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POEMS
Weight

When I was a kid, there was this song that played on the radio all the time. It talked about a road that was long and a brother who had to be carried on it. The singer said the brother wasn’t heavy. That he was, simply, his brother. And that line repeated again and again—*He ain’t heavy. He’s my brother*. And something about the way the singer’s voice hugged these words, proclaimed them to the world, caught in the back of my throat. Making it hard to move. To swallow. I didn’t know then—at nine, ten, eleven—that this was love. That this was community. That this was about a greater good. If the road is long, it doesn’t matter what you weigh—I will carry you.

As a child, I loved the stories inside of songs. And the poetry. I loved how the music existed as air and water around the words—an energy to help them move deeper and more beautifully into our minds—and from there, our memories.

The road has been long. As I sit down to write this, I am so grateful for each of you on it with me. As I read through the selections in this journal, I am carried back to that place in my childhood—where words stopped me, made me have to remember how to swallow, said *Don’t forget to breathe*.

And now—here we all are—at this moment, past the many we’ve lost who weren’t able to breathe into this new day. Past the beginnings of a revolution that is now a movement we have chosen to walk beside, to raise our fists up into. Past a country that feels like it’s losing its mind. Past a moment before we had to remember to grab our masks when we grabbed our wallets and keys. And still—ahead of us, the road keeps winding into a place we cannot yet see.

So on we go.
Every day as a wide field, every page

Standing outside
staring at a tree
gentles our eyes

We cheer
to see fireflies
winking again

Where have our friends been
all the long hours?
Minds stretching

beyond the field
become
their own skies

Windows doors
grow more
important

Look through a word
swing that sentence
wide open

Kneeling outside
to find
sturdy green

glistening blossoms
under the breeze
that carries us silently
And there were so many more poems to read!
Countless friends to listen to.
We didn’t have to be in the same room—
the great modern magic.
 Everywhere together now.
Even scared together now
from all points of the globe
which lessened it somehow.
Hopeful together too, exchanging
winks in the dark, the little lights blinking.
When your hope shrinks
you might feel the hope of
someone far away lifting you up.
*Hope is the thing…*
Hope was always the thing!
What else did we give each other
from such distances?
Breath of syllables,
sing to me from your balcony
please! Befriend me
in the deep space.
When you paused for a poem
it could reshape the day
you had just been living.
Joyce Sidman

One of Us

“That kid is weird,” says
the teacher, flipping her shining hair.
“I don’t know where he’s at.”
Indeed, he is quiet
in the way of a giraffe:
ears tuned to something we can’t hear.
He turns his sleepy eyes on me—
chocolate brown
with long, extraordinary lashes—
as I hand him a seashell:
something to write about, you know,
something to focus on.

Suddenly, silently,
in the mysterious way of poetry,
he is at
that shell,
he is in it,
his heart fills up with it.
O Shell, he writes,
you make lizards dance
in the sky with birds.
Never leave me, Shell.

During sharing time,
he reads his poem aloud—
reverently,
almost to himself.
Half the class is stunned,
half embarrassed.
The teacher shakes her head.

I am barely breathing.
One of us, I sing, one of us!
Mi Casa

When I was a boy
I was either a child eating bugs
or a child being eaten by bugs, but
now that I am older am I a man
who devours the world or am I a man
being devoured by the world?

Someone once told me that mothers
come from a different planet. And if she was correct
then my mother was a warrior from that planet.
And now that my mother is older the history
that is her face is starting to look like a worn map.
The hills that once were her cheeks now have roads
carved into them that tell her secrets.
The roots of her hair are starting to shimmer with silver
that she colors once she sees ten or more.

She no longer cares for long hair.
She says pelo largo is a young woman's game.
In a few years she will be older than my grandmother
ever was.
Cedar Sigo

What did you learn here? (Old Man House)

For Joy Harjo

How to fall asleep easily on the beach, to dig clams, to dream a net made of nettles, a medicine of marsh tea boiled out to the open air, a memory of cedar bark coiled, resting for months in cold water to be fashioned into our so-called lifestyle, clothes for ceremony as well as our dailiness, canoe bailers, diapers, we used the wood for our half-mile longhouse and totems, dried fish, a hard smoke, wooden oval plates that hooked together filled with clear oil of salmon, to wet our palates and smooth our bodies. A shawl of woolly dog (now extinct) they were bred on tiny islands we can still identify, Tatoosh Island off of Cape Flattery, where there were whaling tribes too, the Makah, one of whose villages collapsed, preserved in silt (later unearthed) and how else? Which other ceremonies or necessary edges of objects? Our ivory needles, otter pelts, mat creasers, our dances. What else do you remember dreaming of? A kind of rake to skim the waves, to catch tiny fish on rows of twisted nails.
Tanaya Winder

And I wonder where you are

Sacred stars blanket a nighttime sky,  
each light reminds us of the preciousness of life.  
Your memory lives along the Milky Way,  
each twinkle saying don't forget my name.

It’s an epidemic, a sickness of the earth,  
a war we enter as soon as we are birthed.  
Indigenous women, girls, our two-spirit, too.  
When did this world start disappearing you?
Being

Wake up, greet the sun, and pray.
Burn cedar, sweet grass, sage—
sacred herbs to honor the lives we’ve been given,
for we have been gifted these ways since the beginning of time.
Remember, when you step into the arena of your life,
think about those who stand beside you, next to, and with you.
Your ancestors are always in your corner, along with your people.
When we enter this world we are born hungry,
our spirits long for us to live out our traditions
that have been passed down for generations.
Prayer, ceremony, dance, language—our ways of being.
Never forget you were put on this earth for a reason—
honor your ancestors.
Be a good relative.
Uncharted Territory of Grief

Summers meant sticking my arm out the back of a rez car. No other windows rolled down. Consequences of a mechanic, some stranger’s calloused hands left us with sticky summers, sweat dripping from our foreheads.

I waved to make-believe friends and hungry ghosts. My arms danced against the wind, taking comfort in the resistance of warm desert air.

The ghosts sang along as Journey’s keys and bass blared through a battery-powered boombox. The car hugged the highway curves like a child holding its mom’s hand, afraid to walk alone in the dark.

Our grandmothers told us stories of the desert, how giant serpents laid on mountains to create canyons. Imagine earth crunching under the weight of unbearable sadness. Imagine what it feels like to collapse into an uncharted territory of grief.

