

RUST & MOTH

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Therianthropy

Perhaps in my past life, I was a salmon.
Belly ablush with lustful yearnings,
my pursuits drive me ever upwards
against currents of opposite intention.
Brackish desires, primally quenched.

An exhausting yet determined rush
for gentler waters of intercourse
interrupted by the appetites of bears
and an impassioned redistribution
of my innards.

I awake, drenched.

For the Queen of Stone Fruits

In Tehran,
you handed me chilled apricots—
their flesh spilling, rust-colored,
skin blushed with heat.
Nimble, they lodged between my thumb
and forefinger, as if I were
their queen, smelling of nectar
and damp earth.
You scooped the stones I would throw
into a bowl, laid each one
on a wooden board, cracked it
open with a single blow.

Then, you extracted the kernel
like a tooth with a fingernail, stripped
its sac to a seed. Oh, how I craved
the crunch, the acrid nut milk—

unveiled by the precision of your hand.
A hand, now frail, age-spotted,
too trembly to lift a glass,
too stiffened to reach my face.

These days, you no longer speak.
You mean to call my name—
a train derailing from its tracks.
So we blow each other kisses,
lay one palm over the heart,
gesturing love.
We leave the apricots
where they belong—
dangling from their boughs.
Spectral.
Half-born.

Time Breaks Everything

Rain softens the Earth's leathered
skin. It comes down in sheets and still
the world burns—it is so beautiful
watching it go up in flames, no one
does anything to stop it.

Last year, sink holes bloomed
like terrible tulips.
The year the ice caps melted,
I sat in my office and watched
cracks form in the plaster, as if
the air had grown roots.

In the background, the radio
occasionally whispered reminders
that *investing in securities involves*
the risk of loss.

Every day people
everywhere lose everything.

The future is fragile,
an egg under a goose's wing.

Change is marked by breakage, no matter
the good in our intentions or our efforts
to the contrary.

Revolution is a name for the act
of harnessing that which is always
pushing toward the light, breaking
the darkness to arrive.

The act of trimming the base of a cup
on the pottery wheel is a way of erasing
your fingerprints from your mistakes,
a way of speeding up time to erode
what hands have touched.

Time's true nature is violence.
I have seen it break everything.
Any one of us would be lucky
to outlast our own teeth.

Because my cup holds my tea,
I ignore the chip on its base.

I keep the honey jar on the table
next to the roses to sweeten
the dying.

Statuary Garden

Some were out stone-cold,
content with sleep, while others seemed
frozen mid-wince, undead the very
 instant of the chisel's bite.

*The victors, she said, write their history,
while the losers must carry the weight—
see the shoulders of this ruined maid?*

He ached the stone's ache.
The arms: gone; the face: no lips, no nose;
 all claimed
by what became that statue's history.

A flashing butterfly stilled,
depositing its sulfur on the absent nose.
 Within an instant,
darting, rising, the delicate wings
faded in the sky. *Could I*
chart the provenance, she resumed,
her eyes still pinned where the bug had been,
of one human soul, would the knowledge
 clarify? or merely...

Calcify, he said. *Right*, she said, *calcify*,
harden like...

She gestured to the statues. Nothing moved.
Nothing moved. No answer came.

The sun flashed sulfur of its own, winked
with passing clouds: a line
of hoary, hooded monks, returning to
their cloisters to illuminate, in silence,
their manuscripts, and write their histories.

Through the gaps in their parade,
each flash came piercing, a jet from a kiln.

Each jet hit garden, hardening
the facts there arranged:

sculpture claims stone;
sculptor claims both.

I left that snake at the island hotel room

so I could visit the zoo,
where the animals
are caged. A low metal fence
pens in the giant tortoise,
big as a coffee table and as far
from the Galápagos scrub and sand
as I am from what I had hoped for.
But, here we are,
making our own paradise,
and even before I lean out
to scratch that old, dry head,
in a move more housecat than reptile,
it's already rising
to meet my fingers,
stout legs straightening
toward tenderness.

