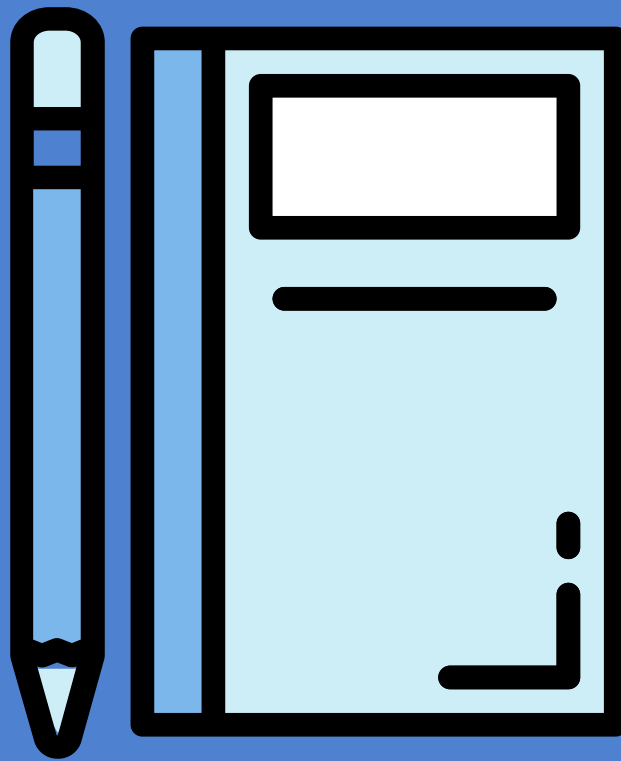


FUTURE

FUTURE WRITERS



'Outside the Window'
Anthology



FUTURE

Future U is a collaborative outreach project bringing together universities, colleges, schools and businesses across Lancashire. We are part of the Office for Students' Uni Connect Programme, which supports young people to overcome barriers to progression and fulfil their potential.

The global pandemic meant that we were unable to visit schools and colleges as we would normally, or run our usual range of events and activities. However, our team continued to work hard to create alternative resources to help support young people and provide opportunities for them to improve their own knowledge and skills in an engaging way.

After the success of our first Future Writers project, The Lockdown Diaries, we decided to launch another programme focused on the power of reading and writing, including a new creative writing competition. This time, the theme 'Outside the Window' allowed for a broader interpretation, and the creativity of Lancashire's young people shines through in their varied and imaginative entries.

This anthology showcases the pieces that had the biggest impression on our judges, including guest judge Philippa Holloway, who highlights in her own commentary just how difficult it was to decide between the variety of high-quality entries.

There could only be one winner, and that piece encapsulates the power of writing to create fictional worlds that resonate with and engage readers. However, all of the authors included in the anthology deserve credit for the quality of writing they produced; each piece offered something different and significant in its own way. We would also like to thank everyone else who entered the competition, it was a pleasure to read so much great writing.

Congratulations to all the writers - we hope you enjoy reading their work as much as we did.

A Year Inside, Looking Out

A year ago, the Covid-19 pandemic was described as unprecedented, and the resulting lockdowns were new experiences to be negotiated and navigated as their practicalities and impacts unfolded. A year later, and we are still navigating lockdown rules, and although there is hope for returned freedoms close at hand, the repercussions and impacts of the last year will continue to resonate through our communities, especially in the lives of young people who have been so deeply affected by the restrictions. I was delighted to be invited to judge this competition, which provided a space for young people in Lancashire to explore through creative writing how the notion of windows - as a protective barrier, gateway to the world outside, or portal for epiphany - has become such a strong theme in their lives as the world has been on pause and we've been asked to stay apart.

The standard of entries for this competition was very high, and so selecting the winners and anthology finalists was difficult. Each entry showcased creativity, imagination, and intelligence in response to the competition. As a writer myself, it was a joy to see how many different interpretations of the theme arose, and I strongly encourage all writers who took part to continue using their creative skills and expression to explore their world and experiences through writing, and to share their stories widely.

