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Drift

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Drift

by
Pilar Randolph

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of Senior Independent Study

Supervised by
Dr. Christopher Kang
Department of English

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Acknowledgments

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and ethereal, and the dichotomy of it will, I think, entrance me for the rest of my life. You are the reason I wanted to be a poet again, and you reminded me of the incalculable potential of poetry to change someone's life. You've helped me get through some of the most difficult times of my life. Your poetry is an endless comfort to me—I know that it will always be there for me to turn to. Again, thank you. I really could not have done this without you.

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Introduction

Liminal spaces occupy territory in the areas of transition, or areas of in-between. In her article “Embracing Liminal Spaces,” Robyn Hilger writes, “liminality is a threshold...the space that is neither here nor there, but is somewhere in between. Liminal spaces are fraught with discomfort and unknowing. Am I going the right way? Will I get there on time” (2). As Hilger notes, liminality represents thresholds—spaces that exist, inherently transitional, between two absolutes. Donna Thomson writes, “if subliminal means that which is below the threshold of ordinary consciousness and perception, then the liminal is the point of emergence, the threshold itself, the turning point between one real and another” (35). Liminality as a “point of emergence” is also indicative of change or disruption of the norm—the moment between departure from one reality and arrival at another. Interpretations of this type of space vary widely—transition occurs everywhere. Change is inevitable, and we are all forced to navigate the in-between, even if many of these moments occur subconsciously. Liminal spaces have gained prominence on social media and, because of their amorphous nature, have been constantly re-imagined as they are portrayed in various forms of art.

My interest in liminality and liminal spaces emerged after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. My perception of the world changed significantly during the country’s lockdown and subsequent stumble toward normalcy, despite the discourse on whether normalcy is appropriate, or even what normalcy was and should be. My sense of self and place was heavily affected; I was no longer working with absolutes. Instead, I began to grow familiar with the deep sense of uncertainty that arose from navigating an unprecedented disruption of society. My sense of place was altered dramatically after the rapid move from campus to my hometown, with the

vague reassurance that we would be returning within a few weeks but a sinking feeling that things weren't going to be quite so simple.

My sense of safety and comfort were compromised on a deeply unsettling level. Suddenly I was afraid to be around other people—for my safety and for the safety of my family. At the beginning of the pandemic, I was afraid to touch surfaces in public. My parents and I would wipe down our groceries with Clorox each time we returned from the store. If I passed someone, even outside, I would instinctively hold my breath until I was no longer in their vicinity. I began to see every physical interaction, no matter how brief, as a threat to myself, or my parents, or to strangers who could be affected by me if I came down with the virus without knowing. I was suspended between a distinct yearning for human connection and an innate fear of physical proximity. I was viscerally afraid of an adversary—if you can project intention onto a virus—unseen, unprecedented, and, at the time, seemingly unbeatable. The way I thought about my body in relation to others shifted dramatically, and I was left, as we all were, to navigate a world in which we were dangers to one another in ways far beyond our control. My reality was radically altered, and I found myself ruminating on this strange space between disruption and resolution—between the past we had been forced to leave behind and the unclear future no one was able to promise, or even describe.

In addition to the countless other disruptions of reality, the line between the virtual world and the physical world was rapidly compromised. Liela Jamjoon, in her article about liminality and the COVID-19 pandemic, writes that the pandemic “has altered the ways in which we work and forced us, quite quickly, to float between the physical and the virtual” (1). As she notes, the distinct walls between two realities had begun to break down. As physical proximity was removed as an option, vital aspects of everyday life began to find roots in virtual spaces.

Workplaces, for example, began to require their employees to work from home. Various forms of entertainment were paused in the physical world in favor of online entertainment, such as streaming services and, notably, social media. Social media also played an incalculably important role in fostering connection between people during the pandemic, when it was not safe or feasible to see loved ones in person. I relied—to an unhealthy degree, admittedly—on social media as a point of connection to people I missed and, as a consequence of my time spent on various platforms, a resource to find art created by people online.

As I traversed the strange space that everyday life became post-COVID, I began to see pictures and videos of liminal spaces on social media. People interpreted liminality in different ways—sickly fluorescent stairwells, empty movie theater hallways with darkness yawning at either end, eerie depictions of childhood bedrooms left abandoned. As I explored these liminal spaces, there was a consistent sense of familiar realities being twisted into something eerie and distinctly unfamiliar. A particularly impressive exploration of liminality is the “backrooms,” which is a fictional dimension that you can supposedly “clip” into accidentally, with no clear way out. People have envisioned hundreds of levels within this alternate dimension, each with its own distinct setting and otherworldly, terrifying adversaries. The first level remains the most iconic, with its endless carpeted corridors, stale yellow walls, and flickering fluorescent lights. I was fascinated with the sheer amount of people who seemed to seek out these liminal spaces—particularly the backrooms—with some videos drawing in hundreds of thousands of likes. In addition, the backrooms seem to call to a by-product of the pandemic: abandoned work spaces. To place an empty office building as a liminal setting is particularly poignant when considering the disconnect from physical communal spaces. The backrooms render a familiar space

unfamiliar, isolating, and dangerous—a significant parallel to the warping of our reality caused by the emergence of COVID-19.

From the sprawling world of the backrooms to the more fixed pictures and art featuring liminal spaces, liminality as a talking point has gained considerable traction on social media. Videos on the social media platform TikTok, for example, are a popular source for finding liminal spaces, with some videos drawing in hundreds of thousands of likes. A video from TikTok user “twiztedimagination,” for example, gained nearly 400,000 likes on a video for their sequencing of various liminal spaces, the pictures shown in the video ranging from abandoned childhood homes to empty operating rooms. Many of the comment sections on similar TikTok videos are ripe with people detailing their reactions to the art or pictures that they are seeing. A common theme is nostalgia, or even familiarity—the sense that they had seen these places in a dream, or someplace beyond waking consciousness. The abovementioned TikTok video mentioned was captioned “come home,” perhaps a call to this widespread, inexplicable sense of nostalgia. I admit that I did not quite feel that *déjà vu* sense of knowing the places in these photographs; however, the pull I felt toward these eerie, transitional spaces was undeniable. I was intrigued by the details—the lighting, the choice of setting, the usage of color and shadow—that made these places so compelling. They felt—and still feel—separate from my distinct understanding of time and place. They feel, truly, as if they are suspended between borders.

