

In Our  
Own Write

Lesbiana

Queen  
invert

top/bottom

WOMAN



*In Our  
Own Write*

*poetry & prose from  
LGBTQ elders*



## Sunday Brunch

by Chrissie Kaczkowski

Our lives are cluttered  
with obligations.  
We diverge,  
taking care of duties.

Our home is a menagerie,  
a four-legged family, we care for as children.  
Cats & dogs, some young & spirited, wanting to play,  
some ill & frail, requiring pills dipped in peanut butter.

We take in the discarded little ones  
needing love & a home.  
Rescues all,  
We can't say "NO."

Pomeranians LoLa, the eldest  
& sickest, and puppy mill Pudgie  
and son Ty. Chunky Gilbert, the Siamese,  
& slinky Bette, the Torby. Our family  
now, & more in memory.

Now & then we try to spin down.  
Take a day or an hour, just ours.  
Steal time spent together,  
to enrich our love.

Some Sundays we cook & eat together  
at the kitchen table set for two.  
Omelet, bacon & toast  
nourish our bodies.

Bacon spread on a sheet,  
sputters & splashes in the oven.  
Chunk chopped green peppers, tomatoes & onion,  
sauté in a butter pat in the pan.

Blended vegetables, whipped eggs  
poured in the skillet & put on the lid.  
When puffed up, done  
sprinkle shredded cheddar, portions for two.

The aromas tease our hungry selves,  
We anticipate the meal to share.  
Charlotte makes toast,  
sets the table with spring flowered placemats & napkins.

We don't brunch often,  
so today it's extraordinary.  
Charlotte pops the champagne & makes Mimosas  
so we sip while we cook.

Brunch is ready & we sit to enjoy  
the hearty meal.  
Prepared together,  
it fortifies our love.

The aromas arouse the fur babies too,  
under the table, they beg for bacon.  
We give them small bites,  
we can't say "NO."

Smiling, we kiss.  
Gathered in the kitchen  
rescues all.

Chrissie Kaczkowski  
4/18/2021  
(in memory of LoLa)

## **The Evening Song**

by Chrissie Kaczowski

If you ask Charlotte, she will tell you how much I love to garden. I am always looking for some sun loving plant, or one that adores the shade; to establish it in just the perfect spot in my flower bed. I am compelled to do this, because gardening is my link to life. Not having children, flowers are my way of giving birth. I prepare the best soil, set the plant, & water with Miracle Grow. Watching them succeed & bloom is my greatest joy.

The sorrow comes when the healthiest plants, even with the best care, don't succeed. Too little or too much water; too little or too much sun; or maybe too much clay or too little food is the cause. Regardless of the caution I take, sometimes my plants die.

We are desperate not to dwell on the fact that life invariably comes to an end. Our solace when we lose someone we love is remembering how they loved us. Ironically, how they loved us is what we miss most.

When I am working outdoors I talk to the plants & the squirrels. I listen to the birds calling to one another & I answer them too. They sound the alert when I fill the birdbath. The robins are watchful; waiting for me to finish digging, so they can fly in for the worms (*poor worms!*)

Today, as I gardened, my thoughts turned to my Aunt LaLa, as they often do. Her name was Helen, but one of my young cousins could not pronounce Helen & called her LaLa. The name was fixed.

She was a constant gardener. Even when she had little income, she spent what she could on plants to beautify her flower bed. Hers was a sad & childless marriage so flowers were her children too.

She was close to my mother so it was natural that she spent considerable time with my family. I only remember gardening with her once. We tried planting sunflower seeds alongside the garage. Sadly, they never grew.

She was in hospice care at my Aunt Rosemary's house. It was a warm April evening and several relatives were sitting on the front porch. I went upstairs to check on LaLa. Leaning close to her face, I knew she was not breathing. I opened a window & pulled my chair up close. The light outside was fading as the birds began to chirp. I imagined they were starting their evening song to mark the close of the day.

Tonight I finished planting two Spanish Lavender bushes, as the birds began their evening song. With sorrow & joy, I thought of LaLa.

Chrissie Kaczowski

5/17/2021



## **All My Brothers**

by Susan Blackman

“Oh, Susie, I love you...” says my little brother Mike at Passover after 4 cups of wine. This is also the year that Bubbe, who speaks only Yiddish, spills a bowl of matzoh ball soup down the back of my mother’s new blue dress. Mother lets out a sharp scream and runs toward the bathroom, stripping along the way. I follow to help and grab a cold, wet washcloth to soothe her back. She is fine. Just shocked. Aunt Anne lends her a robe and we return to the table where we go back to eating and finish the seder. Mike sleeps through the readings.

Time passes. Brothers Pat and Phil are born in February and December during the year I turn 15. Mike marries Jayne. I marry Matt and we have three kids in 5 years. Mike divorces Jayne, quickly marries Nancy, and announces he is to be called Michael. Visits to the family home are awkward. Michael (banker) visibly dislikes Matt (software engineer). Their chins move higher as they each try to show the other how smart they are.

Michael and Nancy have Elisabeth. Thanksgiving, Christmas, summer, Thanksgiving, Christmas, summer. Michael confides to me that Nancy has told him, “You don’t want Elisabeth to turn out like Susan’s kids, do you?” No context, no explanation of what my kids are turning into...

Time passes. Matt and I divorce. I start to date women. Michael has an entanglement with a woman who reports to him at the bank. He is fired. Nancy asks him to leave. He misses Elisabeth dearly. He takes a consulting gig in the Dominican Republic and sends me a photo of shallow cuts he has made on his wrist. He stumbles over a rug and damages all the toes in one foot. He takes pills to dull the pain. He goes to different doctors across Charlotte, describes to each the excruciating pain he has in different parts of his body.

They all prescribe opioids.

I get a call on New Year's Day, 2017, that Michael died the night before. Alone in his apartment. Nancy found him face down on the floor when she couldn't reach him by phone. Phil flies down to Michael's apartment to gather and distribute his things. I attend my first livestreamed funeral.

