

# The New Criterion

## Verse Chronicle

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### The world is too much with us

by [William Logan](#)

On *The Biplane Houses* by Les Murray, *Gulf Music* by Robert Pinsky, *Expectation Days* by Sandra McPherson, *Littlefoot* by Charles Wright, *Waterlight: Selected Poems* by Kathleen Jamie, and *Time and Materials* by Robert Hass.

Les Murray is an outsized poet, big as a barge—no, broad as the outback itself. The poems in *The Biplane Houses* are earthy, strange, almost unclassifiable at times, delivered as if he thought real poetry too hoity-toity for a bloke with 4x in the esky (I mean, beer in the fridge).<sup>[1]</sup> In many ways, the poet's playfulness comes from acting like a cartoon Aussie, the Crocodile Dundee of the poetry circuit. Back home he's called a diehard reactionary, one who loves too well the country that was; but he loves the country of information more, the odd facts and snippets he works up into verse. You never know, as you turn the pages, what you'll come across: a poem about the placement of verbs in different languages, the fate of the descendants of the Bounty mutineers, or the exhibition of ancient skeletons:

crusty little roundheads of sleep,  
stick-bundles half burned to clay by water.

Their personhoods had gone, into the body  
of that promise preached to them. What had stayed  
in their bones were their diseases, the marks  
of labour in a rope-furrowed shoulder blade,

their ages when they died, and what they'd eaten:  
bread, bacon, beer, cheese, apples, greens,  
no tomato atoms in them, no potatoeines,  
no coffee yet, or tea, or aspirin.

This is typical Murray: over-baked metaphors, the occasional oafishness in tone or diction (perhaps that should be *dictionhood*), the list that becomes a longing, the long view across centuries, the deep intimacy with the past—his history has a dark physicality reminiscent of Heaney's. Murray often seems the Diderot of contemporary verse: the world is everything that is the case, and all of it ripe for poetry. His gargantuan appetite can give a poem the look of a python that has swallowed a Volkswagen or two (for better or worse, he doesn't possess the censoring demon that rejects outlandish ideas out of hand). Murray has never been a natural poet—he has trouble relaxing into his lines, or making them seem more inspiration than perspiration. He loves roughneck rhymes, or a slapdash prose that doesn't even pretend to be poetry. Just when your guard is down, when you think

he's matured, he'll give a whoop and writes something like "Pork hock and jellyfish. Poor cock./ King Henry had a marital block./ A dog in the manager? Don't mock!/ Denial flows past Cairo." Get it?

Though you have to forgive Murray for a lot, if you bear with him he can transform the way you see, if what you see is a stallion's "progeny drop in the grass/ like little loose bagpipes," or a display of Japanese swords, "Merciless whitewater craft/ keel-upwards in long curve... / Why, I said to Yojimbo, this/ is an exhibition of lightnings!" When the vehicle so overwhelms the tenor, you enter a world where metaphor acts less like Midas and more like the neighborhood bully; but in poetry sometimes you learn to love the bullies.

Murray's poetry is unafraid of being local, as if truth were by nature parochial. He's the ultimate outsider—the metaphors transform his country like a spell in Ovid, leaving it unrecognizable. I like the homebound, troubled, guilt-ridden Murray quite a bit, and the gallivanting, cantankerous, pun-loving Murray little at all; but unfortunately it's the latter self the poet seems to prefer. He's weakest as a moralist, hammering his points home like a small-town editor on a manual typewriter:

Gentrifical force turned Prunty to Brontë  
and shipped myriads more to colonial bounty  
where some, abashed to be safe on the fringe,  
still feed wars and guilts to their cultural cringe.

"Gentrifical" is Murray's play on "centrifugal," but the pun doesn't make his hatred of immigrants any more appealing. He's a genuine oddity, a man of the people who doesn't much like people, not even his own people. I've been wary, not of his oddity, but of the bumptiousness that comes with it—I'm so busy resisting his vices, there's no time to appreciate his virtues.

Some critics have applauded Murray's clumsiness as an endearing quirk or a necessity of character; but it's clumsiness by any other name. The new poems are warmer and more personable, as if the poet, though not filled with self-love, were no longer so disfigured by self-loathing. (Perhaps Murray's near-death a decade ago has softened his character.) In *The Biplane Houses*, Murray has done what all good poets do, remade the world in his image—like Falstaff and Henry VIII, those other outsized figures, he is magnificent despite the monsters within.

