

epistle

literary magazine

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Issue III

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Epistle

Literary Magazine

Letter from the Editor

When I was seven years old, I decided that I wanted to be an astrophysicist. The ambition was spectacularly ill-suited to someone who has never loved math or science, but it has one undeniable source that holds true to this day: I love looking at the night sky.

What has always fascinated me most, however, is not the stars themselves but the constellations: the indelibly human marks left on the cosmos over centuries. Constellations turn the sky from a terrifying abyss into a shared map, legible across languages and time.

Individually, no single star tells a story—not one that I could read without pursuing the astrophysics career, that is. It is humans who connect them into patterns. A constellation is not something we discover, but something we decide to appreciate; scattered stars become meaningful because we imagine them together. Curating this issue of *Epistle*, I've come to understand that mentorship works similarly.

No single conversation with a teacher changes a life. It's the accumulation of small moments, none individually notable, that eventually forms something meaningful. It's a comment in the margin of an essay, a book recommendation outside of the class curriculum, an assignment whose purpose becomes obvious years later. Even instances that we might resent in the moment—those teachers who refuse to let us settle for anything less than our best—can later come into focus as profound acts of faith in our potential. Only in retrospect does the bigger image begin to emerge.

Curating a literary magazine is, in essence, an act of constellation-drawing. Each piece is strong on its own, but placed beside one another, new patterns begin to emerge. Together, the authors in this issue reveal the larger story of countless, unnoticed acts through which teachers shape students into the people they will become. Each reader will trace the map in these pages differently. I sincerely hope, however, that you will find it leads back to a place of gratitude for the mentors who shaped you, and a renewed commitment to ensuring that other teachers and learners have the chance to form these connections of their own.

Rory Baskin, *Editor-in-Chief*

Table of Contents

A Lemon Tree in Greece <i>Reed Venrick</i>	1
Thanks to My English Composition Teacher <i>Michael Roberts</i>	6
Tenure Track <i>M.D. Briscoe</i>	8
To Be or Not to Be Seen <i>Jane Herschlag</i>	10
Plan B <i>Deborah Blenkborn</i>	12
Mr. Westrich <i>Paul Hostovsky</i>	15
A Letter to My Father in Academia <i>Madeline Ricard</i>	17
The Sisyphean Quixotian English Teacher <i>Sam Hendrian</i>	19
Classroom <i>Sambhu Ramachandran</i>	21

A Lemon Tree in Greece

Reed Venrick

PART ONE—the morning class

Who can forget Homer's similes

In the "Iliad," and for Heraclitus,

This phenomenon called "human

Life" is a river you cannot swim

Across twice, but the most

Famous metaphor from history—

Plato's prisoner in the cave,

We see the mind not doubting

Those dark shadows of reality,

But metaphor most discussed

Was Aristotle; the first known

Teacher to view metaphor not

Just as usual decoration to meaning,

But perception that could enlighten

Reality—that is to say, a perception

Of similarity that expands the mind's

Range, so Aristotle explained metaphor

To a young Alexander—not yet

The great—the restless teen trying

To be attentive as his great teacher

Led them out to the lemon grove

And pulled down a limb to reach up

And pull down a ripe, round lemon—

And rolled the fruit gently in his hands

Like it was a gift from the gods,

And inhaled the rind, as if it were

His last breath, but the design

Of a lemon meant nothing to the teen,

Until, as the story goes, Aristotle

Tossed the fruit to Alexander and

And asked him to hold up

The lemon orb up before the sun,

Not just to match the similar color,

Not just to block the horizontal light,

But to show from their perspective

How the lemon was equal in size

To the rising morning sun, and

The clever Alexander replying:

“Ah yes, this lemon is like the sun,

But the earth one day will be

Like this lemon, for I shall hold

It in my hands.” And Aristotle
Smiled and nodded—he did not
Doubt the mental and physical

Abilities of this prince, who seemed
Gifted enough that one day he
Might conquer all of Greece.

PART TWO—After the class break

After the hungry Prince ate
The lemon, Aristotle admitted his
Own lemon metaphor was paradoxical.