As the world grew stranger and less familiar, I found myself turning toward these liminal online communities. It was validating and intriguing to see so many people feel the almost hypnotic pull toward these depictions of liminal spaces, and it was exciting to see all the ways that artists, photographers, and videographers manage to create these eerie, deeply nostalgic worlds. There was a general sense of excitement around the prospect of liminality. Even still,

there are countless pages across different platforms dedicated to finding liminal spaces—including “@SpaceLiminalBot” on Twitter, who has garnered over 900,000 followers. On Spotify, there are playlists dedicated to liminality—often focused on the nostalgic aspect, with childlike music that has been warped and made darker. One playlist is titled “stuck in liminal space,” with the caption, “what I’d imagine hearing in the backrooms.” As the world has become more liminal, it has been a great comfort to me—for reasons I can’t quite understand, given how eerie and sometimes terrifying the content can be—to turn toward these digital depictions of liminality.

As my interest in liminal spaces developed, I began to pursue the idea of exploring liminality through poetry. The prospect of creating liminal spaces with writing, rather than photography or digital art, was daunting. So much of the pull I felt toward these liminal spaces was due to visual factors. It seemed nearly impossible to create the same compelling sense of eeriness and nostalgia that was so prominent in these photographs. Part of the intrigue surrounding liminal spaces, at least for me, is the fact that the feeling they produce is so hard to verbalize. It is an instinctive reaction, and it is difficult for me to articulate why I’m so compelled by a photograph that I have no discernible connection to. As social media has developed, images have become a dominant medium through which information is communicated and expressed. Because of my time spent on social media, I have grown accustomed to the prevalence of visual imagery in today’s culture—particularly during the first stages of the pandemic, when face-to-face interaction was limited and I found myself turning to online spaces to pursue feelings of community. Art in the digital era is overwhelmingly image-based, and it is often designed to be consumed in its entirety in a short period of time.

Through *Drift*, I wanted to explore liminal spaces that lingered on a page, rather than ones that existed in their entirety immediately, all-at-once. I was curious to see if I could produce similar innate reactions through poetry, rather than through photography or image-based art. It has not been easy, and I still feel that there are aspects of photography that lend themselves particularly well to the exploration of liminality that are nearly impossible to replicate in writing. The quick, instinctive reaction to a piece of visual art is powerful. However, through the process of writing poems for my Independent Study, I have discovered various ways in which liminal spaces are suited to poetry. In a purely visual sense, poems—at least poems that can be found in a book, rather than another surface—exist as structures suspended in the space between the borders of a page. Space is incorporated into the poems themselves through line and stanza breaks. The words themselves, of course, also have an incredible impact on creating liminal spaces on the page. Each time I worked on a poem, I had to be deliberate in the way I employed a particular word, and how it could serve to complicate the space, or how it could render a familiar image slightly strange. Through poetry, I had the opportunity to seek out and re-create moments of liminality that occurred during my everyday life and learn about the ways that something familiar can be rendered eerie and transitional.

During my writing process for my Independent Study, I drew constant inspiration from other poets. My growing interest in liminality coincided with my turn toward Sylvia Plath's poetry. Plath's writing was tectonic. It had an immediate and dramatic impact on who I want to be as a writer, as well as the boundaries of what poetry can be. Throughout the process of building my manuscript for this Independent Study, I have found both inspiration and refuge in Sylvia Plath. She creates strange, richly vibrant worlds from the fabric of her poetry. Her imagery is endlessly compelling—beautiful, unexpected, sometimes uncomfortable, always

unapologetic. Falling into her work like I did allowed me to recognize several of my own faults as a poet, including an underlying fear that my poems are inaccessible, or sometimes even senseless. Plath exposed and subsequently helped dispel some of that fear. She manages to find order within disorder; she sees the world for all of its strange, sometimes horrifying connections. Reading Plath's poetry inspires me to move past logical bounds and embrace the urge to experiment with language and complicate the senses. This was particularly influential during my time writing *Drift*, which moves through fleeting moments of existence that don't necessarily offer explanations or resolution. She exemplifies the idea that, within liminal spaces, "the very notion of 'normality' or 'stability' is brought into question" (Jamjoon 3).

"Full Fathom Five" was, perhaps, the catalyst to my journey with Sylvia Plath's poetry, and it is a poem I return to often. Plath's relentless language spans over frequent breaks between three-line stanzas, creating a nuanced, almost breathless quality. It ends poignantly with the final two lines: "Father, this thick air is murderous. / I would breathe water." Describing the "thick" air as "murderous" is, at once, intensely grounded and notably abstract. The image of the thick air—a concrete, and somewhat familiar, concept—is immediately complicated by the word "murderous," which lends a dark intention to the personified air, as well as to the poem itself. By introducing the air's murderous intent, she is bringing about a distinct sense of aggression or malice on something that is essential to our survival, to the point of mindlessness. Plath's unique voice thrives in moments of deceptive simplicity. Her poetry is not linguistically over-complicated or unapproachable; however, it effectively renders the familiar world unfamiliar, or at least darker and wilder. This is further exemplified by the final line, "I would breathe water." The image she is creating here is one that, while concisely presented, is inherently dissonant. To "breathe water"—willingly, no less—is a layered concept. It invites reflection on what it means

to breathe water, and underlying implications—including death—arise. It is a startling, momentous image, and one could reasonably dedicate an entire poem to the idea. However, it sits, self-contained, at the very end of “Full Fathom Five.” This is an example of a particularly compelling aspect of Plath’s poetry—the wealth of shocking, complicated moments that are presented bluntly, without apology or excess language to soften the moment. Her poems are relentless as they are transformative, and they allow the reader almost no time to breathe. Her poetry also exists in conversation with liminality, with their seamless disruptions of a familiar, bordered world in favor of dense, lingering spaces that deliberately skews the reality that I have grown accustomed to.

Another integral source of inspiration for *Drift* was Alejandra Pizarnik, whose deliberate use of language is uniquely powerful, particularly because many of her poems, particularly ones I am drawn to, are not dense with language. Rather, she creates a sense of time and space with few words, relying as much on the unsaid as she does on the actual words on the page. Another description of liminal states by Donna Thomson asserts liminal spaces as being “characterized by ambiguity, openness, and indeterminacy. Liminality is a period of transition, during which usual boundaries of thought, self-understanding and behavior shift, opening the way to something new” (Thomson 35). I believe that Alejandra Pizarnik is particularly adept at creating the liminality that Thomson is describing—ambiguous and strange transitional spaces in which the self as we know it is challenged. In “In a Place for Escaping the Self,” she writes:

Space. A long wait.
No one comes. This shadow.

