Finding Godot [1]

October 4, 2021 Writing and Faith [2]
Memoir [3]
Coming Out of the Rabbit Hole [4]

Essay by John Vogel

My Magical Relationship With a Bookshelf



From 2003 until 2015, I lived in West Philadelphia. At Baltimore and 47th, the A-Space Anarchist Social Center maintained a free bookshelf outside on the sidewalk. It was stocked by Books Through Bars, a volunteer-run organization, that still works out of the A-Space.

According to my conversations over the years with Tim Dunn, an A-Space fixture, and with roommates of mine who also volunteered for Books Through Bars, the organization takes donations and distributes books to the incarcerated. Inmates write to request books or authors. “We do our best to send the books people ask us for, whatever those may be,” notes the Books Through Bars website. “By fulfilling all requests to the best of our ability, we work to support self-determination, self-education, and healing behind bars.” If volunteers can’t fill a request, they'll send something else that might be up that person's alley.

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But during my twelve years in the neighborhood, donated books that didn't get requested or were otherwise unfit for the program ended up on the shelf outside the A-Space storefront, joining other tables covered with a hodgepodge of free stuff: food, clothing, electronics, records, tapes.

That A-Space free bookshelf became a constant in my life back then. Sometimes, I would check it daily. Other times, I'd let it simmer for a few days, hoping the material would change at least slightly.

Occasionally, I'd get there and know someone with similar taste had just dropped off a box. Passing over all the titles that I already owned, I'd hope something would come up I'd been meaning to read or at least felt confident I *would* read.

Often there was nothing. But a few times, something magical seemed to happen. I'd find a batch of books I was meaning to read or a particularly poignant-looking book that spoke directly to my current thoughts. Like the time I found several Tom Perrotta novels after I really enjoyed watching a video of his 2011 interview with Stephen King at the JFK Library in Boston. I only took *Mrs. Fletcher*, but I've since wished I took the others, too.

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I've always been a hunter of cheap or free media. Growing up in the suburbs of Pittsburgh in the 1990s, I taped CDs borrowed from friends and family on Maxells with hand-stylized labels mimicking the album art. My brother and I used to save money before our vacations in North Carolina so that we could hit all the pawn shops along one stretch of highway, scouring their used CD collections. We'd generally find a fair amount of Prince, several copies of *Angel Dust* by Faith No More, Guns N' Roses, KRS-One, Jungle Brothers, lots and lots of *Break Like the Wind* by Spinal Tap.

Those Little Free Library boxes on people's lawns? I'm there. Boxes of books, CDs, tapes, DVDs, or VHS sitting on the

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sidewalk? I have to look through every single one.

Although the price is right, leafing through piles of trash looking for a gem isn't exactly efficient. It's easier to take chances, but a lot of the chances end up back in a different Little Free Library or the sidewalk in front of my own house. Yet the search can also give me a magical feeling that there's an answer to something in these piles—something that will enlighten or delight and could maybe even break everything open. Except I never know what the question is, and the answer is never what I expect.

In May 2021, while I was writing this piece, *Skyscraper Magazine* editor Andrew Bottomley posted a Facebook story that distills the feeling of finding just the right thing at just the right time. When he and his partner found a treasure trove of records at a thrift store, he wrote:

