

Painted, spoken

edited by Richard Price

number 38

Painted, spoken is edited, typeset, and published by Richard Price. Please send an A5 stamped self-addressed envelope for a free copy to 23 Magnus Heights, Hampden Rd, Hornsey, London N8 0EL

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Earlier printed issues have been digitised at www.hydrohotel.net/mags.htm.

Painted, spoken's editorial policy is constituted in instalments by the contents of **Painted, spoken**

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In Memory of James Aitchison 1938-2023

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Painted, spoken number 38 2024

Three Poems *Yessica Klein*

The Others

The red seats between Malmö & Stockholm
are a straight, uncomfortable nap;
backpacks like teddy bears
squeezed by
our Brazilian streetsmartness.

The European kids, loud & homogenous,
free-roam with their bottles of
vodka.

The overnight train freezes still between
one Scandinavian forest
& another:
the stags & does & spring fawns
approach the carriage
with green torches for eyes.

Breakfast At Greggs

in a city of bare light bulbs

& specialty coffee,

I close my eyes & wish for a Greggs
to give these people

umaminess

& softness

a true reason to rise

before 11am

white bun!

crispy bacon!

pillowy omelette!

we'd drown in

brown sauce –

clothes

smothered & stained by it –

we'd make a wish

in

semolina grains

& magically processed sunflower butter

every

morning

this –

this! –

is the meaning of life

Roberto, Zelda, Rafael (An Elegy)

the downward spiral of

silent dominoes

that is grief –

no answer

but a

handful

of

feathers –

dumbfounded by

their dreamless

sleep,

their sudden

inexistence –

thoughts like floating

vultures

preying

on logic's

corpse –

this bascule

bridge of

whys –

I was told to find

solace in

art –

to fill this
abstract
with
another –

The library is burning René Char

translated by David Bunn

Out of the mouth of this canon it snows. It was hell in our head. At the same time springtime was at our fingertips. It is the newly unfettered stride, the earth in love, exuberant plants.

The mind also, like everything else, trembled.

The eagle is in the future.

Every action which engages the soul, even those which are unknown to it, will lead to repentance or grief. It must be accepted.

How did writing come to me? Like a down duvet at my window, in winter. Straight away a battle of burning sticks began in the fireplace which has not ended, not even now.

Silky towns with ordinary looks, inserted among other towns, with roads journeyed only by us, beneath the wings of lightning which change with our awareness.

Everything in us should be a joyous holiday when something which we have not foreseen, which we cannot clarify, which will speak straight to our heart, happens.

Let us continue our soundings, speaking evenly, arranging our words. We'll end up silencing all these dogs, making them disappear in the grass, watching us with a misty eye, while the wind scrapes their backs.

Lightning makes me endure.

Only someone in my likeness, woman or man, can wake me from my torpor, unleash my poetry, launch me against the borders of the

old desert to triumph. No one else. Not the skies, not the favoured earth, nor the things which thrill us.

Torch, I will waltz only with that one.

You cannot begin a poem without a wrapping of error about you and the world, without a straw of innocence in the very first words.

In the poem almost every word must be used in its original sense. Some of them, separating off, acquire multiple meanings. There are amnesiacs among them. The constellation of Solitaire is spread far.

Poetry will rob me of my death.

Why 'pulverised poem'? Because at the end of its voyage towards the Land, after prenatal darkness and earthly hardships, the completion of the poem is light, brings being to life.

Poets do not retain what they uncover; having been transported into writing, it is soon lost. In that resides its newness, its infinity and its danger.

My craft is a master craft.

We are born among people, we die, without consolation, among gods.

The ground in which the seed is sown is sad. The seed, which will risk so much, is happy.

There is a curse which is like no other. It flutters in a kind of laziness, with a pleasant nature, with a reassuring look on its face. But what a leap, past the defences, what a direct rush for the goal! Probably, because the darkness where it grows is evil, in a completely secret location, it avoids having a name, always slipping away in time. It sketches scary parables on the veil of the sky of a clear-sighted few.

Books without movement. But books which adroitly insert themselves into our days, uttering a cry there, opening galas.

How to speak of my liberty, my surprise, after a thousand redirections: there is no floor, there is no ceiling.