Time passes. I send my saliva to 23 & Me and learn that I am 50% Ashkenazi Jew and 50% mixed western European. (My father's Orthodox Jewish parents emigrated from Latvia.) Pat and Phil send their saliva to Ancestry.com and learn they are 50% Italian and 50% other European. (My mother had an affair with her Italian immigrant boss. My father never knew.)

My parents are dead.

My oldest younger brother is dead.

My other two brothers are half-brothers.

And now no one knows my history.

## Garlic Soup

by Susan Blackman

In June 1994, I flew home from Prague,  
where a hidden basement restaurant  
served a garlic soup so rich and fragrant,  
so mellow and silky on my tongue,  
I had to return three times.

Emma (6) organized a restaurant  
in our living room,  
with the kitchen in the music room,  
just beyond.

She pulled up a small table  
and brought a handwritten menu  
that featured garlic soup  
and other delicacies.

After pondering for a bit,  
I placed my order.  
She took it back to Joel (3½)  
in white shirt and bow tie,  
who she referred to as the “cooker.”

He busied himself, silently,  
with the small plastic cookware.  
Emma joined me at my table and introduced herself  
as the owner of the restaurant  
who ran it with his wife.  
He told me the story of opening his business  
and how much he loved living in Prague.

We chatted while Joel put the dishes on a tray.  
The owner brought it out

and placed the food before me.  
The soup was just as I remembered it.  
He and I continued to talk  
and as I finished my meal,  
I told him how much I enjoyed it.

Now Em (31) uses “they” and “them”  
as their pronouns and lives in Ohio with their wife,  
where they make garlic soup for me.

## Vera's Hands

by Yvonne Hudson

My grandmother's hands  
last used her small sewing  
scissors to snip  
the grass along the sidewalk  
outside her private room.

Her hands insisted on work  
always done with her little push  
mower until  
a fall stopped  
her.

A lifetime of work—  
planting, stitching, making  
things where nothing had been,  
like a farmer's daughter could do.

Fingers pulling needle,  
thimble pushing  
it through fabric.  
Hemming, darning, creating beauty  
with silky embroidery floss.

Pushing a garment through the feed  
of her treadle sewing machine,  
the glossy black Singer whirring  
as her feet pedaled.

Pushed wash on a board.  
Plucked and stored flower  
seeds for the next season.  
Milked a cow, gathered eggs,  
dug in the dirt.

Soft hands. Calloused fingers.  
Nursed babies.  
Gentle, knowing hands  
reaching with care, wringing  
a cold compress, stirring  
healing broth, breaking  
the heart of the bread.

All the while alone  
in that care for others.  
All the while  
working, whirring, wishing.  
Two hands holding  
just enough  
but never  
all she earned.

Making, measuring.  
Casting  
a stitch. Carrying  
goods. Hands doing good.  
Hands grasping for  
just enough.

## **Kitchen Sink** by Yvonne Hudson

1.

There's little that cannot be  
said there: secrets, observations, gossip.  
The heart of the house  
my Dad took forever to build.

The pine cupboards handcrafted and  
coppertone appliances trending.

Dining room, breakfast nook,  
cozy corner for conversation—  
long talks over a cup of tea or an iced glass  
of mom's nine-bag brew boiled  
in her big chipped white enamel pan.

Routine cooking, canning, and baking.  
Important things simmering.  
Decisions like when I dramatically declared  
I'd leave home for college.  
Mom and Dad speechless.  
But not shocked at the choice  
they knew I wanted.

Birthday cakes and candles.  
Hours of talks, smoking and  
drinking coffee for hours  
with laughter or tears.

2.

Our house was never big enough.  
Roller skates underfoot, coats hung  
in the basement stairway,  
shoes and books near the back door

that was really the main door  
that opened into the kitchen.

There was no dishwasher.  
No color TV to see broadcasts In Living Color  
or the Yellow Brick Road.

My Mom always said we robbed  
Peter to pay Paul.

Thanksgiving was in the unfinished  
basement. Christmas was cramped  
in the tiny living room.  
A place to perch on the counter  
when family gathered  
and the kitchen sink  
that held all to be washed.  
The wall phone's long curly cord  
reached way into the hall and even  
the bathroom  
for long talks in private.

3.

The kitchen held everything.  
Love and anger.  
Memories and missing.  
Work and play.

Danced with my mom to Glen Miller.  
Sang along like the Andrew Sisters  
to Bette Midler's  
Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy.  
Harmonized on Great War songs  
her father taught her.

My mom declared my pixie  
cut was like Lisa Minelli.



I struck a pose.

My mom who curled and uncurled  
my hair for school,  
nursed my pets,  
and didn't cook  
very well.

My mom who washed  
each dish and pan.

The window over  
the sink invite our gaze  
into the vast back yard.  
Talking, washing, drying  
every plate, pot and spoon.  
Savoring time with no choice  
but to towel and store  
every thing.

Secrets shared.  
Questions asked.  
Song and dance.

No ticket required.  
The hours precious.

## Origami

by Carol Bertrand

I pull them out and examine them occasionally,  
one, or maybe two. Sometimes more if I've fallen  
into that space where memories tumble  
roughshod while I gasp for air.  
These are the creations I made of their emotions  
now mine.

Pain. I heard her scream when bones snapped  
arm that shouldn't bend like that.  
Just me, find a sling to support and her teddy bear.  
Sh-sh, it's ok I'm here tie the sling around her neck  
she hugs her bear with her good arm  
while I dial. Someone anyone finally find a ride.  
She sits quietly as I hold her wrap her pain neatly,  
delicately, folded up in my comfort.

Fear. He was drowning. Etched forever in my mind  
as eyes so wide, grips my wrist hard too strong for such a little boy.  
In one smooth motion arm over and around pull him against my  
hip. Swim to shore, my wrist still held but no fight.  
He surrenders completely as I take his fear and wrap it neatly,  
delicately, folded up in my strength.

