looking up at... nothing. As I looked him over, he was so much the same, so nearly identical that I completely lost my breath. It had escaped my body and mind. The only thing I was sure of now was that *this* nightmare would end differently.

“Who is here with you?” I began to sign as I spoke, “Mother? Father?” The boy stood there, continuing to sign the word “lose”. After about six seconds his hands stopped and he brought his right hand out in front of his face with fingers spread. It wavered there only a moment or two before he dropped it to his side. If he had put his hand next to his head it would have been closer to the sign of father rather than mother. He must be here with his mother.

“Where-is-your-mother?” I said as I signed the words. The employee just stood there, clearly out of her depth but also impressed. The boy clenched his fists over and over all the while still staring at the invisible site on the ceiling.

“Milk, you’re showing me milk. Dairy section,” I said, more to the employee than to myself. I stood up leaving my cart behind and walked with the woman and the boy toward the dairy section.

“How do you know sign language?” the woman asked me, now in a polite tone.

“My neighbor’s son is autistic.” Maybe it was a lie but I didn’t wish to speak with her. I only wished to find the boy’s mother.

We arrived in the dairy section but saw no one. The boy's face continued without expression, as I knew it would.

"Let's page her over the intercom. I will stay here with him," I said. The woman hustled away as fast as she could without trotting. I dropped to my knees,

"Mother-is-coming," I said to him. I couldn't think of anything else. I looked into the boy's bright green eyes and only thought that if he had been my son now, he never would have left my side. I had made that mistake once, and one time was all it took for everything to change. He stood there with such a sense of peace. I squatted next to him almost in tears, waiting for the hefty woman to call his mother back to him.

I turned his shoulders toward me and said with my words, hands, and heart,

"My-son-was-just-like-you. Do-you-think-he-smiles-for-me-now?"

—Kayla Behrens

Sonnet

Domestic life is tiring.
The chores are mundane-
the dishes, the laundry, the toil.
Remember those simple days
we spent lazing away,
filled with sweetness and spoil?
Now each day is the same
and life is uninspiring.
Yet, there is adventure in our domesticity,
as we delve into the laundry piles
and fight together through dishes.
We are conquistadors searching for the riches
of a priceless, peaceful domicile
and life ripe with love and simplicity.

—Tess Hurt

August 24th

See Atlanta's night skyline:
Silent,
Brightly lit!
Sweet, sultry hieroglyphics.
An electric love note for weary traveler's skybound
contemplation . . .

Rise higher . . .
Awful transformation!
A veiny, twisted, sprawling thing.
Monstrous.
Sickening.

Altitude 10,000:
A decimated X'mas display—
amid chaotic wreckage
distant, cheerless embers burn.
Enticing twinkles hush and whisper
. . . See what we could have been.

Soaring upward . . .
Sightless flying.
No clouds to cushion, comfort.
And then . . .
Inundating winds.
Ear-popping calm.
Darkness
The peaceful descent.

Au revoir.

—Joanna Sallows

Cain

My brother stares up at me blankly.
His eyes are empty and dull.
I kick him hard, and he barely moves.
"Abel, get up. Enough."

He stares back at me unblinking.
His skin is ashen; his breath is still.
I clutch his hair, and it is sticky and wet.
"Abel... Abel." I kneel.

Now fear flashes through me-
A sickening awareness begins.
I have seen death before,
unaware we were able

To die like the sheep.
Like a lamb slaughtered
for that ever-present voice,
Abel, my brother, is dead.

—Tess Hurt

Ass Burgers

Once upon a time there was an evil troll named Enano. Enano spent all of his life in the bathroom closet at Roosevelt Elementary School. The children at the school had all heard the stories of Enano's existence, but none of them had actually seen him before. However, they were scared enough to put off going to the rest room, just in case.

"Hey, Billy. I need to go to the bathroom. Can you be the lookout?"

"What's the matter, Kyle? You're not afraid of the Boogeyman, are you?"

"Shut up, you jerk! You know you're just as scared to go in there alone as I am!" To emphasize that fact, Kyle gave Billy a little punch on the arm.

In the end, both boys went into the bathroom together, as was customary for the children at Roosevelt, since every one of them was scared of Enano. No one knew exactly where this legend had come from, and the teachers always dismissed the story when they mentioned it to them. They were non-believers. The scariest thing was that Enano was said to move back and forth between the boys' and the girls' restrooms, so neither sex was safe.

One day, a new student came to the school. Her name was Missy Brennan. The teachers all talked about how "special" she was. She was said to have something they referred to as "Ass Burgers." None of the kids knew what this was, but they figured it made Missy just weird enough to not be normal like the rest of them.

"Psst. Kyle. Can you believe that new girl has that Ass Burgers disease? What a weirdo! What do you think it means? She eats stuff from her butt? I know there is something wrong with her. She always repeats everything you say to her, and she has the funniest walk. Must be from keeping an ass burger in her pants."

"You're right, Billy. She's such a freak. I'm glad she's not my sister."

A group of girls came over to join Kyle and Billy. The tallest of them, Suzy, opened her mouth first. “Are you talking about that new girl? She’s so strange. She spends forever in the bathroom. I heard Ms. Marks saying she’s ‘self-stimulating.’ Do you know what that is? Ew. That’s gross!”

All of the kids laughed, but stopped when they saw Missy coming down the hall. Her walk wasn’t a walk that any of the children had seen before. It was more like a gait. She moved like she had no hips, as though something was merely propelling her legs forward in a long, slow shuffle. The children watched as Missy walked into the bathroom—alone.

“Oh, no!” said Kyle. “Didn’t anyone tell her about Enano?”

“I didn’t. Why would I?” replied Suzy. “I can’t stand that nutjob. I hope Enano gets her!”

The other kids, all of them except Suzy, that is, stared at the door to the girls’ bathroom. Suddenly, they heard a loud bang. This was followed by several strange “Whap” sounds. Then, all was quiet. The children waited around the door, not sure of what to do next.