Sometimes the silhouette of a colt, of a distant child, comes seeking towards my brow and leaps the barrier of my cares. Then under the trees the fountain speaks again.

We want to remain opaque to the curiosity of those who love us. We love them.

The light has an age. The night has none. But when was that source whole?

Not to have several deaths in waiting, as if snowed in. To have only one, of good sand. Without resurrection.

Let us stay close to beings who can let go of their wealth, even though for them there is little or no respite. Waiting fosters in them a vertiginous insomnia. Beauty perches on them a hat of flowers.

Once the cold is come - you birds who entrust your gracefulness, your perilous sleep, to a bundle of reeds - how we resemble you!

I admire hands which fill, and, matching, joining, the finger which rejects the dice.

It seems to me sometimes that the current of our existence cannot readily be understood, since we succumb not only to its capriciousness, but also to the easy movement of arms and legs which brings us to where we would be happy to go, the desired shore, to meet loves whose differences would enrich us. That movement remains incomplete, quickly fading into an image, like a perfume rolled into a ball in our thought.

Desire, knowledgeable desire, we only gain from our darkness through a few true powers - matched with invisible flames, invisible chains, which, revealing themselves, step by step, make us shine.

Beauty makes its sublime bed completely alone, strangely builds its fame among humans, beside them but apart.

Let us sow rushes and tend the vine on the slopes, beside the wounds in our spirit. Cruel fingers, cautious hands, this playful place will serve.

The one who invents, unlike the one who discovers, adds only things, brings only masks to others, the fifty-fifty, an iron gruel.

All of you, life, at last - when I tear the sweetness of your amorous truth from your depths!

Stay close to the cloud. Keep watch close to the implement. All sowing is detested.

The good deeds of humans on certain strident mornings. In the swarming delirious air, I rise, I enclose myself, insect not yet devoured, pursuing and pursued.

Confronted by these waters, hardened edges, where the exploded bouquets of the flowers of green mountains pass, the Hours married the gods.

Fresh sun, whose tendrils I am.

A Note on René Char's 'The Library is Burning'

David Bunn

'The library is burning' was published separately in 1956 with an illustration by Georges Braque to whom the poem is dedicated. It was republished in the collection *La parole en archipel* in 1962.

The poem explores many of Char's themes, particularly his sense that poetry draws force from a direct apprehension of the world, which he describes the poem as transcribing. He presents the work of writing as an action of discovering or uncovering, and often likens the coming of perception to lightning.

The philosopher Alain Badiou sees at least part of the poem as exemplifying his sense that art can access or uncover truth which has been buried, hidden, or defaced by religion, capitalism, and state power.

The opening paragraph could have been transposed from Char's writings as a resistance fighter in World War II. It records, like them, the mingling of a sense of liberation and purpose with the oppression of the struggle.

'La bibliotheque est en feu' was one of the coded phrases transmitted by Free French radio in London to alert resistance units to drops of military supplies. René Char led teams receiving and storing parachuted supplies in the Basses-Alpes in south-eastern France. He recreates one such drop which did in fact involve fire, adding one of his characteristic notes to himself about his poetic practice:

Leaves of Hypnos Fragment 53

The mistral which blew up did not help matters. As the hours went by my fear grew, barely lessened by the presence of Cabot watching out for the passing of convoys on the road and their possible halt to mount an attack against us. The first container exploded when it hit the earth. Fire enlivened

by the wind spread into the woods and quickly made a blot on the horizon. The plane slightly modified its course and made a second pass. The cylinders suspended under multi-coloured silk scattered across a wide expanse. For hours we struggled in the midst of an infernal light, our group cut into three: one party turned towards the fire, wielding shovels and hatchets, the second sent out to find scattered arms and explosives, bringing them to the door of the van, the third formed up a security team. Maddened squirrels jumped into the fire from the summit of the pines, like tiny comets.

We avoided the enemy entirely. The dawn surprised us sooner than him.

(Guard against the anecdote. That is a station where the station master detests the pointsman.)

Two Poems Robin Fulton Macpherson

Waiting to Hear the Old Oak

A cornflower two metres across.
A calendula four metres across.
A cornflower like a needle-point.
A calendula like a needle-head.

*

Uneasy childhood places,
like beneath rhododendron
roofs. Silence there was not good.
There might be a dead blackbird.

