Collecting Dust: A Play in Verse

by

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Thank you to a little prince, a deckled edge, a lightning bug, once.

Preface

Collecting Dust was born of a joke. One evening, about a year ago, I was sitting around with a group of friends all working on their theses. The youngest of the crowd, I felt compelled to boast about my own upcoming thesis. I knew that I was going to be working on a creative writing project, but in the midst of a crowd of hopeful academics, I decided if anyone asked, my thesis was going to be a catalogue of all the instances of dust and steam in American literature. Every single instance, I claimed. It was the sort of joke that carrel-addled students liked, but it soon drifted out of my thoughts.

Yet dust has a way of lingering, and the idea of such an impossible academic task began to work on my imagination. I thought of an archivist who set out to conquer the unconquerable literary presence of particulate matter. What kind of person would find purpose in such a practice? How would their lives be shaped by their work? What would their house look like? Of these questions came more questions, and the work spun out from there.

It wasn't until recently that I realized how significant that evening was in my conception of this project. I had jokingly tapped into the intersectional heart of the work. That evening, academia inspired me to set out on a creative project. A joke led me to explore an emotional subject. The night's dualisms structured my ideas about the intersecting layers of this hybrid work.

Collecting Dust is a generic hybrid, both poetry and drama. Its hybridism is also positioned within the intersection of academic and creative works. My process of writing was equally a process of reading. This piece is in dialogue with many other literary works and modes of language. The diction of academia finds its way into conversation with alliterative experimentation and formal explorations. Sonnets bump up against stutterings, which are cut with footnotes. This project could not have become what it is in any other context. It is as much informed by the academy as by poets or by the stage.

Although many disparate streams of influence flow into this work, there are a number of authors that particularly locate this piece within a literary genealogy. My language and sonic palate have been most deeply influenced by Emily Dickinson and Gerard Manley Hopkins. Dickinson's line is a spirited machine, hinged on the mechanics of the hyphen. Her meter certainly inspired the dream sonnets throughout the play. Hopkins love of sprung rhythms has made me fall in love with the syllable. His attention to joyful sounds on the syllabic level has been a valuable reference for a character whose life is devoted to ephemeral particles.

I share little formally with Shakespeare, but no play in verse exists without a connection to his work. The dramatic sensibility of *Collecting Dust* is a distant descendent, but it is

more directly influenced by the recent dramatic works of Sarah Ruhl and Paula Vogel. Ruhl's work in particular has been an inspiring example for melding the mundane and the magical on stage. The writings of Jorge Luis Borges and Anne Carson have been valuable guides for articulating the academic in poetic modes, and the poetic academically.

Gertrude Stein's work, especially *Tender Buttons*, has taught me a great deal about serious formal play. I found Stein's contemporary, Djuna Barnes, with her novel *Nightwood*, to be profoundly influential for a sense of mood. The poet Lisa Robertson's lush *XEclogue* was informative to my sense of tone, and brought me to a better understanding of how to make language "perform." Her poems are actors, and her pages are the stage. *Nets* by Jen Bervin, a book of poems made from cutting fragments out of Shakespeare's sonnets, was a direct source for the "Letter" scene.

The extended literary family that helped deliver this work might seem to be without a through-line, but I believe they find their place in the all-inclusive outlook of Scout. This desire to collect everything is at the heart of the archivist character. Although dust is her passion, Scout's encyclopedic sensibility was most informed by the sodden Herman Melville and his *Moby-Dick*. I read *Moby-Dick* as the original American hybrid novel. Melville's prose is profoundly poetic, as he shifts effortlessly from scientific passages on cetology to Shakespearian drama. Although Scout's world is impossibly dry, Melville's leviathanic ghost lingers as a central source.

Collecting Dust is a love story in the midst of all this. The relationship between Scout and Littletongue is a drama hinged on the precarious vacillation of passive and active; how others change us, and how we change for others. This vacillation of the emotional threshold between two people is what most interests me. I call it Collecting Dust for this reason. Read passively, the title implies an unavoidable accrual. Read with an active register, Collecting Dust points to Scout's pursuit of meaning in the minute, a quest in attaining an infinite.

Collecting Dust: A Play in Verse

CHARACTERS

Scout—An archivist of dust. An androgynous, bookish young woman. She lives alone on her family's property in the rural United States.

Carpenter/Littletongue—Also young. She is working on a summer construction job down the road. Dresses like a scrappy boy.

Voice—Like a narrator, but less obtrusive. Narrators buffer between characters and audience, but the Voice should be of the world of the characters. Narrators are usually to the left or the right of the stage, or speak from above. The Voice should come from none of those places, and so the only place left is the floor. The actor who plays the Voice should lie supine on the stage, and be good at not getting in the way. Voice should enter before the others.

SCENE

Scout's Home—A ramshackle farm house with a verandah, screen porch, and an airy kitchen. There are old pipes and worn floorboards that creak in the night. There are fields around the house, a garden, and a dilapidated old barn, more holes than wood. Patterson House—A house frame under construction down the road from Scout's house, where Carpenter/Littletongue is working for the summer.

NOTES

- This play was written to be performed in two different modes. The text as read by a private audience is a performance in itself, the spread book as stage. The play is performable in a more traditional sense as well, on stage or in a site-specific space.
- An excerpt of Scout's work "Instances of Dust in Western Literature" should be printed in the playbill of any performance. See Appendix.

Act I, Scene 1: Scout in the Dust Field Field near Scout's house. Dawn.

[Scout lies curled, surrounded by scattered jars and collecting implements.]

Voice:

Scout asleep in the dust field. Her border staked, her body bounded by jars of dust glowing in sleep sheen.

Crickets chisel at silence. Little nicks in the air. Little echoes swarm the periphery.

Amongst jars and beakers, labels and sealing wax, sun rises, a low purple light.

She sits. She surveys. She begins.

Scout:

Like my father taught me, catching is always best at dawn and dusk, dust or fish alike. The day is carved out while I collect yesterday's shavings.

This jar holds the reddish tint of Sunday, while Wednesday was powdered white. Here are the pebbles of the first day of summer. And here is the moss of last week.

I hold the world's only archive of distilled dew. I could show you samples of sawdust from all my father's birdhouses.
I am compiling a bibliography of dust in Western literature.
It is extensive.