Robert Pinsky's poems are so professional, you feel he dresses in a suit and tie before sitting down at his desk. Even when he goes a bit wild, as he does at times in *Gulf Music*, merrily discarding verbs, yodeling when he feels like it ("Mallah walla tella bella. Trah mah trah-la, la-la-la"), or simply *making things up*, his rashness is the soul of caution—he has all the reckless daring of Walter Mitty. [2] Pinsky's new poems are often political, politically political in that contemporary way, kowtowing to the golden idols of the moment, casting dung upon the correctly incorrect villains, all without a breath of cross-grained opinion.

At Robben Island the political prisoners studied.  
They coined the motto *Each one Teach one*.

In Argentina the torturers demanded the prisoners  
Address them always as "*Profesor*."

Many of my friends are moved by guilt, but I  
Am a creature of shame, I am ashamed to say.

It's hard to know exactly what the poet is fessing up to here, unless he's ashamed of being a professor. E. R. Dodds made the distinction between shame culture and guilt culture more than half a

century ago, but isn't it time to look more closely at the idea and not simply make flippant remarks? Shame cultures, in these days of honor killings, have a lot to answer for. And doesn't invoking the imprisonment of Nelson Mandela and the tragedy of the *desaparecidos* seem all too convenient, done this callow way?

Pinsky is an old-fashioned poet of a recognizable sort, a gentleman buffer who takes up verse the way others take up gardening. Well-meaning, often charming, sincere as a traffic sign, he has all the gifts that education and rationality can provide; but you never feel he's actually *moved* to write. His early poems were composed as carefully as chess problems—the grace of calculation rarely possessed the scent of inspiration. *Gulf Music* represents a departure, an attempt to unchain his inner pit-bull and let slip the dogs of war.

Pinsky's howl, when he howls, has the manic, improvisatory, catch-as-catch-can quality of Allen Ginsberg; but the style sits on this more buttoned-up poet like a hat three sizes too small.

Joan of Arc tortured to death by clergymen  
And failure incidental as for Jackie Robinson engaging  
At one and the same time two worthy difficulties.

Other athletes succeed and get rich and in attained  
Leisure even in Eden or Gomorrah they seek the green  
Fields of the idiocy Golf because it is reliably difficult.

Old joke *It has to be hard to be good*. Manipulable  
Light of the Xbox for all its eviscerations or hoops  
Like chess a grid of exploits adequately difficult.

This sounds like some old hipster dumping his verbs and commas in order to feel young again. (A lot of commas go missing in this book—charitable gifts of punctuation should be sent directly to the publisher.)

Many of Pinsky's new poems read like notes for a set of position papers. I love Auden's didactic mode; but didacticism can be leaden and antiseptic, if you're not as clever as Auden. The précis for one particularly clotted poem might read:

Recollects singing Christmas carols—Jewish boy tells him he won't go to heaven—boy later dies in LSD accident—ancient Jewish community included non-Jews—Maimonides temporized on Jewish resurrection—thoughts concerning the nature of heaven—thoughts concerning Milton's shampoo—older generation named children Milton, Sidney, Herbert.

This pinball path to meaning looks just as crooked when written up as verse. Too often, Pinsky has thrown out the idea of organization without supplying in its absence anything as cheerful as coherence. A long, stolid section on "things" (book, photograph, jar of pens) reminds us how delicately subversive Elizabeth Bishop and Seamus Heaney are when writing about objects, or how Auden turns a tour of his house into a *tour de force* about living. Pinsky may be trying to see things again from the atoms up, but the results are studious, blind to the magic of objects, and reductive about the horrors of the world.

When Pinsky forgets about the poet he would like to be, when he stops posing and finds a way to tell an old story afresh, the results can be devastating in the detail. It happens only once in this book, but perhaps once is enough. Eurydice meets Stalin in the underworld:

She crossed a bridge, and looking down she saw  
The little Georgian boiling in a trench of blood.  
He hailed her, and holding up his one good arm

He opened his palm to show her two pulpy seeds  
Like droplets—one for each time she lost her life.  
Then in a taunting voice he chanted some verses.

