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Souls of Plants

by

Yuanyuan Li

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Art in Metal & Jewelry Design

School for American Crafts
College of Art and Design

Rochester Institute of Technology
Rochester, NY
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Abstract

In creating fictional relationships with organisms within the plant world, I design jewelry and wearable sculptures that heal the individual, by relating to the poetic and peaceful nature of plants. The works involve the use of metal crochet, forging, screen printing, and fabric dying to create my relationship with plants, through narrative, and nostalgic stories.

These stories between me and plants began in my childhood and continue to this day.

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT	2
TABLE OF CONTENTS	3
LIST OF ILLUSTRATION	4
INTRODUCTION	6
BODY OF DOCUMENT	7
CONCLUSION	33
BIBLIOGRAPHY	34

List of Illustrations



1



2



3



4



5



6



7



8



9



10

1. My parent's garden back in my hometown of Guangzhou, China.
2. Another picture from the small yard in my home, that was my childhood paradise.
3. Flower Bougainvillea speetabili in the yard.
4. Orchid is a kind of flower my father plants most.
5. Surinam Cherry in the yard turns green to orange to red, looks like the small lantern.
6. Striped Barbados lily in the yard attract lots of bees.
7. From the parks in Rochester, where I used to go hiking.
8. Another picture from the parks in Rochester, searching for tranquility.
9. Reeds in Mendon Pond Park fluttering in the wind.
10. Leaves and flowers I collected.

Introduction

My love for plants has been greatly influenced by my memory of the natural world in my hometown of Guangzhou. When I started school, my brother and I walked from the north to the west of a forest to attend elementary school. It took us around 40 minutes to get to school, but we usually had lots of fun on our way. In grade 5, we began to ride bikes through the woods. Experiencing the touch of sunshine, feeling the wind speed, and encountering wet rain helped form my primary understanding of nature. I started learning about the changes of seasons in the woods. Spring is the plum rain season in southern China. Raincoats and umbrellas are common. On the way to school, the Bombax ceiba (a big red flower) are all over the ground, falling because of the rain. In summer, the cotton wool from the Bombax ceiba would float everywhere. We were excited to see “snow” in a city where it never snows. Autumn bears fruits. We picked up the fruits from the sycamore tree and made them into a spinning top to have fun. Winter temperatures never drop below 32°F. Even though most of the leaves are turning dark, some trees are just beginning to bloom.

During the holiday, the small yard at home was my paradise, and I spent plenty of time there. My father loves orchids, so the yard has different textures and colors of orchids; Orange, red, and green pitanga dotted on the branches; Bugambilia and Fuchsia were bright purple and rose red. Potted pines would grow out of tiny cones. If you were to bury the head of a scallion in the soil, fresh scallions would grow out a few days later. I like the Barbados Lily a lot, because its orange color is shiny and attractive under the sun. I liked spending a long time in the yard, observing how the plants grew while I watered them and maintained them. These unique experiences in the woods and my yard in my hometown influenced my habit of hiking to immerse myself in nature.

In Rochester, New York, I liked hiking in the parks. When I hiked, I would empty myself and observe the plants around me. I picked up the unique leaves on the ground, took off the reeds broken by the wind, and would take them back home for decorating. In the forest, the isolation would bring me a sense of serenity. A peace and comfort that would mirror the feelings I experience in my hometown would envelop me. I can hear the wind, the birds, the squirrels, and especially, the plants. Plants cannot speak, but they have a way of communicating as if countless spirits are whispering around me, dancing on my shoulder, like elves in the forest. This makes me feel and imagine that the soul of plants exist.

This body of thesis work strives to present my interpretation and idea of the soul of plants in both my hometown and Rochester. I transform precious memories of plants into jewelry to convey their vitality, creating a poetic and peaceful atmosphere. When I wear this jewelry, it brings me back to the memory of communing with nature, which makes me feel quiet, peaceful, and healed.

