



What I Saw

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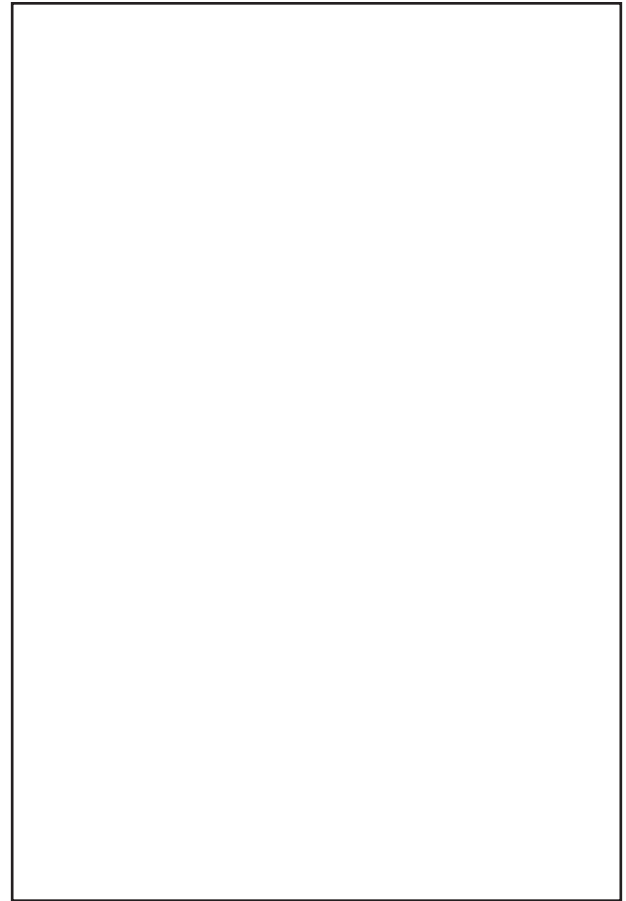
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Content warning: contains discussion and description of anti-black racism, the Holocaust, and white supremacy.

Gas Giants

“On every new thing, there lies already
the shadow of annihilation.”

from *The Rings of Saturn* by W.G. Sebald, 1995,
trans. Michael Hulse

My mother and I drove grandma’s ashes to southern Ontario from Fredericton, New Brunswick and took a detour through Mohican Territory in the Berkshire Mountains. Together we stood with our backs to a cheap motel and looked out across the seemingly endless expanse of interlocking valleys and overlapping mountains. They resembled the intertwined fingers of hands clasped together or folded in prayer. In Western art history, when the blurring of landscapes is used to convey distance in images it is referred to as ‘Atmospheric Perspective.’ Both of us attempted to capture

some photographic record of the wilderness spread out around us but we soon abandoned this futile activity. Instead, we waited together for the feeling of being two small animals in a landscape to sink in.

There are very few images of my mother that exist without her glasses. The same can be said of my father, my sister, my grandmother, various aunts, uncles, and myself. At some point in all of our childhoods or early adulthoods, almost every member of my family began a relationship with corrected vision. This is also the case for three of my four grandparents. No one in my immediate family ever made moves toward contact lenses, preferring to meet the world glasses first. I never think about mine until I break them. I often forget that I am always on the precipice of helplessness and a big, blurry world made of soft edges and headaches. Several years ago, my mother called to tell me that she had been diagnosed with glaucoma and that her eyesight would degrade slowly over the next twenty years until she is functionally blind.

Human eyes are capable of perceiving

objects at vast distances like stars in the night sky but fail spectacularly when faced with the extremes of light and dark, as well as clarity over long distances. Staring into the sun will blind you and many birds can see with greater clarity up to eight times as far as humans. They can also see much farther into the ultraviolet light spectrum. Though the mammalian eye was once the figure head of intelligent design; it can also be read as a history of mediocrity, a spectrum on which the shortcomings of our species can be mapped.

There is a passage in Ocean Vuong's novel *On Earth we are Briefly Gorgeous* in which he relays the following meditation on eyes: "You once told me that the human eye is god's loneliest creation. How so much of the world passes through the pupil and still it holds nothing. The eye, alone in its socket, doesn't even know there's another one, just like it, an inch away, just as hungry, as empty." Though I agree with the poetic truth conveyed in this moment, I don't quite agree with the metaphor. I think that eyes are in constant contact with the world, not lonely but completely connected

with photons and images and metaphors, in an almost glutinous ecstasy of intake.