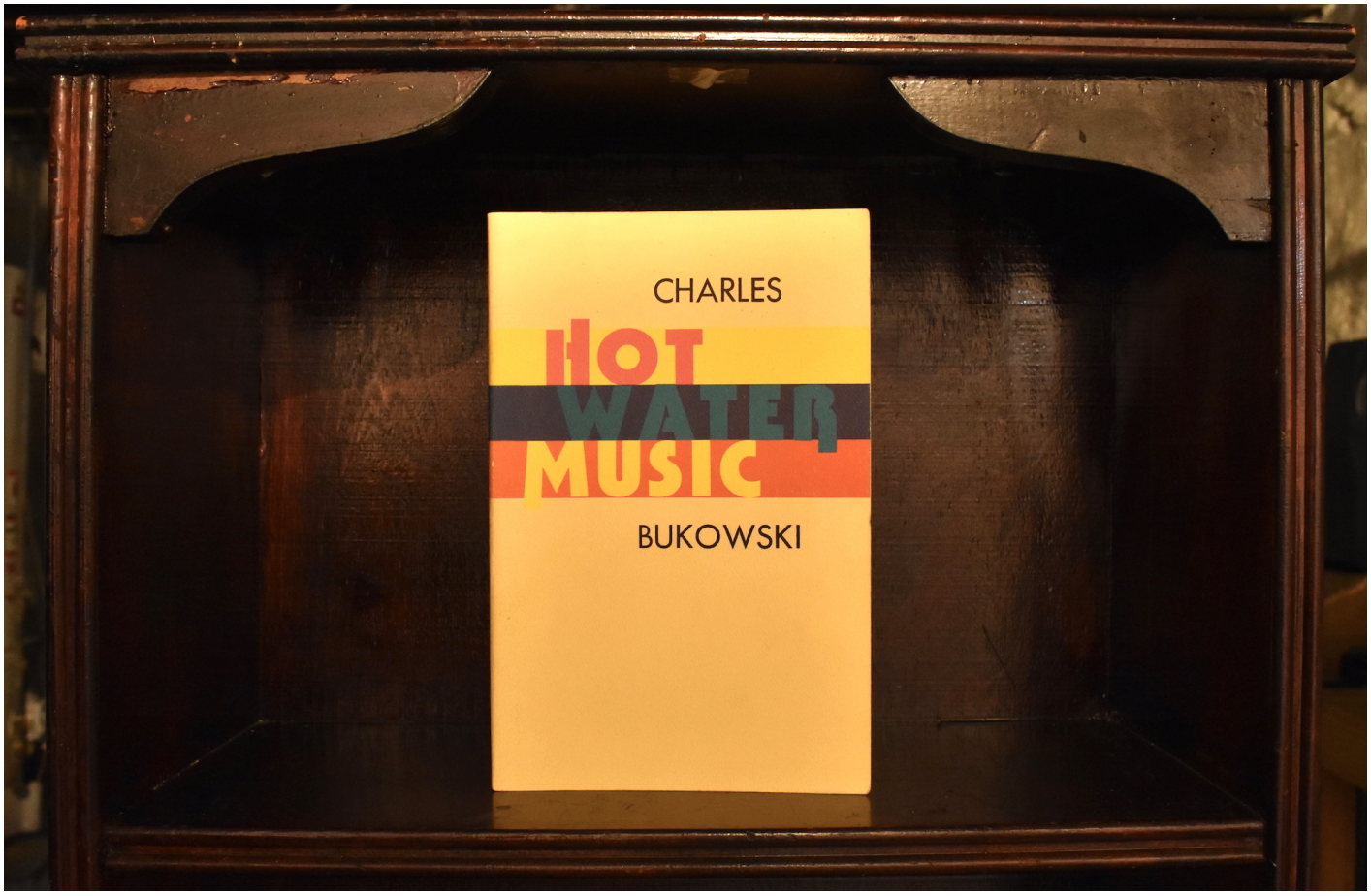
> A wave of panicky excitement shot through me. "What's going on here? Is this real?" I keep flipping and there's record after record of post-punk, new wave, prog, weird jazz, and early electronic music, soul and funk, and more. I wave Diana over. There were a dozen or more crates, and we both start frantically flipping through them, building a pile in between us.

Here's an example from my own A-Space bookshelf: In the summer of 2009, the first week I was trying to secure interviews with other indie musicians and writers for my *Weird Music* project, I only got request denials or no response. I was starting to think this multimedia project (unnamed at that point) just wasn't going to happen.

When I passed by the bookshelf, on the top of a pile of books was *Hot Water Music* by Charles Bukowski, his short stories from a small press in the early '90s that looked like new. This was an exceptionally good find for a cache of books that was basically the opposite of a curated collection. I picked it up and walked away with the strange feeling that I was stealing.

