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Amaryllis

by Patricia Ace

All winter you bloomed,
your fiery throat eating the dark.

In defiance of short days and long nights
you trumpeted, tomato-bright,
vocal in January's gloom.

The blare of the tropics clamoured
from your gramophone lips:
Trinidad & Tobago, Rio de Janeiro,
the hot streets of Havana
loud on our cold kitchen table.

You seemed indestructible.
I cupped your dead petals
on the heel of my palm,
the tissue paper wrappers
of Christmas macaroons;
gold dust from your stamens
stuck to my skin like incense.

Hydra-like, you sprouted new heads,
scarlet feathers unfurling from taut bulbs,
your sap rising, rising
as the days laboured and stretched
towards spring.

Sonnet for a Drunkard

by Jane Patience

Shall I compare thee to a drunken bum?
Thou art not able, though thy mind be willing.
Thine acts befit the ways of graceless scum,
Thy belly slops with too much Eighty-Shilling.

Yet when the inn at last doth close its' shutter,
And no more ale in tankards large doth flow,
The last coherent word that thou canst splutter,
Is "kebab" and off in search of one dost go.

Then, safely home to fumble with thy key,
How quietly into bed thou thinkst thou creep.
And, trying to prove thy masculinity,
Thou jumpst on top of me, and falls asleep!

What Casanova dost thou think thou art,
That maketh love with belch, and snore, and fart?

In the Garden of the Architect

hides the Patio de los Cipreses
secret hideaway of Hamet and Zoraya,
if the guidebook gossip's true. And now ours.
No green lovers of course, our night flight's
the scheduled type, tickets tucked between
credit cards and passports in the bum bag.

Twelve hours to kill in a shady corner
anonymous, bookish, two yet one, with
wine bottles sunk profanely in a Moorish fountain.

Noon swelters, tricks the ancient sundial,
even the quartz pulse of my Sekonda falters as
Time slips into a coma.
A century from now we'll read these same chapters
gaze perpetually over these same page tops...

... at heavy paragraphs I doze in your lap
eyes opening to the odd notion the jet
thirty thousand feet above in blue
hauls Earth's mass round its broken axis
on a tow-rope of white smoke.

*

In a jet, darkly overhead, spearing north
I hear still the drowsy buzz of insects,
the Architect's miracle of source-less flowing water,
feel slippy condensation on glass as I reach
to fish our bottle like a cool memory
from the stony wet bowl of the fountain.

by Tom Rae

Clearing Him Out

by Fiona Rintoul

The removal men are Polish,
Silent Slavic slabs of men. They take tea
From her and don't smile
And heave boxes
Without making a sound.

They are discreet; leave her
To chain-smoke in the living room,
Don't mention the empty vodka bottles,
Which they line up
Under the window sill like skittles.

At the end, she gives them a huge tip " "
Thank Christ " and that's when
They do smile. And one of them,
The small one with the shaved head
Reaches over and touches her cheek.

Better Late than Never

Marjorie A. M. Ferry

As usual the snow forecast for Christmas arrived just in time to hamper the New Years Eve celebrations. The dampness on Mark's trousers seeped steadily upwards, reaching his shins, as he trudged through the melting snow keeping his hand firmly wedged in his bag of chips, his only, and fast dwindling, source of heat. Alongside him Graham's socks had sucked up at least a pint of slush but his shins were perfectly dry. This was because he was wearing Bermuda shorts. He did this not because he was drunk, not because it was Hogmanay but just because that's who he is.

"The bus!" Graham shouted, breaking into a sprint surprisingly athletic for a man of his girth, pointing about thirty yards in front of them where, like a late Christmas present, the last bus that left George Square without them was pulled up at a stop. "Driver! Hold the bus, hold the bus!" their shouts rang out as they made a dash for it, sending spurts of slush bursting up from the pavement in their wake. The half chewed chips shot out of Mark's mouth as he called frantically "stop that bus, stop that bus" at the three or four heads sticking out of the door, who were cheering them on, gesturing and shouting, run!, run for it! come on, run! you can make it!