Act I, Scene 2: Exploring the Collection *Scout's empty house.*

[A note to the director: The observer is to be invited to explore the house of the archivist. If the production is set on a stage, the audience should be allowed to come aboard and look around. If the performance is happening in a house, let the audience roam and touch things as long as they promise to put everything back where it should be. If the performance is to occur in book form, readers should feel free to put the book on their heads and pretend it is the roof of a very strange house.]

Voice: (mumbled, comes in and out, soft and loud) In the Basement Stored for some kind of winter: jars of pulverized glass jars of dated dust jars of powdered pigments canisters of baby formula reams of oak leaves boxes of light bulbs packed in pine needles coffee tin of dead fireflies filing cabinet labeled "haircuts" type cases filled with: dolls' hands buttons seeds train-crushed pennies.

A beam of light comes down the stairwell stroking a line of hanging dried flowers each dated February, starting 1937.

In the Dining Room
There is an amateur museum of dust technologies:

Domestic
flour sifter
vacuum
feather duster
mortar and pestle

Agricultural
millstone
crop-duster
dustbowl era ephemera

Carpentry hand-cranked drill hacksaw sandpaper planer chisels.

In the Bedroom An altar to tins of talcum powder-puffs snuff boxes tooth powder

Collection of crumbs from eating in bed hourglasses ashes of burnt letters.

In the Garden
A fountain often
trembles with sparrows
bathing in dirt.

The basin holds grey patterned document of wing marks and claw clefts left behind in the dust bath.

Here ends the catalogue. Stray cats, pulsing heart-heavy animals, scatter at the sound of Scout coming into the yard, holding a bundle of grasses and wildflowers.

She stoops to pick up a feather. Near the door she bends again for a flat stone to crown a pile she has built on the front stoop.

Scout moves around the house arranging things according to her order.

[Here the audience should return to their seats or move out of Scout's way. If you are reading this performance, feel free to continue hovering about Scout's lettered heels.]

Act I, Scene 3: Instances of Dust *Scout's kitchen.*

[A large book entitled, "Instances of Dust in Western Literature," lies open on the kitchen table. Scout enters with a pile of books, and sits down. She takes the first one, blows dust off the cover and begins reading.]

Scout:

"If lilies are lily white if they exhaust noise and distance and even dust, if they dusty will dirt a surface that has no extreme grace, if they do this and it is not necessary it is not at all necessary if they do this they need a catalogue."

It began with flour sifted from a mother-height. Discovering hair strands left behind after sleepovers. Pulping lighting bugs against pavement with a bare heel. Saving raisins from the bran, hiding them in the corner of the pantry until the ants found them. Spending an afternoon cutting every instance of the word *between* out of the newspaper.

I had a knack for the neglected, miniature, that which has been displaced. I made space for the discarded, placards for the invisible.

I honor the ordered, hemmed in, hoarded. I hold tight to flakes of light. Capture smoke in jars. Stash fractured slate, powdered chalk, gradated color.

The residual preserved. Transitory state made stagnate.

What is necessary

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¹ Gertrude Stein. "A Red Stamp" from *Tender Buttons*. (Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2002), 14.

to preserve? What is possible to catalogue? What is dust and what is not dust?

It is an impossible task to be the biographer of dust, the authority on ephemera, the harvester of chaff.

An archivist of museums or libraries fears dust as much as I love it. The minutial threat keeps him up at night. Mold crawling up nightmare pages. Spines warping in the steamy basements of sleep.

Dust is banished from the preservationist's world, so I must preserve dust.

Vigilant librarians wrap their books in dust-jackets, turn pages with gloved hands, but they cannot keep dust out of the language.

"Do you see that cloud of dust rising there, Sancho? Well, it conceals a vast army, composed of innumerable and diverse peoples, which is marching toward us."²

Dust is a marching thing. A dust cloud in the mind is the particulate leviathan. I plunge.

 $^2\ Miguel\ de\ Cervantes, \textit{Don\ Quixote}.\ Translated\ by\ Edith\ Grossman,\ (New\ York:\ HarperCollins,\ 2003),\ 126.$

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Act I, Scene 4: Dusk Walk Patterson house, Scout's screen porch.

Voice:

Sunset reaches the house frame stilted above the field.
Wooden beams and barred shadow jointed by the dark nail.
A hammer rings end of day.

The front door opens to no stairs. A rope ladder and extension cords straggle out a beard onto the lawn. The carpenter steps forth, prefers falling fast and soft into a dust cloud to careful hand-over-hand descending.

Carpenter:

A thump is a good way to end a day.

[Carpenter brushes herself off, unclips her tool belt, and slings it around her shoulders. Shuffles up the dirt with her boots and gets going.]

Carpenter: (lilting)
A hope wrestles up
my throat. Steep slope
toward some home.

Voice:

Trees hush the plunging dusk. Heat clings to the clay road, last to let go of the persistent day.

Night's gnats crown the carpenter bending to unlace her boots and listen to the dirt settle.

Carpenter:

It sounds like rain is on its way. A drop, here?

Voice:

No, it is the swirling crown descending, clouding dirging gnats nimble puffs pesking presence. Hollow columnar hum of dust animated.

Carpenter:

Swarming air-specks! Away! Away! All aspects of you are awful!

[Carpenter swings at the cloud of gnats, her gestures frantic and graceful.]

Hoarse huddled cloud, my steady course disrupted. My nostrils burn.

I shirk the shrill buzz unseen. Running rallied brisk bolted air panic joyful heart-strutted shun road kick-the-can kid stumble buckle into laughter.

[Carpenter runs from the gnat swarm, away from the road, up toward Scout's house. There is a light on in the screen porch. Scout is sleeping there on a make-shift pallet. It is too hot to sleep upstairs. The screen door swings open and shut in the wind. The wind whistles strong, a storm is coming.]

Carpenter:

What widowed wonderer lives here? Pack rat alchemist drying herbs, spinning threads of stranded light for atemporal tapestries.

Breeze fingers sets of keys, rusting hung in bunches from the eaves like flower bouquets.

Wind wills me to watch the door swing.

Hinged thing, I waver at the threshold.

I won't. Will! [The wind blows the door wide, and Carpenter rushes in. She holds her breath. The sound of rain, then downpour. The storm has come and caught Carpenter indoors.]

Carpenter: (the quietest)

Hello.