The next day Matmos, the electronic duo whose interview played a big role in the rest of *Weird Music*, replied with an acceptance. All of a sudden, the project went from "maybe not" to "It's on!"

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During this time, I also struggled to determine whether the things I encountered randomly were significant or just coincidental connections with no cause or meaning.

It reminded me of when I converted to atheism around the age of fourteen. At a confirmation retreat back then, when everyone was talking about feeling the presence of God, I looked around and thought, *I have no idea what any of you are talking about. I don't feel* any *of this*.

The significant coincidences I sensed in my twenties and thirties marked the first time since that conversion that I began to wonder about additional levels of reality. Every time it happened, I'd reality-check by telling myself, *It doesn't mean anything,* even if it felt like talking to a ghost and telling them, "But of course I don't *believe* in you."

One day in 2012 or 2013, when I passed by the A-Space bookshelf, I decided to set up a "test." I'd been thinking I might like to reread *Waiting for Godot*. I'd read it twice in high school, once as a book with the whole class and once for a research paper. When my teacher assigned *Godot* for the research paper, he said perhaps I hadn't gotten everything out of it, assuring me I'd really enjoy it if I spent more time with it.

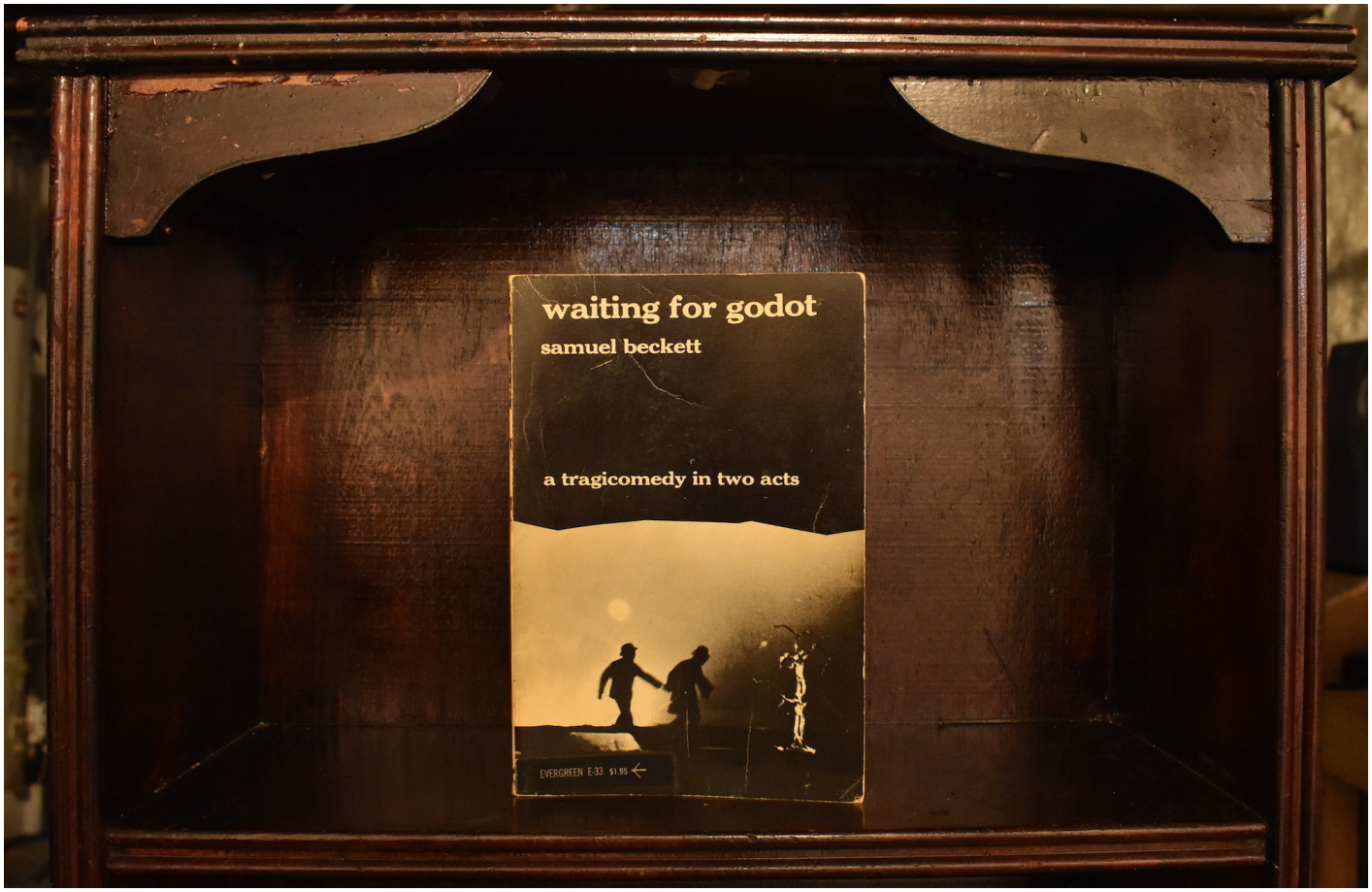
So I spent more time with Beckett's play, but I never enjoyed it. It's not that I didn't think it was good. I got the Abbott and Costello take on existentialism embodied by Didi and Gogo waiting for something that never happens. It just didn't connect with me, although I didn't mind it. I feel the same way about a lot of other art: David Bowie, Nirvana, Bob Dylan, Ernest Hemingway, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, just to name a few. I know I'm supposed to like all these things more than I do.

