

# *Ear Rock*

*Jeff Lee Byrem*

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## *Ear Rock*

Mothers' dreams fly away: a son  
lies limp, his fire cold, his flesh—  
six-years-old and hardly used—is  
ripped and frayed; a daughter,  
older—stars and bars on her  
fatigues—sees the flash, feels the  
killing heat but doesn't hear the  
crushing sound. Metallica pounds  
in young men's helmets, bombs  
pummel, F-18's roar, and tank treads  
scream, but all of it is drowned out  
by the clinking of fine china cups  
on delicate saucers, sitcom  
laughter and American Idols,  
a beauty's sigh when a perfect rose  
is placed in her perfect hand,  
and throbbing hearts as flatscreens  
take places of honor on their stands.

*At the Edge of an Affair*

A sunny field lies before them,  
a darkened hedgerow behind;  
sweet clover and warm sun beckon,  
nurturing and necessary.

Safety lies in the cool constancy  
of the shadowed hedgerow,  
but sharp briars, damp earth  
and hunger hint mortality.

They long to frolic and banquet  
among the blooms but within the  
meadow loiters fang and claw, waiting  
for those willing to risk fatality.

Ever resident in the hedgerow they  
avoid the predatory slash but will die;  
in the meadow, they will taste ecstasy  
but may die. At the edge—

despite the pretense of choice  
appetite leaves no recourse, and  
they emerge into the sun  
one terrified step at a time.

## *Waiting and Watching*

Green palms by the hundreds hold  
sunlight at bay. Damp earth and  
cool air touch me; a zephyr whispers  
that Fall is where we're headed.  
Between the oaks, bottom tickling  
whiskers scatter sunlight like  
diamond pinpricks across the lawn.  
The lowering sun burnishes buildings  
with browns and golds and warms  
the wrinkled Old Men of the Green,  
erect despite their age. Beneath their  
open arms dart pixied coeds full of  
fuss and pride who will not notice  
when the old men drop their cloaks,  
or greening, put them on again.

## *Grand Mesa Rush Hour*

When I awake and reconnoiter, the only sound is the rhythmic rattling of my companion's deep sleep. I slip from my night womb and open my eyes to a starlit Canyonland, seeing all things from distant promontories to my sneaker clad feet in varying shades of grays and blues. Windsound wraps round me like Mother's breath. The air chills my nostrils as I draw in what is left of the night. Far off, three sharp yips echo—a prankster on the prowl. I walk to the Mesa's edge, my eyes drawn to the fast-rising spectrum in the east. Its black-purple crest pushes back Night's darker blue; a scratch of green and broader yellow band bare Day's grays and tans on the flats of the White Rim a thousand feet below, imprinted by the alien handprint of Stillwater Canyon in whose shadows the Green River moves unseen. Like buttes and mesas sixty miles removed, I wait, silent and steadfast, for what has been their morning ritual for millions of years.

As the dawn evolves, dry stream tracings appear on the Rim, and regiments of sage come to my attention in the rising light. We wait for life giving sun, the sage and I, but it is only me who looks toward the mountains—in jagged silhouette against an orange wall—until the sun's rim flashes between two peaks and chases my eyes from what it is I've come to see.

*Kate's Shop*

I strip naked  
a beacon mole ignites  
birth marks shout  
and strangers excise  
with scalpel words  
or mark as beauty  
pieces of me

## *Saturday Night Summit*

As we climb from Overtime Valley, we begin where we've always begun, crossing a shallow stream, its murmurs unchanged from last our feet touched familiar rocks in the crossing. Eunuchs spread their arms in welcome, green palms skyward, hiding us from outside eyes. We stride the early grade at leisure pace, our hearts barely taxed as we brush skin to skin—akin to a sibling's caress—on the narrowing trail. We reach a place where the eunuchs have opened the canopy, and we see in the view a hint of what comes further up the slope. Our pace quickens despite the rising grade. We pass the point where we no longer linger or look behind. The pinnacle in sight, we focus on the stepping, step, step, stepping, heart pounding, lungs burning, head throbbing, and then the peak—a shout escapes! All there is, is where we are, a place beyond our knowing, until we catch our breath and feel our bodies as our own. After unmeasured time, the valley calls to us and we smile, the habit of the summit already tempting us to retrace our steps next Saturday night.



## *Tall Ship*

The sturdy hull slams through the seas  
to gallop on free as you please,  
unrestrained by windblown hills,  
providing us toboggan thrills.

The sails are reefed and very taught,  
and our captain will forbear for naught;  
the course he's laid will not see change  
as across the bounding main we range.

