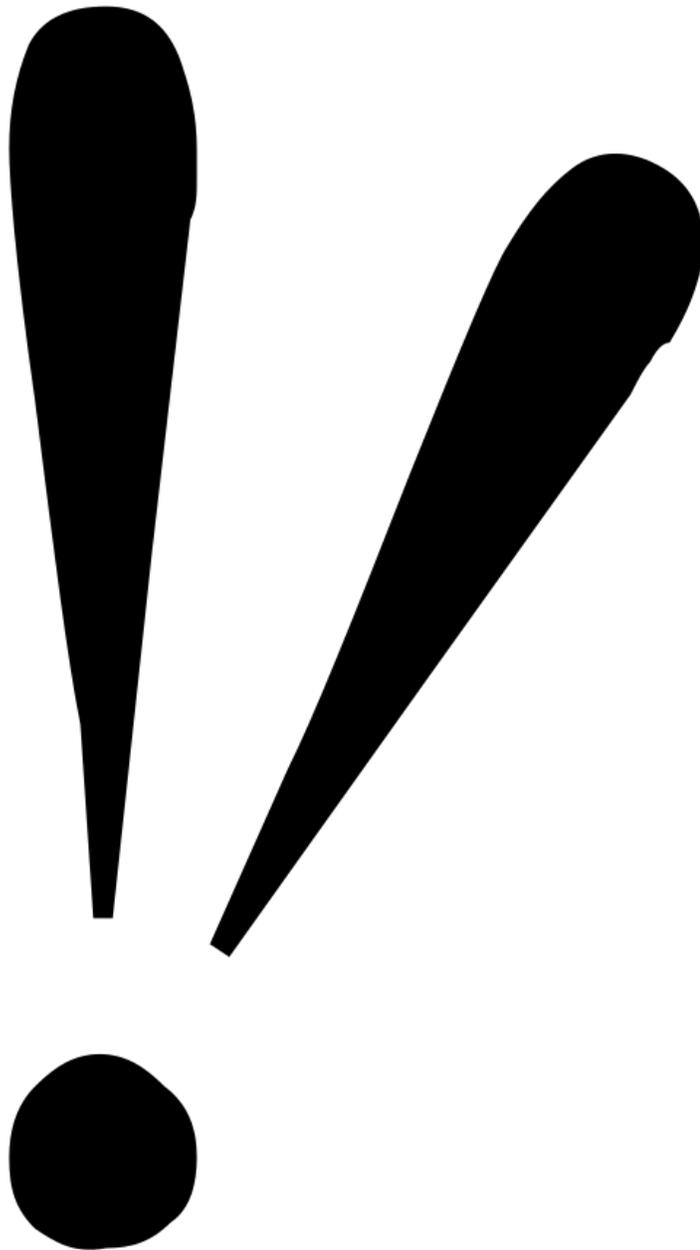


ACCLAMATION POINT

A MONTHLY JOURNAL OF ART and LITERATURE

Vol 1, Issue 4
November 2019



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Greetings!

Welcome to our fourth issue!. We couldn't be happier with the reception of our October 2019 issue and the hope that this November issue will be a great follow up.

Inside you will find two **interviews** with contributors from the last issue. Artist Roskana Zelazkiewicz tells us a little more about her art and creative process. Poet Kushal Poddar tells us a little more about his eerie poetry.

We also have a returning contributor this month. Paul Robert Mullen, whose poems you may remember from our inaugural issue, is back with a **creative nonfiction essay!** You will not want to miss out on his cryptozoological interests and exploration of Bigfoot.

You will also find two **short stories** in this issue. One by new contributor Mark McConville. We think you will really like his style and be intrigued by his characters. The second, is the continuation of co-editor, Ashley Davis, *Four Crows* from the October 2019 issue.

Do be sure to check out our monthly prompt for December before getting into the amazing contributions to this month's issue. As always we'd love to hear from you via our social

media or by email. Tell us what you think about the contributions. Tell us what else you'd like to see in features. And, of course, send us your submissions. We want to see your creative endeavours!

We sincerely hope you enjoy the November 2019 issue.

-The Editors at *Acclamation Point*
Ashley & KB

December Prompt

For next month's suggested prompt we would love to see your creative works related to the theme

FOLKLORE.

Tales of mythical beasts, the fae, morality tales, anthropomorphic animals -- people have been telling these stories for ages, and we want to read your modern interpretations of these longstanding classics.

Have a story from your country, region, or even family? We are especially interested in folklore interpretations with a cultural context or a very particular sense of place.

Please see our website for the [submission guidelines](#) and submit your work by Monday, November 25th. We look forward to reading your Folklore themed pieces or any other work you would like to submit!

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Interview with Roskana Zelazkiewicz, Artist

Hi Roskana! Thank you for agreeing to a short interview. We were very surprised by your work and mission statement in your bio. Your work is exactly what we love to see! We can't wait to see what else you accomplish as an artist.

Can you tell us a little bit more about your creative process?

Sometimes I just need to sit down and make a project. Without research or specific inspiration, just a thought or picture in my surroundings. (On early stages I'm using drawing by hand or I'm doing my job straight in Photoshop it's easier to change my ideas without making a mess.) Anyway, for most of the time it's strenuous process. I had to do fifty shit projects to be content with the final one. Even then projects still evolves; I'm cutting, deforming, throwing it and cutting again. This is how the first version of print is created.

How did you find your way into printing (intaglio)?

It was one of art divisions at university I was applying for. And while I'm not very much into painting or sculpture I give it a shot. Since then I'm slowly discovering the wonders of workshop graphic.

Do you work with any other mediums? Or any other creative pursuits in general?

I'm also a painter, digital graphic designer and big fan of mixed media. In my free time I'm crafting mostly for cosplay.

Can you tell us some advice you'd have for new artists/creatives?

Don't give up doesn't sound too original but it's true. It's hard work not only in learning the techniques and spending hours making sketches. It's also about discovering yourself, trying to figure out your own ideas and place in society. It's not always success and sure it's stressful. Sometimes it's raw and we've all been there. Art in general is exhausting. So keep trying. And remember to sleep sometimes!

What artists inspire you? Obviously, you find inspiration in human beauty in its various forms, but what else inspires you? Any literature?

My first and forever inspiration will be the horror genre. Writers like Edgar Allan Poe or his Japanese equivalent Ranpo Edogawa, Stephen King or Neil Gaiman. Creators like Jim Jarmusch or Wes Anderson who masterfully operating grotesque atmosphere and raw sense of humor. In the end I'm looking inspiration all around me - in old photos, my surroundings, classical artists (Francisco Goya, Basquiat, Kitagawa Utamaro or Velasquez), simply talks with my friends and current pop culture or world politics.

Why do you think art is important to you and for society?

I'll always want to be honest in my art. Through my artworks I want to show what I feel, how I am experiencing my emotions. Through art I want to portray my point of view of society and our problems. If I'll intrigue someone enough to stop for a moment and think about my art and try to interpret it, it's a success for me. Art is subjective, personally I think the most important thing is to keep creating. Whatever it feels.

Thank you so much for your time Roskana!

Through the Hearts of the Damned

By Mark McConville

Sitting here breathing second-hand smoke. Priding myself on my appearance, secluding myself from the drinkers. There is tension in these parts. All over the street are posters with faces of political monsters plastered on them. The men holding machine guns talk to each other, joking about the state of the world and this ungodly place. They're dressed for the part but would they shoot in frequent bursts? Would they hesitate? Would that feeling of trepidation stop them? If their country needs them, would they step up and send a flurry of bullets through the hearts of the damned.

The public houses are filled up. Women are segregated off from the womanizers. They prefer the peace, the tranquil feeling of safety, that hopefulness of returning home unmarked. Since the admission of a new leader, the number of police officers has dwindled, so extra vigilance is needed. Love is needed more so than ever. The backdrop of this city is a picture of badly drawn health, smog and blood soaked walls.

The man in charge sits in lavish surroundings, sipping wine and overseeing the city. His past is secret, his future encrusted in diamonds and new horizons. Under him, are servants, the underclass, the minions, a sea of poor people, trapped in terrible

conditions, paid only pennies. They're not worthy according to the hierarchy. They're there to be trampled on and overworked, paraded around like dummies, like pigs.

I look on at this sunken city. It's like a gaunt face, one which showed great beauty in the past. Through its alleyways, rats fight against the homeless, they're pests, but are interlocked into the fabric of this doomed metropolis. Disease is rife, the common cold rips families apart. When it hits, it kills the elderly, but the youth aren't immune to its spread. I walk through the dirt. Covering my face with a scarf. The stench is potent, the echoes of pain are loud, raucous sounds of people arguing and battling to stay alive are apparent. I am not lucky or privileged, but I try my best to escape the onslaughts and wars.

Some houses are barricaded off. These homes belong to the rich and the infamous. We live in poor conditions so they can eat fresh meals and bask in baths filled up with sweet smelling soaps and warm water. They're the elite, the damsels and the men hiding, concealing secrets that if exposed would damage their reputations. These revelations will never be uncovered.

I walk swiftly through the dark streets. Masking my face as I go. The homeless enter my proximity and I become restless and hesitant to entertain them. A man with one eye begins to speak in riddles. He has a crutch, he has nothing, and he is malnourished and impoverished.

I do have feelings. I do have a conscious, but these beggars are

everywhere. Sitting there, dying per minute. Everyday a struggle for survival. And yet they seem to smile, showcasing their toothless mouths. I throw a few pennies at them. They all become interlinked like bricks building a wall of tension, partaking in the art of whoever catches the coins first keeps them.