A few minutes later, Missy wandered out of the bathroom nonchalantly. “What are you all listening to me go to the bathroom for? It’s my body and my life. All of you can fuck up!” With that, she shuffled away.

“That girl’s so stupid, she can’t even swear correctly,” Suzy mumbled, though she was dying to see what all those noises had been. She headed toward the bathroom door and opened it. The other girls and the two boys followed her as she entered the restroom.

All of them gaped in wonder and astonishment as they looked into the second stall. There, on the cold tile floor, lay Enano. Though the children had never seen him before, they knew it was him. He was the ugliest creature any of them had ever seen. He was short and fat, with a wrinkly white face that looked as if it had never been in the sun. He had brown, jagged teeth, and filthy long red hair. He wore brown pants and a red and green striped shirt, just like Freddy Krueger. But the most striking detail that the kids noticed

was the back of the toilet, the tank, lying on top of Enano's head. Enano was stone cold dead.

The children all screamed and ran out of the bathroom. They saw their teacher, Ms. Marks, at the other end of the hallway. They ran to her as fast as they could.

"Ms. Marks! Ms. Marks! Missy killed Enano! His dead body's in the girls' bathroom!"

"Children, you must calm down. You know that Enano is just a scary story. He's not real."

"No, Ms. Marks! It's true! We saw him in there," said Kyle.

"And just what were you doing in the girls' restroom anyway, Kyle?"

"I was...just following Suzy and the others. We heard Missy doing something funny in there, and after she left, we went in to investigate!"

"All right. I'll go see if there's anything out of the ordinary in there." She marched down the hallway, and the children watched her silently. She came back after a few minutes.

"There's nothing "funny" in there. I think you children have too much free time on your hands. I'm going to see to it that you all get more homework to do." With that, she walked off, leaving the children staring after her once again.

The children looked at each other, still amazed by the morning's events. They knew what they had seen. Enano was dead, and Missy had killed him. They didn't know exactly why, but they were pretty certain about the how.

The next day Suzy, Kyle, Billy, and their other friends were waiting for Missy at the front door when she got off the bus. "Why are you following me around? Leave me alone!" Missy shouted at them, and she shuffled down the hall towards her class. The other children were not deterred, however, and they surreptitiously continued to trail after Missy.

When Missy had reached the halfway point between her class and the entrance door, a bigger student, Cameron, stepped out in front of her. "Get out of her way! Let her pass!" Kyle walked up to

Cameron, yelling at the top of his lungs. Billy and Suzy were close behind him. Cameron turned, surprised.

“Hey, chillax, you little twerps. It was an accident.” And with that, he moved out of Missy’s path, stunned at the aggressiveness of this coterie of younger, smaller kids.

This odd behavior continued throughout the day, and the rest of the school year. And so it was that Missy with her strange walk and strange ways entered junior high with her bevy of admirers protecting her from the harsh scrutiny of the other children, the ones who knew nothing of the true story of ‘Enano’, and the girl with “Ass Burgers” who had saved the school from his terrible reign.

— Lisa Torres

Two Riddles

I am small and silent soaring about,
Wafting away from window to wall.
A natural nuisance, annoying to all.
I gorge on your garbage gratefully
Then perch on your plate unrepentant.

Dirt, my delight, my dark domain.
I troll through the thickness blindly,
Surfacing some slick days.
Escaping the early one.

—Tess Hurt

Haikus

When the sun is out
The neighborhood is full of
Laughter, fun, and smiles

—Brittany Cothron

Enter at stage right.
Life's brevity up for show--
Exit now to the left.

—Joanna Sallows

Pain, Fear, Joy
A bursting cry, Happiness
A healthy boy

—Jamie Matthews

On stage I am home
Under lights and in costumes
Applause is my drug

—Rachel Gorenz

Haikus can be short
Other times they are longer
Hippopotamus

—Alison Huislander

Checkered Taxi of Death

Messenger boy zings along.
The spokes in his tires
Breathe out a windsong.

Down the pavement,
Across the park,
His foot is almost rubbed away,
Like the grime on yesterday's window,
As he passes a speeding checkered taxi.

Green car.
Black truck.
Yellow light.
Stop!

The writhing, headless inchworm,
Traffic,
Hesitates.

Pedals flying,
Legs pumping feet,
In a gust of frenzied wind,
He crosses the street.

—Joanna Sallows

Pius

In beneficence
you reside,
cloaked in silence
and ignorance.
Brushed aside,
here we are dying -
Our pleas denied -
Without you decrying,
with your God on your side.
—Tess Hurt

Van Gogh's Last Words

Before I go I want you to know,
I created from a hold deep within my soul.
Never did I see a blank canvas;
To me it was always the beginning.
With a paint brush in hand,
my mind was at a rare peace.
Red, yellow, blue and green,
together these colors are uniquely me.

You thought you were criticizing my art.
Really you were wrecking my heart.

All along your eyes saw a man who was *not* all right,
but I, I saw the starry night.
Laughing voices ring loud,
through my wounded ear.
One shot will silence it all,
but my art will remain,
to explain for an eternity.
—Carmen Schram

The Answer is “No.”

“I have to say this was a surprise,” She said to her fallen angel beside her.

Giselle sat with her legs crossed, swinging one spiked-heel foot. Her black ensemble matched her mood. Her hair was a smoldering amber pulled back in a loose ponytail. “I want Lauren Williams.”

God smiled at an elderly couple walking hand in hand past the two of them, sitting on the park bench. The day was sunny but cool. Her cream sweater and matching slacks reflected the light shining through the trees. They would be turning colors soon with fall coming near. “I believe you already have her.”

Giselle snorted leaving an amused look on her face. She turned to her adversary and replied, “I want her dead, and in my kingdom. Not Yours.”

“You reap what-”

“You sow. I know. I’ve heard that one before.” Giselle looked on at a young mother playing with her daughters under a nearby oak. “Maybe I should go over there and tell that lady her children are going to be abused by the next drunken boyfriend she brings home. Do you think she’d take me seriously?”

God furrowed her eyebrows.

