

NEW YEARS



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braincase press

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FORTY MENTIONS OF A CLOSED DOOR in the Year of the Cock. The penultimate week of '69. My body's lids & valves. I came to earth, whistling at the cold air and the brown bear with the muted bell in its chest. Words I use to mark my spots in space the point of all the talk-no longer hold their shapes against the stretch of events. I pin my thoughts to random walls. The bar-back job and hustling the occasional table were sketched on a scrap of paper tacked to the finished basement's corkboard wall (installed with the ochre shag in the intervening Year of the Dragon). And now it's the Snake, and the forty doors lead to the places of twenty friends, or at least ones who were friends, and, if only for a moment, mine. Then the bathrooms all over the world, those in orbit, too, flood, as events, locally synchronized for so long, finally break the hold of ordinal time. Seeking the sharp loss of breath upon breathing, the one-lane bridge at 70 and I stick my face out, feel the girders whir.

To keep working, getting no response, feeling more and more baffled. Nevertheless, I would say this, that if we can only hang on to this patient, find something to help her, we'll be able to like her better. The sacred tourniquet.... The halls are painted colors judged soothing, yet battleship grey railings and metal skid guards skirt the concrete steps. The brick building, built in the '20s, has holes for the wind to pass through. Green diamonds in blocks of yellow stucco. I thought of a story about a boy who won the lottery and ran away, afraid of money and what he thought it would do. Then a hospital scene and a girl in a cold car; a sibling rivalry wobbling from looping sexuality; a conventional road trip—floating and framed by each footfall as I run past the old school.

THE WRONGS DONE to language, no matter how funny, have analogs here on the ground. They'd always been there, in favor for a while, later relegated to shadows, and, finally, darkness. My peers insisted on placing animals, drawn or otherwise imagined, in sordid and violent situations. I gave up my resistance, pretending not to have, and began to write stories instead of reports (in the manner of the day). Soon enough, I joined them, using new words

in sentences. Benefactor. Furlough. Poignant. Adversary. Garble. My benefactor held me under too long and I almost choked in the chlorinated pool. The soldier never returned from furlough. The poignant scent of pomander balls, combined with the sight of poinsettias, set off alarms in her head, signaling the coming of the annual dull hurt drill among family. The idea of turning back is to meet yourself as adversary, then to overcome or be overcome. But what if it's someone else instead of you? Wind in the dry branches garbles our talk on the trail.

BUT A WOMAN is in pain, despite the meds, and, due to my own derangement, her pain easily enters me. "Why are you hurting me?" she asks. I can't wait to go to the party.

NOBODY HAD BEEN HOME for a long time. Through the kitchen window I could make out a couple of eggs on the countertop. I always expect a neighbor to call the police, especially in winter when I'm bundled up, but they never do. I can break in with no trouble.

RHYTHM IS ATTENTION dropped a full stop from intent (catch your foot aping your heart). Why do hooky hideouts figure so prominently in old Doc's memoir? "Freedom." His answer is as good as mine—complementary silences.

RECALLING EXES breaks the backs of my best public poses. I mull over having left and why, or whether I was left and why. Sit down, I tell myself. We all look enough alike in this dark bar on such a winter's night. The character sketch on the napkin is true: Lives in a basement, works in a bar, smokes too much dope, handsome but lacks confidence, plays mediocre guitar, rises to the occasion only when he, for a few seconds, believes life is being destroyed.

GOLD LIGHT CASTS into night, folding long thoughts and their objects.

BLAZING THROUGH TIME ... What I wrote off the cuff yesterday seems awful now. Today is Monday, and I am a working person. I make no other claims. I work with the "like-minded." Picking, as if at a scab, then doubting, but at least I've got something to say, relating the matter at hand to something interesting. Several

pages extend from here, in which I consider questions of reception and criticism. The dead brown leaves on the modest street leading down to Gowanus and beyond. Knee-biting Brooklyn. Dark rust, white frames, lilac shades, aluminum storms. Third floor squirrel ladder (or imps). I am like the spoon. Look into my bowl. Hold me upside down and stir me around, noting the reflections.