*

The pavement whitebeam's alter ego,
clinging and frosty, is back again.
There's not one argument to be found
for the existence of foliage.

*

Leaves are so many and hours so few.
Black tree, past master of greenery.
Hours are so many and leaves so few.
White tree, as if it could never melt.

*

Huge empty winds take off from glaciers.
They don't know where they can land safely.
Some rain become snow for a soft landing.

*

When the white tree between one moment
and one moment is now the black tree
as if the whiteness was never there.
When the sun rises moments sooner,
sets minutes later. When we're halfway
through a long tunnel beneath the sea.

*

Sunlight, for a while, after sunset.
Moonlight, for a while, between two clouds.

*

Our windows are too narrow
for the light that now wants in.
The light won't negotiate.

*

The sunflower acres in Hungary,
dandelion verges in Norway
lose all of their yellow in the dark,
but the calendula in my dream
is a miniature sun all night through.

*

Spring starts with green spikes.

*

We've waited all winter
for the reply of leaves
but now
we just won't have the time

to weigh their pros and cons.

*

Leaves don't count the hours.
Trees don't count the leaves.
Trees say they've enough
counting up to one.

*

The old oak's half-million voices
are out of time with each other.
They're not.
They're the single-minded voice of a stream.

*

A furthest-back, close by me now,
cornflowers wavering,
and blackbirds still arguing in
eternal rhododendron shade.

Was it

an after-life we talked of,
a perhaps, a slender if?

“Just in case,” translated as
“I’ve been told I’ll die quite soon.”

The big sunflowers heard nothing.
Their petals were all show-off

but each centre bulged with seeds,
none of which needed to say
anything.

Domestics James McGonigal

repainting four walls white and recalling other tight corners
the brushstrokes kissing each other overemphasise affection
strokes becoming interdependent as the brush and me ghost
this room into broad white sheets to wrap ourselves inside

neither a scab nor a scar nor scarab although presenting
a spud shape whose colour is garnet where soil has been
scraped away before even a blister formed all that time
I was raking with eyes only on what the tines had caught

two poetry pamphlets emerging from padded envelopes
like new-born twins skin fresh and ready to be lifted up
and held and gazed at for whatever it is we are seeking
to discover in those eyes that might well speak volumes

pickled cucumbers little lizard limbs paddling through
vinegar to set dill swirling within your sweet and sour
society behind curved glass as I count those green legs
to see how many are left how many right o you ticklers

my right cuspid that broke in half would any tooth fairy
want it and what is the current worth beneath my pillow
of an old salt's tea-stained gnarl with its ice floe ridges a
sign of always trying to bite off more than I could chew

Unstill Lives *James McGonigal*

Folded Purse, Tessa Berring (Blue Diode Press, 2022) pp. 83

(Find Yourself) At Constant Falls, Kathrine Sowerby (Blue Diode Press, 2022) pp. 114

Here are two original poets who earlier in their careers performed and published together as Usual Shoe. The origin of that collective name is hard to track, but it suggests not two mismatched shoes but one shared existence in unfashionable daily life: not buffed up for a special performance, but evoking the hard-upness of family life, of fitting art into parenthood, temporary work, and making things last.

Both trained as painters, at the Edinburgh College and Glasgow School of Art respectively, and both have turned to poetry. Kathrine Sowerby added an MLitt in Creative Writing from Glasgow University to her MFA, and opened a poetry café, *Tell It Slant*, near the School of Art; Berring's first collection *Bitten Hair* (2019) was highly commended in the Forward Prize.

I recall myself being mightily intrigued, as an undergraduate student of French in the mid-1960s, when a lecturer quoted from Albert Camus: 'An intellectual is someone whose mind watches itself.' This from his *Carnets 1935-42* (1962). That sentence seemed to declare my intuitive self unfit for duty on the battlefield of ideas, or at least for the sort of public intellectualism favoured by French culture. If the lecturer had continued as Camus does, my response might have been different: 'I like this because I am happy to be both halves, the watcher and the watched.'

It strikes me now (as it should have then, because we were studying Camus as a novelist) that such intellectual watchfulness is equally the province of any creative artist: making marks on paper or canvas, then stepping back to consider their impact, and then revising or moving ahead. Intellectuals of a philosophical cast of mind proceed more rigorously, of course, but artists and poets also explore the life of the mind in its reactions and responses to this world in which we find ourselves.