[Scout sleeps still. Carpenter gets down on her knees and watches her.]

Carpenter: (whispers)
She has the faintest
hair on her arms.
Lighter than her skin.

[Carpenter comes closer. Kneels besides Scout.]

And a cut on her index finger.
A distracted cook?
A cat jumped to the windowsill while she chopped tomatoes. Shocked, cut, she spilled red into red.

[Carpenter lies down beside her. Watches her face.]

Her eyelashes are long, the kind that look sad on children. She hasn't grown into them.

[Scout rolls over and places her arm across Carpenter's chest. There is no moving now.]

Oh, Nontense!
Take away time:
To be here.
To hold.
To settle.
To make some sense of this transgression.
Am I mad, held in the dream of a stranger?

[Scout holds fast to Carpenter's shirt all night, fast asleep. Carpenter spends the night awake. A train whistles through the rain. Sound of rain gives way to sound of grass straightening.]

Act I, Scene 5: Scout Wakes to the Carpenter *Screen porch*.

Voice:

Looming morning spreads the room. Awakening fingertips feel out edges. Ears draw wisps of continuity. The I emerges. I needles into sentences. Warp of narrative mind, weft of sun cuts time. You is felt of a sudden. A stone in the palm.

[Scout wakes, stares at Carpenter.]

Scout:

Where did you get those eyes?

[Carpenter claps both hands over her mouth. Scout watches her. Carpenter looks back, sheepishly. They look for a long time.]

Scout: (standing)

Would you like some breakfast?

[Carpenter nods. Scout goes into the kitchen. Carpenter stays in bed, holding her knees.]

Carpenter: (to herself)

What wind brought me here?

Deep-minute morning

ringing in my ears.

Steal me from the world.

Where did I come from?

Scout: (peering in from the kitchen)

Would you like oatmeal?

[Carpenter nods and starts to follow. Scout stays in the doorframe to watch her pass. They sit down to oatmeal.]

Scout:

Do you live around here?

[Carpenter shakes her head.]

Scout:

You working?

[Carpenter nods.]

Scout:

What do you do?

[Carpenter shows her calloused hands.]

Scout:

You work with your hands.

[Carpenter pantomimes hammering, sawing.]

Scout:

Carpenter. You're a strong one, huh?

[Carpenter flexes, laughs. Scout laughs too.]

Scout:

Are you working on the Patterson house up the road?

[Carpenter nods.]

Scout:

Are they putting you up? Where are you staying?

[Carpenter shrugs.]

Scout:

Well you should eat up. Not everyone is about to feed a rascal like you.

[Pause.]

I had a dream last night. I was a leaf. A leaf-like thing or a piece of paper floating.

[Carpenter, not herself, a dream agent, picks Scout up, floats her around the room, lays her down.]

I settled on the ground, looked up at the grasses, sibilant stalks talking with the voices of glasses clinking or keys fumbled.

[Carpenter pantomimes grass with her fingers. Sound of keys rattling, xylophone tinkling.]

A drummer boy marched out with his mallets and played a tree stump kettledrum to welcome the sun.

[Carpenter pantomimes a feathered bandmaster's hat, twirls an imaginary baton, and rhythmically slams the porch door.]

The sun rose and stroked my face.
The light grazed along my eyelashes.
My hand reached out to clasp
the ray playing in the dust around my body.
I held on to the sun until I woke.

And there you were.

[Carpenter returns instantly to herself, the dream broken.]

Carpenter: (stuttered)
Got to go. Thank you.
Sorry.

Scout: (pause)

Alright.

Carpenter: Goodbye. I'm sorry.

Scout:

See you, Sorry.

[Carpenter looks startled, then leaves quickly. Scout sits in a sort of shock. She gets up to go make the bed, when she notices a trail on the ground. She picks up a crumbly bit of sawdust and sees it goes from the Carpenter's chair, back to the bed and out the door. She follows it on hands and knees to the screen door and sits on the back stoop.]

Scout:

Sawdust.

[Scout marvels at the dust, then takes a small jar out of her pocket, scoops a handful into it. Then carefully labels it, "Sorry, 9:12AM August 2nd."]

Act I, Scene 6: Carpenter Gets a Name Front Porch, screen porch.

[The next evening, Carpenter comes back to Scout's house. The lights are all out except one lantern sitting on the porch. Beside the lantern is a plate of food. She sits down and eats. There is a note on the lantern.]

Carpenter: (reading the note)
I cooked this food for you.
I don't know what you like to eat.
This is what I like.

[Carpenter puts a biscuit in her palm and looks at it.]

I thought about how you used your hands today. I don't use my hands much, except for cooking. Writing if you count that.

I can make out the rafters of the Patterson house from my window. Do you get scared of heights? I bet you don't. I think you are a tree-climber.

I don't know if you will come back for this food. But I made it anyway and if you don't eat it, some animal will. Then I will burn up this letter and wash a plate, and sweep out your sawdust, and that will be that.

Or you will finish up that biscuit, drop a few crumbs for the birds, and come inside.

I have something to tell you.

[Carpenter enters the house. Scout is sitting in bed on the screen porch.]

Scout:

Hello, Sorry.

Carpenter:

I'm not Sorry.

Scout: (thinking)
Hello, Littletongue.

Littletongue:

Hello.

Scout:

Do you mind that name?

[Littletongue shakes her head.]

Scout:

I think it suits you. You don't say much. You can call me Scout.

Littletongue:

Hello, Scout.

Scout:

Today the sky looked like a glazed porcelain bowl.

Littletongue:

It was really pretty.

[A silence. Crickets.]

Scout: (to herself)
I bristle—
I watch her. I stand straight. I think I heard her voice before.

She hurries me with her eyes. I cannot unbutton myself fast enough. My I is palmed. My nose finds the crook of her neck. Where had I heard her?

(to Littletongue)
Lone light steady
in your eyes.

Act II, Scene 1: The Barn Dilapidated barn. Dawn.

Voice:

They wake in the barn.
Wind whistles through rotten wood.
Their eyes adjust to the day.
Shadows weave and unweave
dark and light across their bodies.
Barn swallows swoop interlacing lines.
Littletongue, imbued with a magician's will,
begins to tame them. They fold in her palm.
Scout takes them gently and tucks them
into the clefts of the wood.
The barn twitters into warmth.