The winning piece is a tale of connection and confinement, in which the window theme is used to show the harrowing toll captivity can take on a character, and the longing there is to escape, to touch hands and engage with another life without a pane of glass as a barrier, and to discover more about the world beyond. It resonates with our shared feelings of entrapment over the last year, but presents this in such a vividly imaginative way the reader can empathise without it feeling too familiar. Clever writing indeed! Second place is awarded to a carefully woven picture of family and loss, and the bonds of family broken by death yet still held firm through memory and love. Vivid imagery lingers in the mind long after the pages are closed. The third place entry reveals the reawakening of a life after a period of isolation and stasis, and offers a glimpse of hope amid visceral description - I can almost hear the chair creaking and leaves rustling as the character slowly emerges from their resting state.

The other entries showcased here were chosen for their creative interpretation of the theme, or their clever way of expressing the feelings and experiences that the last year under lockdown has generated. They are startlingly honest, and take us on journeys of fear, confusion, escape, love and hope. Most of all, they ask questions and ignite reflection, as all good literature does, inviting us to read meaning between the lines of text, to identify those emotions and behaviours, anxieties and hopes that live inside each and every one of us. If this is the next generation of Lancashire based writers, then let's hope they keep writing, keep honing their craft and exploring the world through creative expression, and we'll have a lot to look forward to on our future bookshelves!

Dr. Philippa Holloway



Philippa Holloway is an author and teacher, specialising in fiction. Her short stories and travel writing have won competitions and been published in the USA, Canada, Australia, Africa and Europe. She is the Writer in Residence at Hack Green Secret Nuclear Bunker and she has worked with artists and writers on special features and commissions for various publications. She teaches English Literature and Creative Writing at Edge Hill University, and during lockdown co-curated a global literary writing project that has reached over 100 countries worldwide (<https://100wordsofsolitude.wordpress.com/>).

**“A short story is what you see when you
look out of the window.”**

Mavis Gallant

The Winning Entry

Mavis Quinlan had forgotten how many times she wished to be free. Her world was made up of exactly 1,100,000 litres of salt water and she had never known life outside the tank. Three of the walls were a deep ocean blue, with a ceiling to match; one, a clear glass wall for visitors to admire them; and a sandy floor in which kelp grew metres tall.

Mavis was one of two mermaids at Seven Seas Aquarium. Lira sat opposite her, a small gold mirror in one webbed hand, and a shell-covered hairbrush in the other. She brushed her short hair back, and powdered lilac blush onto her grey skin.

Pitch black eyes stared back at Mavis through her own mirror, she saw the thin gills on her neck open and close slowly as she breathed. This focused her wandering thoughts as she got ready for their first show of the day. Tourists from near and far gathered to watch the aquatic rarities, and with her and Lira performing for them three times a day, Mavis's mind was regularly stressed.

She swam down to the tank floor and picked up a small sponge. Bringing it to her deep grey tail she began to clean the scales, they glistened as she rubbed it over them. Mavis sat herself on an open clam positioned in front the vast window. It looked out into an observation room, the walls and floor all covered in a thin black felt-like material. A long rectangular bench covered all twelve metres of the back wall.

From the right-hand corner, Mavis saw a sliver of light appear. As it grew, she realised that it was the door opening. A small child sized shadow came into view and spun as it shut the door behind it. Panting, a young girl walked up to the window and looked up in amazement. Two curly pigtails swung from the top of her head tied up by green ribbons, a pastel pink and blue dress fluttered around her. She paced the length of the window, swinging the small octopus toy clutched in her hand, admiring the variations of tropical fish and coral that lined the sandy floor.

It took the girl several moments to notice Mavis. Her eyes widened in bewilderment and the eight-legged teddy fell to the ground with a thud. She paused, eyes furrowing in confusion, and took a hesitant step forward. A hint of a smile played on Mavis's face as she watched the youngster walk towards the glass. Swimming closer to the window, Mavis held up her hand in a wave and saw the little girl's eyes light up and her mouth move in a what looked like a giggle.

Mavis kept her eyes on the child as she made her way closer to the edge of the tank and rested her hands upon the glass. Her breath fogged up the clear walls as she brought her face up to the window. Mavis pressed her own webbed hand against the smaller one. Lifting her tiny head, the girl's eyes met Mavis's. Her hand was several times bigger than the one that lay opposite her.

She wondered if the girl on the outside felt the same connection she did when their hands met – a warmth that soothed her soul, made her realise that there was a world that lay just outside of her own. And that she would never get to experience it. Get to make friends not unlike the small girl that had sneaked into see her. A world she would forever dream about. A world outside the window.

