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Sidelined

ELFRIEDE JELINEK

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ELFRIEDE JELINEK, winner of the 2004 Nobel Prize in Literature, was born in 1946 in Mürzzuschlag, Austria. She studied art history and drama at the University of Vienna and music at the Vienna Conservatory, where she received the organist diploma in 1971. Her first book, a collection of poetry, appeared in 1967. Growing out of what the Swedish Academy called "a lengthy Austrian tradition of linguistically sophisticated social criticism," her writing includes the novels *Die Liebhaberinnen* (1975; *Women as Lovers*), *Die Ausgesperrten* (1980; *Wonderful, Wonderful Times*), *Die Klavierspielerin* (1983; *The Piano Teacher*), and *Lust* (1989; *Lust*). She has also written film scripts, texts for radio and theater, and an opera libretto based on David Lynch's film *Lost Highway*.

This translation of Jelinek's Nobel Lecture was provided by the Nobel Foundation.

IS WRITING THE GIFT OF CURLING UP, OF CURLING UP WITH REALITY? ONE WOULD SO LOVE TO CURL UP, OF COURSE, BUT WHAT HAPPENS to me then? What happens to those, who don't really know reality at all? It's so very dishevelled. No comb, that could smooth it down. The writers run through it and despairingly gather together their hair into a style, which promptly haunts them at night. Something's wrong with the way one looks. The beautifully piled up hair can be chased out of its home of dreams again, but can anyway no longer be tamed. Or hangs limp once more, a veil before a face, no sooner than it could finally be subdued. Or stands involuntarily on end in horror at what is constantly happening. It simply won't be tidied up. It doesn't want to. No matter how often one runs the comb with the couple of broken off teeth through it—it just doesn't. Something is even less right than before. The writing, that deals with what happens, runs through one's fingers like the time, and not only the time, during which it was written, during which life stopped. No one has missed anything, if life stopped. Not the one living and not dead time, and the one who is dead not at all. When one was still writing, time found its way into the work of other writers. Since it is time, it can do everything at once: find its way into one's own work and simultaneously into the work of others, blow into the tousled hairstyles of others like a fresh, even if malign wind, which has risen suddenly and unexpectedly from the direction of reality. Once something has risen, then perhaps it doesn't lie down again so quickly. The angry wind blows and sweeps everything with it. And it sweeps everything away, no matter where, but never back to this reality, which is supposed to be represented. Everywhere, except there. Reality is what gets under the hair, under the skirts and just that: sweeps them away and into something else. How can the writer know reality, if it is that which gets into him and sweeps him away, forever onto the sidelines. From there, on the one hand, he can see better, on the other he himself cannot remain on the way of reality. There is no place for him there. His place is always outside. Only what he says from the outside can be taken up inside, and that because he speaks ambiguities.

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And then there are already two who fit, two whose faces are right, who warn, that nothing is happening, two who construe it in different directions, reach out to the inadequate grounds, which have long ago broken off like the fangs of the comb. Either or. True or false. It had to happen sooner or later, since the ground as building ground was quite inadequate. And how could one build on a bottomless pit anyway? But the inadequacy that enters the writers' field of vision, is still adequate enough for something, that they could also take or leave. They could take or leave it, and they do leave it. They don't kill it. They merely look at it with their bleary eyes, but it does not become arbitrary because of this bleary gaze. The gaze is well aimed. Whatever is struck by this gaze says, even as it sinks down, although it has hardly been looked at, although it has not even been exposed to the sharp gaze of the public, whatever has been struck never says, that it could also have been something else, before it fell victim to this one description. It says exactly what had been better left unsaid (because it could have been better said?), what always had to remain unclear and groundless. Too many have already sunk into it up to their stomachs. It's quicksand, but it doesn't quicken anything. It is groundless, but not without grounds. It is as you like, but it is not liked.