Give it what everyone gives:
meanings that are somber,
not full of wonder.

Space. Blazing silence.

What is it that shadows give each other?

Like much of Pizarnik's poetry, this poem explores a seemingly liminal space—one without clear time or direction. The language is particularly sparse in this poem, and much of its impact lies in the implicit. The lack of clarity allows a sort of negative space to emerge; the reader is forced to wade in the space between handholds, or the space between distinct visual landmarks. The recurrence of the word "space" without a clear qualifier creates a vague, nearly formless world—a transitional area. The only visual dimension she lends to the setting is through her mention of shadow. Shadows are amorphous and often deceptive; they promote discomfort, especially in a space that lacks concrete visual cues, and Pizarnik's usage of them further establishes a strange, liminal world. Pizarnik's vague language is powerful. She effectively weaves unusual, eerie realities that rely as heavily on the unknown as they do on the tangible.

At the beginning of the poem, Pizarnik immediately establishes an unresolved suspense. "A long wait," followed by no one arriving, is a particularly liminal concept; it situates the speaker between an expectation and an outcome, with no clear resolution available. The speaker is suspended in a space of unknowing. This carries through to the question at the end of the poem: "What is it that shadows give each other?" The choice to end a poem with a question further develops a sense of liminality. The speaker gives very little detail about their surroundings and, rather than an assertion, the poem ends with a direct questioning of the shadows. It is a tangible expression of unknowing, and the speaker's simple request for knowledge lends itself to an overall tone of unfamiliarity. Pizarnik expertly weaves pockets of existence with undeniable atmosphere, exemplifying the ways that sparse language can develop liminal spaces.

In addition to connecting with Plath and Pizarnik, my explorations of liminality for my Independent Study have allowed me to draw from another significant source of inspiration for my writing: the natural world. For as long as I have been writing poetry, I have found inspiration within nature. The region of Appalachia I grew up in was always ripe with opportunity to observe. From the winding, deer-populated backroads to the lush bodies of the mountains in all their summer green glory, there is always something to see and, subsequently, something to write about. As I decided to pursue the concept of liminality and liminal spaces in my Independent Study, it was instinctual for me to turn toward nature for inspiration and imagery. As I always have, I looked toward happenings within the natural world to serve as moments within my poems.

Exploring liminality in nature invited me to turn toward the darker, more uncertain pockets of the natural world—uncertain, at least, in how they depart from natural elements that I find familiar or comforting. In my poems, I have attempted to veer away from natural serenity—or to complicate it. Sunlight, for example, appears in several of my poems. However, rather than allowing the familiar image of sunlight to produce comfort or safety, I aimed to situate sunlight as an agent of uncertainty and change. In “August,” for example, I am attempting to create and linger on the feeling of the summer heat—a seemingly endless heat that strips you of complex thought or desire to do anything but lie down and let it overwhelm you. Intense sunlight can produce a sense of timelessness, and I aimed to create this sensation in my poem. In “Daybreak,” sunlight marks an arrival of a new world, one far removed from the speaker’s experience of traversing a dark trail to get to the peak. However, I wanted to portray the new world as something not entirely friendly. Rather, I wanted it to appear overwhelming. With the use of the word “breach” in the first line, I was attempting to establish a sense of intrusion. In addition, in

the last line, I described the “strange dark” that the speaker experienced as being “timid in the face of a world hollowed out with light.” I wanted the word “hollowed” to complicate the sensation of experiencing sunrise after a long period of darkness. Rather than joy or a sense of fullness, I wanted to mark the sun’s arrival with a sense of distinct change, and even loss—both loss of the dark world that the speaker had grown accustomed to, as well as their memory of it.

A far more recurrent theme in my poetry for this project is darkness. Darkness seemed like an inevitable destination for my explorations of liminality—darkness produces uncertainty. It erases clear borders and opens up the possibility of transitional spaces, particularly ones that allow for a distinct skewing of time. Over the course of this Independent Study, I found myself particularly drawn to write about late hours of the night—before sunrise, but well after midnight—because of their inherent existence in the transitional space between sunset and sunrise. Writing about these particular hours also seemed productive because of their innate sense of unfamiliarity. To be awake at 3 AM, for example, carries with it a sense of isolation. The knowledge that you may be the only one awake lends an intimate, almost eerie sensation to the experience. Those hours feel personal—the terrain belongs to you. However, late hours can also be hostile. They can produce feelings of non-belonging—feelings of overstaying your welcome. In addition, they invite introspection, sometimes to an uncomfortable degree. I was interested in exploring the strange balance of intimacy and discomfort, and how it feels to navigate that.

A final thread of inspiration—the body—also became an important part of *Drift*. Before I began my Independent Study, I began to develop an interest in the relationship between the natural world and the body. Sylvia Plath was particularly influential with her visceral, beautifully grotesque connections between the body and nature. This, too, carried forward into my

exploration of liminality. The body emerged as a central figure in my poetry. The concept of liminal spaces invited me to explore both the intangible and the tangible, and I found the body to be a consistent grounding point in the presence of abstraction. I wanted to complicate more emotional or logical depictions of uncertainty and timelessness with more tangible sensory details, particularly touch. In addition, I feel that the emergence of the body in my poetry exists in conversation with my perception of my own body during COVID. It felt like a sort of reunion with my physical self. Instead of seizing up with discomfort at the thought of my body as a potential vessel for the virus, I was able to focus deeply on bodily sensation. I believe that the process of writing *Drift* reignited an awareness of my body outside of fear, and it also helped me recognize and connect my bodily experience to both liminal spaces and the COVID-19 pandemic.