As young girls we learned the tale of a mother who cried so many tears she created a lake in the middle of the desert. Today she sits in stone beneath a star-stitched sky, holding up the otherwise untethered blue.

Last month, I read an orca gave birth to a female calf who died thirty minutes after entering our world. The orca carried her dead calf for 17 days. Tethered by grief, hers the price paid for love and loving.

At 34, my sister gives birth to her first child, a winter-born boy. In recovery, my sister asks if she can walk yet. Her nurse says, “Wait until your legs are yours again.”
I wonder who and what I’ve carried
and carry for days, months, for years. Grandmother,
take me back to your childhood, where you sang
“Blue Moon” in boarding school, where you won
the talent show.

Take me back to 17,
when my back first curved into an S—
the serpent inside me coiled under grief,
my scoliosis stopping any sports
outside of prayers and inside dreams.
I wish we’d had more time.

Take me back to the day my fingers learned the blues
until chords calloused their tips,
the electric progression of “Ain’t Got No Home”
etched into my body’s memory.

Take me back to when we were all children
given songs to sing. The ones you proclaimed
were anthems, predictions for how we would love.

Take me back to when
we were all children saying
let’s pretend. We’d yet to swim
through grief. Our spirits hadn’t been crushed
by fists breaking through bedroom walls
and I could still hold your hand in the dark.
Let’s pretend our ghosts have been fed.
Let’s make-believe our hearts are
ours so we can walk again.

Reverse the journey, playback
the boombox, rewind the cassette tape
to our favorite part where we all sing along
to the na na na nas,
until my lungs can remember what it’s like to breathe
in a world where you are still here
and I am still waving at ghosts
through the back window, singing:
now it’s your turn girl to cry.
Cornelius Eady

“I am here because somebody survived”

—Mahogany L. Browne, “On Meditation”

Which means, sometimes, you disarm
The goon by acting the fool—what they want
Is your throat cut, or your heart broken
By a dum-dum bullet, or your eyes filling
With the void. So they leave with their cartoon
Of you in their heads. The instant they turn—
the flood waters stopping just before the top step,
The hawk grasping feathers instead of flesh—

All the small stuff—your sweat beading off
Your skin, your breath slowing back from flight
To human, you’ve won it. You can pass it on.
The Racist Bone

I know this is a real thing, because
When I was a kid, my big sister took me
To the Capitol Theater, in my hometown
Of Rochester, NY,

And there was a movie that afternoon,
The Tingler, which starred Vincent Price,
And what I remember best about the film
Was that it was about this extra, insect-like gland, that

We all appeared to have been born with,
But nobody but sci-fi movie scientists knew about.
If it wasn’t fed properly, it would crawl up
Your leg, and choke you to death with its claws!

Your only hope was if you saw it coming, and knew
What it was, you could scream—loud.
Which we did, when it crawled across the screen.
Then the lights blacked out, and Vincent Price

Shouted it had skittered off the screen, hungry— which it hadn’t;
The Capitol was the Black movie house— 25 cents a seat,
The last drop of profit squeezed from the theatrical run.
No need to pull Mr. Castle’s hokey string and rubber model

Down the aisle for the likes of us.
In our heads The Tingler scurried, our darkest screams,
The horror we know, but won’t talk about,
From the mouth of the corpse

Like a weevil, looking for a home.
So many characters perished
In that movie—they never believed they had it in them
Until those pincers closed.
How It Escaped Our Attention

When a whole being
births into your hands
still you see your hands
no matter how unworldly
the beauty of the child

Then the universe of words
works past cosmology
to a useful name a handle
in English unlike the Indigenous
genderless language of verbs

Moon blues comet misses
moon looms super moon bleeds
many cosmological shifts later
our hands eclipsed by
the lovely being come so far

Come closer than ever
across the several heavens
we Ojibwe name
the layers of our atmosphere
and further out there
the fourth sky forever sky

When you first came to us
we did not have an Ojibwe name
to know the sky beyond
the sky beyond the sky

How were we to know
he was she was
they are
you

How were we to know who?

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A smile always heals

You cannot pronounce my name.
“Soo-rya.” Not “soar.”
Surya—the sun god.
Mom always tells me that a smile heals everything.
So I try.
I sit beside you in the cafeteria
and smile.

You look down at your food
and eat your cheeseburger,
I eat the lemon rice in my box.

My mom cut and squeezed two lemons
and cracked open a coconut to make my lunch.
I savor every spoon of my vegan rice
while you savor your meat patty.
You enjoy your burger. I enjoy my lemon rice.

We don’t say anything to each other
until almost the end of the lunch break.
I apologize for splattering ink
on your shirt when you got my name wrong this morning.

You smile back at me. “Surya,” you say.
You don’t know how that makes me feel.
Mom is right.
A smile always heals.
Filter

I come from a country so far away
that you may have visited only in your dreams.
My face does not bear the pale color of my palms.
I don't speak your language at home.
I don't even sound like you.
If you come to my house, you'll see my family:
my mother in a sari,
my father wearing a sacred thread around his body,
and me, eating a plate of spicy biryani
instead of a burger or pizza
at the dinner table.
If you, for a moment, shed your filter,
you will also see my pockets filled with Tootsie Rolls,
waiting to be shared with you.
Illustration by Lisa Desimini
The Floatin Baby

A doll was forgotten in a bedroom
when the old owners of the house moved out
and G-ma and Gramps moved their family in.
There’s an old photograph in an album
of boy Uncle Roy laughing, holding it
in a jumble of moving-in boxes.

It spent thirty years on the shelf in the hall closet,
a reminder of the history of the house.
It was graduated up to the attic
the day G-ma made the last house payment.
There’s a framed photo of that day,
G-ma surrounded by handsome men sons.

My cousins and I sit in the parlor
paging through albums. Photos on the walls
capture special events, celebrations.
The grownup voices drift across the hall:
Dad and the uncles sharing memories,
two aunts calling from the kitchen.

The cousins whisper about The Floatin Baby.
My dad says he was always scared of that doll…
Yeah, and my dad says he thought it carried the rage
the before-us owners felt when they sold the house
to Gramps and G-ma… You’d open the closet door,
even in August, and feel the rage chill…

Ten minutes alone in the attic, the cousins say,
and The Floatin Baby floats up from behind
the boxes and spiderwebs. They’ve all seen her:
a plump, pink babydoll with wide blue eyes,
puckering up and holding out her arms.
Just ten minutes alone up there. You scared?

