

2013

Leaves and shrapnel

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LEAVES AND SHRAPNEL

A Thesis

Presented to

Eastern Washington University

Cheney, Washington

In Partial Fulfillment of the requirements

for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts in Poetry

By

Michael Luke Belch

Spring 2013

THESIS OF MICHAEL BELCH APPROVED BY

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MASTER'S THESIS

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Christopher Howell and Jonathan Johnson for their guidance, support, and instruction over the last two years. I would also like to thank those classmates who helped in critiquing the poems in this collection. Last, I want to thank my wife, Becky, for allowing me to focus so entirely on this project.

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Leaves and Shrapnel

Dim

*And when we look ahead, expecting light,
as oft as not there's only grimy glass
and dirty, broken windows to excite.*

*And when we reach for what's to come, alas
sharp, shattered expectations slice our hands
until the pain and murkiness surpass*

*the gasping flame of hope that yet commands
us carry on in Sisyphus' last rite,
until we swear off water and drink sand.*

Part One

A Purple Crow

A purple crow stands over
the rubble of my dreams,
scratching my unbearable question
in the dust.

I have prepared myself
for this end, dear ones,
have nothing left to give
now that my stubbly shadow
drifts into nights
of ghosts,
white with longing.

From crucifix wings
the crow whispers
like the hiss
of a steam train
Where is salvation?
Night comes on like
the sha-shunk of the last train
leaving a bombed city.

You see, my darlings,
nothing left,
no magic joys,
no wise roots to plant you among,
only these moments strewn
like debris across the stillness

of these streets
and the shadows of my questions.

Lost Causes

Tree says to fire: I'll stand.
Chicken says to earth: I'll fly, or swim,
or leap out of this picnic basket
and flop across the road.

Earth still spins
around a sun's child support:
heat, photons, the occasional
birthday cake. Still,
all we want is some magic
as we run out of gas.

How to quantify a lack?
The belly rumbles more,
the dark darker,
Eyes dry for days at a time.

We're all together in this
failed petition.
Spiders to bird: Please.
We leap into moonlight,
silk lifelines billowing like anchors.

Distance

Sometimes distance
sails apart
like two dandelion seeds
on August breeze.

The moon turns her dark side
to the stars,
but her face she gives to a sleeping planet.
And behind her, a star winks out –
the moon still smiling
ridiculous and huge.

In 1990, twin girls were born sharing the same
body: two infant cries,
two wrinkled faces,
one overworked heart.
To think the doctor wanted to cut
one from the other in the delivery room,
as though it were better to be alone
than to be alive.

Missing Her

I miss her just now
that she's back.
Funny how one moment can be enough
for memory and regret
to bloom like sweat on the brow,
sharp and blinding.
We have to be this close for distance to hurt.

Remember. We dance still
in August glow.
Crickets and shadows
ease to twilight.
When the moon blushes and steps
from behind horizon's curtain
even bees forget
the sun will blaze tomorrow.

Memory

The moon turns half away.
Tide advances over a town
of carefully constructed sand castles
that cannot answer the question
of who we are.
July evenings
and cool brooks do not speak
our words.

We come to in a home
that is the howl of a coyote.
How long have we stared at dull embers
of each other's eyes
and felt alone?

In the dark
fireflies answer the moon.

Firefly

The symphony of light sounding off
across the field is not a galaxy,
only the glowing echo
of lonely flies. How many
have tried to reach exotic grasses, the
drowsy scent of pine and forest?
One tail sparks longing, another
gall, and how do we know
fireflies don't flash
when they weep?
Maybe, in the hazy swarm
as July shimmers in the afterglow
of sun, one firefly sings
a happy song. She has been to the forest
and returned to the open field ecstatic.
How would we possibly know which one she is?

Out of Place

All the bones and baseball stadiums
and school buses are out of place
again. It's that sense you get
after moving to a new house. By habit,
you open a cupboard for a plate
and find molasses instead.
You think for a startled moment,
This is not my home.

