

Submission for The Edward J. Czwartacki Award for Short Fiction

“Translation”

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Translation

Ren saw Caitlyn on a Tuesday sitting at a steel-grated café table with a man he did not know. Caitlyn listened to the man talk and stirred with a silver spoon the tea in her beige mug. Then she laughed—the deep, honest laugh reserved for close friends and lovers—and tapped her spoon against the rim of the mug before placing it neatly on a pink linen napkin. Caitlyn clutched her burgundy sweater when a gust of wind rushed across the veranda, and Ren watched her long black skirt flit solemnly on the breeze when her napkin fell off the table. Caitlyn’s spoon skipped across the patio, alerting a waiter at a nearby table, and she smiled as she reached for her man’s hand.

Ren, mesmerized by her familiar mannerisms, pretended to read his book and ordered another cup of coffee. Seven years separated their last happy, breathless summer together from the cooler nights of adulthood, yet suddenly at that particular café, they were only a few feet apart. Ren had thought of Caitlyn occasionally over the course of time: the pumpkin-scented candles scattered throughout her old apartment, comfortable Sundays reading together in the sun-speckled park, Caitlyn making breakfast while pirouetting around the kitchen in Ren’s cross country t-shirt and white cotton socks. Her hair was much longer back then, almost halfway down her back, and it tangled in their lips as they rolled on cheap cotton sheets. But for the most part, Caitlyn was exactly as Ren remembered her. The years had been kind to her; a certain worldly grace had polished her girlish charms. Ren wished he could say the time had been as beneficial for him, but the years had cruelly increased his insecurities and attacked his hairline.

Ren followed Caitlyn home, working hard to keep her head visible through the people walking down the sidewalks of the busy Philadelphia streets. He watched Caitlyn wrap her arms around her man’s waist as the two of them waited for a light to turn, and the couple eventually made it to her doorstep, where Caitlyn’s man leaned against the door as she fumbled with her keys. Caitlyn kissed the man as the door

closed behind them. Ren waited until the light turned on in the apartment before he walked home.

Ren spent the next day in the museum. While he was standing in front of an impressionistic painting, a small group of schoolchildren following a tour guide caught his attention. He watched as a brown-haired boy and a freckled girl held their arms out; they were tightrope walking along the seam between the granite tiles.

“I bet you can’t get all the way to the next painting,” the girl said from behind the boy.

“I definitely can,” the boy responded.

Their teacher shushed the two of them, and the children continued their balancing act quietly. Just before the boy caught up to the rest of the group at the next painting, the girl pushed him off the seam. Ren smiled, recalling a backpacking trip through Europe with Caitlyn, namely their afternoon at Père Lachaise.

Ren could remember how beautiful the cemetery was, how they were happy to walk around after hours on the train. Life surrounded death: manicured bushes and flowers splashed alive with sunlight; chipped stone and unhinged, cracked doors draped in shadow. Elm-shaded cobblestone walkways weaved through the mausoleums and gravestones, some mossed over and gray from years of abuse.

Ren had carried their things in a backpack. Caitlyn thumbed through a guidebook purchased in the small shop across the street, where she had attempted French, only to find out the woman behind the register was raised in North Carolina. They shared a long baguette sandwich as Ren leaned his back against the trunk of an oak tree. Caitlyn laid her head on his thigh and laughed at how terrible they both smelled.

“I think it’s mostly you,” Ren said.

“Oh, ha ha.” Caitlyn dog-eared a page describing Chopin’s burial plot; she had been going through the book and marking the plots she wanted to see the most.

“Where are we going next?” Ren asked.

“I think we should start with Balzac, and then go from there.”

They had followed curving walkways and balanced on concrete curbs with their arms outstretched. They visited the gravesites as they were listed in the book, zigzagging across familiar intersections and past previously-seen landmarks. Balzac had a monumental gravestone, with a bust glittering atop it; Chopin’s was adorned with a drooping woman carved in what looked like white marble; Proust was buried under nothing but a polished slab of dark stone. Pissarro rests with his family, under a white stone with black chiseled letters.

Standing in front of Wilde’s stone, which was spotted with lipstick marks—kisses of hundreds of admirers—they watched as a small older woman with a blue purse leaned to kiss the stone herself. Several onlookers chuckled, and Caitlyn told Ren to turn around.