Just ten minutes alone, the cousins coax.
Come on. It’s our family tradition…
The attic’s up two flights of stairs
lined with sad-looking wallpaper.
Where we live, houses don’t have inside steps.
Or basements, or second floors, or attics.
I walk in front, hand on the bannister.
We pass Malcolm, Dr. King, and Barack
and Michelle Obama, weddings, babies.
We pass a scroll called “The Serenity Prayer.”
Young Dad holds his thumbs up before I was born,
and it feels like he’s looking straight at me.

Omari leads us up the attic stairs
into a cold, dark-raftered open space
where plastic clothes bags hang from a garment rack
and trunks and boxes gape open here and there.
The other cousins huddle together.
I ask myself: Am I a fraidy-cat?

I pick up a few old hardcover books
and some brittle-paged, browning paperbacks
and put them back. Look one by one
through a pile of kid art signed in crayon.
The cousins have stopped whispering. I am
alone. I hear feet rumbling down the stairs.

I find a bundle of stamped envelopes
addressed in cursive to G-ma as “Miss.”
I’m standing there concentrating on untying the knots, when...

light falls on something in the shadows!
*The Floatin Baby!*

And you know what? She looks
just like my friend Evan’s baby sister.

I pick her up and put her in a box,
on top of some books and old report cards.
I find a fake fur jacket in the garment bag
and tuck her under it, so she looks warm.
If she WAS carrying rage, it’s time to stop.
Evan’s baby sister can say my name.
I hear them calling *Dinner’s served!*
I run downstairs, wash my hands, take my place.
The cousins grin at me, and raise their thumbs.
G-ma tells Uncle John to say the grace.
She tells Uncle Roy to carve the bird.
She says *Y’all remember to save room for my pie!*
Ari Tison

The Storyteller Gets Her Name

My dad used to call me Eagle Eyes. I was the one to find eagles, owls, blue jays on a dark day. He called me so until my brother was born infant and grew to boy.

Having heard my name, as younger siblings often do, he wanted to be called Eagle Eyes too. He studied the birds’ flight, kept his eyes to the skies for hours, and soon he knew their long names and could correct me. Except, at sixteen, I never liked to be corrected.

But my brother showed me the work, and I had to learn to give. Give him all I could as my elders did for me.

So I tugged on my heart to let go, as I knew he had earned Eagle Eyes more than I ever could. And what I found instead was new room, for a new name.

I am Siwa’köl, storyteller.

And my brother, he is Eagle Eyes.

I tell his tales and mine so someday when we join the elders, my stories may be told and his birds can take to the sky.

But for now, I will share with you my story so that you can know who you are—and maybe you are Siwa’köl too.
The Ache

A fatherless child will do almost anything to receive approval from the world.

A nod
or really
any sign of recognition
would cause me to put my own life in danger.

Once
I let my sister lift me
on top of both of her extended feet
in the middle of the dark
of our shared pink and white bedroom.

She mimicked a rickety resemblance of Superman
her legs locked at the knee
and me, dangling in the air
both her hands holding tight my wrists.

I lie back on the soles of her feet
let her kick me up into the night’s jawline.

I landed hard against a plank
splintered against the edge
of our new and exposed steel bed frame.

My forearm split itself into a welcome flood
blood spilling like a song
and I swore I could hear my father sing.
This Is the Honey

There is no room on this planet for anything less than a miracle
We gather here today to revel in the rebellion of a silent tongue
Every day, we lean forward into the light of our brightest designs
 & cherish the sun
Praise our hands & throats
   each incantation, a jubilee of a people dreaming wildly
Despite the dirt
beneath our feet
or the wind
pushing against
our greatest efforts

Soil creates things
Art births change
This is the honey
   & doesn’t it taste like a promise?
Where your heart is an accordion
   & our laughter is a soundtrack

Friend, dance to this good song—
look how it holds our names!

Each bone of our flesh-homes sings welcome

O look at the Gods dancing
   as the rain reigns against a steely skyline

Where grandparents sit on the porch & nod at the spectacle
in awe of the perfection of their grandchildren’s faces
Each small discovery unearthed in its own outpour
Tomorrow our daughters will travel the world with each poem
   & our sons will design cities against the backdrops of living museums
    Yes! Our children will spin chalk until each equation bursts a familial
    tree

Rooted in miraculous possibilities
& alive
Invisible Children

Invisible children fall
through the cracks of the system
like Alice in the rabbit hole.
But these children won’t find
an eat-me cake or a drink-me bottle.
They won’t wake up on the lap
of a loving sister.
They’ll open their eyes on the hand
of a monster called Negligence
who’ll poke them with its sharp teeth
and bait them with its heartless laughter,
like a wild thing in a wild rumpus.
But the children won’t awake
to the smell of a warm supper,
nor will they find a purple crayon
to draw an escape door or a window.
Instead they’ll make a mirror
of a murky puddle on the city street
which won’t tell them they’re beautiful
but it’ll show their scars, as invisible to others
as these children are.
The Line of Fire

our children in the line of fire
scrambling for their lives
while we dreamily polish our guns
reminders of the good old days
when we lived in the wild west
when war was a synonym of greatness
when guns didn’t fire eight hundred rounds a minute
we cherish the smell of red brass and gunpowder
as our children practice hiding in closets
learning to shiver and cry in silence
instead of multiplication facts
we pat our sweet babies’ heads
and send them off to the line of fire
War

War
War Motive
War Marvel
War Mother
War Martyr
War Mourning
War Money
War Monger
War Murder
War Monster
War Monster
War Monster
Monster
Illustration by Jolene (Bean) Nenibah Yazzie
At the Student Poetry Reading

I guess you could call me broken, says one. I’m still lonely, says another, but now I can name it with a song.

In my poem, says another, I can forget I am forgotten. Now I understand being misunderstood, says another. And another says, in a bold, undeniable voice of power, I won’t step down from myself again.