A mother walks into
her lost son's room to look
for some misplaced knick-knack.
For a startled moment she
sees only pez dispensers, dusty trophies,
small brown glasses.
Her mind revolts, tries
to forget, grasps at dust
falling through the sunbeam,
a white sock on the bed,
dirty windows.
Relentlessly memories press in

like gasps after a fight.
Always we carry the sense
that we are out of place –
a father yells himself red,
neighbors exist in the spritz

of sprinklers,
black cars fume around the block again
and again, and I,
holding molasses
stand startled
in some stranger's kitchen.

She Bore Other Sons and Daughters

The mother of regret sits by herself
dying her burial robe blue,
pulling at loose stitches
where the earth will finally creep
through her ribs.

She rocks on her heels, arms clasped
around her shoulders like indigo chains.
The children
have left the world out
all night again and
gone to the fields
grown up.

She's born many
hopes, dashed now.
She bore Cain, the brutal,
who grandfathered wind and fire
from the ground, bent
iron to his will.

She bore the memory of Abel.

She bore Seth, and a hundred great grandchildren
who didn't crush the serpent
or the fear that hope is a child stillborn,
blue and too soon.

The wind calls to her like loss
from the deep veins of the forest,
softly rehearsing memories.
She lets the robe fall, listening again
for the dead to whisper.

The Children are Dancing

The children dance
like yellow petals
falling on the graves
of their parents.

The dance is their lullaby
and the memory of a kiss
their ghostly music.

Tiny tongues nurse
on loss while infants dream
fireflies and eyes
of mothers.

The mothers hear
feet dance like parades
of broken twigs
beating at their graves
like a strangled heart.
And *oh, oh*, the mothers, sing.
Come and sleep with us.

Midnight at the Drive-Through

Ahead of me by the dumpster
a mother smacks a cigarette from a crinkled
red and white box
and three boys press against her legs.
The oldest mimics her,
smacks imagined box and clicks
his thumb like a lighter.
He can't know the nicotine,
not the gesture is what she's after.
The youngest boy laughs though,
and the middle one eyes my #4 combo
as I ease past them towards the street.

We arrange what we know
like a child's treasures
on a windowsill that
cast shadows of ships,
monsters, dark and flying carpets
across the floor.
This miracle of change
is our beatitude,
stars that salt the sky
as clouds roll in.

Losing Her

Sometimes my daughter and I waltz on the beach.
I bow, she curtsies, music rises from across the world.
How gracefully evening serenades the sea.
Does the foam know
those wind-whipped harmonies
are a dirge?

What if the star that winks our cadence
has already burst,
scattering dregs of afterglow
over our wishing?
Would the shattered spindle curse her
even as she reaches almost far enough to touch
evening's first pinprick?

The sun is just over 8 light-minutes from my head, its' half-circle
nesting on the horizon makes up 99.8 percent
of the mass in the solar system. And then there's Jupiter.
We are only an asterisk.
Why can't I simply dance and wish for unicorns?

Until now, I've mostly hidden my faults.
And while she still orbits me,
other lights, brighter,
more massive, threaten to collide.

Her clapping hands will always fit between my fingers, won't they?

I clasp this to my heart.

The next wave laps my ankle and my daughter's hand
slips from mine as she dances up the beach without me.

Mariah, Even Now?

Mariah, where has your daughter gone
and where have you left her?

At the market where you traded
winks for green plantains
and sex for bacon slivers?

On the bus she hid behind
the rough weave and tattered hem
of a stranger's skirt.

What hand followed you home
tugging at your waistline
and your thigh?

Mariah, have you loved
any of your men?

They visit you in the morning
like ghosts
in your children's eyes.

Even now your daughter wakes
to eat bacon and boiled plantains
beside another man.

Dammit, Lorca

The gypsies have left their
impossible colors –
red lipped blue guitar,
obsidian night with its blue tears,
red skirts that whirl their dervish,
and the moon's pale grimace –
to torment me.

Lorca, you must have wept
your words onto the page,
knowing life
cannot follow the flourish
of the gypsy fire dance,
nor feel the devastation
of their crimson llanto.
The pomegranates
of your women's stormy eyes
turn our days to sawdust.

I cannot allow myself
the yellow of your weeping suns,
the deep pathos
that is peril
to the unsure heart.
I mutter my winter
where darkness falls early,
hoping your gypsies will gallop back

and plunge their glowing knives
into the hard clay of my heart.

