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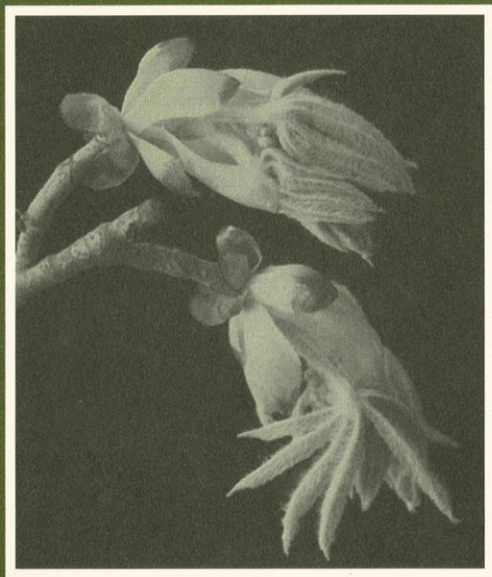
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A P A R A L L E L P R E S S C H A P B O O K



Only on This Planet

Poetry by John Graber

A PARALLEL PRESS CHAPBOOK

Only on This Planet

Poems by
John Graber



PARALLEL PRESS 2007

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FIRST EDITION

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for Elise

Over There the Sun Shines

*Over there the sun shines
through a small gap in the clouds.
It makes a gold circle of heaven
on the frozen, snow-covered lake.
Driving further down the road,
I see there are holes in the shelf of ice
over Isabella Creek that show her dark water
has been flowing lower and lower all winter long.
As I drive up to higher ground, clouds
have cleared, and the sun shines all over,
even over the black memories still circling
within my skull like water curling in an eddy.*

*Maybe this year, even in a few months, the sun
will come down deep enough to clearly show
that there is solid, level limestone in me, flat bed
of a decent fishing stream that I can stand in.
Maybe this year, the sun-warmed water
will invite me into myself, and I will go,
and the stream will not float to me my old
dead faces, but instead, release hungry trout—
to move like living water, sides glimmering
with the light shining down into my blood.*

There Comes a Time

There comes a time when you have to go outside
and notice something: the lace edge of an undercut
patch of snow thawing or the uncovered still-green
fern leaves of yarrow or the furred lamb's ear,
the stubby fingers of sedum, the praying leaves of iris,
green flames of daisy or tiny hands of rue.

There comes a time for the heart not to be a river
but just to be a sign of something melting
on a hillside facing south. Just a simple seeping in,
then puddling, meandering, just a going anywhere,
sliding on its own self is what heart wants.

Because too long a man's heart can be a stone
of winter, ice unable to think of root or flower
or even shiny pebbles wet with light. But this time,
this heart, this man stands up and hears
the songs of birds becoming keys unlocking
something bright to go outside and be.

Solidarity

February 9, 6:45 p.m.

Air stiffens in the nose.

It's been snowing so much
that every second day the dogs
must revisit around each tree.
Even the healthy walnuts look like sick elms—
with all their lower branches hanging down.

The whole world's gone inside,
dreaming of the heart opening up and loosing
its geese to dare Canada again with a faith
that the flush on the face of this February sunset
is not put-on, but real
as the undiscriminated larval ghosts at the bottom
of the frozen Saskatchewan mating pools are real

and ache to rise up from the depths through strata
of ever warmer layers of water and become nymphs
aching to rise up to the occasion of air
through the gauzy-lit band and break through the silver-
backed mirror of the surface as Mayflies
aching to rise into their one day
of long sun and ache as I ache
to fly May again.

Sounding February

This is the first day the road has steamed
since mid-September. At eight o'clock
the angle of the sun has turned the snow to skipping
sparks across its waves to greet the eye.

Stubborn, stiffened leaves of oak still hang
but soften their final few degrees toward fluid brown.

The air has warmed enough to call wind, "breeze."

My North Shore indoor potted spruce
puts forth its first phosphorescent needle tip
of tentative green and makes me six years old.

Fifty years of winter fall from me like water
streaming from a leaping dolphin's curve.

Black Bud, Green Bud, Flag, Flag, Flag

Just now,
the sun rises over my right shoulder,
and, ahead, the trees to the left
become dark tributaries of light's passage,
collecting and offering fire to sublunary roots,

and all along the fanned-out branches
range multitudes of tight little fists
looking like tantrums waiting to happen—
but it's really not anger
unless at the lying April sun.

