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February 2014 Volume 25 Number 3

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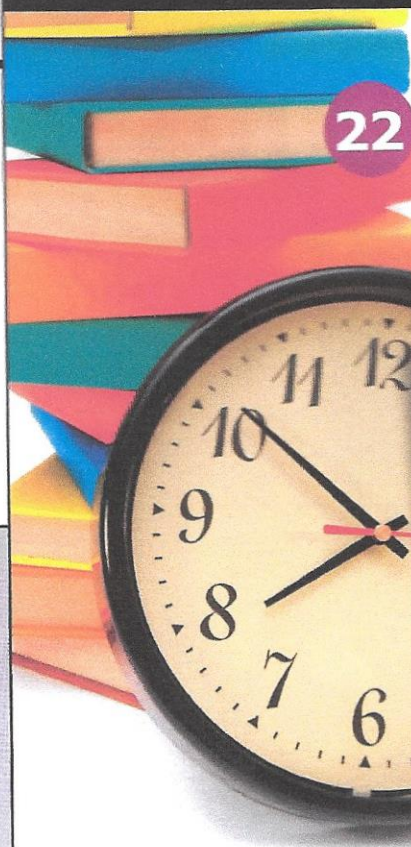
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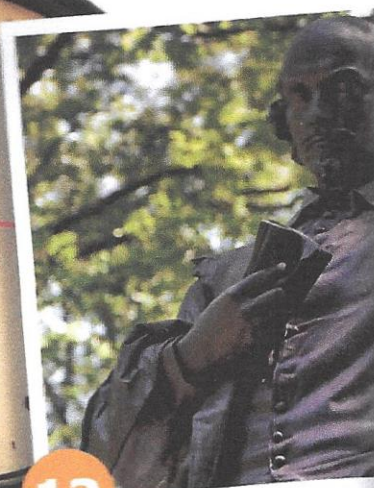
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2 Language and identity in *We Need New Names*

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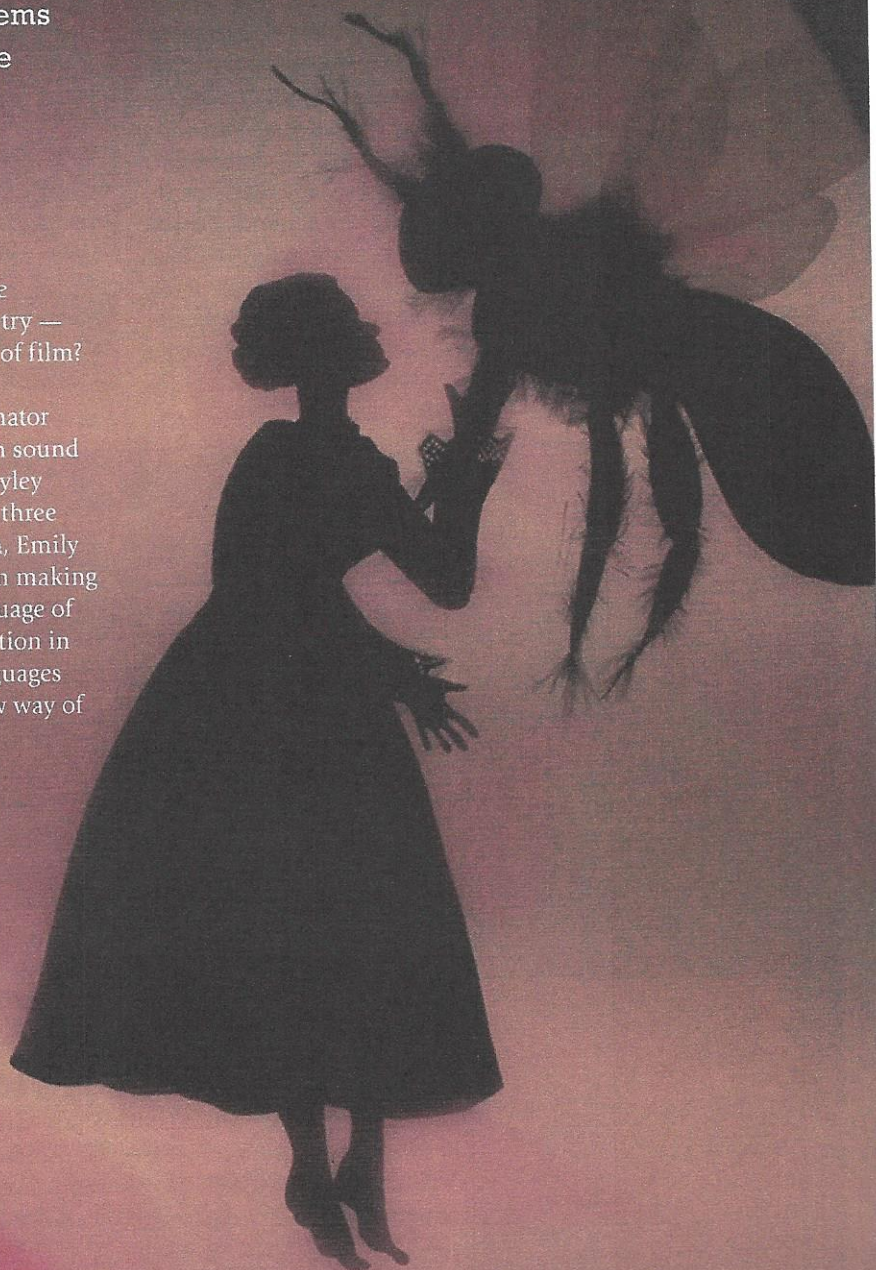
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Turning metaphor