This Afternoon at My Mother's

My mother's little dog won't go up to the field with me anymore, not past the shed with its fishing boat growing a green shadow; not even past the mountain ash with its berries shaking their flamboyant booties like the choir of a musical. Maybe it's because of something that happened when she ran away, a mile, a long distance for a tiny dog. Then lost, then gathered into stranger's arms and finally restored. But now she won't go past the small lawns. She doesn't like our voices raised. I'm sure she didn't like my brother yelling, my mother trembling, my mother now tiny like the dog, living a dollhouse life. Remember, my brother lost everything. A fishing pole, an anchor, a kayak, all he's scavenged so far that might be useful. He broods over what the fire took. The little dog shudders in her sleep. Outside, in the summer heat, the cat watches over the garden, the garden which is now empty and has been for years.

St. Christina

Today, March 13th, is my name day, along with all girls
named for Christina. In Poland, my father told me,
the streets were flooded with daffodils
for the other Krysias.

In her honor, I consider how the tongue was cut
from her mouth before she was executed. I imagine
a street-side barber on house call, razor blades, rapiers,
a tiny guillotine, rusted knife. The severed tongue
lies on the floor like a slug, and she is sodden.
Her father first tried to drown her,
tying stones around her neck.

I don't attend church, but last year at my grandmother's
funeral I genuflected before the altar—that slab
on which I still autopsy my body from time to time
and find it besmirched: bare, queer, full of desire
for myself. In mass, I fought back, toying with how best
to insert Tom Waits lyrics into Ecclesiastes.
God's away on business, and often
all I have are jokes.

Some people can speak
with the nub of a tongue.
Again, I picture Christina's final minutes,
hear her slur a word or two in prayer
before they shoot her body
full of arrows. Finally, she sings a hymn I know,
mouth full of blood, unintelligible.

My tongue is here, pushing
lightly against my teeth, sucked
against my palate. I've never used it
on another woman, never cursed my parents' god
with real vehemence. Fuck. I say it
because I want it—Christina's tongue
in my mouth, to take that muscle
and use it for my own goddamn business.

Vigilance

Whenever I could, I lived
in the woods—pine forts, turning vines
into ropes and slinging myself

across the creek. Evenings, my mother
stripped me for inspection.
She was looking for deer ticks, hidden

passengers. With precise gentleness,
she wrenched the pinpricks free,
crushing them between her fingers.

If you didn't catch them early,
the ticks would burrow beneath
the skin. Sealed inside,

lost in their own relentless feed.
In those cases, she funneled a path
with a utility knife, grazing the wound

with a just-extinguished match,
so the tick would release its bite.
They always found my unseen places—

underarms, inner thighs, the loose flap
of a testicle. Nothing changed
her approach: emotionless, methodical.

That is, nothing changed
until Dad passed, and she grew
too drunk for mothering. The inspections

became self-inspections.
Stranded in the full-length mirror,
sweeping my skin with my hands.

That's how I learned to touch myself—
cautious, thorough, always expecting
a hunger that didn't belong.

At a Clothesline on Chios

Leave it be, the priest said. Don't think about it.
Don't think about how the wall shook
when your father shoved your mother
against it, her wail when his fist struck
her cheek. Don't think about how
your mother's hands tremble ironing his shirt,
peeling potatoes for his roast lamb. No, not
when you're laying awake, helping your mother
cook, wash clothes. Not another thought about her sob
scrubbing your father's boxers, bloodstains
off a blouse. Not here at the clothesline,
where you focus instead on a clothespin
while you and your mother hang laundry
in your yard above Chios harbor,
the tough wood clothespin gripping your father's
denims ruffling in northerlies off the slender strait
splitting Greece and Turkey, the thin slip
of sea once breached by Ottomans
who burned Chioti hamlets, savaged women
like your mother, who reaches for a clothes peg
while swallows sweep the sky
toward the island's other side,
where her own village faces west,
away from the narrows,
your father's brute appetite,
his jeans jammed in a clothespin's splintered loins.

I Dream of Pearly Gates

in chromatic figuration, colors popping and sizzling
at my forsaken touch. i name you thrice &

you deny me thrice. light fogs between my lips
like something renounced.

i tremble through pinhole camera, hungry eyes
brushing the face of a black hole God.

i dream of blindness & naked shadow hanging
over grass like a noose. you are haloed in loss

& milky corona. we are five seconds from totality.
5. 4. 3. 2. boned pitiless atoms pared from

raw breath skipping in your lungs. a bitter please.
heaven and earth made 1.