Both Berring and Sowerby are poets of mind, I think, with the former the more philosophical, albeit as playful as she is rigorous. We can note the way that *Folded Purse* is divided clearly into three sections, each introduced by riddling quotation. Section I asks: *What is the difference between surfaces and closeness*, introducing a key question for any artist or poet who seeks to engage the observer firstly in looking at and considering, and then in appreciating or grasping a new perspective on the world.

Section II consists of 24 brief poems, each about one subject, actual or abstract: About Beauty, About Identity, About Sex (the briefest of all: one word, centred: 'So?'), About Kindness, About a Frame of Mind, and so forth. It is introduced by a definition that reminds the reader to consider such elements, and indeed the process of looking and listening, with care:

Definition of About

a: reasonably close to

b: ALMOST

c: on the verge of

This poet is unafraid of abstract concepts, then, but treats them with an often ironic tactility that is very engaging. Here are two examples, from facing pages:

About Identity

Swallow your clothes whole

as if they were a small white pill

tucked inside the lining of a suitcase

on a soap filled underground train

Don't you just love this?

About Commercials

and about touch and delicacy
and rich roast coffee

Oh and glamour and owls and aliens
and waterfalls and opaque tights

and droplets of blood
on tall and slender blades of grass

but only when you look closely

Section III's quotation blends her painterly and poetic worlds: *A soft absorbent cloth wrung out like a bell*. Sound and image are delightfully involved in 'Attractive Works of Art / Real Weather' (p. 80-81), written in two parts and for double voices:

i)

Voice 1: A sudden urge to be vulgar

Voice 2: Why?

Voice 1: I don't know

Voice 2: That's strange

Voice 1: I know

especially as I see
that you love mist

and cashew nuts

and figures in snow covered landscapes
snug in their thick fur coats

and stout leather boots
looking for firewood

ii)

Voice 2: Yes I loved the snow

and the way it fell

and how the fog lifted
and left us

a partly sunny day

The collection's focus throughout on voice and conversation is significant, often a fragmentary conversation sparsely punctuated by the rhythms of thought and afterthought. As a whole it is dedicated *to every conversation*. Two poems will quite often respond to each other across facing pages, one taking up a stray phrase from the other, as a painter might explore motifs across different works. There's a brief Prologue that begins 'What matters is / the arrangement' and indeed the collection is as carefully arranged as three gallery sections of an intriguing exhibition that we can wander through. Leaving, there's an Epilogue that asks: 'So whatever do you mean?' – a wonderfully artistic sort of encounter with a 'critical friend' or an inner critic. But the Epilogue closes confidently (enough) with a dream of 'trembling underwater / like the softest crimson jellyfish // without a doubt'. I like the potential sting in that credo, and the intellectual sense of being both watcher and watched that Camus would surely have recognised.

Kathrine Sowerby also watches the mind at work, in a fascinating 'neurodivergent' poetry which explores the autistic consciousness of a puzzling and impinging world, as experienced by herself and her children. Introducing her new collection at the Glasgow Mirrorball poetry group in February 2023, she described how she had withdrawn all three from school before lockdown because of the learning and emotional

difficulties they faced there, and tried to educate them at home by following their interests and her own painterly ones. She introduced (*Find Yourself*) *At Constant Falls* as a sort of memoir for her eldest daughter entering late teenage years. That's not quite the whole story, but it's enough to get started and helps explain the intensity of this 108-poem sequence, each a single-paragraph blocked prose poem of a dozen lines or so, recording elements of dislocated life experience and the daily struggle to make links among the neural and social disconnections of autism. Here are the two opening pages of the collection, in a space-saving layout but with the original line-breaks indicated:

Find yourself loving deeply, some falls to be expected, in a
village/ with a child, quite your own. You are someone
knowing, remind-/ ed of that phrase – I am a good example –
as in liked, you tell your-/ self. You are someone of meaning,
someone hidden in wonder and/ slopes, water and sure, if
you're– if –you know, loved, you are/ awake. You are someone
of utility. Repeat said the teacher, repeat/ hard. You know you
love the sound of the teacher. It's just that you/ aren't used to
framing it, the information – alive and marginal./ You just never
know what might happen. Still, the phrase is sweet/ and the
child is facing adulthood. Hood up, you say, let's illustrate
together. The context being waterfalls, dehydration.