The iris—streaked with coloured ridges known as radial furrows—has the depth of any image captured by the Hubble Space Telescope. Almost every one of us carries two gas giants swirling slick and liquid around our most perceptive and prolific void: the pupil. It feels solipsistic to compare something as small and seemingly insignificant as a human eye to something as immense as a gas giant until you consider that there are most likely more gas giants in the universe than there are human eyes.

I carry within this personal cosmology, an implicit connection to my mother and my grandmother. We are a three-generation-long vein of blue eyes among brown and green. For this resemblance, and many others including rage and sugar addiction, I see myself in a line of decay with these two other bodies. Though no future is certain, I imagine myself trailing behind them, reflected in their bodies, mirroring their turns, a phantom in their wake.

As my grandmother aged, years began

to fall away from her life. She would call me by my uncle's name. She would refer to my mother as her sister. Generations were smeared or erased and their predecessors took their place. As her dementia progressed, it was like the rings of Saturn falling away from her. The newest relationships in her life had the least gravitational pull and so they were the first to go. This included my sister and I. The next were her children and after that her brothers and sisters. For the last few years of her life, there seemed to be no rings left to lose.

What I Saw

“I saw what I saw very clearly.
But I did not know what I was looking at.”

from *The Enigma of Arrival* by V.S. Naipaul, 1978

I watch a bead of sweat drip from a golden chain and fall into my eye, blurring my vision by its salty sting. It pools again, gathering faster this time, and closes the gap between our bodies once more before you get up to shower and leave. As I lay there, holding the memory of your gaze meeting mine, it feels like all those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain, and I make a list of what I have seen: a pop star burst into flames; countless soundless explosions in the dead of space; two beatings by the light of fireworks; the moon in all of its phases. I saw a crystal bowl slip from a trembling hand and split into a thousand pieces and a moon

splintered by the impact of an asteroid.

I have seen black water spill over the sidewalk and shred fishing boats like cotton floss. I have seen a syringe pop the skin of a Concord grape and pull its insides out. I have seen a dog eat its own afterbirth and an Icelandic man pull his arms apart on kettle stones. I have kissed your eyelids in the afternoon and asked you “What is the difference between looking at someone’s eyes and looking into someone’s eyes?” I once heard a comedian say: staring at something for a long time with other people is what makes something art. Together, we conjure art by looking.

I have seen bruised fruit piled up in a dark ally, waiting for sunrise in an ancient city. I have seen the raw clay of Arizona and New Mexico sifted and doused and strained and pressed into bricks to bake in the sun. On the same day I saw the horizon bend and quiver in the heat.

One spring I stood in a fjord under the midnight sun and watched a cruise ship on a pleasure voyage to the arctic circle pass slowly. I have seen a sinking ship snap in half and

plunge into the North-Atlantic and another roll onto a rocky outcropping and accumulate two and a half years of Mediterranean sludge. I have seen the storm surge of a Tsunami in dusty, dark, low resolution.

In September I saw a person cry tears of their own blood and lay, prostrate, over a pile of cabbage. I've seen things you people wouldn't believe.

I have seen a king decapitated—his head thrown into a cheering crowd and his fresh blood fed to a sickly child. I have seen a cow's eye slit by a razor.

I still like to look at people in airports and I like to see boiled potatoes pushed through a very fine sieve. I like looking at a painting knowing that it is changing imperceptibly in front of me; on a different time line but changing none the less.

Ptolemy's Gaze

Before it was discovered that vision was the product of light traveling into the eye, seeing was conceived by the Roman scholar Ptolemy as a kind of radiation that extended out from a viewer. He posited that a physical substance called 'flux' was projected from an eye toward an object, like a lighthouse casting a beam into the ocean. Maybe this is why we look 'at' things rather than receive visions?

This Ptolemaic conception of looking makes the line between a viewer and what they are regarding: a line of sight. Perhaps this is why looking can feel so much like touching—of bridging some expanse of space between bodies as either ecstasy, violation, or the mundane annoyance of a stranger grazing your arm in an elevator.