Scout finds a ball of twine used once for tying up the tomato vines. They pass it back and forth.

Scout:

Tie this string around your ear.

Littletongue:

Tie this end to your thumb.

Scout:

Tie this around your waist.

Littletongue:

Tie this to your ankle.

Scout:

To your calf.

Littletongue:

To your thigh.

Scout:

Tie this into your hair.

Littletongue:

Tie this below your breasts.

Scout:

To your palm.

Littletongue:

Take this end between your teeth.

Act II, Scene 2: Shower Scout in the field. Littletongue in the house.

[Scout and Littletongue occupy two different spheres. They dance their days distinctly. Scout collects dust, while Littletongue does a building dance.]

Voice:

Scout collects specimens.
Her hands sieve-spread
filters the air for fragrant pollen.
She scoops dandelion seeds into
paper sachets. Swollen linen
purses, synched, lined, and tagged
for the summer's catalogue.

As sun downs, the dry acres are scythed by the long light. Bounty of dust explodes iridescent, a rural aurora.

A daily marvel for those who know to look.

[Directions for a building dance: Littletongue stretches full length along the floor. Kneels. Places chin on an imaginary windowsill. Shows palms cupped, then couples them to hold the air like a fallen bird. Smoothes palms. Stands, arms stretched upward. Bends at waist, upper-body parallel to ground. Spirals like a squirrel chased up a tree-trunk. Crouches, stands, crouches. Pulls arm out to fingertip. Forms a pair of goggles with hands, holds them to eyes. Curves right arm over head, holds right hand to left ear. Brings other to mouth, speaks softly into her hand.]

[Scout and Littletongue finish their movements simultaneously. Scout surveys the glowing dust around her. Littletongue packs up her tools. They speak over each other.]

Scout:

Little! Come see this!

Littletongue:

Scout, come here!

Scout:

You're missing it!

Littletongue:

Scout, put down the dust for once. I made you something.

[Scout gives up on getting Littletongue to join her and comes inside.]

Scout:

Where were you, Little? You should have seen the dust hour. All the invisible exposed in the uncertain light of sundown.

Littletongue:

Sorry I missed it.

Scout:

It's my favorite time. What were you doing?

[While speaking the following, Littletongue repeats the movements of the building dance, except replaces the last movement. Instead of holding one hand to her own ear, she holds the receiver hand to Scout's ear.]

Littletongue:

All day I built a track of pipe starting from the bed across your room out the window around the veranda through the garden up the mulberry tree back under the crawl space through the laundry chute behind the stove beneath the squeaky floorboard through the pantry minded the library curved around the potted plants in the sunroom accordioned it up the stairs and coupled it to the shower so I can sing to you while you shampoo.

Act II, Scene 3: Peach Story *Screen porch*.

Voice:

Littletongue full of love and feather ticking lifts the sheets unfolding the stage.

The sheet wrinkles as she paces, frothing at her bare ankles. Littletongue grips the end of the sheet, snaps it like reins, makes cotton waves all down the porch.

[Scout draped in sheets, watches Littletongue. She eats a peach, juice dripping, soaking the cloth. A puddled girl, applauding.]

Littletongue:

Here comes rushing the rural dusty road. The sun pouring down thick summer light. Tumbling a huddled hubbub, rustling rolling strolling, as peaches sometimes do.

These peaches, I sees them, roll along. I chase them, they chase me, until we come to the field. Rows and rows of blackbirds. Acres of feathers and flapping.

The peaches stop rolling. I look at the birds. They look at the peaches. One of them has his eyes on me. But all the rest are staring at the peaches.

Then, from the sky, first I think it is the heat pouring down, but ten little sparrows swoop and perch one on each of the peaches.

The blackbirds are watching. They don't like this. Even that little one looking at me starts squawking.

The sparrows—
One squeak in unison
and they are off!
Rolling those peaches
straight home like little
circus seals down the road.

Scout:

What about the blackbirds?

Littletongue:

Well they just about lost their eyes. They couldn't stand it.
They began screaming and pecking and flapping.
Feathers everywhere.
Wish you were there.

Scout:

My ambulant fabulist.

Littletongue: (nods at the peach)

Let me eat some of that.

Scout:

Come get it.

[Scout rolls away, down the porch like a peach. Littletongue catches her up in her arms, throws her over her shoulder.]

Scout:

I'll pass the day this way, thank you. To the garden, please.

Littletongue:

My human knapsack. How's the air up there?

Scout: (smells Littletongue's hair)

Smells of cedar. And big thoughts.

[Pantomime:

Littletongue carries Scout around on her back all day.
Littletongue gets an itch, Scout gives her head a scratch.
Littletongue bends down, Scout picks some flowers and holds them to her nose.
Littletongue wants something up high, Scout reaches for her. Puts it in her pocket.
Littletongue gets hungry, Scout spoons her some soup.
Littletongue gets lonely, spins Scout off her back, and lays her down, head in her lap.]

Scout:

Nestled beneath your voice recounting how we spent our day not quite accurately. Well enough—you gave the glow. I stopped listening. The fold of night turns us to our place.

[A train whistles in the darkness.]

Act II, Scene 4: Pressed *Front of the house.*

[Scout sits on the stoop with a book and scrap of paper. Littletongue stands on the roof, shading her eyes with her hand.]

Scout:

I hold your name beneath my nose fragrant syllables sound out a lilted understanding. I press Littletongue into a book to discover years from now. A memory thinned to translucence.

[Scout closes the book. Littletongue breaks from look-out pose.]

Littletongue:

Scout!

Scout:

Down here.

[Littletongue climbs down from the roof to the porch.]

Littletongue:

I had a waking dream aboard the deck of house turned ship.
The acred ocean swelled bellow, lush lapping grasping swift.
The sound of water shook my footing.
I fell fathoms to unsounded thoughts.
I saw myself a half-hearted creature of the deep. A wavering wisp, an impermanent current.
I tried to shake it, though it is much harder to wake from waking than from sleep.
The slushing sounds of somniloquy subsided, but I waking hear it in my heart.
Only half full, I feel it rush an ocean tide always needing to spill into another body of water.

Scout:

Still, be still. I give you home my head my sanctuary my skull, spun cord windless warm luck spilled to you, kind drill. You open me.
We sound each other.