And they are beautiful, beautiful, standing one by one at the mic where they have come forth at last from behind the curtain.
Equinox: Greta in Poland

Because they were rich and clever, all the ambassadors designed an echo chamber of glass and platitudes, and took turns denying the future. And because they were old, only the next few years mattered, and so they pushed around tarnished words like chess pieces in their narrow grid:

*progress, growth, stability*—

words any child could see were obscene, were a screen obscuring catastrophe. So Greta stood and showed them what maturity looks like, what truth sounds like, what leadership feels like, and then she went home to change us.
Before the Rains Had Come

The design committee for making the world had stalled with the problem of drought. “We have the sea over here, the desert over there—how many roads do we need, how many trucks, how many miles of pipe?”

At the back of the great hall stood the daughter of the doorman, who had brought him supper. She pulled him down to whisper in his ear her dream of the mystery of mist. “My child,” he whispered, “that makes no sense at all.”
She told me, Mama, I want to see the world. I told her, Go. When she returned she said: I saw barefoot women carry water from village to village, saw men limp from border to border, saw children disappear in tunnels that lead to freedom, or so they hoped. I saw families who lost everything, even what they dreamed they’d have one day. Saw history hide its shame in the huts of poor people. And one night, I saw girls count stomachs swelled up like small balloons, while boys played with empty soda cans. They were so hungry. I saw madness. I told her, What a terrible world. She told me, It’s also in that world that I saw the sky speak to the wind, the wind to the sea, the sea to the waves, and the waves to rising souls that sang with voices so clear, everything took flight. Mama, you have to be brave to see. In their phenomenal eyes, I saw a promising world.
I’d like to be a shrine, so I can learn from peoples’ prayers the story of hearts. I’d like to be a scarf so I can place it over my hair and understand other worlds. I’d like to be the voice of a soprano singer so I can move through all borders and see them vanish with every spell-binding note. I’d like to be light so I illuminate the dark. I’d like to be water to fill bodies so we can gently float together indefinitely. I’d like to be a lemon, to be zest all the time, or an olive tree to shimmer silver on the earth. Most of all, I’d like to be a poem, to reach your heart and stay.
Others Are Us

He said I was different because I was dark. She said I was different because I wore a scarf. He said I was different because I had an accent. She said I was different because I couldn’t read. He said I was different because I stuttered. She said I was different because I couldn’t hear or speak. He said I was different because I should be a girl. She said I was different because I should be a boy. We are all different so doesn’t that mean we are the same? I mean it’s like heartbeats, we all share the same beats per minute but not exactly.
Truth is I would like to escape myself.

Detach my body from my skin,

peel it layer by layer to uncover

beneath the surface of petals

and thorns piled up year after year,

who I am and who I want to be.

I want to be the flower that grows

in dirt, the feather that flies free between

the cracks of fences. A wise woman

once told me, *don’t worry about you,*

*don’t worry about who you could be.*

I want to be the woman who sits

on a desk and writes pieces of oceans,

rivers on a white space in a place

where imagination has no border.
Illustration by Linda Dalal Sawaya
My Rock

Summer’s ending.

I sit on my desert rock, listen
to the world’s hum.
Crows and ravens caw,
finches and sparrows chirp. A dog barks.

Can I face
the halls of judgments?

A breeze strokes my face,
brings me back to spiders
and lizards busy at their chores,
private conversations—
sights and sounds I savor.
This earth, my home.

High on the vast blue canvas,
clouds curl, float.

Taking a deep breath, I gather myself.
I bring what I am.
The Only Me

Spinning through space for eons,
our earth—oceans, rivers, mountains,
glaciers, tigers, parrots, redwoods—
evolving wonders.

And our vast array, generations
of humans—all shapes, colors, languages.

Can I be the only me?

Our earth: so much beauty, hate,
goodness, greed.

“Study. Cool the climate,” advises my teacher.
“Grow peace.”

Can I be the only me,
become all my unique complexity?
Chera Hammons

Clarinet

Apart, we are two quiet things:
a person and an instrument.
I in my body,
the clarinet in its case.

We are like good friends.
The clarinet takes nothing away from me.
It lets me borrow its notes.

If I loan it my breath,
I can speak with its sweet voice.
Together, we will make a world
full of song.
my grandfather and home

I

my grandfather used to count the days for return with his fingers
he then used stones to count
not enough
he used the clouds birds people

absence turned out to be too long
thirty six years until he died
for us now it is over seventy years

my grandpa lost his memory
he forgot the numbers the people
he forgot home

II

i wish i were with you grandpa
i would have taught myself to write you
poems volumes of them and paint our home for you
i would have sewn you from soil
a garment decorated with plants
and trees you had grown
i would have made you
perfume from the oranges
and soap from the skys tears of joy
couldnt think of something purer

III

i go to the cemetery every day
i look for your grave but in vain
are they sure they buried you
or did you turn into a tree
or perhaps you flew with a bird to the nowhere
IV

i place your photo in an earthenware pot
i water it every monday and thursday at sunset
i was told you used to fast those days
in ramadan i water it every day
for thirty days
or less or more

V

how big do you want our home to be
i can continue to write poems until you are satisfied
if you wish i can annex a neighboring planet or two

VI

for this home i shall not draw boundaries
no punctuation marks
Things You May Find Hidden in My Ear

For Alicia M. Quesnel, MD

I

When you open my ear, touch it gently.
My mother’s voice lingers somewhere inside.
Her voice is the echo that helps recover my equilibrium
when I feel dizzy during my attentiveness.

You may encounter songs in Arabic,
poems in English I recite to myself,
or a song I chant to the chirping birds in our backyard.

When you stitch the cut, don’t forget to put all these back in my ear.
Put them back in order as you would do with books on your shelf.

II

The drone’s buzzing sound,
the roar of an F-16,
the screams of bombs falling on houses,
on fields, and on bodies,
of rockets flying away—
rid my small ear canal of them all.

Spray the perfume of your smiles on the incision.
Inject the song of life into my veins to wake me up.
Gently beat the drum so my mind may dance with yours,
my doctor, day and night.
You are the ice cream sandwich connoisseur of your generation.

Blessed are your floral shorteralls, your deeply pink fanny pack with travel-size lint roller just in case.

Level of splendidferous in your outfit: 200.

Types of invisible pain stemming from adolescent disasters in classrooms, locker rooms, & quite often Toyota Camrys: at least 10,000.

You are not a jigglypuff, not yet a wigglytuff.

Reporters & fathers call your generation “the worst.”

Which really means “queer kids who could go online & learn that queer doesn’t have to mean disaster.”

Or dead.

Instead, queer means, splendidferously, you.