The sidelines are at the service of the life, that precisely does not take place there, otherwise we would not all be in the thick of it, in the fullness, the fullness of human life, and it is at the service of the observation of the life, which is always taking place somewhere else. Where one is not. Why insult someone, because he cannot find his way back to the path of journeying, of life, of life's journey, if he has borne it—and this bearing is no bearing someone, but nor is it any kind of bearing on—has simply fortuitously borne it, like the dust on a pair of shoes, which is pitilessly hunted down by the housewife, if a little less pitilessly than the stranger is hunted down by the locals. What kind of dust is it? Is it radioactive or active by itself, just like that, I'm only asking, because it leaves this strange trail of light on the way? Is what is running alongside and never meeting up with the writer again, the way, or is the writer the one who is running alongside, onto the sidelines? He has not yet passed away, but he's already passed the line nevertheless. From there he sees those who have parted from him, but from one another too, in all their variety, in order to represent them in all their credulity, in order to get them on form, because form is the most important thing, anyway he sees them better from there. But that, too, is chalked up against him, so are those chalk marks and not particles of luminous matter, which mark the way of writing? At any rate it's a marking out, which simultaneously shows and obscures and afterwards carefully covers up again the trail he himself laid. One was never there at all. But nevertheless one knows what's up. The words have come down from a screen, from blood-smeared faces distorted with pain, from laughing, made-up faces, with lips pumped up beforehand just for the make-up or from others, who gave the right answer to a question in a quiz, or born mouthers, women, who have nothing for and nothing against, who stood up and took off a jacket to point their freshly hardened breasts, which were once steeled and belonged to men, at the camera. In addition any amount of throats, out of which singing comes like bad breath, only louder. That is what could be seen on the way, if one were still on it. One goes out of the way of the way. Perhaps one sees it from a distance, where one remains alone, and how gladly, because one wants to see the way, but not walk it. Did this path make a noise just now? Does it want to draw attention to itself with noises now and not just with lights, loud people, loud lights? Is the way, which one cannot walk, afraid of not being walked at all, when so many sins are being constantly committed after all, torture, outrages, theft,

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threatening behaviour, necessary threat in the manufacture of significant world fates? It makes no difference to the way. It bears everything, firmly, even if groundlessly. Without ground. On lost ground. My hair, as already mentioned, is standing on end, and no setting lotion there, which could force it to firm up again. No firmness in myself either. Not on me, not in me. When one's on the sidelines, one always has to be ready to jump a bit and then another bit to the side, into the empty space, which is right next to the sidelines. And the sidelines have brought their sideline pitfall along with them, it's ready at any time, it gapes wide, to lure one even further out. Luring out is luring in. Please, I don't want to lose sight now of the way, which I'm not on. I would so like to describe it honestly and above all truly and accurately. If I'm actually looking at it, it should also do something for me. But this way spares me nothing. It leaves me nothing. What else is there left for me? I am prevented from being on my way, I can hardly make my way at all. I am out, while not going out. And there, too, I should certainly like to have protection against my own uncertainty, but also against the uncertainty of the ground, on which I'm standing. It runs to make certain, not only to protect me, my language right beside me, and checks, whether I am doing it properly, describing reality properly wrongly, because it always has to be described wrongly, there's no other way, but so wrongly, that anyone who reads or hears it, notices the falseness immediately. Those are lies! And this dog, language, which is supposed to protect me, that's why I have him, after all, is now snapping at my heels. My protector wants to bite me. My only protector against being described, language, which, conversely, exists to describe something else, that I am not—that is why I cover so much paper—my only protector is turning against me. Perhaps I only keep him at all, so that he, while pretending to protect me, pounces on me. Because I sought protection in writing, this being on my way, language, which in motion, in speaking, appeared to be a safe shelter, turns against me. No wonder. I mistrusted it immediately, after all. What kind of camouflage is that, which exists, not to make one invisible, but ever more distinct?

Sometimes language finds itself on the way by mistake, but it doesn't go out of the way. It is no arbitrary process, speaking with language, it is one that is involuntarily arbitrary, whether one likes it or not. Language knows what it wants. Good for it, because I don't know, no not at all. Talk, talking in general keeps on talking over there now, because there's always talking, talking, without beginning or end, but there's no speaking. So there's talking over there, wherever the others are staying, because they don't want to linger, they're very occupied. Only them over there. Not me. Only the language, which sometimes moves away from me, to the people, not the other people, but moves away over to the real, genuine, on the well-signposted way (who can go astray here?), following their every movement like a camera, so that it at least, the language, finds out, how and what life is, because then it is precisely not that, and afterwards all of it must be described, even in what it precisely is not. Let's talk about the fact, that we are supposed to go for a medical check-up once again. Yet all at once we suddenly speak, with due rigour, like someone who has a choice, whether or not to speak. Whatever happens, only the language goes away from me, I myself, I stay away. The language goes. I stay, but away. Not on the way. And I'm speechless.

