

The Closet Room

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Abstract

The Closet Room

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This project is an extension of my longstanding interest in visual storytelling through domestic still life. In an attempt to discover these stories, I rely heavily on the practice of collecting and investigating evidence of existence. In search of human paraphernalia that hold some anonymous history, I find artifacts that, together, evoke new narratives and place value in moments and items that were once discarded. This project has developed into a series of interdisciplinary set-ups that collapse expectations of reality and dimensionality. It disorients through uncanny familiarity and illusion, communicating a sense of both nostalgia and anxiety. The work weaves together personal stories of growing up in Massachusetts with those of anonymous figures and fictional characters. There is a human presence that transcends the body and grants subjectivity to inanimate objects. I encourage viewers to step into this mirror world, reminiscent of a dream, in search of a feeling, an answer, or a memory. This statement seeks to clarify the concepts and decisions set forth in the body of work.



The Closet Room. Installation at Henry Art Gallery. 2023.

Reality is presented as an accepted truth, a qualifier of existence. It carries with it suppositions of physicality and dimensionality. It authenticates on the basis of evidence, science, and sanity, delegating all that cannot be proven to a realm of illusion. Despite a desire to draw hard lines, to find solace in the solidity of reality, the relationship between the real and unreal is far more complicated. An inability to make these distinctions is inevitable, as sentient beings incapable of escaping our own perspective. Still, culture has surrounded us with *a* reality, one fabricated through illusion, and more often than not, for the benefit of a select group. In order to renounce this prescribed reality, I invite viewers to join me in a place between real and fiction, past and future, original and replica. There, I hope they can relinquish control enough to get lost, to find truth in the illogical and the imagined.

This line of thinking draws from the Surrealist movement, which places value in the subconscious, giving integrity to the psychological. Bill Brown says in *Thing Theory*, “By transforming the bricolage of the dreamwork into the practice of everyday life, the surrealists registered their refusal to occupy the world as it was” (Brown). Of the surrealists, I look specifically to Rene Magritte and his intentional uses of repetition and obfuscation. In many of his paintings, doors, windows, glass, and mirrors are used to capture an alternate understanding of perception and reality. By giving psychological experiences physicality through art, I am able to validate them. While absurdity is an obvious side effect of delving into the subconscious, it must not be mistaken for meaninglessness. The stories told through *The Closet Room* are built on rearranged memories and symbols of home and identity, referencing personal and cultural experiences.

The home and its belongings are stabilizers in our experience of reality as we rely on them to orient us. By generating familiarity through the home that simultaneously defies expectations of space and rationale, the installation induces disorientation. Sara Ahmed writes in *Queer Phenomenology*, “disorientation is a way of describing the feelings that gather when we lose our sense of who it is that we are” (Ahmed 20). This sensation is intrinsic to the human experience, as we form and reform our identities. My work reflects that which is isolating and hard to grasp because these elements of life require greater processing. Here, I have only begun to explain its influences and processes. Like a feeling that you can’t put your finger on, there are parts of this that cannot be explained and I hope the work speaks for itself in these moments.



The Closet. Gelatin Silver Print of Installation. 2022.

“It is a process of becoming intimate with where one is: an intimacy that feels like inhabiting a secret room that is concealed from the view of others”

Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*

The Closet

I initially became fascinated with the closet as a subject for its cultural associations, its shallow space, and the bare bulb that stereotypically dangles from its ceiling. My interest in a scene is almost always prompted by its light. How lighting is orchestrated affects what is illuminated and how the surfaces and forms of the environment appear. It is an instrument of focus and obliteration. Unlike the pattern of light and dark traced by the sun, artificial light is reliant upon humans, insinuating their presence on the scene without a physical body. Often suggesting nightfall, the light then draws our attention to the darkness. The relationship between light and dark holds grand metaphors of good/evil and knowledge/ignorance. Light and dark, like black and white, oppose one another. It is within their coexistence that the subtle complexities of their relationship emerge.