“You will do nothing of the sort. She still has time to make a change.”

Giselle scoffed at her response. She never liked having these get-togethers. “And You’re telling me that *my* creation is bad? Now that’s something to laugh about.”

Her companion sat silent for several moments. Giselle waited. “Giselle, I want to break something down for you. I think it’s important we are on the same page here,” She said very seriously.

“Okay...”

“You created something in the image of an imperfect being. And you did this to destroy that being, correct?”

“Well-” Giselle was cut short.

“You’re right, I am incorrect. You wished to destroy mankind

with your creatures in order to show Me you had the power of a divine creator? I shall not reward your actions by giving you an undead who worships Me only because I have given her protection.” Giselle shifted her curvy weight on the seat of the bench.

“You know You are being idiotic. She’s a vampire, *my* creation! Her soul belongs to me.” God smiled at the creature beside her. She might not like Giselle, but She could never stop loving her.

“I am sorry but the answer is still no. As long as her allegiance lies with Me, you will never have her soul.”

—Kayla Behrens

Untitled

I wanted to
turn the moist soil,
smell the dank earth,
and feel the fresh spring day.
Wanted to dig and till
and maybe plant some seeds
with you,
but
here comes the storm
again.

—Tess Hurt

Untitled

The rain won't stop.
I sit in a glass room.
Looking out.
Heavy drops hitting the walls.
Rolling to the ground.
Reading my book
The words stop making sense.
Dripping off the page.
A puddle on the floor.
My feet soaking wet.
Saying my goodbyes.
A fire caged by an iron ring.
Hisses fleeting as the raindrops hit.
Shadows dancing
On the ground behind.
In a foreign land.
Trapped in a tent.
Reminiscing with a stranger.

Recycling bottles to collect the rain.
Everything stops.
No wind,
No sound of the drops hitting the ground.
It's frozen in place.

A moment of clarity.
Before the rain drops again.

—Nicholas Babeu

Blue

A few trees had begun to change colors, but not all. There was still a giant green canopy above me as I strolled along the wooded trail with my dog, Blue. Named for the color of her eyes, Blue was a Siberian Husky with a dainty personality and a nose that loved to smell every inch of the lumpy trail we traversed. Blue looked like a bad ass, though she wasn't. She weighed 80 pounds, and her light blue eyes had an ethereal quality to them. Even I admitted she looked eerie, but I loved her and knew her kind personality. I gave her all the length of the leash and let her smell to her heart's content. I inhaled deeply myself. The autumn air felt cool and fresh, and the mild chirping and clicking of random insects added to my contentment. This calming, evening stroll was exactly what I needed.

I was losing myself in this quiet, wooded paradise, forgetting myself piece by piece with no effort. I let my eyes roam from tree to tree, from flora and fauna, sometimes hopping over roots that jutted up into my trail. Blue padded along beside me. She seemed to be as lost in it all as I. We came upon a gentle curve in the trail, and Blue stopped.

Stiff. I'd never seen her do that. She had adopted almost the stance of a Pointer; her entire body motionless, one paw raised but frozen, as if in mid-stride. I moved ahead of her a bit, peeking around the bend, both curious as to the cause as well as alarmed at her abnormal behavior. At first, I saw nothing but more trail, more dirt, more leaves, more roots to jump. Then, it caught my eye. I had mistaken it for a bright patch of sunlight at first, but the slight movement I had made caused it to raise its head.

Its fur was pure white. I had only seen its back as it was even with the tall grass at first, but when it raised its head, I froze in terror. Its eyes were blood red, and it must've been eating something I couldn't see in the grass because blood and chunks of something were smeared around its mouth. It looked like some sort of albino wolf. It lifted its nose and sniffed the air, never taking its eyes off me. I tried to gather my wits and recall what you should do in these types

of situations. Don't show fear, I remembered. I think that's it anyway. The thing began advancing slowly towards me. "I'm not showing fear" I thought desperately, but I was pretty sure this animal could see a flashing marquee above my head that read "This bitch is scared, and she tastes like chicken."

As the wolf advanced, I slowly tried to back away, wondering how far I could get until this animal caught me. . . and it *would* catch me. I wasn't foolish. However, fight or flight is a natural instinct and so my next thought focused on weaponry. Attempting to keep aware of the animal, I tried to survey my surroundings; anything, a rock or stick or the random 20 gauge shot gun one often finds in the woods. No luck for me there. The rocks all seemed like pebbles, the sticks like twigs, and damn it, can't a hunter just lose a gun in the woods or something, just once, for me please? My mind raced with terrifying thoughts. I may have predicted 37 scenarios in less than 10 seconds, when I suddenly realized I wasn't standing there alone.

Blue had come up next to me. I hadn't heard her at all, and neither had this wolf with its attention focused on me. I had a quick moment of both "Thank God!" and "Oh Shit!" having no clue what would happen next to me or to my mild-mannered, four-legged friend. Blue's manner hadn't changed. Although she seemed to be extremely alert, she did not growl. She kept her cool. Her ghostly, blue eyes fixed upon the bloody, crimson eyes of the white wolf. At once he noticed her, and his eyes left me and he stopped moving.

Blue still made no sound, but held her head high, almost regal. The wolf eye's narrowed, its ears lying back flat on its head. He was going to leap at her. I had no idea what to do. Blue seemed to know what I was thinking. With the quickest of movements, she cocked her head up to me and then nodded back towards the back of trail. I read the sign correctly. She'd told me to run.

I dropped her leash, turned and sped off just as I heard the thing jumping from the grass. I leaped over the roots I had not minutes before playfully skip-jumped. I couldn't hear anything. If they were fighting, it was quiet. I ran at full speed for maybe a minute before something stopped me completely in my tracks.