Love. It wasn't possible. Still we sit together  
in her car silent, on the last day.  
I feel her hand touch my wrist and come to rest on my hand,  
softer than anyone's touched me before,  
or since.  
I hear her say quietly, I wish I'd been born thirty years later.  
I glance at her, she's looking right at me, then looks down.  
A shiver creeps from between my shoulder blades and wraps around  
my heart collapsing with a flutter. She sighs, her hand slips away.  
After a while, I tell her goodbye and leave forever with  
her love neatly wrapped, delicately, folded up in my heart.

## **What It Was**

by Carol Bertrand

By the time I met you, years past the highest degree they give, I'd sworn I'd never take another class again. But life had other plans, you were going to show me I still had much to learn.

I was finally going to listen to that queasiness inside, that quiet voice of reason that said something's not quite right and maybe I should change.

But I'm jumping ahead. I'd ignored that quiet voice for so many years, it had to scream to make me listen. I imagine it was a surprise to you that I finally did.

If I'm honest with myself (and really isn't that the quiet voice), I knew you had problems with alcohol and drugs from the start. The signs were pretty obvious, because it wasn't unfamiliar territory for me.

That was another thing though, my own worlds clashing present and past. I kept them apart, slipped back and forth between them never reconciled. I know that was hard for you.

Because I was ok with partying, at least in the beginning. It was the first way I'd learned to handle what I couldn't. Except when I could, and then I'd slip back to present, and away from you.

And that made you angry. Which of course pulled me back to the past, where I stored my tools to handle anger, yelling, and violence. It wasn't until much later that I realized how well you could use my tools.

Or my past. We had some common history after all: childhoods spent with abusers and the abused. But your tools included strong emotion, apologies and promises sworn through tears. You knew that mine did not.

And so for a decade I'd relent, give you money, take care of you when you over did it, give you another chance. But there was never going to be enough. Empty is infinite.

When I found the lock was broken and the gun was missing, my head screamed go.

And I left.

**Miss Diva**  
by Jeff Raines

She performs Sunday nights at the Up Club.

The audience is seated, drinks on the tables, cigarettes burning, men cruising, the DJ is spinning disco.

Smiling, head held high, dressed in a white split leg gown, red boa, white high heels, and black teased Afro wig.

THE Diva enters front stage, rainbow lights dancing, disco ball spinning.

She lip-syncs “Touch Me In the Morning.”and “I’m Coming Out.”

She introduces Miss Divine, Miss TNT, Miss Blake, and Miss Kitty

They joined the stage with Diva performing their special entertainer’s music.

James believes impersonating women is a talent, to be respected and kept professional.

He choreographs each Sunday Night Show.

Star Wars, Carrie, Miss Up Club, Best Gown, Best Lip-Sync, Amateur night.

He was RuPaul of the 70’s and early 80’s.

Rehearsals were at 1:00PM show time at 11:00PM, shows never started on time.

He replicated Diana's evening costumes she ate bread, drank water to fit in the costumes, waited to shaved four hours before putting on make up to get that smooth skin tone.

James was James Monday through Saturday, Sunday night James was, Miss Diana Ross.

Her audiences loved her she was invited to straight bars on Capital Street to perform where the top of the bar was her runway. A small town Diva showcased Vegas and New York.

He felt impersonators should not perform past thirty.

He completed the queens' dresses late afternoon, sent them off to the Sunday night drag performance.

It was his 30th birthday.

He went upstairs to his bedroom, put on his special Diva dress, played a Diana Ross melody.

He took out a revolver and ended his career.

## I Remember

by Jeff Raines

I remember my first kiss. Pam Robinson, I was ten and she was nine. We snuck to the side of the house by the forsythia bush so no one could see us. The Smokey the Bear Club had just adjourned.

I remember the time I dropped a card catalog of cards while completing inventory and the cards went all over the floor in the junior high school library. Ms Bland the librarian and I laughed and she advised I will be the one to re-catalog the cards.

I remember a time my dad took my brother and I fishing in Cranberry River, West Virginia. He fell and sprained his ankle. My brother and I helped him walk back to the campsite with six rainbow trout in our tackle bag. We made a trip to the emergency room. Returned to camp. It was a very cold night. We woke up to ice on the tent canvas and dad's wrapped ankle.

I remember the first time I walked in the gay bar in my hometown. How I felt at home. The side booths were filled with men with men. The disco ball was spinning reflections of itself onto the small dance floor. The bartender greeted me and asked me what I would like to drink. It was happy hour. My eyes would not stop spinning around the room looking for anyone I might know. The jukebox was playing disco music. I just knew this was the place for me.

I remember smoking pot on the balcony of the bar and dancing to Donna Summers, *Last Dance*, Karen Young, *Hot Shot*, Gloria Gaynor, *I Am What I Am*, The Weather Girls, *It's Raining Men*.

I remember Eddie and Bill stopping at my house early Sunday morning. They got me out of bed to tell me the bar was no more. *What are you saying, I just left the bar five hours ago*. Eddie stated, the bar caught fire shortly after closing. We barely got out. I

got dressed and drove to see the damage. There was no more bar. The turntables were rusted from the water and hanging from the DJ booth. The crate of albums was melted into one pile of black vinyl.

I remember the phone call I received informing me my best friend Michael had been killed. I remember how sad I was while I was given the details of Michael's death. He had been picked up after bar hours and was taken to a secluded place, raped, and stabbed seventeen times. The killer took his car behind the barn and set it afire to hide any evidence. The killer was out on parole and his ex-wife had a restraining order against him.

I remember the day the oncologist confirmed I had small cell esophagus cancer: August 15, 2019. The physician advised my case was rare, they usually see small cell cancer in lung cancer disease. The physician stated *we are not sure what plan of treatment we will use. A team of oncologist will get together to discuss your treatment plan.* I asked the physician *what is my prognosis? How long do I have to live with the disease?* She stated *we have studies that shows up to five years. I will get back to you tomorrow.* My husband was with me and we cried. I perked up and stated *I going to beat this and I am going to have longer than five years.*



## The Waiting Ends

by Robert Lonie

I look in the mirror  
imagine your stare  
fashion my style  
flee into the night  
from soil, barren of love  
open the door  
to the Holiday Bar  
dark to light  
a hothouse of men  
jukebox rhythm  
"I Am What I Am"  
somewhere within  
love surely can sprout.  
I find a wall hidden  
in the gray of shadows,  
a wallflower  
afraid of the light,  
but by the thickets of men  
you are hidden

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Thinking of you,  
tendrils of growth  
spring in my brain.  
Separate days, I had noticed you  
like me, a wallflower,  
but peeled from the wall  
transplanted  
onto a barstool  
quiet, reserved,  
eyes mostly down,  
other times dancing around.