Often, when I am looking at someone and trying to evade detection, I will look at a

person's reflection in a window. This happens most on the bus, but I also remember looking at an attractive man in the reflection of an inactive T.V. in a hospital waiting room. After years of harassment from the men that I would find myself attracted to, this averted looking has been naturalized as a defense mechanism. In the past, when men have noticed my attention they have scoffed and turned away or even threatened me. It often feels like they are afraid that the attention of other men will implicate them in some deviancy, that they will be touched and infected by this queer Ptolemaic gaze.

A Landscape Photograph

A friend of mine went to the arctic in an attempt to track the nearly twenty-four hour summer sun with her camera. For several weeks she bounced between rocky shores, receding permafrost, and an antique sailboat perched atop rolling seas surrounding the Svalbard archipelago. For almost the entire journey, the sun was obscured by dense fog and heavy clouds. The sun, at most a fuzzy yellow spot in the sky, remained a memory—both distant and ever-present.

She returned several months later, in the depths of polar winter's darkness, to practice standing still. She sublimated this nothing activity into performance by turning a camera on herself and making a record of her idleness. I asked her to take a picture in the direction of

the sun with the lens cap of her camera left on. The resulting image, a large black square, is a tribute to the unphotographable, the opacity of embodied experience, and the limits of looking.

During its short little life, photography has been overwhelmingly allied to evidentiary or documentary activities. The celebrity/fan pic is not only evidence of the material existence of celebrities but also a document of a fan's physical proximity to them. A selfie can be a proof of life or the promise of a reality to come. In any case, the photograph remains a fragment of the past.

In his 1980 treatise on photography, *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes expresses his amazement at photography's ability to connect him to other people, noting that a photo is "a sort of umbilical cord [that] links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze." In the opening of this text he recalls seeing a photograph of Napoleon's younger brother Jerome thinking, with amazement, "I am looking at the eyes that looked at the Emperor."

Some pockets of activity exist which investigate photography's usefulness in imaging

the unseeable and the metaphysical. In the late 19th century, spirit photographers like William Mumler exploited the alchemical potential of the new science to image the living and the dead on the same picture plane. Many debates about the legitimacy of this activity would call photographers like Mumler frauds but only because he presented them as evidence of an afterlife, rather than representations of it.

A couple of months before I graduated from my undergraduate degree, I applied to and was rejected from a prestigious residency program in Austria. I proposed a project in which I would attempt to take a picture of the future. I was not able to provide any concrete plan about how I would do this except to say I would manipulate the alchemy of traditional photographic methods as well as the glitch and digital smear of cell phone cameras (a new technology at the time). At the time I considered this a conceptual, and mostly rhetorical project—but now I wonder if I was not looking for a way of engaging something more mystic or literary?

In a landscape already shrouded in

darkness, my friend made a photograph with the eye of her camera shut. In this action, the camera generated a picture of its own thwarted attempt to make an image. I wonder if this makes a more honest representation of a such an otherworldly place?

Bryan Gysen's "Dream Machine" is a tool used to extend one's perception. It is a cylindrical column of paper with a pattern of holes cut out. It is placed on a record player and a light is hung into the center of the column. When the record player is turned on, the pattern cut into the paper causes a strobe which is meant to be looked at with your eyes closed. This flickering is a tool of divination, like the photograph. It offers the possibility of a glimpse into something beyond sight.

Corrected Vision

When the first images came back from the Hubble Space Telescope—after thirty years of development, funding setbacks, engineering breakthroughs, and millions of years of light traveling from distant galaxies—their vision of the universe resembled the reflection one might see in a foggy bathroom mirror. The brilliant points of light at the edges of the observable universe were fuzzy dots hanging in clouds of pastel gases.

The density of our atmosphere causes blurriness, reducing the clarity of optical images; but this was not the problem for Hubble. One of the advantages of putting a telescope like Hubble into orbit is that they bypass 300km of dense atmosphere that hamper earth-bound telescopes.

The blurring of the Hubble images was the result of a minute flaw in the main

mirror. To correct the flaw, NASA installed COSTAR (Corrective Optics Space Telescope Axial Replacement) which consisted of two corrective mirrors that amended the mirror's flaw in "much the same way a pair of glasses correct the vision of a near-sighted person."*

*as described in a NASA press release.