By Alex Beattie

**“If there's a book that you want to read,
but it hasn't been written yet,
then you must write it.”**

Toni Morrison

Second Place

Tonight was a starry night – a rare occasion for a town on the outskirts of London, where pollution shrouded the skies in a dull, grey wash – and one of my mum’s favourites. I remembered her anticipation for a night like this; the way her face fell when she saw the cloak of clouds and how her fingers tapped impatiently on the keyboard to search whether the weather forecast had changed. Then, finally, her childish excitement when she received the gift of a cloudless night.

We would lug her equipment up to the rickety roof, carefully avoiding the loose slates and sheets of plastic peeling away underneath our feet. I’d haul her empty canvases and painting tools up from the downstairs window and then mum would tentatively lift her box. I only ever saw the contents of the box on nights like this; otherwise, it spent most of its time underneath the tons of old clothes in my mum’s closet. It was a black rectangular shape, with curved edges and a shiny gold zipper and inside, somewhere underneath the shield of bubble wrap, was my mum’s pride and joy: her telescope.

It had been a present from her father, and she brandished it with pride. With it, she was one step closer to the sky. She’d point out to me distant planets and mimic their curves and profiles until the stars became splatters of paint on her cotton canvases. But still, she was never satisfied and she continued to return, as the man-made paints could not capture the celestial beauty of the sky in front of her.

My mum said these nights were magical; a glimpse into the natural world, and something so breathtaking it was hard to believe that it was real. That the sight in front of you wasn’t conjured up by your imagination.

Huddled up against the window, wrapped in my mum’s tatty, knitted blanket, a life is reflected back at me, so different from my own, and suddenly the inch of cold glass widens to form a barrier - a wall - that I long to break down but I can’t move, afraid that, if I look away, it will all disappear.

Over the countless nights I’ve spent in this position, I’ve become acquainted with the stars; they don’t reveal themselves to you straight away – instead, they wait, as your eye adjusts, and extend a hand. And, all of a sudden, you’re up there too, cocooned by the sky, the ground vanishing beneath you. You’re in a world of your own, where worries and thoughts don’t tie you to the earth and you’re free. In those seconds, when you look up at the sky, you are transported. That was what my mum was trying to capture in her paintings.

A starry night is all I have of her anymore. The moments we shared together – all the memories – eventually fade, but the stars don’t.

That’s why, every night, I sit here and see her in the stars.

By Clémence Lewis

Third Place

My calloused fingertips have over time woven themselves into the sleeves of the armchair that I lay in.

My mind felt clogged. By what is too unclear to see. Sometimes it feels the best way to get away from the pressures of life to hide. Is that the only way though? I think I'll never get to find the answer to my question.

I let my head delicately fall down to my chest and began to process the memories of my day. Today had been a quiet day. Anyways. I brought my head up and stretched my jaw into a yawn. Once my mouth had resumed to its resting place I turned to face the cabin window. Beautiful.

I see trees. Tall and spiky. Some short and flowing. And some are barely grown. The blueprint of what they can become. They're breath taking. The life that they're able to support. Not just small. They support us. They support tiny organisms that rest inside. And just starting to think about what they used to support millions of years ago is enough to fry your mind. Imagine. Imagine tall and mighty dinosaurs slowly tearing off green leaves from those ancient life givers. Imagine the tiny bugs of the ancient ages slowly crawling in and out of trees, the bugs just trying to survive.


I close my heavy eyes and slowly pull my cup of tea towards my dry lips. Refreshed.

As I resume to life by slowly opening my eyes. I look up to see birds. Beautiful birds. Tiny yet so majestic. They gracefully spread their wings and have the power of flight. The ability to go anywhere they wish. Whether that wish is to glide back down to Earth and play in dirt or whether their wish is to fly high and mighty above the clouds. Conversing with planes that every so often whizz by.

Time. It goes so fast once you start to think about the Earth's true miracles.

Soft and fluffy. Sometimes grey and heavy. They float across our sky. Taking power in the weather we experience. The weather that has the power to completely change our lives for the worse. Averse to that they also have the power to provide us with the warm summers that manipulate our lips into warm smiles. They shift into familiar faces, or animals. They give us chance to let our imagination run wild without being held back by the reins of society.