“What for?” he asked.

“I have to get something out of the bag.”

Caitlyn dug into Ren’s knapsack, checking pockets intently until she found a tube of cherry lip balm. Caitlyn smeared it on her lips and rushed over to where the woman stood, and she sheepishly kissed the stone. The woman laughed and hugged her, and Ren watched Caitlyn talk to her. Ren had only been able to hear one thing the woman said, *d’être constant*.

Ren walked out of the museum and took a cab toward his apartment. His breath lightly fogged the back window as he watched the city zooming through the glass. The night air stampeded around the city corners, and people walking under lit streetlights hugged their lapels. Ren paid the driver his fare and walked to a convenience store with

a red neon sign in its front window, where he bought a few small items and made his way home on foot. On the way, Ren stopped at Caitlyn's apartment and pulled a red tube of Chapstick from his plastic bag. Ren placed it in her letterbox.

* * *

Ren was on his way to work, walking along Market Street, when a light curtain of tiny snowflakes danced its way down the city skyline. None of it stuck, but it was a welcome sight after an autumn that stretched into a dry and uneventful start to winter. The air was still cold and bitter, but the snow added something to the season—almost a sense of warmth—and Ren was pleased to see it. The snow continued to fall throughout the morning, steadily and drowsily, and in between phone calls and meetings Ren watched the flakes drift like dandelion seeds past his office window. The snow stopped by lunchtime, reduced to puddles and slushy spots on the sidewalks, and the week continued on normally. Work was slightly busy for the holidays; Ren was involved in organizing an advertising campaign with a rising pharmaceutical company, which brought a considerable check along with it.

Winter eased its way farther from autumn, days shortened, and snowstorms got heavier than those prior. One dry and cold Saturday, Ren spent a considerable amount of time in Center City, leafing through fiction anthologies, magazines, and large art collection books. Ren decided to stop for lunch and a drink at a small Irish pub he'd never before entered—for some reason, its plain sign caught his eye from Sixteenth—and he spent an hour drinking Smithwick's and chatting with the bartender.

Ren paid his tab and added a tip before starting the walk home. The air was bitter, and he tucked his chin into his upturned collar as he walked. While he stood at an intersection waiting for the light to change, Ren noticed something in a store window that surprised him. He stepped toward the window for a closer look, and he was amazed to see what looked like Caitlyn's necklace in the display.

There was a day in January of their senior year when Ren had woken to his phone ringing across the room. He got up and answered the phone. It was Caitlyn.

“Hey, did I wake you?”

“Yeah,” Ren answered, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Well, classes are cancelled today,” Caitlyn said. “I made it all the way to the Agriculture building before I found out. The class was completely empty.”

Ren looked out the window. “There’s no one out there. You walked all the way to the Ag building without checking?”

“Yeah, I almost bit it twice too: once right on the sidewalk outside my apartment, and then again when I was going up the steps to class. My boots were the loudest thing in the building.”

“Thanks for calling to let me know.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I’m going to go back to sleep. I’ll walk over later.”

“Love you.”

“Love you too.”

Ren had ventured out of his apartment sometime around eleven that morning, squeezing past store owners shoveling snow off the sidewalks. On his way to Caitlyn’s apartment, Ren smiled at people in town laughing through the scarves wrapped across their mouths. He stopped in a bottle shop and bought two bottles of liquor, and in a flower shop, he bought a small bouquet of paperwhites arranged around a single poinsettia, following the recommendation of the woman behind the counter.

Ren stepped into Caitlyn’s apartment to find her balled up on her couch, wrapped in the red comforter from her bed. Caitlyn stood, still comfortably adorned in her favorite white sweatpants and a Penn State hooded sweatshirt. Caitlyn took the flowers and bottles so Ren could take off his coat, and then she kissed him, hugging the

flowers to his back. “Your lips are cold,” she said, filling a glass water pitcher to use as a vase.

They watched television on the couch, munching on Triscuits and using the snow that collected on Caitlyn’s balcony to make frozen tropical drinks that they sipped from cheap, mismatched wine glasses. In Caitlyn’s bedroom, they made love and lay prone on her soft, pink sheets. They left the curtains open, and the sunlight poured over their bodies as they rolled atop the rose-colored, cotton ocean—they the tides crashing, searching, longing, finding. Ren had laid his head on Caitlyn’s stomach and watched the sun fall in the rectangles created by the window panes—the rectangles twisted and curved across her smooth breasts, like sheets of thin silk—and he kissed her stomach as her necklace glinted in his eye.