Body of document

Context: Recording plants and me

a. My habit of recording daily life in my diary forms my motive for making narrative jewelry

Since middle school, I have been keeping a diary. The most common things that I wrote down were the exciting events and changes that happened in my daily life. My memories are vivid and generate nostalgia, whenever I read the diary and look back to the past. I feel the same emotions that I had in back then, and I also better understand myself through retrospection. This writing habit influenced my later motivation to create narrative jewelry, often inspired by my records, memories, and feelings of nostalgia. I recognized narrative jewelry could always transfer my ideas. The contemporary narrative jewelry artist, Jack Cunningham has stated, "Inherent in the human condition is the need to find meaning in our lives. Contemporary narrative jewelry has the capacity to engage us on many different levels, to crystallize and encapsulate some of that meaning through a range of emotional and emotive subjects."¹ The process of creating narrative jewelry from precious memories is similar to the act of keeping a diary. I can always read to help recall details and emotions. For example, in some topics of my previous jewelry projects, I recorded the fantasy of exchanging identity and perspective with the koi fish I fed. I recorded the funny static electricity phenomenon between friends and me, along with the nostalgic feelings for Guangzhou by using bamboo, a material used in the morning tea dim sum culture. By replicating memories with precious jewels, I narrate stories to the audiences through my wearable art. As mentioned earlier, this thesis explore my memories in relation to plants.

b. My nostalgia for my hometown environment and my feelings about nature.

I grew up in a city where plants are everywhere. It seemed ordinary to have so many plants in my daily life before I went to do my undergraduate study in Beijing. Because of the climate and

¹ Cunningham, Jack. Cunningham, Jack (2008) contemporary European narrative 2008. http://radar.gsa.ac.uk/4948/1/2008_Cunningham_Jack_PhD.pdf.

geographical differences, it rains less in Beijing, and the winter is cooler, which causes the biodiversity of woods in Beijing to be less diverse. Staying in Beijing for years made me longingly nostalgic for the plants and woods in my hometown.

Later, I came to Rochester for to further my studies. Here I found a greater diversity of plants. Because I have always felt relaxed and calm with plants around me, I found comfort when hiking by myself in the parks around Rochester. In this environment, I am able to let my mind wander or even clear a bit. My walks help me to deal with the stresses of daily life. They leave me with a clearer mind and better mood. This activity was very much akin to my observation of plants in my childhood environment of woods and yard. In my memories, a wide variety of plants presented an impressive poetic vitality. Even though they are covered in heavy snow in the winter, they still come back to life in spring. Their vitality gives them a feeling of power, as if they have souls. I wanted to create a fictional relationship with organisms in the plant world and imagined their spirits in transparent and lightweight forms.

c. Artists that are relevant to my work

I endeavored to create an atmosphere of peace and vitality in my works. During the research process, I discovered the works of several influential artists relevant to nature, plants, and metalwork techniques. Luna Ikuta's work is representative of the spirits of flowers. They are lightweight and transparent, evoking a sense of the energy of plants. This sentiment is serene, tranquil, and poetic, resonating with both life and death. In her piece '*Afterlife*'², Luna has created an installation that combines sculpture, aqua scaping, bio-engineering, and chemistry to form ghostly underwater landscapes of botanical scaffolds. Luna developed a unique method to isolate the extracellular tissue matrix from immersing me in a spiritual world of living things.

Hye Jung Sin's work also evokes a poetic atmosphere, embracing the concept of the vitality of plants that I pursue. '*Nature of Others V*'³ and '*Re-Birth*'⁴ showcase the infinitely free features of plants. Hye combines dried nature objects with metal, giving them a sense of rebirth. This inspired me to express the vitality of plants as it relates to their freeness, flexibility, and strength.

² Ikuta, Luna. "Luna Ikuta." *LUNA IKUTA*, 2021, <https://www.lunaikuta.com/afterlife>.

³ Sin, Hye Jung. "Nature of Others V." *Nature of Others V* " *Hyejungsinstudio.com*, 2016, <https://hyejungsinstudio.com/2017/09/03/512/>.