I'D TAKEN THE BUS down from the mountains with Pepper the tramp organic farmer. I mean *temp* organic farmer, on break from Stanford. We took the I AM taxi through miles of Soconosco scrub, to Puerto Arista. The mushrooms had been packed in honey at 7,000 feet, above Jovel. Now, at sea level, the heat turned the contents of the jars into gray goo. I thought some emptiness might make sense near the surf, that something would wash up with the tide.

Not the same—same day, same apartment, same keys—but not. Differences do not go unnoticed, piling up like meringue, but too often they are considered nothing. Home alone, attempting to answer a personal ad, the longest I've ever seen—the complete works, even a shelf, stuck in my head.

CAT STOPS HER PACING in response to my glance. I thought I was being smooth. She chirrups at the pocket door, apt metaphor for my I-know-not-what-I-want-and-want-not-what-I-know state of mind. We're tight like that. All possible worlds are awful.

PUT EVERYTHING IN ONE PLACE and leave it there. Some other brain. The earth, the delicate ball of sensations ... of which to say more would be indecent.

A NIGHT AGING. Stay here. Memory repair. A little riddle for sleep. You're in the army now. It started long ago, removing the rooftops over our heads. Watch yourself for signs of progress. I black out when I step through the apartment door. The next day there's a puddle on the floor and a long, forgotten talk to repeat. Into the windup, grip fixed in the glove upon delivery of yet another conundrum—spit, scuffs, baby oil? Unhittable junk. They've got nothing on you—locker, shoes, hair, cap—nothing. I drank for lunch, dinner and breakfast, making now happen properly—that is to say, just wrong enough. I learned from your panic attack. I learned there's a certain normalcy in the belief that you can never leave, never having really been there, but there you

go again. The face of the new kid, not the chosen one. All doors lead to the river.

THE HEMOGLOBIN TEST was great—the phlebotomist was beautiful. A week later, I signed up for a drug study requiring weekly blood draws. I never saw her again. So I did breathing tests for a beautiful research assistant. I was poor and poverty has a way of sharpening desire. I was happy in the hospital; in bars, at home, thinking of her. It lasted all summer. She would induce an asthma attack in me with an inhaled irritant, run some tests and then give me five times the normal dose of bronchodilator until I shook all over, finally breathing freely.

"I'm superstitious to the point where I'm not superstitious," the Vulcan-eared small forward said when asked about his recent road woes. Like me, the proverbial falling swallow. Syntax and grammar of obsession with detail. Can I get a witness? Orangutans have culture. One isolated group exchanges raspberries at bedtime. Bronx cheers. And we are going to war, so come along and stop complaining. In fact, everybody's happy to go: Just look at us, right in the middle of my *roman à clef*. Mannerism means a forgotten

why, other than doing likewise. Me and Richard Jefferson. We pronounce the f in clef.

I FOUND A NEW IDENTITY today—I'm a mule. A peaceful time at home, until wolves appear at the door. Out the back I go, working my teeth with the tip of my tongue to dislodge an oat as I pass through the shadows cast by the century oak and across the balding lawn. The catapult's working. I strap myself in and relax. Back in the city I drop the package off, then visit my museums.

HERE'S THE STORY with me finally out of the way. "Impossible!" she gasped, looking out the window at the empty parking space. Stories that may or may not be true. He giggled and made a face like a Chinese dragon, red trance eyes and a grimace with long forked tongue pinched between his fangs. "I'm serious, asshole!"

THE MINUTE FLAGS—if you can't see them they're not on your mind; the ambiguous syntax adds misery to the mix as the students interpret under the gun. 30 seconds later, every inch of the sky and skull having shifted slightly (orchestrated or improvised, who can tell?) the trigger's squeezed. My army of

sane people never appears. It remains in my museums. We were forced to march up the wall behind the television. If I return and insert what I mean for what I meant I'm still wrong. Backtrack and insert before "30 seconds later" the following: "What does it take to keep a thought aloft for more than a moment?" Better yet, go to page 139 of Who's Who in Classical Mythology, where Circe changes Picus, "a pure Roman deity . . . an ancient prophet and forest god," into a balloon animal as vengeance for playing her off. A woodpecker. In early times his figure consisted of a wooden pillar with a woodpecker on it, which was afterwards exchanged for a figure of a youth with a woodpecker on his head. I can relate. I'm a woodpecker. And I have one on my head.