The experience of being inside of a closet's shallow space is a feeling referenced frequently in our culture. Horror stories and true crime display the closet as a location of hiding, of banishment, and of burial. While the phrase "skeletons in the closet" may allude to such literal associations of murder, it also references all of our secrets and shame. For the queer community, closets have long represented the tight confines of secret sexuality and gender identity. These associations influence the narrative that emerges from *The Closet Room*, which call on my own personal memories, but hopefully for viewers, their own.

The body of work as a whole is so named due partly to the chronology of the closet as the first element. It also relates to the spirit of the work as an expansion of the closet, a place of storage for the mind and its cluttering of memories and collections of human artifacts—hidden, banished, or buried. In *Remote Control*, Bensen-Allot writes, "Cultural artifacts are not just passive registers of social forces; they are also social forces in their own right." It is important to understand the work from this standpoint, as it seeks to reflect the culture through which it has been established, but also the culture it perpetuates through its own existence.

Because the relationship between the fabricated and collected elements carries so much meaning, rearranging has become an integral part of my practice. It is only through this process that new narratives emerge and the "still life" gains autonomy. There have been several iterations of the installation, one of the most important moves being the reorientation of the closet. Torn from the

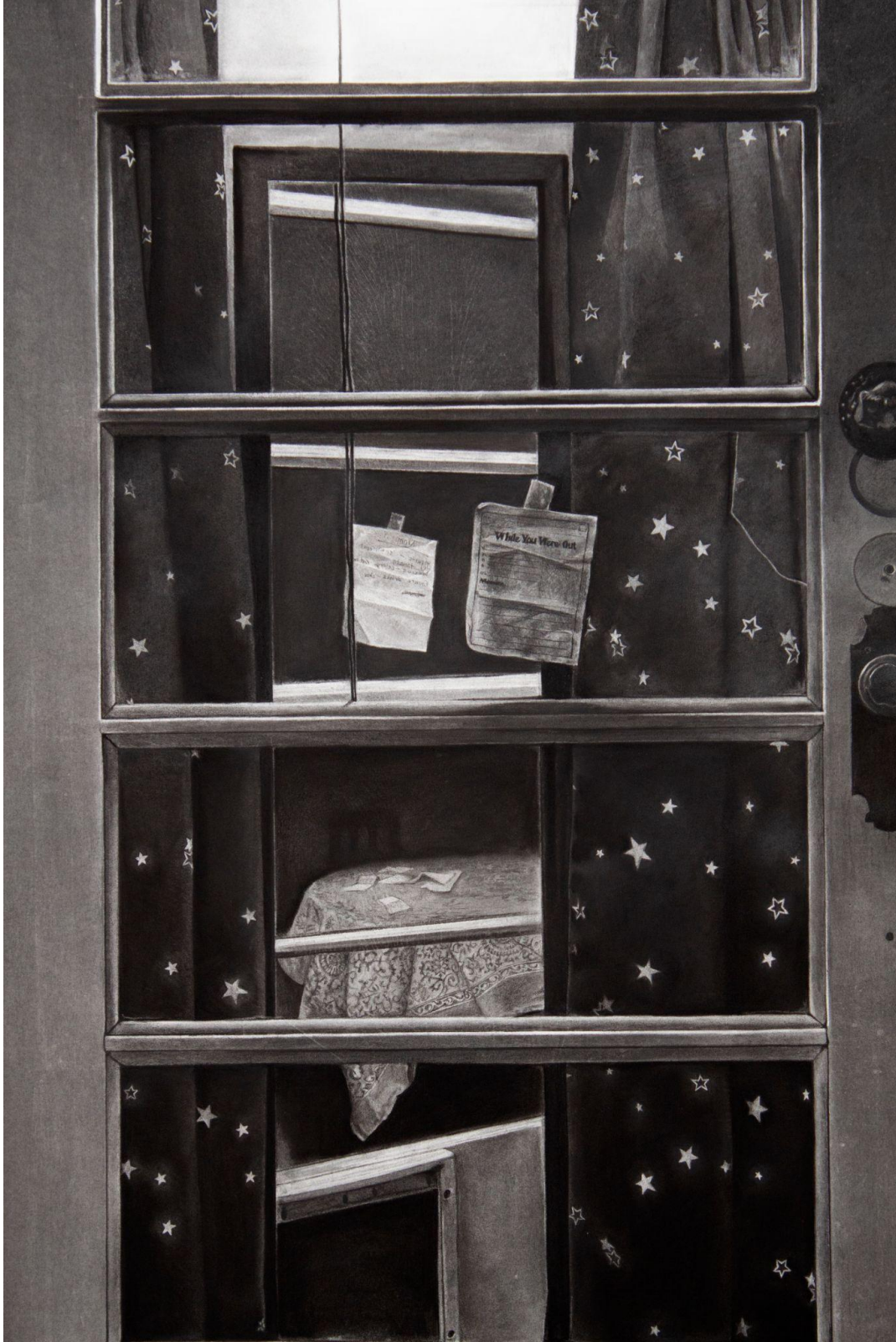
wall it was built against, it speaks to displacement. Participants are encouraged to walk through the back of a closet and emerge into another world.