The body as an essence in my poems also allowed me to explore feelings of vulnerability more deeply. As I attempted to create liminal spaces within my poems, I found myself referencing parts of the human body constantly—hands, chest, even the throat. In “August,” for instance, I wrote, “last rain’s phantom hands reach from the soil / grip over the tender skin of my throat / blue thumb searching the arid hollow of my jaw.” The sensation of hands gripping your throat, a particularly vulnerable area of the human body, is a centerpiece of this poem. With this particular choice in the area of the body affected, I was hoping to invoke a sense of vulnerability, as well as a certain loss of control. This focus on intensely physical moments of sensation and vulnerability helped to break down some of the barriers I had set in place between my consciousness and my body due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It allowed me to revel in simple yet intense moments of bodily sensation—something so inherent to life, but also so undeniably complicated by the pandemic.

These threads of inspiration—nature and the body in relation to each other and to liminality—permeate nearly every poem in *Drift*. However, toward the end of my writing process, I began to explore liminality within man-made structures. I was particularly interested in exploring communal spaces that were already transitional in nature. Hotels, for example, are spaces that are inherently impermanent. There are spaces that play witness to very narrow windows of peoples’ lives. I chose to explore this setting in “Visitor,” in which the speaker is walking down a seemingly endless hotel corridor, dimly aware that behind the closed doors are past versions of them. I wanted to play on the fleeting intensity of hotels and the eerie notion that they forever contain remnants of distinct moments in our lives.

In “Final Feature,” I decided to utilize the setting of a movie theater as a liminal space. Movie theaters are also, I believe, innately liminal. There is, at least for me, a distinct sense of familiarity associated with movie theaters. Going to the movies has been a consistent source of comfort for most of my life, and I am well-acquainted with the routines associated with going to the movies, including which snacks to buy and what seats are best. However, when you go to the movies, you are stepping into other worlds. You experience a sort of sensory deprivation through soundproof walls and dimming of the lights until you, as well as a number of strangers, are immersed in a new reality. Even in terms of design, movie theaters are full of quintessentially long hallways dotted with doors, each one opening up to a new reality. Because of the balance they strike between the familiar and the wildly unfamiliar, a movie theater was a compelling setting to explore. “Final Feature” is centered around the space between deciding a relationship should end and truly ending it, when a partner is becoming increasingly distant while remaining painfully familiar. A movie theater seemed a particularly fitting setting. In addition, in terms of my relationship with both liminality and COVID, movie theaters hold a great significance to me.

As mentioned above, they have provided me with a deep sense of comfort over the course of my life, and being afraid of going to theaters during COVID was a drastic shift, as I am sure it was for many people. As my pandemic experiences remained in my thoughts during the process of writing *Drift*, movie theaters seemed to be a liminal space that I would inevitably want to explore.

In one of my final poems, “Landline,” I wanted to portray home as a liminal space. “Home” as a concept, at least to me, is a deeply comforting one. It sparks intense feelings of safety and nostalgia. When coming up with potential depictions of liminality, I felt drawn to write about my time at home after my parents were diagnosed with COVID-19 last year. The day after I arrived home from campus, my Dad was taken to the hospital. I felt a debilitating sense of helplessness, particularly because I couldn’t be in the hospital with him due to COVID restrictions. Because of this, I spent hours anxiously anticipating calls, either from the hospital with reports on my Dad’s condition or from my Dad himself. The fact that these incredibly powerful feelings of fear and distance occurred at home—a space of deep safety and connection with my family—was heavily disorienting. In “Landline,” I state that sleeping in my room would feel “too familiar.” The recurrence of “too familiar” is intended to display the frequent moments of discomfort experiencing these painfully unfamiliar moments in my home. This poem is the only one to deal directly with the pandemic, and it felt, to me, like one of the most personally impactful poems I had written. Through this poem, I was able to acknowledge a painful, disorienting experience, and acknowledge the dichotomy of familiarity and fear that was so jarring. In many ways, *Drift* has been a process of discovery, sometimes on a highly personal level.

As I continued to write poems, my concept of what liminality is, as well as how to portray it, became far less rigid. Exploring and constructing liminal spaces was a fluid and sometimes even cyclical process. Almost immediately, I drifted away from my initial sources of inspiration in favor of liminal spaces that could be found within the natural world. Toward the beginning of the process, I was surprisingly eager to depart from liminal spaces that existed in man-made places. However, toward the end of my writing process, I found myself being drawn back to the depictions of liminality I had initially found so inspiring—the backrooms, for example, inspired “Lucid,” which was one of the later poems to be written. The concept of liminality became somewhat amorphous during the process of writing *Drift*. I allowed myself the freedom to explore whatever version of liminality presented itself, even if, on a surface-level, some of the spaces I created in my poems divert significantly from the initial atmospheres I was drawn to.

As my concept of where liminality could exist became more fluid, I wanted to avoid constricting my ideas by committing to a particular form. I tried to give respective poems appropriate spaces in which they could develop, and those spaces typically made themselves clear relatively quickly. As I worked on this project, I allowed myself to switch freely between certain stylistic choices, depending on what I felt the poem needed in order to fully materialize. Some poems—“Feed,” for example—relinquish certain grammatical standards in favor of a relentless, almost frantic flow. This includes occasionally forgoing capitalization in a poem, or removing punctuation, coupled with inserting unusual line breaks, in order to allow for organic disruption. Other poems in *Drift*, however, called for a more standard structure, with line breaks, for example, attempting to maintain rhythm rather than disrupt it. Many of my poems involving more detailed imagery called for more structure. By allowing myself to switch between various

stylistic choices, I was able to explore liminality more freely.. I have learned not to rely completely on one technique or the other to create liminal spaces, but to continue to explore the potential benefits and drawbacks of each method while acknowledging that effectively producing liminality is not solely dependent on one stylistic choice.

The process of working on my Independent Study has been an incredibly rewarding experience. My understanding of what constitutes a liminal space expanded drastically—and so did my understanding of my writing, particularly my writing process. I learned about the experience of working on a project of this magnitude, and the patience, dedication, and delicacy it requires. I now know what it is like to dedicate myself to a topic I could talk about for hours. I've gained invaluable knowledge about the frustrations that can occasionally occur during the process, as well as how to work through them. I am also incredibly grateful for the support that both my topic and my work received from my community at Wooster, who would constantly point out empty storage units, strange tucked-away closets, and countless other eerie little pockets of campus for me to draw inspiration from. I am excited that a project that was conceived during a place of intense loneliness has turned into a source of communal interest and conversation. I am still unsure about so many things—pandemic included—but I am grateful that I have gotten to explore that sense of uncertainty in its various forms. There is beauty to be found in uncertainty, and I am incredibly thankful for this opportunity to spend time in transition.