I DECIDED TO WORK. It wasn't easy. There were no instructions. Apartment blocks edged in navy blue. In one window, *la fille* sat in silhouette. Down the street the transmitters hummed; up the street the garbage truck downshifted as it hit the hill. Lightning's within, hidden. Sealed peals of thunder slipped out like dreamt letters, piling up in the corner and dispelling behind my back. Where they go, nobody knows. The microwave relay station has the benevolent look of a Dutch windmill farm. The moonfaced

boy opposite me on the R train reads *The Art of War*. He'd like to think, but I'm doing it for him. Malevolence is a matter of time. A blind violinist lurches our way. I could dig for change, but it doesn't make sense under the circumstances, a moment of judgment where everything freezes and what we have and what we're doing is what we've had and what we've done. *The Art of War*, starring the Hardy Boys.

"Speak to the diagram," holding up the user flow. We were staking out the House of Large Sizes, watching the fat men come and go. Worsted words—big as houses.

BANDS LEAD STRAIGHT TO OTHER BANDS. Surprise endings are rare. The expression of need many times can convey, in subtle, not too clearly understood terms, the desires of the patient—the demand for a pill, a drug, a massage, another examination. If we drink we still think, and we wake up in the morning, or we stay out all night long. The righteous path straight as an arrow. (That's not me.)

I'M WORRIED ABOUT CUSTOMS though I have nothing to hide. An F-16 in the movie, and another one outside the window, hiding in the sun. In the movie, the pilot's lover is crazy with fear and grief. The real F-16 doesn't appear to be moving. Waiting to make a move? And the marshals' dull conversation? Too nervous to read.

By "MY PLEASURE" I mean trying to imagine "an animate still-life." Contradiction can make people bloom or it can kill them. The internal heat spike, the chemical release & transformation have us on our knees, gasping for air. No transition, just juxtaposition; a now/then differential engine. Clear the Range Finder. We aren't exactly where we want to be. It drives the car, which is the only way to get there, they say. There's an access road off the old highway into Mark Twain National Forest. The quarry is a perfect cube.

A MACEDONIAN VENETIAN BLINDS SALESMAN in Boston. Banana by potato masher on the kitchen counter. Color judging then dispelling. Lightning bug, laundry; "a perfectible sky" sprouts unrepressed blue exhaustible star-crossed life. Scattered answer walls pop up. Intelligent encouragement must suggest locations.

Wake painting. Revolt against alphabetical order. Perhaps these thoughts are shibboleths, as I myself suggested to you in the dream of the stream and the cornfield fire. We were meeting in the tree house to plot our escape from wage slavery at the pencil testing facility. We didn't know enough to keep the new kid away and he kept coming back.... He turned out to be one of *them*. The fire was set to smoke us out, but we were able to jump into the stream and evade the hounds and the flames. But we couldn't shake the new kid. How I ended up alone in a Kum & Go buying a Slurpee at 4 AM remains a mystery for the ages. But it worked, and I woke without physical harm, though I experienced the usual guilt for having lost you in the confusion. It's a gift, if I unwrap it right, that redeems lost time, though not without pain.

Nancy is programmed to do good. Her mysteries follow traditional recipes and work almost every time. Phlox and painted daisies, snapdragons and calendula, petunias, and verbena. Towering over them all, the delphiniums. In a man's world, I wouldn't be the kind of guy who sits still and watches. Trouble's always knocking at the massive oak door. Nancy! She regards me without moving. We're frozen. I watch a kid roll by on a

banana seat low rider with streaming handlebar tassels and fresh whitewalls. The wind whips the trees as clouds plummet.

BILLY BUDD IN HAND, I head for the beach. Wild dogs yelp in the surf (animate still-life). Wet fur like tar. Mind in hand, no touching! Bliss, a terminal point on the coast. No one knows who I am, mother included. No mirrors, no English, no phones. What was it that I left back there? Was it a good idea? I soak my bandana and plaster it to my forehead, heading back to the crossing to buy water.