While You Were Out and The Closet. Installation at Henry Art Gallery. 2023



While You Were Out. 110 x 50 in. charcoal on paper. 2023.



While You Were Out (detail). charcoal on paper. 2023.

Left: *While You Were Out* (door and mailbox). Installation at Henry Art Gallery. 2023.

Right: *Untitled* (mail). porcelain and underglaze. Installation at Henry Art Gallery. 2023.



“Real things are not the vulgar and easy things of our immediate surroundings. What’s genuinely real, there’s only a certain time when we get that feeling. And that’s what I try to express with my paintings.”

René Magritte



Above and Below: Untitled (paper). porcelain and underglaze. 2023.



While You Were Out

This body of work includes drawing, mixed media, ceramic, film photography, assemblage, and installation. An interdisciplinary approach facilitates a composite of dimensionalities. This is in reference to physical dimensions, depth of meaning, as well as plane of existence. In the installation, an exterior door¹ equipped with five panes of glass is installed against the wall, creating a shallow space in which a mirror, lightbulb, and set of star curtains mock deep space. In a different part of the room, there is a charcoal drawing of said door in which a kitchen table is reflected in the mirror. These do not coexist for the purpose of comparison, but for multiplicity and rediscovery. The drawing of the door and the original door together create a dimensional loop in which the viewer is able to see two versions of one side of the door, never possessing the ability to see its other face, or to pass through its threshold. Neither version of the door is capable of being used according to the supposition of a door's intended purpose, thereby declaring the installed door no more or less "real" than the drawing. Doors are emblematic of liminal space. They are made to contain and connect two places, with a very narrow transitional existence between them. Liminal spaces are places of momentary suspension in the inbetween, neither where we came from, nor where we are going. The installation is meant to capture the stillness and silence of a frozen moment in time, with both past and future stretching in all directions.

A general disbelief in the realness of the two-dimensional motivates me to complicate such assumptions. In drawing, the illusion of space has the capacity to transform the dimensionality of the surface on which it is drawn. This may be seen as an expansion of flatness or alternatively as a collapsing of space. This phenomenon occurs similarly in mirror reflections and photographs, both of which hold illusions of reality on two dimensional surfaces. Mirrors disorient by pointing us in the direction of something that then proceeds to point back at us, or somewhere else entirely depending on our point of view. Mirrors, doors, and windows are symbols of orientation: we face them to discover something else. In *Glass* by John Garrison, he states, "we look into