Yet in this, the young Alexander—not
Yet the great—questioned why.
Aristotle raised his walnut-brown eyes

To the Aegean horizon and thought
How to answer: for a master teacher,
It was not enough to create a lesson

About a subject in isolation; not enough
To give an illustration of metaphor
Without also showing the frame and

Cultural context with ideas weaving
And interweaving; not enough to show
That metaphor was made by comparison,

So breaking a stick from the lemon tree,
And with his tanned, rough hand, randomly
He scratched in the orchard's sand

One line, then two to make adjacent line
Segments—perpendicular—to meet
At a 90 degree angle—I.e., the letter

“L” then with the stick he wrote “E”¹
And then “M” then “O” then “N.”
And when the sleepy prince raised

An eye to ask why the letters were
Written randomly in the sand,
Aristotle noted that that the letter “L” has

No meaning on its own; it takes an “E”
To follow and so on to create meaning,
And while he was not ready to discuss

How the sound system of Greek worked,
Be aware, he said, that while metaphor
Works by comparison, written language

Creates meaning with contrast, just as²
Heraclitus centuries before had taught
The truth of “Unity of opposites” and not
Just in flowing rivers, but also in language—
And such the great thinker explained that

Day standing by a lemon tree in Greece.

NOTES AT THE FOOT:

¹ For the sake of an example, I hope the reader

Accepts that I use the English word, originating from old French.

² Refers to the theory—first expanded in depth by structuralist

Teachers and linguists such as Ferdinand Saussure and

Later Roman Jakobson—that showed how letters and words

Had no meaning in and of themselves—but create meaning

Only when placed in contrast to other letters and words. Although

This fact seems obvious today, until the 20th century,

The implications of the relationship between a signifier

And its signified was unexplored in academic circles.

Reed Venrick resides near Marseille, France and tends to write "pedagogical poems" which use footnotes.

Thanks to My English Composition Teacher

Michael Roberts

Dear English Composition Teaching Assistant,

I am late in writing, but like they say, better late than never. I want to thank you, my English Comp teacher from my freshman year at the University. In this letter, I emphasize that any mistakes herein are mine to own like using “like” and invoking lame cliches. It has been 55 years, and I have thought about this for a long time. Thank you for your thoughtful outlines, diligence, caring, and long hours of grading, giving detailed feedback on my writing.

The class of 20 diverse freshmen and women came from the rural farms and towns, the inner city and suburbs. You had a quick laugh and often corrected us with, “there’s an easier way to write.” And, “let’s remember who you’re trying to persuade. Who is your reading audience?” You called attention to our many sentences starting with “This is” and “It is.” The dreaded passive voice. You quietly corrected, “I ain’t” and “I seen.” You did not put us down; perhaps you saved ridicule for the restricted office warren of GTA desks over in the English building, but we felt accepted and supported to learn.

I appreciated the written feedback on my papers, whether on a pop essay quiz or a homework assignment. I could see where your eyes stopped reading, and your pen dotted the margin as you must have pondered whether I made sense or if you should comment on grammar. There were longer pen marks where you probably frowned at my cliches. And I know you must have struggled to read my handwriting in the blue books while appreciating homework essays from my typewriter. For the first few assignments, you would use arrows pointing up for good points and down for poor communication. You later assigned letter grades as the university required.

When you opened the first class by asking what the latest book we had read over the summer was, you didn’t grimace when I said, “Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged*,” which was true, but not evidence of my preferences. I had read it because I had just devoured everything I could find by Kurt Vonnegut, but my contrarian uncle had challenged me to be “enlightened” by reading Ayn Rand. I wonder if you were just happy that we were reading something.

Once you handed out a poem to analyze in class. I remember we drained it of all meaning in our naïve interpretations of life. You showed vulnerability and bravery because we found out later that the poem was yours and had just been accepted for publication in a literary journal. Your voice caught as you told us about the acceptance. You were justifiably proud but did not contradict our interpretations.

You were working on a doctoral degree and going back to teach at a college close to your family. I cannot remember your name 55 years later, but your influence as a teacher stayed with me. After all these years, I wanted you to know that I valued the class and felt supported by you in my writing. Your positive feedback sustained me, especially when my dissertation advisor only a few years later said, backhandedly, “Now, I’m not saying you write like shit...” Maybe I do, but I truly needed and cherished your encouragement. Your class was probably the freest I ever felt in which to express myself and be given affirming feedback.