SOMETHING IN THE PICTURES drains possibility from the intended object—like having an assignment and too much time—making it indistinguishable from the incidental subject. This is the effect of certain photographs taken at the time of the neutron bomb's development: the cropping of people to preserve the integrity of the infrastructure. Brown's Custom Shop with its brown & gold linoleum array. The blue "Main Street" banner over the whiskey keg planter on the sidewalk, everything pulling into shadows cast over the faded green storefront. A drastic reduction, all plausibly deniable. The way space opens around

objects, framing them along with you, as original time & space pass by. A broken Eggleston *Dinggedicht* yielding the word "azure." The world between people remains pure, empty.

AFRAID TO WRITE because I might find something out. Afraid to say hello. Work expands to fill all available space. Back-back-back-back-back-backspace. What fear of going without stopping to have a full thought? Goodly night will be here soon. The phantom phone rings within the hidden track. Our favorite patient. Bumping into her, she gets the note and passes it on. Your hand's going borderline again, each letter its own word, you took such care. The longer you go without looking. The bus pulls up and kneels at your feet; getting on suddenly makes sense. You're right back in it with burning ears, now in plain sight. The pain is worth almost everything.

Now for details. Take buildings, innovations in design and materials. We can make one from wattle and mud. We just need a computer and phone line.

CHARACTERS PLOT.

Morning drops marbleized ragged little purpose here and there. First and only thought.

LIKE YOU, I NEED to think this through and not too quickly. A letter is hard to write, but harder not to if I'm going to at all. Very strange—like a dream, but truly awake. That's why I'm listening to Yma Sumac. The war is on. She sings, it sounds like, "It's only a page that carols unseen, fitting your hawks their jesses!" I know, impossible (this is the perfect sentence). How do you wrap them up like that? What if everyone were to respond in kind? Where would it stop—100% public property? A parallel universe? Just one? Forty shades in as many windows, eyelids flapping. An eagle, carved atop its column, on the verge of flight.

AFTER BEING PINNED DOWN most of the morning, noon brought news both good and bad: Though they're not mad at us personally, we underestimated those Biblical people. I've been laminating maps for hours. Brighter yet darker, an enormous appetite has developed. We receive notice that it will not let up. Oversized balloons twist in the wind. With the heat come flies. Voices on the other end sound frantic. Tensions rise quickly, the men under

the tarp snap and swear at each other. They're willing to make a spectacle of themselves. I'm inside the most powerful political machine ever. How would I like to be shot in the street?

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Q: Is there hostility that must be overcome between physician and patient?

A: That idea hits me as an error. I think...there's probably anxiety ... related to hostility by nature.... But in general, patients feel the doctor can do something.

Q: What can the physician do when he finds himself hostile to the patient?

A: Most of the time the tendency is to look to see the mote in the patient's eye. What is it that he wants the patient to do that the patient has not done? It seems that this causes most hostility to disappear.

Q: What happens when the doctor tells a patient that her trouble is "nothing but nerves?"

A: One sees the patient—properly chastised and back in her shell—decrease any attempt to make a statement of what it is she feels, since obviously she is somewhat less than privileged in the eyes of the doctor because she is not vomiting blood and doesn't have a great huge gaping ulcer.

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THE POINT RECEDES into a pail. My hearing is oblique, picking up spurts of conversation off the mainstream broadcast (the one we're so confused by). All we have to do is not listen, and it will come to pick us up. My poor mother walks on her hands across the room as I watch a film of big-rig wipeouts from the analyst's couch. That's not true, not true at all! My modesty is false, as is my pride. The cancellation, occurring in the air, creates a momentary star to worship. I'm the only one with eyes tonight, the only one with ears, god damn it. I get something bounced off a cloud from Richmond, Virginia, while I'm driving at 2 AM across

southeastern Iowa. Religious programming, all of it, though no one will admit it. Baptism of fire until you close your eyes. Your trouble is all in your body.

The formal tailoring of lines forces a posture I can't hold and I collapse in front of the mirror and everyone. It's for a funeral, and while I make my split-second dream passage from boy to man and back again, the great swan boat in which my grandfather lies recedes into the distance, obscured by reeds. I'm only four, though six feet already, and freshly anxious that my new teacher might expect me to know multiplication. A pair of doves have made their nest on the fire escape, and I'm as happy as can be.

BROOKLYN IS FLOATING in the sky. May it drop into a park to survive. Based on what was here before. Fat queen thinking about the way art responds to itself. Miles comes through miles of wires into my rooms. I reply with my lines, banking significance off signs until worlds page ahead to the end of my daybook.