Sally Bayley explores the relationship between text, image and sound in the poems of Emily Dickinson and Harold Hart Crane

How easy is it to turn poetry into film? What is the relationship between the core component of poetry — figurative language — and the narrative arc required of film? How do you turn metaphors into stories?

These are some of the questions asked by the animator Suzie Hanna who, since 2007, has been working with sound composer Tom Simmons and poetry scholar Sally Bayley in creating animated films that interpret the work of three metaphorically dense American poets — Sylvia Plath, Emily Dickinson and Hart Crane. The essential challenge in making these films was how to transfer the compressed language of metaphor to the equally compressed forms of animation in visual and sonic forms. In bringing together the languages of sound and moving images we hoped to find a new way of thinking about the structures of poetic metaphor.



'The miniature puppet of Emily with her bee (being) in her microscopic world of heavenly nature'. All illustrations in this article are by Suzie Hanna

into moving image

What is a metaphor?

In its most basic definition, metaphor is a process of carrying over one body of language to another; from that marriage of two languages a third language is born. 'Metaphor' stems from the Greek word *meta*, which means 'across', and *pherein*, which means 'to carry'. You might think of metaphor as being a bit like the changeling child in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, who is carried over to us from the exotic world of India in the poetic language of Titania, Queen of the Fairies, who tells us his story. We learn of the child's dead mother, who was once one of her followers. That history is dead and gone, but Titania wants to transport the changeling child, to adopt him as her own. However, the child never appears. The changeling child remains nothing more than an alluring idea belonging to another poetic realm and cultural history. We can only imagine him.

Metaphor is a kind of imaginative transference or transplantation of one language-body to another. In the poetry of Emily Dickinson, metaphor is often a way of representing what is not easily imagined: namely God and everything to do with God. Dickinson's poetry is built upon several cryptic metaphorical codes that seem to be trying to represent things that are difficult to imagine or remain invisible (like Titania's lost changeling child).

In making our film, later to become *Letter to the World*, we began to think about Dickinson's famous remoteness from the social world and her reliance upon letters sent to friends, neighbours, family and especially her future editor, T. W. Higginson, a colonel in the American Civil War. It was during this period of turbulence that Dickinson was at her most productive as a poet. She produced poems as she produced letters, and letters often carried poetry with them. Dickinson parcelled up poems inside letters and sent them away from her everyday world of small-town Amherst, Massachusetts. These

AQA (A) Literature: 'Victorian literature'

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poems and letters were read and no doubt transformed in the mind and environment of her recipient.