Drift

Moonflower

Night drifts like powder down the pale track of my bones,
lake a hyaline spill, forest marrow sweet where it eases
down into my chest's jade hallways—a dim terror
rolling soft over the hillside, perched in the cattails, drifting
in the belly of the overripe night. The sky bends toward itself.
My bleakest edges fray against the hour. We both mourn tonight.
The stars calcify and I am left imminent, waiting for the lake
to step out from its borders and drift like clouds toward the canopy.
The moonlight falls like ghostly plums to the ground.
I can almost hear the impact, the dull thudding,
the light bursting open, ready to taste.

Hum

Out from the crooked tower of my sleeping body, softer
parts of me sit cross-legged, sulfuric under night's frail
dome, bruised with amber rot spilling from open mouths of
streetlamps. The drone of the bugs hangs limp and reedy from
the corners of the world, exposed insulation, fizzing rafts drifting
on muted oceans of pavement. I am sure that the distance between
the thin atmosphere of my body and the nearest car is hundreds of miles.
It is just me and the night bugs and the cold drape of the stars—I hear
thunder, some distant exhaling, wake off-kilter, ozone stuck up under
my gums, sulking in gaps among the fragile canopy of my lashes—
distant parts of me sing at the palest whispers of rain.

August

an arrival into myself along the ripe center of august
when the timid silk of my consciousness
is urged away from its violet handholds
noon has eroded my edges
last rain's phantom hands reach from the soil
grip over the tender skin of my throat
blue thumb searching the arid hollow of my jaw
I dream of rivers and other lonely things

Lucid

No other task but to sift through this silence
before it thaws and browns into something with
softer foundations—I could tell you about my dreams
and time's fraying edges, how it feels
to sit cross-legged in a library's exoskeleton,
all its shelves cleared out, carpet working my thin palms
into their secret pink gradients, wallpaper musty yellow
and filled to bursting with every cut-off word,
every premature ending, all the waiting in the world
for something that won't arrive—I could tell you,
but I know nothing about how to drift from my blue absolutes
and allow myself to be floral and borderless,
how to justify the faces peeking through whorls of wood,
the fluorescent suspense, the fear that if I looked too close
my silver wheels would stop turning and I would be left,
dazed and unraveled, somewhere in dark transit.

Elevation

The ascent ends with the sun's cardinal breach.
Trees fissure out black against the pastel unfolding,
silhouettes of night's last trembling handholds.
I've forgotten already the terrible climb,
moments of curling down next to the
sweet dark earth—reign in my breath
from where it fled the ochre confines
of my lungs, those dim fibrous cages,
night so narrow, my headlamp the worldmaker,
fleeting blue amassings—the strange dark
is so far now, seeped down into my marrow,
timid in the face of a world hollowed out with light.

Yucca

I've been boiled down by July and left to simmer,
dandelion deconstruction leaving me yellow and soft
and citrus-clean, some sweet new thing to be stirred
by summer's hand—sure-fingered, gold lifeline
running like a canyon from thumb to wrist, feathering
through ancient topography.

The yucca plants have tripped into bloom, the white inevitable—
birds land, blue and catastrophic, like bombs on the flowers,
setting the plant into swaying motion. The flowers whisper meanly
to each other in passing, poised at the ends of their long stalks.
I have been here, with the yuccas, for as long as I can remember.
I am eased by sunlight into my simplest absolutes—
sun-dazed and resolvable, my denominators fall toward simplicity.
My cheeks begin to burn, and red numbness drags net-like over my skin.
If I open my eyes, I see a horizon ringed with distant storms.
I keep them closed. Around me, the breeze stops, and everything stills.
The yuccas sigh deep into the earth. All I can do is follow.

No Man's Land

if the planet had a true edge,
an earnest vanishing point,
there would be a yellow house there
no painful thing could reach
starflowers would trip into bloom,
hanging pots and their blue yawns swaying
if I could find it, I would grow herbs
on the windowsills, go outside to sit
before the pitless blue, tuck the chip
in my mug's handle under the
pale swell of my thumb
helpless, I'd look for birds

Feed

autumn trickles in and begins its feast belly
full of chlorophyll sick from the green mushrooms
stack themselves up along the bark of the sycamore
orange spine-bones fibrous with need hungry it is just
the way of things the hunger and the cave the slow
giving in canopies shed relinquish themselves to the
wind drop bloody to the pavement air sweet with
death the bruise the fruit is too ripe now perfect
for small ravenous things

summer is caving in around the soft spots I step
outside hear the feeding fingers drip with it the clouds
burst the blue spills out syrup along the horizon's upper lip
it is the time for sweetness, the rusting

Projector

Among the canopy's dark shatter, lights
pour themselves into the empty,
erupt into blue motion,
some luminous accumulation, phosphorescent
spill, midnight's frontal lobe fizzing open
against the bathhouse—the gold
windows cannot be earnest next to
the blue terrible unfolding.
Any other light does not have the bones
for cold like this.

Tourmaline

alone now in the thinnest stillness
ushered into the hollow below night's jaw
a streetlamp hiccups amber against the blinds

my arms sink at my sides
pale anchors, old bone, no water just
stillness, dim scorched earth,
the sour peel of midnight's yellow walls

fluttering net of my arteries
bleached by the endless bloom
of my blood, my heart's tourmaline doors
drifting half-shut, a black waning—

liminal and scared of the dark,
I close my eyes and wait for flowers

Shore

The pale bloom of her dream arrives early tonight. She comes into herself on a terrible shoreline. Endless, its pebbled body flakes itself off into dark water, dawn hidden behind the clouds' bruised shoulders, a nimbus veil pulled over her eyes. Waves and their curling violence, tangled procession of foam tips, blue collapse. A fine mist dusts along the world's cold seams. Salt gathers like slate on the dark cliffs of her face. She does not know what is behind her, if there's anything beyond this pale track of shoreline and the bottomless water ahead. She has never turned. It is good here, looking forward. Above, a break in the clouds. Milky wound, slot of perfect light, the spectral violence of a seagull's wing cutting into that ashen valley. Its hollow bones ring. We are all floating, in our own quiet ways.