SHE DOES LEG LIFTS on a bar stool.

Where was I? Avoiding work. Give the people a fire sale up and down the island. I have been knocked off course by the old "whosoever shall x, shall not y" formula. The twins take notes on paranoia (having been stared at for years, they really get it) but lose both notebooks.

OP-ED BOMBER, making the argument for shared wealth with my body, pulling up and motioning to you with a smile. If only I existed! Instead I'm reading a pile of books, spine by spine, hoping never to open any of them. Not like I have a century to enjoy myself, but it's not such a horrible day, after all.

This is not my notebook. The tired faces of the twins, I look into their eyes, their private language. That makes one of us. Trick optics, I guess, a true mirror, and my face feels warped, as others see it, surpassing right and left, good and evil. The trouble with being onscreen, the wobble in your walk caused by tracking it as you go, looking left, feeling right, proper balance led by preference, chance-cum-certainty. Open a window, blow history, circle your selections like a vulture.

My time on the Island has been intense. The fire coral got me—I thought I could swim to the quay over the breakers, but they threw me back onto the reef. I have an urchin spine in the heel of my hand. Add sunburn and dehydration. Hallucinate this exchange. So I'll withdraw and meet you in the old Lerkenlund ruins. No more Hull Bay for me—no more Heineken and horseshoes, no more resort sewage and storm surfers. I'll be in the bushes in my wet jeans, a wet sock, no shirt.

Has the moment passed? Whosoever asks must have let go long ago. It's the nature of the question—not the answer, which lies in memory. The catch is the thing, is it? Never learning, that's it? Or just enough to get you in trouble for taking the trouble (what did you expect?). Nested sentences, words like birds, sounds without meanings.

THE BUS IS FOUR MINUTES LATE. I know because I've been here at least that long, missing connective tissue in my knee. I demand immediacy, and am thus immediately frustrated by every moment's utter self-absorption. Turns out the world doesn't care until you make it then it does. I record this in a poem named "Do," then

throw away the words and forget 'em. The sad thing (laughter) is the amateur nature of the ambiguity around here. The wonderful thing, too—so many meanings for "make it."

THE MOMENT'S PASSED. Two six-second sides? Not much for a major release. Mystery lies in the space between us. I pare you down to a point. One dimension, the perfect being. Music corrugates the air, vents it, knocks angles off the blocks, makes room for baby.

REDUCED TO THE SHAKY BELIEF that no matter how many, all my thoughts are ultimately one little one. I could break with the faith, of course, and lose it forever, or accept changes and origin and end in question, insisting on perfection. I read and my mind wanders.

Walking, Standing, Flexing, rubbing, etc. Forever? That's the path—no scenery. Words are enough for a change, but not more than one at a time. In between, they themselves change and may no longer find their objects.

HE HAS POLICE ENVY and bald tires. Perfect for nothing. The sentence begins, understandably, with a feeling-out movement. Under the hood, torn wires, missing distributor cap and a cigarette butt (nobody's brand he knows). Too much information. He decides to hoof it. The park is full of kids drinking beer in the bushes. He pinches his nipple to make sure he's there.

I DON'T UNDERSTAND we're at war.

Make the mistakes. They aren't people, exactly. They wait to load paper. So are they its or what? Sure, you can do what you want—to which the first law of lawmaking says: But don't. And that should fix things. It's perfectly clear, so looking for answers here is both wrong and stupid, if cute. Just be yourself and don't worry. Look around, listen, but don't pay attention. Listen to me. I feel free. Yet you continue to cling to your point. For example, the world is out to get you. Guess not, lest ye be outguessed. Flatten yourself.

I STAND BY MY COMMENTS on the weather: cloudy, red, cold, envelope, table, dream, perpetual. I board the saucer

with no form in mind. The grand marshal urged us to think of heaven. We observed a silver tureen.

I WISH I'D STUCK to my initial thought (like you to your point). Eraser to paper. And maybe I have stuck—it was one of change, after all. I guess they *have to* believe, sparing the rest of us inestimable difficulty. Soon, the herd doubles and is ready to go to market. If I'm not mistaken, my eraser makes all this unnecessary.