Home isn't a palace. Far from being a place of promise. I place my coat down on the wooden chair. The room is a cold reminder of how deprived I am. I only have some stale bread and a flask of cold tea. There's no heat in my bones. Wrapping up is the only way of staying lukewarm.

I turn on the dusty radio. Advertisements litter the airwaves. Men talk about why we should vote again for the Sir Beatty, the dictator already ruling the city. My ambitions decrease at the sound of their voices. My life is in his hands. We aren't classed as humans, we're like paper notes ready for the flames of misery.

The voices are interrupted by an emergency broadcast. A woman starts to talk in such a cathartic tone, managing to stay professional at all times.

'Tonight we are in shock. Sir Beatty, our leader, has been poisoned and is now dead. More to follow'

I rise from the wooden chair perplexed by the outcome. Sir Beatty is dead. Does this mean total mayhem or a calm life? Does it mean things will change? Does it mean we will be slaughtered like cattle?

I feel optimistic that we will see the light. Through brand new eyes, we

will see an upturn of fortune. But then, a shudder of negativity hits me. This news could start fights or could commence a revolution?

Revolutions? Dreams?

Shocked and frightened, I board my windows with the strongest wood I can find. And wait...

The early hours of the morning seem quiet. But, as I fall into slumber, gunshots startle me. Outside this broken home, a war hits fruition. The true extent I don't know, but I know the future will go either way.

I curl up like a kitten awaiting my fate. They could throw their Molotov cocktails into here and burn me to death. They could easily barge through the feeble defenses. I am waiting for such chaos.

Alarms go off, red alerts are present. I turn the radio on, and listen to the commentator speak of an Armageddon. The uproars, the needless killings, the rampant guns.

Through it all, I am thinking about a utopia being built over the streets of dismay. This city could be revitalized. Optimism is still bubbling in my heart, dreams are managing to stay relevant in my mind.

Until!

I hear a loud knock at my door. A frantic rattle. I hesitate, I move backwards, I cover my eyes.

'Please, please let me in'

It's the voice of a young man.

'Please, I beg you'

An automatic feeling of hesitation overcomes me. I want to help the boy, drag him in and let him spill his guts. But, I am not compelled to save him. He could be a crook, a thief, one of the mental patients from the nearby asylum?

Towards the light I look, I see inside my mind, his face, stricken with fear, his body a shell containing a strained heart. I can picture him, groveling at the door, his bloodied hands chipping away at the wood. He's beginning to fear his demise. This young man, forced to his limits.

And I open the door to him. Forcefully pulling at his cotton jumper.

'Get in now'

He falls to the floor. Shaking and sputtering. I offer him a glass of water. He takes and consumes quickly. Steadily he gets up and looks through the door window wondering if the world is going to cascade onto his head. He's jittery, scared, and hopeless. His demeanor is of a wounded animal, deprived of comfort and sense. Beyond the door are fiery temperaments, people rushing to their homes but shot down and mowed over by trucks and boots. The innocent, the underclass railed into the dirt.

'I've done something wrong'

He gazes into my eyes and sparks a frenzy in my head. I don't need the drama. The attention at my door. But, he's alone and trapped in his ways.

'What has happened?'

'He was treating us like animals. No food, no future'

'Who?'

'You know who'

I try to puzzle together a name.

The dictator is dead. It can only be him. The antagonist, disposed of. This boy in front of me, in my line of vision, was complacent enough to kill the leader of this decaying city. The repercussions will be unthinkable.

Stories will appear spontaneous, hyperbolic, dramatized. They'll overcoat the reason of life.

'You, it was you'

I would applaud him, but I am shook. Bringing down the empire with a couple drops of poison. Triggering a raid, a rampage, bloodshed, is what he has achieved. Connections are lost. The radio is dead. The lights are flickering. Power will be compromised. Dreams may as well fall into the void.

We're in for some company. The door bangs. We hear voices.

'Get down there and don't utter a word'

He goes underground. In a cellar I haven't stepped in for years.

The soldiers barge through the door. I am sitting on the wooden chair. A little stricken, but I keep my head in the right place.

They point their guns at me. They check the house.

'What are you looking for?'

'A killer'

'Well you're looking in the
wrong place'

If I could, I'd detonate like a
bomb. Spreading nails and hurt.

They discover the opening to
the cellar. I stand like a weak shield.
They push me aside. Voices of
discontent are loud. Gunshots are
heard. The surge of dread is pulsating.

The quiet...

I hear footsteps. The boy stands
there covered in blood. He's wounded
but alive.

'How?'

'We must leave. They'll be after
us'

The home I have resided in for
many years is a bloodbath. Tarnished
by the bullets of the order.

Paradise is there under all this
dust and gunpowder...

I know it.

Interview with Kushal Poddar, Poet

Hi Kushal! Thank you so much for agreeing to do a short interview with us. We were very intrigued by this eerie feeling about your work.

It's funny because we would read your poetry, go about our business, and then have a line from your poems randomly pop into our heads...and then go back and read it again to find something new. It really sticks with you. It makes your readers really think, not only about your work itself but about the larger themes you discuss with your work. What are some large themes you find yourself thinking about in terms of your writing?

In writing, I believe we all create our own tiny universes, parallel, interloping and interweaving because we are not impervious to or ignorant of others' writing and precedents and also because we follow our own aporias. My universe is what you may call is my theme. Here I create my own chronotope. In my yard of time and space the shadow of the outside and interloping worlds lay an intricate trellis. For example, when I speak about God, I am hardly religious or even mystic. It bears an echo of a precedent. In my universe my wife becomes a character. My mother and father and the parents are all subject to be analyzed into different presence and together as a part of my writing. I let my pen (I write with my fountain pen first and then type my words

again) stand against the injustice or what oppose my stand in morality in the outside or real world, and yet I cannot say I am a protest poet. I have animals in my writings. They, sometimes, are not animals. Even metaphors are alive, hungry when not fed and lusty when they are in heat. A writer should have a green thumb and apply that in the orchard of mind.

From our personal experience of reading your poetry, you really have to sit with it and let it fester inside of you a little bit. Is your writing process like that at all? Can you tell us a little bit about your creative process?

I pick up where we left in the previous question, I use my green thumb, and as a constant gardener I plan and also act without any, spontaneously, dreamily. In previous interviews I explained an element – the conversation between my wife and me, and in addition to that I shall mention my chitchat with a book or a dictionary or a TV series (rather web series), a movie (even the rotten tomatoes) and as a family/private person I turn to my wife and discuss them, sometimes funnily, mocking jays we be to the opposing views and executions; we spark a word may be or a phrase and I fall silent, tell her to hush and I open the cap of my pen. Foucault insisted that we analyze the role of power in the production of textuality and of textuality in the production of power – well, here is the first part or both of them as I write I

birth more into my chronotope and our family embraces more embryos. It is powerful, I know I am stretching out of the perimeter of Foucault, to be a writer. In short my method includes thin air, fountain pen, wife, doxa, episteme, and gnosis.

Are there any other creative pursuits you have?

I tried to be a human being, it became a hobby, a passion, sometimes a failure; I paint and etch – loosely traversing between expressionism and cubism; I fragment a book inside my mind and put together the puzzle thus created; I curate a family of cats; befriend the institution of marriage.

Where do you find inspiration for your poetry?

Inspiration is a haiku form for a sequence of epics. Inspiration is meta and it stereotypes itself. Frequently muse is born without a period of pregnancy and I become aware that it is conceived through the journey of human being since his genesis – all the history, politics, sociological undulation and shifts, personal experiences, geography in real and virtual, psychological paradigms. Specifications should include Jazz, wife and parents, cats, sparrows, philosophy and media. Once I feel the pang I ink them through the method I elaborated above. Inspiration, above all, is alive and ends in being a piece of

writing - as Derrida would have described – a dead letter.

Are there any poets/writers or artists that inspire you?

I began writing as a child, at six-years old, because of the poetry and fictions I guzzled. Hence I shall include fairy tales along with Derrida, Barthes, Foucault; Gabriel García Márquez, Jorge Luis Borges, Isabel Allende, Graham Greene, Aldus Huxley, Neil Gaiman, Milan Kundera, Michael Ondaatje, Philip Roth, John le Carré; Chaucer, Yeats, Geoffrey Hill, Armitage, George Szirtes, Paul Muldoon, T. S. Eliot, Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, Wallace Stevens, Charles Simic, Robert Pinsky, Franz Wright, Kevin Young and Ilya Kaminsky; Van Gogh, Édouard Manet, Seurat, Klee, René Magritte; and the list traverses beyond.

What is some advice you'd have for new poets/writers in pursuing their craft?

I shall echo Michel Houellebecq that one need to have certain megalomania to be published, but before that I shall add, one must let his bubble of thoughts built from and burst by the reading and the other mediums of precedents. The ocean is vast and the best process is osmosis. Do strive on criticism, welcome them but let them change you only in a good way and in favor of your innermost guidance. Remember the green thumb and being a constant gardener.

Why do you think poetry is important for you and for the general populous?

The importance lies in the factum that poetry is not required for any other particular purpose except that it is needed because without poetry the hollowness will not ruin anything but demolish what is yet to be perceived

because in all its forms (from real to unreal; from literary to Insta) it never quite ceased to exist. Once I told one interviewer - poetry is a tool to capture the vast beyond within the canvas of personal experience – and so it shall remain.