It was a simple necklace, made of a thin silver chain adorned with a round-cut sapphire stone, from which dangled two small diamonds set in a curved piece of white gold. Caitlyn had worn it more frequently than any other piece of jewelry Ren could recall. He would watch as she held the pendant between the thumb and forefinger of her left hand, lightly spinning it back and forth calmly while watching television or thinking to herself. In class discussions, Caitlyn would instinctively check to make sure the glittering blue stone was centered, and once her fingers found the small sapphire pendant, she would slide it absently back and forth along the chain before letting it fall under her chin.

Ren was astonished by the similarity of the necklace in the store window to the one that used to adorn Caitlyn’s neck, and he walked inside and purchased it immediately. Ren stopped the older man behind the counter from displaying it neatly in a long, black velveteen box, and the man nodded and handed Ren the necklace and a receipt. Ren stuffed both in his pocket and exited the boutique before hailing a cab to take him home. In the back seat, Ren removed the necklace from his pocket and

fastened it around his neck. The necklace had gotten cold in the few minutes it took Ren to hail the cab, but it quickly warmed against his skin.

Cold air whipped against Ren's face as he stepped out of the cab. He walked hurriedly down the sidewalk before ducking into a small shop, and grateful to be out of the cold, he bought a few small items. He left two of them, a paperwhite and a poinsettia, in Caitlyn's letterbox.

* * *

It was a week later when Ren followed some coworkers into a bar after work. The work day had been a particularly stressful one, so they were pleased to trade stale coffee and cooler water for pint glasses and paper napkin coasters. They sat on tall stools and leaned against the mahogany bar, while occasionally glancing at the people at the front door discussing whether to sit at the bar or eat dinner in the restaurant side. They had just made it through their second round of drinks when Ren considered leaving, eyeing the door and fingering the handle of his briefcase. It was just as one of Ren's coworkers stood to leave—a clear opportunity for Ren's departure as well—when Ren turned to the door, only to see Caitlyn step inside, chatting with an attractive woman while casually removing her overcoat and draping it over her arm. The hostess seated the two of them in the restaurant, just out of sight from where Ren ordered another beer.

Ren liked knowing Caitlyn was in the building; he didn't expect to see her, and he was mere moments from missing her entirely. Caitlyn had her hair pinned up effortlessly with a tortoise-shell clip, and she wore a white button-down blouse and dark gray pants. She walked assuredly in her high heels, and she looked as though she had also just finished her workday. Ren wondered where Caitlyn worked. He could imagine her working for a pharmaceutical company, seated at one end of a long oak table, working late into the night on a presentation and laughing with her coworkers

with a slice of pizza in her hand. Or maybe Caitlyn was a teacher, thudding a heavy textbook onto a podium before launching into an introductory lecture on biochemistry. Caitlyn had had such a desire to make something of her biology degree—she was always buried in books and meeting with teachers, talking constantly about graduate work in molecular biology.

Ren finished his beer and walked to the bathroom. On the way, he peeked into the restaurant and saw Caitlyn sitting with her friend; the two of them sat quietly, perusing the menu and looking up to remark on the items that were appealing. Caitlyn reached for her wine glass, and as she sipped from its rim her lips left a delicate smudge on the clear crystal. Caitlyn's friend said something that made Caitlyn put down her menu and raise her left hand. Caitlyn placed her glass on the table and smiled, leaning forward to show her friend the glittering ring on her finger. The engagement band was new since the last time Ren had seen her. Caitlyn gave her friend time to look at it before nodding at the waiter that she was ready to order.

Ren left the restaurant half an hour later, shaking hands and waving to the coworkers who were still scattered throughout the bar. It was a comfortable night for early January, and Ren decided to take a walk. He walked toward Olde City, in search of nothing in particular, when he recognized a coffee shop. The lights were still on and several people were inside reading books and typing on laptops, and Ren decided to stop in for tea. The coffee shop was just as he remembered it: artsy people behind the counter, an old register with wooden buttons that *ka-chinged* with each sale, tables etched with doodles and names, those same black mugs emblazoned with "Olde City Coffee" in gray block lettering. Some bored customer had scratched the word "City" off his mug. Ren sat at a table near the window, and he sipped his tea and stared at the adjacent building. He counted the stories up from the sidewalk, counted the windows from the fire escape on the right. Ren couldn't remember which apartment it was, but it

was, without a doubt, the same building in which he and Caitlyn shared the last of their time together.