To this day, I don't know what it was. I don't know why it happened. But I know I saw it, and I know it was real. It was a flash of blue light, and it came from behind me. It lit up the forest, and for one brief moment, everything was blue. Every tree, every rock, every stick, animal and plant, everything was blue. I had skidded to a stop and was trying to adjust my eyes to it. I blinked and squinted and as I stared, it began to fade. As it faded, my dog padded up to me. I knelt down and hugged her, looked her over from head to toe. She had no marks, no scratches. I know that wolf jumped for her, but she had nothing to show for it. I looked back nervously at the trail. Gathering up her leash again, I pulled her from the woods as quickly as possible.

I have no explanations for this experience, just the ones I've created while playing it over in my mind. Sometimes I think she is supernatural. Sometimes I think maybe she is a Queen of Dogs. Most of the time, I'm just thankful she was there. Luckily for me, Blue hasn't changed at all. As long as we take long walks (we stick to sidewalks now) and she gets a good belly rub, she seems content being the supernatural Queen of Dogs, idly protecting me from evil.

—Caressa Clearman

MyTurn

Running home in the storm, I watch lightning rend the sky.

Can't catch me!

At six, I am immortal. Crack.

Sparks fly; sharp splinters, wooden fireworks, erupt behind me.

That towering pine, once so solid, slowly descends from above.

My feet, seconds before so nimble, are paralyzed within an invisible quagmire.

Peering through torrential rain to the haven of our porch, I glance at my feet.

I cannot move;

My eyes fix on the falling tree

then squeeze tight.

I am flying in the blackness... dead?

Powerful arms sweep me up

Just

In

Time.

Swift legs pump, speeding us away.

My shadow expires under pine limbs bangled with torn, sparking power lines.

Flash ahead a decade. Flip through snapshots of us:

You removing rusty nails from my stubbornly bare feet, making me laugh away welling tears;

You French-braiding my silky, shiny, slippery-straight hair (same color as yours);

You trying to hide your "secret" heartaches (How could you think I didn't know?);

Me perched safely on your shoulders, watching the forest brambles tear at your legs;

Us going on nature walks, car drives, and motorcycle adventures. (How did we laugh so much?)

Wait. . . .

He's getting married, his face aglow! I danced at the reception,
hiding a million dazzling tears.

A few years later, I haven't seen him much. I graduate soon. Do I
even know him now?

Probably not.

I don't even know myself. Who was I then? (What happened to us?)

But watching him coo his newborn baby to sleep and glance up to
his wife, eyes worshipful and shining,

I catch a glimpse of miraculous life, though destined right from the
start to terminate.

"Please love him back," I think. The new mother smiles, but is she
sincere?

I remember that now, perched on this barstool, adrift, waiting for you
amid so much human wreckage.

Car keys, in fingers clutched, knuckles white and clammy, carve out
a word I've repeated

Ceaselessly

Through revelations of betrayal, down hallways of divorce court,
outside shut doors that muffle

Your sobbing agony,

Amid moving trips, lawyer visits, vicious fights, and custody
appointments:

"Why?"

Why do I just sit here with that same sick grin plastered on my face
since the day

I zipped up that shapeless, Peptobismal-pink sack of a bridesmaid's
dress and watched you at the altar.

Four years ago.

Did I ever take off that mask?

When we laugh now, it's hard and cold. And some days we are still
all the other one has.

Why?

Why can't I fix this?

Why can't I take away the booze, and the babes, and the

Bitch

Of a fact that you are alone?

I hold your son the way you held me. You hold the toilet, your body
purging the poison.

I blink back tears of shame. I fail you now when you need me most. I
can't fix you.

Your pain is so palpable, so acute; I feel the sharp stab with every
breath you inhale.

Why?

You are my big brother.

Why can't I save you now?

—Joanna Sallows

Snot Sonnet (Or So Not)

he runs in the rain
and pounds
over the wet ground
past silent train
tracks and it helps
to be a bit mad
at the sad
little commuting schleps

he glares at traffic
and blows farmer snot
onto the bike
path: it
is so not
polite

—Chris Henshaw

Stranger Things Have Happened

Janey sighed and stared out the window of the backseat. The tall, yellow grass seemed to zip by and stretch as far as her eye could see. She sighed again heavily, low enough though that her parents did not hear it as they talked between themselves in the front of the car, discussing Janey's aunt and uncle, whom they were on their way to visit.

Janey loathed these visits. Her aunt and uncle lived way out in the middle of nowhere, on a country road that sometimes smelled like manure. Worse than the smell, however, were Janey's cousins. Janey and Stephanie were the same age, 11. They got along mostly, but occasionally Stephanie had a mean streak in her like her brother.

John, at 13, always liked to pick on the girls. Janey hated to admit that she was scared of him, and she hated that she never knew whether he was going to be nice to her or mean. His moods seemed to change with the breeze. During the long drives to her cousins' house, Janey would daydream that John had some sort of transformation and was suddenly nice to her. Maybe he's been visited by a ghost, like Ebenezer Scrooge, she'd think; or even, bitten by a spider, like Peter Parker, except instead of super powers, he becomes super nice.

They came to an intersection, which Janey was sure no one would know of unless they were specifically looking for it, took a left and made their way down Manure Road. At the end of the road sat a big farm house. The house had actually once been a real barn, but had been converted into a home. It still had the barn shape, and inside it was roomy but had very tight staircases on which John would sometimes chase the girls.

They pulled into the gravel driveway and were greeted as they exited the car. Kisses and hugs were shared as they all clambered in the house, and the adults went about "settling" themselves.

"Go find something to do," the children were told. "It will be awhile before we eat. Go outside and get some fresh air." Janey

dreaded hearing that, but hoping Stephanie would be in a friendly mood today, smiled and walked over to her.

“What do you feel like doing?” Janey asked.

“I don’t know,” Stephanie answered. “Let’s just head outside, maybe we’ll just walk down by the creek.” The answer was friendly enough for Janey, and feeling optimistic, she followed Stephanie out the door. They had only gotten a few steps, however, when they heard the door open and close behind them.

“No hi for me, Janey?” asked John as he came up behind them.

“Hi, John,” Janey answered.

“Now just where are you girls wandering off to?” John inquired.

“We’re just heading down to the creek, John. Why don’t you go find something else to do?” answered Stephanie.