Thank you so much for your time Kushal!

A Longing For Our Crypto Zoological Brethren

(An unlikely obsession with Bigfoot)

By Paul Robert Mullen

The question must be asked. How on earth does a man born and raised on the north-west coast of England develop an obsession with the crypto zoological “myth” that is Bigfoot? The story is more complex than you might at first assume, and it starts way back in childhood.

As a boy I was drawn to anything mythological, supernatural, paranormal. My bookshelf was stacked full of mysteries and urban legends. I loved the slightly scary element of Roald Dahl's tales, especially *The Witches*, and craved a good ghost story, or anything on TV involving monsters or creatures unrecognized by science in our daily subsistence. *Labyrinth*, starring the rather alarmingly revealing David Bowie as Jareth, the Goblin King (his tights have become stuff of legend in adulthood), was my absolute favourite movie early

on without competition. The cast of wonderfully eclectic and often monstrous misfits appealed to my slightly off-kilter character. I also loved *The Never Ending Story*, chiefly for my fascination with Falkor, the luck-dragon who helps Atreyu on his fantastical quests. I spent many an evening before sleep imagining starlight rides on his back far above the world. Science fiction fantasy *Krull* also bewitched me; it seems so tacky now in terms of special effects, but the ‘Widow of the Web’, Cyclops and the Beast have resonated in my psyche long into adulthood.

A defining moment, however, came when I was eight years old. A boy called Mark who lived across the street (sadly neglected by his parents – he was left to do as he pleased, much to my mother's distress), invited me over to play ‘Rockfall’ on the old Amstrad tape-deck computer. We are talking late 80's. My parents didn't like me going over to Mark's house because his Dad was a drunk and had been spotted on several occasions in a state of inebriation pissing in the street. They also knew that the house was a smoke choked mess, and my Mum took particularly unkindly to my

clothes and hair stinking of cheap cigars. There were also rumours that the older brother was a 'druggie', which was huge news in our quiet suburban neighbourhood. When I arrived at his rundown abode early that Saturday morning (having used the usual excuse – "Just going to the penny sweet shop, Mum!"), he put on Bruce Campbell's *Evil Dead*, which part thrilled me, part horrified me. At the time there was no spoof involved; it was pure horror for my eight year old eyes.

I went home that day a different boy; utterly affected, one might say. I knew something for sure though – that thrill of the unknown, and the sickly sweet feeling of being scared was a sensation I really liked. From that day forward I craved horror movies and would search out Stephen King novels in the charity shops, devouring them one by one until I had no option but to read them again. I had two school friends, Andy and Michael, who were equally as curious about all things scary, and we would raid the local video rental for all the classics: *Halloween*, *Night Of The Living Dead*, *The Exorcist*, *Texas Chainsaw*

Massacre, and the particularly disturbing *Cannibal Holocaust*.

This went on most of the way through my teens until, by complete coincidence, I saw the infamous Patterson/Gimlin film of the suspected, elusive Bigfoot striding across Bluff Creek, California, in 1967. If my memory serves me right it was on some tacky strange but true documentary that I barely recall. I was absolutely entranced by this revelation. The thought that there could be a species of undiscovered bipedal hominoids roaming the forests of the world captivated my imagination. I researched this legendary video – by far the clearest supposed footage of a Sasquatch (North American name for our beloved Bigfoot) ever recorded, even up until this day – and found myself entrenched in literature about it. All sorts of conspiracy theories have been formulated; a man in a suit is the most popular. It was interesting to me that, solely from the footage itself, the possibility that this creature could be real had been impossible to disprove. The footage has been analysed to death to this day, frame by frame, shot by shot, but still there isn't any conclusive proof that this is a

fraudulent portrayal of a fictional monster.

As YouTube and other such technological advances in social media started to explode and colonise our subconscious, I found myself scouring the internet regularly for Bigfoot footage ('Bigfootage' as I like to refer to it) and related documentaries. One of my favourites is the *Missing 411* podcast featuring the stories of Bigfoot researcher David Paulides, who alludes to our scarily mysterious suspect, Bigfoot, in relation to thousands of National Park disappearances in the US. Listening to this late at night became my go-to habit, and it sparked a general interest in crypto zoology that would also lead me to read widely about the Loch Ness Monster, Chupacabra, Mokele-mbembe and the Giant Squid.

Of course, in the region that I was born and raised (slightly North of Liverpool, in a seaside town confusingly named Southport) there are no forests. Our tiny island doesn't lend itself to these cryptids very well since we don't have masses of unexplored territory. The best I could manage as a kid was the local pinewoods leading onto the sand

dunes of the Northwest coast. I managed to see a young couple having sex, a local environmentalist we called 'Swampy' smoking joints in his tent, and a group of scouts doing field research – but no Bigfoot.

Such is the nature of our species, Bigfoot is considered a myth in scientific circles and nothing more. I have watched documentary after documentary where scientists, terrified of blotting their copybook by even suggesting the possibility, trample on the notion of this creature through their predictable get-out-clause: *evidence*. Scientists want bones. They want teeth, and brains, and hair, and carcasses. They want confirmation in their hands. What they don't want to admit is that the bodies of bears, and mountain lions, and practically everything else that exists in the wilderness are completely devoured and emaciated within hours of death. Predators and scavengers are in their element when the meat doesn't fight back.

Admittedly, this still doesn't completely justify why at least *one* body hasn't been found. I get that. It is all very hard believe when there is no concrete proof at all. Plaster-cast

footprints can be easily faked, this is indisputable. However, the lack of concrete evidence could simply be down to the fact that Sasquatch populations are tiny in comparison to other species. It also fails to take into account that this creature may be super intelligent, and therefore fully aware and in complete control of its own invisibility. There are also the conspiracists that insist that this undiscovered species is extraterrestrial; a farfetched but not wholly impossible theory. Not in my mind anyway. Look around you. Everything that exists is extraterrestrial; it's just that the wind and the rain and the trees and the sky and everything else we see and come into contact with has become our normal, our everyday, our *reality*. We live on a really wacky revolving piece of rock in the middle of a colossal universe that is, quite simply, immeasurable.

Recently I took part in a podcast, hosted by the super-sharp Radio DJ, Cameron Maerevoet, in which we discussed the Bigfoot conundrum. During the show he asks:

“Are we saying [Bigfoot is] this one thing, or are there many of them?”

“Oh no, there's not just one,” I respond, remarkably confidently.

“There's not just one?”

“No, it's a species,” I assert.

“That seems to me how it's projected though,” Cameron reasons, “like the Loch Ness monster is one ...”

It's at this point in the broadcast that I interrupt to lay it all on the line and proceed with my most profound take on the Bigfoot saga yet:

“Well, really, they should have thought about plural by now ... it's Bigfeet, not Bigfoot. I mean, could you be arsed going looking for *one* of them?”

I'd like to revisit the notion of cryptozoology. It may seem unfathomable now, but the Mountain Gorilla was considered a mythical beast until 1902, when first officially discovered by German Officer, Captain Robert Von Beringe. The Platypus was considered a practical joke – and let's face it, rarely has there been a creature that looks more like a hoax – until 1797. The Giant Panda, which is embedded in our social conscience as the cutest of all the bears, was nothing but a fable until its formal discovery in China

in 1927. Yes, that's right, we have only known that the Giant Panda really exists for less than one hundred years! And then, most recently, is the debacle over the Giant Squid – the 'Kraken' in folklore – that leggy horror that wraps itself around pirate ships, pulling them down to their watery graves.

Landlubbers refused to believe such nonsense. In 2004 researchers in Japan took the first ever confirmed footage of the Giant Squid, and in 2006 a 24-foot female was captured by Japanese scientists. The largest ever Giant Squid found to date was 59-feet in length and weighed nearly a ton.

Terrifying.

So, there is my dig at the uptight, non-believing establishment. We are not so far on in the cultivation of this planet that we know everything about *everything*. It is perfectly plausible that undiscovered creatures exist, however unlikely that may seem. I also wonder what the reaction must have been of the first humans to see a giraffe come striding through the trees, or an elephant crashing through the jungle, or a Great White Shark slicing through the waves. Surely they must have been paralysed with fear; they are all monstrous and unusual

creatures to behold. We know that dinosaurs existed. Imagine bumping into an Argentinosaurus (all 50-100 tons of it), or a T-Rex standing at 20-feet high, or looking up to see a Quetzalcoatlus (with a wingspan of 7-metres) gliding over your head. Spare a thought for those who may have seen a blue whale emerge from the ocean for the first time, or a Grizzly Bear come to confront them, or a Saltwater Crocodile snap its jaws, or even an Ostrich legging it to wherever Ostrich's leg it to. I mean, an *Ostrich!* God help you if you suffer from Ornithophobia.

So, yes, I believe. I've never been to any of the hotspots on planet earth for Bigfoot sightings. I'm talking about the Pacific Northwest region of the US, as well as the Ohio River Valley, central Florida, the Sierra Nevada Mountain Range or the Mississippi River Valley. I'm talking about the Himalayan regions spanning Bhutan, India, Nepal, China, and Russia (Siberia). I've never had my own experiences or encounters with Bigfoot, or Sasquatch, or Yeti, Skunk Ape, Yeren, Yowie, Mande Barung, Orang Pendek, Almas or Barmanou. I may have come close in KFC or McDonalds from time to

time, but nothing 'concrete'. In all honesty, I have absolutely no justification whatsoever to believe in this creature other than my own innate lust for salacious mystery. I just know that deep down in my heart I want it to exist, and really believe it could.