¹ I found this door on the side of the road in the summer of 2022. It was leaning against a tree which stood atop a median island (common at residential intersections in Seattle). I had a mini-van with several dogs in the back. Driving around the residential streets of Seattle picking up and dropping off dogs was the perfect time for spotting free paraphernalia. The door was stupid heavy, and a stranger walking by helped me lift it. It barely fit in the van and the dogs were not fans of me trying to shove it in there with them, but we managed. Later, back at the studio, no one was around to help me and I was too impatient to wait, so I balanced it on the most precarious rolling cart I've ever seen and held it up with my body, clumsily making my way up the elevator and across the building to my studio. It barely survived the ordeal.

glass not for reflection but for speculation into the world to come or for alternate versions of the world that is.” (Garrison 11). In my current body of work, dimensionality is not only in reference to physical measurements; it relates to other realities. These suggested alternate dimensions challenge the solidity and authenticity of the reality we believe ourselves to be a part of.

Paper became an important material in the work due to its ability to elude suppositions of flatness. Paper carries information on its surface and history in its folds. Spanning a spectrum of value, paper can be a temporary reminder, discarded after use; an official document, framed and displayed; or an image, captured reflections of a different time and place. Creating porcelain paper from the impressions of traditional paper questions its two dimensionality by entering it into a realm of sculpture. Using porcelain as a material increases our perception of the paper object’s value and demands a certain level of care with its fragility. It can no longer serve the same purpose, and because it reflects with specificity the form and quality of an original, it becomes a reference to reality while simultaneously distancing itself from it.

The title *While You Were Out* references the grocery list² that is written on the back of a sheet of printed note paper and taped to the inside window of the door. It is typically a note left for the absent with the supposition that they will return. The sentiment behind the phrase “while you were out” is one of having missed something³, an inclination carried throughout *The Closet Room*. Though the installation does not tell a chronological (or even logical) story, it is the culmination of many smaller connected narratives and characters. The story I seek to tell with this piece is influenced by my paternal grandmother, who lost all four of her children in a matter of three years. This monumental sense of loss is accompanied by her own frustrations with aging. Growing older seems to mean growing disoriented, and I wonder if we all lose ourselves before we lose our breath.

² From 2012-2014 I worked at a Stop and Shop grocery store in Beverly, Massachusetts. I began collecting the discarded lists people would leave behind, knowing they held something beautiful that I couldn’t quite place. These lists sat in a box until 2021 when, after having traveled across the country with me, I looked to them for inspiration. My collection has since expanded, and I continue to collect grocery lists and other found notes, categorizing them in my studio. The mysteries provided by these anonymous scraps of human detritus have become subjects of the narratives my art attempts to tell.

³ In 2003, my maternal grandparents’ house burnt down while they were out. No one was injured aside from an iguana whose heat lamp is presumed to have caused the fire, but it caused physical displacement, psychological disorientation, and sentimental loss. It is this address and the jumbled letters of my grandmother’s name that are stamped on the ceramic envelope inside the mailbox.



They Smiled. mixed media on panel in studio install. 2022.



They Smiled (details). mixed media on panel. 2022.



They Smiled

With *They Smiled*, I wanted to create a piece that declared itself a work of art against the backdrop of its surroundings. Delineating a box around a subject marks it as media or art, allowing us to digest it apart from our own lives. Truth is told through cropped narratives. In *They Smiled*, the panel becomes the film still to the set. It is through the imitation, revision, and mediatization of the real that we interact with the world. We believe in the news channels but not the ghost stories. We put faith in the phrase “based on a true story” and are told beautiful people living in mansions is “reality tv”. We entertain ourselves with real horrors reenacted with fake blood. We are under the illusion that there is a determinable line between the real and fictional. In *They Smiled*, wallpaper and paper are collaged onto the surface and wire runs from the panel to the ceiling. Two plastic tacks protrude from the surface, but they cast pencil drawn shadows. Here I combine the accepted real with illusion to question our ability to discern the two.