Each gesture and muscle  
a poem I kept reading,  
finding new meaning.  
One night, a man spoke to you.  
Too quick, your obliging smile ended:  
an earlier quarrel?  
You knew him  
but didn't want to be bothered.  
Anxious to find you  
thirsty for love  
I step from the shadows  
order tequila.

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Immediately, I find you  
two barstools  
from your usual planting.  
You glance at me with a smile,  
but quickly  
your eyes turn away  
my return smile wilts.  
Still smiling,  
you look back my way.  
The bartender points:  
"He paid for your drink."  
The flurry of words  
shake every fiber.  
I zig zag push collide apologize  
then, I am next to you.

\*\*\*\*\*

Giving thanks, our foliage opens:  
common ground shared,  
dreams of rich soil, light, and clean air.  
I notice your scars  
searing pink and white ripples.  
You answer my unspoken question:

“Old wounds.”  
Softly, so softly I say “It’s okay.”  
Feeling your pain  
I speak of my own  
scars on my arms  
emotional scars  
rattling around in my brain,  
caustic agents  
too close to our roots.  
We are two exotics  
on a floating island.  
You look up at me,  
our eyes clear and bright,  
the wallflowers out from the dark

\*\*\*\*\*

I reach for your hand  
sparks ignite  
longing for flame  
our arms coalesce  
your lips a gentle breeze  
me a swooning willow tree.  
You stand up  
our bodies held tight  
the two of us erect.  
Someone bumps into us.  
We both look away,  
the strong bond frays.  
With lingering smiles  
we think to the future:  
where do you live?  
how long a drive?

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We leave  
hand clasping hand  
walk to your truck

our hands stay clasped  
our passion incandescent  
we enter, the door is shut  
our bodies entwine  
petals unfold  
shirts and trousers shed from our bodies  
the wallflowers blossom  
not in my mind  
but in our bodies.  
The wait has ended.

## **Late for Work** by Robert Lonie

Muddled among others  
in cold white waiting  
for the green crosswalk.  
Surrounded by wide buildings,  
rhythmic metered windows rise.  
Interiors luminous with people  
already at their stations.

I skirt black pools,  
melted snow puddles,  
step in gray sparkling slush.  
With a gust of wind,  
streaks of white curve  
one direction to another,  
traversing back in time  
to large translucent black buttons,  
my mother's gray coat  
the style of the day, rushing  
to the theatre, an idolized actress  
combating hardship, snow  
cold on our faces.

Sidestepping ice,  
feet crushing fluff,  
dirt on our cuff, dodging cars  
speeding through yellow,  
replicating mother's walk,  
standing tall though small.  
A sense of belonging  
in the hurry and rush,  
tall buildings shadow  
my feminine manners,

queer for a male,  
from glacial glares.

Alone with memories past  
the old theatre, into the office  
on time, stronger  
for the day's rigor ahead.

## **I Remember... Church** by Lisa Kay Schweyer

I remember being taken to Sunday school and told to be a good girl.

I remember sitting in the church pews and the smell of the altar flowers, usually the pungent fragrance of lilies.

I remember the deep maroon velvet seat cushions on the hard wooden pews.

I remember standing and sitting and the robotic recitation of words and singing of songs.

I remember being part of the church bell choir, the white gloves we adorned to hold the plastic handles of the bells and really enjoying the music we created.

I remember becoming an acolyte and watching the show from the other side of the stage.

I remember lighting the many candles on the altar, touch each one by one with the long handled brass lighter.

I remember carrying the four large brass collection plates and handing them to the awaiting deacons who would pass them throughout the pews to collect the members donations.

I remember being told I was handing out the collection plates to the deacons in the wrong order left to right or right to left, and wondering why it mattered if the money still ended up in them.

I remember disillusionment when I saw first-hand the business side of the church, watching the money counting after the service.

I remember when my favorite Sunday school teacher died tragically and wondering how someone so devoted could be taken.

I remember the deep sting of the loss and my equally deep anger at God.

I remember all the people who showed up at Christmas services dressed in their best clothes.

I remember all the candles and if you squinted how the flames would look bigger and brighter.

I remember my parents dropping us off and going for donuts and coffee at their church.

I remember being a young teenager in confirmation class and asking WHY.

I remember wanting to believe what I was being told.

I remember being told you just have to have faith and feeling inadequate because I just didn't.

I remember announcing I would not be confirmed.

I remember my mom shaking her head but not being surprised.

I remember as long time active members of the church my grandparents' embarrassment.

I remember my search for a faith community where I would fit.

I remember visiting many places and trying out many faiths but never quite finding the one.

I remember eventually realizing that my spirituality was not found in a building.



## **Going Home**

by Lisa Kay Schweyer

Our noses crinkle from the acrid smell, even before we realize we are passing the farmlands covered with fresh manure. The car windows sealed tight doesn't stop that odor. I said, we are not far now.

This, our first trip to my hometown and I was nervous to be exposing this part of my history. The 250 miles were not enough to prepare.

We passed the county line sign, I honked 3 times and exclaimed Hip, Hip, Hooray. Why? Well, that was always what we did when I was little and travelled and passed the last sign to the upcoming destination.

Familiar sights and signs appeared on the horizon - Hawk Mountain, Crystal Cave, Roadside America.

Then the brewery came into view. Originally producing Schaefer Beer, I remember being little and taking a tour. It still sits on the side of the highway, dark brown brick and the columns pushing out the exhaust into the clouds, but now they make some sort of bubbly flavored water.