I searched college websites around the state to see if any still had a faculty member of your age and experience, but you are probably retired by now if still alive. I emailed several possible professors and instructors, but they denied being my teaching assistant back then, pointing out timeline and location discrepancies. Each thanked me for making this expression of appreciation.

I'm sorry I'm not more poetic with metaphors, symbolism, and irony. I'm just grateful. I hope you read this, but maybe other former English comp teaching assistants, and I know there are thousands of them, might have a better day knowing that a student, even after so many years, appreciated their work.

Gratefully,

Michael

Michael C. Roberts is a psychology professor published in scientific journals and books. Now retired, he needed to thank his college freshman English GTA. He has placed numerous photographs in literary outlets and written pieces in *Invisible City Literary Journal*, *A Story in 100 Words*, *Story Quilt*, and *Silly Goose*.

Tenure Track

M.D. Briscoe

Two roads diverged, but no yellow wood.

Dozens pushing to go to take this path;

No time to stand, no time to look,

I charge in with your guidance.

The uneven path is impossible to run on;

Still I try.

Vines catch my neck

And toss me on my back.

The path alone is not my obstacle, though hardly fair.

Others push and pull,

Holding back in bitter anguish,

Or perhaps in desperation—afraid of getting lost themselves.

Thorny comments cut my ego.

I turn around and think of the other path.

I doubt if I should ever have come this way,

But I see your footprints, you've been here before.

Ages and ages since, I arrive.

Out of the woods, but not off the path.

A mountain looms before me; I sigh.

But there I catch sight of you, and you've taken this path before.

You throw a rope and I take hold.

M.D. Briscoe is a sociologist by profession, a poet by practice. He believes that poetry and fiction can help us understand society, history, and our individual place in the world.

To Be or Not to Be Seen

Jane Herschlag

Octavia's giggle is contagious
as Michael stutters though his poem.
I explain to my fourth grade class,
Many of us have flaws, some visible, some not.
I can usually cover up a little glitch
in my brain which attacks my memory,
so, I don't yet know many of your names.

Michael is very brave.
Most people who stutter hide.
Michael doesn't, he raises his hand
to answer, to be heard and seen.
When our flaws or wounds show,
that's when we most need
gentleness.

Octavia apologizes to Michael
who has run to his seat,
buried his head in his folded arms
and softly cries.

When Michael sees me in the hall
he giftwraps me with his arms.

A week later, standing next to me,
my hand on his back, he reads
and does not stutter.
Tears rim my eyes.

Jane Berger Herschlag's full-length poetry collection, including her photography, *When the Mouth Can't Speak the Body Will*, is published by Finishing Line Press. *Bully In the Spotlight*, her 40-page docu-poetry chapbook is published by Pudding House Publications. Her poems are included in four anthologies and many university presses.

Plan B

Deborah Blenkhorn

Going from an elementary school that had only 60 students to a high school accommodating about 2,000 was so intimidating that I had to construct an imaginary alternative for myself, in case it didn't work out. As I first confronted the banks of green metal lockers stretching endlessly down a wide hallway, I thought maybe I could be sent away to another school somewhere: that was my fantasy. Meanwhile, I settled into Napanee, Ontario, where I would spend my years as a high school student from 1978 to 1983.

During my teenage years, the high school in Napanee was the most consistent factor in my life, running through it as the Napanee River ran through town—so in a sense it was disloyal (perhaps it always is) to have a Plan B in the back of my mind. My teachers were more a part of my daily life than either of my parents; among my fellow students were the family I chose for myself. And the building itself, a sprawling brick edifice, which on the horizon of my memory assumes the guise of a low-rising castle with domes and towers, just a short walk from the turbulent, if not sacred, Napanee River, was the site of all my emotions and aspirations—far more than the home I left at 6:30 a.m. on the first day of grade nine.

I can't forget my first view of the high school, for it is the same view I saw every school day (the principal wrote on my report card, "Congratulations on five years of perfect attendance!")... I vowed, just to be more like the other kids, to skip a class someday before I graduated, and despised myself for what I thought was a lack of courage preventing me from doing so. Now I realize a simpler truth: I never wanted to.