“The creek? What’s at the creek? That’s boring. You two follow me.”

Stephanie and Janey looked each other. Both seemed to feel the boredom pressing and silently agreed. John had taken a few steps to the right of their original direction, and so both girls turned and followed him.

The warm October sun beat down on the three as they trudged down a dirt road, crunching dead leaves underfoot. No one spoke and Janey took in the scenery: trees and more trees, some half bald. They walked in the indentations of the road, probably left by tires; most likely tractors, thought Janey. All was quiet too. There was a soft breeze of wind, but no birds, no tweeting or chirping, oddly quiet.

Abruptly, John took a hard left and headed directly into the trees. Janey turned to follow him.

“John, no! We aren’t supposed to go down there!” exclaimed Stephanie. John’s head poked out from the trees.

“Aw... c’mon, we’re not gonna walk *on* them. We’re gonna walk *by* them.” John persuaded.

“Where is it we’re not supposed to be going?” interjected Janey.

“The train tracks,” said Stephanie. Janey, feeling bored with the dirt road, for once felt like she agreed with John.

“Why not? We just won’t walk on them like John said.” The response provoked a smile from John. He gave his sister a look as if

to say, “See.. c’mon chicken”, and turned back into the trees. Janey went to follow him, and Stephanie continued to follow her, but kept grumbling as she went.

“They’re not *just* train tracks, Janey. They’re haunted,” Stephanie said behind her. Janey’s ears perked, but she continued to follow John.

“What do you mean by that?” Janey asked, a bit skeptical, anticipating that Stephanie and John may be playing a joke on her.

“They say a little girl was killed here a long time ago. She haunts the tracks. The trains don’t even use it anymore because of all the accidents they’ve had,” Stephanie began.

At that point, they came up behind John. In front of him was a very small rise of land and on top of the land, the train tracks. The point directly in front of them was deserted, but they could see about a half mile to the right, and positioned there on the track was a rusted train car.

“C’mon. Let’s check it out,” said John. The trio moved on toward the abandoned car.

“So, the little girl was hit by a train?” Janey asked.

“The story is,” replied John, “that she was playing on the tracks and one of her shoelaces got stuck. She was hit and killed. After that, they had all kinds of reports where engineers would pull the brakes for no reason, and the trains would buckle. The engineers all claimed the same thing. They saw a little girl in a pink dress standing on the tracks.”

“That is creepy,” Janey said, as they arrived at the deserted car. It had looked a lot spookier from far away. Now that they came upon it, it just seemed sad. It was broken, and only half on the tracks, the other half hanging over the opposite side from the children. The entire thing had turned to rust and when John reached out to touch the corner of it, it crumbled a bit under his touch. John frowned and wiped his hands on his pants.

“Let’s go up a little further and see if there’s anything else,” he said. Stephanie sighed at this.

“Just a bit, John, I don’t want to go too far,” she said.

They continued on, seeing nothing out of the ordinary. More trees, thought Janey, and still no birds though either. The tracks took a curve to the right and the children followed it. Janey looked back over her shoulder and could no longer see the deserted car. Stephanie seemed to be uneasy, and Janey was feeling less like this was all a story at her expense. Both girls told John they were ready to head back.

“Fine,” John agreed. He turned around, and at once they were headed in the direction of home. They walked along in silence and rounded the curve that had brought them nothing else interesting to see, and then John paused.

“What is that?” He pointed in the direction of the deserted car. They could not make out what lay on the ground, but it was small, pink and looked... vaguely human.

“What *is* that?” Janey exclaimed. “It wasn’t there before.” Stephanie squinted at the object in the distance, saying nothing.

“C’mon,” John said cautiously. “We’ve got to go past there anyway.” With John in the lead, the three of them gingerly approached the object lying next to the tracks.

When Stephanie saw it, she gasped and turned white. John stood stock still. And Janey couldn’t believe her eyes. Lying on the ground was a child’s doll, in a pink dress. It had not been there moments before when they had examined the empty car, and John had stood on almost the exact spot where the doll lay now when he touched the train. The silence overtook them, so oppressive it seemed to have weight.

A child’s cry broke it, at first, slow and mournful, and then gaining strength and volume; it seemed to come from the bird-less trees. The three children stood rooted. The sound grew louder until all three covered their ears as their faces grimaced in fear and bewilderment.

John grabbed the hands of both girls and began pulling them away from the car. The cry seemed to resonate from all around them as they stumbled to the point where they had come upon the tracks. They picked their way through the trees; John alternating between trying to hold the limbs back for the girls and covering his ears to

block out the unearthly wail. He fell once but was able to keep a branch from smacking Janey in the face. Only when they came to the dirt road, did the sound finally begin to fade. They began to run, and didn't stop running until they reached the front door of the barn house. The three of them stood there, panting.

"Look, I don't know what just happened back there, but we can't tell anybody about this," said John. "We weren't supposed to be there for one and for two, they'll think we're crazy."

Stephanie looked fearfully at him. "John, you're bleeding!" She pointed to his leg. There was a small tear in his jeans and a spot of blood. He pulled up his pant leg and looked down.

"Just barely, it's not bad, it's nothing; it must've happened when I slipped."

Janey gulped her breath and said, "At first, I thought you guys were just doing it to mess with me."

"Janey," John said. "I know I haven't always been the nicest to you, but I really don't know what happened back there or where that doll came from and I can tell you one thing, I ain't ever going back to those tracks again, and neither are you, Steph." For the first time, Janey thought she saw a bit of caring in John's eyes.

"Ok, so we went to the creek, and I took a fall. That's our story, got it?"

"Got it," the girls agreed.

The three headed into the barn house. It smelled of food and parents and safety. John headed straight to his room to change his pants. His mother called to him from the kitchen. As he hurriedly pulled on a new pair of pants, he glanced at the small cut on his leg - too quickly to notice, however, that the cut was actually a small bite mark, in the perfect shape of a small child's mouth. He scratched at it absentmindedly and headed to the kitchen.