No, it's still there. Has it perhaps been there all the time, did it weigh up, whom it could weigh down? It has noticed me now and immediately snaps at me, this language. It dares to adopt this tone of command to me, it raises its hand against me, it doesn't like me. It would gladly like the nice people on the way, alongside whom it runs, like the dog it is, feigning obedience. In reality it not only dis-

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obeys me, but everyone else, too. It is for no-one but itself. It cries out through the night, because no-one has remembered to put up lights beside this way, which are supplied by nothing but the sun and no longer need any current at all from the socket, or to find the path a proper path name. But it has so many names, that it would be impossible to keep up with all the naming, if one tried. I shout across, in my loneliness, stamping across these graves of the departed, because since I am already running alongside, I cannot pay attention as well to what I'm treading on, whom I'm treading down, I would only somehow like to get to the place where my language already is, and where it smirks mockingly across at me. Because it knows, that, if I ever tried to live, it would soon trip me up, then rub salt in my wounds. Good. So I will scatter salt on the way of the others, I throw it down, so that their ice melts, coarse salt, so that their language loses its firm ground. And yet it has long been groundless. What bottomless cheek on its part! If I do not have solid ground under my feet, then my language can't either. Serve it right! Why did it not stay with me, on the sidelines, why did it part from me? It wanted to see more than me? On the highway over there, where there are more people, above all more likeable ones, chatting nicely to each other? It wanted to know more than me? It has always known more than me, it's true, but it has to know even more than that. It will end up killing itself by eating into itself, my language. It will overindulge on reality. Serve it right! I spat it out, but it spits nothing out, it's good at keeping it down. My language calls over to me, over on the sidelines, it likes best of all to call over to the sidelines, it doesn't have to take such careful aim, but it doesn't have to, because it always hits the target, not by saying something or other, but by speaking with the "austerity of letting be," as Heidegger says about Trakl. It calls me, language does, today anyone can do it, because everyone always carries their language around with them in a small gadget, so that they can speak, why would they have learned it?, so it calls me where I am caught in the trap and cry out and thrash about, but no, it's not true, my language isn't calling, it's gone, too, my language has gone from me, that's why it has to call, it shouts in my ear, no matter out of which gadget, a computer or a mobile phone, a phone booth, from where it roars in my ear, that there's no point in saying something out loud, it already does that anyway, I should simply say what it tells me; because there would be even less point in for once speaking what was on one's mind to a dear person, who has fallen down on the case and whom one can trust, because he has fallen and won't get up again so quickly, in order to pursue one and, yes, to chat a little. There's no point. The words of my language over there on the pleasant way (I know it's more pleasant than mine, which is actually no way at all, but I can't see it clearly, but I know, that I too would like to be there), the words of my language have, therefore, in parting from me, immediately become a speaking out. No, no talking it out with someone. A speaking out. It listens to itself speaking out, my language, it corrects itself, because speaking can still be improved at any time; yes, it can always be improved, it is even entirely there to be improved and then to make a new linguistic ruling, but then only to be able immediately to overturn the rules again. That will then be the new way to salvation, of course I mean solution. A quick fix. Please, dear language, don't you for once want to listen first? So that you learn something, so that you at last learn the rules of speaking. . . . What are you shouting and grumbling about over there? Are you doing it, language, so that I graciously take you in you again? I thought, you didn't want to come back to me at all! There was no sign, that you wanted to come back to me, it would have been pointless anyway, I wouldn't have understood the sign. You only became language to get away from me