At first, I never missed a day because it would have meant spending it at home with Grammy. This would have been unthinkable: marooned in my wooden, four-poster bed in my room at Solworks as if awash on a sea of tedium, staring blankly out at the sheep grazing listlessly in the overgrown field behind our property, drinking endlessly bland mugs of warm milk—or worse yet, Grammy's homemade eggnog (her accent on the second syllable), a nasty concoction of milk, sugar, vanilla, and a raw egg.

The sympathy of my teachers, if I were ill, was a much more appealing prospect. "Feeling a little lack-luster today?" Mr. Baker, my favourite history teacher (his wife was also a history teacher, and also a favourite—but they were all my favourites—no wonder I was known to my fellow students as a "browner"), asked me once.

"Mm-hmm," I responded, tears of joy in my eyes. The concern of a teacher was such an exquisite boon that I would have endured anything to obtain it. As it was, a long bus ride—including the time on the ferry from the Island—was a small price to pay.

At home with Grammy Seaman, on the bus with the Islanders with whom I felt a gradual slackening of the tie of a common origin that bound us together, even in the evenings with the people at the Farm next door, I struggled to conform to others' expectations of me, others' ideas of who I was. At school I felt no such pressure. At school I was simply me: me-in-waiting for my life that was about to happen. I had a sense of being on the verge of something terribly exciting and important—and that something was my future, which all my teachers, my beloved mentors, seemed to have such confidence in. I've often wondered, when is it in life that we realize the limitations of our own potential? Kids think they can be anything: a movie star, an astronaut, the Prime Minister. When I was in

high school, I envisioned my future career as a translator at the UN (I had high marks in French)—or perhaps a famous writer.

President of the International Club, editor of the school newspaper, I did all the extracurricular activities I could—considering that I had to finish in time for the “late bus” after school, which dropped me off at the ferry dock on the mainland side. Then, of course, someone would have to pick me up at the dock on the other side, since Grammy Seaman and I lived six miles from the village. This arrangement became increasingly difficult, as Grammy did not like to drive—and, indeed, should not have been driving, as she had become increasingly accident-prone—and our neighbours were often pressed into service. Guilty as I felt about causing such inconvenience, I refused to deny myself the pleasure of taking the late bus, for it afforded me the extra time at school that I craved.

I told myself that if for any reason I couldn’t live with Grammy anymore, I could go live at the Farm. But this possibility became more and more remote, as my ties to the people there became somehow incompatible with my ties at school. It was just too weird and disorienting to be the besmooched companion of a teenage boyfriend from nine to five and then locked in the embrace of a 33 year-old man from seven to ten of an evening. The latter, Gordon, was I guess my “Plan B” in those days, but a “Plan B” that initially seemed far more dependable than any of my “Plan A” boyfriends. Whatever petty disputes and anxieties beset my daytime relationships with guys at school, I could come back to Gordon’s waiting arms. Similarly, although I always planned to spend the evening with Grammy Seaman, at some point (usually after about 15 minutes) I would give up and resort to “Plan B”: going over to the Farm. But the Farm, and my connection to it, had started to fade long before I abandoned it. If nothing else, I had a vague feeling that my beloved teachers—who were also admired adults—would not approve of my Farm world, would see something disturbing in it. Moreover, in high school as never before, I was drawn to a fascinating group that represented virtually uncharted territory in my own life: people my own age.

I was a bit too much of a “browner” (teacher’s pet) to fit in with the kids who came with me on the bus from the Island every day. Besides, I had odd habits, like taking classical guitar lessons. Once a week, my father would pick me up after school at the ferry dock (on the mainland side) to go to a guitar lesson. On those days, I would have to take my guitar to school (where did I put it during school hours? It wouldn’t have fit in my locker...), and the other kids on the bus would torment me: “Play us a tune! Aw, come on! Just one song! Spandau Ballet! Culture Club! Genesis?”

“I don’t know any!” I would protest vehemently, and they would shake their heads in disbelief.

They showed the same amazement (for I was known to be clever in school) at my lack of common sense: my head was often in the clouds, so that I was sometimes strangely unaware of my environment. For instance, the bus usually parked on the ferry in a crosswise direction, but one day turned up towards the front to accommodate a large dairy truck: as we headed out into the lake, I looked up from the book I was reading as I slouched in my favourite seat at the back of the bus, saw that the bus driver had left, and, jolted out of my usual reticence by panic, shouted, “There’s no one steering the boat!”