Ren and Caitlyn had taken over the lease after Caitlyn's sister's friend decided she needed an apartment closer to her job, and they moved into the apartment sometime in the early summer. Their parents helped them move their things: boxes with permanent marker labels, cheap furniture that survived college, framed prints and photographs, plants to go on the windowsills. Ren and Caitlyn spent a few weeks together—the time passed in the flipping of Caitlyn's sandals against the heels of her feet, in the constant swivel of the fan that sat in the corner of their kitchen—before Caitlyn started graduate school at UPenn and Ren landed a freelance job in an in-house advertising agency.

Ren and Caitlyn learned how to accept spending more time with coworkers under fluorescent lights than with each other. To Ren, the week became a constant balance of working days and tired nights. He spent time with Caitlyn watching sitcom reruns with microwaved rice and chicken breast dinners. The months passed, and their breath left like steam from their mouths as they ventured out in woolen scarves for late lunches and coffee in paper cups tucked into cardboard sleeves. The apartment was warm even as the air got colder—hissing radiators covered in thick white semi-gloss—as Ren tried to hold Caitlyn close in t-shirts and pajama pants.

The winter brought Ren notoriety for his work on a national advertising campaign, and he accepted a consulting job with a computer company based out of Austin, Texas. He took short trips—two nights, three days, and back into Philadelphia for dinner on Thursdays—but the trips were draining and the job meant even less time with Caitlyn. Caitlyn started to get deeper into her graduate work, spreading proposals, textbooks, and Dr. Carson's research notes across their kitchen table while sipping on Earl Grey tea. They started watching television on the couch with laptops, started

washing the coffee machine before bed and setting the timer for the morning. The nights they spent together were marked by stress and invaluable sleep; the mornings were announced by separate alarm clocks—Caitlyn’s was set to her favorite CDs, like Dashboard, the Beatles, or Joni Mitchell, while Ren’s broke its silence with an abrupt siren-like beeping.

As months passed, Ren and Caitlyn proved unable—inexperienced and unready—to maintain a relationship while juggling different career goals. Ren could remember inane arguments leaving the two of them indignant in separate rooms, thumbing through paperbacks or flipping through channels. But they had pushed on regardless, maybe just to ensure they would have someone to sleep with or next to. Four months after his first consultant job, Ren was offered another in Washington, D.C., which was unexpected and much more lucrative. Caitlyn was spending a considerable amount of time in the lab, and she was tiring of her translation work with Dr. Carson and also with the program’s lack of funding. It showed in her eyes, their bed, and her conversation.

It was sometime in April, after a string of dry days, when Ren and Caitlyn had decided to take a weekend trip to New York City to catch up with some friends. They each took a short day on Friday, and they drove to New York in Caitlyn’s maroon Saturn through the sunny afternoon. They checked into their hotel and met Ren’s old roommate Tim for dinner. Tim was working as an intern for the Daily News at the time, and Ren and Caitlyn met him in a bar, where they drank dark beer and laughed about blurry nights and sober days in State College. After dinner, Tim walked them back to the hotel and left them for the night, and Ren and Caitlyn visited the hotel bar before stumbling back to their room.

They spent the next morning walking through the city, stopping in aromatic flower shops, antique book stores with overflowing shelves, and busy coffee shops. They met Natalie, Caitlyn’s best friend from high school, in a restaurant for lunch; she

brought a date, an older man named Michael with lightly graying hair and a blue v-necked sweater. The restaurant was lively, with plenty of windows and large drink glasses, and the conversation was light and comfortable. Natalie started telling Caitlyn about her job as a nurse at Mount Sinai, and Caitlyn began to talk about her work at UPenn, airily going into detail about her frustrations, when Michael asked what she wanted to do beyond her protein synthesis work with Dr. Carson. Caitlyn had responded that she wasn't exactly sure, but she hinted at her fatigue with her mentor, and she wanted to work on something more *meaningful*, to which Michael nodded in understanding. Ren and Caitlyn left Natalie and Michael right outside the restaurant, and they watched them speed away in a cab before heading in the other direction to window shop and spend the rest of the day together.