Gasping for breath, a red faced Mark began to loose faith. They're going to drive off at the last minute, he thought but he kept running anyway, mainly because he was going so fast had he tried to stop dead he'd risk the added humiliation of falling flat on his face. Punching the air with his fist, Graham shouted, "Hello!!!!" as he threw himself into the bus, to the wild cheers and thunderous applause of the passengers. Mark was swaying all over the place, like an octogenarian who'd just run a marathon and had to be helped up on to the bus. "Thanks driver" he heaved out to the scrawny, miserable looking figure hunched over the wheel. He drew Mark a filthy look which made Mark, remembering the no hot food on board rule, swiftly send his supper flying up and out in to the night, adding a humble little 'mia culpa' smile for good measure. The driver sneered back at him and started to speak. Instantly all went quiet. Not masking his sick pleasure he said "we're broken down". The cheering and clapping exploded.

Tennis Love

by David Keeney

When I first saw it, I thought I was mistaken. So the next time I prepared myself beforehand. I stood by the fence and patiently waited for her to serve again. And that time it was clear: the words "Smack It Hard!" printed on the back of her knickers. Whenever her skirt lifted up, I saw it, the tag line of my tennis love. With a smile I tossed her another ball. She tucked it under her skirt and prepared to serve again. The next time I positioned myself to spy, she peeked over her shoulder and winked at me.

15-Love

I was always yelling at them. They would serve a basket of balls together and then never pick up. One time I walked to the court and found it literally littered, splashes of yellow splattered everywhere on the green, pools of yellow settled against the fence. I'm sure my face was crimson with anger as I stormed back to the clubhouse. But as the door swung open, I saw him place a milkshake in front of her. With two straws they shared the sweet treat while looking in each other's eyes. I cooled. Ah, to be fifteen and in love.

30-Love

She felt she was halfway through the game: already thirty and no life-long mate. Remembering high school she made a call to a one-time boyfriend and tennis partner. She reminded him of their pact to marry if they found themselves single and thirty. She reminisced about a late night love she gave him on the service line under the lights. After a pause, he coughed, and she waited for him to ask where she was living and when he could pick her up to begin their new love, but he announced he was married. His wife just had a baby.

40-Love

I was teaching her how to hit a forehand. Standing behind her, hand in hand, I guided the racket through the ball. At first I thought it was accidental, but she continued to back into me, more with each swing. Twisting in my grip, she said she was turning forty. Her husband said she could pick out a present and she thought she'd pick me.

After dinner we undressed. Lying together, I traced faint stretch marks on her thighs. I thought of her son, who I taught that morning.

We went over keeping score and learned how to "smack it hard."

Mail Order

by Shaun Manning, who delights in stage directions

CAST:

Paris, 20s, male

Helen, 30s, female

Cassandra, early 20s, FedEx girl

Menelaos, 30s, a king of the Achaeans

(Living room. PARIS and HELEN sit eating microwavable dinners.)

HELEN

So. Paris. You hear anything interesting at work today?

PARIS

Nope.

HELEN

No?

PARIS

Should I have heard something?

HELEN

Well, I kind of thought you would, since everybody else seems to know the Greeks are hell-bent on attacking Troy again.

PARIS

Never happen. We're on 'em, Helen. Like this.

(PARIS gestures to show how Troy is on the Greeks.)

Doorbell rings. HELEN answers it.)

HELEN

Oh, hey Cassandra. What have you got for us today?

CASSANDRA

You wouldn't believe me if I told you. Could you just sign for this, please?

HELEN

Ok. Heeere "you go.

CASSANDRA

Thanks. Just a heads-up: I wouldn't open that if I were you.

PARIS

Ooh. What is it, Cassandra? Is it the Greeks' super-secret weapon, a miraculous craft of cunning by wily Odysseus?

CASSANDRA (frantic)

Yes! Yes, exactly! You see, the entire Greek army is in there, led by Menelaos, and they're all tiny and packed into a "

(HELEN opens the package and takes out a small wooden horse.)

HELEN

What is this?

PARIS

It's a toy horse. See Cassandra, nothing to be afraid of.

(PARIS turns to HELEN and makes a "cuckoo" motion with his finger.)

HELEN

Paris, dear, tell me again why someone mailed you a toy horse?

PARIS

Er. It's from one of the offers I did to get a free ipod...?

CASSANDRA

An ipod, eh?

(Does a little ipod dance, then pretends to die.)

CASSANDRA cont.

You won't hear the Greeks until the spear's in your chest.