Poetry was popular in Hell, the shades  
Recited lines they had memorized—forgetful  
Even of who they were, but famished for life.

Here the poet bureaucrat has heard the voices of hell.

Sandra McPherson began as a delicate, dilettantish observer of nature, her eye a direct descendant of Moore's and Bishop's. There was a meticulousness, an otherworldly clarity, in the way her early poems refused the mundane for metaphor (Bishop called the poems "clean," which suggested both their freshness and their starched, virginal quality). Intensity of description can transform the world but also displace it; in some fifteen books, McPherson has struggled to balance the pure pleasures of the eye with the soiled, rueful life that exists when pleasure is past—this is not merely the slow Hogarthian progress of innocence to experience, but the rise to vision of all the experience the innocent eye fails to see.

The new poems in *Expectation Days* are sometimes an embarrassment of riches, so clotted with detail and crowded with metaphor, they're like beautiful lakes overrun with hydrilla—yet every nuance of the visual world has been refreshed by observation:[\[3\]](#)

This water flows dark red  
from alder tannin:  
boot-stain river

between white rocks.  
An ouzel, flannel-feathered,  
sips the current up.

There's nothing McPherson can't compare to something else (she sees the world through rose-colored metaphors); yet, however acute or transforming the eye, a poem can't be simply a static roster of observations, checked off like a "To Do" list.

McPherson's recent poems have become meditative, roughened with grief after the death of her husband, a younger man who died young. The darkness that has entered her work presents the beauties in a more fragile light—it's not merely that in nature the gorgeous dies, only heartbreakingly to be reborn, but that to the bereft every beauty can seem criminal. The husband, during his illness, apparently suffered from drug-induced hallucinations, which the poet records with wry fondness:

And so when he whispered  
I should buy medallions for dressing up dogs  
Or revealed the "I'm a little grandpa" secret  
Or pointed to five men he noticed  
"Counting a green fish"  
Or introduced me to the Concertina Brothers  
Or asked how many people I saw

Put on feather suits in our living room,  
Coaxed me with  
“Let’s go shopping for mirrors in the dark,”  
That was his newfledged  
Lucidity.

At such moments, McPherson redeems the horrors by having witnessed them. Too many of these new poems, however, are private and elusive, rising into quasi-religious vacancy—the world is cast down in fragments, thought cast down in fragments, too. Though meaning may be the more valued for being won bitterly, the cloudy and broken phrases emphasize the difficulty McPherson has in rendering whole a talent for discrete glances. Her poems are so often about happenstance, it seems odd when she has in mind a particular subject—the illustrations on an old book of needles, say, or the death of a bat from the bat’s point of view. You might think her exotic vision would be just the thing for a creature so strange, but the results are tear-stained and precious—“*A kind neighbor/ drowns me. Phoenix sloshing in a pail./ He drops me on a glacier.*”

McPherson has gone from being a poet whose gifts seemed natural to her, as easy and involuntary as breathing, to one who has to win her successes by hard graft, when she can win them at all. Sometimes a poet seems to improve his work with every small change, only to end with a style worse than when he began. And yet, in half a dozen of the poems here—when McPherson sees in a sand road the “Broken armor of a crustacean age,” or, scattered about her, “Miner’s lettuce,/ Its sake cups// Moored to leaf’s center by ruddled, bronzed umbilicals”—nature presses so close we want to be in thrall to it. If there is a world that is too much with us, this is that world.

Americans wander about like nomads, their true home the interstate highway or the airport hub; but they never lose their loyalty to place. American poets are no different. Allen Tate taught in Minnesota for decades, a Southern poet to the end. Lowell’s poems, no matter where he lived, never seemed more at home than when taking place on Boston Common or in the “brackish reach of shoal off Madaket.”

Charles Wright was born in Pickwick Dam, Tennessee, which sounds like a good place to be from. After early poems of a pinch-mouthed, scraped-knuckle kind, the words rare as dropped silver dollars, he remade himself as a poet of lush Southern landscapes and genial woolgathering. Often, early and late, his thoughts turned to Italy (just as his rhythms turned to Pound)—if he invoked some literary forebear, it wasn’t Faulkner or Sidney Lanier, but someone Pound had approved, like Wang Wei or Dante. Wright became the émigré poet who mostly stayed home, a poet whose local hills were his Harvard and his Yale. Still, it seems odd for any poet to write

It may not be written in any book, but it is written—  
You can’t go back,  
you can’t repeat the unrepeatable.