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and to ensure that I got on? But nothing is ensured. And by you not at all, as well as I know you. I don't even recognise you again. You want to come back to me of your own accord? I won't take you in any more, what do you say to that? Away is away. Away is no way. So if my loneliness, if my constant absence, my uninterrupted existence on the sidelines came in person to fetch back language, so that it, well-looked-after by me, at last came home, to a beautiful sound, which it could utter, then it would only happen, so that with this sound, this penetrating, piercing howling of a siren, blown by the wind, it could drive me further, ever further back from the sidelines. Because of the recoil of this language, which I myself produced and which has run away from me (or did I produce it for that purpose? So that it immediately runs away from me, because I have not managed to run away from myself in time?), I am chased ever deeper into this space beyond the sidelines. My language is already wallowing blissfully in its muddy pool, the little provisional grave on the way, and it looks up at the grave in the air, it wallows on its back, a friendly creature, which would like to please human beings like any respectable language, it wallows, opens its legs, presumably to let itself be stroked, why else. It's greedy for caresses, after all. That stops it from gazing after the dead, so that I must gaze after them instead, and of course in the end it's down to me. So I had no time to curb my language, which now shamelessly rolls around under the hands of the caressers. There are simply too many dead, whom I have to see to, that's an Austrian technical term for: whom I have to look after, whom I have to treat well, but then we're famous for that, for always treating everyone well. The world is looking to us, no need to worry. We don't have to take care of that. Yet the more clearly this demand, to gaze at the dead, sounds in me, the less am I able to pay attention to my words. I must gaze at the dead, while meanwhile the strollers are stroking the good old language and chucking it under the chin, which doesn't make the dead any more alive. No one is to blame. Even I, dishevelled as I and my hair are, am not to blame for the dead staying dead. I want the language over there to finally stop making itself the slave of strangers' hands, no matter how good it feels, I want it to begin by stopping making demands, but itself become a demand, to finally face up to, not the caresses, but a demand to come back to me, because language always has to face up, only doesn't always know it and doesn't listen to me. It has to face up, because the people who want to adopt it instead of a child, it's so lovable, if one loves it, people therefore never face up, they decide, they don't answer calls, many of them even immediately destroyed, tore up, burnt their call-up order to sociability, and the flag along with it. So the more people who take up the invitation of my language to scratch its stomach, to ruffle something, to affectionately accept its friendliness, the further I stumble away, I have finally lost my language to those who treat it better, I'm almost flying, where on earth was this way, that I need in order to hurry down? How do I get where to do what? How do I get to the place, where I can unpack my tools, but in reality can right away pack them up again? Over there something bright is gleaming under the branches, is that the place, where my language first of all flatters the others, rocks them into a sense of security, only in order for itself to be lovingly rocked in the end for once? Or does it want to snap again? It always wants to do nothing but bite, only the others don't know it yet, but I know it very well, it was with me for a long time. Beforehand there's first of all cuddles and whispering sweet nothings to this seemingly tame creature, which everyone has at home anyway, why should they bring a strange animal into the house? So why should this language be any different from what they already know? And if it were different, then perhaps it might be dangerous to take it in.