Dawn

the blue morning has poured itself into the house,
thrown dusty debris in great pale swathes
over the hardwood. the hills are red today,
and lonely. the coffee I brew is thunderous.
midnight lingers sourly, repairing to the
last few pockets of darkness. I am all hollowed out,
now, acres of bone and ginkgo leaves
like old stars in the hollows.

Cleaning

Young man, empty bar, cracked neon and static
stumbling its way over the senses like a swarm of locusts
with jewels for eyes or, better yet, cicadas freshly emerged,
consciousness newly minted after seventeen long years in the
earth's wide, dim heart.

To be a cicada, then—not to be winged,
but to wait, stupid and clean, while the sweet stench
of the earth chases the phosphorus from his pores,
purges the blue light from the hollows of his cheeks—
maybe the sharp edges of his consciousness would be softened
until he could only think of simple and tender things,
like the ancient tangle of a cypress root
or what it will be like to wade into dawn,
that quiet hollowing.

Last Light

Dusk pulled tight over the horizon, bruised and royal—
fireflies drift through heavy air, bubbles of round light
dimpling the evening's filmy surface. Sky's weary bruise,
violet understanding, ease into the gloaming.

I feel the last tenuous threads of summer being tugged
from their gold coil around my fingers, pulling my palm
flat against the cool earth. Grass stains—a green complication,
dirty landmarks against my palm's muted plane.

Clouds split open in the face of the impending dark.

Late wind urges the trees into hissing song,
scattering the remnants of the day. The world has cooked down
to something sweet and viscous, caramelized time cooling
between my measured exhalations, ruddy and crystalline.

Tomorrow scratches at the door and I allow myself to entertain
the drive, the highways that will lead me back to campus,
the road's boiling grey body disrupting the air around it,
sending that narrow slice of reality quivering. I nudge it away
and let the overgrowth resume its crawl across my thoughts.

I have accepted my truths that exist here, in these last pockets
of summer, these last bright palmfuls of childhood.

Anything else could not distract me, now, when the pearly cap
of a mushroom is leaning toward me from its tree perch,
inquisitive and graceful even in the face of time's civil disinterest.

I could lick this summer from my fingers. I grab handfuls.

Already, it is running in gold rivers from my palms.

I am my most honest here, witnessing this merciful departure,
simple and clean.

Doom Closet / Farewell

I've opened the closet for the first time in months.
I turn on the light and kick a plastic bin aside. Dust motes
throw themselves into drift. The smell of stale candy
pervades deep into the long room, like the faded presence
of a distant housemate announced only by her perfume.
My suitcase sits in her violet solitude, tucked between boxes
and abandoned sketchpads. My roommates drift around
the apartment, their laughter searing itself into the fresh
soft body of this memory. I measure my breaths against the sting.
A short wade through the lake of excess items and the handle
is in my palm. A tug urges the bag into purple movement.
I look toward the door of the doom closet and into the apartment,
where sunlight spills, bodyless and untethered, onto the hardwood,
umber tributaries of light running through the room, easing everything
toward dream. My roommates' belongings lie scattered
among shallow basins of light. Another burst of laughter,
and something in my chest comes loose, a secret unraveling.

Until

The tree line drags itself into clarity
and I have never seen my window as a barrier
until these emerald moments, when I imagine myself
clawing into the earth's cool, aromatic flesh,
burying myself deep enough that my fears and their
restless maws would pass like water above me, but
shallow enough that the sun could reach me,
warm my cold hands and creep like rust
behind my shuttered eyes. To be green and compliant,
let the mycelium dissolve my borders
and send me soaring toward whatever tree needs me,
to erupt toward the stars, pink and eager,
a glacier flower among the grass.
But for now the waiting, and the glass,
and my heartbeat pulsing from my palm through the glass,
impossible green, the stars and their
royal indifference above me, the slow exhale
threading like clouds over the silence.

Departure

Ghosts treading the dark lake of my coffee flush lilac
when I add the first spoonful of sugar. *Two, then.*

One more. The sky's ruddy mouth bursts, clouds lolling
out, pink tongues against the horizon's violent upturn.

The day's teeth are sinking into the house. Shadows yell.

Count the eggs. Close the carton. *Three.* Tomorrow's shopping
gains one more yellow dimension. Yolks converse in their
bright pop of a language. Toast springs from the toaster.

I grab it before dissonance of forgotten toast sours
the corner of my kitchen blue. I cut the slices into neat sections.

Four. Gather my eggs and usher them onto the bread.

My jade plant leans toward the earnest dinner. Its greens are
more earnest. A glance between my microwave clock and
the afternoon's departure dripping down my window.

Five. Too early for change like this. I gather my plate and fork and
glass, already bracing my shoulders against the night's cold arrival.

Wake

The dark altercation of my midday nap
ejects me into dusk. I've woken
cotton-mouthed and dream-soaked,
winter's sapphire heart molding itself
to the shivering boundaries
of my consciousness, a slow blue brand.
I run a slow hand through whatever
time is left standing. I cannot calculate
the losses. My clock moves forward
in cool mockery. Dusk's edge nudges
into the room, all teeth. Dread flickers.
The day is cracking. Shadows leak.

Ambient

where do I exist but the pink slots of skittish matter
between neon letters, rain-starched and tenuous,
my quiet distinctions fizzing out into precarious indigo—

until I can allow the terrible stillness,
I flee to the river and its pearls of
removed sympathy, those pity currents
I dent with flat stones before the water
stitches itself with its silver lace—

the moon has receded into its nimbus mirrors
I hover paper-winged in its light, waiting—

Triple Point

and what can be said for the all-at-once—
the triple point, the too-much, hope and
cigarette smoke and a feverish earth—
is it naïve to shrug free from my indigo self
and duck headfirst into the night?

Boil Your Water

the moon is poison and our radium moon swings low over the water
and the coal plant yawns teeth-first into the wet fabric of the night
and the stars drift among the waste-clouds and the mountains direct
their dark rivers of old silence toward the horizon
if the landscape dreams, we do not discuss it

I drive to the river and the mountains listen
surfaces scarred silver from the mining
the wind blisters and I am left dusty and dissonant
water rushes its filthy inhabitants north, toward
pittsburgh and its dripping yellow hands, the light
that falls like stones into the water and blooms into rippling lanterns
lures for the dead and the two-headed fish and whatever transitory souls
wish to drift like quiet wreckage toward the iron shore

Catmint

Of course the flowers bloom most unforgivably
where I did not plant them.