Didn’t Thomas Wolfe write a novel on the subject? Didn’t Heraclitus once say something about a river?

Charles Wright has been doing what he does for a long while, and it shows—it shows in the ease and confidence of his line, in the way he warms to his material, and in the lackadaisical manner of his delivery. Set around the poet’s seventieth birthday, *Littlefoot* is a meditation on age (like Wright’s recent books), a meditation on nature (ditto), a meditation on memory (ditto once more), with more valedictory gestures than could be stuffed into a phone booth.<sup>[4]</sup> The book is broken into numbered sections broken into smaller sections, a day book or night journal rather than a series of poems, catching whatever orphan thoughts strayed into his mind and got trapped there.

The graces of Wright’s mature poems have been in landscape, where he displays, not the

*phanopoeia* of Pound's crisp, sculptural images, but a broader-stroked, more richly hued impasto. Wright has a religious awe of the world around him, which he sees with luminous intensity.

The cardinal in his fiery caul,  
The year's first dandelion globe,  
    ash-grey on the ash-green lawn,  
Dear tulip leaves, color of carp bellies, wisteria drools  
Withered and drained dry.

One can love these moments, cherish their invocation of the American sublime (though Wright's notion of the sublime seems closer to the lurid paintings of Bierstadt than to Whitman), and yet dislike the cracker-barrel philosophizing in which they're embedded. If you're going to stand around a cracker barrel very long, you'd better have a sense of humor—Wright will allow himself the occasional dry remark (he describes herons lifting their legs “Silently, and very slow,” which is funny if you recognize the allusion to Auden), but mostly he likes the sort of *sententiae* a Roman orator kept a warehouse of: “The language of landscape is language,” “Love of the lack of love is still love,” “A word to the wise is a word to the wise,” “Life is a long walk on a short pier.” A little of this goes a long way; a little more, and you start thinking fondly of the fate of Cicero.

Wright isn't writing poems any longer—he's laying down a coat of sensibility, as if sensibility were somehow enough; but sensibility isn't like house paint. You have to have a house to paint. America is a forgiving country, and old geezers can write old-geezer poetry for decades without suffering any punishment worse than having a sack of awards dumped on their heads. Wright's late poetry has fallen into a kind of dumb rumination—like the beasts of the field, he has to be prodded not to chew the same damn thing over and over. It might be amusing to see an index to this long, lazy, undemanding book, with entries like:

memory, a lonely observer, 25  
memory, deep blank of, 55  
memory, immeasurable, like the heart, 25  
memory of fur coats, erotic and pungent, 32  
memory, slide show of, 3  
memory, thick staircase of, 17

Wright was more ambitious once; and I wish he'd drop the immanences and immensities, the references to angels and the moony vacancies (“We're not here a lot longer than we are here, for sure./ Unlike coal, for instance, or star clots”). He's gone over this ground so often, it has begun to look like an open-pit mine.

We have lost so much American dialect in the past fifty years, it's difficult to remember how strongly regional American English used to be—you can scour Flatbush now and rarely hear English murdered the Brooklyn way, or walk halfway across Boston without being assaulted by the Boston *a*. In Britain, whatever losses have occurred, language in recent decades has become a skirmish line in literature, especially in Scotland. If dialect is the most subtle form of treason, the United Kingdom is threatened partly by the quiet rejection of standard English.

Kathleen Jamie is one of a group of younger Scottish poets who don't take English as the natural valence of the tongue. Just when she has allowed you to grow comfortable in the language you know, she'll throw in a “smirr of rain” or a place “hained by trees”; and you'll realize how tentative our treaty with dialect is. (Scots began as a dialect of Middle English, but whether you think it a dialect now or a separate Anglic language may depend on which side of the border you're on.) *Waterli; Waterlight*, a selection of Jamie's poems, introduces American readers to her modest, insinuating voice, one often with a surprising sting to it. [5]

When I pause to consider  
a god, or creation unfolding  
in front of my eyes—  
is this my lot? Always  
brought back to the same  
grove of statues in ill-  
fitting clothes: my suddenly  
elderly parents, their broken-down  
Hoover; or my quarrelling kids?