Dandelion Autonomy

Dandelions have it easy,
no wondering when they'll finally let go,
no fear of fulfilling their purpose,
no moral debates about seeding
the lawn across the street.

Autonomy is our curse I think
while dragging the lawn mower
back up the slope of my front yard.
A little boy with yellow hair stops
in front of me,
picks one of the juicy stems
and holds the bouquet of white seeds
to his mouth. The breath he takes
makes me think the whole world waits.

Last week I stared for hours at a wall
decorated with self portraits
of seventh grade art students –
sphinx noses and mouths like fish on a line.
In one painting blue watercolor background
bled across the bold black edge
of a girl's face, coloring the cheek purple,
like a bruise or makeup.
I recognized the struggle in the paint,
the losing battle to keep the world out,
to keep herself,

herself when the borders blur and run together.

What I really want to know is why
the boy with hair like the sun catches his breath
right before blowing
and drops the dandelion back to the lawn
where it lies under the sky
and waits for some other wind.

Thoughts at Night

There is a distance,
unknown and black
between where I am

and where I need to be.
I sense it in the keen of aspen,
in the urgent fox dash,

in breezes that bring grains of sand
from across the ocean and
salty foam from the bay.

And oh, the nights when stars
seem close enough to leave alone,
when distance between each one is

a finger or two held to my eye,
when something bears down on me
with the hot breath of July.

Does a dandelion seed know where it will land
when it leaps, or is it enough to be
balanced over scurries of field mice,

not thinking about where to land?

Prodigal Sketch

The obvious: pig slop,
hunger, dysentery,
jeering friends,
the paste of dirty
hair and teeth.

The less apparent:
longing
choked back,
hope hurting more
than poverty,
and days of blanking the mind
from the face of a father,
trying not to dream
 anything but pig dreams

Parable

1

A man and a unicycle making their way out of the desert.

The man wonders how to carry a unicycle.

By noon: a beaten man and a refreshed unicycle.

Obituary: a man plowed, tripped, waded
through life's flooded rice field. He owned a unicycle.

2

From their perch at the flaky crest of a sand dune the meerkats laugh.

They say there is no arriving, only moving on.

Chase west like your tail, north like mirage.

Somewhere a man learned to ride the wheel.

He became a unicyclist and rode

every day, farther

over the deep sand of the sun.

The silky meerkats made him a god, tried to raze him.

3

A unicyclist is learning to crawl

under the weight of the wheel

towards ribbons of water.

Years later the meerkats no longer believe in unicycles,
but their pups enjoy evenings on the rusted
ferris wheel and nights
in the haunted pit of bones.

Morning Fear

Morning again
and my first breath
like a purple finch
blown out to sea in a storm,
flapping hard
and falling steadily
to glinting steely waves.

If the tide dragged a finch in, drowned,
right to our feet as we walk
as near each other as we dare,
would we raise a requiem to the sky, spade
a grave on the beach, find
only tiny bird bones
everywhere? –
water rushing in from beneath,
to drag everything back out?

Remorse

1

Rattlesnake does not care
that Red Hawk is sorry
for slicing talons
through his backbone,
that her chicks are hungry.
Rattlesnake is not sorry
that it manages to rake one angry fang
across Hawk's thigh
as they lift into the
hot desert winds.

2

What does it tell you that
Coyote is never sorry,
no matter how many quail
he tempts into the dancing desert?

3

Have you heard of a cactus without spines?
No. Cactus is the dessert's whip,
makes you pay for survival,
for longing after water.

4

A man lost his way in the desert.
Mirage possessed him
for days, sang like wind
caressing fields of maize.
He *was* sorry he'd tried
to cross the sand,
but when he finally stumbled
onto a highway
and flagged a ride out
he turned back,
looking for the shimmery
embrace, the sultry invitation to drink.

5

They say there is no apology
in the desert, the sandy blaze
and sweeping arms of dunes
simply consume.
But I have heard Coyote
crying and the moon
weeps every night.

Part Two

Leaves and Shrapnel

Sometimes there are no words,
only connections.
Mortar blasts, birthday candles,
wildfire licking across a meadow.
Our minds try to make sense, try
to decipher the message.

On a day of impossible blue and yellow,
this crisp hue of tart apple,
someone prepares to jump
from a bridge
while the level is low and dry stones
gasp for air.