I release a calm sigh from the grasp of my lungs. Letting it spread freely through the room. I lay a soft glance towards my clock. It's intimidating. As it rests secured to the wall. It speeds through time without the thought of stopping. It never does stop. It will carry on. For ever and ever. Until it doesn't. And when it doesn't tick for you it starts for someone else. Interesting it is.



Finally I snap out of my mind. Reality collapsing back onto me. Eyes flicking around the room reassuring itself of where they are. Finally they decide to gently lay on the sight of the window again. Already Earth's magic has shifted slightly creating a new masterpiece for us to enjoy. But what was different? What was it tickling the back of my mind? What wasn't I seeing?

My jaw snapped down. And my eyes fell wider by the second. My cup of tea fell slightly but regained composure on the coffee table.

It wasn't a pair of eyes. It wasn't a big scary demon with deformed limbs. It wasn't the realisation of having no reflection.

It was hope.

After almost a year and a half of being completely alone in a cabin, locked away from society. I finally saw hope. The hope in life. The wonders of earth and the beauty it offers us made me realise. It's easy to give up and let life pass you by, but it is so much better to enjoy what you can no matter how dull life may seem.

I rose from my armchair. Slipped on some walking boots. Pulled a small cap over my head. And approached the door.

There I was. In the beauty of the world. Ready to pursue any adventure life throws at me.

By Holly Biddulph

Specially Commended Entries

Everything's a blur of greens and browns. The occasional blob of blue peeks its way into my line of sight but within seconds it's already said goodbye. I rest the palm of my hand against the clear surface, it's cold to the touch and sends shivers crawling down my spine. You'd think I'd be used to the sight; I do see it almost every day. I know what the blurs represent – trees, bushes, bridges and houses are the most common – yet I always find myself enthralled with the view I've seen hundreds of times. Never have I touched any of it though. They're just sights to see, something to pique your interest every now and again while you wait to return to reality.

I'd love nothing more than to be able to walk closer to them, to touch the silky green leaves that have captivated me like a siren's song ever since I first laid my eyes on them. It's not just the foliage either, I want to run my fingers over the rough texture of the bricks that belong to the bridges. It all tells a story and I'm eager to know more. Sadly, the wall in front of me isn't ready to let me go just yet, their friends that surround me want to keep me for as long as possible; dreading the moment when it will finally be my time to leave.

I take one last longing look before everything goes dark in front of me. I blink rapidly in an attempt to get used to the abrupt change. The darkness from outside always takes over eventually. It seems my moment with colour is over for the time being, hopefully I'll see it again later today.

The vast sea of black is suffocating, I can already hear my breathing subconsciously growing quicker. Removing my hand from the cold surface I replace it with my head. The temperature hits my forehead and provides some relief, it would provide even more if it weren't for the headache that has started to form thanks to the repetitive ringing in my ears. Closing my eyes, I conjure up images of the light, anything to get me away from the hell that is trying to wrap itself around me. Nothing works, the darkness still finds a way to break my barriers.

It's only a couple more minutes, I can manage.

I let my eyes open again and I focus on the view from outside. A flash of red and white shine through in my peripheral vision and a small smile tugs at the corner of my lips. Almost there. Lifting my head from the glass I let my body sway sideways as a loud screeching sound overtakes the ringing in my ears. Tilting my head to look out of the window on the other side, I let out a breath of air when I see that we're finally at my train stop.

Time to return back to reality.

By Elisha Foster

Dull, desperate eyes stare out the window, the gleaming glass producing an eerily translucent reflection of the girl's miserable features. A pale, dainty hand makes its way onto the pristine glass, yearning for a touch, a feel, of the world beyond. Overseers are dotted along the never-ending alabaster corridor, their hawk-like eyes ready to prey on anyone or anything out of line, yet she stands motionless and stares outside the window.

Billowing out of the chimney, thick white smoke hovers over the church, a flurry of waltzing ghosts seeking redemption, each tendril's ancestor-of-five-seconds vanishing into the clear horizon above. Directly in front of her vision is The Factory: the heroic place of occupation providing for The Institution, her place of residence – never home. Further along, out of her field of view, out of her reach – always out of reach – is The Jungle, feared by all other dwellers except her; she perceived its freedom, so close yet so far. She'd seen it once, accidentally, as her young-self had ventured too far out of bounds, a territory far too perilous to advance towards to at her age now (if she didn't want to be treated with unrelenting distrustful scrutiny and viewed as perfidious to the long-lasting regulations of The Institution). She reminisces about her secret adventure, her one experience outside of the confining walls and windows, recalling the tantalising sip of freedom she'd tasted.