HELEN

Jesus Christ, Paris. Menelaos "my ex-husband, remember?" and his muscle-headed buddies are storming the gates, and you're ordering toys off the internet. You are such a child!

(HELEN waves the toy horse around as she speaks. Tiny screams can be heard within.)

PARIS

Oh, I am so sick of hearing about how great Menelaos is! "Menelaos would know what to do, Paris!" "Menelaos was a real man, Paris!" "Menelaos is favored by gods, Paris!" Well, you still left him to run away with me, right? So you tell me who's the better man.

HELEN

There you go! Get mad a little. It's nice to see you stick up for yourself, Paris. Maybe you should think about sticking up for Troy.

PARIS

Troy is fine, Helen.

HELEN

Troy likes to feel appreciated, Paris.

CASSANDRA

Troy likes to not be burned to its foundation, so please please PLEASE get that horse out of here!

HELEN

What's the horse have to do with anything?

CASSANDRA

It's full of Greeks! Tiny Greeks! Who... expand when exposed to oxygen.

PARIS

Oh man, Cass, that might be your wackiest "prophecy" yet!

(PARIS is amusing himself throwing the horse in the air and catching it, but now drops it behind the couch. MENELAOS stumbles up.)

MENELAOS

Helen!

HELEN

Menelaos!

(MENELAOS holds up a box of chocolates and an enormous bouquet of flowers. CASSANDRA shrieks in horror.)

MENELAOS

I have come bearing gifts!

(PARIS takes the chocolates.)

PARIS

Dude, Frangos! I love these!

MENELAOS

On to my dark purpose: I have come to reclaim my dear wife, and lift the curse on the house of Atreus by utterly destroying Troy.

PARIS (mouth full of chocolate)

Oh, well, good luck with that.

CASSANDRA

(trying to rush MENELAOS and HELEN toward the door)

Ha ha, we're glad you showed up, Menelaos, to take Helen home and end the war.

MENELAOS

Yes, come with me Helen! Our victory is already assured "I've slaughtered one hundred ripe heifers in your honor, letting their red blood run out upon the altar sacred to Apollo. I have broken the shields of so many Trojans, crushing their skulls with my heavy spear and rejoicing as their brains rush out from cleft helmets, or twisting my sword in their bellies, freeing the viscera from its fleshy casing. I have unstrung the knees of mighty Polydollyopolus, burying my thumbs deep in his eyes, blinding him before cleaving the digits from each foot and hand, tapping him on the shoulder with his own fingers and watching him writhe in befuddled agony, then finally drawing my knife across his neck and bathing in the "

(HELEN makes a face.)

MENELAOS, cont.

What? You can't anoint yourself in blood without cutting "

HELEN

You still don't get it, do you? Menelaos, you've got to be a little more romantic, you know? Maybe pay attention to what makes me happy. I mean, for our anniversary, you brought me "the choicest pieces of the fatted calf." And then made me burn them in the backyard.

MENELAOS

There's nothing quite like a good fatted calf.

HELEN

I'm vegetarian!

CASSANDRA

Hey, um, Paris? I know nobody believes a damn word I say, but I'm telling you this right now: whatever you do, do not tell Helen how you really feel about her.

PARIS

You know, I think you're right. Menelaos, a moment please?

(PARIS claps MENELAOS on the back.)

PARIS, cont.

It sounds to me that Helen doesn't appreciate your manly and honorable gifts, right?

MENELAOS

She is a vexing woman.

PARIS

Exactly. Like the way she disinterestedly clips her perfect little toenails while you're trying to watch the Olympics. Or the exasperated look on her face when you bring home your war trophies. And those adorable fits she pulls when you try to bring a servant woman to bed. I mean, whew.

MENELAOS

You said it, brother.

PARIS

So why all the fighting, right? I mean, is it worth all the trouble?

(MENELAOS looks at PARIS, then at HELEN. Then at CASSANDRA, who looks terrified. Then back at HELEN, and finally to PARIS.)

MENELAOS shakes hands firmly with PARIS, and exits.)

HELEN

Oh Paris... you do care about Troy!

PARIS

Helen, you know much I love Troy.

HELEN

Troy just likes to hear it sometimes.

CASSANDRA

This won't end well.