Continuing along the highway, and rounding the big bend, the very top of the rollercoaster at Dorney Park comes into view. We used to drive to the park after dinner, buy some tickets, and ride the train. Or we would ride the carousel, and listen to the calliope play. The clown, ever present, would be at the one 4 way stop directing traffic. The park has expanded outside its original footprint, people now pay one price just to enter and the clown is retired.

We exit the highway. Before we made the turn to the right, I explained that straight ahead used to be Josh Earlies candies. The

brown and white Swiss chalet held such sweet treasures. As kids we used to walk there. Every time the door opened, scents of chocolate floated out, luring us in. The long counters lined with glass partitions showed off all the goodies available for purchase.

A little further down the road on the left is the now vacant Charcoal Drive-in. It is a red cedar one story building with a long parking lane extending from one end. That end was where people used to drive up and order food from the girls on roller skates. The food was all prepared on the charcoal grill and in deep fryers. As kids we would walk there, order some food, smoke cigarettes and try to be cool. Behind the building was the bus depot, where daily commuters and travelers could make the short trip to escape to New York City. I daydreamed about getting on that bus and getting lost in the big city.

We travelled down the road to the house where I spent my first 18 years. A non-descript ranch in a subdivision. New owners have changed the colors, added a fence, but they would never know where Dog was buried. Nor would they know the memories and secrets held within the walls. The ghosts of our childhood still barrel down the hill on big wheels. So much has changed, the area is no longer surrounded by farmland. The cornfields now grow houses.

Then we visit some other landmarks.

The Rose Garden, a beautiful gem where roses upon roses show off their colors and the smells are so sweet. The weddings being held there and the newly married have their pictures taken in 15 minute increments so they can all be accommodated.

The Fairgrounds, an indoor farmers market where hundreds of vendors sell everything from prepared meals, Amish specialties, dried corn, hex signs, fresh fruit, spices and more. It is a kaleidoscope of sights and sounds. The people rush by to compare prices, find their treasures, visit with neighbors.

Cedar Beach, which is not a beach at all, but a lake where the Canadian Geese now overrun the water and ruin the grass each year. But before being overrun by geese, we used to stop by Yoccas, pick up their special hot dogs, topped with chili, onions and mustard and picnic by the lake. We would walk along the water's edge and talk about the old brick oven that stands on the other side, the last remaining vestige of our distant relative's homestead.

Left off the tour is Lentz's Bar. That was the spot I spent many days and nights, while my father drank. I don't know why I was the child chosen to be perched atop a barstool nursing a shirley temple while my father on his barstool next to mine, tried to drink his demons away.

When it came time to leave for college, I did. And I never spent more than a few weeks at a time there again.

Each visit deepens the layers of reflection on my experience growing up there.

And then again, as each time before, I leave to go home.

## **My Hometown** by Nancy Holston

Lydick, Indiana was the last stop on the commuter train that runs from downtown Chicago to South Bend. The town was filled with family, aunts and uncles, cousins to play with and grandparents to spoil me. A community where everyone knew each other. My grandparents owned the grocery store. Grandpa was a butcher and made sausage while grandma made macaroni and potato salad for the deli along with ham salad. This small town had a hardware store that was jumbled with all kinds of things for town people. We were regular visitors since my dad was a carpenter. The Ice Cream Parlor sat on the edge of town. It required a long bike ride but my brother and I could get sundaes there when we had some pocket money. We didn't visit often for that reason. Ice cream treats were free at the grocery store when our pockets were empty. There was a tavern in town and a barbershop and a beauty parlor that always seemed busy.

I recall the community fundraising ham and bean soup dinners for the school. We attended spaghetti dinners and fish frys for the Volunteer Fire Department and Lydick Church. Old friends and school mates could be found while our participation helped the community. We weren't Catholic but we did enjoy the Fish Frys on Fridays during Lent.

The family holiday gatherings were the best. My mom had four sisters and everyone had their own special dish to bring. Aunt Clarice always made kidney salad, similar to macaroni salad but a bit healthier. Aunt Genny would bring a cake and her icing was so good that I called her long distance when I moved to Ohio just to get her recipe. Mom made delicious pies and made something different for each holiday. My favorite was pumpkin, peach and cherry but my brother loved her apple pie best. Aunt Ruth

and Aunt Delores would bring side dishes, sweet potatoes and Green bean casserole.

My other grandma lived next door. She died just before my 10th birthday and I'm so grateful that I visited her everyday because I'm not sure I'd remember her if not for those visits. I can remember her laugh. My dad had four brothers and all but one were neighbors having been given land to build a home on from my grandparents. All of them knew carpentry and three of them made a living from it. They all helped each other build their homes. I remember those Holston Family reunions but they disappeared for decades until my brother and Uncle Lee started hosting them 12 years ago. It falls to my brother now since Uncle Lee, the youngest brother and last member of the family died 2 years ago.

The grocery store closed in 1974 when my grandparents decided to retire. That seemed to be the beginning of the end for many of the businesses in Lydick. The hardware store closed soon after and the barbershop followed. The Beauty Parlor was one of the last to close but the Ice Cream Parlor gets new life every few years and reopened recently. The Tavern has changed hands a few times but serves up great food last time I stopped in. My home is disappearing while the nearby city grows. No longer large enough to host the annual memorial day parades like those my brother and I often marched in as scouts and my brother in the school band.

My mom was the last family member living in Lydick. She spent nearly her entire life living in a home built by my father and his brothers. Whenever we spoke she would tell me the latest town news, about the people I grew up with, those that snitched on me to my grandparents, old classmates and about her friends that she was able to spend time with. She and two of her sisters were regulars at the American Legion on Friday's nights. It was dinner and Polka music. They served up hamburgers, chicken fingers, fries and Polish Dinner on special nights. My mom, Aunt

Clarice and Aunt Genny would go to the Legion together and I always joined them when I was in town to visit. Aunt Genny always had a gin and tonic and I'd join her ordering my favorite rum and coke.

I left Lydick for college just before my 19th birthday and only spent two summers at home before joining the Army after my 22nd birthday. I started a career with the federal government after serving in the military and left Lydick for good a few months after being discharged from the military in 1977.