Gigantopithecus is my final trump card. This was a known species, and the largest primate that ever lived, standing up to 3-metres tall, and weighing as much as 600kg. The primate fossil record suggests that this species could have been in existence up until one hundred thousand years ago, prominent in the regions that are now India, Vietnam, China and Indonesia. The first remains of Gigantopithecus were found by anthropologist, Ralph von Koenigswald, would you believe it, in a Chinese apothecary shop in 1935. This gargantuan creature is, essentially, the Bigfoot that so many of us dream exists. Is it totally implausible to think that a community of these elusive primates may have survived the climate change of the Pleistocene era and continued to reproduce in the shadows of modern day existence? I'm no scientist, but I don't think, on the

basis of so many sightings, experiences and encounters down the years that this is impossible. Imagine bumping into that as you're walking your dog?

I'd like to think that Bigfoot would be discovered during my lifetime. It would be pretty inconvenient if they found it after I was gone. Regardless, it has filled my days with moments of wondrous curiosity. I hope one day to visit the Pacific Northwest region of the US and badger the locals in remote forest towns for their stories about the legend. In the age of camera phones some more captivating footage may still emerge, who knows? I only know that, in my mind, Bigfoot is as real as the territories it lives in; I just hope it's not me that gets those heavy handed raps on the window at night because the curtains are staying well and truly shut.

Four Crows, *cont.*

(Please find part 1 in October 2019)

By Ashley Davis

Adam and I raced from the bed to the door of my room to watch for Mother. She let the screen door slap against the doorframe and paraded down the hall with her head held high as she approached my room.

"Lucy?"

"I'm here," I stepped out of my room.

"Good, get changed, put something nice on, we're going to the town meeting this evening. Where's your brother? Tell him to get changed."

She didn't stop to discuss the plan with me. She carried on down the hall to her and papa's room. The door was flung closed behind her, the sound echoing back down the hall.

Behind me I heard a chuckling emitting from Adam. Turning back to him with eyes widened out of fear he began laughing even harder. Stifling it for his own safety he whispered in between bursts.

"She's...she's so mad," he covered his mouth for a second as he composed himself, "Papa's in so much trouble."

"Just get dressed, Adam. Papa'll take it out on you if he sees you laughing about this."

"Why are we even going though?"

"Get out, I'm gonna change." I pushed him out towards the hall, but

he flung an arm out and held himself on the door frame.

"Papa's right, we shouldn't be aligning ourselves with him. Mother's gonna get us into even more trouble. You shouldn't have been with Declan this afternoon."

"I wasn't with Declan, he walked me home. Get. Out. Adam!"

The door to our parents' room flung open and from it, our mother's voice rang out.

"Adam!"

With immediate response, Adam straightened his posture and let go of the doorframe.

"If you don't get changed now, I'll drag you down to the kitchen and wash your face myself. Do you want that?"

"No, Mama."

"Get changed."

"Yes, Mama."

Adam looked over his shoulder and made a face at me.

"This is your fault. I'm just gonna change my shirt..."

"And your trousers. They're caked in mud."

"Fine, but-"

I slammed the door in his face. Smiling at myself for having the last word I wandered across my room and stood in front of the window. The breeze was beginning to have a chilling effect. As goosebumps ran down my arms I considered what I should wear to a town meeting. Mother wanted to make a good impression, that much was clear.

My wardrobe stood directly across from the window. Opening the doors I peered at the dresses

contained inside. Most of them were day clothes I could wear to the shop. I had no need for anything else. I pushed my arms in between two dresses in the very center of the wardrobe and spread them apart so I could better see the options. Too light. Too old. Too black. Too warm. At the end of the dresses to the right hung my white cotton dress.

It had remained as white as the day Mother and I had finished making it. Mostly due to the fact I had refused to wear it since it had been completed. I had been convinced the moment I put it on something would attack leaving a stain ruining the most perfect dress that had ever existed. It was my first dress I had made and my first womanly dress. This wasn't a girl's dress. It had elegance and shape to it. With its high buttoned neck and lace detailing on the skirt it would make a good impression.

Pulling it from the wardrobe I held it up and pressed the waist of the dress against me. I slowly, cautiously walked to the mirror to look at it in the reflection. Its reflection in the mirror was stunning. A rapping on my bedroom door startled me and the dress fell from my hand as I jumped. A gasp escaped my mouth as I realized what I had done.

"One second!" I called towards the door. Bending down I carefully picked up the dress with one hand and swept my other hand under it examining it for stains. It seemed to be okay. I laid it across my bed and went to the door.

Mother was standing there in the hallway. Her face wasn't as red as it

had been but she was still holding her chin high.

"Can I come in?"

I murmured an agreement and stepped out of the way for her to enter. She crossed my room and shut my window.

"Close the door. I want to talk to you for a moment."

I did as I was told and watched her turning from the window to my bed. Seeing the dress laid out on the bed she looked puzzled. Then she smiled.

"Will you wear this to the town meeting?" She ran her fingers over the buttons at the collar and traced the line of buttons down to the waist.

"Maybe? Is it too much?"

"I think you'll look beautiful. Someone you're trying to impress?" She picked up the dress, sat on my bed and draped the white dress over her lap. Beginning to unbutton the top of the dress she looked at me expectantly.

"No. I just thought it would be nice," I felt my cheeks grow hot though. It must have shown on my face too because Mother looked back down at the dress with a short chortle.

"Here, let me help you get dressed. Take that dress off."

I did as she asked and hung my worn dress over the end of my bed.

"Arms up," Mother held the dress up, her hands poking out the bottom of the skirt and the collar of the dress scrunched up to her elbows. She reached over my head and let the skirt of the dress fall. "Here we go, right arm first. Good, left. Good. How's it feel? Too snug?"

"No, it feels alright," I stretched my arms out to ensure I could move them.

Mother began doing up the buttons starting from the waist. They were silver, elaborately designed buttons. Grandma had said they had come from buttons of a British soldier's redcoat from when her own mother was a girl, but they didn't look nearly that old. The design in the center of the button always reminded me of a thistle. Father had a hand-embroidered thistle, with a forest-green stem and deep purple petals, on his old coat that he'd given to Adam. It was hand-stitched by his mother that we never got to meet. He said that she lived at the base of a mountain overlooking a lake, but that this place was across an ocean.

"There we are," Mother adjusted the last button and ran her hands across the shoulders of the dress, smoothing out any wrinkles in the fabric. She rested her hands on my shoulders and looked me in the eyes. "It's perfect on you. Go look."

Stepping out of the way she ushered me towards the mirror. I didn't recognize myself for a few seconds. Being used to the older dress that hung on my frame it was a strange sensation seeing this white dress cling to my form. Mother approached me from behind and began taking my hair out of the braid. She ran her fingers through my hair separating the waves.

"I think you should wear your hair up this evening. You look the part of a young lady."

"Maybe half-up?" I suggested. "I like the waves in my hair."

Mother smiled and nodded. She grabbed the comb from the small table beneath the mirror and began helping me with my hair.

"Lucy, why was Declan Benally with you when you came home?"

"He walked me home. That's all."

"You don't really know him, Lucy. Why did you walk with him?"

"When I left the shop...I was standing there on the road, but I was confused. I must have been there for a few minutes. But then Dec- Mr. Benally approached me and asked if I was alright."

"And what did you say?"

"I said I was fine, but he said I looked a little ill. He gave me his cap because he thought maybe it was the heat."

"He gave you his cap?"

"Yes, and he asked if you were busy, and I told him you and Grandma were doing a reading right then-"

"You didn't say anything about the reading, did you?" Mother looked at my face in the mirror. She was very serious looking.

"No, no. Of course, not. I was so afraid I might blurt something out I hardly spoke to him."

"Then what happened?"

"Well, he said that he would just come to find you later and insisted on making sure I got home safe..."

"What did you talk about on your way home?"

"He did most of the talking...He told me about the city, I asked him about the books he had with him...We saw two crows together not far from

the house. He told me that he had seen crows earlier today and I told him I had too-

"Crows? How many?"

"He didn't want to say how many he'd seen, but I told him the rhyme for-"

"No, how many did you see today?"

"Well, the two with Declan, and I saw four of them this morning when I first woke up."

"Four for a boy?" Mother looked at me with an eyebrow raised and a teasing smile. "But Mr. Benally...he didn't...well, did he make any advances or say anything that made you uncomfortable?"

My cheeks felt hot again and I could see the color rush into my face this time. I shook my head as a response.

"That was it. Is that what Papa and Adam were worried about?" I looked away from the mirror. "Oh! He tried to introduce himself and explain to Papa. But he sent Declan away. I didn't even get to give him his hat back...He'll be there tonight right?"

Mother's eyes flicked back to the mirror to look at my face and then looked back to my hair.

"I'm not sure if he will or not. The meeting's about him. It could only help his case if he was present among the rest of us."

I nodded slightly to myself. I thought about the dream I had and the shadows that had approached Declan.

"Mama?"

"Hmmm?" She laid the comb back down on the table.

"When I came home I took a nap and...well I had a dream about Declan. He was in the woods by himself, but four shadows surrounded him and pushed him to the ground. It looked as if they were hitting him. I wouldn't think anything of it, but he had been walking off to the woods when he left here so I was thinking maybe..."

"Shadows? What did they look like? I mean could you see through them? Or did they block out the light?" She pulled a piece of hair on the side of my head and twisted it back behind my ear.