Find yourself looking for ways to earn money, your gut taken
with/ worry. Kangaroos and orange are in fashion again but
seriously,/ it's about economics. About easy cauliflower dishes.
About hav-/ ing a light body, said someone, and they said it
often. Misguided./ You heard traffic in the middle of the night.
In the middle of the/ road you left art. Just left it! Not with
bananas, not with peanut/ butter. Diminishing, you said, easy to
digest. It was mushroom/ time. Apples. Gather them up, take
photos to prove it. Learn all/ the varieties. What was easy about
science. Wear simple fabric,/ beetroot red, code avocados with
your poor qualifications. The/ system told you to. Art was
spending. Buy okay coffee. Remember,/ it's not easy to balance.

This opening provides an initial domestic context for, it might appear, coping with autism in self and others, and attunes us for later shocks of sensory overload. Just turn the page to find yourself in another space. While I was trying to account for the immediate attraction of this voice, a further sentence resurfaced from that distant undergraduate education: ‘Poetry gives most pleasure when only generally and not perfectly understood.’ Coleridge this time, from *Anima Poetae*.

I’ve always been attracted to a poetry that is both clear yet somehow puzzling: Basil Bunting’s, say, or W.S. Graham’s. Then Keats came to mind: ‘We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us’. Kathrine Sowerby’s intense descriptions seem to express not a cunning design but honest vulnerability. And Keats adds in this same letter of 3 February 1818 to John Reynolds: ‘Poetry should be great and unobtrusive, a thing which enters one’s soul, and does not startle or amaze with itself, but with its subject.’

The lack of verbal flashiness in (*Find Yourself*) *At Constant Falls* should not lead us to assume that its life is prosaic. For we then might miss the artistic shape of each verse. The first moves from ‘some falls to be expected’ through ‘water’ to ‘waterfalls’; and from ‘adulthood’ to ‘Hood up’ (which conjures the protective hoodie of the sensitive child being taught ‘together’ with her mother). The project-based, child-centred learning of the second poem (‘Apples. Gather them up, take photos to prove it. Learn all/ the varieties.’) hints at the safety in obsessiveness that often features in people on the autistic spectrum. But such compulsiveness is set between two attempts at balance, one of the bank account (‘Find yourself looking for ways to earn money’) and the other the more difficult existential balance between art and duty, self and others: ‘Art was spending. Buy okay coffee. Remember/ it’s not easy to balance.’

The radical uncertainty of a creative mind under such domestic complications is, for me, the kind of ‘great and unobtrusive subject’ that Keats was seeking. We can perhaps sense this uncertainty in the title’s ambiguity: (*Find yourself*) *At Constant Falls*. Each poem opens with the words: ‘Find yourself’ (doing this or that, somewhere or other). This is not so much a command as a strange or inconsequential memory, which

accumulates detail around itself. But, as a whole, the title could mean several things:

- a) Suddenly wake up or come to awareness at a place called Constant Falls, a mysterious arrival.
- b) Realise, or make sense of, your identity as a person, in a place called Constant Falls.
- c) Reach mature adult identity by learning through your repeated errors, missteps, or simply a tendency to mess things up.

What is clear throughout is a sense of unease or vulnerability in social situations. But there is equally a creative indomitability and inventiveness that carries us through as readers, learning how to pick ourselves up after cognitive falls which we could otherwise scarcely imagine.

But what about the poet's creative process, the reshaping of prose memoir into poetry? In the blog of her publisher Blue Diode Press she describes, in '9 thoughts on 108 poems', her decision to match the last 108 sections of a previously-written memoir to the 108 sun salutations she was then learning as a yoga practitioner, and to 'think about faith and stamina'. To create distance, she fed each section into a dada poem generator and then worked with the jumbled but pleurably familiar lists.