Small Fires

A white candle brings peace—black, protection; green, growth; red, strength. A yellow candle brings the light of the sun, intelligence, and good memory. A candle with a black flame, lit by a virgin, brings witches.

A candle can be cleansed by passing a knife through its flame, burying it in salt, or leaving it in moonlight. One can stare into a candle flame to see through deception—looking further can reveal the future. If you watch a candle burn itself out you will be granted one wish.

Between 1982 and 1983 Gerhard Richter made 23 paintings of candles. Two were later over-painted. The year I was born Sonic Youth put one of Richter's candles on the cover of Daydream Nation.

A Black Marriage candle has two wicks and is burnt at the separation of a couple to

symbolize the dissolution of their union.

Soak the pith of an Elder branch in tallow to make a rushlight and burn it from both ends for maximum light. Keep several tapers on hand for emergencies and tea lights for fondue.

At the end of the Han dynasty, the general Dong Zhou seized control of the capital and then retreated to Chang'an where he led a vicious reign of terror. After months of maniacal torture and lavish feasting, he was assassinated by a group of his generals and his body was left in the streets of the city. It is said that a wick was placed in his belly button which burned on his fat, as bright as the light of the sun, for several days.

Chroma

In 1993 Derek Jarman wrote *Chroma*, his lilting personal history of colour, as his body was overtaken by AIDS and lesions developed on his retina. Jarman made a catalogue of seeing as his eyesight went through flashes of white and flocks of black specks crowded his field of vision. Unable to read, he wrote his texts with Belladonna, plumbing his recollections of visible light and scribbling his jewel-tones onto all available scraps of paper.

Blue Eyes

Researchers at the University of Copenhagen have traced all bodies with blue eyes back to a common ancestor who lived between six and ten-thousand years ago. When I read this fact I was immediately nervous. In the vacuum of science, this fact is unremarkable and blunt. Science is in the business of information, not meaning. What comes after information, the meaning making, is what triggers my anxiety.

In high school I sat on the fringes of a group of mall punks. Many of them wore tee-shirts with swastikas being thrown into clip art garbage cans which said things like “Nazi Punks FUCK OFF!” One punk in particular often referred to me as an arian, presumably because of my blue eyes and blond hair, and it was always meant as a slur. In the early days of punk, especially in LA and London, teens wore swastikas and other Nazi paraphernalia.

Some were genuinely white supremacists, but most were dumb kids who wore them to piss off older white people; as a symbol of their rejection of middle-class values; or simply to be sensational and outrageous. This mall punk was doing the same thing with a thin veneer of leftist rage. To him, I was an enemy because I was effeminate, preferred the Distillers and Hole to Rancid or NOFX, and wore colourful clothes. Calling me a Nazi was short-hand for “you don’t belong with us.” I still find it strange that my body was placed in proximity to Nazi ideology by someone who was actually wearing a swastika.

Many years later I watched a documentary about the queer people who were imprisoned by the Nazis years before the start of the Second World War and throughout the Holocaust. Many of the survivors’ interviews recounted the horrifying humiliations they endured at the hands of the Third Reich and the friends and lovers they lost to blunt, bloody tortures and gaping pits stacked with extinguished, emaciated, exhausted bodies.

As these men told their stories, most

cried—some from blue eyes that never spared them from this attempted extermination. But of course it is not just this painful history that my mother and I inherit from our blue eyes. They also hold a history of privilege; a history that places my gaze closer to the centre of discourse, to the erasure of so many others.

In the wake of George Floyd’s murder in the spring of 2020, a large outdoor sculpture by the artist Tony Tasset was spray painted with the words “NOW U C US—GF” and “I CAN’T BREATHE.” The sculpture is a three-storey eyeball whose iris is almost impossibly blue. Far from being a ‘public artwork,’* the sculpture was purchased by one of the wealthiest men in Dallas and placed outside his five-star hotel in the downtown financial district. This confluence of power, whiteness, and wealth is a beam that marks the city. To all of those for whom blue eyes are a marker of white privilege, the sculpture is a reminder of surveillance and the gravity that works to keep white bodies in the orbit of power and repels all others.