But wait! Dead ahead see danger rise,  
a glistening rock of mammoth size  
as each trough passes does appear.  
Calm faces preside; inside there's fear.

We look to the stern for guidance clear  
as the ominous menace rushes too near.  
The quick skipper bellows over the sea,  
“Hands to your places! The helm's a lee!”

The sails do luff sounding like thunder.  
A sea breaks abeam, tearing asunder  
the order that once existed on deck,  
but seaman's skill keeps her in check.

We fall off the wind; the hazard is past—  
stress lies diminished abaft the mast.  
There are spirited shouts, a fine sleigh ride,  
off to Wood's Hole with favoring tide.

Approaching the dock we're sure we're born  
destined to sail the storms of Cape Horn,  
proud to have proved our courage was strong  
on a mighty sloop all of nineteen feet long.

## *The Perfect Pair*

For years the two of us have paced life hand  
in hand. Others enjoy the company we offer  
but within the walls of our relationship our  
love is but two thin coats of cold white plaster.

Walls protect our legal liaison from probing  
eyes and incendiary questions. Within our  
room, there is another wall you built ten  
courses tall with blocks I brought to you.

It divides our chamber evenly, leaving space  
for each of us to roam without scraping against  
anything rough. Though I sense your presence  
on the other side I cannot see the intimate you.

I used to long for what I cannot see, but I've  
learned persistence does not always pay; being  
alone is curable, the elixir intimacy, offered  
willingly, wantonly, warmly, never dutifully.

For too many years we've lived together, alone.  
Years of shared experiences and children  
are assets held in common, but there is nothing  
to declare were intimacy is held as currency.

## *Windwatchman*

He watches the jetsam sink through the clear blue, fading as it descends yet remaining within his reach if he chooses. Beside the surging sea, discordant chimes ring heard only by this singer of ballads. A memory emerges to enfold the daydreaming rhymer in the arms of a treasure lost overboard, tossed overboard to lighten life's boat. There is an instant when he could drop into the depths to retrieve the loss, but the home bound vessel would abandon him in its wake, he, treading water, feigning ignorance of the grave fear tapping on his chest, waiting for the last burning breath, clutching the treasure to his heart—fear of the fear battens down the windwatchman. Freed from the burden treasure, the vessel sails on, but time will gnaw the once saved ship's steel. A worried hulk, she'll slip to abyssal sleep beside the still burnished gold. Far above the cold deep, storm swells defy patience, encourage frenzied decisions, and command desperate measures that lose treasures temporarily salvaged during the tormented memories of a sailor's remorse.

## *A Summer Night*

A summer night, but an autumn evening,  
Cool breezes blowing, mutated trees swaying,  
Strange creatures falling from limb to limb,  
Bruised and broken, they're a hideous sight  
With five long arms reaching into the night.

Sad though it be, they are humans being.  
Their ancestors, through all fault of their own,  
Disregarded their role, ignored what was known  
Of the danger inherent in ignoring the tide  
Of politicians' excess and terrorist homicide.  
The power of the atom was a well-known thing,

But all the knowledge could not bring  
The greedy and selfish to forgive and desist,  
To soften their hearts, to unclench their fists.

Then a cataclysmic event;

The fabric of Man was rent.

What was left of that pitiful race  
Propagated and raised a fitful brace  
Of deformed beings worth nary a look,  
All brought on by power: it wanted, it took.

Our legacy need not be

A summer night, but an autumn evening,  
Cool breezes blowing, mutated trees swaying,  
Strange creatures falling from limb to limb,  
Bruised and broken, a hideous sight  
With five long arms reaching into the night,  
If we are willing to choose what is Right.

## *A Sad Stocking*

There is an old story about a sad stocking,  
Which begins in a stable; a mother is rocking  
To quiet her child's cries one midnight clear,  
While a star shined so brightly it seemed to be near.  
Its heavenly light reached far away to a land  
Of exotic oases and seas of white sand,  
Where wise men studied stars and began to unravel  
A mystery from scripture which led them to travel  
Long roads to the home of a boy, years away,  
Bearing gifts for the sweet child's happy birthday.  
Though centuries have passed we remember that act,  
With stars and shared gifts, as a matter of fact.  
You give me socks, a drill, and a tie.  
I give you a book and a toy that can fly.  
No one is forgotten, and all join the fun,  
As all stockings are filled to the brim except one;  
It belongs to the child who slept in the hay.  
Where's the gift for him, isn't this his day?  
What is it, I wonder, he'd wish for the most?  
It would not be gold nor heavenly hosts,  
But mercy and compassion at the top of his list,  
Making peace on earth our very best gift.