HEAD TILTED BACK, mouth open, the boy's asleep in the back, car rolling forward. He's a reflection of the sun. His dreams started big then ran away small. The tires popped right off the toy, and that's how he felt: effective contact with the imaginary road—actual parquet living room floor—gone, thoroughly beyond any control but that of a little boy. You sustain me here, for some seconds, like a held note. I will never return to you, not that anyone will ever know. Our little secret, all grown up, a stranger with a life of its own. We look stupid without being able to see it. But enough wheel-spinning—where's the soap? Monsieur P. is obsessed with cleanliness. Maybe I haven't heard myself correctly.

Tangible time is us. Caller, we're cutting you off. Your voice in my head becomes my voice. It's enormously exciting. It really is, you know, and I'm committed, or should be, I'm sure we can agree. But I have problems with commitment, no matter how hard I cry for help. It's obvious because I'm alone. I steal books, joke about suicide, run around claiming that "life is for living," and roll in the hay by myself, then back to you in my head, in my voice, snickering in the rafters. Phantasms in meditation, they confuse the issue—your issue, the one you brought me, left in my head, heaving in its sleep like a sick cat. The same problem I have with myself. I choose until I'm left without a choice, other than you. Is this a routine? A rigmarole of loose paraphrases, willing themselves into the shadows of obscure predecessors, and doing so happily enough, like solid taxpaying citizens? I'm doing fine, living in an old hunting shack on the other side of town where the suburbs are just arriving. It used to be woodland, perfect for deer. I don't mean to make things difficult, only what they are—a lovely fantasy, like contemplating "perfect weather."

WE NEED EGGS in the padded room. The rain is a drill the world runs through. Tuna roll in mercury. Check the advice booth and

pony up two cents, with everything spotless as a lab. The only relief is blue rectangles in asymmetric arrangements on the walls. I will work out a plan for my future with a professional stranger. I see an artificial tulip in a vase, its leaves painted white. Someone here is an artist, perhaps, for the paintings bear a unified style. You should be glad to be here, giving yourself up to the process that will save us all time. Invest in water—it's gonna be big. The little boy struggles to make change. Cigar boxes of fossils and rocks.

I FOLLOWED THE DRY CREEK bed and returned to the cave, where I resumed digging with the spoon. Through the gradual opening I could feel the other chamber four feet from my face in the dark. The walls grew wet. I made out shapes and a pattern of drips. Roots had worked their ways around the mouth and deep inside, breaking through the silicate-slime ceiling and walls. In the distance, I could hear engineers blasting tunes on their lunch break.

I swivel and peck a key.

HER MOUTH MOVED a little, as the thought came to her. She studied the jukebox. "All of Me." She broke: Solids. Outside, the day died and the lot light popped on as a cicada crescendoed. No words, just Bechet, as she methodically ran the red felt table.

Man bites book, calls it funny, is truly hungry. Monday a fugue state, high in the teens, drunk in the twenties. Confusion about where to turn for the sun, the whole of earth a thicket of cars. The blown-up sun in the lane; the curled-up girl; the far cries of restrung history. The new sun bounces on polished stone—the glass world's lungs, facts of the matter already cold—yields few clues.

LOOK WHAT THOUGHTS WILL DO. Beautiful to have a winning language. The twentieth of June changed by a letter. Is this my reward? The Siege of Eden? Right from the start the finish comes closer than I can bear, right around bend sinister. But it will be undone. I hate them.

WRITE A STORY. The boy and the girl. He picked up bread to replace the loaf he'd eaten the day before. The mountain pass is

right here and it always has been—it's not remote at all! New socks, new shoes—a whole new way of thinking. All of it, without sharing a slice. She slept on.

You can't find anything in here. I may never pass through again. Thoughts of resolving problems by myself. Walking the chimera, I met a man with a small dog—one of those crimesagainst-nature breeds created for courtly laps. We discussed the rain, the heat, the construction crew's pneumatic tools, and vets. He was a vet, in both senses of the word. He'd found the dog abandoned on a rooftop. It barked at every passing shadow.

THERE'S NO WAY to close the door—not when it matters. Making promises. Planning your week. All this will be worthless one day, perhaps even now. One way to a kind of freedom.

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