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Perhaps it won't get on with the one they already have. The more friendly strangers there are, who know how to live, but are nevertheless very far from knowing their life, since they pursue their caressing intents, because they always have to pursue something, the more my seeing no longer clearly sees the way through to the language any more. Miles and more. Who else should be able to see through things, if not seeing? Speaking wants to take over seeing as well? It wants to speak, before it has even seen? It wallows there, is groped by hands, buffeted by winds, caressed by storms, insulted by listening, until it stops listening altogether. Well, then: all listen here for once! Whoever doesn't want to listen, must speak without being listened to. Almost everyone is not listened to, although they speak. I am listened to, although my language does not belong to me, although I can hardly see it any more. Much is said against it. So it no longer has much to say for itself, that's fine. It's listened to, as it slowly repeats, while somewhere a red button is pressed, which sets off a terrible explosion. There's nothing left to say except: Our Father, which art. It cannot mean me, although after all I am father, that is: mother, of my language. I am the father of my mother tongue. The mother tongue was there from the beginning, it was in me, but no father was there, who might have belonged to it. My language was often unbecoming, that was often made clear enough to me, but I didn't want to take the hint. My fault. The father left this nuclear family along with the mother tongue. Right he was. In his place I would not have stayed either. My mother tongue has followed my father now, it's gone. It is, as already mentioned, over there. It listens to the people on the way. On the father's way, who went too soon. Now the language knows something, that you don't know, that he didn't know. But the more it knows, the less it says. Of course, it's constantly saying something, but it's saying nothing. And already the loneliness is taking its leave. It's no longer needed. No one sees, that I am still inside, in the loneliness. I am not heeded. Perhaps I am honoured, but I am not heeded. How do I ensure that all these words of mine say something, that could say something to us? I cannot do it by speaking. In fact I cannot even speak, because my language is unfortunately not at home just now. Over there it says something else, which I didn't ask it to either, but it has already forgotten my command from the start. It doesn't tell me, although it belongs to me, after all. My language doesn't tell me anything, how should it then tell others something? But nor is it saying nothing, you must admit that! It says all the more, the further away from me it is, indeed, only then does it dare say something, that it wants to say itself, then it dares to disobey me, to resist me. When one looks, one moves further away from the object, the longer one looks at it. When one speaks, one catches hold of it again, but one cannot hold onto it. It tears itself away and hurries after its own naming, the many words I have made and I have lost. Words have been exchanged often enough, the exchange rate is incredibly bad, and then it's no more than: incredible. I say something, and then it's already been forgotten from the start. That's what it strove for, it wanted to get away from me. The unspeakable is spoken every day, but what I say, that isn't to be allowed. That's mean of what has been spoken. That is incredibly mean. The spoken doesn't even want to belong to me. It wants to be done, so that one can say: said and done. I would even be satisfied, if it denied belonging to me, my language, but it should belong to me nevertheless. How can I ensure, that it is at least a little attached to me? Nothing sticks to the others after all, so I offer myself to it. Come back! Come back, please! But no. Over there on the path it's listening to secrets, that I'm not supposed to know, my language, and it passes them on, these secrets, to others who don't want to hear them. I would want to, it would be my right, indeed, it would go down

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well, if you like, but it doesn't stand still, and speak to me, it doesn't do that either. It is in the empty space which is distinguished and differentiates itself from me, in that there are very many there. Emptiness is the way. I am even on the sidelines of emptiness. I have left the way. I have only said things after another. Much has been said about me, but hardly any of it is true. I myself have only said what others have said, and I say: that is now what is really said. As I said—simply incredible! It's a long time since so much has been said. One's listening can't keep up any more, although one must listen, in order to be able to do something. In this respect, which in reality is a looking away, even a looking away from myself, there's nothing to be said about me, there's nothing to be said, nothing more to be said. I'm always only gazing after life, my language turns its back on me, so that it can present its stomach to strangers to caress, shameless, to me it only shows its back, if anything at all. Too often it doesn't give me a sign and doesn't say anything either. Sometimes I don't even see it over there any more, and now I can't even say "as has already been said," because while I've already said it often enough, I cannot say it any more, I'm lost for words. Sometimes I see the back or the soles of the feet, on which they can't really walk, the words, but faster than I have been able to for a long time and even now. What am I doing there? Is that why my dear language has lain down some distance away from me? That way it will, of course, always be faster than me, jump up and run away, when I go across to it from my place of work, to fetch it. I don't know, why I should fetch it. So that it doesn't fetch me? Perhaps it, who ran away from me, knows? Who doesn't follow me? Who now follows the looking and speaking of others, and really can't mix up them with me. They are other, because they are the others. For no other reason, except that they are the others. That's good enough for my speaking. The main thing is, I don't do it: speaking. The others, always the others, so that it's not me, who belongs to it, sweet language. I would so much like to stroke it, like the others over there, if I could only catch hold of it. But then it's over there, so that I can't catch hold of it.