& you means someone who knows that common flavors for ice cream sandwiches in Singapore include red bean, yam, & honeydew.

Your powers are great, are growing.

One day you will create an online personality quiz that also freshens the breath.

The next day you will tell your father, You were wrong to say that I had to change.

To make me promise I would. To make me promise.

& promise.
The School of the Unschoolable

See the stars nightly
disobeying the night.

Watch the pattering rain
sketch an anarchist’s
map to the future, then
unpattern it away—

an anarchist’s revision.

Praise my mother

who wears a plaid hoodie
over a polka dot sweater
over a simply
brown sweater.

Praise your fashion icon,

though I doubt she’s
as iconoclastic.

Prove my doubt

so wrong.

Call the sun
the heterophobe
it’s always been.

Never stop babbling
to old friends or
fields about your earliest

whiff of banana bread.

Lick the sad
from the sea & on
a Tuesday.
Flabbergast
in some earthly

mouthful of a way
& tonight.
the world is about to end and my grandparents are in love

still, living like they orbit one another,
my grandfather, the planet, & grandma, his moon assigned
by some gravitational pull. they have loved long enough
for a working man to retire. grandma says she’s not tired,
she wears her husband like a coat that survives every season,
talks about him the way my parents talk about vinyl—
the subject salvaged by the tent of their tongues.
grandma returns to her love like a hymn, marks it with a color.

when the world ends will it suck the earth of all its love?
will i go taking somebody’s hand,
my skin becoming their skin?
the digital age is taking away our winters,

and i’m afraid the sun is my soulmate,
that waste waits for a wet kiss,
carbon calls me pretty, and i think
death is a good first date.

i hope when the world ends it leaves them be,
spares grandpa and his game,
grandma spinning corn into weight,

the two of them reeling into western
theme songs, the TV louder
than whatever’s coming.
anthem for my belly after eating too much

i look in the mirror, and all the chips i’ve eaten
this month have accumulated
like schoolwork at the bottom of my tummy,
my belly—a country i’m trying to love.
my mouth is a lover devoted to you, my belly, my belly
the birds will string a song together
with wind for you and your army
of solids, militia of grease.
americans love excess, but we also love jeans,
and refuse to make excess comfortable in them.
i step into a fashionable prison,
my middle managed and fastened into
suffering. my gracious gut,
dutiful dome, i will wear a house for you
that you can live in, promise walls
that embrace your growing flesh,
and watch you reach toward everything possible.
tribute for when i’m quiet

quiet is a mouth i screw onto my mouth
quiet, a twin spinning my evil
quiet, a snake i hold without flinching
i treat my quiet like a pocket knife
quiet, a blade i sharpen and consider
ready my quiet for any jaw
quiet, a suspect i bring into questioning
quiet, a fire i use for cooking
quiet, this country i defend
quiet, a law i have written
quiet, so i am told by every man
who will surely kill me
quiet prayer in the mouth of all my victims
i am so quiet
mice make a simile out of me
Nikki Grimes

The Last Word

I am a door of metaphor
waiting to be opened.
You’ll find no lock, no key.
All are free to enter, at will.
Simply step over the threshold.
Remember to dress for travel, though.
Visitors have been known
to get carried away.
Stomp

I come home,
feet about to bleed
from angry stomping.
“Boy!” says Mom.
“Quit making all that racket.”
But what does she expect
when, day after day,
haters sling words at me
like jagged stones
designed to split my skin?
I retreat to my room,
collapse on the bed,
count, “One. Two. Three…”
When I get to ten,
I snatch up journal and pen,
flip to a clean page,
and unload my hurt, my rage
’til I can breathe, again.
Letter by letter,
I rediscover
my power to decide
which words matter,
which words don’t,
and whose.
Calm, now, I remember:
I get to choose.
I am hardly ever able
to sort through my memories
and come away whole
or untroubled.
It is difficult
to sift through the stones,
the weighty moments and know
which is rare gem,
which raw coal,
which worthless shale or slate.
So, one by one,
I drag them across the page
and when one cuts into the white,
leaves a trail of blood,
no matter how narrow the stream,
then I know
I’ve found the real thing,
the diamond,
one of the priceless gems
my pain produced.
“There! There,” I say,
“is a memory worth keeping.”
We all have the same little bones in our foot twenty-six with funny names like navicular. Together they build something strong—our foot arch a pyramid holding us up. The bones don’t get casts when they break. We tape them—one phalange to its neighbor for support. (Other things like sorrow work that way, too—find healing in the leaning, the closeness.) Our feet have one quarter of all the bones in our body. Maybe we should give more honor to feet and to all those tiny but blessed cogs in the world—communities, the forgotten architecture of friendship.
Illustration by Neebinnauskzhik Southall
Blue Earth Banks

Mankato, MN, my hometown, is the site of the largest mass execution ever on US soil: a platform, 38 men hung, jeers and sneers of the masses. This is the aftermath of the US Dakota War. Growing up I remember a small plaque, referring to this historical event, lay hidden among the library shadows. Now, a public library sits on this site next to the Minnesota River—a waterway encased in blue clay shores. These are the voices I heard: the 38 Dakota. I hope we always remember the stories and lives of the Original People.

Their memory, do not let it lie fallow
On the blue earth banks
Which caught the 38 tears
As they spilled, shedding death amid jeers.
Mother absorbed them,
Heard them,
Entwined them in the River Minnesota.
Oh, Mankato. My Mankato, what have you done?
The shades of flesh are not
Red
Nor
White
But
Honor and dishonor,
Truth and deceptions,
Peace and fury.
So, Mother, continue your burial.
Swallow the 38 into your blue earthen clay,
Molding a fount to hold the tears:
Washing out the words *sioux uprising* and *dakota conflict*.

Mother, clasp the vibrations
Of their last voices rising to sing,
*I am here!*
From the water’s edge,
Let all remember and hear your funeral dirge in the currents of the River Minnesota.
Ode to Langston

Langston, we too, sing Turtle Island.

We are the 574 Nations.
They want to hide us
In the past tense,
Yet we love,
And dream,
And are still here.

Today, now,
We are at the oval table
As our women lead.
Nobody can ever
Say to us,
“Natives lived, Natives ate, drank, led.”
We are present tense.