It's simply cold that makes the buds
look so black and insect-like
clinging to their boughs.

They're just all wrapped-up
in holding their breath until their faces
turn green with delight and a wonder,

that opens up their million wrinkled flags
to fatten in the breeze, like patriots
of a story hushed all winter long.

The First Spring Birds' Thawing Song

Hardly a week and already the birds' magic,
insistent chorus has lengthened the days
and pulled all the dirty quilts of snow off
the open ground to show a world of quiet grass
pressed down like sleeping children's hair.

Taking it up a peg or two, finch and wren
get serious and join the robins, penetrating song
further out and down, softening earth's deep frost resolve
and sending its last death throes heaving through
the broken backs of every county road around.

It seems that only up into the steepest ravines
and along the northern most-shadowed slopes
the birds don't go with their thawing song.
They seem afraid, and that's O.K.
You can't expect a song to do it all

and face down those last threatening, littered
snow-backed humps and the long, translucent tongues
of pitted ice in each shadowed pocket of winter
where the air's as cold as a dead man's jaw
and sheer ghost breath to breathe.

You've got to know that there are some few
spirits at work down deep that even birds
can't conquer with their song and though Easter's
already been and gone, there's prayer and fasting yet.

What Wonder If This Birdsong

What wonder if this birdsong
flowing like white water
over all this morning
awakened all the stones.

What wonder if these songs
freed thanks that moved
the thousand hearts locked
in these tiny mountains.

What wonder if these stones
were only waiting for a people
to find songs inside to sing
in harmony with their praise.

What wonder if the next stone
you see sees you and stares
until you pick it up but
refuses to sing for you.

What wonder if it will
not jump out of your hand
unless your tongue tastes on it
the grayness of your life.

What wonder if it waits for you
to smell on its other side
a sudden evening of death.
What wonder if it leaps

then from your hand and strikes
the grass with a muffled thump
that sounds just like the last
or first beat of your life.

May 5

This morning from the northeast,
between home and Maiden Rock,
through the pickup window,
out of the corner of my eye
a sudden flash
caught my heart, stopped,
then contracted it again:

red, then *red*, and RED:

three flushed cardinals
beat their wings in my throat,
igniting the cold fire there,
riddling my whole winter's tinder dry body
with the old benign conflagration
of wed-locked awe and love:
praise.

The Dance of the Robins

Lacing the air with their filigree of song,
baroque or rococo—it doesn't matter—
the birds own the morning
and publish what they choose.

This time, it's the ancient song and dance
for life that brings them down to earth
in a springly mating persuasion, like ours,
ignoring the wings to involve the legs
as if proving the weight Sir Robin can carry
and leap from gravity's ground were credentials
for levity's coupling. Oh, how they dance
and lock and weave the pattern of their history
here on this greening turf of eventual demise,
flirting in the dangerous cat's grass,
sticking their necks out to touch
more children into laughter.

Pulling Rank

There is a bird whose song and name
both sound like gargling gravel: the grackle.
And right now one's coughing it's bull's-eye
shrapnel of song into my shell-shocked day.

He's squawking about how he doesn't want me
to smoke a cigar on my own porch.
Insolent as a lifetime army private,
he lounges in my lilacs just ten feet away.
I offer to make him a sergeant
if he'll just shut up. He starts to consider
what it might mean to his future—
a better retirement perhaps.
But, alas, he makes up his mind and starts
gargling again, refusing to re-up.

Well, I won't quit either, not until
my song is more beautiful than his.

I start to scribble, "The sun going down
behind some trees shines through their limbs,
and I can hardly see where my pencil
touches paper. The paper is really bright."

The sun stops in the sky and says
it will make me a lieutenant if I quit writing.

"Wait a minute," I say, "look at how beautiful
you've made this bird's shimmering head—
a living rainbow testament. And see
the cunning genius you make look easy
in each tiny fingertip of promise
you invest in every lilac bud."

The sun smiles, "Carry on Captain."
I throw the grackle a purple heart.