Setting a time constraint, she next wrote through or into the images and patterns that emerged. To that extent, I tend to read the collection as a sort of Language Poetry, somewhat similar to Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* (1980, 1987), which has 'a sort of shadowy sense of structure through repeated phrases which are brought in fairly arbitrarily ... but which give the reader a series of handholds or landmarks, such as a listener might receive from leitmotifs in music ... small-scale structure but overall endlessness, as in some Indian music or Scottish pibroch.' Hejinian was one of Edwin Morgan's favourite poets, and this comment comes from a 1989 lecture on 'Language, Poetry, and Language Poetry' (*Edwin Morgan, In Touch With Language. A new prose collection 1950–2005* (2020) p. 202).

Part of the fascination of this collection is that several 'selves' appear or coalesce in its pages; or one might say that the self is itself 'languaged' by pattern, repetition and off-beat humour. The reworked shape of 108

paragraphs may be a critique of the unified memoir; and the collection itself may present a critique of the unified sense of self, or of the assumed model of 'good' parenting and education that helps to shape a self. This parent-teacher 'finds herself' in reacting to her children's minds: which are not always in control, or else often over-controlled as they try to find and retain the security of pattern. The collection is dedicated: *for my young folk.*

Yet the poet is also an artist, and has created as its cover image a zany collage of bananas, boulder, shopping baskets and kitchen tiles. In its assemblage of homely details here and in the text, it reminds me of the paradox of *vie morte* or still life, which was never still at all in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as a domestic form of display was transposed into cubist geometries, surrealism. mixed media and video. That's another way to read this collection, as an enlivening and making-strange of 'a woman's work', which of course is never done, as parent, carer, organizer and, somehow, artist to the end:

Find yourself dreaming overgrown dreams of pink pauses, bro-/
ken parts, bits found under the broken pink parts, cutting
sounds,/ cutting trees, gravestones hidden everywhere,
impossible to prop/ up and paint. Pink holidays, pink money to
spend on pink an-/ tiques, wondering where all funds went. A
roadshow next to the/ sea. Walk the harbour wall. What time do
the taxis leave? Shall we/ get engraved? Like pink stones. Like
artefacts. Washed up. Host a/ pink party knowing no one will
come. Gather up the trees before/ someone else takes them.
Enrol in a furniture making class, make/ chairs, make friends,
make sawdust, make soup with parsnips and/ ginger and turmeric
to eat from a pink bowl, sitting on the chair/ you made from the
trees you saved.

The colours, texture and shape of being alive are combined in the poetry of both Tessa Berring and Kathrine Sowerby to make an intricate collage of their own perceiving minds. Neither goes in for wearing glitzy fairytale slippers, but definitely, defiantly, they have selected more than just the usual shoe.

Contributors

René Char (1907-1988) was associated with the Surrealists and progressive causes in the 1930s; fought in WWII, including in the Resistance; was friend to and collaborator with Camus, who published him, Boulez, who set some of his works to music, Matisse and Braque and many others.

David Bunn (1946-) writes from Melbourne. He worked for many years in the Australian trade union movement. His first book of poetry *The Great Scheme* was published by Ginninderra Press in 2021. **Yessica Klein** is a poet based in Berlin, Germany. Her writing has been published in *Magnum Photos*, *Polaroid Originals*, *The Moth*, *3:AM*, and many more literature and culture publications. She is also a writer and editor for tech, sustainability, and education start-ups.

James McGonigal is a poet, editor and biographer based in Glasgow. Recent publications include *Edwin Morgan: In Touch With Language. A New Prose Collection 1950–2005* (ASLS, 2020) and the poetry collections *In Good Time and Life Sentences* ((Red Squirrel Press)

Robin Fulton Macpherson is a poet and translator and long-time resident in Norway. Marick Press published his *A Northern Habitat* (2013) and his *Unseen Isles* (2020), and Shearsman Books published his *Arrivals of Light* (2020). He has translated many Swedish poets, including Harry Martinson and Tomas Tranströmer, and the Norwegian Olav H. Hauge

Richard Price's latest books are *Late Gifts* (Carcanet) and *Tinderness*, an artist's book with images by Simon Lewandowski, evoking the world of dating apps (Wild Pansy Press).

Painted, spoken

poems

René Char *translated by David Bunn*

Yessica Klein

James McGonigal

Robin Fulton Macpherson

Unstill Lives

James McGonigal reviews new books

from Tessa Berring and Kathrine Sowerby

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