In an interview with Christopher Blay

for Glasstire, the artist lauren woods described the graffiti not as vandalism, but rather an intervention—a rebuttal to this emblem of the white gaze—because there is a difference between watching and seeing. Not all people with blue eyes like mine are white, but the enduring legacy of Nazi aesthetic dogma has made these eyes into a symbol of Whiteness which only hopes to disqualify. It whittles away at humanness. It is repellent. It carves out who it can in the broad strokes and chips away at who is left. This Whiteness is a machine for eradication.

* Many of the artwork’s defenders claimed that this act of intervention was deplorable because it was a destruction of public property.

Two Peonies

During a lonely research trip in the Low Countries, I slept on the second floor of a slim hotel that overlooked the Antwerp Cathedral of Our Lady. The two-storey stained glass windows felt like they were just an arm's length away, across a small cobblestone alley. At night I leaned out the window and drank single serving bottles of warm white wine, watching the other tourists bathe the sidewalk in their sticky-sweet Aperol cocktails.

I walked slowly through the narrow streets and stopped to sit for very long periods in the city's botanical garden. I ate every meal alone. I visited a small museum dedicated to the collection of Mayer van den Bergh, a Belgian aristocrat who never married, lived with his mother, and took great pleasure in thoroughbred horses and the cultivation of dahlias. After his death in the early 1900s, his

mother Henriëtte van den Bergh built a new museum to house his collection.

Moving through most museums creates the illusion of time travel. I move between rooms—1400s to 1500s and so on—stepping from one time slice to another and back again, jumping whole centuries of objects. When I am alone I practically sprint through galleries, tracking the whole of the space over and over before settling in to particular works. In the landing of a staircase, amongst a salon of other works in guided frames, was a small still life by the Belgian painter Clara Peeters.

Besides being one of the only works in the collection by a woman, it was exceptional; luminous and sharp. The two peonies looked exhausted, slouched in a heavy glass vase, their petals beginning to collect on the table. There, they are joined by a frog, a grasshopper and several beads of water flecked with the reflected brightness of the sun.

When I looked at the painting I thought about the gulf between my body—my eyes, and the eyes that looked at these flowers in their moment of twilight, freezing them in oil. The

fact that my eyes could see what those eyes saw felt like some sort of miracle, but I am still confused about where that body went and why I cannot meet Peeters, why our eyes cannot connect.

Many metaphors about the passage of time employ the language of distance. After an emotionally charged incident we often ‘need distance’ to process this event. When I fight with a loved one we often need to ‘give each other space.’

As I walked the streets of Antwerp I thought about things that were made ‘in’ the past and imagine this place—the past—like a room I might wander into. As I traveled from one street to the next I thought about the phantom line I might cross to find Peeters at work in her studio. I searched the corner of my hotel room for the crack of light signaling the arrival of a morning before, rather than after, yesterday. I look for a way out of time and all of its metaphors.

In my search for Peeters and the space that might connect our bodies, I consider a small tattoo on my left forearm given to

me by a young painter when I was in my early 20s. It is a representation of the Pleiades as the constellation was recorded on the Nebra Sky Disk, a bronze-age artifact found in Germany just before the new millennium.

When you look into the night sky in late autumn, close to midnight, a bright cluster of stars is visible high overhead. The Pleiades, sometimes called the Seven Sisters, is a star cluster located about 440 light years away from Earth. The nuclear wavelengths that are just now reaching your eyes were emitted by these stars in the late 1500s, a few years before Peeters’s birth in the Spanish Netherlands.

Sun God

“You are a lifespan in yourself;
one lives by you.”

from *Hymn to the Aten* by Akhenaten,
trans. William Kelly Simpson

Sunflower, sun god, sun screen, and sun showers. Sunny days, sun-dried tomatoes, and sunshine yellow—mostly a cool yellow, unlike warm pink sunsets and red hot sunrises. I feel the power of the sun on my back, that nuclear heat—so good.

Ptolomy thought that the earth was the centre of the solar system, that the sun revolved around us and not the other way around. To Ptolomy, the sun was like a concerned parent orbiting its frail offspring, or perhaps a predator circling its prey. When I was a child, it bleached my hair and burned my shoulders. Large

patches went red and hot and tightened into ripples of pale, crisp phyllo. During the height of summer, the sun moved me into shadows or under beach blankets and my mother’s hand, filled with aloe gel, across my stinging skin.