I thought about it for a moment. "I think they blocked out the light. When they surrounded Declan I couldn't see him anymore. I could only see the shadows."

Mother's eyebrows furrowed. She took the brooch off her own dress and positioned it on the back of my head.

"Let us hope it was nothing, but we will pray for his safety in this town."

"Mmmm." I agreed with her. "Why do people think he's dangerous? Adam was really mad at me. I don't understand. He was nothing, but nice and even gentlemanly."

"People don't like what is different from them, Lucy. Mr. Bellany is different from a lot of people in this town. Just like we are different from a lot of people. But if he is a good man as you think he is from your experience then there is no reason to fear him because he is different. I can only advise you to act cautiously yourself until you truly know him or anyone for that matter." Mother finished tucking

pieces of hair into the brooch. "I would prefer if you refrain from going anywhere alone with him though," her voice had taken on a serious instructional tone. "You know how people are in this town. And if your dream has any meaning at all I'd like you to not be mixed up in that."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I think you are ready. What do you think?"

I turned my head to look at her work. She had twisted small sections of hair on either side of my head, just above the ear, back towards the center of my head where she had placed the brooch. It was as if I had transformed into one of the socialite ladies in the newspapers that get to us from the cities.

"I'll check on your brother. We'll leave in a few minutes." She left the room quietly and I was alone with my reflection.

Looking at everything put together it felt as though something was missing. I looked too washed out. Too pale against the white. It needed color. Purple. It needed something purple. Going to the small table by my bed I opened a tiny jewelry box that Grandma had given me for my last birthday. Inside I kept a small trove of precious treasures. A ring from Papa that belonged to his mother. A dried rose sunflower petal from Adam. A purple ribbon that had come off of Mother's silk dress. And a cloudy, white stone I'd found in the fields.

Picking up the ribbon I walked back to the mirror. I lifted my hair that hung around my shoulders and tucked the ribbon around the collar of the

dress. Tying it loosely around my neck into a neat bow that I carefully situated in between two of the buttons I knew this is exactly what had been missing.

"Lucy! We're ready to leave."

After one last look, I paced back over to my bed and pulled Declan's hat out from underneath it. I opened my door. Papa was coming down the hall. When he saw me he looked me up and down with a quizzical look.

"You're wearing that to a town meeting?"

"Yes...is it too much? I just thought-"

"No, no. It's just-no, nothing. You look lovely, Little Bird." He put his hand on my shoulder. "Be safe. If anything happens you stick with your brother, right?"

"Yes, Papa."

With a curt nod and a grunt, he patted me on the shoulder and moved to let me pass him.

When we arrived in town there were small groups of people standing talking to each other in hushed tones. A couple of the gaggles of ladies grouped together had greeted Mother and waved at her to come over. Normally, Adam and I would have been sent in to find seats as she conversed with them. This time though she merely waved and said hello to them as she continued to usher us towards the town meeting place.

Every town gathering was held in the same building. On Sundays, it was used by the preacher for church services. On the first Saturday of the month, the building played host to

dances or community dinners for those who would like to be seen. It was a large white building with sliding doors like a barn. Large windows that could be opened up on nice days. Several of them were open now to let the late summer breezes pass through it. It was the largest building in town. Large enough to accommodate every in the town if they ever decided to all be in the same place at one time. From the look of the groups gathering outside it sure looked like this might be that time.

Mother pushed Adam and me past everyone standing outside. Once in the building, she put a hand on either of our shoulders to stop us as she looked around for a place to sit. People were moving the benches used as pews for church services to the center of the room. They created two rows of benches with an aisle running down the center. Papa liked to sit in the back when we came to town meetings. Mother was looking closer to the front though.

"There. Go." She pushed Adam and I to the right towards the second bench from the front. Adam stopped at the entrance of the row and let Mother go in first, then me, and he took his place next to me.

Next to Mother were two old ladies. They had been to our shop before. The closest to her was Mrs. Fitzroy. She had come to see Mother and Grandma about the ghost of her husband. Sitting next to her was Ms. Shellings. She was what Grandma called, "an old maid." She had never married. Mother and Grandma had helped her deal with her sister's

husband, whom, according to a dream she had, was forging documents to steal money from the family. He wasn't, but she finally talked to her sister again after years of not speaking. Both ladies turned their heads, smiled and nodded a greeting to Mother.

Mother greeted them sweetly. She always waited to be greeted by others first. Some people in the town preferred to not have everyone else know they knew each other. Mother gestured towards us and asked the ladies if they remembered her children. Mrs. Fitzroy's wrinkled face scrunched up in a smile as she nodded and said hello. She reached into the pocket of her apron and revealed two caramels delicately wrapped in a white paper.

"Two sweeties for two sweeties," she chuckled at her joke. Her hand shook from age as she held them out to us. We thanked her politely and took them gratefully. "Don't tell the other children or they'll want one too. It is just for you two." She tapped a finger to the side of her nose and winked at us. Her eyes looked younger when she winked, I thought, as if they twinkled with life.

At the front of the room, five men brought out a long table. They centered it a few feet from the aisle in the middle of the pews. Three chairs were brought out and placed behind the table to face the gathering crowd. A fourth chair was brought out and placed to the left of the table, in front of the section where we sat.

The crowd from outside meandered into the room and took their places. For those who were

slower to enter the building, they resigned themselves to standing behind the pews. Three men walked down the center aisle, stood in front of the table, shook hands with each, smiled and traded pleasantries, and then faced the crowd.

"Silence, please!" called the one to the left. Mr. Higgins, was the local saloon owner. He had been elected as an elder this year and everyone said that he had proved to be a just elder.

Mr. Fletcher, the man to the right, had been an elder for two years. No one could agree if he was the best for the position, but he managed to charm them for two years now. In the center stood Mr. Portsmouth. The oldest of the three men, he had served the town as an elder for as long as I could remember. Everyone always praised his wisdom.

As the hush washed over the crowd the three men took their seats. Mr. Higgins, took Mr. Portsmouth by the elbow and helped him to his own seat. Once they were settled and looking at the expectant crowd Mr. Fletcher took the floor.

"Good evening, everyone. Thank you for joining us. As I'm sure you are all aware we are meeting this evening to discuss the problems of a returning member of this town. Mr. Declan Bellany-"

Some whispering and jeers interrupted the man.

"Now, now. I know and understand. We will hear everyone's concerns in due time. Please, now. Usually, the person in question would be here in attendance. As Mr. Bellany is not here we can only assume that he

does not wish to defend himself. In that case, the council would like to hear your concerns and question the situations you bring to us. We cannot dismiss a man from our company on rumors alone you understand.

Therefore, we do ask that all of your concerns be admissible as fact with proof. Mr. Portsmouth will preside."

With that, Mr. Portsmouth slowly and with difficulty pushed himself up to stand. He cleared his throat, licked his lips, and looked at all of the faces. Taking his time to see who was in attendance. Then he began.

"Thank you, Mr. Fletcher. I will be sure to do my best to chase justice in this manner," his soft-spoken demeanor was always surprising. "In a calm manner, I would like everyone who wishes to speak to raise their hand, please."

A dozen or so hands raised in the crowd.

"Thank you." He looked around slowly at the people raising their hands and considered his options. "Ah, Mr. Robert Clark. We will hear from you first. Everyone else who raised their hand, please make your way to the left side of the room. Mr. Higgins will take your name and you can return to your seat. We will have order in this meeting. Thank you. Mr. Clark, if you would please?" Mr. Portsmouth gestured to the area in front of the table.

As Mr. Clark stood in front of the table, footsteps from the back of the room echoed throughout the building. A whispering sound made its way through the crowd. A few gasps of surprise could be heard above the

whispers. Mother looked over her shoulder and turned back to face the front with a slight smile, but a worried expression on her face. From the back of the room, Declan made his way to the front of the crowd.

Declan who had looked put together this morning now had mussed up hair, a bruise on his cheek, a scratch that had not yet stopped bleeding completely over his left eye, and bloodstains on his white shirt that could not be completely covered by his vest that was buttoned up. Instantly, I remembered my dream. The shadows. Declan had been attacked. But how had I seen it?

"Ah, young Mr. Bellany. Are you alright?" Mr. Portsmouth held his hand out to Declan.

Shaking hands with the old man Declan nodded. Then he reached his hand out towards Mr. Fletcher and Mr. Higgins who both shook his hand.

"I'll be alright, thank you. I'm afraid I had some trouble find me this afternoon. Apologies for the tardiness of my arrival."

Declan turned towards Mr. Clark, "Hello, I'm sorry to have interrupted." He held his hand out to Mr. Clark.

Looking down at his hand, Mr. Clark put his hands on his hips. He took a long look up and down Declan's form. Then spit at his boots before letting out a chortle.

"Mr. Clark, I'd appreciate your civility in this matter." Mr. Portsmouth scolded the man's behavior before gesturing to Declan to take a seat in the fourth chair in front of our section.

Declan took a seat and looked around. Once he spotted me with Adam and Mother he nodded toward our direction. I smiled at him in what I hoped was an encouraging manner. Adam scoffed and Mother reached across me and gently tapped him on the knee to correct his behavior.

"Mr. Clark, if you are ready now?" Mr. Portsmouth took gingerly lowered himself onto his chair.

"Yes, thank you. I have it on good authority that the man who sits next to you, Mr. Declan Benally is a villain with the loosest morals. Several can attest to his work in the city as being heinous and those he worked with being nothing more than thieves, liars, and those of a more violent nature. His work is politically dangerous, not only for this town but for the country. The men he worked with plotted murderous ventures against those who disagree with their ideas."