—Marissa Clearman

Living in the Orchard and Being Hungry

"The world is with us far too much"
I'd tell Levertov and her "O taste and see."
I'm overwhelmed with love and touch,

never mind her subway posters and such.
I've got four fantastic babies:
the world is with us far too much.

Grief, mercy, language and such
seem to never let me be.
I'm overwhelmed by love and touch.

Tangerine, weather, and orchard touch
tickle our days, but we're not free:
the world is with us far too much.

Crossing the street has meaning in such
a new way , away from me.
I'm overwhelmed by love and touch.

The Lord, I guess, gave us such
roles and this is all a part of me:
the world is with us far too much.
I'm overwhelmed by love and touch.

—Maria Fischer

Dinah and the Green Fat Kingdom

I once lost a friend named Dinah.
Actually, I lost Carrie, Steev, and
Sheila; Nicole and a couple of Kims; the
names are fading like fall's green
to a nasty brown. My once fat
land of friends is now an empty kingdom.

Northumbria, Mercia, my kingdom
rivaled. With a Dave, a Kim, a Dinah,
I ruled. I felt healthy-baby-fat,
not from food, but conversation and
excitement, Christmas and beer, green
and blue, the hues of company, the

Crayola box of kindred souls, the
spiritual commitment of God's kingdom.
We were priests and nuns of green,
with names like Sister Mary Dinah.
We served each other and
our coffers grew fat.

Perhaps our conversations grew fat,
as well. Tammy was the first the young the
one to leave. Then Belinda, Andi, Becky, and
others, so many others, the kingdom, our kingdom,
crashed like a motor car. Dinah
and I waited for the summer to be green.

But when that green came, that green
that should have been jolly and fat
and brought our friendships back, Dinah
felt its ribs and said, "I think the
end is near." Death to the kingdom.

Disease. And

And
And Dinah with it. Green
Dinah. Dinah of the kingdom.
She stuffed a suitcase fat
with new friends and left the
cool colors we created. Dinah.

Kingdoms die, I guess. Friends grow old and fat.
And people change, though cliché. The green,
the garden, dies. And I do not mourn, Dinah.

—Maria Fischer

Midfall

I don't write like I used to with the air
of the artist, alternative, afraid.
My colors have changed to a deeper shade.
Don't get me wrong - I still have that mean glare
I give to the garden of normal plants,
people who wear pants and play with a maze
of ordinary life and never blaze
into books and paints and out of those pants.
I drink and dance, wearing dresses of brown,
and drink tea with white rabbits in the den
upstairs and down, chasing after the men
who own the coolest book stores in the town.
Then I write the poems down, mail to be sent,
only lonely for my own amusement.

—Maria Fischer

THE ORDEAL

Liam stretched and opened his eyes, letting them slowly adapt to the dawn's light as patches of gooseflesh sprouted across his arms and legs. The air was cool and moist, and the grass surrounding his prone frame glistened with the previous night's dew. The night had been rough as Graham had said it would be, and Liam's joints cracked and popped as he sat upright.

The forest stretched in all directions: cold and brown and primordial. Liam allowed himself a quick shudder as he pulled his knees beneath him and stood, the damp fabric of his clothes hugging against his body. The previous night had been mercilessly cold, and the wind's chill had sliced through him. In retrospect it was a miracle he'd been able to sleep through the night at all.

Giving his head a quick shake to clear the remaining vestiges of sleep away, he turned his body toward the sun's warm glare and followed it. He left a faint man-shaped dimple within the grass in his wake and nothing else, for he had brought nothing with him, save the damp clothes on his back and the years he had spent in preparation for this day.

Yesterday was sharp in his mind as if it had burned itself in place never to be dulled or tarnished with years. He had risen just before dawn to find Graham already awaiting him outside the cold concrete of his family's housing unit. He offered no greeting or instruction before marching quietly away. Liam knew well enough to follow the old man without remark, the other units stretching solemnly down the row, lifeless in the dark.

He felt a chill run through his body as they passed the last unit in the row. It had not occurred to him until then that he would very probably never pass through the threshold of his family's unit again. When the ordeal had passed and he returned to the commune he would be declared a man and granted all of the rights and privileges of a citizen, including a housing unit. In the commune there was no reason to enter a unit if you were not one of its tenants.

Liam's people lived a Spartan existence, and the community's walls were little more than thick slabs of concrete lining the

perimeter. The main gate was a brief span of chain-link fence on a mounted hinge. It was manned by two of the younger citizens, both of them clad in the dark green camouflage of militiamen. Liam could easily tell that neither of them had seen more than two years as citizen and they wore their gear with the discomfort of those who are new to it.

The Elders required that all new male citizens serve at least one five-year tour in the militia. Liam watched them shift uncomfortably at their posts as he and Graham approached and wondered if he would bear the position's equipment with the same unease. All militiamen were issued a satchel of standard gear including all of the hunting gear of a citizen, fresh first aid kits, a heavy flashlight that would put up with years of abuse, and a small black pistol. These rarely if ever saw any use. Occasionally a bear or stray wolf might wander too close to the compound and the loud bang would become necessary to send it away.

In the commune guns were never used to hunt. Reliance on firearms, the Elders said, showed a lack of discipline and facilitated the carelessness that had made the commune necessary in the first place. Why rely on a fickle, mass-produced tool when one could use one's own resourcefulness? A spear was a much more practical implement: when misplaced, one had only to look down and fashion another, and while there were jobs that only a gun could perform it was always important to understand a tool's time and place.

"Purpose?" one of the militia men murmured, more out of the fact that it was expected of him than out of any wish to challenge Graham's intent.

Graham gave a soft chortle, amused with the younger man's anxiety, "Today is ."

The militiaman nodded and looked Liam up and down. He shuffled under the scrutinizing gaze and held his head high. He could not wait to be rid of the title.

"You are aware of the terms, lesser?" the militiaman's words were muted and atonal as he spoke the ritual.

"I am." Liam tried to sound confident and betrayed himself with a shudder.