⁴ Sin, Hye Jung. "Re-Birth." *Re-Birth* " *Hyejungsinstudio.com*, 2016, <https://hyejungsinstudio.com/2017/09/03/re-birth/>.

Additionally, I opted to use metal crochet to build a lightweight feeling of the souls in the work. This technique was inspired by the work of Arline Fisch. Her *'Bracelet and Glove'*⁵ utilizes metal weaving and exemplifies the range of possibilities inherent in this process. Arline has long been devoted to crafting wearable jewelry, and her use of textile structures like weaving and knitting imparts a softness and warmth to her metalwork.

Evolution:

"There is never a shortage of awe and inspiration to be found outdoors." --Rick Rubin⁶.

Once, I collected reeds while hiking in Mendon Pond Park, in Rochester and used them to decorate my studio. The reeds, fluttering in the wind, imbued me with a sense of the freedom inherent in nature, so I brought them back to my studio to incorporate some natural decorative elements into the space. After one semester, the reeds remained unchanged, evoking memories of my winter wanderings in the park. I was surprised by their longevity. At the same time, I began researching the concept of plant souls, for my thesis. All of this inspire me to present reeds in my work, narrating my hiking experience in the park. I resolved to return to the parks to observe more aspects of reeds.



⁵ Fisch, Arline. "Bracelet and Glove." Smithsonian American Art Museum. 2003. <https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/bracelet-and-glove-71852>.

⁶ Rick Rubin. *Nature as Teacher* Chapter. in *The Creative Act: A Way of Being* 36. (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2023)

Reeds in studio space

I went hiking in Mendon Pond Park on a sunny day in October. Along the pond's shore, there were several large areas of reeds. As the weather started to cool and the wind picked up, the colors of the woods turned dark. Peering into the distance from the hiking path, I saw the pale-yellow stems of the reeds swaying like undulating waves. As I approached, I witnessed the wind dispersing their seeds. These seeds fluttered and danced in the sky, softly and gently, connecting with the clouds and blending into one another, stretching into the distant sky.

The sensation I experienced in this natural environment was one of freedom and relaxation. They flew to me in the wind, surrounding my shoulders and fingers, communing with my body and morphing into new blossoming shape. A thought struck me: I could record reeds in the winds with jewelry or sculpture in a free form, to keep and express this relaxed memory. I started to sketch this and came up with the idea of building a group of jewelry pieces that present the movement of the reeds in the wind.



Reeds in Mendon Pond Park

I kept hiking for relaxation and more inspiration to aid in developing my thesis. The plants in the woods captured my attention. In this fall season, many of them started to turn darker colors in orange, brown, and red, and started falling to the ground. I was attracted to their unique shapes and colors and wanted to preserve them. So, I picked them up and brought them back to put into my notebook. When I was holding them, I imagined they had spirits and interacted with me. Each

leaf had its unique spirit. Like little elves in the woods, they twined and spread around from my fingers to my hands through my arms, then to my whole body. Immersed in this fictional fantasy, I felt relaxed, happy, and peaceful. This moment led me to want to narrate how I imagined the plants were communing with me as I began making jewelry.

In addition to doing more hiking in the woods in Rochester for thesis inspiration, I sought to reconnect with the nature I had experienced in my hometown. I revisited some photos I took in my hometown of Guangzhou. There were pictures of the plants in the yard and the woods I used to walk through. These images evoked a sense of nostalgia for my hometown, transporting me back to cherished moments. To gain more recent references, I asked my mom for help by taking some current pictures. In those pictures, although the yard and woods had undergone significant changes over time, they still felt familiar, eliciting happy memories of the past and the serene times spent in the yard and woods. These memories were precious to me and led me to create a series of jewelry pieces narrating my childhood memories when I communed with nature.

Drawing from the concepts of the freedom of reeds, the fictional form of the plant's souls, and my hometown's nostalgic memory of plants, I started to do some sketches around these themes. For the feeling of vitality that the reeds generated, I created a loose sketch to describe how the reeds looked while blooming, then fluttering, and finally floating in the sky. I also sketched how they interacted with my body. The pale yellow color represented the color of the reeds in winter.