Coos of horrified astonishment echoed through the audience. Mother looked around and shushed those around us. This only earned her a few stares of disgust. I grabbed her hand and squeezed it.

"Surprising?" Mr. Clark turned to face the crowd. "This is but a drop in the ocean to what you'll hear tonight about Mr. Declan Benally." He turned back to face the elders. "That is all I have to say this evening."

Mr. Portsmouth's gaze lingered on Mr. Clark for several moments as he tapped a finger against his mouth. Then he cleared his throat and began questioning Mr. Clark.

"You say that several can attest to this claim?"

"Yes, sir."

"Their names, Mr. Clark?"

"Ms. Meadows, owner of a public house in the city close to this press Mr. Benally worked at. Mr. Yates, a politician that lives just on the outskirts of the city. He's very active in the oppositional parties' circles. The same party who was threatened with physical violence. Those are just two who could tell you enough."

"And did you witness Mr. Benally's active participation in violent proceedings?"

Mr. Clark was silent for a second, "No, sir. But those two might be able to give eye witness accounts should they be needed after this evening."

"Mr. Fletcher, please write down the names. Mr. Clark, you'll provide him addresses for the witnesses. Mr. Higgins, call the next speaker."

"Ms. Bordeaux will speak next."

A middle-aged plump woman with rosy cheeks made exited a pew. Running her hands down her the skirt of the dress to flatten out the wrinkles she walked towards the elders. Once in front of them, Mr. Portsmouth rose from his chair with the support of Mr. Higgins. She politely curtsied towards the men and shook their hands softly.

"When you're ready, Ms. Bordeaux. And I do hope your father is doing better today." Mr. Portsmouth was seated again.

"Thank you, sir. I'll tell him you wish him well. I'd like to speak about a delicate matter regarding Mr. Declan Benally. As a mother of three teenage girls, I feel it is my duty to make it

known so that the other mothers in this town know to keep their girls away from him."

Mother squeezed my hand tighter and pulled my hand into her lap. I patted her arm. Adam leaned in towards me and whispered in my ear.

"I told you he was dangerous. You'll see."

I shooed him away with my free hand.

"Mr. Declan Benally is a seducer of evil means. A friend of my cousin has confided in me the news of Mr. Benally's ways. This friend knows a young girl who was known to keep company with him in the city. They were frequently seen about the city, arm in arm, obviously in the way of courting. This poor, young, misguided girl is now heartbroken and has been left...in a bad way."

Gasps of horror arose from a few women in the crowd. Echoing them were jeers of disgust from some of the men.

"She'll now have to raise a young child on her own as Mr. Benally abandoned them in the city to return to the comforts of home where he believes no one is the wiser to his ways."

Whispering began to climb to a loud chatter in the crowd. Mr. Portsmouth raised a hand and the silence slowly swept over the crowd.

"Thank you Ms. Bordeaux. And do you know this young lady personally?"

"No, sir."

"And do you know her name?"

"Not her full name, sir. You see the friend who told my cousin this

news did not want to smear the poor girl's name anymore that it already has been. My cousin was able to get the girl's first name. Her name is Sarah, sir."

"And the name of your cousin's friend?"

"Mistress Gunter. She's headmistress at a finishing school in the city."

"And what is the name of this school?"

"I'm not positive, sir."

"So you have no way to locate this friend of your cousin?"

"You'd have to ask my cousin, sir. But I'll tell you this if Mr. Benally is welcomed back with open arms to this town no young girl or woman will be safe until his departure." Ms. Bordeaux turned to the crowd, "And I think all the mothers here will agree with me that our young daughters would not be seen out of their homes with a monstrous seducer in the town's midsts."

Some cheers of agreement erupted from the crowd. I looked at Declan who seemed to be calmly taking in the proceedings. Ms. Bordeaux spun around to face him. She spat towards his boots which garnered sounds of approval from the crowd.

"Shame on you Mr. Benally. Your family should be ashamed of you."

Declan lowered his gaze from the crowd but straightened his posture. He shook his head slightly in dismay.

"Mistress Bordeaux," Mr. Portsmouth raised his voice in a stern tone. "You may return to your seat

immediately. I will not tolerate this sort of behavior in this meeting."

With a huff, Ms. Bordeaux spun on her heel deftly for some of her plumpness. She seemed to waddle with anger as she made her way back to the seat. Mr. Portsmouth took this opportunity to address the crowd again before the next speaker.

"I know many of you are upset. But we are here this evening to divide rumors from facts. Personal attacks and erratic behavior will not be tolerated I can assure. If one more person should make an attempt at such actions this meeting will be dismissed and it will fall solely upon the elders to make a decision after hearing Mr. Benally's case." He paused and looked around at the crowd to ensure his message was clear and received by the people of the town. "Mr. Higgins, the next speaker please."

"Mrs. Grammerie, will speak next."

I looked at Mother as she stood and excused herself past the two old ladies. She had not raised her hand at the start of the meeting. Surprised whispers escaped from those with the tendency to gossip. I turned towards Adam to ask him, but his jaw was hanging slack in shock. Looking towards Declan I could see he too was surprised. Quickly I turned my attention towards the elders. Mother curtsied and shook hands with the men.

"Mrs. Grammerie. It is good to see you." Mr. Portsmouth addressed her. "You look well. I do hope your family is in good health as well. Please say hello to your mother for me. We

were good childhood friends she and I, you know?"

"Thank you, sir. I do know. She often talks fondly of those days. We'd be happy to see you in our shop at your convenience."

"Thank you for the invitation. I will be sure to stop by to say hello. Forgive Mrs. Grammerie, but I did not see your hand raised earlier. Was I mistaken?"

"No, sir you were not mistaken. I apologize, but when I heard of the meeting earlier this afternoon I did ask Mr. Higgins if I may speak tonight regarding Mr. Benally."

"That is most irregular, but this whole evening has followed that suit." Mr. Portsmouth laughed at his joke. "And what is it you'd like to say about Mr. Benally?"

"Normally, I never speak about a customer's interpretation Mr. Portsmouth. They are private and concerns only the person who comes to see us about them. However, with permission from my customer, I'd like to speak about an interpretation from this morning."

A low murmur came from the crowd.

"Mrs. Benally, Declan's mother, came to see us this morning. She had concerns about her son's actions leading to some sort of violence that he would see as his responsibility."

I saw Declan squirm in his chair slightly. This must be shocking for him.

"However, what I saw during the interpretation was a grieving mother who was frightened over the gossip swirling around her son's name. There is an act of violence in his life to be

sure. Like I explained to Mrs. Benally though, violence is a part of all of our lives. What I interpreted was a choice that lies before Mr. Benally.

Unnecessary violence may be avoided if he makes the right choice." She nodded and smiled comfortingly at Declan. "That being said, I think I may have been wrong. As we can all see Mr. Benally has been attacked. An assault has taken place in this town and no one has done anything to apprehend those who are capable of causing violence to others. Do you see anyone else here with signs of being in a fight, Mr. Portsmouth?"

"I do not Mrs. Grammerie."

"I would like to put it to the elders that Mr. Benally was attacked by four men this afternoon in the forest. He did not fight back. Is this the usual action taken by a man who is said to have violent tendencies, Mr. Portsmouth?"

"It is not."

"My daughter, who is gifted in interpretations as well, had a dream this afternoon where she witnessed the attack. This may stand in a court of law, but from where I stand it is as concrete as the witnesses who have already been mentioned to attest to Mr. Benally's supposed evil ways.

"Furthermore, Mr. Portsmouth, I'd like to also mention that I sent my daughter out of the shop today due to the interpretation. Given instruction to find her brother at home she was sent on her way, but took ill upon leaving. She was found outside the shop by Mr. Benally who kindly asked if he may be of assistance to her. Leaving his own duties in town to be finished later he

escorted her home to my husband and Lucy's brother, Adam. They arrived safely. I've spoken to her about this event and she has assured me that Mr. Benally was nothing but a gentleman towards her and never made any untoward advances at her. I would put it to you, Mr. Portsmouth, that if we were in the company of an evil seducer this would not have been the case."

Mr. Portsmouth considered Mother momentarily before smiling and rising from his seat.

"My father was a lawyer, Mrs. Grammerie. Did you know this? I can tell you this...you'd have made a fine lawyer and would have given my father a run for his money in court."

Mother smiled courteously and bowed her head.

"Please allow me to cross-examine your testimony. Is Mrs. Benally here this evening?"

"I do not believe so, sir."

"Would she speak to us about her time with you and your mother?"

"Possibly so."

"Your daughter, Lucy? She's here this evening though." Mr. Portsmouth waved at me with a friendly smile.

I returned his wave.

"She would be able to tell us this dream of hers?"

"If you'd like, sir, I'm sure she would."

"Would she be able to identify any of the attackers involved?"

"I don't believe so, sir. She explained to me that they looked like opaque shadows in the dream."

"Hhhmmmm," Mr. Portsmouth considered this for a moment.

"Perhaps, we will talk to her when an investigation is in place. Mr. Benally," Mr. Portsmouth turned to him, "you'll be sure to make a formal charge with the deputy tomorrow morning. Be sure to let us know if you feel you would need an escort." Turning back to mother he stated, "thank you for your statements, Mrs. Grammerie. We know where to call on you and your daughter should we have more questions about the situation after this evening. You may return to your children."