Whale Watching

It was the giant eye beneath us,
giant eye in a giant head—
baleen-plated, tubercled, throat-pleated—
spread out beneath our keel,
our boat's sharp backbone,
giant eye meeting our own eyes,
as we tipped over the railing, gaping.
Whale, watching. Here was a mind
more expansive
than our own, its view more
immersive. Time slowed down
to an underwater speed.
The massive body turned,
twisted, propelled itself
through the viscosity of water,
flippers like wings pumping against
resistance, body tilting
towards light.
We strained our gaze
through the dense atmosphere
of ocean. The pebbled bulk
flipped tail, dove down and
disappeared. We waited.
The morning fog had
cleared, white clouds rose like towers
at the horizon.

Long flippers reached
out of the ocean, languidly
slapped rhythm.
Cetaceans multiplied.
Leviathans hurled themselves airborne,
flipped massive bodies, crashed back
into the sea.
What was it for—utility or joy?
We—small, graceless creatures—watched,
elated. Again,
they launched themselves skyward.

Moments of Grace with a Line from Thoreau

Some days, I don't even think of it,
the planes, the towers,
the fine dust encircling this one world.

A pelican flies over rough waters,
snow falls over arctic tundra, somewhere
a tree is milled, then paper in my hands.

I linger in this web and gather groceries,
a package from the post office,
then rush through the rain.

Too often I forget how to love this life,

the scarlet veins of maple leaves,
steam rising from a warm cup of tea,
the amber glow of the sky at the end of the day,

a humpback whale traveling ten thousand miles—
all as much a part of this world
as the ashen coating from shattered buildings

covering shoes worn that day,
shoes that are kept in a box,
now shelved in our closet.

And I will likely forget a thousand times more
how to suck out all the marrow of this life,
but I'll never forget the people who came

to search through the rubble,
as if we were made of something unsevered—
like the ocean or light from the sun.

Nine of Ashes

How a field of dead flowers and a field of red
poppies are both landscapes for forgetting. How fire
instead eats new—the world unworlded, burned
blank. How the crow and the arrow both know

flight: one for life, one for death. How the ground is
the dead and it lives toward the sky. How a hand
and a hill can both hold a fist against that bright
horizon. And how the sun, even when we don't see

it, tells our story: stitched in the mountains, painted
on the prairies, glinted off the face of waves. Or dealt
from a deck two cards at a time to try to tell the future
about itself from this always present, the same dream

a dried petal or a charred thorn has when it wakes
up into new life.

Peregrine

She has a quiver of calls—
the ee-chup, the kak, the chitter—
but today, like most days,
it is the wail she hurls
from her water tower perch.
A peevish carping,
sharp as a hard pinch, it means
I want something to change.

I'm with you, sister.
I too want something to change,
want so many things
to change. I want to go back
to the way it was. Or to rush ahead
to better times. I want a cookie,
a laugh, a garden abuzz with bees.
Give me something, anything
other than this.

Talons clamped around the steel railing,
we'll shriek our chagrin,
whip our knife-edged gripes
over the treetops:
want-want-want-want

Unbuttoning

Flowers loosen
green buds
that open to pink.

Within the maples
a warm slide
of syrup drips
sweetness

for a sapsucker's
tongue. The bird
drills shallow wells
in orderly rows

in the bark. Black
butterflies burst
giddy and greedy
into the arms

of a spicebush,
the air so fragrant
it's hard to breathe.
As the sun sets,

night-blooming
jasmine slowly
opens its
fragrant blouse.

My Husband Says All the Stars We See Are Dead

He's wrong, I laugh, there is no way
to know which have burned out and for what
ages we wait to know. This slow light

cannot always be a blast, a supernova, yet
he's so sure. As sure as I used to be about
pronouncing the word chimera. Language,

subject as anything to science, is full of strange
and stranger histories. But what I know in the soft
glow of the chimenea logs amid a landscape

of rolling Texas hills and winding stars is that
I like his mad attempt at romance. Earlier, at dusk,
we hiked the yellow grasses and stared as

our bright orb gently moved its nuclear heat
to the other side of the world. Every night
is super nova, chimera, and when we are

wrong we are most true to self, feeling
that fundamental chaos. What we know,
riddled with holes shot into heaven, sieves

molten into soul, impossibly real. And he
is telling me right now our lives are a flash
and I am saying the light takes a long time.