Because,
They will know what we’ve always known
And be humbled—

We, too, sing Turtle Island.
This Body II

My body is
perfect and
imperfect and
black and
girl and
big and
thick hair and
short legs and
scraped knee and
healed scar and
heart beating and
hands that hold and
voice that bellows and
feet that dance and
arms that embrace and
my momma’s eyes and
my daddy’s smile and
my grandma’s hope and

my body is masterpiece and
my body is mine.

Elizabeth Acevedo

A Daughter Named After Nina

voice of incoming 2 express train

pray herself altar

contort mouth shotgun:

sawed off a saw

soften tongue songbird

hands mosaicked mirrors

donning skin like battle gear

dawning skin like evening gown

this name pinned on her shoulders;

a heavy mantle. an incantation.
Manhunt or Ode to First Kisses

it was always the older kids
running to Riverside,
hiding behind trees and underneath

jungle gyms, holding their breath
in the darkness as the other team
tried to find them.

I could not wait to be old enough;
a captor’s arms clasping.
Manhunt, manhunt 1, 2, 3.

This poem asks me to turn
the compass in a different direction:
perhaps commentary on police

or the assaults
that happen in the dark
when children play games

while adults sip beers and
summer unrolls a carpet
into the worst of memories.

But no. Sometimes
being honest means offering
more than one draft.

The game was
a different kind of winning:
the chase about the waiting,

wanting to hear a
countdown softly whispered
as the July air
stuck our baby hairs
to our necks, and everything
was playful in the damp.
Respectability

We ask our children
to act calm/nervous/whatever
innocent looks like when
some cop shows his badge/pulls his gun/slows his car.

We beg kids
to say soft yes sirs.
We beg kids
to get on the hood of that car/empty their pockets/shut up/put your hands
behind your head.

No is an existential threat.
No is an existential threat.
No is an existential threat.
No is an existential threat.

Never is an existential threat.
Never is an existential threat.
Never is an existential threat.
Never is an existential threat.

We dare ask for humility
in the face of this oppression?
We have no idea what the threat feels like,
but we know

Breonna
Rekia
Sandra
Nia
Bettie
Yvette
Miriam
Shereese
Ahmaud
Trayvon
Eric
Laquan
Michael
Philando
Stephon
Alton
Amadou
Akai
Quintonio
Rumai
John
Jordan
Jonathan
Reynaldo
Kendrec
Ramarley
Kenneth
Robert
Walter
Terence
Freddie
Samuel
George
Tamir
and more
and more
and more

There's no open wrist declaring our innocence that will confer peace where innocents need.

Our children
stand in front of doors/pages/words/in the streets.
They shut down/they shut down/they shut down
the forces that burn against them.
School—12:15

Imagine the lunchroom, crowded and wary— seating charts a welcome apprehension.

Loose-leaf papers spiraled from ballpoint-scratched notebook covers until the last hour, when a teacher sighed and sighed.

Today, we close our backpacks, but minutes come quick and quit the ease of dawn.
The Summer You Learned to Swim

For Lea

The summer you learned to swim
was the summer I learned to be at peace with myself.
In May you were afraid to put your face in the water
but by August, I was standing in the pool once more
when you dove in, then retreated to the wall saying
You forgot to say Sugar! So I said Come on Sugar, you can do it
and you pushed off and swam to me and held on
laughing, your hair stuck to your cheeks—
you hiccupsed with joy and swam off again.
And I dove in too, trying new things.
I tried not giving advice. I tried waking early to pray. I tried
not rising in anger. Watching you I grew stronger—
your courage washed away my fear.
All day I worked hard thinking of you.
In the evening I walked the long hill home.
You were at the top, waving your small arms,
pittering down the slope to me and I lifted you high
so high to the moon. That summer all the world
was soul and water, light glancing off peaks.
You learned the turtle, the cannonball, the froggy, and the flutter
and I learned to stand and wait for you to swim to me.
Who Will Tell Them?

It turns out you can kill the earth,
Crack it open like an egg.
It turns out you can murder the sea,
Poison your own children
Without even thinking about it.

Goodbye passenger pigeon, once
So numerous men threw nets over trees
And fed you to pigs. Goodbye
Cuckoo bird who lays eggs
In the nests of strangers.

Goodbye elephant bird
Who frightened Sinbad.
Goodbye wigeon,
Curlew, lapwing, crake.
Goodbye Mascarene coot.
Sorry we never had a chance to meet.

Who knew you could wipe out
Everything? Who knew
You could crack the earth open
Like an egg? Who knew
The endless ocean
Was so small?

Right now, there are children playing on the shore.
There are children lying in hospital beds.
There are children trusting us.
Who will tell them what we’ve done?
Linda Sue Park

Red-Crowned Crane

Rare cranes have flourished in the world’s unlikeliest sanctuary, the heavily mined demilitarized zone between North and South Korea.
—Smithsonian Magazine

curve and swoosh
of wondrous white
brushstroked black
the throat and wings

modest cap of scarlet

stretch and flap
a regal span
dance romance
on chopstick legs

elegant and awkward

nest and stalk
between the mines
screech and whoop
past endless loops

of shining razor wire
Nowhere Else to Go

Turn off the lights.
Wear another layer.
(Sounds like a dad.)
(Sounds like a mom.)

You say hand-me-down.
I say retro.

Walk.
Bike.
Walk some more.
Recycle.

(See what I did there, bike—recycle?)

Your name in Sharpie
on a good water bottle.
Backpack. New habits.
*No thanks, don’t need a bag.*

What else.
Oh yeah.

Tell ten friends
who can tell ten friends
who can tell ten friends …
Make enough noise,

maybe the grown-ups
will finally hear

the scream in the title.
Padma Venkatraman

Undone

They ignored the new boy, snickering behind his back.

In silence, I stayed safe.
My lips pressed together.

Growing bolder, they pierced him with arrow-sharp words.

I pretended I hadn't heard.

They twisted his arms. One word escaped his lips before they dragged him out of sight, out of earshot: “Cowards!”

I ran away.