“And she’s an A student—go figure!” they sniggered.

Ah, but aren’t we all misunderstood to some degree, in our teens? And isn’t that the essence of teenage angst? In any case, it was only a matter of time before, among so many people at the high school, I found some other eccentrics who empathized with me.

Chief among the new friends I found was Lisa, a beautiful, generously-proportioned (this label would apply to any girl in high school who wasn’t a toothpick) redhead with an artistic bent and a love of academia (as represented by high school in Belleville) that equaled my own. She too was impractical—irresistibly so—with her head so far in the

clouds that we could see each other clearly through the haze. Nothing Lisa said or did was normal or ordinary; if she slipped while walking down the hall, she would fall into the splits, which she had been practicing as part of her elusive dream of becoming a self-taught ballet dancer.

Lisa was more “familiar” with her teachers than I was, for her father was a community youth leader who liaised with all the local schools, and they were his friends. I found it delightful to hear Lisa referring to my favourites by their first names, and could hardly find the courage at first to call her father Terence, even after I moved in with the family.

“Whatever you do, don’t become an English teacher!” my English teacher told me. “You’ll find it too frustrating.” Mr. Onstein must have been frustrated, himself, teaching what were probably for the most part a reluctant and recalcitrant batch of ingrates. Yet he had a few disciples, and I was devoted to him even though I was not his star pupil—that was my friend Jennifer, whose every response in class was met with his resounding approbation: “Full marks!”

He gave us a list of some 30 or 40 books to choose from as the subject of book reports, and that list has seen me through years of subsequent reading and teaching. His approach to poems still comes to my mind every time I teach a poetry class, and each term I inevitably select some of the same works he taught me to love half a lifetime ago. I try to mimic his intonation as I read “Lord Randall” aloud to my class; I try to infuse “Kubla Khan” (resonating as it did in those days with Rush’s 1981 live version of “Xanadu”—the longest song played at every high school dance) with the same sense of magic he inspired.

But my best moment with Mr. Onstein was, as with Mr. Baker, when I was conscious of an intersection with an empathetic soul in a moment of crisis. I was late for a final exam because the ferry had been stuck in the ice, and entered the gymnasium shaking with anxiety. Mr. Onstein—Hank, as I later found out his name was, through Lisa’s family—quickly, and in a compassionate disregard for school regulations preventing teachers from touching students—put his arm around me and led me to a desk, assuring me I would be granted extra time to finish the exam. Tears of gratitude stand in my eyes even today as I recall his kindness, the warmth of his calm reassurance after that cold and desperate ferry ride.

I went back to the high school to visit Mr. Onstein a few years after I had graduated, and told him I had finished a degree in Literature and a Bachelor of Education, so I was well on my way to becoming a high school English teacher.

He shook his head in mock disbelief. “What’s Plan B?” he asked.

“To stand within the pleasure dome,
Decreed by Kubla Khan...”

Deborah Blenkhorn’s strong commitment to coaching others to achieve their potential as writers inspires her teaching in the English Department at Kwantlen Polytechnic University and in Extended Learning at the University of British Columbia. Deborah’s creative work traces a path through her childhood in rural Ontario, summers in Canada’s Maritime provinces, and mid-life on a small island off the coast of British Columbia. Fusing memoir and imagination, her poems, essays and stories have been featured in over 50 print and online literary magazines in Canada, the United States, Britain, the Netherlands, Germany, Australia, Brazil, India, Singapore, Indonesia, and Bulgaria.

Mr. Westrich

Paul Hostovsky

They're talking about tying teacher pay
to teacher performance,
and tying teacher performance
to student outcomes. They like to use words like
outcomes. They probably don't read
much poetry, whoever they are,
and wouldn't know a good line
if they wrote one. I remember Mr. Westrich though,
my seventh grade English teacher, who died
in a boating accident the summer I was 12.

I remember his performance—his
performances—the way he'd make us all laugh,
the way he'd interrupt us whenever we said
um or er. "Don't burp," he'd say
(he called um and er "burps"). We had to put
a penny in the jar every time we "burped."