Act II, Scene 5: Baking *Kitchen*.

[Scout is baking a pie. Littletongue comes to the back door with a bundle of flowers picked on the side of the road. Her hair is wetly combed, her whole body ruddy from a good scrubbing.]

Littletongue:

Hello, Scout. Me and a little bear picked you some flowers.

Scout:

You did? Where did the bear go?

Littletongue:

He needed to eat his supper, so he couldn't come say hey.

Scout:

Well, he's going to miss out on this pie.

Littletongue:

All the more for me!

Scout:

You took a bath!

Littletongue:

Yep.

Scout:

Where?

Littletongue:

In the tub. Best place for baths.

Scout: (hesitant) Truly. I don't know if I like you

this clean.

[Scout rubs Littletongue's hair with one hand, the other she holds out to catch falling dust. No sawdust.]

Littletongue:

Aren't I nice?

| Scout: | |
|-----------|--|
| Every w | hich way. |
| [She thr | rows flour up in the air.] |
| Littleto | |
| Hey! N | o fair! |
| [Littleto | ngue grabs a canister of baking powder, chases Scout into a corner.] |
| Scout: | |
| You're | a carpenter |
| not a co | ook! |
| Littleto | ngue: |
| | ng to bake you |
| | eat you my little |
| blueber | ry! |
| Scout: | |
| Hold o | n. |
| [Littleto | ngue lets Scout push aside her hand, lets Scout kiss her. Then, in a flash dumps the |
| on her.] | 7 |
| Scout: | |
| "I desir | ed my dust to be mingled with yours |
| Forever | and forever and forever."3 |
| [The pa | ir throws flour and spices and flowers. The room smells of ginger, lavender, lemon |
| | llapse. Scout draws patterns in the flour with her finger.] |
| Littleto | ngue: |
| | isty enough? |
| mir i ut | incy circusti. |

Scout:

Almost.

 $^{^3}$ Ezra Pound, "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter" from $\it Ezra \, Pound: Translations.$ (New York: New Directions, 1963), 192.

Act II, Scene 6: Under *Kitchen. Morning.*

[Littletongue is eating cereal, standing in her shorts. Scout enters sliding along the floor on her back, her hands behind her head like she's lying in a hammock. She pushes herself along with strong kicks, moves quickly.]

Scout:

Under the lintel. Under the table. Under the cabinets. Very dusty.

Under the stove. Under the lampshade.

[Scout slides up to Littletongue's feet.]

Underwear. Very nice.

Littletongue:

Hello. What's going on down there?

Scout:

Looking for dust.

Littletongue:

You haven't even had breakfast. Already at work.

Scout:

Come down here. It's like a morning swim. The water's great!

Littletongue:

I just washed up.

Scout:

Suit yourself.

[Scout finds a small vial hidden under the kitchen table. She gets up to show it to Littletongue.]

Scout: (reading the label) Crumbs, August 4th. Breakfast:

Rye toast. Egg shell.

Orange rind.

Isn't that nice?
You were sitting there,
hair sticking up in the back.
You didn't ask for the butter,
just went to the fridge
and got it yourself. And then
I knew you were sticking around.
That's what happened when
we made these crumbs.
I forgot about this jar.

Littletongue:

That's sweet. A crumby sort of diary.

Scout:

Exactly.

[Littletongue opens the cupboard looking for a glass, but finds a row of other breakfast jars. Inspects one of them.]

Littletongue:

But what about this one? "June 8th:
Cherry pits.
Pencil shavings."
It's soggy.
You need this?

Scout:

But that is the question that makes dust dust. Not need, not usefulness. Not new. It is memories never remembered. Dust is substance not just consequence.

Dust ignored is dirt.
Dirt is without reference.
Dust is of something:
Dust of wheat
Dust of haircut
Dust of the body
Dust of the fireplace.

Dirt is dusts mingled.

Someone once said, "Dirt is matter out of place." ⁴ I place dust.

Dust is of the border spaces. Animate, inanimate. You, me. I preserve it in the state between referent, nonreferent.

Littletongue:

Yes, but sometimes it's hard to find a glass to drink from.

Scout: (to herself)
Your dust will stay
with me longer
than you will.

_

⁴ Anne Carson, "Dirt and Desire: Essay on the Phenomenology of Female Pollution in Antiquity" from *Men in the Off Hours*, (New York: Knopf, 2000), 143.

Act II, Scene 7: Letter *Yard*.

[A single white sheet hangs from the clothes line. Scout enters, pins a note to the clothesline for Littletongue. When she exits, the letter should be projected onto the sheet.]

Dearest,

Where did you come from? You're my lost boy, lucky eyed lean thing. Your boots are too big and still so much grace. Your shirt is so big sometimes I worry you'll set sail when the wind picks up on the prairie. Winged seed. My long lost. I'd fill in the creek with all this dust if you wished to cross. Or make you paper out of all this pulp. The years before, the search for fragments, may just end in this whole. I will hold.

Love, Scout.

[Littletongue enters, finds the letter, then crosses out phrases to make her response. Pins her version back onto the clothesline, exits. In the projected poem, the phrases she deleted fade away leaving the following:]

```
rest,
from
lost eye
still

wind
ing
I ill with all this
cross
out The years
whole. I will

Love
```

Act II, Scene 8: Scout asks for a Cabinet *Kitchen. Morning.*

Littletongue: (sleepily)
I wake. The morning,
a burst of citrus
scents the hall.
I walk toward the kitchen
where you hand me
a mason jar
with dripping hands.

Scout:

Take a sip.

[Scout cups her hands over Littletongue's ears as she gulps.]

How does it sound in there?

Littletongue: (thinking)
Hmm. Skipping stones?
Or frogs diving into a pond.

[Scout takes her hands away.]

Littletongue:

Hold your hands. I like them there.

[Scout puts them back.]

Scout:

Will you build me a cabinet? The collection is getting bigger. And the dustiest season is on its way.

Littletongue:

Of course.

[She takes Scout's palm and sketches a blueprint.]

A cabinet for dust, one inch by one inch. A single mote in his miniature home.

Scout:

I was thinking a little bigger. So I could organize everything.

Littletongue:

Ah, a dovecote.
A menagerie.
A cabinet of curiosities.
An armoire.
An armory.
An ark.

Scout:

Something like that.