Ancient Egyptians had a dense, complex cosmology of Gods responsible for the sun. Khepri, the Egyptian god of the morning sun, was represented by both a scarab beetle and a blue lotus flower. Scarab beetles lay their eggs in balls of dung and roll them around until the offspring emerge, fully grown. Ra, the God of the noon sun rolled the burning orb across the sky. The appearance of scarab beetles, seemingly from nowhere, coupled with the advance of the sun was a symbol of creation from nothing and a possible explanation for the origin of the world. Now they can be seen as a creation of life from shit and to me their divinity still stands.

Akhenaten, father of Tutankhamun, thought that the Sun was the one true god and that he was its son. He removed many of the names of other gods from temples and other public spaces during his seventeen year reign.

He moved the capital deep into the desert. Philip Glass wrote an eponymous opera about Akhenaten. His rule was a small band of monotheism nestled in thousands of years of the Egyptian Pantheon.

Akhenaten wrote a hymn to the sun disk (called the Aten) tracking its westward march across the sky and the land that lay beneath the sky. When it set, leaving Egypt dark—in the manner of death—the people slept with their heads under blankets where one eye did not see another because the Aten brings sight of the body, of the sand, the Nile, and anything else worth seeing.

In many images of the pharaoh and his family, the Aten can be seen above him, depicted as a disk with hands reaching down. Its rays, light, and heat are the touch of the sun's fingers.

Some days I watch my dog migrate between pools of sunlight. These young bands of radiation just 8 minutes and 31 seconds old, washing over the hardwood floors, bathroom tiles, his heaving belly, and my bare foot as it joins him there, in the small shaft of afternoon

warmth. It is our best star and when the sun dies it will swell in size, engulfing the earth.

The Flush of Living Tissue

Arterial Fluid is a class of embalming chemical that gives dead skin the bounce and flush of living tissue.

It has the viscosity of nectar. It is hot pink. It is manufactured to preserve time, or at least stop it. This chemical (even its 'safer' formaldehyde-free version) is too toxic to be in the open air. Some have a floral scent and other smell of clove oil—naturally anti-bacterial and used for centuries to ward off disease and decay.

There is a fringe religious sect that campaigns for the abolition of embalming practices called the Rest of Jesus Ministry. They terrorize funeral homes and threaten morticians. Their tactics are cruel and their paradigm is flawed, but I think their suspicion about the current culture of death is worth a

moment of reflection.

The orifices of embalmed bodies are wired or glued shut and stuffed with wadding material so that this fluid does not leak out during viewing. It makes dead bodies hazardous and carcinogenic. When they are buried, a cement grave liner is usually installed. They are the size of a stone sarcophagus but instead of protecting a body from the outside world, they protect the earth and ground water from the body.

Heaven Facing

“...history as we understand it is really just an avalanche of garbage toppling down.”

from *I Love Dick* by Chris Krauss, 1997

In a performance workshop on the subject of time, Marilyn Arsam asked the participants to point first to the past, then to the present, and lastly the future. A conventional approach to this request, especially in a Western context, would be to point behind, down, and forward. This is a metaphorical approach which places us on a ‘time line’, a slipstream, a river, a road, or a piece of string. This makes time directional, forward moving, always leaving the past and approaching the future, but any depressive person can tell you that time moves without any of the will or intention that this metaphor would imply. Even at rest the body continues to

change, to metabolize, to dehydrate, to decay.

In science fiction, a genre synonymous with the future, many narratives see humanity ascending to the heavens (a potential rapture?) or aliens, both gruesome and benevolent, descending from the sky or crashing into the earth. Laurie Anderson says that the future is a place—about 70 miles east of here—where it’s lighter because time spreads out across the globe as it turns. The earliest places in the world are New Zealand, Fiji, and the eastern bits of Russia. They celebrate the new year first.

Chao Tian Jiao, a pepper common in Sichuan cuisine, are referred to in English as “Heaven Facing Chillies” because the tip of the pepper grows upward towards the sky. When read by Christian eyes, they signal ascent to a possible afterlife.

Diptych

When I look into the future, I see the blurry image of a 140 year-old still life painting and when I look into the past I see the light of distant galaxies, millions of light-years away, making their way to my eyes.