We speak our litanies against loss,
that life is what we make it,
that love will bind our brokenness.
In spite of our lore,
leaves streak the air
red and gold and glinting
like shrapnel. Up and down the street
children throw themselves
desperately to the ground,
trying to cover them all.

Those Who Wait

At the shore
the tired sea rises against cliffs.
When the waters fall again
and the sun sets, boats will set out
for the last time.

Many hopes will
fade with that tide
of fishers and warriors
crowding the surf like
driftwood driven in from far lands.

All the people stand at the shore
to watch boats strike into sun
and only one small girl wonders why
with this tapestry of cast gold
spread over the the water
like a melody
there is still war.

The kings stand on cliffs
and laugh down at the ships.
They fling their hammered scepters
at craggy boulders
and drink strong wine and
only one young boy wonders why
kings laugh at so much death.

The watchers at the shore are silent
as rowers strain up sloping waves
until the ships are lost in night.
For a long time everyone waits,
even as rain begins to mist, then comes
in rages and torments and wind
tosses the crowd like ships.

By morning half the people have left
and the kings are drunk and calling
for more wine. They and the leavers
do not believe the boats survived the night.
One small girl and one young boy
step out into the choppy gray sea,
hands held high,
as though they could reach the boats
or offer fists of sand in elegy.

Aftermath

[Two] bodies were recovered about 20 yards apart Thursday morning in a marsh near McLaughlin St.¹

At night the water
like blood, dark and seeping
through arteries of streets,
seemed less fearsome than
wind or hail. Morning,
and the water everywhere still,
cast iron under sky gray
gloom and gray sand left
like clods of dirt after burial.

Where is the gravedigger's shovel?
and large how large must it be?
Did he cast it into the sea
past Staten island or return it, in good
condition back to God
with two young souls.
They, who instead of dying
of a less momentous cause
washed up as though on the shore of Galilee
inexplicably calm.

1. *New York Daily News, November 1, 2012*

Knowing

We whisper our love
into darkness
afraid that in embrace
we are singular
as the black goldfish
in deep shadows of the koi pond.
Our tentative releases flood out
like turbulent debris
left to dry on the scarred bank
or carried down clouded currents.
We are like a woman awakened
after giving birth
by the horror of her empty womb.
We give something vital
to know each other,
like Christ, writhing
there on the cross
to feel our pain.

What Prayer Is Like

At sunset a dog sniffs
in bushes and tall grass.

The dog pauses, perplexed
as its small brain roots

through available smells
for something familiar.

How strange that particles colliding
with the olfactory nerve

bypass memory like
reflex, skipping the mind

so that the essence
rather than image

of thistle, rabbit, mud
flood the dog's nose.

It knows a certain scent,
lost now, in early moonlight.

The dog has never seen the girl,
only the sweater her mother gave the police,

and yet it knows her – static plastic of a slide,
vanilla lotion, sweat

from fear of a stranger.
The dog lives in these scents.

It does not know the terms ‘citywide manhunt’,
‘press release’, or ‘jurisdiction’,

does not know a hundred people
hold their breath

as it pauses to flop its ears.
No amount of coaxing from its handler,

can spur it any faster
or change the agonizing facts:

the scent was there
but now it is gone.

The Desert Again

In the desert again
searching for tracks,
where God might have dragged his feet
tending this rock garden.

The sky black above and grains of stars
marking the silence like headstones.
We are lost in this whirl of galaxy,
this cosmic afterthought.
Lost, but love is here,
circling a black hole
that can only consume.

Under bare feet grainy sand cools.
Night and the moon rise over cactus spines.
How easy if the crickets' scratching
carried the voice I long to hear.

I wait in a womb of darkness
without awareness, absorbing all sounds,
every touch of breeze,
each dry scent of rustled tumbleweed.
This widening plain of night
has left me empty before,
yet here I am,
looking for something luminous
even if it glows far across the cooling sand.

Circles

The way she looked into dark trees
beyond the back fence and wondered
if wolves or sex offenders
would come for her children
is the stalking premonition of our need.
I was ten when I shot a bird's beak away
with a slingshot,
and couldn't finish it off.
I'll let it live, I thought
as I ran home.