I've lived in three different cities in Ohio and then in Denver since then before coming to western Pennsylvania in 1998. I've had a different address about every 5 years since 1980. I loved all the places that I've lived but they didn't feel like home. In 2002 I moved to a rural area between Oakdale and McDonald. The years have grounded me in a new community that in some ways feels like Lydick. People recognize me at the local pubs and restaurants, say hello and share a friendly conversation. I see folks from the library or that work in businesses I frequent that I share a smile with and care to share a word with. There are ham and bean soup and spaghetti dinners that help raise funds for the volunteer fire department. There are fish fry's during Lenten season. I can get some of those same items that were served at the Polish Dinners. It feels like home. I like that it's comfortable, friendly and safe here.

But, it also makes me long for family and the town I grew up in, Lydick.

**Bending**  
by Jenni Malloy

The weight of the snow and ice  
Bending branches almost to the breaking point  
Will they snap never to be the same?  
How much pressure can they take?  
Sunshine! Slowly melting, dripping  
Strength to rebound  
As we are tested by life  
Issues and trials we bend almost to the breaking point  
Friends who listen are our sun  
The melting away of one gender  
Because of you this girl has the strength to snap back  
To emerge as the woman she is

## Changes

by Jenni Malloy

Face soft and blemish free until 13  
Pimples? No chicken pox, ugh  
Shaving now around the pock marks left by stupidity  
Hair growing EVERYWHERE  
Finally a moustache but not enough growth for a beard just a goatee.  
Shaving my leg to tape my knee for sports along with my face  
Eventually shaving both legs only in Winter because they hide under clothes  
Shaving my underarms starting in my thirties and it lead to my mid-section.  
Finally around 45 a hair free body, soft and silky smooth  
No more cares about what people will say  
Guys don't shave their bodies unless they are bodybuilders or swimmers. Why do you do  
it?  
I hate body hair and now no need for the facial hair, she is out of your life.  
Someone suggested waxing as an option  
Same effect with no razor bumps and even more smooth than ever!  
Can you do my face? No the hair is too coarse and wax doesn't react to gray hair  
Only shaving my face now but waxing the rest.  
Scars and tattoos exposed  
Even less hair growth than before because of the hormones  
Every inch from head to toe now soft as it once was  
Exposing the scars and age spots that reside on my skin  
Only I get to see the slight imperfections all over  
Now when I see people who haven't seen me in awhile I get, "Oh my god you look so  
different!"  
Hormones and extra sharp razors  
Face soft, blemish free and now feminine



## **Brave as a Lion**

by Kay Jones

Daniel was always brave and maybe a bit outrageous too. His final party could have been sad: we had lost a much loved member of our community.

It wasn't sad.

I could almost hear him laugh. Damn right he was a much loved member of this group: he'd loved most of the men in the old wooden church with his "member", his arse, his mouth or hands. He was a generous soul, was Daniel.

Even in death he was with us. He lay there in the open coffin, centre stage. Almost 50 but looking younger. Dark beard and pale skin from years running a gay sauna. Clad head to toe in black leather, his outfit softened by oil and regular use: a leatherman right till his end. He could have been a Tom of Finland model.

Guests chose flowers or a scrap of leather to drop on his body. I chose leather, his favourite once he'd outgrown the ballroom dance outfits of his early days. I didn't know him then, but he'd been proud of his ribbons and trophies and still had photos.

Friends at his wake shared stories of him coming out to his family in a small town. He was only 16, and being gay was illegal. So shocking for the family. Too difficult for him to pretend to be straight, so he left to find excitement far from their scandalized ears.

By the 80s he'd come to my town. Many of his friends met him at his respectable day job or his night life at the bars and saunas. I met him a bit later after HIV struck him and his long time love Peter.

They quickly learned more than the doctors, and cajoled friends

into helping where we could. Daniel always had energy for bossing us around even from a sick bed. He sweet-talked the nurses into getting a wheelchair to go to a fundraiser. And pushed himself to bounce back so he could argue with doctors or politicians to work harder to help.

The virus took Peter but not Daniel. It wasn't AIDS that killed him years later.

His doctor thought long hours at work and pneumonia were too much for his heart. Years of taking poppers wouldn't have helped, but parties were more important than sleep. They found him on the floor in the sauna office on Monday morning after a busy weekend. Pushing himself to the end no matter how sick he felt.

Daniel got more living done than most people would in twice as many years. His funeral was like his dinner parties, full of friends and followers laughing and sharing stories. We were there to celebrate his life, and our tears only fell when we laughed.

We cracked up hearing how Daniel's sisters had packed up his house and accidentally found his dildo collection, hidden by forgetful friends. They laughed too when someone joked what a size queen he was.

He wouldn't have been ashamed. He never was.

**O, Mary Ann**  
by C.E. Pino

*Just sit right back and you'll hear a tale, a tale of a fateful trip...*

O MaryAnn, MaryAnn O MaryAnn  
Why did you leave me alone?  
Was it something I said?  
Was it something I did?  
Did I just grow too old for you?

You said you were invited  
to spend the dayout on the water  
with  
friends

some guy named Professor  
*Really? No name?*  
And Ginger –  
*never did trust her game.*

When it was clear I wasn't included  
my mind spun with doubt.

Then - that suitcase  
why so big and so full  
for only a three-hour tour?

Were you really coming back?

O, MaryAnn

I am undone.

How foolish of you to climb onboard

that tiny ship  
with everyone carrying so much.

And now you're lost. You  
and your "friends"  
and whatever other fools  
who happened to be on board.

my heart grieves  
my heart aches  
will I ever see you again?

Since hearing the news  
of that awful typhoon  
around my neck I now wear  
a chain  
that holds a  
tiny life preserver  
with S.S. Minnow upon it.

I shall ever hold out hope  
that you'll return  
bake me some pies  
and reclaim the love that was always true.

The love that was my first.

**My Last Pride Before the Pandemic:  
Pittsburgh, June 10, 2019**  
by C.E. Pino

**Prologue**

I am not one for large crowds.  
I don't like people too close to me.  
*Only if I allow it.*

Also large crowds bring loud noises which usually  
makes my head want to explode.  
Especially if it's a lot at once and I'm supposed to think.  
*Unless it's in the ballpark.*

Why then, you ask,  
put yourself  
in the middle  
of a gay pride parade  
in a large city  
with thousands expected to attend?