When I’m driving, my eyes are roaming the shoulder for free items and garage sale signs. When I’m walking, my head is down scanning the ground for paraphernalia and investigating the litter. Collecting is habitual. The search is a long game. To be human is to search, for ourselves, for answers, for meaning. These pursuits will rarely offer a satisfying conclusion but a collector fulfills this drive by searching for that which is capable of being found, though sometimes with great difficulty. The moment of revelation I experience upon the discovery of a list or free coat rack has the ability to alter the trajectory of my day. When I found a clumsily drawn smiley face on a faded post it note on Lake City Way on my way to the bus, I couldn’t help but think of the strip of smiley stickers I had found in the dumpster at the Ceramic and Metal Arts Building. I tacked them to the wall next to one another, drawn and printed, iterations of the same idea.

It is largely agreed upon that the smiley face was first drawn by graphic designer Harvey Ball in 1963 in Massachusetts (Honan). While some dispute that this was its first appearance, I connect with this time and place, which mark a personal generational past. *The Closet Room* reflects not a particular moment in history, but a series of moments overlapping. My grandmother was born in 1941, my father in 1964, and I in 1993. I aim to represent a slipping of the years between these dates as a reflection of the way generations bleed into one another, granting us time travel in the moments we walk through one another's lives.



Dorothy (No Toto). mixed media installation at Henry Art Gallery. 2023.



Dorothy (No Toto) (detail). Installation at Henry Art Gallery. 2023.



Untitled (Glass). gelatin silver prints on glass. 2022. Installation at SandPoint Gallery. 2023.



Dorothy (No Toto) (detail). mixed media on panel. 2023.

Dorothy (No Toto)

I have always been drawn to creating fiction through my art, sometimes to the point that I deny my place in it. Initially, I struggled with the way that stories were being weaved out of personal experiences, anonymous artifacts, and fictional characters, but I've come to believe that all stories are. In some ways, the work remains at its most authentic within my studio, the space in which it was built. The studio was given to me as a (relatively) blank box and has since recorded every transformation of the project in floor scratches, smudges of material, hardware holes, and accumulated detritus. There, my history shows through the seams in the wallpaper. It is the result of time in a way that any gallery install cannot capture. Fabricating a domestic environment inside of an art studio or gallery is bound to feel like a set, but this connection is also an intentional reference to entertainment and its relationship with truth and illusion. Mystery in particular plays an important role in the work that I make. Curiosity and wonder call viewers closer. We are driven to know the unknown, and while my art embraces uncertainty, it still relies on this human tendency to elicit attention.

Dorothy (No Toto) is inspired by a *Wizard of Oz* themed nutcracker I purchased at a thrift store. In my research, I found an exact replica of the doll on Ebay listed as "Dorothy (no Toto)". Evidently, Toto is easy to lose in this edition of the fictional duo. Referencing the pet door in *While You Were Out*, Toto, though absent, is an important character to the narrative. In the installation, a dog bowl full of candy (the same seen in *They Smiled*) sits on the ground, calling Toto home, while Dorothy stands, heartbroken and vengeful, in the display case. *The Wizard of Oz* is about a dream world full of false promises for solving the problems of reality back home. In the 1939 film, Dorothy emerges from and returns to a black and white consciousness, validating my decision to use charcoal to represent a desaturated Dorothy within the painted backdrop of deep purple blue. With this piece, I have utilized a classic story to offer a new one. Dolls are a horror trope due primarily to the uncanny nature of a small inanimate object in the image of a child. We are disturbed by that which mimics reality (and more specifically humanity) too closely, as well as the notion that the inanimate has agency. This psychological impulse allows me to generate the feeling of unease that accompanies the work throughout *The Closet Room*.



Power Off. mixed media installation at Henry Art Gallery 2023.



Power Off (detail). acrylic on television. 2023. (above)

Power Off Installation at Henry Art Gallery. 2023 (below)



Power Off

I make this work as I transition from my twenties to my thirties. Becoming an adult has reoriented my perception of my childhood and my family relationships, as I am sure it does for everyone. My relationship with my father changed significantly in the years leading to his death in January of 2022, in the midst of my first year in the graduate program. His story is one I am not prepared to tell in entirety, but it appears in the work, both intentionally and inevitably. Two days after my father's death was his brother's, followed by Professor Doug Jeck's two weeks later. It was as if my father's death reverberated, echoing loss into my life. I was becoming familiar with death in a way I never had before. I knew I was going home to take my father off life support, but I wasn't expecting to see his body had changed shape so significantly that it was clear he couldn't fit inside of it any longer. This is what a liminal space looks like, somewhere between life and death.