The militiaman nodded to his companion who quickly turned and opened the chain gate, allowing them to pass. Graham stopped Liam just outside of the compound, staring intently into the younger man's eyes.

"This is your last chance, boy. After this there is no turning back."

"I am ready, sir."

Graham gave a half-smile and nodded, "Then by the powers invested in me by the Elders of our community, I give you leave to enter the ordeal."

Liam stood for a long moment watching him, considering how much of his life he had spent under the wing of the grizzled older man. Graham had taken a special interest in him at a young age and focused all of his efforts into making him the best he could be. This man had worked him hard for the past 10 years, had drilled him night and day and rewarded every success with the demand that he do better next time. For so many years of his life, Liam had considered himself among the most unfortunate beings on the planet, but now at this moment it occurred to him how immensely lucky he was.

Liam gave his instructor one last nod and turned to go. His every step felt heavy and slow as he descended the hill. He had walked a few yards that felt like miles when his mentor called his name. The old man was standing where he had before, beaming with vitality and pride at the sight of the boy he had trained entering his first true test.

Graham's eyes glistened with proud tears, but his voice was steady, "Come back a citizen or not at all."

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The second day of Liam's ordeal proved to be as fruitless as the first and he soon found his stomach to be roiling with pangs of hunger. He stopped and drank at streams when he could, but there was no way of carrying any of the cold water with him. He had no canteen or skins to fill, no bowls to dip. Food was a matter for another time. So long as he stayed hydrated, the absence of food

would remain no more than a painful nuisance for some time to come: time enough to find the proper materials to fashion some tools.

It was at the end of the third day that he had moved far enough East to find what he needed. The soft padding of his boots against the supple dirt and grass slowly gave way to the grind of gravel. He grinned and began to jog across the grey landscape, his eyes scanning through the sea of smaller rocks, eagerly seeking something bigger: something he could use.

His stomach turned angrily with the jostling movements, daggers of pain rolling through his abdomen. He had not eaten since the night before he left, and the effects were beginning to show. His stomach felt swollen despite the fact that nothing was in it, and he knew he should not run. It was a stupid waste of his energy at a critical time. Such an act in front of Graham would have earned him a swift swat to the back of his head.

With an effort, Liam forced his legs to slow and made his eyes work methodically over the landscape. He couldn't help but curse under his breath as the first hour went by fruitlessly. None of the rocks would work. They were all far too uniformly small. Soon it would be too dark to see anything and his starved body would demand rest.

A bead of cold sweat rolled down his neck as his eyes continued to scan the jagged landscape. It stretched in the distance to eventually disappear into what Liam knew would be a river. Behind him was at least another hour's walk before he would find any variety of land that could even remotely be thought of as soft, and then he would have to start all over again in the morning. There was no escaping it. Liam would have to spend the night amidst the sharp bed of rocks.

He forced himself to continue searching and worry about the sleeping arrangements later, sliding down to his hands and knees and pulling aside handfuls of sharp rocks. His fingers deftly brushed handful after handful of scratchy rubble aside, developing shallow scrapes and cuts by the dozen. He angrily clawed aside a handful, stalking further ahead to continue his desperate search.

By the time he reached the river, the sun had been below the horizon for hours. He'd spent what felt like an eternity of twilight sifting his way through the rocks by touch alone. His desperation had driven him to crawling across the jagged sea in more than one fit of irrational rage, and his pants now bore several tears and holes where the sharper rocks had gouged through and ripped the hardy fabric. Their effect on the flesh beneath was similar.

Listening to the cool babble of the swiftly running water, Liam drew in a deep breath, let his fingers stop working and drew them out of the ground. It was too dark to see them well which was probably a blessing of sorts. They were cold, and sticky, and numb.

He let himself relax against the rough ground, barely noticing as the sharp points dug into his ribs. He'd been thrusting his fingers stupidly across the landscape for long enough that a couple of pricks seemed mild in comparison to the hot swells of pain that had stopped stabbing up his arm and into his brain only just recently.

Laying there on the rocks, blindly breathing in the coppery smell of his own blood, Liam was glad to be days away from his home. He was glad to have spared Graham and his parents from the embarrassment of his failures. In the course of less than half a week, he had forgotten all his training. He had shown himself to be a stupid, bumbling fool. All had come from one simple falsehood.

From the start of his trip he had underestimated the power of hunger. He had presumed that since his body could deal with the absence of food, so could he. His hunger had made him desperate and careless.

The greatest sin a citizen could ever commit was carelessness. This was to demonstrate one's complete lack of self-reliance, proving an unhealthy dependence on the competent members of society. Such uselessness had almost destroyed the commune.

Liam knew the history by heart. Graham had impressed it upon him throughout his training, and had never shown the slightest satisfaction until Liam could recount every fact and explain every nuance. When the commune was first founded, there had been no necessity for the citizenry. All were equal. Everything was shared. The founding members were all living the utopian dream they had

left their homes to fulfill, free of lawyers and banks and corporations. They had been free of money and the unending materialistic yearning that went with it.

And life had been good. For a while. A lack of discipline is not conducive to the well run unit the commune had to be, however. A large number of people did not pull their weight, and those who did suffered as a result. Supplies grew scarce and the competent members became saddled with the responsibility of supporting those who could not take care of themselves. It became necessary for all citizens to prove themselves by demonstrating their worth to the community by traveling for days without any tools but those one could create for oneself and bring back proof of one's skills as a survivor and as a hunter. This, Graham repeated again and again, demonstrates a citizen's ability to provide not only for himself, but for the commune as a whole.

Liam slept fitfully and dreamt of cold, painful angles. When he awoke, he found the perfect rock. It was lying right next to his head.

The next day went considerably better. It took him a couple of hours to chip away at the rock until it resembled the crude knife he had fashioned under Graham's tutelage on his eleventh birthday. He had to shorten one of the legs of his pants and cut the rough fabric into small strips in order to wrap the handle of his new knife with a coating that would prevent the rock from slicing his hand open. The other pants leg was sliced into a small make-shift sling.