Just as I've always preferred Talking Heads and Brian Eno over Bowie, I preferred *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* by Tom Stoppard over *Godot*. In our high school speech and debate club, I performed the opening scene from

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Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for “Humorous Interpretation” (came in last all but one time), and I loved the 1990 movie version with Gary Oldman, Tim Roth, and Richard Dreyfuss.

But back to my test, with me in my early thirties. As I approached the A-Space, I thought to myself, *If I find* Waiting for Godot *on this bookshelf right now, I'll admit that there's something going on besides hard reality*. I may have even thought the words, *I'll believe in God*.



And it was there.

I both couldn't believe it and could.

Even after setting up this absolutely unscientific “experiment,” I still couldn't persuade myself to believe in a higher power or whatever you’d like to call it. *Preposterous.* I told myself I must have seen it there yesterday and it didn't register.

Or, as Cody Delistraty writes in a 2018 article “On Coincidence” in the digital magazine *Aeon*:

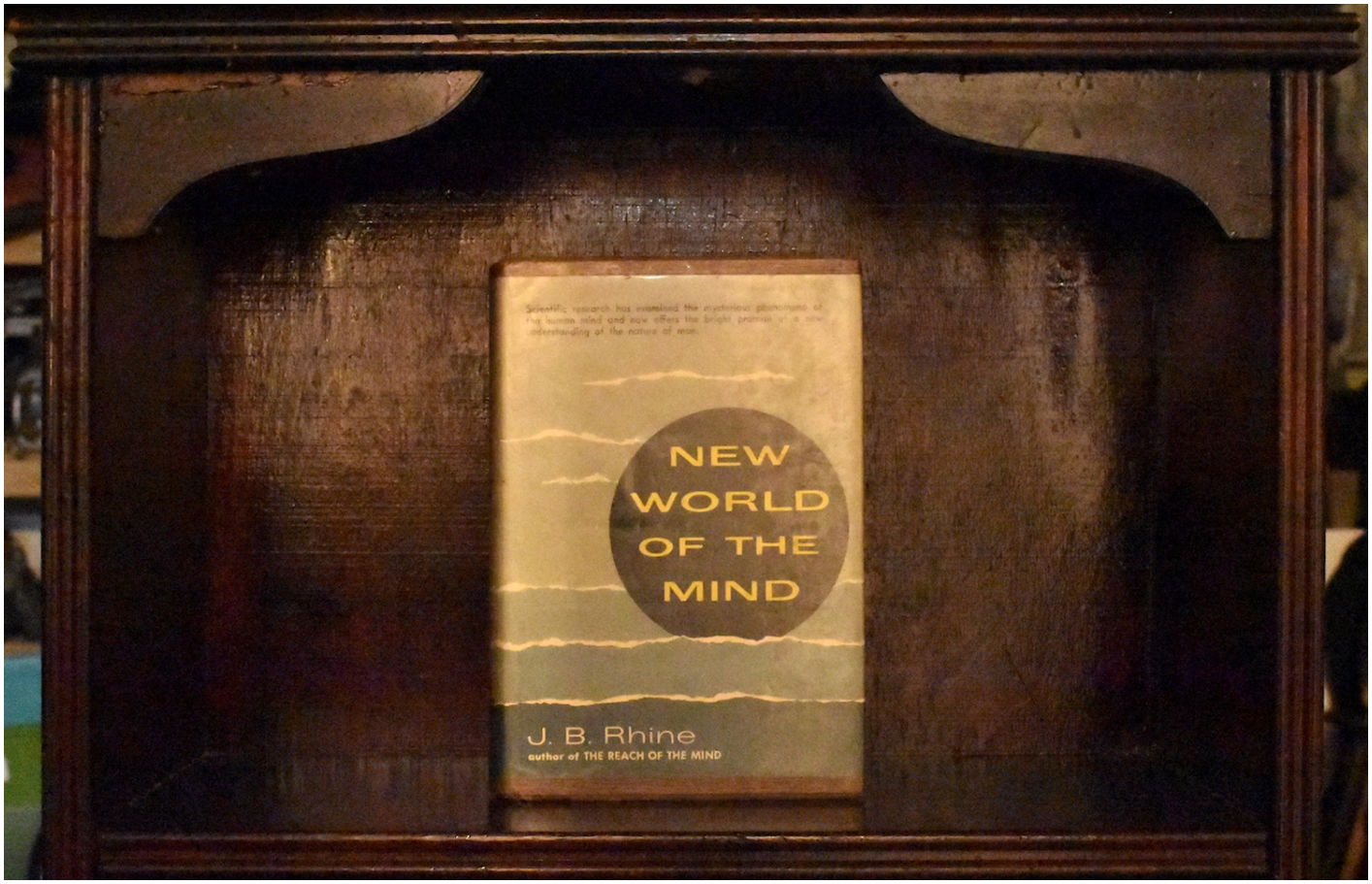
> Today, nearly all scientists say that coincidences are just that: coincidences—void of greater meaning. Yet, they’re something we all experience, and with a frequency that is uniform across age, sex, country, job, even education level…. One of the most commonly experienced “meaningful coincidences” is to think of your friend for the first time in a long while only to have her telephone you that instant. Any self-respecting statistician would say that if you tracked the number of times you thought of any friend, and the number of times you had that friend immediately ring you, you’d find the link to be statistically insignificant.

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If I tracked the number of times I willed a specific book to come up on a free book shelf, and the number of times the book did show up, it would probably be statistically insignificant, too. Lord knows I do it all the time, even if I'm pretty confident this test was the only time I consciously qualified it with an agreement to believe in God. After all, *Waiting for Godot* is by no means rare, and it makes total sense it would end up on a shelf of donated books in West Philly.

But, okay, let's follow the divine route for a minute. Let's say that God (capital "G") *Him*self (definitely an older white male with a beard) registered my thought and placed *Waiting for Godot* in front of me just at the moment of my trial of faith. If this was the case, it seems like his message would be: *Don't wait for me. I'm super busy.* That would be something of a strange loop.

The thing is, I have no more facts about this event to support the more reasonable interpretations than the magical one. It might be statistically possible, but it definitely *feels* like something else.