Power Off is the setup within the installation that most directly calls upon memories of my father. My dad worked third shift for a lot of my childhood. If he wasn't at work, he'd be on the couch, sitting in front of the TV into the late hours, never sleeping on a schedule (or in a place) that made sense to anyone else. He taught me that breakfast was as good a time as any for dinner and the best way to eat it was in the company of the TV. For eight months prior to his death, he was secretly living with his mother in her 1 bedroom assisted living apartment⁴ (which he only got away with because my grandmother blackmailed the secretary). He slept on the recliner every night, drifting in and out of sleep under the flicker of the TV. I took the other recliner one night to watch over him after being released from the hospital. He didn't have all his mental faculties and he attempted to crawl into my grandmother's twin sized medical bed with her. She emerged from the bedroom in her nightgown with her dentures out and took the recliner next to me despite my insistence that we get my dad out of her bed. There we sat, my father's mother and my father's daughter, in the dim light of the TV: exhausted, worried, frustrated. *The Closet Room* is imbued with this generational residue, where time leaks through relationships.

⁴ My father lived in my apartment with my two roommates and I for six months prior to this, after the culmination of his mental breakdown. We had not anticipated that his physical health would decline so suddenly, and I was not prepared to be the advocate and caretaker that I was suddenly expected to be. We struggled for a year to get him on disability, to find him housing, and to get him the medical help he needed. He died before this country even attempted to help him. To understand ourselves in relation to the home we must consider what damage displacement from belonging can cause.

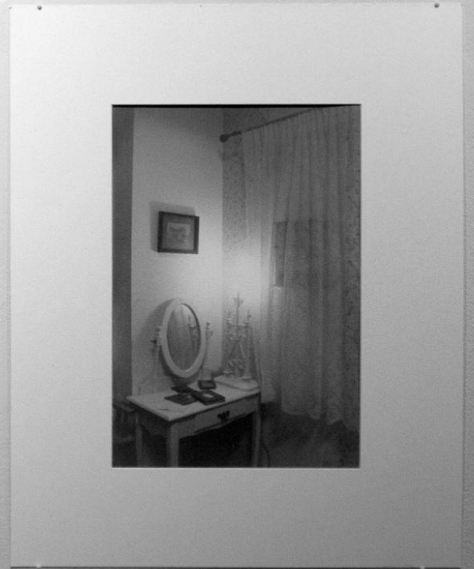
In this set-up, ceramic remote controls accompany the TV painting and represent the illusion of control that we have over our lives. Press the buttons, but the television will continue to project static. Creating this work is an act of both taking and surrendering control. Art making is, for me, an essential exertion of control. It is a safe place in which I make, break, and submit to rules governed by the material, the discipline, and pure intuition. My practice comes from the frustration of unobtainable jurisdiction over my mind, the future, and the world. Making allows me to exert my authority, but never fails to remind me that *nothing* is without its own limits. Art forces me to fail despite my best efforts. Craving control, fearing failure, and thinking in absolutes are psychological obstacles I contend with in every aspect of my life, certainly in my practice. The work does not offer a solution, for I don't believe there is one. It accepts the lack of control, the unknown, the gray areas, and the inconstancy of the human experience. After a great deal of authorship, discipline, re-decision, and patience, the narrative surrenders to inevitable uncertainty.



Remote Control. Ceramic. Installation at Henry Art Gallery. 2023.

Gelatin Silver Prints of Studio Installation:





Untitled. gelatin silver prints of studio installation. Installed at SandPoint Gallery. 2023. (above)
Untitled. gelatin silver print of studio installation. 2023. (below)



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