All the words I didn’t say haunt me every day.
Whenever you see a tree

Think
how many long years
this tree waited as a seed
for an animal or bird or wind or rain
to maybe carry it to maybe the right spot
where again it waited months for seasons to change
until time and temperature were fine enough to coax it
to swell and burst its hard shell so it could send slender roots
to clutch at grains of soil and let tender shoots reach toward the sun
Think how many decades or centuries it thickened and climbed and grew
taller and deeper never knowing if it would find enough water or light
or when conditions would be right so it could keep on spreading leaves
adding blossoms and dancing
Next time
you see
a tree
think
how
much
hope
it holds
The Care and Feeding of Poetry

Nurturing poetry is like bringing a wild creature indoors. We need to learn which leaves, fruits, and flowers it can eat, and which will make it sick, or destroy its free spirit. In other words, poetry is an experience, not a genre. Poetry is a form of exploration, with intuitive and natural aspects that are often neglected while poets—or teachers—focus on specific skills. Poetry, like peace, is personal. No two poets interpret a subject in exactly the same way, and each individual poet is likely to interpret her own poem differently on two different days. She might not be able to tell you what her verse means, but she will be able to describe how she felt while leading a wild creature across a bridge of words from her mind to yours.

Poetry is interactive. The open spaces between lines and stanzas are filled with echoes like the resonance after ringing a bell. Those spaces hold the poet’s emotions, as well as the reader’s. Poetry, in other words, is music. Rhythm. Melody. Lyrics. Birdsong. Hoofbeats. Heartbeats.

When a teacher asks students what a poem means, the joy of hearing music might be lost, and fears of failing to interpret “correctly” can be triggered. Instead of “What does this poem mean?” I suggest asking, “How does the poem make you feel?” Music is a fluctuating, emotional experience, not a rigid formula that always produces identical results.

When I was little, I wrote poetry because my mother read poetry to me. I wrote outdoors, my poems moving to the rhythm of my own footsteps, scribbling in my mind rather than on paper. As a teenager, I was allowed to write poetry on the walls of my room. It never occurred to me that poetry could be disdained, until I was placed in a high school honors creative writing class where the teacher said of my sonnet sequence about snails that snails were not a noble enough subject for the form. I disagreed. I loved nature. What could be more heroic than a small, slow creature facing life bravely?

For many years after taking that honors class, I kept my poems secret. Fortunately, in graduate school, Tomás Rivera taught me that it’s fine to write from the heart without caring about anyone’s judgment, without worrying about publication, without feeling caged by expectations.

So how can we, as adults, help children preserve their natural love of rhythm, rhyme, and other aspects of musical language? We can encourage them to let their words flow. We can offer the three Ps: peaceful surroundings, a pencil (or pen), and paper. If they’re serious about writing, they’ll eventually learn to revise. They’ll read, read, read, simply because they love poems and stories. They’ll practice, practice, practice, just like any other artist, musician, actor, or athlete who would never dream of performing in public without rehearsing, training, learning, and improving.

If children end up with awkward rhymes, adults can guide them toward
other forms, such as free verse, tanka, and haiku. We can show them how to use internal rhymes, near rhymes, or vowel rhymes, which often sound more natural than end rhymes. When they don’t know what to write about, we can take them outdoors, where nature never fails to work its magic by engaging all five senses.

Children and poetry were born to love each other. All we need to do is offer room to grow, so that words can flow freely, like wild creatures returning to their natural habitat.
Illustration by Raúl Colón
Contributors

Mosab Abu Toha* is a Palestinian poet, short story writer, and essayist from Gaza. He’s the founder of the Edward Said Library. In 2019–2020, Abu Toha was a visiting poet and librarian-in-residence at Harvard University.


Nour Al Ghraowi* is a Syrian writer, activist, and educator. Her poetry and essays have appeared in *Dame Magazine, Mizna, Porter House Review*, and others. She writes about social justice, migrant identity, and in the hope of changing the Western view of the Middle East and the Arabic language, which are often viewed as inimical.

Weshoyot Alvitre* is an author and illustrator from the Tongva tribe of Southern California. Her work focuses an Indigenous lens on projects from children’s books to adult market graphic novels.

Kimberly Blaeser* is a former Wisconsin Poet Laureate and has published five poetry collections, including *Résister en dansant/Ikwe-niimi: Dancing Resistance* (Ed Lisieres, 2020) and *Copper Yearning* (Holy Cow! Press, 2019). Founder of In-Na-Po (Indigenous Nations Poets), Blaeser teaches at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee and Institute of American Indian Arts.

Tina Boyer Brown is the managing director of the arts conservatories and creative writing department head at the Chicago High School for the Arts. Her work has appeared in *Jet Fuel Review, RHINO*, and *Waxwing Magazine*.

Mahogany L. Browne is the executive director of Bowery Poetry, artistic director of Urban Word NYC, and poetry coordinator at St. Francis College. Browne is the author of *Chlorine Sky* (Crown Books for Young Readers, 2021) and *Woke: A Young Poet’s Call to Justice* (Roaring Brook Press, 2020).

Chen Chen’s debut collection, *When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities* (BOA Editions, 2017), was longlisted for the National Book Award and won the Thom Gunn Award. He teaches at Brandeis University.

Raúl Colón* lives north of New York City with his beautiful wife, Edith, who can often be spotted as the model for his characters. New York City has been Colón’s loyal patron, from illustrated *New Yorker* covers to an MTA mural at
the 191st Street subway station. Colón is a prolific children’s book illustrator and has illustrated a book for Dr. Jill Biden, now the First Lady of the US.

Lisa Desimini* graduated from the School of Visual Arts and is an award winning writer and/or illustrator of thirty-five books for children. Her work has also graced the cover of many book jackets.

Cornelius Eady is a poet, playwright, and songwriter who was born in Rochester, New York. His poetry collections include Brutal Imagination (G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 2001) and Victims of the Latest Dance Craze (Ommation Press, 1986), winner of the Lamont Prize. He is cofounder of the Cave Canem Foundation and is a professor of English at SUNY Stony Brook Southampton.

Margarita Engle* is the Cuban American author of many verse novels, most recently Your Heart, My Sky (Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2021). She was the Poetry Foundation’s 2017–2019 Young People’s Poet Laureate. Her awards include the Neustadt Prize and a Newbery Honor.

Heid E. Erdrich is the author of Little Big Bully (Penguin Books, 2020), a National Poetry Series winner. She is the editor of New Poets of Native Nations (Graywolf Press, 2018). Erdrich is Ojibwe enrolled at Turtle Mountain.

Nikki Grimes* is a New York Times bestselling author whose books include Bronx Masquerade (Dial, 2002), winner of the Coretta Scott King Author Award. Her 2019 memoir is Ordinary Hazards (Wordsong).