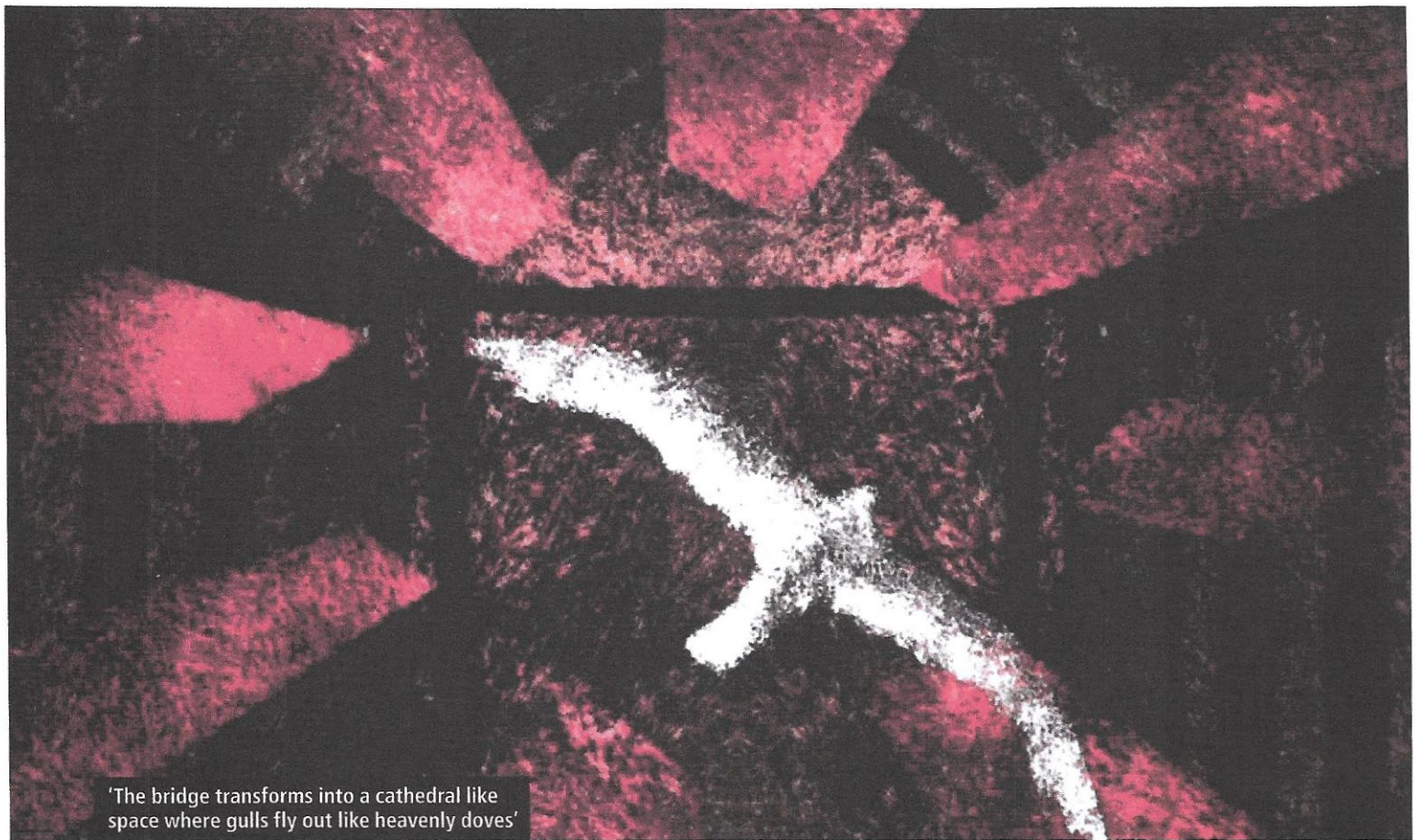
The letter-writing plot

In her devotion to writing letters, Emily Dickinson enacted a form of leaving home. Our film *Letter to the World* was inspired by Dickinson's busy world of linguistic (letter) writing and transportation that begins with the animated movement of her writing tools. As Dickinson asks in one poem, 'Who'll let me out some gala day / With implements to fly away?' For someone who rarely left her father's house after the age of 44 (the year her father died), writing was Dickinson's basic method of travelling — imaginatively — through the world. In the opening of the film we see Emily Dickinson (played by the American actress Elisabeth Gray, who studied Emily Dickinson at high school) sitting at her writing desk in her room in Amherst writing with her quill pen on a sheet of paper.

Dickinson had a very particular relationship to paper and much of the soundtrack of the film imitates the sound of the pen marking the surface of paper. Dickinson very much crafted her own private paper world. Between the years 1858 and 1864 she made poetry booklets (the contemporary equivalent of self-publishing perhaps) by folding a sheet of paper into four parts to create what editors have called her fascicles. She then stitched together these miniature paper-books, leaving 40 in total when she died in 1886.

The central drama