What I Want To Say

That silver tree beyond the road
is not what I want to say.
The child with very big eyes
in a movie I saw once,
I see in the clouds
but he is not what I want to say.
The lawnmower lines in the grass
are like musical staffs
for the notes you play
or don't play, sing or don't sing.
This, too, is not what I want to say.

All this out there
is seen by chance,
but here is a three-note chord:
a silver tree, a child's large eyes,
and your hands at the womb
of your own history being born.
This chord is for your remembering.

Today will be named after you.

Subrosa

along the Mississippi at Lake Pepin

A wood duck flies from cover for water,
a brush stroke of cloud cruises south,
children's stripped play-clothes lie on the lawn,
a red-leafed tree that's been there all night
blocks the view of the lake and the barge
brunting the deep channel's water before it,
lifting the food from the floor of the river,
waking with miniscule odors the fish
sleeping as fish do in their pockets of safety.

These are the isinglass layers of May morning,
peeled back by the day's awakening through the eyes,
revealing a man in the cold air of dawn, then,
hiding him again under a day of his moving
from place to place as if he knew what he did,
lifting the food from the floor of the river.

Reach

Reaching just below the ground to where
the weed can be pulled without breaking.
Reaching to where, by bending it over and pinching
just so, the wild mushroom stem will break
clean without lifting out part of the root.
Reaching just high enough on the asparagus stalk
to snap it with a turn and lift of the wrist.
Reaching into your wife's home of words and failing.
But then going on reaching to find her face
foremost and hold it between your hands and gently
shake all the snow down from her limbs, shake
all the red and yellow leaves, shake all the ripe fruit,
shake free the spring of her hands' silence singing,
reach back into the home of words.

August Garden

Enough feminine licorice air
exults from a single row of basil
to canopy half the garden.

Alongside, even the heavy-handed dill
is overcome and has to rely on its flashy
star-burst flower to catch the eye
and send the tongue searching its memory
for the exact place on the lower lip where
astringency was left after teeth split the seed.

The surrounding disheveled bed of tomato vines
looks like the refuse of a broken fast
except for its galaxy of exhausted suns
remaining rich on the storm-pressed ground.

This is a good place for well-worked
love to walk, carefully placing his feet.

In My Hands

The town across the lake
and all its lights
are in my hands.

The splash of stars
and the hidden moon
revolve here in my hands.

The wind's
legions of leaves
and all their spring trees
sway together in my hands.

The sight of you standing—
the children in your eyes,

the thought of your turning,
the breath of your touching

is all so much bigger
than anything
in my hands.

Water Torture—August 12

Hundreds of stars fall for my birthday every year.
Really! Right from the Perseids asteroid belt.
What a show! But not this year. This year,
even the moon is a dim smudge through black wet paper
air that clings to our faces as the rain pours on
right through it into my birthday night.
What's more, we've seen no star for eleven days.

It just keeps raining, and we're showing the strain.
This giant weather god, suffering from some sugar
blues, won't stop crying, and it seems contagious.
The powerful south wind arrives and limply capitulates.
Our world soothes us by dripping its faucets day and night.
The living room smells like a rag lost beneath the sink.
Even my tuxedo becomes a T-shirt after weeks of gym.
Chunks of dry split wood for winter, even under cover
suck up moisture, swelling up like ticks on a dog.
Consumptive pallor starts to overtake us all.
No one eats. Even beef jerky becomes raw liver.
The grass is up to the windows, but we can't mow.
The garden swells, grows pale, and proceeds to rot.
Mosquitoes do the breaststroke through the air.
The air has a bright green cast of reflective mold.
Clear up to the attic, the house is mildewed basement.
The horizon of possibility shrinks to just beyond the nose.
Excitement is like being fourteen in Pig Wiggle, Iowa.
For fun we try to forget how much the blanched
invading cellar crickets look like grotesque walking shrimp.

We lift the rugs and find that love is not
a many legged thing. Strange lunar plants
grow through cracks in the floor. Our whole universe
wets itself with self-pity. Far from passion,
we notice our bodies becoming bumpy,
decapitated tongues moist with our own secretions.
Like slugs we move sweating across our floors.