A Highland Folk Tale

by Jane Patience

He had requested a room on the ground floor with no patio windows opening into the grounds and on no account, a loch side view. When he arrived, he insisted on inspecting the accommodation before he brought his wife in. He ran a long and elegant hand along each side of the window frame, pressing the glass every few inches. Craning forwards, he checked each angle of the bay recess and asked,

“Where is the loch from here please?”

I pointed in the direction of Loch Carrick and he seemed contented at that.

Tall and rather gaunt, with eyes the colour of a baby's veins, he gave the impression of someone who was coming to the end of a long convalescence, or someone who was about to embark on a lengthy illness. From beneath his hat a raven fringe slashed diagonally across the white forehead as though carelessly arranged by a calligrapher's pen. He refused my offer to fetch help for his luggage.

Back in the office, I could see his car parked at the front door. His wife sat patiently in the passenger seat, motionless and apparently absorbed by our scenery. Several minutes passed before I next looked out, where she was still sitting, staring into oblivion. After half an hour I had reassured myself that it was not polite to keep her out there in the cold for so long. The poor thing must be frozen, I thought, and was on the point of going out there myself to invite her into our cosy lobby with its blazing hearth, when he reappeared.

I asked him if he wanted a torch to see his way to the car. Darkness falls so quickly out here. This offer, he also declined but asked instead if a nice deep bath could be drawn for his wife.

A poor thing, she was, moving like a woman twice her age in the stilted way of the acute arthritic. Every step that she took looked like an ordeal of pain. Her hair was so dark that it reflected other colours like oil does. Greens, purples and blues danced among the long strands that seemed to be constantly in motion, like trees in the wind. I took her elbow to help her up the stairs and she was just skin and bone. Then she spoke. She turned those huge grey eyes up to thank me. Her eyelids lifted so slowly under the weight of those dense elongated, lashes that I wanted to tell her to save her strength.

“Thanks so much, I can manage from here.” Her voice was all mercury and melted butter.

They didn't emerge from their room until the following evening when they startled everyone with their sudden change in demeanour. Mrs. Leskie was a different creature entirely. She moved with the flowing grace of something wild, her unruly tresses piled into a majestic knot of turbulence at the back of her head.

His gaze only left her when it was absolutely necessary and it seemed impossible for him not to be touching her always. He watched her, captivated, as she studied the menu, his hand resting on hers. She looked up and smiled, handing the menu back to him. I approached to take their order.

“The mussels and the trout please, but none of the sauces or vegetable accompaniments. If you could bring a large jug of water also, we'd be grateful.”

I was too skilled in my position, to express any surprise at such a strange dinner order, but I did remark that we were all pleased to see Mrs. Leskie looking so radiant after having seemed so drawn when she had first arrived. They exchanged a brief but meaningful glance before he spoke.

“We travel a lot. Sometimes my wife gets extremely tired...but nothing that a good rest can't put to rights.”

I wasn't convinced. Whatever affliction she had been suffering, it had seemed far more serious than mere exhaustion. I commented that I was sure the weeks that they had booked with us would leave them feeling relaxed and rejuvenated. They didn't hear me. Already they were lost once more, in each other.

By the beginning of the first week, we were all intrigued by the beautiful and devoted couple who had booked in for such an unusually lengthy stay. They never left their room during the day at all. Eventually, I had to explain that whilst our greatest wish was that our guests should be happy and comfortable at all costs, it was difficult to provide adequate services if the chambermaids couldn't access the room to clean during the day.

Mr. Leskie's mood became cool and rather agitated at this as he stressed that yes; he knew their requirements were a little unusual but that he had not been entirely honest when I had last enquired after his wife's health. She apparently had a rare skin condition that made sunlight intolerable to her and left her unable to venture from the room during daylight hours.

As the days turned to weeks their behaviour established the same routine and no longer struck us as particularly unusual. Keeping to the room by day, down for dinner at dusk, then a walk around the grounds or the surrounding countryside. He rarely took his eyes from hers nor she from his and yet I always felt that his was the desire, the need, dependence if you like- and hers was just love, simply that.

It was during my lunch break that old Tam, a retired keeper came by. I was sitting on the bench outside the kitchen door. He knew I always offered him a sandwich, maybe a mug of soup. He asked if the fair folk were still with us. I don't know why he referred to the Leskies in this way, although they were an undeniably handsome couple. I asked him why he was so interested in them, since he'd never enquired about any other guests so persistently.