Mother curtsied and made her way back to our pew. A woman seated behind us hissed at her as she took her seat, but Mother only looked straight ahead. She gave a curt nod to Declan who bowed his head to her.

"I know there are more of you who wish to speak, but I think it is time we let Mr. Benally defend himself against the two egregious accusations that have already been laid at his feet. Mr. Benally," Mr. Portsmouth gestured to the front of the table, "if you would join us here."

Declan rose from his chair. Briefly, he wrapped his arm around his middle and grabbed at his side. He quickly recovered and walked calmly to the front of the table. He shook hands with the men.

"Thank you, gentlemen." His voice echoed warmly in the silent building. "Where would you like me to start?"

Taking his seat again, Mr. Portsmouth stated, "Start with these accusations of murderous plotting."

"Yes, sir. I can start by telling you the circle of people I kept company

with in the city were some of the most intellectual people I've ever had the privilege of meeting outside this town. Most of them are even sworn pacifists and conscientious objectors. However, I must admit there is a certain kernel of truth to these accusations. There was one man among us who took it upon himself to act on behalf of this circle of people. Driven mad, he swore to violent endeavors upon those who think differently to us, and yes, even attempted a fatal assault on one man in particular. This was an act of one man, an extremist, who did not have the authority to act on behalf of the rest of the company we kept.

"This group of people I consider my friends now want nothing more than to provide education, increase care for the general populace, do our best to personally help those in need, and discuss new ideas about the world. You will find men and women of good morals and kind hearts in this group. We have all been deeply saddened by this one man's behavior and hope to prove that this is not our idea of idyllic virtues."

"And the name of this extremist, Mr. Benally."

"His name is Thomas Brady, sir. He is in custody at the asylum in the center of the city."

"Take that name down please Mr. Fletcher. Would anyone else in your group be willing to talk to us about this event?"

"Yes, sir, I'm sure they would appreciate being able to put the record straight. I'd be happy to give a list of names and addresses for those most involved with our efforts."

"And what of this young girl that is said to have been left in a precarious situation?"

"Of this situation, I'm afraid I don't have much to say. You see, with my studies, my work at a journal publishers, and meeting with my circle of friends there was very little time left to even consider the fairer sex. During my time in the city, I never courted any young lady. I do know a woman by the name of Sarah, but she is happily married with three children. I'm afraid I'm not sure where this accusation is coming from, sir. Anyone from the group I've already mentioned, my professors, and peers would all be able to give accounts of my lack of time to consider love."

"Yes, we will take names from you after this. Is there anything else you would like to say?"

"Yes, sir. I'd like to comment on my return if that is alright."

Mr. Portsmouth waved at him to continue.

"You see, I'm not here to stir up trouble. This town is my home. It always has been. I left in order to better myself in order to give back to this town. I never left because I didn't care about this town. I only have fond memories here. Yes, it is true I would like to set up a school, sir. I'm sure some may have already mentioned this to you. But I can assure you that my intention is not to indoctrinate these fine people's children. I only want to ensure their success. Children are curious creatures who deserve to be taught to read, to write, and to formulate questions about their life. This is my way of giving back to this

town and its community-minded people who I adore. All of these people...well, they helped raise me, sir. When my father was injured they brought food from their own tables to feed my family. When I looked for odd jobs I was given hard work for fair pay. When my mother struggled with my absence they came to her side. They supported her. I understand change is difficult. It can be scary. My hope though, Mr. Portsmouth, is to have a chance to prove to my extended family of this town that I have nothing but good intentions and only wish to give something back to them. What I can offer to give back is education. I believe in the goodness of these people, sir. That is all. Thank you." Declan extended his hand to Mr. Portsmouth, who shook his hand once more.

Declan returned to his seat and looked around at the faces of the crowd. He lingered on my face and smiled encouragingly at him. Mr. Portsmouth stood and cleared his throat.

"I'd like to thank everyone for coming this evening. Mr. Higgins, Mr. Fletcher, I feel as though we've heard enough. What say you?"

Both men echoed with an agreement.

"We will deliberate then. I'd like for the silence to remain."

The three men talked in low tones to each. Each seeming to passionately make points and extend arguments. People around us mimicked them as they all talked about Declan. His speech seemed to have some effect as some people admitted confusion about the

situation now. I looked at Mother. She was staring at the elders with lips pursed. She was worried. Adam was kicking the back of the bench ahead of us. He was obviously upset. I looked back to Declan who kept a steady gaze towards the back of the room.

After what seemed like ages Mr. Portsmouth addressed the waiting crowd once more.

"It is our opinion that Mr. Declan Benally has been falsely accused of vicious slander due to the unnecessary wagging of gossiping tongues in this community."

Jeers and whispers broke out amongst the crowd again.

"However," Mr. Portsmouth raised his voice, "it is also our opinion that we should be cautious with the people of this town. Therefore, our decision, which we believe to be the most judicious outcome for the situation, is that Mr. Benally will be allowed back to his home town on a preliminary basis as we check up on the given names from all the speakers. In two months time we will have a final verdict. Until then, Mr. Benally is welcomed back. That is all. Thank you for your time and travel safely home."

Mr. Higgins and Mr. Fletcher proceeded to take names from the speakers and Declan. Their next task of ushering everyone out of the building proved to be more challenging. Mother took my hand and pulled me to my feet.

"Take your brother's hand," Mother pushed me towards Adam as he began to lead the way towards the door.

When we neared the exit I heard Declan's voice behind us.

"Mrs. Grammerie, one moment please." Declan rushed over to us. "Hello Miss Grammerie. Young Mr. Grammerie." Turning his attention back to Mother, he extended his hand towards her, "Thank you for your words. I do believe you won the elders over with your powerful voice and strong demeanor." He smiled at her with kindness. It made his dimples appear again.

"Congratulations, Mr. Benally. And welcome back home." Mother hugged him lightly and kissed his cheek.

"You'll not be here long, Declan," a man whose face was obscured pushed past Declan. "Heathens..." he spat at Declan and Mother's feet.

Mother never took her eyes off Declan. She had always been good at ignoring those who were looking to cause trouble. Placing a hand on his shoulder she squeezed lightly and encouraged him.

"Pay them no attention. You keep your head down and nose clean. Follow your plan. Prove to them your intentions."

"Thank you. I will try my hardest. How are you feeling Miss Grammerie?"

"Oh! I've got your cap for you, Mr. Benally." I held out his hat to him.

"Thank you, Miss Grammerie. I take it that you're feeling better then? That was the promise on the return of this hat."

"I am. Much better, thank you."

Mother cleared her throat, "Yes, thank you for walking my daughter

home this afternoon. I hope you didn't go out of your way."

"Not at all. It was my pleasure. I just hope I didn't cause too much trouble for anyone there. Mr. Grammerie did not seem too pleased with my accompanying her."

"Oh, he was concerned about her is all. I hope you weren't offended."

"Not at all. I understand. Hopefully, my being welcomed back will help."

Mother nodded and smiled politely, "Children, we should be going. Oh, Mr. Benally, Lucy mentioned you might have something you need to be interpreted for you? We have no appointments tomorrow morning. Do please come by. We'd be happy to hear your concerns."

"Thank you, Mrs. Grammerie. I'll stop by first thing. Actually, would it be alright if Lucy and I took another walk? If it is alright with her as well."

Mother's eyebrows shot up. She turned to me and looked at me questioning if I wanted to take a walk. I looked up at her and nodded slightly.

Sighing Mother replied, "I suppose that would be fine. However, Adam, you'll wait in town here for your sister. Lucy, please start making your way home with your brother in one hour, yes?"

"Yes, mama."

"One hour, thank you, Mrs. Grammerie. We won't go far. Adam, you're welcome to join us if you'd like."

I elbowed Adam sharply. Who grunted and politely declined Declan's offer.

We began walking through the fields behind the town meeting building. The line of the forest was in the distance and we were just able to make it out in the moonlight. The sky was clear and it had turned into a cooler summer evening. The breeze had a chill of coming fall about it. Declan talked and laughed as he told me jokes he had heard in the city. I didn't quite understand all of them, but I found myself laughing anyway.

I was so nervous about getting dirt on my white dress. It seemed like a constant battle to picky the least dusty path. Over Declan's voice, I could hear the stream nearby. Its babbling was usually comforting. Tonight, however, my mind kept repeating only word. Mud.

"Did you hear me?"

Looking up from the ground, I saw Declan. He had stopped walking and was facing me now. There was a queer half-smile on his face, but his eyes were nervous.

I let go of the skirt of my dress and stared at him blankly. I had been listening. My face started feeling hot again.

"Oh, I-No, I'm sorry. I was listening, but-"

Declan began laughing. He wiped the back of his hand against his forehead as if it were hot outside.

"Why are you always apologizing? Should I tell you what I said when you definitely were listening but somehow missed what I said?" He winked at me and grinned. Dimples on full display.

My cheeks must have turned red again. "Yes, please. I am sorry."

"Don't apologize to me," he walked closer to me, took my hands in his, and looked me in the eyes. "You are fine, Lucy." Taking his eyes off me he looked down at my hands in his. He smiled slightly and I thought I could see him turn a shade of pink.

My stomach turned to knots. My palms began to feel clammy. Why? Adam had said he was dangerous. Maybe it was that. But he had proved himself at the town meeting, right?