This sounds like a poem Larkin might have written, had he been a woman. So many young poets on both sides of the Atlantic fall into dotty blandness or the dementia of accusation (the difference between the School of Blah-Blah-Blah and the School of Wah-Wah-Wah), it's a pleasure to read a poet with the courage of her grumpiness.

Most of Jamie's recent poems limit their attention to nature. Often they start with some casual thing she's observed—moulted feathers washed ashore, a peregrine that returns to the quarry where it fledged. Taut, closely rendered, the poems mark out a moral territory by negating almost everything outside it.

First come the jellyfish:  
mauve-fringed, luminous bowls  
like lost internal organs,  
pulsing and slow.  
... ..  
It's as though we're stalled in a taxi  
in an ill-lit, odd  
little town, at closing time,  
when everyone's maudlin  
  
and really, ought just to *go*  
*home*.

These poems are local in the best sense, true to the torsions of the poet's experience, a chronicle of the way nature rubs against the human.

The poems she casts into Scots, unfortunately, offer only beauties borrowed or begged—perhaps that's the result when a language once robust becomes largely literary, learned with half an ear in childhood or only later from books: "I'd raither/ whummel a single oor/ intae the blae o thae wee flo'ers/ than live fur a' eternity/ in some cauld hivvin." That may be the language of Burns and MacDiarmid; but, "wee flo'ers" and all, the lines might just as well have been inscribed in whatever passes for a Hallmark card north of Hadrian's Wall. When a Scots poem doesn't work, you feel you've woken up in the middle of a haggis-throwing contest. Tom Scott's versions of Baudelaire and Dante almost fifty years ago and William Laughton Lorimer's more recent translations of the New Testament and *Macbeth* promised more than Scots poetry has delivered.

Jamie's English poems, however, offer a mind with a mortal view. There's nothing preplanned about their architecture—they seem accidental, full of the random imposition of the ordinary. She loves long, implicating sentences that take time to catch her restless intelligence—like Amy Clampitt, she treats syntax as the machine of thought. If many poems seem slight or offhand, Jamie is a poet defined by her limitations as well as determined in them. She's a poet of senses as well as sensibility, interested in the sculpted presence of the world but in little she cannot see. (Scotland has

a long tradition of skeptical thought, though Hume would not have written these poems.) The poems look better the more you know of them, and the more of them you know—they live halfway in the shadows, like a predator waiting to strike.

Robert Hass is the most intellectual poet of his generation, but he's intellectual in a curious way. The poems in *Time and Materials* usually start in a sort of post-Buddhist, post-meditative fog. [6] Shadow-dappled woods, scudding streams, the stippled haze off the coast (not for nothing was his first book titled *Field Guide*)—these make you think what follows will be the California version of emotion recollected in tranquility; but the gestures of lyric, the invocation of Wordsworth, may plunge darkly into an anecdote of wartime:

The other man, the officer, who brought onions  
and wine and sacks of flour,  
the major with the swollen knee,  
wanted intelligent conversation afterward.  
Having no choice, she provided that, too.

Potsdamerplatz, May 1945.

When the first one was through he pried her mouth open.  
Basho told Rensetsu to avoid sensational materials.  
If the horror of the world were the truth of the world,  
he said, there would be no one to say it  
and no one to say it to.  
I think he recommended describing the slightly frenzied  
swarming of insects near a waterfall.

Are those American soldiers? Russians? (The soldier pries open the raped woman's mouth to spit in it.) It's surprising how horrifying this flatly composed scene is—yet the poet's contrast with lyric innocence, the limitation of language in the face of monsters, seems to condemn poetry for being poetry. Are Shakespeare's sonnets culpable for not mentioning the Spanish Armada? (The one supposed allusion is likely anything but.) Or Pound's lyrics worse for not conjuring up Passchendaele? Lyric is not the villain here.

Hass wants to say the unsayable; yet his poems imply that happiness must always be guilty, because someone somewhere is dying. The poems are often novel in conception, full of wrenching juxtapositions for which the term *discordia concors* might have been coined—after a while, though, you recognize that he possesses a rigid set of mannerisms: if he mentions poetry, it's to belabor the self-consciousness of it; if a woman, to spring into bed with her (there's a lot of heavy breathing in this book); if war, to condemn the inhumanity of it. No one would deny him his tastes, but why does he think they're in any way remarkable?