The film's central drama is the action of the writing poet. The opening — actress Elisabeth Gray seated at her writing desk — is shot in the form of a pixilated silhouette. A key reference point for this action was Dickinson's poem 'This is my letter to the world', no. 519 in the Ralph W. Franklin *Reading Edition* of her poetry:



'The bridge transforms into a cathedral like space where gulls fly out like heavenly doves'

This is my letter to the world,
That never wrote to me —
The simple news that Nature told
With tender majesty.

Her message is committed
To hands I cannot see;
For love of her, sweet countrymen,
Judge tenderly of me!

Dickinson's poem voices the work that poetry does in giving expression to her feelings for a form of intimacy she doesn't experience. The poet seems to be saying that she wants intimacy ('hands'), but she can find that only in her relationship to the natural world where 'hands' remain invisible. 'Hands' in this metaphoric sense are the 'hands' or 'work' of God. And yet the speaker is addressing a wider audience, her 'sweet countrymen', and asking for tenderness. In the poem's opening line, she tells us that the world has never written back. For Dickinson, writing is not a fulfilling two-way conversation but something more bitter-sweet. Her poet-speaker is addressing an audience, but that audience remains silent and invisible. Perhaps her larger audience is in fact God, or something like God — what we might call the realm of the transcendental: all the things in our living world that cannot easily be explained, such as death.