To convey an atmosphere indicative of the poetic nature of the plant's souls, I considered using thin metal wire to shape these fictional souls, so that they would be lightweight and delicate. The process I chose to work with was metal weaving, which allows for the creation of light and delicate forms. I chose crochet, because it would give the metal a more chaotic feeling, making the jewelry look less orderly, and more clearly representing the plants' flexibility and growing organic form. I chose silver wire to do the crochet because of its softness and the fact that it is less easily oxidized. Additionally, I used the hammer to reshape the form and polish the silver. After hammering the crochet works, it became shiny and stable with a thinner wall and smooth surfaces.

Furthermore, I also sought to create the sense of transparency that I imagined these organic souls would exhibit. I found several transparent fabrics to shape the jewelry form. In the beginning, I tried cotton and silk scrim, as they were soft and easy to deform. I also experimented with nylon mesh, which has a more fixed form that more easily retained its shape. I can work with stitching

on the mesh with both silk and thin metal threads. I also found that the protective netting covers that I used for the flower buds, could be reshaped. I bend them into various forms and stitched glossy silk thread on these fabrics to represent the veins and texture of plants. Dyeing was used on the transparent fabrics to match the specific colors of various plants.

For the structure of the sculptural bodies of the plants winds around the wearer's arms and surrounds the body. 12 gauge stainless steel wire was chosen for the body of the sculptures as it provided a more stable structure. Despite its difficulty in shaping and needing to be repeatedly annealed and hammered, the stainless steel conveyed a sense of the power of the spirit of the plant as it twisted and spread around the wearer's arms.

In the series that dealt with my hometown memory of plants, I hoped to express a sense of nostalgia. I selected several plants which I was particularly drawn to, in my childhood yard. The plants include Bougainvillea Speetabili, Orchid, Surinam Cherry, and Striped Barbados Lily. At the same time, I was taking a printmaking class and without making a conscious decision, I printed out numerous plant images. These images became a graphic means to convey my ideas.