Elegy for Jacqueline

I dreamt I found you in the rust-wet shallows,
skin like damp birch peeling,
mouth filled with river silt.
I tried to call your name,
but the vowels burned out before they reached you.

It's been years, and I still don't know
if memory is a mercy or a cruelty.
Some days, your laugh is a bright struck match.
Some days, it's a voice breaking apart
mid-sentence, dissolving into static.

I tell myself there was no moon that night,
no silver map to pull you back to shore.
Only the dark, only the weight,
only the thought that maybe
the ground had softened enough to hold you.

I don't visit your grave. Or haven't.
You'd roll your eyes at the flowers,
at the weight of stone trying to hold you in.
Instead, I keep lint in my pockets,
in the cracked heel of my shoe,
in the way I still flinch when I hear your name
on someone else's lips, or worse, when I don't.

You are not really gone.
You are just somewhere I can't follow yet.
And some nights, when the streetlights hum out,
when the wind chimes talk like they belong anywhere else,
I think I hear you breathing.

Go Tell Your Mom, “I Love You.”

I want to know:
do you still believe
in the American Dream?

You say you are happy,
but I hesitate to let go of the what ifs
tangled in old 4×6 photographs
and half-finished English textbooks.

When the guilt rinses me of my fury,
a pot of resentment abandoned on the back-burner,
I remember you left everything behind city walls
for a life that only existed in movies.

You signed up for language classes
and wrote *con mèò* next to C-A-T
until the bell rang and you found work
in service jobs that needed no degree.

From brown leather massage chairs, I watched you
soak your body with the scent of acetone and OPI,
scrubbing feet and cutting cuticles
for twelve hours a day, six days a week,

no breaks a year. You are not the owner
or decision maker: you are an average worker.
When the internet celebrated Anjelah Johnson,
your clients thought of you and laughed too.

Parent-teacher conferences scared me,
and I became a hypocrite who finished
each stuttering sentence you started.
You flushed red, and so did I.

You thought you hid your weeping well,
but I felt it echo inside me
before the walls could give out
and confront me with what I already knew.

There is no house, no miracle.
America has kept you chained to labor,
trapped to one bedroom apartments,
brought you back to chemical warfare.

Is this still your American Dream?

Your hunched body,
calloused hands,
armored heart—
your daughter is a poet

who cannot give you this dream
but will forge a new one
using the language
you allowed me to breathe.

I am running for three.
You, me, and the young girl
who heard of the land of the free.

Moon Garden

The Evening Primrose is anything but
 prim. I blush at its frank availability—

the fleshy stigma, swollen and sticky, that reaches
 beyond a yellow hem of heart-shaped petals,

drool in the night air and sacs of scent pumped
 loud as house music. The smell of damp earth,

blood of the gods, rises under a ruddy buck moon.
 I am waiting for the arrival of a sphinx moth,

which I have never seen. I am not a true creature
 of the night. Not at ease with the beetle

laboring toward nectar glands, nor with globs of pollen
 dropped and drifting on ghostly sheets.

I draw my coat around my knees even as I whisper
 my poems to this floating world.

Yellow, Purple, Black

"This is a new use for the canary"

—Nottingham Evening Post, 1906

Here among the man-made
night, I churn—an engine heaving
through the imprecisions of burning

out. I'm tired of glowing
furiously against the dark
side of the bars, but what

else is there to be but a flame
in this suffocating still, this shadow
veining through the mountain's

chest. Long before you even have a chance
to feel it, I'll be gone—purple
replacing my lungs in the invisible

after damp. My only failure, a heart
not yet replaced by less
delicate machines.

Beach Poem

The sun goes behind a cloud like a fever
breaking in the night. I float on my back in the cold
water, ears under, and hear my own breathing
like it is the whole world. Later, beachside, I hold

my palms cupped over my ears so I can swim
in the sunlight, the sound
of myself. On the beach we agree
the only reason we don't build castles

is because we wouldn't know where
to put them, how to handle that kind
of permanence. My dried saltwater hair
is strange, heavy, not quite mine.