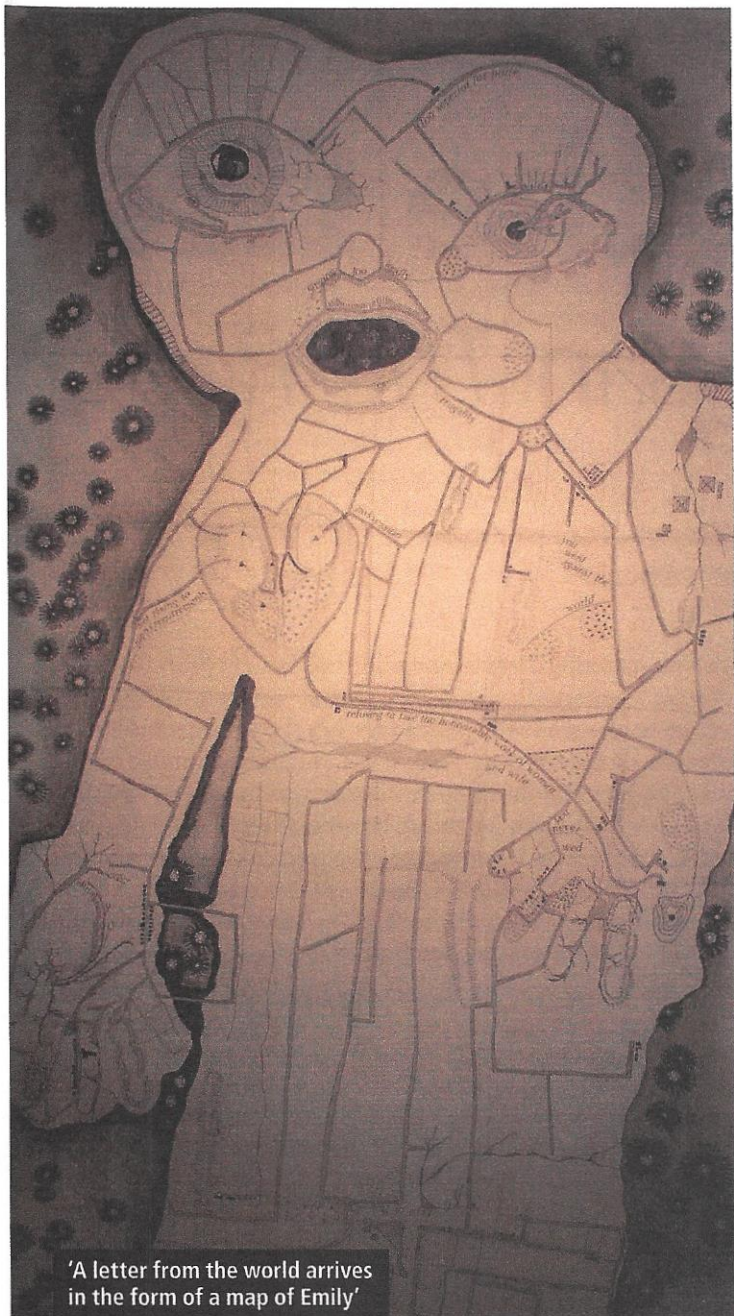
The soundtrack

'Transcendental' is the word usually associated with Dickinson's poetry and in its most basic definition it means an

experience above and beyond the ordinary and commonplace; perhaps an encounter with the supernatural or otherworldly. In developing his soundtrack, Tom Simmons wanted to create a sound that would resonate with the image of the poet reaching for hands she could not see. From the start of the film we hear the amplified human sounds of writing and breathing, the diaphragm lifting and falling. Tom's idea was to produce a close-up sonic experience: as though we, as listener, were passing from Dickinson's living, breathing body into the internal realm of her mind or brain. Ringing harmonic tones plunge us deep inside the mind. Even before we see anything on screen we hear a pulsating soundscape depicting the sound of the soul tuning itself to its internal patterns and harmonies. Tom's soundscape conjures the sounds of deep, soulful breathing; a pulsating rhythm that suggests a body plunging into deep internal waters, what might be the fluid around the brain.

The metaphoric plot

What Dickinson produced from her brain as she wrote became the film's only real plot. *Letter to the World*, the mixed-media animation that we produced in August 2010, combines representations of Dickinson-the-poet, in the form of actress Elisabeth Gray and a small paper cut-out puppet based on her silhouette. The major dynamic of the film is an oscillation between several scales and ways of seeing some of Dickinson's recurring metaphors: small and large, near and far, grand and obscure. One of these is the image of heaven as it collapses into the form of a bumblebee drinking nectar from its favourite



'A letter from the world arrives in the form of a map of Emily'

flower. This act of compression — of folding away a very large idea into a miniature form — reflects Dickinson's working relationship with metaphor as well as with her own writing implements, her folded sheets of paper.

The first sequence poses the poet against a window frame cut into four dark-blue squares. Inside the frame sits the white round of planet-earth-cum-moon. Dickinson the poet-persona is seen tossing letters through the window; these are her letters 'to the world that never wrote to [her]'. In the blink of an eye, the poet becomes miniature, and flies through the window to join her beloved bee. Together, they drink nectar and kiss the heads of flowers. But this erotic communion is interrupted by the outbreak of a storm, signalled by the sound of Civil War gunfire. Dickinson's most productive period of writing was the early years of the Civil War, 1860–63. Triggered by the sounds of war, an image of a volcano appears spewing lava and smoke.

We wanted to show how sound and speech also stimulate and produce imagery. Soon after, the entire screen begins to flicker with the impact of sound, and poet and bee fly off to avoid danger.