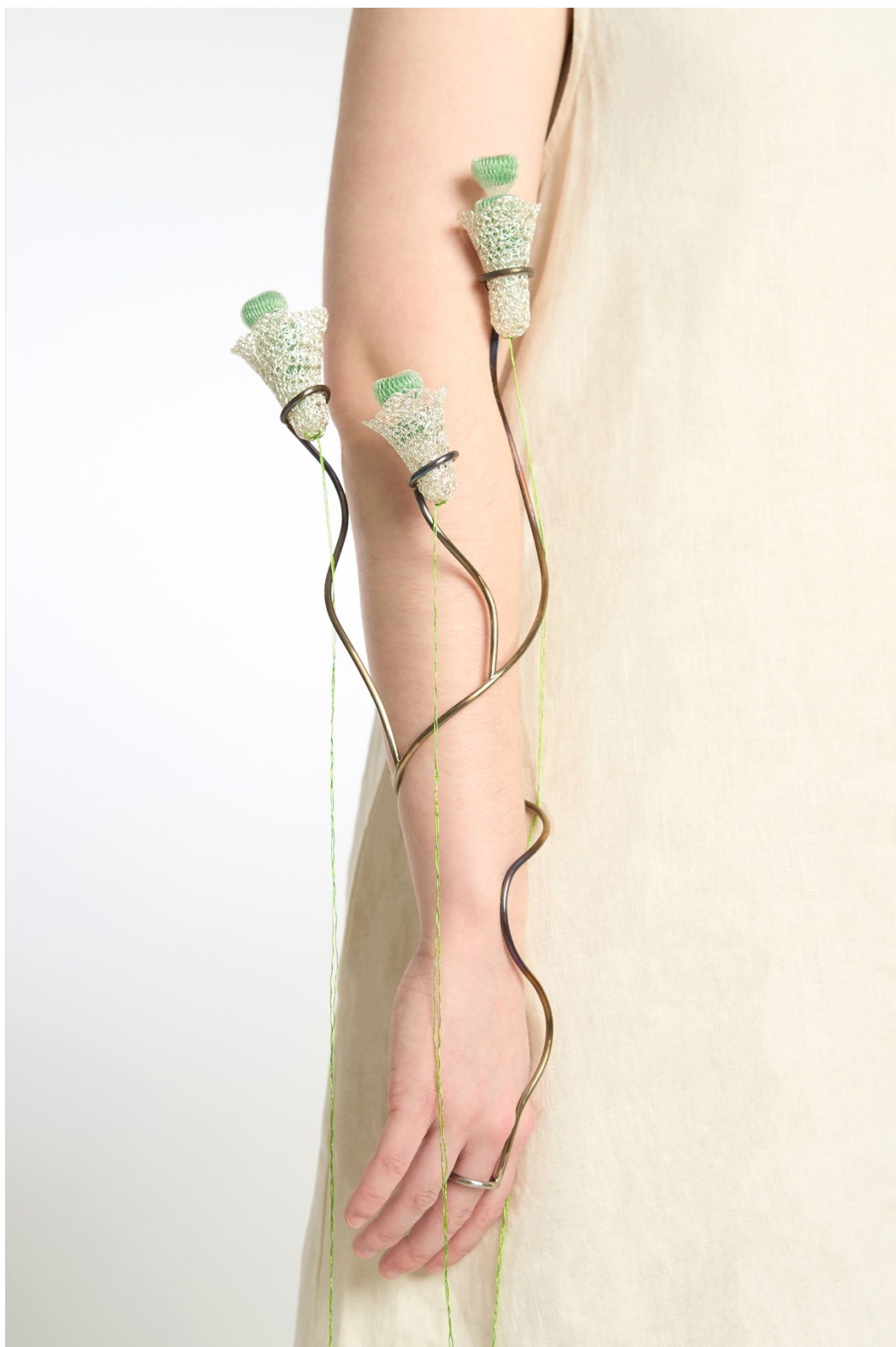
Body of works:

Picking up Leaves series:



Picking up Leaves 1 | 拾叶 1

38*30*15cm Stainless steel, silver, nylon, embroidery floss, needles, 2023



Picking up Leaves 2 | 拾叶 2

43*15*12cm Stainless steel, silver, nylon, embroidery floss, needles, 2023



Picking up Leaves series | 拾叶



Picking up Leaves in 2023 Thesis Exhibition

The '*Picking up Leaves*' series consists of 2 arm pieces. The works narrate the hiking experience in Rochester, creating a fictional connection with plant souls in a serene natural environment. While hiking, I collected leaves. When picking up leaves, I envisioned their spirits flowing from my fingertips, up my arm, and finally enveloping my body. This interactive moment brought me a profound sense of tranquility and serenity. I heat patina oxidized the stainless-steel wire that naturally twined from fingers to arms. The blossoms are created with silver crochet, which is hammer polished, to become shiny and thin as paper. Translucent green balls create a gradation in the center. Translucent balls with silk stitching on them, connect to the center of the blossom's

flower. From the bottom of the blossom, is a long silk wire with a needle point at the ground. I kept these as an aspect of the piece because I believe that their spirits will eventually go back to the ground. In the process of making, I immerse myself in crocheting and stitching, enjoying the tranquility of the craft.

Reeds in Snow series:



Reeds in Snow 1 | 雪中的芦苇 1
Silver, nylon, embroidery floss, needles, 2023



Reeds in Snow 2 | 雪中的芦苇 2
Silver, nylon, embroidery floss, 2023



Reeds in Snow 3 | 雪中的芦苇 3
Silver, nylon, embroidery floss, 2023



Detail of Reeds in Snow 1 in 2023 Thesis Exhibition

The 'Reeds in Snow' series includes two necklaces and a ring. They reflect my hiking observation of the reeds in the winter. Their forms floating in the wind look like undulating waves, vital and free. I dyed the translucent ball in pastel yellow hue to match the color of the reed, and utilized the same color in the silk thread. The sulfated silver in white symbolized the winter snow. The glistening embroidery floss is soft, fluttering slightly as it moves. Wearing them, the movement of these pieces relates to the light and vivid movement of the spirits of the reeds that I felt surrounding my shoulders and fingers.