They spring like violet accidents, amassings of color
where the painter flicked a brush.

My house, catmint-cornered and urgent,
slips back into its fragrant sleep.

I crouch before the dark blossoms,
stroke a patient finger down each petal,
trace pale veins until we open to each other,
catch myself before I look too long
and the moonlight begins to crawl.

Final Feature

I still love you but our conversations have begun to feel like a movie theater past closing, when all of the staff have gone home and the night has reached the peak of its dark parabola and we're the last customers, the forbidden ones, sat stranded in the middle of the sea of empty seats and remnants of conversations drifting feather-fine through the aisles. I can no longer name the movie we're watching, only that I am sure I've seen it before, absolutely sure of it, but now it's hazy, like the film was bad, and the voices are muffled, and did they replace all the actors? We watch, hands drifting toward one another and then away, moved by all the dim currents we never learned to pay attention to. The movie is almost over and I haven't cried, or laughed, but it's dissolving into static, anyway, and the hallways are clean in a way that suggests vacancy rather than diligence, and the blue neon "E" is sputtering loudly outside, like it hurts, and morning has never seemed more distant, and I cannot bear to look at you now, in this space where the sun has no say. I would rather look forward—to sit, silenced by static, guided by the slow drift of our hands, two continents following their ancient courses. I love you, but the screen is still and dark, now, and my cup is empty, and the red floor lights point out, toward the stagnant night, and you're a stranger, anyway, too embarrassed to watch a movie alone. I gather my things. You remain. Maybe you want to stay for the credits. What is there to say?

Clean Bones

The silent pull toward empty buildings in the heat,
when summer is beginning its turn toward rot
and the air clings to my skin, citrine cellophane,
when cicadas hum themselves to death
and time is rusting at the hinges.

Days cook down like caramel and the houses by the river
preen when I look at them, especially the vain one
with the roof that turns to bronze when the sun takes its time.

The plants are melting into their stone walls,
turning toward me when I pass, whispering so soft
I can only ever hear it in hindsight. Everything I know
can be narrowed down and slotted into the space between
two rungs on a leaning wooden fence. The sewage plant
and its cruel fragrance rule the trail. Pretenses cannot last long here—
they will evaporate. Summer finds the bones, picks them clean.

Rust

Tonight, I am a pickup truck broken down on the road,
hinges rusting, right side of my bronze body
sunken into the withered body of a winter field.
No passengers but the dim awareness of dusk and its
bruised settling over the world, the long brisk sigh of it
pulling the last reedy threads of sunlight
tight against the horizon. A bird lands on my right mirror,
a new star pulled into the industrial constellation,
shared mass, aching denseness, some old painful closeness
threaded between our bones, humming some place just below
logic's pale overhang. The bird opens its beak to trill.
November bears down, cutting music down
to its in-betweens, the small gray silences.

Distance

I should have been more suspicious of your blue corners.
Your absence upturns the bones. The reflections in my old mirrors
are not always back in time. I catch glimpses through the glass,
the warped knowing, dim acknowledgments that begin
to unravel something drifting in the pale river of my skin.
I don't look for too long. It doesn't quite fit my shoulders.

Some Fresh Air

You've been walking for minutes, now, and the party glows in the distance behind you, a cigarette burn on the thin webbing between night's pitch fingers. The hour has fogged over, ghosting gem-like over your cheeks, a crystalline murmur you've interrupted. You're drunk enough that the world looks like it's been dipped into a thin glaze, tempting and smooth-cornered, but not drunk enough to warm you, so you walk fast, sifting through bodies of vapor, streetlamps looming over you like still moons, dim and indifferent to your cold bones and restless hands, the absent grip-release-grip of the lipstick in your pocket. You know red will stain you like a memory. The street unfurls in front of you. It is cold and endless, blanketed in thick silence cut only by your footsteps and the infrequent car. Headlights swim toward and past you, vanishing into the swarm of past selves you left behind at every bench, or intersection, or house with its porch lights turned off. Your breath writhes in the mist.

Landline

It is 2 AM and the dogs are asleep. Ed's house is in REM. I know because I can feel the dreams drifting across the street and into the slim space between my temple and the pillow. It is my pillow but not my bed. I am on the couch tonight. My room is too familiar. It is 2 AM and my mom is asleep. I imagine her curls talk to each other to break up the silence. She might be sleeping on her stomach, or her side, elegant hand stretched across the bed to the vacant side. The curtains are thick enough to throw the room into faultless dark, but she might have left them open a sliver to let in the dusty moonlight, let it turn the corners of the room toward their silver absolutes. She might have. I didn't look. It is too familiar. It is 2 AM and there is absence. It is my father. The house phone sits on the coffee table parallel to my head. He is in the hospital and I am not there. He is sleeping in a hospital bed, gowned and gaunt and strong, too, but I know him, and the toll it must be taking to be there amidst the machinery and the suffering, the sterile compassion. I am not there. I imagine the distance between our hands as a silver river. I want all my hope to ripple through it, but none of my fear. He is afraid enough. I stopped praying years ago, but I'm praying now, for his lungs and his laughter and his amethyst heart and the wings that unfurl in his words. It is 2 AM and my dog sighs in her sleep from another room. I turn away. It is too familiar.

Flicker

Turning of a page, slow fold of light,
blue murmur into the slots of darkness
your window has become, midnight
and its burned fingertips, your fingertips
moving in a slow slide down the spine
of your book, the sky muffled with cloud,
starless abscess—wax and its organic melt
over the rim of your candle, fragrant stalactites,
flame-licked silence broken by you and your
filmy inhalations, sickly kitchen air spreading
glassy and faintly luminous across your lungs
until you feel clean and buoyant, like you could wade
knee-deep into the hour and let yourself float,
driftwood in midnight's amber river,
away from yourself and back again.

Reflections

hands full of rain shadow splayed into
spindling canvases on the dashboard
moons and their drifting craters
ripple-bordered haloes drift
over secret shelves of bone
my windshield wipes the moment
time is red and imprecise
from under its dark canopy:

11:01

but I know it's later by the night's slant
and my introspection's yellow turn
the streetlamp outside sputters
amber interlude—
shadows wade through the disruption
as if they hadn't noticed. I've forgotten.