The most disturbing poems in *Time and Materials* are prosy narratives:

When I was a child my father every morning—  
Some mornings, for a time, when I was ten or so,  
My father gave my mother a drug called antabuse.  
It makes you sick if you drink alcohol.  
They were little yellow pills. He ground them  
In a glass, dissolved them in water, handed her  
The glass and watched her closely while she drank.  
It was the late nineteen-forties, a time,  
A social world, in which the men got up

And went to work, leaving the women with the children.

This is cruel, even excruciating, though Hass seems to believe his readers so doltish they know nothing about families in the 1940s. The father here is a vague figure full of phony bonhomie; but, just when the poet might say a word about his mother's drunken benders, he calls up the scene of Aeneas escaping the flames of Troy with his father astride his shoulders. Then:

Slumped in a bathrobe, penitent and biddable,  
My mother at the kitchen table gagged and drank,  
Drank and gagged. We get our first moral idea  
About the world—about justice and power,  
Gender and the order of things—from somewhere.

And that's the end. *Justice and power? Gender?* What was a harrowing family portrait finishes as a lecture on gender. There's no pity for the father, guilty of that terrible crime, not wanting to leave his young son with a lush.

Poetry, for Hass, has increasingly become a conscientious prose, but not necessarily good prose—the syntax is often wobbly; you'd pay a ransom for a few semi-colons; some of the modifiers dangle until hell freezes over; and, when the poet attempts to distinguish between *O!* and *Oh!*, he botches it. Hass is too clever and dry a writer for the "poetry of witness," that most deadly of contemporary genres—instead he writes the "poetry of lecture." A long poem called "State of the Planet," commissioned by a famous observatory, starts with one of his gorgeous pastoral set-pieces:

Through blurred glass  
Gusts of a Pacific storm rocking a huge, shank-needed  
Himalayan cedar. Under it a Japanese plum  
Throws off a vertical cascade of leaves the color  
Of skinned copper.

Soon, however, he's droning on about chlorofluorocarbons; by the time he's done preaching about the destruction of the ozone layer, you're counting the tiles on the floor. One poem offers a potted history of aerial bombardment in Vietnam; another, a sandbox account of the Korean War. The facts are numbing, but they're too eager to become parables. Most people learned these things in tenth-grade textbooks, or from Al Gore.

Hass's taste for Horatian state-of-the-nation poems too easily becomes moral hectoring—after all the idealism, you long for a little *Realpolitik*. It's one thing to be nervous about what the lyric ignores, another to blame poetry for the horrors of the world. These poems of genial guilt overwhelm poems far more intriguing: a Pinteresque conversation between lovers, a tale about watching a Thirties movie with the sound off, or the many lush poems about eating (though Hass can't devour a piece of Parma ham without letting the reader know that somewhere a city is getting sacked—food all too often makes him think of mass murder). In these new poems, you get rueful intelligence by the bucketful, a welcome suspicion about the nature of language, and stunning renderings of the natural world, as well as a lot of scolding. I doubt I'll like a book of American poetry better all year; but it's a pity Hass has become a lyric poet with a conscience, because he can't make the conscience shut up.

## Notes

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1. *The Biplane Houses*, by Les Murray; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 99 pages, \$23. [Go back to the text.](#)
2. *Gulf Music*, by Robert Pinsky; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 83 pages, \$22. [Go back to the text.](#)
3. *Expectation Days*, by Sandra McPherson; University of Illinois Press, 90 pages, \$40; \$18.95 (paper). [Go back to the text.](#)
4. *Littlefoot*, by Charles Wright; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 91 pages, \$23. [Go back to the text.](#)

5. *Waterlight: Selected Poems*, by Kathleen Jamie; Graywolf, 112 pages, \$14 (paper). [Go back to the text.](#)
6. *Time and Materials*, by Robert Hass; Ecco, 88 pages, \$22.95. [Go back to the text.](#)

**William Logan's** most recent book of poetry, *Strange Flesh* (Penguin), was published last year.

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