Like Growing Potatoes

“present at the creation”

First you dig a trench nine inches wide
by six deep and rake in some fertilizer.
Next reach into the bag beside you and select
a planet—Mercury, Venus, Earth, whatever.
If it’s the size of an egg or so, put it in.
If it’s bigger, like Jupiter, cut it so at least
three eyes are showing and placed to look up.
Then, cover it over halfway, just three inches.
Wait a week or two until the eyes peek through.
Then cover them over the rest of the way.
Every few days walk down to the trench and watch
for the eyes to become leaves reaching for light.
When you see them, it’s time to weed and be patient
a couple months more until the plants’ purple blooms
fade and seem to wither down the rest of every plant
into what looks like rotting piles of hopeless disease.
Here faith steps in. Though half unbelieving,
walk with your shovel to the stump of any stem
and back off nearly a foot. With a boot, press down
on the shoulder of the shovel. Push deep,
even with the ground, and tilt back . . . Wait!
If at all possible, go find a kid to watch.

Now, pull the handle back, slowly lift and turn,
spill out on the ground

The Bear

The River

Orion!

Thanksgiving Dawn

For more than a month now the flies have slept,
but this morning the first all-night stove has warmed
the house enough to wake their buzz for dawn.

Already a hawk is up and soaring its canny,
seeming nonchalance, waiting for any lively move
in the fields caught in the quadrants of his eyes.

Down to earth but further out, the lake
of flat cast pewter is, along the nearer shore,
hammered silver by an incoming breeze,

while the light across the land is such
that each opaque object is caught in a crystal
moment somewhere between Kansas and Oz.

And, even as I say it, the last traces
of night's tenacious monochrome are overcome
by revolutions among the surviving greens.

Here, now, just off the porch, the surrounding
curtain of lilacs that hold their leaves so long
has finally dropped enough of its local color
to clearly tell the story of a dozen nests—
the songs we lived in all last summer.

Watching through Three Windows before Leaving

"May God us keep from Single Vision and Newton's Sleep"

—William Blake

Again, this morning, through this window,
everything is perfectly there:
there in the glare of silver
sun behind a frost of cloud
and there, drooping from each branch,
the systematic walnut leaves—
shadowing leaves shivering
beside the darker, steady, deeper green
shadowing leaves splayed
from akimbo limbs
of the erratic white ash.

And clearly, closer in, through this window,
these turned white pillars of our porch
and their bric-a-brac of trim
are figures of bride and groom and wedding—
ours—before our entry into marriage to this
high brick house: hundred-year-old monument
to nothing dead or dying, but too soon left monument
to the continuing play of musical chairs with families
and houses all over the world of Time, unblinking,
and even so, this morning,
through the big windows we are watching . . .

watching everything be perfectly there:
there, as the garland blessing of early lilacs
and, there, as the wild grape leaves clamber
over the bushes after the blooms have gone
and, there, the grapes themselves, lovely clusters
of tarnished beads before the shining tongue's shining
of the tart burst, and always, here and now,
the birds, filling the trees, like this morning's
pair of mourning doves calling together today
into a song which sings, "fade, fading . . .
fading, fade," and clearly cleans the eye.

Grace Note

The sugar maple's side that faces south
flames before its other side
that still is yellow green.

The purple asters
get done before the lavender,
and beyond that,
the stubborn climbing rose
pushes up and out its last
erratic blossom clusters

while the yarrow has its own
last few things to say.

The radio predicted
"sunny and windy."

It's raining hard.

I'm overjoyed
to stay inside a day
and clean a room
to find another there
and open doors
closed since last
I wrote

and not to care
where anything is going.

Early October along Plum Creek

I have seen the curve of this hardwood hillside before
from the outside, and I will see it again from within:
these clustered bouquets of fall leaves,
the many colors of the last hurrah,
flashing reds and mellowing yellows,
infiltrating brown and evergreen shoulder-to-shoulder
emblems of what life was always all about:

a living cathedral, a stained-glass explosion of light
before the soon to come sudden mid-October storm
with its hard wind and harsher rain that strips
the forest down to the dark lead patterns
of collar bones, neck tendons, and arm bones
hinged and reaching out with hands
that don't know where to go.

This I've seen and this have dreamed from within
the end that will come. Dreamed my life
moved sure towards death and dying but then
found in death that Time turned back around,
swinging through its apogee, out of the dark,
closer and closer, until I was given a second life
in light perfected into who I really am, in a skin
all the colors of this hardwood hill of fall.