## *Bluebird Fly*

Bluebird fly, fresh and feathered,  
fleeing boundaries, never tethered,  
flip and twitter, hearty mite,  
dip and soar, stringless kite.

Tiny speck of a child's eye blue,  
you shame the sky's lesser hue,  
and jealous blooms wilt in sadness  
beside your ever-glittering gladness.

Chasing sunbeams seems your fate;  
yet, fierce pursuit does not abate  
the evident joy of your short life  
jubilation rich, ignoring strife.

When the sun pulls down the shade,  
you'll fold your wings in glen or glade,  
to await the morning's sunbeam clue,  
and anointment by sweet drops of dew.

*Albatross*

'Tis a magical bird that soars  
On stretching wings across the Southern Ocean,  
Years from land and reality,  
That dips beneath the waves,  
Wings tucked,  
Eyes open,  
Its momentum slowing  
Until it begins to fly through the water  
With laborious pulses of its tireless wings.  
It needs no air nor energy  
Beyond the pent-up energy  
It has stored within itself for countless years.  
It is drawn ever deeper toward some unknown place  
Far beneath the surface of the world.  
With depth, time passes in reverse,  
The age of it being shed  
Like so many unwanted feathers,  
Going back to a time when it was very young,  
An innocent alone with a powerful father,  
Who controlled and demanded all.  
Deep within the bosom of the sea hides a place,  
A cellar room,  
Dank and dark,  
But not wholly so.  
An evil glow emanates from somewhere within.  
Words are not spoken,  
But it is clear what it is I must do,  
Even though I don't want to,  
I don't want to,  
I don't want to do  
What only the Albatross remembers.

*Battle 49*

I yell loud enough  
For you to hear me through the wall;  
You yell back for the first time.  
I planted the seed of your attention;  
A millisecond growing season  
Yielded a harvest,  
But ergot guilt steals my profit.

The flash fire  
Has cleared the field;  
We decide to plant again,  
To take more care in nurturing the seedlings,  
As they push against the oppressive soil.

You claim the blush of freedom has you high;  
The sun has never felt so warm.  
I claim the warmth has withered  
My affections;  
Your freedom has left me free  
To be alone.

We volley without malice  
Until exhaustion brings a revelation.  
My needs are from another aeon  
Of Nelsons, Andersons and Cleavers,  
Repressed during three decades of equality.

Grudgingly I realize that what I admire--  
Your adherence to values long lost,  
Your tenacity among the whirlwind  
Of ebony and ivory ghetto progeny,  
Your tolerance of my eccentricities--  
Is born of freedom and equality.

I speculate that the glow of who you are  
Has long cast a light upon who I can be,  
Illuminating the possibility,  
It may be enough.



*Bernie*

The mental mantra is ever present,  
Taught to Billy by a mother  
Who believed what it alleged:  
*Bernie must've tripped  
And struck his poor head;  
No one knows how it happened;  
You know how kids are...*  
It was a tragedy to another mother,  
Well into her eighties,  
Who had heard the same words,  
But reconciled her heart  
To a mystery sown  
A half century ago.

All his life  
Billy had been drawn to a fantasy site,  
Deep in a church,  
Dark like the night,  
Where he imagined a boy  
Running pell-mell,  
Tripping or slipping,  
No one to tell,  
But voices kept whispering,  
Never quite near;  
When he tried listening  
He was forestalled by a fear  
Which silenced the voices  
That reached out from the past.

Despite fear's resistance,  
Persistence meandered through the lore,  
Puzzling pieces, keeping score.  
One day in the company  
Of a contingent of thoughts,  
Billy ran into Bernie;  
Oh, what it cost!

A window had opened, and Billy could see  
Far back to his childhood before he was three;  
His father was absent, studying at school;  
Billy was at home, biding his time,  
Until the day arrived  
When Daddy came home.  
They made for the church that same afternoon  
To meet Dad's old friends,  
But when they got there  
They were alone.

After a time  
A curly haired angel appeared,  
Little Bernie boy;  
He lived next to the church,  
Often played in its halls,  
Perfection in a snow suit,  
All of five years old.

It was Billy's place to say,  
Why not come play with us?  
We'll pretend the janitor's closet  
Is a magical place of wizards and wonders!  
Bernie followed unconcerned,  
Feeling safe in a place  
Where nothing would harm him,  
Especially if a daddy is there,  
But when Bernie turned around  
The devil was where  
The daddy had been but a second before;  
The devil reached out and bolted the door.