And I will say:  
I love singing.  
I love dancing.  
I love my choir and  
I love my community.  
*Why would I not?*

**Scene One**

Light rain in the morning,  
cloudy,  
do I really want to go?

No, but yes. Contrary to what

you may believe inside,  
    you would be missed.  
*You tell yourself.*

So on goes the identifying t-shirt,  
the shorts that fit so well,  
nicely showing off my legs  
    (one thing I'm still able to rock)  
and the most comfy footwear in my closet.  
My failing hips would not allow otherwise.

## **Scene Two**

We're off! We strut along the downtown  
streets to the beat  
of endless rounds of the anthem  
    *Born This Way*  
singing, clapping, smiling, waving,  
    *"you're beautiful in your way"*  
the noise of the crowd, the hoots and hollers  
and whistles  
momentary connections, wisps of interactions.  
    *"and you are not a mistake"*  
engaged a drag queen dressed to perfection,  
singing together as if headliners on stage  
transported for a chorus-length of time to an intimacy  
of shared energy  
igniting, re-igniting a fire of validity.  
    *"you're on the right track, baby"*  
I dance my ass off, feeling invincible and,  
    for a brief time,  
younger  
the music and the energy hold tight, numbing  
pain that is building, growing, spreading.  
unaware (or in denial) that what used to be normal activity,  
is now creating a firestorm within my body.

### **Scene Three**

We reach the end  
move off and out of the way  
of those behind as they approach their end.  
The rush of energy from the crowd, the colors waving, the voices raised,  
quickly dissipates, falling off like an avalanche in slow motion.

I cannot walk. Pain sears through my lower back down my right leg.

What have I done?

### **Scene Four**

An excuse to friends,  
a wave goodbye,  
I watch till they are out of sight,  
hobble home,  
cringing  
cringing  
with each step my right leg takes  
with every pot hole the bus hits  
with any slight move that sends  
piercing daggers  
ever stronger though me

### **Epilogue**

The bathtub is the only place my body wants to be right now.  
alone  
quiet  
not singing  
not dancing  
not strutting  
Connected

*A cento is a poem constructed by taking lines from other poems or prose work and arranging them into something new. Erik Schuckers, who led the “In Our Own Write” class, found the students’ work so inspiring that he made two centos for this chapbook. Each takes one line from each writer whose work is included here.*

**A Night at the Fourth Avenue Stock Exchange**  
by Erik Schuckers

I remember smoking pot on the balcony of the bar and dancing,  
the melting away of one gender,  
momentary connections, whisps of interactions,  
hands grasping for just enough:  
a community where everyone knew each other.  
We are two exotics in a floating island.  
Smiling, we kiss:  
so mellow and silky on my tongue.  
Love. It wasn’t possible.  
It wasn’t sad.  
And then again, as each time before, I leave to go home.

*Lines taken from Jeff Raines, “I Remember”; Jenni Malloy, “Bending”; C.E. Pino, “My Last Pride Before the Pandemic”; Yvonne Hudson, “Vera’s Hands”; Nancy Holston, “My Hometown”; Robert Lonie, “The Waiting Game”; Chrissie Kaczowski, “Sunday Brunch”; Susan Blackman, “Garlic Soup”; Carol Bertrand, “Origami”; Kay Jones, “Brave as a Lion”; Lisa Kay Schweyer, “Going Home.”*



**Remembering James**  
by Erik Schuckers

How I felt at home:  
scars and tattoos exposed,  
my feminine manners, queer for a male,  
so shocking for the family.  
Our house was never big enough,  
a nondescript ranch in a subdivision,  
but there was never going to be enough.

Our solace when we lose someone we love is remembering  
    how they loved us,  
and now you're lost.  
My home is disappearing while the nearby city grows,  
and now no one knows my history.

*Lines taken from Jeff Raines, "I Remember"; Jenni Malloy, "Changes"; Robert Lonie, "Late for Work"; Kay Jones, "Brave as a Lion"; Yvonne Hudson, "Kitchen Sink"; Lisa Kay Schweyer, "Going Home"; Carol Bertrand, "What It Was"; Chrissie Kaczowski, "The Evening Song"; C.E. Pino, "O, Mary Ann"; Nancy Holston, "My Hometown"; Susan Blackman, "All My Brothers."*

## Contributors' Notes

**Carol Bertrand** is a research professor with the University of Pittsburgh and holds a doctorate in biophysics from CWRU. She lives in an ancient Craftsman house with two calico cats. When not in the laboratory or her gardens, she writes to heal her soul and share a life repurposed.

**Susan Blackman** is a long-time arts manager who has sat on both sides of the funding table, as both grantmaker and grantwriter. She has worked as staff, consultant and board member for organizations as varied as the Mattress Factory, Chatham Baroque, and Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council. Passions include Baroque music, linguistics, and theatre.

**Nancy Holston** studied English for four years, one while serving in the US Army in Germany. After completing her enlistment, her math skills landed her a job as one of the first women electronic specialists for the Federal Aviation Administration. She recently worked in her local library before the pandemic.

**Yvonne Hudson** has always thought of herself as a writer and editor, but more as a playwright since creating her long-running solo show Mrs. Shakespeare and other presentation scripts about strong women. The Pitt graduate alumna joined Quantum Theatre as development manager in 2020. She is board member of Pittsburgh Shakespeare in the Parks and sings in Handel's Messiah annually with her partner Lynette. Now, her novel-in-progress is calling her back.

**Kay Jones** grew up listening to public servants on trains, to activists in the classroom, and to queer and trans people in drama classes. Their day job as a public servant paid for amateur performances and human rights campaigns. Kay now volunteers in communities in Wellington, New Zealand.

**Chrissie Kaczowski** (she/her) lives in Hampton Township, PA, with her wife, Charlotte and their dogs and cats. She attended Indiana

University of PA and holds a degree in English. She belongs to SAGE (Service & Advocacy for Gay Elders) and is Treasurer of her local Democratic Committee. She enjoys gardening and vacationing with her gal pals in OBX.