Littletongue:

I will build you a beauty.

[Littletongue exits.]

Scout: (to Littletongue offstage)
I'll tell you a story while you work, ok?

There is a bird that builds an altar as a nest. The bowerbird lays a lattice intuited. His eye unable to perceive the structure wholly, yet a single nettle unwebbed, or a twig bent outward instead of in, he pecks in place.

He collects with a private logic glistening beetle shells, blue glass, black fruits, pink shocks of flowers. When he begins, he does not know why he collects, but once the bower nest is finished, he has furnished a feathered home for his mate.

[Littletongue enters with a simple cabinet, one drawer.]

Littletongue:

And you, bowerheart, what do you think?

[Scout examines the cabinet.]

Scout:

There is only one drawer. What if you put in a divider? For human dusts and outside dusts. [Littletongue fits a board into the drawer, dividing it in half.]

Scout:

Maybe you could put in some hooks? To hang dried plants.

[Littletongue takes some screw-hooks out of her pocket, and screws them into the door of the cabinet.]

Scout:

Thank you. That's lovely. But what if you added a shelf?

I want to store all the dust we shook from the rafters.

Littletongue:

You are my most perverse archivist. A shelf.

[Littletongue slides a board into the cabinet. Her body shows disappointment.]

Scout:

This is perfect. Thank you. It's very nice to have a carpenter around, you know. To begin with—

[Scout scoops a handful of sawdust made from the construction of the cabinet, jars it, and puts the jar in the cabinet.]

A catalogue that catalogues itself!

Littletongue:

Can we go swimming? It's too hot for dust.

Scout:

But there's so much to do!

[Scout begins arranging things in the cabinet, busy at work. Littletongue watches her, then exits, affection defeated.]

Act III, Scene 1: Tampering with the Collection *Scout's bedroom. Night.*

Voice:

Littletongue restless with Scout nested in her counter form. She rises

to face the cabinet wrapped in sheets holding her breath. The door pulled open, she surveys the jars and beakers lined along the shelves. The labels are careful, the chronology impeccable.

Littletongue in a fit of inspiration unscrews the mason tops unplugs the corks gently, breathes in and out.

Her air condenses in the glass. A catch in her throat, she coughs. Feeling caught, she seals the specimens, and comes back to bed coughing.

Littletongue: (quietly)
Trust in dust hushes
harsh love. Jarred lust
mellows airless. But I
drink it out, and leave
behind a spirit unclassified.

Act III, Scene 2: Dust Season *Living room.*

[Scout's house is now filled with boxes, huge piles of dried plants, birds' nests, glass bottles, shards of fireworks. There is so much clutter that Littletongue must move boxes just to enter. She carefully makes her way toward center stage, picking up boxes and coming forward incrementally, waltz-like.]

Voice:

Autumn arose. Windows lowered. Threshers razed wheat. Sunrises dulled. Sunsets fell heavier.

Birds molted and composed their winter feathers. Pods expelled their seeds. Days dried. Dust season dawned.

[Scout enters, moving boxes, attempting to move toward Littletongue. They waltz with boxes between them.]

Scout:

Let's clear this clutter. I want a straight path to you.

Littletongue:

We need another cabinet. Can't catch up now that we've become smaller than the dust. Hand me my hammer.

[Littletongue starts working on a new cabinet. Scout straightens things as best she can. She hangs a series of drawings on the wall, sketches in blue ink on newsprint of a plant incrementally shriveling over.]

Scout:

Apart from feeling there we proceeded. A felt reason seeped into the heart of the matter.

Littletongue:

Hold this will you?

[Littletongue has Scout hold up the cabinet door while she hammers in the hinges.]

Littletongue:

The days grew shorter or we became busier. We became or I lessened. I learned something of staying put.

My work here is ending soon. The summer's through.

Scout:

Whether or not we could muster a mutual decision we continued walking toward an acute ending.

[Littletongue accidentally hits her hand with the hammer.]

Littletongue:

Ow!

Scout:

Little—

Littletongue:

It's nothing.

Scout:

Come here. Forget about that. Let's go swimming or something.

Littletongue:

I'd rather finish first.

[Littletongue continues hammering.]

Scout:

The boundary disintegrated. I dove into your arm like a bird into a glass window.

Act III, Scene 3: Littletongue Builds an Ark *Scout's bedroom, living room.*

[Middle of the night, Scout sits on the edge of the bed, sketching a crumpled pile of clothes on the ground. She sharpens her pencil, then jars the shavings.]

Scout: (whispering)
My hand unused to drawing
yet nightly drawn to the folds
of her clothes where they fell.

Sharp angles of a shirt tossed in a fervor. Idle overlapping lake-like layers I can't quite capture. But then there's always the dust to remember.

[She shakes the page for pencil dust, into the jar. She sharpens the pencil again. Littletongue wakes.]

Littletongue: (groggily) What are you doing?

Scout: (whispers)
I'm drawing your shirt.
I've started a night diary.
Each night a new form.
Look how it folds, so creased.
I want to remember those lines.
The way you threw it like you never wanted to see it again.

Littletongue:

Your eyes are endless. It's too much tonight. Tuck in to me.

Scout:

I'm almost finished.

Littletongue:

Please, stop.

Scout:

I'm sorry. I think your shirt is beautiful.

Littletongue:

Think I am beautiful.

Scout:

Yes, I do.

Littletongue:

Not a question, a request. I can't sleep anymore. I'll take a walk.

Scout:

Ok.

[Littletongue leaves the bed and walks into the living room. She picks up part of the cabinet, sets it on its side, and rests her foot on it.]

Littletongue:

Scout spent the day canning preserves, but forgot her breakfast.

I pilfered the berries past any taste or hunger, so they could not be saved, only savored of a moment.

In a home made archive, I don't know how to place myself in the catalogue of objects cleaved from purpose. Once wood was for building. Books were for reading. Stones were for throwing. Berries were for eating. Dust was for dusting And I was for roaming.

[She gets up and paces. She notices the cabinet on its side looks like a miniature boat.]

A boat!

[She gets inside the cabinet, inspects its sides.]

Watertight. Ship-shaped. A sail for catching prairie wind. No room for lagging freight.

[She picks up a sheet, holds it out like a sail.]

I'll build an ark for my archivist. We'll sail off, plant a new life. And take two of nothing but ourselves.