Carl Jung and William James both believed in telepathy, a fact that seems to be met with a "people used to think the darndest things" attitude before putting it completely out of mind. Sure, experiments with dice rolling and Zener card tests to prove the existence of telepathy were mostly absurd, but brains transmitting and receiving signals doesn't seem far-fetched to me at all. In a 2019 *Scientific Reports* article, for instance, University of Washington researchers describe experiments in which they created brain-to-brain communication by sending EEG signals between subjects using a computer interface they call "BrainNet."

Maybe these signals could be emitting all the time but are amplified through the use of technology. Without the technology, such a transmission would be weak, rife with noise and inaccuracy, not to mention floating freely all over the place.

In the same way, the phenomenon of meaningful coincidence is so diffuse and confusing, even to the person experiencing it, that the problem of gathering, quantifying, and analyzing evidence seems insurmountable. Hardly anyone is trying to do that. I'm certainly not going there. (And Jung's attempts with astrological analysis

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in *Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle* did the theory no favors.) On an intuitive level, though, every human knows the heady feeling described here—the magic.

For my test, the interpretations could lie along a continuum from *God put it there* to *the entire universe, both interior and exterior, is interconnected in ways that we can't figure out* to *it was just a coincidence*.

In David Mamet's *Three Uses of the Knife* (his 1998 guide to playwriting and another book from the heavens—that is, a free bookshelf), he notes:

> We dramatize the weather, the traffic, and other impersonal phenomena by employing exaggeration, ironic juxtaposition, inversion, projection, all the tools the dramatist uses to create, and the psychoanalyst uses to interpret, emotionally significant phenomena.
>
> We dramatize an incident by taking events and reordering them, elongating them, compressing them, so that we understand their personal meaning to us—to us as the protagonist of the individual drama we understand our life to be.

I think all parties can agree that the human brain is built to assign causality and create personal meaning; it's probably necessary for survival. I'm writing about this incident because it's uncanny enough for me to second guess it. I doubt it will convince anyone else. (I'm not even sure it convinces me.) But by writing it down and giving it order, my intention is to relay its meaning in my life and the role it's played.

Soon after picking up *Godot* from that seemingly magical bookshelf, I did sit down to read it again. I got about a third of the way through and didn't finish it. I wasn't in school anymore; I didn't have to finish books I didn't enjoy (although I usually do).

I also reread it while writing this essay, and I still don't enjoy it. The dialogue sounds like political speech: profound but semantically meaningless; I don't laugh when it's supposed to be funny. I'd rather watch *Waiting for Guffman*. The one extra layer I noticed this time was the treatment of class and hierarchy, although it hasn't fundamentally changed my understanding of the play. I am, however, listening to Spinal Tap's *Break Like the Wind*, thinking it's an absolutely underrated album.

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Publishing Information

- A-Space Anarchist Social Center ("Philly A-Space") website [5].
- Books Through Bars website [6].
- "A Conversation With Stephen King [7]," video of Tom Perrotta interviewing Stephen King on November 7, 2011, at the JFK Library and Museum in Boston.
- "I just about lost my mind at a Salvation Army," private Facebook post by Andrew Bottomley, May 18, 2021 (used with permission).
- "On Coincidence [8]," by Cody Delistraty, *Aeon*, July 10, 2018.
- "BrainNet: A Multi-Person Brain-to-Brain Interface for Direct Collaboration Between Brains [9]" by Linxing Jiang, Andrea Stocco *et al.*, *Scientific Reports*, April 16, 2019.
- *Three Uses of the Knife* by David Mamet (Columbia University Press, 1998).

Art Information

- Photos of A-Space and media © John Vogel; Creative Commons license.

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John Vogel is a musician and writer in Philadelphia. He is the art director for *Talking Writing* and creator of the multimedia project *Weird Music*. Aside from his TW work, he has been a reviews editor for independent magazines, linguistic annotator, and member of the Philly band Grandchildren.

For more information, visit John Vogel's Vimeo page [10], and his Eddie Sids Vimeo page [11].

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