Bernie was whimpering,  
Billy, scalding mad!  
After those absent weeks  
Bernie was the aim of Billy's dad,  
Who softly begged Bernie  
To perform a perversion,  
Then asked Billy to show him  
Just what he should do,

But Billy refused and pouted;  
He wouldn't do more.  
The Daddy was fuming;  
He wanted to score  
With God's little angel.

Billy wanted Bernie to die for stealing his dad;  
Though Billy was small, he knew the man  
And knew he needed his power.  
The seconds flashed by;  
Bernie started to shout,  
Calling for his mother to save him  
From the hell of that snapshot spell.  
Billy relished his rival's suffering,  
Reaching ecstasy  
When his father rasped warnings,  
Threatening to extinguish  
The boy on the spot,  
But Bernie kept calling,  
Mommy! Mommy! Mommy!  
The sound reverberates still.

The father grabbed a broom stick,  
Cocked at the ready for Bernie to see,  
A devilish batsman demanding silence.  
When Bernie persisted,  
The cudgel flashed!  
Bernie lay still.

Elation replaced the anger  
Billy felt for the contender who had  
The attention of his Dad,  
Who now was maniacal,  
Gurgling with rage,  
Accusing the boy whose victory was done,  
*Look at what you've made me do!*  
If you'd done your part  
He wouldn't be gone!

It was at that instant  
A brand was emblazoned on Bill:  
The imprint of guilt!  
For it was he who had willed  
That Bernie should die.

They ran from the church,  
Father and son,  
No one ever to know;  
They ran home to Mother,  
Not saying they had seen  
Little Bernie alone on the floor;  
Billy buried the memory,  
Locked tight the door,  
And created jailers to guard the key,  
So that no one would know it was he  
Whose jealous rage had murdered  
An angel.

The dungeon-bound secret  
Remained restrained,  
But fomenting torture just the same.  
Jailers grow tired after forty-five years,  
Yet it wasn't their voices Billy heard  
In the night of his thoughts;  
It was the voice of a tormented toddler  
Begging parole  
From his life sentence of shame.

Billy appealed to the courts of his consciousness--  
Justice ultimately reigned--  
His little child is finally free from the pain,  
But somewhere in this world  
Lives a man never charged  
For killing a curly haired angel,  
Bernie by name.

## *Blessed Are*

Well past deep midnight on this Christmas Eve,  
We lay in our beds tucked in snug as you please.  
Our stockings are hung as the story foretells  
And we sleep the deep sleep of those who do well.  
The job has its moments; the kids are a strain;  
Traffic's a nuisance, but all in all in the main,  
Life's a light burden we shoulder along,  
With a skip in our step, in our hearts a sweet song  
Of thanks that we own what it is we deserve,  
While a few miles away in poverty's preserve  
Squirm sad, sleepless children whose unlucky fate  
Will find them tomorrow with cold, barren plates  
On neglected tables, because no grownup is there;  
They've no bulging presents; they have no fair share  
Of the largess that plumps large not far away,  
Which begs the hard question: Is it their Christmas Day?  
Or is Christmas a day meant only for us,  
The blessed and the fortunate who have only to fuss  
About stuffing too dry or a shirt that's too small,  
Or worries about return lines overwhelming the mall.  
We don't care a wit for that poor, innocent child  
Whose life is not easy, whose destiny's filed  
Under throw away, discard, delete or reject,  
Whose fortune is not, like ours, one to elect.  
Perhaps this one day in the midst of our joy,  
We should take time to think of the poor baby boy  
Base born in a stable, and destined to be  
A man with no patience for the rich and wealthy;  
A man who cared deeply for the meek and the poor,  
Who'd never have turned a lost soul from his door.  
He once spoke with passion as clear as could be:  
"As you do unto them, so you do unto me."

## *Twins*

Bright lights, cold frights, jostling hum;  
Hard pulls, strange touches, delivered from  
An intimate cradle of warmth and wet  
To a rude table, they struggle and fret  
Over the perplexity of alien novelty,  
Not knowing the profit of being free.

One released from its loving home,  
The other rescued from a grasping tomb  
Of hard hunger and stimulant chemistry,  
Two souls lie blind to life's rich tapestry,  
Semblable additions to the great human brood.

One contractor declined the coarse and rude,  
And commanded choice constituents be used,  
Allowing nature's tradesmen to best infuse  
Into a living edifice their finest craft,  
Ensuring adherence to the Architect's draft.