"Ask instead," he said, "why they're so interested in each other."

"They're in love!" I gestured him to sit with me.

"I ken her type, you'll see," with the aid of his staff, he eased himself down onto the bench, "Just like the one that did for Laccie McBain." I resigned my self to the roll of listener for the rest of my break.

"Killed him, so she did... though as much his ain fault as hers. Couldnae leave it. Couldnae just walk away. It's a power they have, sure enough."

I wanted to tell him that the Leskies had a power over each other, bound to each other in an almost a slavish way, but Tam was in full flight now.

"Laccie found her on the loch, early like, near dawn. Swam right up to the boat she did. Such a beauty and who's to blame him? Just a wee laddie, me then, but nae doubt a few years on and I'd hae been lost as he was." He was ranting, as ever, and I should have just ignored him.

"Aye, well I doubt you'd catch Mrs Leskie taking a dip at that time o the morn' " not in those temperatures. Tam looked at me in surprise.

"Why hen of course she'd do just that. That's what they do. What they have to do. Back to the water every day, it's their life source. The very sight of water is overwhelming to them ye see. They must have it or die...but not in daylight for that means death to the ones they've chosen. Auld Laccie, he made himsel' ill keepin' them on the move all those years. Folk got ower suspicious if they stayed anywhere too long."

Tam had lost me now, which he noted, and tried again.

"It's what did for Laccie. Caught sight o the sea one day she did, and couldnae fight the calling. Such a strong call to them. It's the only thing more powerful than their devotion."

I suppressed a smirk as I realised his reasoning.

"Oh Tam! You think Mrs. Leskie's a...what're they called? Those mythical things from the Highlands."

"Aye, a selche withoot a doubt...a selkie or a roan some folk ca' them." He nodded earnestly.

I wandered back to the office, shaking my head. The housekeeper was waiting for me. She offered to do the Leskie's room as for once, they were out of it before the evening meal.

"Are you sure?" I was doubtful, "they never come out during the day. Apparently it makes her ill."

"I saw them on the way back in at lunchtime," she said, "down by the loch side." She gave an earthy laugh. "She didnae look ill tae me. Swimming like a fish she was and him that agitated, calling her back. He didnae see me but she did. Shoots right oot the water like one o they dolphins, and naked as a new bairn!"

They never appeared at their table that night. I grew concerned after an hour and knocked the door of their room. No reply. I unlocked the door. There was nothing extraordinary about the room, but in the bathroom... I smiled but wasn't shocked. You see all sorts of things in the hotel industry. The bath, still filled with water, now ice cold " and a pair of handcuffs attached to the taps. The window was open too, the room chilled and dampened. I didn't want to create a panic or fuss " it wasn't good for the other guests. Instead, I took a walk around the lochan nearby.

I found him on the south shore, soaked and still, in the shingle. Tiny strands of weed stuck to his white neck, his lifeless eyes gazing up to the night sky, and a small, wistful smile suggesting itself onto his violet lips.

Somewhere in the night I heard the forlorn noise that an animal makes in a trap, when all is lost. There was not a sign of her.

Give the Cleric a Big Hand

by Steve Petchey

A famous one-handed cleric, jailed for being a bad man and for inciting others to badness, was fortunate enough to have his missing hand grow back when he was in prison. It was slightly bigger than the original hand, which he had lost when his plan to blow up a neighbouring religious group failed.

When he was released he revealed his new hand to his followers, saying, "Behold! God has blessed me with a new hand with which to smite my enemies. And smite them I will! Come! Together we will smite the non-believers!" In saying this he was guilty of a new act of naughtiness and was jailed again.

In jail he was set upon by a group of thugs who regarded religion-based misdemeanours as worse than their own secular acts of criminality. His regrown hand was famous by this point, so when one of the thugs shouted, "Off with his hand!" the others laughed, and off his hand came.

Once more it grew back, this time bigger still.

The cleric knew God had favoured him. He told his cellmate, who did not like to disagree as the cleric was fearsome in his self-belief. The cellmate asked to be moved to another cell. When the cleric found out he was furious, berating him with the words, "I am good company!"

The cellmate replied, "I can't sleep."