Mouthfeel

Show me what it is that makes you hunger like copper
for a sharp, hot spark.

You are a magnet, moth-flame:
Don't stop lapping at my wings.

Someone comes between us
and pours the wine. Your fingers, swirling,
cup the heat. Legs part
against a curvature of glass.

Talk to me all night
if that's what I can have. Language
is crackling foil, the rush of being served
what I want.

At tables beyond us, metal rings, waiters pass
too close. Everyone in here wants to be sated.

The flower moon clings to the window
like wet lace lost in bed.
In the kitchen, the steam is climbing, climbing.
Nowhere to go but up.

Vanity, Greed, Extravagance, Death

I kissed men and women
drank absinthe and Slivovitz
until my tongue grew numb
smoked Czech cigarettes
until I wheezed, gave them up
for whatever the man I was seeing
smoked, Davidoffs I think
jogged through a monastery
wearing just a bra and shorts
gazed at the ground
whenever I passed a monk

(I am still sorry)

took Vicodin for a headache
drank tea with forest fruit on the bottom
each bite a discovery like the first time
I tasted black currant and then
danced my way down the Golden Lane
cobblestones swimming beneath me.

Why did I swim naked in the Vltava
its dark water tinged with the blood
of Saint John Nepomuk
whom King Wenceslas IV threw
from the Charles Bridge?

Why did I sleep with a man twice my age?
I wanted to hear his stories about war.
This was my grandfather's homeland.
They'd killed his sister already, and his niece
and were going to kill him, too,

the night he fled, just before
the skeleton rang its hourly death knell.

Ninth Inning

“The fundamental truth, a baseball game is nothing but a great slow contraption for getting you to pay attention to the cadence of a summer day.”

—Michael Chabon

With the city spread out before us, our seats under
the cantilevered roof, the cadence of the summer's day

slows toward dusk, darkness and impending storms.
How often do we sit and watch the weather reach us?

When the rains do come,
it's seeing rain for the very first time,

as if we've been blind,
and the bandages have been removed.

Magnified under 1.5 million watts,
this electrified rain, this glistening,

miraculous rain just might be able
to cool our planet. Oh, dear

dear earth.

Stone

Lying still on the middle shelf
of the bookcase, palm-sized, shadow gray,
flattened egg, smooth, cold.

Pick it up. Feel its chill.
Look how your fingers wrap around it
like the embrace of a lost love,

how it hides deep in your grasp.
It was always meant for slinging against
the beating temple of Goliath,

always for battering the harlot
who broke the old laws. See how perfectly
it fits your faithless hand?

fever dream

moon splits into mercury veins,
dripping through a sieve of pines—
the river gnaws its reflection.

a hàn fú's¹ embroidery sprouts thorns,
stitches clawing into a cage of ribs,
while rusted bells hum static hymns.

smoke braids the alleyways, thick
as congee left to rot. a boy dissolves
into paper lanterns, each breath

a flicker. his palms clutch static—
cicada husks, a fistful of teeth,
the weight of a name unsung.

nightmares bloom like ink in milk:
mother's voice warped to radio waves,
a bicycle's skeleton sinking in rice fields,

the horizon a suture split wide.
he chews on shadows, tastes
burnt sugar and diesel, tongue

stained by the ghost of fireworks.
his shadow drags a scythe of moonlight,
carving hymns from cracked asphalt.

dawn arrives as a bruise—
jade mountains bled to charcoal,
a sparrow's wing pinned under glass.

he wakes to the murmur
of looms weaving his lungs to dust,
each thread a shard of unshed light.

the world now a wet matchstick,
his spine a fuse smoldering
in the throat of a storm.

¹ *Hànfú is the traditional clothing of Han Chinese people.*

Coastal erosions

Curious whiskers fizz
with myths and particulates,
as a seal signatures the sea
off-shore.

Its body is a black redaction
on a vivid current that whips at
our feet,

diluting the salted cells,
and the microbial bones
holding us together.

A grey knuckled surface
is broken,

split open with a sound that cries
like a shop-till
singing underwater.

Each note is a welt,
a bruise easily excused,
the slow crush of
exposed blood vessels
on a forearm.