Ought to hide this mess. Even Scout won't miss this.

Dust above and dust below. Dust on the floor and dust in the floor. Submerge the scattered, a dust deferred, at least, I prefer it.

[Littletongue puts the cabinet upright in the corner, covers it with a sheet. Then she pulls up a floorboard and hides jars and jars beneath it. Loosely nails it down, and heads up to sleep.]

Act III, Scene 4: Addition and Subtraction *Living room.*

[Scout enters with her arms full of newspapers, places them in a pile, then exits. Littletongue enters, pulls up the floorboard and hides a tray of beakers underneath. Conspicuously reads one of the newspapers on the couch. Scout enters with a taxidermized fox, stuffing exposed and trailing, places it in the corner, exits. Littletongue hides all the newspapers under the floorboard, pretends to work on the cabinet. Scout enters with a box of moth-eaten lace, places it, exits. Littletongue hides the fox and the lace under the floorboard, jumps on it to keep it down. Scout enters, beckons Littletongue, then exits again with Littletongue trailing. Both reenter carrying an impossibly huge branch of a tree with all the leaves and twigs still on it. Scout exits. Littletongue looks at it baffled, and then hides some boxes under the foliage. Sits down on the branch. Scout enters with a paper bag, sits beside her. Kisses her cheek, hands her a powdered donut. Scout takes one for herself, and bites into it, the powder falling on her lap. Littletongue throws hers over her shoulder and tackles Scout. They fall backward behind the branch.]

Act III, Scene 5: The Water Main *Scout's bedroom, living room.*

[Littletongue watches Scout asleep in bed. Sounds of the house creaking, pipes groaning as she paces.]

Littletongue:

Not I watched I held her to her with her was her not. I went away somehow.

I went nowhere. I went off. I was offended not offended. Well, yes, but, I was nowhere.

I tried to say, or at least tried to look like I was trying to say, something.

I tendered tenderness. I think.
Tried feeling dusty, felt small often.

[Coughs.]

Caught a cough.

[Littletongue goes down to the living room, surveys the collection, then picks up a jar of metal filings. The metal rattling in the jar sounds rain-like.]

Nightly now I hide these jars, these fistfuls of feathers, and tamp it all down.

I want to see her again without all this mist in our midst.

[Littletongue pries up the floorboard and stuffs as much as she can beneath it. She must put all her weight on it now to nail it back down. She hammers, then hears a horrible creaking sound. She jumps once more on the floorboard, then steps back. A huge jet of water burst through the

floor. The weight of all that she has piled beneath has cracked a water main. Water floods the room. The sound of a torrential rainstorm. Littletongue is soaked. Scout runs downstairs.]

Littletongue:

Scout!

Scout:

What happened?

Littletongue:

The water main.

[The room is flooding, higher and higher. Light reflected on the water's surface illuminates their faces from below. Scout is grabbing jars and boxes and trying to keep them from getting wet. Littletongue remembers her ark, and begins to set it to float.]

Scout, I made an ark. It was a joke, of sorts, but it floats. Get in. Let's get out of here.

Scout:

I need to get these out of the wet.

[Littletongue gets in the boat.]

Littletongue:

Come on, there's no saving that.

[The water rushes faster, higher. The pressure shakes the house. Scout moves frantically. A huge rush sends Littletongue sailing out the front door.]

Scout! Leave it, or I will.

[Scout runs out clutching jars, looks for Littletongue in the distance.]

Scout:

Little!

Littletongue!

Act III, Scene 6: Paper Outside the wrecked house.

[The water has drained, but the house remains waterlogged and wrecked. A train whistles in the distance. Scout steps forth from the wreckage of her house. Pools reflect watery light, the collection is strewn across the lawn.]

Scout:

I promised you once a dust transformed. You, maker, marveled at such a wealth of material moldering.

Your hand changed everything it touched. A doorknob carved itself into an eye to see your hand coming. The banister bent a spine to bristle at your passing. You spirited. I saved hollow dust for your spark before I even knew it.

A pulpy wake you left me. I awoke to my dusts mingled. Like yeasted loaves, dried flowers bloom in puddles. The cabinet you built has warped, the water-logged hinges open always.

The collection made into a slurry. Memories melded, fibrous pasts, now a paste smooth. I must make a deckled page. Turn out these soaked ghosts, and learn to leave.

A window screen will do. And for pulp, I have enough for a library's worth of pages.

[Scout manufactures a papermaking deckle from a window screen dislodged after the collapse. She scoops the soaked dust and spreads it out across the screen, a smooth film.]

I'll let it dry, and then I'll write you. I'll write you on all my dustmade pages.

[She waits, and then picks up the sheet of paper from the deckle.]

I leave this sheet unsized so it absorbs my breath, absorbs my fingerprint. I press my watermark. Dearest,

I hear the distant lowing train. The distance does not grow. The bowing of a deep freight string that does not tie me to your home.

Your forehead pressed to some unknown wind. My eyes dull to your sights. An odd shape in the corner I mistake my shadow for your night.

I had a dream that I approached your gate. One hundred sparrows rushed into my chest. I pushed against the tide that hushed me awake.

The morning comes deranged and trickling— I cannot call to you, Littletongue, in this thickening.

[Scout folds the letter over, tucks it into a glass jar, and then sends it down the stream. A train whistles.]

Appendix

Extracts from: "Instances of Dust in Western Literature" By An Archivist of Dust

To those who ever thought that the first words of the greatest water novel were "Call me, Ishmael," it might come as a surprise to learn that Moby-Dick actually begins with a scene of dusting. Melville compiled an extensive list of literary, biblical, and scientific quotations pertaining to the whale, presented dramatically by an unnamed archivist. Long before Ishmael packs his carpet bag and sets off for adventure, Melville encyclopedically introduces the whale in the terms of the librarian. Like Melville did for the mammoth whale, I do for the mote of dust. His "Extracts" is the predecessor for my project, thus where his catalogue begins with Genesis, I begin with Moby-Dick.

"The pale Usher—threadbare in coat, heart, body, and brain; I see him now. He was ever dusting his old lexicons and grammars, with a queer handkerchief, mockingly embellished with all the gay flags of all the known nations of the world. He loved to dust his old grammars; it somehow mildly reminded him of his mortality."

-Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

"Death is a Dialogue between
The Spirit and the Dust.
'Dissolve' says Death—The Spirit 'Sir
I have another Trust'—"
-Emily Dickinson, "Death is a Dialogue between"

"The Leaves unhooked themselves from Trees—And started all abroad
The Dust did scoop itself like Hands
And threw away the Road."

-Emily Dickinson, "The Wind begun to rock the Grass"

The white image of Dickinson in our cultural imaginary is strewn over by a dusty dialogue throughout her life-long work. Flipping through her collected poems, countless pages host a stanza with the mention of dust. These two offer her most dynamic visions of a dust embodied.

"Of yestertempest's creases; in pool and rutpeel parches Squandering ooze to squeezed | dough, crust, dust; stanches, starches Squadroned masks and manmarks | treadmire toil there Footfretted in it."

-Gerard Manley Hopkins, "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection"

Hopkins treats syllables like hopping specks of dust in sunlight. His "sprung rhythm," his love of "dappled things" I can only imagine came from a love of minute inanimate objects, for him endowed with a spiritual core.

"Pointing towards a gathered heap of dust, Asked in my futile folly to attain Birthdays as many as those dusty grains. It slipped my mind to ask those years should be forever young."

-Sybil of Cumae in Ovid, Metamorphoses Book XIV

The Sybil of Cumae was a powerful oracle, whom Apollo granted a quasi-immortal life. She lived nearly one thousand years, reading the fates in signs from scattered oak leaves. Like the dry leaves, her body shriveled and eventually was so small that she finished out her life inside a jar. Granted her wish through dust, dust she became.

"There is shadow under this red rock, (Come in under the shadow of this red rock), And I will show you something different from either Your shadow at morning striding behind you Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you; I will show you fear in a handful of dust."

-T.S. Eliot "The Wasteland"

Ezra Pound convinced Eliot to place the dusty Sybil at the beginning of his "Waste Land" in the form of epigram. Eliot quotes a passage from the Satyricon in which the Sybil begs for her life finally to end. She is a truly fearful hand of dust, a mere voice in a jar.

Dust touches upon every surface, every subject. Some dust fits into categories easily, its significance readily understood. Biblical dust is a well known trope, a metaphor for mortality. Dust in the American imagination is history, as well as the betrayal of the land. Dust is magic in the stories of our childhoods. But dust is unstable, and sometimes the best means of classification is to let it speak for itself in its own hushed voice.

Bible Dust

"In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return."

-King James Bible, Genesis 3:19

"I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint: my heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my bowels. My strength is dried up like a potsherd; and my tongue cleaveth to my jaws; and thou hast brought me into the dust of death."

-King James Bible, Psalms 22:14-15

"But have I now seen Death? Is this the way I must return to native dust?"

-Milton, Paradise Lost

Childhood Dust

"Of course Peter had been trifling with them, for no one can fly unless the fairy dust has been blown on him. Fortunately, as we have mentioned, one of his hands was messy with it, and he blew some on each of them, with the most superb results."

-J.M. Barrie, Peter Pan

"Presently there came along the Djinn in charge of All Deserts, rolling in a cloud of dust (Djinns always travel that way because it is Magic), and he stopped to palaver and powwow with the Three."

-Rudyard Kipling, "How the Camel Got His Hump"

American Dust

"If, as they say, some dust thrown in my eyes Will keep my talk from getting overwise, I'm not the one for putting off the proof.

Let it be overwhelming, off a roof
And round a corner, blizzard snow for dust,
And blind me to a standstill if it must."

-Robert Frost, "Dust in the Eyes"

"That old dust storm, killed my baby, But it can't kill me, lord, And it can't kill me."
-Woody Guthrie, "Dust Can't Kill Me"

"Like a long sighing of wind in trees it begins, then they sweep into sight, borne now upon a cloud of phantom dust."

-Faulkner, Light in August

"Some days I feel that I exude a fine dust like that attributed to Pylades in the famous *Chronica near areopagitica* when it was found

and it's because an excavationist has reached the inner chamber of my heart and rustled the paper bearing your name

I don't like that stranger sneezing over our love."
-Frank O'Hara, "Poem"

Shakespearian Dust

"Let's talk of graves, of worms, and epitaphs, Make dust our paper, and with rainy eyes Write sorrow on the bosom of the earth."
-Shakespeare, *Richard II* Act III, Scene 2

"And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? man delights not me—nor woman neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so."

-Shakespeare, *Hamlet* Act II, Scene 2

Other Dusts

"O Death all-eloquent! you only prove What dust we dote on, when 'tis man we love." -Alexander Pope, "Eloisa to Abelard"

"I desired my dust to be mingled with yours Forever and forever and forever. Why should I climb the lookout?" -Ezra Pound, "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter"

"Human nature, essentially changeable, unstable as the dust, can endure no restraint; if it binds itself it soon begins to tear madly as its bonds, until it rends everything asunder, the wall, the bonds and its very self."

-Franz Kafka, "The Great Wall and the Tower of Babel"

"He felt closer to dust, he said, than to light, air or water. There was nothing he found so unbearable as a well-dusted house, and he never felt more at home than in places where things remained undisturbed, muted under the grey, velvety sinter left when matter dissolved, little by little, into nothingness. And indeed, when I watched Ferber working on one of his portrait studies over a number of weeks, I often thought that his prime concern was to increase the dust."

-W.G. Sebald, The Emigrants

"Do you see that cloud of dust rising there, Sancho? Well, it conceals a vast army, composed of innumerable and diverse peoples, which is marching toward us."

-Miguel de Cervantes, Don Quixote

"I'm all these words, all these strangers, this dust of words, with no ground for their settling, no sky for their dispersing, coming together to say, fleeing one another to say, that I am they, all of them, all of those that merge, those that part, those that never meet, and nothing else, yes, something else, that I'm something quite different, a quite different thing."

-Samuel Beckett, The Unnamable

"To those whose threshold vacillates give that bruise the dust astonished."

-Lisa Robertson, "How to Judge" from Debbie: An Epic

"If lilies are lily white if they exhaust noise and distance and even dust, if they dusty will dirt a surface that has no extreme grace, if they do this and it is not necessary it is not at all necessary if they do this they need a catalogue."

-Gertrude Stein, "A Red Stamp" from Tender Buttons

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