The cleric knew his cellmate was telling at least some of the truth, as every night he looked at his hand by torchlight muttering, "My beautiful hand! Thank you, God!" over and over again. He lashed out at his cellmate, who fell face-first onto his bed. The cleric, knowing a sign when he saw one, spanked the man. He found the spanking enjoyable, and very, very easy with his new, big hand.

The cleric then set about spanking those who had removed his previous hand. He spanked one in the table tennis room, one in the television room, one in the shower, two in the dining area and yet another in the corridor somewhere between the first aid room and the broom cupboard. He was so successful at spanking with this new hand that he became known as Spanky.

His new nickname annoyed those he had spanked, who had become known collectively as Spanky's Spankees. They ambushed him in the dance rehearsal room. He tried to sashay and spank his way out of trouble, but there were too many of them. When one of them cried, "Off with his hand!" there was no laughter this time. Someone shouted, "Use a rusty blade!" and off it came, slowly, painfully, rustily.

It grew back, bigger still.

This fourth hand was enormous. He could bat away people if they annoyed him; anyone who did not agree with him annoyed him. He became top dog in the wing and everyone feigned conversion to his religion rather than be spanked or batted out of the way.

On his release he felt great. He went back home and slapped anyone he felt like slapping. A lot of slapping happened that day. "God made me Spanky!" he shouted. "And so I spank!"

For lunch he visited a local shop. In the window he saw a poster that read, "See the cleric blessed by God! See the hand that God created!"

He was delighted by this. "A rally has been arranged for my release," he said to the shopkeeper. "And in the outdoors. It is as it should be."

The shopkeeper swallowed. "There is another."

"Another?"

"He is known as Spanker."

Spanky spanked the man. "There is no other! And I am taking this for my lunch."

With that he left the shop carrying a ploughman's lunch sandwich.

He sat in the park at a distance from the meeting watching the crowd gather. When the rival cleric took to the stage Spanky stood up, slung his hand on his shoulder like a shotgun, and marched towards the man. Before the other cleric had said anything into the microphone Spanky shouted, "Ungodly!" and raised his hand aloft.

The crowd parted, and Spanker stepped down to meet Spanky.

They stood facing each other. Spanky could not believe God could bless another with a hand the equal of his own. "You are indeed blessed," he said. "But I am more blessed for I have been gifted a hand mightier than

any. Agree and you will remain unspanked .”

“Unspanking is not in your gift,” said Spanker. “I will leave you unspanked if you so wish. But first you must admit that mine is the greater hand, for mine is a gift from God, who was very kind when he gave me this very big hand. The biggest, mightiest hand in the history of hands.”

“God was more than kind,” said Spanky, “ when he gave such a gift to one so deserving of being spanked. But you are mistaken in your belief in your hand’s greatness. It is indeed a fine hand. A hand that could spank many a deserving spankee. But it cannot spank me.”

“I shall spank you for your words,” said the other.

“No - I shall spank you!”

They rushed at each other and grappled violently. Spanky managed to remove Spanker’s trousers and began to spank as Spanker achieved the same with him. They spanked each other with such violence that the crowd that was gathered were flecked with blood. The numbers in the crowd swelled more as the chant, “Spank! Spank! Spank!” went up and attracted people from further and further afield.

Spanky’s fury became so powerful he clenched his giant hand into a fist and thrust it up Spanker’s rectum and pushed on through to the liver. Spanker reacted by grabbing Spanky’s genitals and ripping them off. He then thrust his hand in the wound and pushed on through to the heart.

“Ha!” shouted Spanky, holding aloft Spanker’s liver. “Your liver!”

“Ha!” shouted Spanker, holding aloft Spanky’s heart. “Your heart!”

Both then dropped dead.

Spanky was buried in a hand-shaped coffin and songs of religious violence were sung at his funeral. Each of his followers, who were few yet too many, cut off their strongest hand in his honour, and they piled them on top of his grave. After this, when they met each other they would mime a slap across one another’s face with their handless arm by way of a greeting. At home, in the quiet of the night, they prayed to God for a really big hand to grow where their sacrificed hand had been.

Spanky’s body was later dug-up by a gang of embittered ex-convicts who dumped his remains in a skip, having first hung by a dirty piece of string a plaque round his neck reading “big handed TWAT”, and written the word “TWAT” on his face and the words “hand of a TWAT” on his big hand.