Ren and Caitlyn returned to Philadelphia and went back to work. Ren had to leave on Tuesday for Miami, and when he got back on Thursday Caitlyn told him her news. On Natalie's urgings, Michael had called a childhood friend, a Dr. Stephen Hastings from Columbia University. In Ren's absence, Caitlyn had gone back to the city for lunch to meet the doctor, who was experimenting with RNAi, a regulator of gene expression. Michael introduced Caitlyn to his friend, and the three of them ate lunch together before Dr. Hastings suggested to Caitlyn the possibility of transferring to Columbia. The lab work was more engaging, more groundbreaking, and the program had greater funding than Dr. Carson in Philadelphia. Ren was hurt, caught unaware and surprised to not have seen it coming, and as he tried to collect himself, Caitlyn told him she was going to send an application to Columbia the following Monday.

In May and June, Caitlyn left Ren to stay with Natalie almost every weekend, and then one day Ren helped her move into a single bedroom apartment in the Upper West Side. Ren talked with Caitlyn on the phone every day—ears warm and pressed against plastic cell phones, staring up at the spikes in the stucco ceiling—but their conversations drifted from cheery anecdotes to work-related reports separated by deep,

exhausted yawns. Ren waited for Caitlyn to come home for the Fourth of July, and Caitlyn had arrived late Friday night carrying a small black suitcase.

As they sat on a park bench on Saturday afternoon, Ren had pulled a small, square black box out of his pocket and knelt on the concrete sidewalk. He could remember waiting as Caitlyn cried, and he sat back down on the bench when she answered no. (Ren knew what a puerile move it was to offer Caitlyn a ring—desperate, selfish, and unfair—and he couldn't say he really expected her to accept.) They started talking less, seeing each other less, and eventually Ren found consolation in a brunette named Cassidy from his bank. Ren hadn't seen Caitlyn or heard from her in seven years and four months until he saw her back in Philadelphia at a café in the fall.

Two days after seeing Caitlyn in the bar, Ren saw her in a grocery store, adorned in blue jeans and a black wool coat as she pensively walked through the aisles with a blue plastic basket containing a loaf of wheat bread. Caitlyn's powder blue and white scarf dangled unevenly, the left side much shorter than the right, and as she walked she batted the longer end, sometimes grasping it loosely and letting the tassels dangle between her fingers. Ren watched her browse through the shampoo aisle before finally settling on a bottle and putting it in her basket. In the next aisle, Caitlyn stopped in front of the toothpaste section, seemingly overwhelmed by the diversity of choices—mint, citrus, whitening, tartar control—and Ren smiled when she picked one tube up puzzledly before placing it back neatly on the shelf.

Ren walked to where Caitlyn was standing, and he waited for a moment before saying something absently about the absurdity of so many choices.

Caitlyn chuckled not at the joke, but out of politeness. "I think I want to try a new type. But I have to say I'm a little hesitant in having to use a whole tube of foul-tasting toothpaste because of an impulse buy," she said.

“I didn’t see a toothpaste tasting booth anywhere, no Ritz crackers covered in Crest,” Ren said. “But maybe you can just squeeze toothpaste tubes onto your finger to test them.”

“Now there’s an idea,” Caitlyn said. She was smiling, and she tilted her head slightly. “Maybe you can keep a lookout for stock boys.”

“The headline could read: Toothpaste Bandit Strikes CVS. Conspiracy Dubbed ‘Colgate’ by Officials,” Ren said.

Ren could hear a forced quality in Caitlyn’s laughter, and he didn’t think his joke was funny enough to warrant such a laugh. “I think I’ll just stick with the same kind as last time,” Caitlyn said. As she reached for another package, Ren noticed the ring on her finger.

“Congratulations on the engagement,” Ren said.

Caitlyn pulled her hand back, smiled, and ran her fingers through her hair, as though embarrassed by the ring. “Thank you,” she replied. Ren noticed a change in Caitlyn’s stance, and she reached forward and pulled a tube of whitening toothpaste off the shelf and placed it in her shopping basket. “Have a nice day,” she said, turning to walk away.