When the jar filled up, he said, he would buy us
a cake. And we'd all eat it together. He was as good as
his word. I hated school but I loved
Mr. Westrich. Whenever we said y'know
he'd interrupt us and say, "No, I don't know,
tell me!" Our outcomes, if anyone cared
to measure them, spanned a lifetime

of not burping, of saying what we meant
instead of saying y'know. But his greatest performance
was dying like that, in high summer, on a sailboat,
or under a sailboat—I don't remember
how it happened, only that it did, only that he died—his final
act. His perfect disappearance. No one I knew and loved
had ever died. He was the first one. It taught me
what can't be put into words. It taught me
the ineffable. It was around that time
I first started making poems.

Paul Hostovsky makes his living in Boston as a sign language interpreter and Braille instructor. His poems and essays appear widely online and in print.

A Letter to My Father in Academia

Madeline Ricard

Father, I wish to write to you in form.

I wish to pen a narrative well,

A show and tell, of the horrors of my home:

My reptilian friends meet again

The jowls of my cat,

He flicks their bones, they subtle groan

Crunching to their death.

Father, I wish to share about this town.

—You'd hate it here, I know.

Petroleum farms with lakeside charm

Is all the gleam and glow,

Yet the joy abounds

In the silent sounds

Of Lovebugs on their bayou throne.

Father, please come down some day!

I brag of you in every class, where

Frivolity's praised and art displayed

For beauty you'll never ask.

Father, will you ever bask in

the sovereignty of my work?

You'd hate it here, I solemn swear,

You'd curse the bugs, and love the tug

Of the warring in my soul.

I value logic, praise the art

"A piece of you," Ha! I'm hardly smart,

Still I fear the thought of you,

In spite of frivolity I hold so true.

There's beauty in my cool toned cat

And in the bugs and in their mating pact

There's horror in the lakeside glow

In the lapping waves of cancer thrown.

Father, all I wish to know:

Are you proud of me in your pompous home?

Madeline Ricard is a poet, journalist, native Alabamian, Jax State alum, and a firm believer that the cup is half empty. When she's not busy working on obtaining her MFA in Creative Writing from McNeese State University, she can be found enjoying a Red Bull and doting on her cat, Randall. Madeline's work can also be found in *Something Else*, *FUCKUS*, and *North Meridian Press*.

The Sisyphean Quixotian English Teacher

Sam Hendrian

Lectures about roads less traveled

Sketched out in dry erase marker

Alongside a picture of Neil Young

And other 20th century poets.

He knows they're barely listening

And even those who are

Might get taken by a war

Or roadside accident.

Still he persists in preaching stillness,

Awareness of surroundings

For the fraction of a second

Pocket rectangles aren't buzzing.

Wears a scarlet letter

Except it's not an "A,"

Rather an "I"

For Idealist With Reservations.

What those reservations are

Changes day to day,

Sometimes faith in deaf ears,

Sometimes doubt in alleged apathy.

Splits time between the residences

Of Sisyphus and Don Quixote

While occasionally going rogue

To roll back the boulder from impossible dreams.

Sam Hendrian is a Los Angeles-based filmmaker, poet, and playwright striving to foster empathy through art. From writing personalized poems for passersby outside of LA's oldest independent bookstore every Sunday, to making Chaplin-esque silent films about loneliness and human connection once a month, Sam lives to make other people feel seen and validated. More work can be found on Amazon, YouTube, and in various online literary magazines.

Classroom

Sambhu Ramachandran

All at once I learnt the classroom I sat in
was the most dangerous place on earth.
The piece
of chalk in my teacher's hands ceased to be
what it was and became a comet
blazing forth through
the semi-darkness
of my mind her words first heard
then seen and felt widened out
into a blaze of auroral light
whose changing colours
showed in sharp
contrast the dullness of all I believed to be
tinted black and white but I remember
nothing of what she taught except the danger
it led me boldly through of how her lessons
took me to a precipice and left me there
to learn to fall all by myself.

Sambhu Ramachandran is a bilingual poet, translator, and short story writer who moonlights as an Assistant Professor of English at N.S.S. College, Pandalam. His work has appeared in *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Two Thirds North*, *The Bombay Literary Magazine*, and *The Tiger Moth Review*, among many others. He lives in Kayamkulam, Kerala, where he attempts to capture the transience of the world through his writings and occasionally answers to @sambhuramachandran on Instagram.

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