Forward

The hallway stretches into shadow in either direction
and I've been walking for hours, carpet's scarlet discourse
with the soles of my shoes moderated by the fluorescent buzz.
I've been shedding memories like skins and leaving them
in blue piles down the corridor. The doors stand back from the light,
handles peering through the dimness like cheap gold sirens.
No one has responded to my knocking, but I must imagine
they are there, shadows drawn forward by lamplight,
hungry ears and sharp mouths pressed close to the door
as they navigate their terrible silences. The corridor's dark yawn
continues to drift out of reach, any beginning or end wading toward
dizzying nowhere. Time steps over its sheer boundaries and I bend
my perception accordingly until I am sure the hallway's inhabitants
are hollower versions of myself, quiet and ravenous, waiting to
open their doors and step into fluorescent warmth
before following me in silent hordes toward elusive end.
A door opens behind me. The carpet and my shoes speak
in whispers. I don't look back.

Ideas to ponder when waiting for a train that won't arrive:

- Fog pouring like milk from an upturned glass over some distant riverbank, the image of it spun into cotton, stuck somewhere in the muted web of your memory.
- The loss of an orange: immediate post-fruit, fading sunspots, juice still turning the backs of your teeth sunny and ripe until you banish the brightness with an absent swipe of your tongue, peel in the palm of your hand, the squeeze of it so a cloud of orange dust erupts like a fading polaroid.
- Sunset and pent-up shadows running loose, free from their noonish confines, prowling like melting animals through the city.
- Anything but the thing with the broken wing inside you, the desperate flutter against your ribcage, the dim yellow song it lets out in the cold slow corners of the night.

Smokies

the mountains have folded down into the night
creek bed a terrible shoreline the moss and the
water bugs are hungry they swallow hard against
the stars those cold distant remnants light long dead
by now I am in the palm of the hills those green fingers
tracing slow over my spine yearning for perfect bones
the trees ring in the dark wind my blood echoes

Porch Light

All I can do now is smooth my hands over
the pale crests of my knees--
night drips from the awning and
the porch light rusts the perimeter.
The moths are here, fragile, moon-tipped,
fluttering against the edges of my awareness.
I am shivering with the moths in this
halo of shy light, dreams pooled up under
my tongue, committing night's sluggish sting
to memory before daylight arrives,
wreathed in its polished disruptions.

Tunnel

Tunnel's mouth, vine-draped and slick with cool rain,
bearing the wet excess silently, pale stone armor
turned slate-dark in the downpour. The hill
sings with it, folding green and plump over
the tunnel's wide skull. The world tips forward,
storm-drunk and callous, ruthlessly alive.

A surge of argent wind and I am no longer safe,
rain pulled inward and toward me, through me,
droplets interrupted in their pale trajectories,
landings clean and violent, phantom craters
blooming on impact, new valleys along
the flaxen fields of my cheeks. A water-logged roar
and a red sweep of light rippled by rain.
It is not my ride. A sweet, secret concession:
I am glad. A response: the tunnel deepens into itself,
toward its small silver heart. The storm howls with loss.

Eavesdrop

my body's dense atmosphere reinvents itself after sundown
the frail jade dome of my skull overturns its boundaries
and I am left suspended in the yellow hour,
the waveless lake of my consciousness
pooling up under night's crooked nails
the stars are so far tonight, wind impending
the trees and their weary joints lean
their groans widen and sweetly urge darkness to bend
it is easy to turn away

Shatter

but some things are just passing through
and I live devotedly so each dark transit
has my undivided attention

snow falls cold and focused
bodies worked during descent
into their rich arrangements

a world muffled down to its most
complacent silence, quiet that's been
whittled to perfection by obsessive time

white murmurations are guided
into pristine collisions
a streetlamp exposes the umber carnage

the silence is too much
a responsibility stained with urgency
the moment is stretched to violent fragility

I know I will dream of a storm that shatters
the sweet dissonant collapse
every impact ringing like a piano key tuned flat

Checkup

the doctor will be with you shortly but the off-green walls are nearer,
swooning toward you, drawn to the last presence emanating human warmth
in the empty waiting room, and you can't see the nurses anymore behind their
glass borders but you can hear them whisper—the portable radio, too,
left by another patient, stuck on a static requiem you could turn off
but don't really want to, not enough to urge you away from your
sacred pocket of stillness that's souring too quickly, ripened
by anticipation, pungent and full, coiling in metallic thrashes
around the room like the body of a snake trying to shed its old skin,
or a snake dying, and you never liked the doctor, anyway, and the air
is plump with waiting, sweetly frantic, and you could be sick from it
so you grab scratchy red handfolds of the chair you're sitting on
to ground yourself in the crimson tactility, to ground or drown,
but it doesn't matter because the door has opened a crack
and any face waiting behind it *the doctor will be with you shortly* chooses
to stay hidden, and the nurses have stopped whispering but the absence
is displaced by the pale stretch of a hand toward you, loose-fingered
and delicately beckoning, and you surge past your red limits
to step toward the door, toward the hallway yawning, unlit,
behind it, because you don't like the doctor, or the way the lights flicker
when you approach the door, or the low hum drifting from the hallway,
begging you to let your eyes relax, just for a minute, but it's your annual checkup
and you would feel silly for not going, of course you're going to go,
even if you're feeling green as the desperate walls. Step forward—
the door closes out its dark rotation.

The Cartographer

I want to ask you how and when you've become so settled
into your monochromes, shadows pooling in the arch of your wrist,
in your blouse, in the creases of you like syrup making its fluid crawl
toward the neck of the bottle, toward its inevitable descent into
new territory. The way you now peek out from your room,
the black geometry of it, and into the warmth of summer that
sticks to your fingers like peach juice, insistent and cloying, your hair
curled soft against your cheek, mouth a dark smudge, hazy, the curve
of your arm waiting for something to fill it. You wade dimly
between worlds, pale blue in your inquisitions, the first explorer,
the mapmaker, charter of grayscale.

Unfurl

My edges shrink away
from these long horizons.
I try to reserve my hardest thinking
for the uneasy pool of light
that gathers on my floor
just before night comes
to commence its dark feast.
I think of you, too, mostly when
the picture frames seem to be hazing
at the edges, leaving space
that was not there before.
Most days, I discover something finite.
I saw too much when a bird
unfurled its wings. Your absence swells.
I should not have looked.

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