**Robert Lonie** is a graduate of the University of Pittsburgh, where he studied Physics and Mathematics. He enjoys exploring nature and science, hiking, bicycling, and architecture. He is an advocate of human rights equality, social justice, and environmental protections.

**Jenni Malloy** is a native Pittsburgher who has been writing poetry and short stories for over 40 years. She is currently working on her memoirs, which she hopes to finish by the end of this year. Jenni can be reached on Facebook at Jenni Rose or by email [jennim4457@gmail.com](mailto:jennim4457@gmail.com).

**C.E. Pino** is a musician, licensed massage therapist, and overall creative soul. Previous writings have been limited to musical ditties she would compose to accompany life's experiences, usually in rhyming form. Creative writing sans music has proven a worthy challenge in keeping the sparks flying in the mind of this bonafide senior (what? how? when? gasp!!).

**Jeff Raines** moved to Pittsburgh in 1978 from smallville Charleston, WV. He completed general studies at CCAC, and graduated with a bachelor's degree in business administration from La Roche College. He worked for the health industry for 45 years in clinical and insurance settings. His hobbies include travel, camping, reading, sharing stories with friends, entertaining, and canning.

**Lisa Kay Schweyer** "comes out" as a poet in this book. Attending the "In Your Own Write Class" was a way for her to try something out of her comfort zone. She enjoyed spending time with the other students, sharing stories, and trying the different writing styles covered in class.

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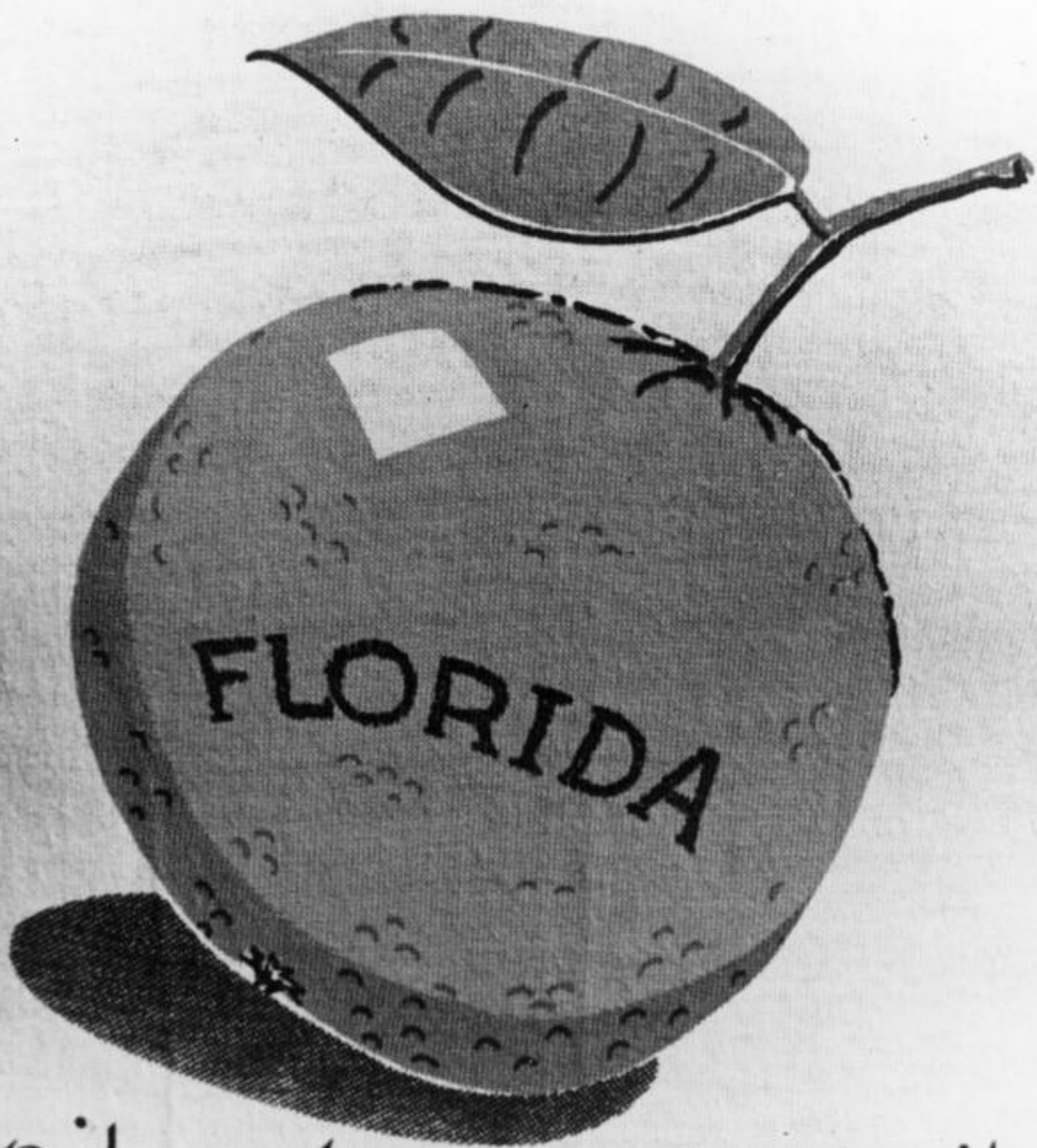
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### **A Note on the Chapbook**

The text was set using EB Garamond. EB Garamond is a free and open source implementation of Claude Garamont's Antiqua typeface Garamond and the matching Italic, Greek and Cyrillic characters designed by Robert Granjon. Its name is shortening of Egenolff-Berner Garamond which refers to the fact that the letter forms are taken from the Egenolff-Berner specimen printed in 1592.

The cover was hand-set and pressed, and the marbled papers produced, in the Text & conText Lab, a partnership between the Center for Creativity and the University Library System at the University of Pittsburgh. The binding was hand-stitched by Text & conText staff.





Anita, dear...cram it.

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