Viridescent leaves had twined themselves around and clung to the umber branches, with luscious moist berries glistening like alluring jewels – rubies, amethysts, garnets, topazes – against the large pillows of emeralds, which waved, danced, and pirouetted frantically in the gentle breeze, a liberating freedom she would long for, her whole life. A carpet of similar treasures had blanketed the floor of the surrounding trees, an enticing call to the wild – to freedom. Verdant bushes teemed with a mouth-watering plethora of pulpy, fleshy fruits: emerging as spheres of shimmering saffron; scarlet seeds dripping from bursting fruits; and saccharine cones of succulence. A deep longing to once again experience the wind caress her face emerged whenever she looked outside of the window; for it to run its invisible slender fingers through her once golden hair as an opportunity to revel in the defiant nature of the act, a silent rebellion against the constricting rules in her life.

Approaching footsteps snap her out of her memory transportation, the sharp clicks of a heeled shoe allowing her to regain focus and momentarily witness her bland appearance; dark contacts force her brilliant blue eyes to appear murky brown, and the warden's weekly dyeing of her lustrous golden hair to a mousy brown ensures she looks alike to every female in her unit. After all, she is EVE-003187.

Her eyes zero in on the smidge she's left on the clear window; its unique rebellious existence is wiped away by an Overseer faster than she can release a weary sigh. A shove, and she's forced to walk away. Away from everything outside the window. Away from freedom.


By Aneeqah Asif

I knew that even trying to focus on maths was pointless. The numbers all jumbled on the paper. It made no sense to me. I looked at the cluttered, dark room that surrounded me. I got up and opened the curtains to a blinding light that people call the sun. The windowsill was a mess, filled with piles of paper and little bits of metal. It was always better to ignore it, so I blocked out the sound of my maths teacher's nonsense and looked out of the window. Nobody walked the once busy streets and everyone's curtains were shut. It's like I was closed off from everyone. Trapped in the walls of my room. My room, my haven, my safe space, has become my prison. But it all changes when you look closer, the little birds pecking at the seeds. Wings beating so fast that it's just a blur of brown and white. Nature could be so beautiful when you take the time to look, and with everyone cooped up inside the nature stands out. The flowers that were planted in the flower bed ever so long ago were blooming brightly, making such a contrast to the bland soil.

My breath clouded the window as my fingers touched the cold glass. I couldn't begin to imagine how cold it was outside. I could hear the wind whirling outside shaking the trees. The clouds were blocking out the sun. Part of the world had given into Covid as the world was slowly dying. People were giving up too I noticed as I looked all around. Plastic was floating across the road and everyone's curtains were closed. Their cars were parked and gathering dust, there was no trace of life. But there was still a glimmer of hope for the world as I looked back to the ground. The flowers had grown without any help, showing their blues and purples to the world. Rainbows were in some people's windows, even if we couldn't see in. You could see that there was still hope inside even if it was a small child. The virus doesn't control us even when we are kept inside. Even when we are gone the nature still thrives.

I took my hand away from the window as the cold was beginning to hurt. It's funny how a sudden temperature change starts to burn. I sat in a heap back on my bed and started listening again to the drained voice of my teacher talking about maths. To a group of students all alone at home waiting for them to end the call. It wasn't the same as being at school with the teacher there to help. Their words didn't make sense and the video played too fast. The words jumbled together like a whirlwind of confusion, I didn't understand but I grabbed my pen. I dared one last look through the window then started writing the sums down.

By Amber Rostron



White. White walls, floor, ceiling. The entire corridor was enveloped in a protective sheet of white. They led me into another room. It was black. He veered me towards an empty chair, which I sat in. The ground was shaking. It often did this far away from a gravitational field. I heard them speaking to each other; they said something in their unique language – it was different to any that I had heard on Earth. Then, a huge plasma screen lit up the room. It was no longer black, we were no longer just a clunk of metal floating around in what we perceived to be an endless vacuum, I finally felt something except fear.