When will it silently make off? When will something make off, so there's silence? The more the language over there makes off, the louder it can be heard. It's on everyone's lips, only not on my lips. My mind is clouded. I have not passed out, but my mind is clouded. I am worn out from gazing after my language like a lighthouse by the sea, which is supposed to light someone home and so has itself been lit up, and which as it revolves always reveals something else from the darkness, but is there anyway, whether it is lit up or not, it's a lighthouse, which doesn't help anyone, no matter how hard that man wishes it would, so as not to have to die in the water. The harder I try to make it out, the more obstinately it doesn't go out, language. I now put out this language light mechanically, I switch to the pilot light, but the more I try to clap myself over it, a snuffer on the end of a long pole, with which in my childhood the candles in the church were extinguished, the more I try to snuff out this flame, the more air it seems to have. And all the more loudly it cries out, rolling around under thousands of hands, which do it good, which unfortunately I have never done, I don't know myself, what would do me good, so it's crying out now, so it can keep away from me. It shouts at the others, so that they too join in and cry out like it, so that the noise grows louder. It shouts, that I shouldn't come too close. No one should come too close to anyone at all. And what has been said should also not come too close to what one wants to say. One shouldn't get too close to one's own language, that is an insult, it is quite capable of repeating something after itself, piercingly loud, so that no one hears, that what it says, was earlier recited to it. It even makes me promises, so that I will stay away from it. It promises me everything, if I just don't come close to

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it. Millions are allowed to get close to it, except me! Yet it's mine! What do you think of that? I just can't tell you, what I think of that. This language must have forgotten its beginnings, I've got no other explanation. With me it started small. No, how big it's grown, I can't tell you! Like this I don't even recognise it. I knew it, when it was just so high. When it was so quiet, when the language was still my child. Now it has all at once become gigantic. That's not my child any more. The child has not grown up, only big, it doesn't know that it has not yet outgrown me, but it's wide awake nevertheless. It is so wide awake, that it drowns itself out with its crying, and anyone else who cries louder than it. Then it spirals up to an incredible pitch. Believe me, you really don't want to hear it! Also, please don't believe that I'm proud of this child! At its beginning I wanted it to remain as quiet as when it was still speechless. Even now, I don't want it to sweep over something like a storm, causing others to roar even louder and to raise their arms and throw hard objects, which my language can no longer even grasp and catch, it has, my fault, too, always been so unathletic. It doesn't catch. It can throw, but it can't catch. I remain imprisoned in it, even when it's away. I am the prisoner of my language, which is my prison warder. Funny—it's not even keeping an eye on me! Because it is so certain of me? Because it is so certain, that I won't run away, is that why it believes, it can leave me? Here comes someone, who has already died, and he talks to me, although that is not planned for him. He's allowed to, many dead are speaking now in their choked voices, now they dare to, because my own language is not keeping any eye on me. Because it knows, it isn't necessary. Even if it runs away from me, I won't slip through its hands. I am at hand for it, but it has slipped through my hands. But I remain. But what remains, the writers do not make. What remains is gone. The flight of fancy was cut. Nothing and no one has come. And if nevertheless, against all reason, something that has not come at all, a little would like to remain, then what does remain, language, the most fleeting of all, has disappeared. It has replied to a new situations vacant advert. What should remain, is always gone. It is at any rate not there. So what is left to one.

Translation from German by Martin Chalmers

Im Abseits

IST SCHREIBEN DIE GABE DER SCHMIEGSAMKEIT, der Anschmiegsamkeit an die Wirklichkeit? Man möchte sich ja gern anschmiegen, aber was geschieht da mit mir? Was geschieht mit denen, die die Wirklichkeit gar nicht wirklich kennen? Die ist ja sowas von zerzaust. Kein Kamm, der sie glätten könnte. Die Dichter fahren hindurch und versammeln ihre Haare verzweifelt zu einer Frisur, von der sie dann in den Nächten prompt heimgesucht werden. Etwas stimmt nicht mehr mit dem Aussehen. Aus seinem Heim der Träume kann das schön aufgetürmte Haar wieder verjagt werden, das sich aber ohnedies nicht mehr zähmen läßt. Oder wieder zusammengefallen ist und nun als Schleier vor einem Gesicht hängt, kaum daß es endlich gebändigt werden konnte. Oder unwillkürlich zu Berge steht vor Entsetzen vor dem, was dauernd geschieht. Es läßt sich einfach nicht ordnen. Es will nicht. So oft man auch mit dem Kamm mit den paar ausgebrochenen Zinken

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