Death Doesn't Advertise

Wake in peace enough to keep your eyes closed.

Look through your eyelids and see on the inside
the color of every human being.

Wake into the morning and feel all the points,
edges, and curves of your body touching the bed,
where it's safe to stay, slow and weighty,
as the day opens up with sounds of water
tapping in the sink or roiling from distant trains
or hissing down white noise from a passenger jet

while maybe your love is making coffee love to you
after all those stumbling years of throwing pain
back and forth inside what's now a stronger love
that seems it's always been warm folded clothes,
raked leaves, stains of new mown grass on shoes,

and stars on stars strewn across domestic skies
full of the scent of foods you can take up in your hands:
constellations of curry, oregano, rosemary, garlic,
cream, and each other. Take it all up in your hands—

such a rich waking in peace enough to keep still and see
through your eyelids the color of every human being.

Except for this morning, before leaving your bed,
feel your eyelids become a heavy screen as mine did
where from left to right I reread the images
projected from last night's TV news:
a long line of dark men, women and children,
all seated in front of a chalk white wall . . .

such bright spring clothing. See that they have no hands.
Remember the various lengths of machete hacked arms
that each person, so dark, raises up to you
before that wall, so white. See black Easter
candles without flame, there in Sierra Leone,
just inside your eyes.

Standing in the Middle of My Life

Down this road above my Mississippi,
along Lake Pepin, I have often walked
but never seen what I have seen today.
Down the steep bank through sumac reds
and past the ash and willow yellows,
impossibly swimming in cold October water,
were all the people I can't forgive
and all I fear who can't forgive me.

And they all were happy, wet with forgiveness,
all glad to be wearing the same robe of water.
They were all one and all was forgiven.

But how could I trust their faces
calling me into the same water they swam in?
How could I let their water flow over me?
How can forgiving and being forgiven be the same?
How can both cover me as it covers them
as is the nature of water?

How could I have stood and just watched?

Still-Life at the January Window

Loving you right now
is like the grace
frozen in this tree branch's
curve against our pane.

I love you still
but have shrunk—
grown too old
in consciousness
and young in modesty
to know or hope
precisely how
to thaw and open up
the lid of night
and show the plain day

truth of loving
that in the silence
of an eye glimpse
on the world seen
over horizons of limb,
stays wise,
until the mouth of the palms
begins to speak in tongues
and says a kind of clapping
more like water flowing.

We are like dancers
who have thought enough
to catch their breath
and ceased to breathe.

This White Shirt

Nothing happening inside this white shirt.
Nothing happening between this crown and chin.

Where is the heart that once at least could hear
its own failure sound all the way across the lake
and echo back in language that it knew?

What is the chance that these thought-foreshortened arms
can embrace this promise of the moon's silver body
reaching out her elf-queen arms across the waves?

Why is the moon in the sky as flat as tomorrow's silence?
A white-faced clock with hands fallen off. A mute's, "Oh."
A bullet's vacant entry hole with no blood left.

Who is this man, scooped out? This man become
the mere place of his life, loose change, a handful
of words spoken in the third person, tattling to mirrors
in invisible ink on a blank sheet of paper?

There's nothing happening between his crown and chin.
Nothing inside this late winter sky. This white shirt.

Wind Gusting

The wind gusting to forty or fifty miles an hour
rocks tree trunks the way boxers move
from the waist in the early, probing, less dire rounds.
Branches paw and test the air. Roots stretch but hold.
I see this slowly as I say it, passing it on to you.

And are you, too, like I am, hanging on?
The storm has lasted long, many rounds.
My head snaps back on its exhausted neck.
My waist, my legs, have lost all strategy.
I am a face slapped. I am dangling arms
with hands so stiff they can't even make change,
or hold an egg, button a shirt or brush my hair,
touch with the curve of my palms
someone's cherished face, and here I cry.

Let angels weep as well. They cannot know
desire, our body's grip on earth with legs
long numb that do not seem to stand a chance
to stand or move away from punishments of taking it
and taking it, while we sing failure's love song
sweeter words than they can hear or understand.