Memory in Forest series:



Memory in Forest 1 | 树林中的记忆 1
Silver, nylon, embroidery floss, pearls, 2023



Memory in Forest 1 | 树林中的记忆 1
Silver, nylon, embroidery floss, pearls, 2023



Memory in Forest 1 Details



Memory in Forest 2 | 树林中的记忆 2
Silver, nylon, embroidery floss, pearls, 2023



Memory in Forest 2 | 树林中的记忆 2
Silver, nylon, embroidery floss, pearls, 2023



Memory in Forest in 2023 Thesis Exhibition

The '*Memory in Forest*' series narrates my childhood experience of travelling through a forest on my daily route to school. One particularly vivid memory involves the ride home after school. As I rode, I climbed a long slope, that led to a downhill slope. When I coasted down the slope, the wind whistled in my ears and skimmed over my cheeks. The sun filtered through the dense canopy, casting dappled green shadows. I felt so close to nature, relaxed and happy, all my exhaustion dissipating. When crafting *Memory in Forest*, I focused on designing them to be worn on the ears and around the shoulders, as if they were listening to the sounds of the forest. The lightweight structure was formed using thick silver wires, adorned with dangling several flower bud shapes. These buds were crafted from glossy fabric and polished crochet silver wire, stitched with embroidery floss that catches and reflects light while swaying in the wind.

Barbados Lily in Yard& Orchids in Yard:



Barbados Lily in Yard | 院子里的报春花
Silver, print, nylon, embroidery floss, steel, 2023



Barbados Lily in Yard | 院子里的报春花
Silver, print, nylon, embroidery floss, steel, 2023



Orchids in Yard | 院子里的蝴蝶兰
Silver, print, nylon, embroidery floss, steel, 2023



Orchids in Yard | 院子里的蝴蝶兰
Silver, print, nylon, embroidery floss, steel, 2023

The '*Barbados Lily in Yard*' and the '*Orchids in Yard*' pieces narrate my childhood memories of the plants in the yard, evoking a strong sense of nostalgia. I relieved plates to stamp print the flowers I remember from my home. The cutting of the Soft Cut Relief plates also allowed me to become fully immersed in the crafting and the memories associated with these plants. The gradient effect of the print achieved an unreal sense of nostalgia for me. The abstract flower forms and smaller hanging objects are transparent and stitched with embroidery floss, symbolizing the fictional souls of the plants.

Conclusion

When I began exhibiting the jewelry and sculptures I created in this series, I aimed to evoke a sense of nostalgia through the display. Thus, I used warm, dark-toned lighting. Additionally, I intentionally retained the shadows cast by the works on the wall as part of the display, as they resembled the souls of the pieces. Through the exhibition and the defense in the end, I figured out what I missed and what I wanted to pursue for the next body of work. The scale of the wearable sculptures is smaller than the original full-body size that I thought they would be. Eventually, I hope to shoot them again in the woods where I hike, to better articulate the ideas.

All in all, these works reflect my memories, experiences, and feelings. I constantly explored myself through them, to better understand myself.

Finally, I want to express my gratitude to all those who have supported me. My professor Juan Carlos Caballero-Perez, my committee Elizabeth Kronfield, and Eileen Bushnell. They kept questioning me, helping me clear my thoughts, suggesting areas of exploration, giving directions, and pushing me to take risks. I am also grateful to Professor Leonard Urso, who encouraged me all the time and helped me explore my ideas. Additionally, I appreciate the insights provided by my friends from various perspectives, and lastly, I am deeply grateful to my parents for their constant support. Thank you all.

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