When something is killed
blood splatters
as predictably as the roundness
of a ring, as red
as a satellite flaming
over the ocean.
The circles that surround death
are not orbital streaks
nor dark descents of vultures,
but the spinning of the earth again
and again. Every night

something brilliant is gone
and even the moon's pale shoulders
can distract us for only so long.
We trick ourselves as we sleep,

so that dawn becomes a beginning
rather than a plodding on.

Sometimes I envy the beakless bird
as it thrashed and bled out,
how much life it felt in one moment,
like ferrets who mate until they die
from exhaustion, or deer,
flush with terror
as wolves circle in.

Oh, America

How shall we comfort ourselves? - Nietzsche

Evening skews
across frozen grass

like a thing clawing trunks
in the deep forest.

I fear that we are like this,
America, fading

wrongly into night.
The withered leaves of our hands

flutter finally down
on skiffs of scattered breeze,

roots tap for water
in scrapes of dry bedrock,

our wells are dark pits
of fern bones.

Let's call down the shaft
again as we drop the pail,

maybe something is listening
this time.

Where will we go,
when we are thirsty?

What will our children say,
that we were too strong of will

to doubt ourselves?
We have dragged

buckets through dusty cisterns
and passed them to hospitals,

bars, and swimming pools,
as though we had always bathed

in dirt, as though
thirst never compelled

the way a beak shatters a shell
or wings catch a hawk

at the bottom of its plunge.

Dogwood

I could tell you we're like the dogwood,
dropping white petals in our yard.
Blossoms all spring,
then passion and berries in the heat,
and when the air cools, leaves
never quite radiant
but there
behind the maples' fireworks –
and always the dead months.

You tell me friendship, not love,
is the hardest art,
all those tangled brush strokes,
perspective shifting like trees
absorbing a new season.
You ask if by berries I mean sex
and I wonder if you're being coy
or just stubborn. I'd say no:

if we manage to find any ripe berries
before the sparrows take them
home, before the tree
litters them all over the lawn
and the county arborist sprays
white x's on the trunk,
if we do manage to get our tongues
around a berry, it'll never live up

to its hue. It tastes like rind
and too many will make us sick.

Or I'd say yes, at least the dogwood
puts itself out there periodically,
puts on rouge and winks
long leaves at the stoic larch,
wears scarlet, musses its branches,
and whispers to the birds,
we know what these berries are for.

But I'm tired of expecting the dogwood
to blush. I look outside again
and see it's not flowers settling
through sunbeams, but the first snowflakes,
wet and big as petals on the dying grass.

To Say We're Different

is to say we're not the same.

Horsecrap! My grandfather would say, and Mom adds, you know they actually call it shit on the farms. Out there in the fresh air, no one notices the Oakleys I left

when I ran, or the chicken I stole from the coop. But maybe the tractor I ran into the river. It looked so easy to drive – a green lever, a rusted wheel, my heart like rubber balls

thrown in a greenhouse. To say we're all different rejects how we're the same. Yesterday I had to fight off militant vegans while I slaughtered a chicken. Good protein, sure,

but it flaps around guzzling afterlife with such gusto. All we can hope is to thrum through the end like a lost comet. A matter of perspective, perhaps, but all things being equal, we'd all be the same.

I sat in a gray and mauve waiting room wondering what the applicants across from me had that I might not. I hoped they'd piss themselves, saw how they looked at me the same way.

You and I keep saying we want the same things.
But I turn on the lamp to read
and you roll away from the bulb.

Couple's Therapy, Week 2

The therapist read the following from a vividly pictured book:

“By thursday afternoon the flies have begun to menace. The vendors take machetes to their melons, severing them on their rickety tables. *See, see?* says one vendor. *This stench, it's not from my fruit. Surely it is from Juan Pablo's next to me.*

“By Thursday afternoon the children of the vendors have shed their clothes and slosh through the cramped market like drunk flies. They sing as they flit about, *Sí, sí, we are the pigs. We've escaped from the butcher and we do as we please.* The flies and the pigs and Thursday afternoon easing towards sunset.