Caitlyn stopped after a few steps and turned around. “It was nice to see you... You look good,” she said.

“You too.”

Ren watched her turn at the end of the aisle, and he continued on with his purchases before getting in line to check out. He had only a few items in his shopping cart, and the cashier indifferently slid each over the laser scanner as the register beeped and the price rose. Ren’s eyes searched the nearby checkout lanes, wondering if they would find Caitlyn there, but she was gone. The cashier mentioned something about his hopes for an early spring as Ren handed him the money for the groceries. The cashier

dumped a handful of change in Ren's palm and wished him a pleasant weekend, and Ren ventured home.

Ren carried two plastic bags in the warming, early springtime sun; the sunlight knifed through the buildings, stretching shadows across the sidewalks that hewed lines through small clouds of steam rising through metal grates. As he hurried through an intersection, Ren could feel the necklace around his neck jostle as the pendant slid over his left shoulder, eventually falling to his back between his shoulder blades. It pulled the light chain taut around his neck, applying just enough pressure to cause discomfort. Ren finally reached his apartment building, where he nodded to the doorman and caught an elevator. When the elevator doors opened, Ren stepped out and shifted the plastic bags to the same hand in anticipation of having to open the door to his apartment. Ren pushed his key into the slot for the deadbolt and then the door handle, making a mild racket as he threw his keys to the coffee table.

Ren could hear the water running in the kitchen sink. "Did you remember the eggs?" Michelle called.

Ren put the bags on the floor and undid several of the buttons of his shirt; the necklace clasp was right in the front, and he took it off easily and placed it in his pocket. Michelle turned her head when Ren entered the kitchen, and Ren put the bags gently on the kitchen table. She continued washing a stainless steel pan in the sink as he walked up behind her and placed his hands on her hips—Michelle's hair was pinned back; her neck offered a hint of her light, fruity perfume, which tasted bitter on his lips. She turned and they kissed; her arms draped around his neck, they were posed as though about to dance.

"I got everything but the eggs," Ren said, and Michelle laughed and pushed him playfully away. She returned to scrubbing the pan, which they had left in the sink the night before, after a marginal attempt at Veal Oscar.

Ren put the carton of eggs next to the sink and started to put the contents of the plastic bags away. “Eggs, how did you know?” Michelle said.

Michelle had just shut the water off when Ren dangled the necklace over her right shoulder. She took the necklace excitedly, spinning to kiss him, and draped the necklace across her neck. She asked Ren to help her put it on and turned back around, and as Ren hooked the clasps around her neck, Michelle picked the pendant off her skin and held it with her fingertips—the shape of her hands made a heart, the pendant a dazzling, sinuous cleft through its center, reaching from her thumbs to her forefingers. She smiled as she remarked how much she loved the thought.

They spoke of love in the bedroom; sweaty and unclothed, they lay tangled atop their silken, shiny sheets. Michelle ran her hands gently through Ren’s hair; it tickled his scalp, and he closed his eyes dreamily. Ren lightly grazed her bare stomach with his dancing fingers as goosebumps raised on her skin. Michelle got up to walk to the bathroom, and when she closed the door behind her, Ren lay staring at the ceiling, trying to follow a single slat on the spinning ceiling fan before he closed his eyes. He felt dizzy, unsure of whether he should blame the rotating fan or his pounding heart, when the latch on the bathroom door clicked open again.

Ren watched as Michelle stood in the doorway with her long brown hair hanging over her left shoulder, highlighting the sparkling jewels resting upon her smooth skin. She walked slowly toward him and stopped in the middle of the room. “What are you thinking about?” she asked.

Ren didn’t know what to say; he felt as if his mind had been wandering and in the moment at the same time. Michelle tilted her head to the left—so slight, so honest—and she asked him again.

“You just look so beautiful,” Ren answered.

Ren went to work on Monday, missing the warmth of his apartment, the comfort of Michelle's touch. The thought of Caitlyn stayed with him over the next few days. It was strange to think that he could live without Caitlyn for so long and suddenly desire to see her everywhere, but Ren half expected her to appear at adjacent tables during his lunch breaks, perhaps nibbling on a chocolate chip scone or stabbing at a pasta salad. Caitlyn was, of course, nowhere to be seen.