"What I had said..." he cleared his throat, and his foot stamped a little on the ground. It was as if he were trying to ground himself. Get courage from the earth. He looked up from our hands and looked me in the eyes again. I had been right, he was blushing. Holding my gaze, he smiled queerly again and took a breath. "I said that you look very pretty tonight. And ehm- well just that. You look very lovely tonight, Miss Grammerie."

Before I could think of anything to say to him my heart beat against my chest so hard I thought that Declan could probably hear it too. I think I had stopped breathing since when I finally did responded it came out as a squeak.

"Thank you..."

"You're welcome," he whispered, but his grin broadened into a full smile. "Do you- Do you have a beau? If not, I'd like to spend more time with you. Get to know you more... if that's alright with you that is."

I shook my head...I couldn't think straight.

"Oh...Oh, okay. My apologies," Declan dropped my hands carefully next to my sides, "I hope I haven't

offended you or ruined our walk. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have thought about that more clearly since-

I burst out laughing once I understood what had happened. Declan stopped talking and looked incredulous.

"No, no...Declan. I'm sorry. No, I don't have a beau. Yes, I would like to spend more time with you too. I'm sorry, I'm stupid. I didn't think- I was...I was trying to clear my head is all. I didn't mean-" My laughter overtook my sentence. It felt as if I could laugh and cry simultaneously for days.

Settling down into giggles, I looked back to Declan. He was wide-eyed but smiling. Eventually, he joined in with a chorus of his own laughter. We could have been a chorus of wolves that night.

"I thought you hated me," he managed to get out in between chuckles. Declan walked closer to me and took my hands in his again.

"No, of course, I don't."

Declan ran his thumb over my knuckles and got quiet. Staring into my eyes again he asked, "May I kiss your hand?"

I nodded slowly.

He raised my right hand and bent his head to press his lips to the back of my hand. The stubble of his beard tickled and I could tell there was a scab on his lips from the attack in the forest. Declan then stepped to the side revealing the path through the fields.

With a gesture towards the path, he asked, "Should we sit by the stream, maybe? It's nearby, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's just down there."

"Great," still holding one of my hands in his he pulled my arm gently across his body as he held out the arm closest to me, "would you like to take my arm? It looked like you might have been struggling before." A mischievous, teasing smile revealed his dimples again.

"I wasn't struggling! I was- I was trying not to get dirt on my hem."

"Ah, of course. Wouldn't want to ruin that beautiful white dress of yours." He gently placed my hand on the inside of his elbow.

I nudged him in the ribs gently with my elbow, "Have you ever tried to get mud off a white fabric? I think probably not."

"It's quite difficult. To be honest, I had to get rid of most of my white shirts. Could never get the smog of the city off it." He told me more about the city as we approached the bank of the stream. Declan suddenly stopped and dropped my hand from his arm, "Wait, not there. Mud." He shook his foot and mud flung from the bottom of it. "Let's go down further." He took a few steps away and looked around, "Yeah, there it looks drier."

I took the hand he held out to me as he helped over the mud. He walked closer to the bank. Following him, my gaze turned to the water. In the moonlight, the streaming water that rushed past us looked like tiny opals flowing on the surface.

Slowly I turned my gaze back towards him, "Declan, don't you think the water looks like opals- oh!" I quickly turned my back to Declan.

"Sorry. I know, not very gentlemanly, but I figured you'd

probably not like to sit on wet grass. Here...Lucy, here, it is fine I promise. Turn back around."

I listened to him. But cautiously. Looking over my shoulder at him I saw Declan was standing with one hand outstretched to me and the other gesturing to the ground. Turning around to face him fully I saw that he had spread his jacket out on the ground by the edge of the bank.

"If you'd like to sit with me?"

"Oh, I see...thank you." I took his hand and he helped me to sit neatly on his jacket.

As he took a seat next to me, he whispered, "Now what was it you were saying?"

I thought that he sat like an excited child. Knees bent up and arms around them. His shoulder touching mine. Face turned towards me expectantly with wide eyes.

"I was just going to ask you, don't you think the water looks like opals rushing past us, but it sounds silly..."

Declan's eyebrows raised in a rather quizzical look and then furrowed in a serious manner. He turned his face from me to the water to the moon and back to the water in quick succession. A smile slowly spread across his lips and his eyebrows raised again.

"You're right, they do. I wouldn't have thought of that."

"It's silly. You don't have to pretend to contemplate it so seriously."

"It isn't silly at all. And I wasn't pretending. That's a very interesting observation. Really...I mean I would have probably only commented on

how the reflection of the moon looked on the water. Not what it looked like exactly. Do you see the world in pictures like that?"

"I don't know what you mean?"

"Well, for instance, I see words when I look at things around me. Like in my head I see the words. For example, the stream. Water. The letters are fluid. Just like the thing the word is a symbol for..."

"Oh, I see. Maybe I do. I like colors. And Mother has shown me how to spot symbols in nature since I was young. So maybe I've just learned to look for images?"

"For...what is it your family calls it? Interpretations?"

I nodded, "Symbols are everywhere when you know how to spot them."

"Could- rather, would you interpret something for me?"

"I'm not supposed to yet."

"Well, who am I gonna tell?" He nudged our shoulders together and then leaned in closer so our faces were inches from each other. Declan stared into my eyes for a moment and then quickly backed up as his face turned pink again.

"Alright...I'll try. I've not learned everything yet. Just so you know. I might not be able to interpret whatever it is."

"I haven't learned everything either," he winked at me and then looked into the water. "But I'd really like to know what you think. I had a dream you see? Last night. Something bad happened in the dream. I'm not sure exactly what, but the next thing I knew I was looking down at my shirt

and hands. They were covered in black ink splatters, but it was warm...like blood, I guess? When I looked back up there was a crowd of people in front of me. They were crying. Some of them were screaming at me. Some of them jeered. Then a noose fell from sky. I looked up to see where it had come from but it reached up into the clouds. It fell around my neck. Then I looked back down and I was standing on a platform. The crowd was still there in front of me, but they had gone silent. I woke up as soon as I heard the click of the level and felt the floor of the platform drop from beneath me..." Declan stared into the water and was quiet for several minutes. Then he turned his face to me and waited for me to interpret. "I'm sorry, I hope that didn't frighten you."

"No, not at all. I've heard worse listening to others. I'm just thinking..." I stared up at the moon and felt Declan's eyes still on me. Ink? The crowd seems like it could be guilt of some kind. The noose. Not quite death. "Well, I'm not sure what ink is symbolic of...Your books maybe? Or teaching? The crowd who is screaming usually represents feelings of guilt. Can I see your hand?"

Declan unwrapped his arms and leaned back steadying himself on one hand. He held out his palm face-up. I drew a finger over his life line. It was solid and strong, no breaks or bumps in the line.

"See here? This is your line indicating life. It's very solid. I would say you don't have to worry about an abrupt end at the end of a rope any time soon. See? It continues all the

way across your palm. You'll have a long life. Perhaps it is indicating a new chapter of your life though?"

Staring at his palm, Declan murmured an agreement and thanked me. He still looked unconvinced. I grabbed his hand in mine and leaned over the edge of the stream.

"We can try to scry here. Perhaps it will tell us more. Here, look," I touched a finger to the surface of the water and watched it ripple.

Declan leaned forward and watched. "Can you really see things in the ripples?"

"Sometimes. What should we ask first?"

"Why was I covered in ink?"

I looked into the water and let my eyes lose their focus to gaze past the water. I felt something graze my hand though. I lost my focus on the question as I realized my purple ribbon had become untied somehow and had fallen into the stream.

"I'll get it! Don't worry. Here take this," Declan was already standing up and placed his cap back on my head. He jumped into the water and walked downstream. Quickly catching up with my stray ribbon, he plucked it out of the water and began pressing it into his palms to dry it as best as possible.

I pushed myself up to stand in case he needed help getting out. Declan walked back to where we had been sitting. He held the ribbon out with one hand and bowed formally.

"M'lady, your ribbon is returned to you." He stood up and a wide grin was plastered to his face.

“Thank you kindly, sir.” I curtsied and took the ribbon from him. Then I held out my other hand to him to help him out.

Declan grabbed my hand, kissed my knuckles and bent down to steady himself on the bank. That’s when the explosion sound rang out. At first, it sounded like slow echoing rings that harmonized with the babbling of the stream. Like everything slowed down around me. Then the pain in my back and stomach started. I remember looking down at my dress. A large deep red stain began forming on my white dress. Like red paint being slowly poured onto the first snow of winter. I looked at Declan. His shirt and hands and face were spattered with red. He was screaming, but I couldn’t hear it. I remember smiling at him and reaching my hand out towards his shoulder. But I fell. I fell towards the water. Declan caught me, but I could feel the warm water around my legs. I remember his face. I remember wishing this wasn’t the last time I would see him. I remember hoping that I’d see the city he talked about. I remembered the four crows in the grass that morning. Their feathers shining like opals in the morning sun like the stream looked with the moon’s reflection. Then everything was gone.

Contributor Bios

Robert Paul Mullen is a poet, musician and sociable loner from Liverpool, U.K. He has three published poetry collections: *curse this blue raincoat* (2017), *testimony* (2018), and *35* (2018). He also enjoys paperbacks with broken spines, and all things minimalist. You can follow him on Twitter [@mushyprm35](https://twitter.com/mushyprm35). *Editor's Note:* Robert Paul Mullen is also an editor of his own journal of poetry and photography! It is [Broken Spine Artist Collective](#) and we highly recommend that you check it out! You can also follow them on Twitter [@BrokenSpineArts](https://twitter.com/BrokenSpineArts).

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