He let the sling hang from his side as he strode back into the green foliage of the forest, correcting his movements to take him in a more southerly direction. Though his stomach was still empty, Liam found that his spirits were up considerably. The knife and the sling did much to make him feel more the part of a hunter. He was no longer starving so much as he was awaiting the chance to make his next meal.

It was almost night when he heard the faint rustle of nearby bushes and drew a rock from his pocket, setting it into the sling. It took him some time to see the faint grey fur of the foraging rabbit. Liam's mouth watered in anticipation as he set the long strip of fabric whirring, eyes locked on the fluffy rodent. Its eyes connected with his

just as the stone took it in the head.

Collecting wood and starting the fire seemed very long work when his stomach was bloated with hunger, but he performed every task with methodical grace, determined to ensure that his first meal as a man was not raw. Within the hour his catch was spitted and sizzling over the fire. The rabbit was gamey and not quite cooked all the way through, but Liam felt he had eaten no finer meal in his life.

He sat before the fire for some time watching his dinner's remains shrink and blacken within the flames as he considered his next move. Letting the warmth of the fire soak into his flesh, Liam casually drew a spare piece of wood and began to lightly scrape at the tip with his knife, fashioning it to a point. Tonight he had demonstrated his worth to himself. If he was to demonstrate his worth to the commune he would have to bring down larger prey on the next day. Liam plunged the tip of his spear into the fire.

Liam found deer tracks early the next morning and immediately set to tracking the large animal. He tried to keep from grinning giddily but couldn't. His heart wouldn't stop pounding and he felt like dancing. It was actually going to happen today. He could feel it. The air was thick with the electric buzz of momentum.

The buzz became difficult to ignore. It was hard to focus on the task at hand, but somehow he managed, quietly stalking the forest for his mark. His trophy. The proof of his worth. It was midday when he finally caught sight of his prey.

He let himself sink into the green foliage as a deer stepped gracefully into the clearing, his eyes following the animal intently. It was a light brown doe that was just short of maturity. It was no prize animal, but it was prize enough. It let its head sink to the ground to forage, and Liam slowly stalked through the green mesh of leaves, careful to rustle them as little as possible as he circled around, hefting the spear over his shoulder, ready to hurl at a moment's notice.

The doe's ears flattened against its head, and Liam tensed. The timid animal stared cautiously at the foliage as it began to rustle with movement. Liam followed its gaze to the bushes next to him and moved slowly in. He had known the deer would be a sure thing; had

known it to be far too easy prey for a predator to ignore.

The animal poked its head slowly out of the bushes, preparing to attack the defenseless deer. Liam lunged, thrusting powerfully forward with the tip of his spear. He knew from the moment that his first foot left the ground that he had struck true. The tip of his spear stabbed into the animal's chest and it toppled screaming. The doe sprinted away as the prey fell helplessly to the ground. It screamed again.

"Help!" it screamed.

Liam drew his knife.

"Please, someone help me!"

The animal looked kind of like him. It was shorter than he and wider around the middle, and it wore a thick mane of beard around its face, but as animals go it certainly looked a lot like him. A foolish man might have even claimed that it *was* like him, but Liam knew it was not. Liam was a man, and this was an animal. Men came from within the commune. Animals from without.

This moment was pivotal, he knew, and he wasted no time in quickly stepping in to kick the long lump of metal and wood from where it lay next to the animal's hand. The rifle rolled helplessly away as Liam sank to his knees to claim the symbol of his worth. Animals such as these were amongst the most dangerous in the world and were of particular danger to the commune. Their uselessness was a threat as was their arrogance. So long as they existed, the commune would never truly be safe, so it became custom that every citizen prove their ability to protect the community by plucking one more from the world.

The animal saw Liam's knife and stopped using words. It instead opted for an odd blubbering sound with occasional bits of language that Liam supposed were prayers. Irritated with the distracting sound, Liam put his hand over the creature's mouth to stifle it and considered the situation. He would need proof that the deed had been accomplished, perhaps by removing the ears or the scalp. After that he would need to dispose of the body. Perhaps he could find and entice a bear with the remains.

After a moment, Liam realized the dying creature was struggling

weakly and knew there was no more time to waste. He guided the tip of his knife down to the center of the animal's chest, just below the solid mass of its sternum and applied firm pressure with the knife. The tip drove with calculated precision into the animal's heart and it stopped struggling.

Liam wasted no time in preparing for his citizenship.

—By Jonathan James

SOLDIERS OF LOST CAUSES

Beyond them lay the task undone
Warriors called from the field
The battle never won
Battered, but yielding
Not to glory and power; or those sounds
That ravage thoughts
With truths, alien, that bound
From minds wasted and wrought.

For where is the glory? Does it lie
Upon the hill garlanded by
Bluebells shading the shallow grave
Of once young, once brave

Whose souls in the abyss now wander?
Those countless soldiers, forever lost, wandering. . .

—By Clarence Wiser

Hunger

If I can recall.
A warm winter was upon us.
I remember the blood red sun.
That cast the shadows of the risen
Dead upon the floor.
The fear still creeps up my back.

They knocked on the door.
Wanting me to let them in.
They shattered the glass.
Try to suffice the feeling of hunger.
We run to the back door.
The moans start to drown

The small pools of sanity left,
In that part of the human soul,
That pushes us forward.
The screaming was mute
We know they had gotten in.
The red was speckled splashed on the walls.

The back door was forced open
Corpse fell on the out dated tile floor.
We thought the house was safe.
That they could never find our little
Hole in the wall.
I noticed a window

Too late to make a move.
Someone beat me to it.
The sound of tearing flesh still echoes from the
Small fenced in space.
I turned to head upstairs
Leaving them all behind.

I don't know what happened to them.
All I know is I made it out of the house.
To be left with an insatiable hunger.

—Ryan Rivers

VOICES LITERARY AWARDS

Fiction

Kayla Behrens

Carissa Clearman

Jonathan James

Poetry

Joanna Fallows

Tess Hurt

Maria Fischer

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