In Dickinson's metaphoric world, volcanoes signify the eruption of speech, the violent act of communication after a long period of silence. The metaphor describes what is, for her, the violent act of writing. As she puts it in one of her letters, 'Vesuvius dont talk — Etna — dont — one of them — said a syllable — a thousand years ago, and Pompeii heard it, and hid forever — she couldn't look the world in the face afterward'. Dickinson's 'still — volcano — life' is her dormant yet stirring collection of poetry stored inside her own head. It is this world of silent words, words heard only inside the poet's own head, words left hidden and unspoken, that is the film's ultimate metaphorical plot.

Hart Crane's 'To Brooklyn Bridge'

In December 2013 we completed a new short film called *Proem*, which continues our research into designing representations of poetic metaphor. This time the subject was modernist poet Hart Crane's proem 'To Brooklyn Bridge', the poem that sits at the front of Crane's epic narrative *The Bridge* (1930). *The Bridge* is a mythical allegory of American history embedded in metaphor; a metaphorical coming of age story of America that takes as its beginning and ending point the structure of Brooklyn Bridge. Crane's dynamic, wheeling stanzas carry us back and forth through several aerial views of the bridge as it intersects with aspects of New York City:

How many dawns, chill from his rippling rest
The seagull's wings shall dip and pivot him,
Shedding white rings of tumult, building high
Over the chained bay waters Liberty —

Then, with inviolate curve, forsake our eyes
As apparitional as sails that cross
Some page of figures to be filed away;
— Till elevators drop us from our day...

The strongest image here is the 'inviolate curve', an image that suggests the ever-receding and invisible sightlines of the implied viewer inside the scene. This implied viewer is a version of you and me, the reader and onlooker of the poem who must make of Crane's obscured and often unfinished metaphors — metaphors that often drop away from us like the elevators in tall buildings — what we will. We hope that this film will help with the process of building new meanings in the gaps left in between one metaphor and the next.

Sally Bayley is teaching and research fellow at the Rothermere American Institute and lecturer in English at Lady Margaret Hall, University of Oxford. This article is based on collaborative work with Suzie Hanna, a chair of animation education at Norwich University of the Arts, and Tom Simmons, research leader for the School of Communication at the Royal College of Art. *Letter to the World* and *Proem* have both been selected for international festival screenings and can be viewed online via www.suziehanna.com



Rebecca Perry

Flowers, Love etc

Many times I've become lost
and snapped out of it next to a rose bush
and bins in someone's front garden
or by a four-way crossing and car horns
and my mouth is full of boring questions.
Many times I've become lost
and found myself helpless as a snow globe
on a mantelpiece in unforgiving sun.

When I kiss someone new my mouth
is full of the ghost mouths of old loves.
A TV static mouth, a cigarette mouth,
a mouth full of piano air and its own ghosts.
And when I touch someone new my hands
are full of grass from all the countries
I've visited alone.

If you look hard enough at any flower
it can resemble some part of the human body.
All living things are busy imitating each other
and while my tongue attempts shadows
of a poppy petal and my belly button is a rosebud
I've become lost again on my lookout for a
lost soul who also doesn't believe in souls.

In 2011, *Poetry Wales* magazine awarded the *Poetry Wales* Purple Moose Poetry Prize for collections of unpublished poems for the third time. The winning poems by Rebecca Perry were published by Seren as the pamphlet *little armoured*. John McAuliffe wrote that 'Its miniatures and transforming images sometimes recall Elizabeth Bishop, its tonally various sequences Paul Muldoon, but this is a young poet who already discovered her own voice in these exact and tender, smart and moving poems.' She has also published poems in *Poetry London*, *The Salt Anthology of New Writing*, and *Best British Poetry 2013*. Her debut collection, *Beauty/Beauty* (Bloodaxe Books 2015), has just been published. 'Flowers, Love etc' was part of BroadCast's Summer Season poetry reading events and is reprinted here by permission of Rebecca Perry.

Rebecca Perry graduated with an MA in creative writing from The Centre for New Writing at the University of Manchester in 2008. She lives and works in London.

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