“The vendors know that soon they will trudge up the mountains to their farms and the new day will find them with spoiled melons and not enough coins for feed or food. They begin forcing their fruit on passersby – thirty five vendors pressing sliced melon into stranger's lips. A swarm of children snatching orange pulp from raised and swatting hands, leaping through stalls with melon-drenched laughter, colonies of flies staking claims in pulpy, green rinds.

“Thursday evening and Juan Pablo kicks the legs from his neighbor's table– laughs like tumbled melon. The neighbor reaches for his curved blade and just like that rust and blood on the breeze. Juan Pablo recoils pleading, *See, see? It was an accident. See? It's only a few melons.*”

The therapist slowly pushes his glasses up and looks at you from the book in silence. Finally he says, “I think we can all agree that the lesson here is self-evident.”

Aftertastes

Salty

While the little carcasses are still fresh,
butchers bring them in from the flies
and pack them in pounds of salt.
Even now they are pampered,
those prize piglets that roamed the forest
rooting for nuts,
fattening to the perfect flavor:
oaky with a hint of fresh acorn,
the brine coming on at the end.

Sweet

Fruit flies swarm small wounds
in the skin of mottled pears.

Rancid

we would say
as the flies dive in.

A ripe banana has been:
green, then appley,
finally sweet.
There's one day for a perfect banana.
After that, bruises,
a wet paste like honey.

Bitter

Our tongues lick into the guts
of a teaspoon
left on the counter. The last of the vanilla
flecks the bottom darkly
like heartburn.

We react violently,
think always, always
why?

Sour

Milk, the way its curds float,
the liquid almost clear.

Lemon zest, somehow synonymous
with clean.

The sweat after love,
reeking of the end.

Dandelion Innocence

I'm tired of watching
dandelion seeds blow by.
I want to join them,
the way they
carpet bomb a lawn with serenity.

Who are dandelions trying to impress?
They only happen
to end up in the fireproof of my neighbor's
windshield or in some sparrow's
tiny stomach. Dandelion seeds will never care.

I wish I was as innocent
of regret, as free.
Even now I can't get past how I betrayed you
on an afternoon like this one – warm breeze
in the curtains, dandelion seeds slipping through
windows and landing
just there, next to me,
silently asking me to fly.

Dandelions List their Grievances

We've been called weeds. We prefer
lawn herb or natural perennial.
We're wholly unrepresented
on postage stamps, murals, state flora lists, and license plates.
Van Gogh painted the sunflowers
while we breezed through his back window
every morning and evening.
It has become fashionable to strip our greens
for salad, add them to the menu,
but never to name a child after us –
as with Heather, Rihanna, Rose.
No one considers our art. We whiz
through evening like sparklers
We dance with abandon and without
fear. "Stop fighting," we say.
"Live," we say.
You only answer with some
'all in one' herbicide
or multi-pronged torture device.
But no one wonders when we rise
from the harvest moon's loamy grave.
We are ignored, expendable, stepped on,
as though we were weeds.

Trying Again with Distance

I don't wake frantically,
flailing to escape
the smell of cheap whiskey
and the battered scruff of leather.
Still, I've sifted through these memories
like a prospector desperate for a strike.
I need to find that I'm like you.

When I was twelve, my mother swam with me in deep lake water.
We are real people she said.

Your dad and I.

We all are.

I remember the cold and darkness below us.
Numbing
like the day
my best friend told me,
that instead of sending students to detention
my father beat them in his office,
after school.

Still twelve: my blowgun in hand and blood
in the hollow of my brother's elbow,
and none of it accidental.

Thirteen: I regret the blushes on cheeks
of girls who caught me peeking
between buttons of their blouses.

I rifled through the underwear drawer
of my mother's friend
while they drank coffee downstairs.
A bird had flown through
an open window. It burst
around the house, then finally against the screen door
straining even then
for what it remembered of freedom.

Story of a Man

The man has come
to believe
he requires answers
in order to plod on.
All he has left
are prayers
scattered about
like rubble
after bombers
thrum through
night skies again
and again.
Sometimes
even the slow swing
of seasons
outpaces his heart.
A moment billows out
like a sail in wind.
The man sees wafers
of autumn leaves
suspended in air,
dredged in the dark wine
of loam, or
rising reverently
as though to trembling lips.
Even now
resurrection labors

as seeds
imagine sun
and the man groans
to bear this strain
of becoming.

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