Our throats are choked
by drifts of oiled feathers,
floating into our mouths,

signals sent in tarred smoke.

bewildered spring

petals strewn
from an unforgiving storm
bewildered spring

About the Contributors

Abigail Lilith Ravenheart (she/her) is a queer, transfemme poet residing in Carbondale, Illinois. Her work has been published in *Grassroots Literary Magazine*, and she is a forthcoming winner of the Jon Tribble Memorial Award for Poetry.

Kathy Ray lives in upstate New York and has retired from many perfect careers in education, manual labor, journalism, and medicine. Happily, all roads lead to poetry.

Leila Farjami is an Iranian-American poet, translator, and psychotherapist. She is the recipient of *The Cincinnati Review's* 2024 Robert and Adele Schiff Awards in poetry, a finalist for the Prufer Poetry Prize by *Pleiades*. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Pleiades*, *Ploughshares*, *The Cincinnati Review*, and *Mississippi Review*, among others.

Svetlana Litvinchuk is the author of a chapbook, *Only a Season* (Bottlecap Features, 2024) and a full-length collection due in spring 2026. Her work appears in *swamp pink*, *ANMLY*, *About Place*, *Flyway*, and elsewhere. She is Associate Editor of *ONLY POEMS*. Originally from Ukraine, she tends her garden in Missouri.

J Kramer Hare lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where he enjoys rock climbing and listening to jazz. A Best of the Net nominee, his work has appeared or is forthcoming in the *Dawn Review*, *Zero Readers*, *Jerry Jazz Musician*, *The Oakland Review*, and elsewhere.

Chris Dahl's manuscript *Not Now but Soon*, forthcoming Spring 2025, won Concrete Wolf Press's Louis Award. Her chapbook *Mrs. Dahl in the Season of Cub Scouts* won Still Waters Press's "Women's Words" competition. Her poems have been nominated for BOTI and the Pushcart Prize.

Krysia Wazny McClain is a poet, writer, and editor. She holds an MFA from Bennington College, and her poetry and criticism have appeared in the *Colorado Review*, *Milk Press*, *Bloodroot Literary Magazine*, and *Bicoastal Review*. She is also a community organizer working for prison abolition in Massachusetts and beyond.

Mickie Kennedy is a gay writer who resides in Baltimore County, Maryland. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *POETRY*, *The Threepenny Review*, *The Southern Review*, *The Sun*, and elsewhere. His first book of poetry, *Worth Burning*, will be published by Black Lawrence Press in February 2026.

Lily Jarman-Reisch's poems appear in *CALYX*, *New York Quarterly*, *ONE ART*, and *Pushcart Prize XLVII*, among others. A 2024 Pushcart Prize recipient, her chapbook *Sack of Home* was a Two Sylvias 2024 Chapbook Prize finalist. A poetry reader for *Los Angeles Review*, she is also Contributing Editor for *Pushcart Prize XLIX*.

Haeun (Regina) Kim is a student writer, artist, and amateur ballerina from Seoul, South Korea. She serves as the Executive Editor of *Polyphony Lit* and writes for her school literary magazine, among others.

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Kimberly Gibson-Tran holds two degrees in linguistics. Her recent writings appear in *Creation Magazine*, *Rowayat*, *Jelly Squid*, *Saranac Review*, *Paper Dragon*, *Dunes Review*, *RockPaperPoem*, *Anodyne Magazine*, *Elysium Review*, and *The Common Language Project*. Raised in Thailand, she now lives in Princeton, Texas with her husband and cats.

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Margaret Kasper Reed is a writer and educator living in Pittsburgh. Her poems have been published in journals such as *Rattle*, *The English Journal*, and *Poet Lore*, as well as the anthologies *99 Poems on Joy*, edited by Roger Housden, and *Roots and Flowers*, edited by Liz Rosenberg.

Ron Stottlemeyer is happily retired with his wife Joan in Southwestern Montana where he writes poetry, cooks Chinese, Mid-Eastern, French, and Mediterranean recipes, and lives quietly in old age.

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Born in Newport, Wales in 1988, **Gareth Nurden** has been writing poetry since his teenage years and has more recently begun focusing on Haiku and Senryu and has had over seventy pieces published in more than thirty journals and websites worldwide.

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