Rudy Gutierrez*’s art has been published and exhibited worldwide. Among his awards are a Gold Medal from the Society of Illustrators, Dean Cornwell Recognition Hall of Fame Award, Caldecott Honor Award, Pura Belpré Award, and Africana Book Award for his children’s books. He teaches at Pratt Institute.

Chera Hammons* received a 2017 PEN Texas Southwest Book Award. Her third poetry collection is Maps of Injury (Sundress Publications, 2020).

Nathalie Handal’s* recent poetry books include Life in a Country Album (2019), winner of the 2020 Palestine Book Award, and the flash collection The Republics (2015), winner of the Arab American Book Award. Both are from the University of Pittsburgh Press.

Kara Jackson is a singer/songwriter, musician, and writer from Oak Park, Illinois. Jackson served as the third National Youth Poet Laureate from 2019–2020. She is the author of Bloodstone Cowboy (Haymarket Books, 2019).
Colin Laurel is a Black trans illustrator working in editorial, licensing, posters, and social justice. Throughout his work, he explores identity, culture, mental health, and advocates for self-help through making art. Laurel hopes that his practice will inspire others to use creative solutions as a means for therapy and liberation.

Mariana Llanos is a Peruvian-born writer based in Oklahoma. She has published several children's books including Run, Little Chaski (Barefoot Books, 2021) and Luca's Bridge (Penny Candy Books, 2019).

Rafael López was born in Mexico City and is an internationally recognized illustrator and artist. He is a founder of the Urban Art Trail movement, designed to add color and art to his San Diego neighborhood. Mariachi (2022) is López’s most recent stamp project for the US Postal Service.

Pat Mora has written books for adults, teens, and children. In 1996, Mora founded Children's Day, Book Day, a year-long initiative to connect all children to bookjoy. Culminating celebrations are held across the country on April 30th.

Marilyn Nelson’s recent and forthcoming books are Augusta Savage: The Shape of a Sculptor’s Life (Henry Holt & Co., 2022), Papa’s Free Day Party (Just Us Books, 2021), and Lubaya’s Quiet Roar (Dial, 2020).

Naomi Shihab Nye is the current Young People’s Poet Laureate through the Poetry Foundation. Her most recent books are Everything Comes Next: Collected & New Poems (Greenwillow Books, 2020), Cast Away (Greenwillow Books, 2020), and The Tiny Journalist (BOA Editions, 2019).

Linda Sue Park is the author of many books for young readers, including the Newbery Medal title A Single Shard (Clarion Books, 2001). Her most recent book is The One Thing You’d Save (Clarion Books, 2021), a story told in a series of linked poems.

Dawn Quigley is an enrolled member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Ojibwe. She lives in Minnesota.

James Ransome has illustrated over seventy books for children. His newest, which he also authored, is The Bell Rang (Atheneum/Caitlyn Dlouhy Books, 2019), which received a Coretta Scott King Illustrator Honor award.

Edel Rodriguez is a Cuban American artist who has exhibited internationally. Inspired by personal history, religious rituals, politics, memory, and nostalgia, his works examine identity, cultural displacement, and mortality.
Luis Daniel Salgado* is a Houston native. Salgado earned his Master in Fine Arts at Texas State University in May 2020.

Linda Dalal Sawaya* is the youngest of five daughters of Lebanese immigrants from the picturesque mountain village of Douma and is an artist, writer, gardener, and cook living in Portland, Oregon.

Joyce Sidman* received a Newbery Medal for Dark Emperor and Other Poems of the Night (Houghton Mifflin Books for Children, 2010) and the National Council of Teachers of English Award for Excellence in Children’s Poetry for her body of work. She teaches poetry in schools in Minnesota.

Cedar Sigo is a member of the Suquamish Tribe. He was the Bagley Wright lecturer for 2019. A book of these lectures, titled Guard the Mysteries (Wave Books), will be published in June. He is currently a mentor in the MFA program at Institute of American Indian Arts.

Michael Simms* is the founder of Autumn House Press and the founding editor of Vox Populi. His most recent collection of poems is American Ash (Ragged Sky, 2020).

Neebinaukzhik Southall* is a member of the Chippewas of Rama First Nation and is a graphic designer, artist, photographer, and writer based in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Kim Stafford* has published a dozen books, including Singer Come from Afar (Red Hen Press, 2021), and was Oregon’s poet laureate from 2018–2020. He teaches and travels to raise the human spirit through poetry.


Suma Subramaniam* lives in Seattle and is a children’s and young adult author. She received her MFA in Writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts.

Jillian Tamaki* is a cartoonist and illustrator living in Toronto, Canada. Her most recent picture book is Our Little Kitchen (Harry N. Abrams, 2020).

Ari Tison* is a Bribri American poet, essayist, and autoethnographer. She is the author of the young adult hybrid novel Saints of the Household (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2023). She belongs to the Bribri people, an Indigenous tribe of Costa Rica.
Rhea Vega* is a visual artist based in California. She draws inspiration from her mixed, indigenous heritage, creating empowerment through vibrant images on the canvas. Currently her favorite mediums are acrylic and charcoal, and she is now exploring digital art.


Renée Watson* is a New York Times bestselling author. Her books for young readers have received several awards and international recognition, including a Coretta Scott King Award and Newbery Honor.

Tanaya Winder is the author of Words Like Love (University of New Mexico Press, 2021) and is a winner of the 2010 Orlando Prize in Poetry. Winder is currently working on her third collection. She is Duckwater Shoshone, Pyramid Lake Paiute, and Southern Ute.

Jacqueline Woodson* is the Poetry Foundation’s inaugural Young People’s Poet Laureate. Her New York Times bestselling memoir, Brown Girl Dreaming (Puffin Books, 2016), won the National Book Award, Coretta Scott King Award, NAACP Image Award, and a Newbery Honor. Her adult books include Red at the Bone (Riverhead Books, 2019). From 2018–2019 she was the National Ambassador for Young People's Literature.

Jolene (Bean) Nenibah Yazzie* is of the Diné tribe, and her clan is the Black Streak Forest People born for One Who Walks Around. Yazzie is a self-taught artist currently residing in Farmington, New Mexico, with her wife and their furry critters. She is one state away from receiving a Bachelor’s degree in journalism, with a media interest in photojournalism.

* First appearance in Poetry
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