The huge screen was lit up by footage of my family. My two young children, my beautiful wife, and our year-old puppy. It felt like a lifetime since I had seen them, but somehow only a few minutes.

“How did you get cameras in the house?” I questioned, the pure shock of seeing my family again stunting my ability to form cohesive thoughts.

I ran up to the screen, almost tripping over a wire that snaked across the ground. Tracing the outline of my beautiful wife’s face, I watched as she put food on our daughter’s plate. I had never seen either of them look so miserable. A tear ran down my cheek. All I wanted was to go back home. It was like I was just outside of a window; I was looking in but they could not hear me; I was invisible. Again.

The signal began to weaken, sending black and white pixels across my screen, breaking up the rainbow drawing that the camera showed to be on my fridge. Maybe not my fridge anymore. Maybe just her fridge. Had my wife moved on?

Suddenly, the screen went black. We were in darkness again. The magical window had been tinted. A scream emerged from my stomach as the creatures pulled me away from the screen. I didn’t sound like me anymore. I guess, in a way, I wasn’t me anymore. Maybe that was something that I’d just have to accept. Maybe I will never be me again.

They pulled me back out of the room and into the hallway.

“Why?” I exclaimed, exasperated, “why give me a glimpse of what I had and then yank it away from me?”

It was no use. They couldn’t understand what I was saying.

How is it that life can feel so amazing one moment, you can feel only one small sheet of glass away from someone, you are almost back there with them, but, then, you are millions of miles away, probably in another solar system by now? I couldn’t feel any more disconnected. From the Earth, from myself, and, most importantly, from my family. Nothing could ever be the same as it once was.

That was the day that I was forced to grieve for my life whilst continuing to live.

By Emily White

I woke up suddenly, my breathing heavy and a thin layer of sweat coating my body. Sitting up, I ran my hands through my damp hair.

Not another nightmare.

Trying to calm my breathing, I swung my legs out of my tangled sheets and headed downstairs to get a glass of water. I tried to make as least noise as possible, knowing my parents were just down the hallway. The stairs creaked slightly, and I prayed no one heard me.

Lately, my nightmares have been getting worse and I don't want them to know.

I squinted in the dark, making out the familiar shapes of cupboards and kitchen units. My hands fumbled in the dark, searching the inside of the large cabinet until I found a glass.

I opened the window above the sink a fraction, the cool breeze calming me and the sound of gushing water filled the quiet house as I turned the tap on.

Absentmindedly, I stared out the window, tilting my head at the faint reflection of myself.

Moonlight filtered through the kitchen, casting its silvery glow. The sky was a dark, dusky-blue colour, twinkling with stars that winked like a thousand pair of glittering eyes.

I turned off the tap, leaning on the windowsill, watching the dark shapes of our front lawn become clearer the longer I stared.

Something moved.

I blinked rapidly, shaking my head. First the nightmares and now I was seeing things?

But then I heard it. A slight rustle of our hedge.


I jumped as the glass of water slipped out my hands, shattering into a hundred small fragments onto the floor.

Weird. Wouldn't my parents have heard that?

I backed away from the window a little.

This is almost like in my dream.

But that's all they were...dreams, right?



A shadowy figure jumped up from the hedge and my heart began to beat twice as fast as I scrambled away to the other side of the kitchen, well away from the window.

Cold fear seeped to the bottom of my stomach.

The figure came closer to the window and my hands shook as I stood frozen with dread. Their face was almost pressed up on the glass, their features twisting into a familiar smile.

I breathed a massive sigh of relief as my neighbour grinned broadly.

I smiled, embarrassed at how scared I was.

He stood deathly still at the window; lips still stretched wide in a grin.

“Mr Brown? What are you doing up at this time? You know, you really scared me for a moment there.” I admitted, hoping he could hear me through the slightly open window.

Slowly, more dark figures rose behind him. I furrowed my eyebrows, searching their familiar faces.

These are all my neighbours.

Confusion and a slow realisation of terror rang through me, as all their lips twisted in the same way as Mr Brown’s: a wide grin on all their faces as they stepped closer.

And as I watched through the window.

By Humayra Vohra








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**"Either write something worth reading or
do something worth writing."**

Benjamin Franklin

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