Drinking America

I've drunk America like a glass of water
when I expected wine.
Taken the battered, enamel cup of Iowa,
hung from a working windmill,
and drunk an oat harvest, taking turns.
Drunk America like a glacier in the eye.
Thoughtlessly drunk it with a handful
of pain pills—sip, swallow, back to work.
I've taken America like a grapevine in June
and felt it all the way up from deep roots
go out through the arms to clusters
of fingers . . . thank you, thank you!
Sometimes even while making love
with my free wife, forgetting even as I drank,
I've drunk it. Drunk it poor
and drunk it rich. Drunk it in New York
and drunk it in over forty states
from cabin springs, Kansas days,
Florida swamps, Cascade streams,
and now by the Mississippi I take it in.
And all along the way, before the image
of the crowning heads of our three children
being born, I've paused with the skull of it
at my lips and then, OH! drunk it,
toasting America to them as I drank
it for years like a vote, a paycheck
forgotten to wait for, a spade-fork full
of the surprise of new potatoes,
a careless speech, a flag.

The White Water Brule River Draught

If you think you can just
open your mouth
and swallow this river down,
and not have it
change your life,
you can forget it.
It's not going to just
meander through your throat,
your neck and chest,
belly and sex,
soak your legs
and dribble on out
of your feet.

No!
You chug this river
and it'll change you.

It'll scour your mind,
whirl through your throat,
shout through your chest,
eddy in your belly,
lap your sex,
power on over
the edge of your hips,
waterfall down
through your pillars
of leg, and finally
crash at your feet,
flinging up
mountains of mist
you will walk on
for days with maybe,
if you're lucky,
a rainbow's end in each hand.

Thanks to the Sky

Just once, up in the morning, I looked up to angels and saw my perfected family there, myself included, all of us bending over at the stiff-backed angle one assumes for viewing over the edge of life into a coffin. That's a lot of eyes to live with.

And there, the one who seems the least afraid of my future is a grandfather I never saw on earth. He's so short his back has to be straighter. His huge hands are right on the rim of the sky, and his head like a strange sun and moon layer over each other rising at the same time, coming up like an exclamation point for the sentence of life they are all breathing down with their eyes

like prayers for breeze blowing through the still green wheat of me again. They like dead mornings even less than I. They look through all the dead surfaces of the world of me, all the dead skins of the strange-shaped country I live in, wrapped up in my body, while for years they have been building a cathedral in my chest, a first best bed deep in my belly, and the usual factories all up and down my arms.

They look this morning as if they think their work is almost done; some have already stepped back from the edge, confident now that their welfare attention can be over. I wish I were as sure that in just a minute the power would go on, lights light up, machinery hum, rivers flow to their seas under our sky, and I stand up and walk right out of my grave, waving up at my grandfather's smile and tipping my hat to the sky.

Only on This Planet

January 8, Northern Wisconsin

*When late afternoon sunlight
comes in low over the land
on a blue day after an ice storm,
only on this planet can you see
stubble fields littered with sapphire.
Only here can you look through one ridge
of ice-bent birch-barked trees
to another higher ridge behind it,
with the sun behind them both,
and see the quivering silver chain mail links
of the highest angel, Michael,
sequin with his every move, like wind
flattering autumn aspen. And only on this earth
are there oaks and hickories strong enough
to laugh triumphant under crystal ice
while arching it up on limbs flaunting high
the weight of their lace palaces of beauty.
Here alone is the place where even the fringes
on the hedgerows stun, and the dark red
of the stop signs warm so much that the sun
drips down from them in cut glass tears.
But that's not sad. Not here. Not now.
Not for any of us left on this only planet blessed
with ice storms with mostly happy endings.*



John Graber grew up in western Kansas and received degrees from St. Olaf College and the Iowa Writers Workshop. He taught grade school, high school, and college students for six years at Holden Village in the North Cascades. Since 1978, he has lived in Stockholm, Wisconsin, a village on the Mississippi where he and his wife, Elise, enjoyed raising their three children. Although bipolar disorder has complicated his teaching, editing, and writing, he has had more than fifty poems published in a variety of magazines. Included among them are *The American Poetry Review*, *The Christian Century*, *The Great River Review*, *Free Verse*, and *The American Review*. An earlier collection of poetry, *Walking Home*, is available from Pudding House Publications.

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