The second builder in rampage frenetic,  
Clearly believed the house autogenetic;  
With hedonistic pursuits, chemically driven,  
The plan was refuted, the construct was riven,  
Which yielded a frail frame for occupancy  
Where pain ousts the love due all infancy.

## *The Way*

The way of the world  
    is avarice unfurled;  
A battle to acquire  
    the most from the mire  
Of intrigue and deceit,  
    avoiding defeat,  
Bathing in glitter  
    despite poor so bitter,  
The depths of despair  
    are all there is where  
Hunger and want  
    are specters that haunt  
With hatred so deep,  
    the have-nots can't keep  
The dream they are told  
    to heart they should hold:  
The belief that good will  
    will help them until  
Their child is well fed,  
    their pain is long dead,  
Their home *is* a home,  
    And not streets to roam,  
But the way of the world  
    is avarice unfurled;  
The keepers of wealth  
    of necessity use stealth  
To maintain their stash,  
    consolidate their cash,  
And pilfer the bereft  
    In a manner so deft  
They appear to be clean  
    despite behavior so mean,  
Their own lives won't count  
    in the Final Amount.

*Shaggy Dog Tale I: The Count*

Once long ago in a faraway land,  
Lived a king who ruled an irascible band  
Of fallen evil knights and deviant dukes,  
Who delighted in distributing edicts, rebukes,  
Upon the sad peasants with no clear choice,  
But to accept their sad lot, absent of voice.  
Fortunately for them there arose to their aid,  
A secret order of men devoted to raid  
The castles of evil, which created a strain  
That racked the king and threatened his reign.  
The king fought back with espionage quick!  
To capture a leader by the name of Count Rick,  
Born Richard d'Guilliarde, descendant of kings,  
But ancestry can't stop what treachery brings,  
Even when it's cloaked by a mantle of Good;  
Thus, came the shadow of the executioner's hood.  
Before the evil king gave the axe man his day,  
He provided salvation, provided the Count say  
Who were his compatriots, assistants, and mates,  
And also name meeting places, codes, and dates,  
T'would allow the king to put down the revolt,  
But Count Rick was heroic; he would not bolt  
The secret course carefully plotted and planned;  
Upon silence is where d'Guilliarde would stand.  
The king raged loudly, "It's vengeance I want!  
Only divulge your colleagues, and I'll not affront  
That fair neck of yours; the dread axe won't rise!"  
The Count remained silent, unwilling to apprise  
The king of names of the conspirators he led,

*Continued...*



So, the king cried out loudly, “Off with his head!”  
As the keen blade came down the Count’s way,  
He cried out, “Wait, wait! The truth I will say!”  
But the blade did its run, the Count, he was done;  
His last-minute plea was not intended to stun,  
Yet the King stood aghast; he had come so near;  
T’was impatience that lost what he wanted to hear.  
He recalled an adage that made his pulse quicken:  
*Don’t hatchet your Counts before they chicken.*

*Shaggy Dog Tale III. The Rarey*

In the Valley of the Hudson, in the town of Tivoli,  
Lived a lovely woman whose name was Madeline McGee.  
Maddy had an appreciation for all things odd and queer,  
And one day when she came to shop, I gave a little cheer,  
Because I owned a plant so odd, I couldn't find a buyer.  
I knew Maddy'd buy the thing, easily paying higher  
Than any other fool in town, or even from the county.  
I had a feeling Maddy's purse would offer me a bounty  
Not equaled since Van Weasel bought that sickened rose,  
Which fetched a local uproar that caused my doors to close,  
Until I calmed Van Weasel by telling him, "Have sense!  
I regret that ill begotten rose, but you'll have recompense,  
As soon as I can pull together the money you clamor for;  
Right now my till is empty; all my cash is out the door,  
Spent on buying summer stock my customers will want.  
You will not forget my words, my vestibule you'll haunt;  
Until you have back every cent, I know you'll be a pest,  
So, leave me now, old man; I promise I'll do my best!"  
The answer to Van Weasel's wish, and obviously my own,  
Walked through my open door, as though Maddy had known  
Something special was in my shop, certainly spectacular.  
At first, I feigned she wasn't there, and made a pose vernacular.  
I realized she'd find the plant her craving could not resist;  
I knew she'd laugh right out loud, then persistently insist  
On buying the awful, ugly thing for any price required;  
This is what she eventually did, but before my plan transpired,  
I had an unforeseen assignment corresponding to her need  
To own the most unusual plant that ever grew from seed.  
A story was invented on which claimed rarity would stand;  
I prattled about ancient times and mystical wizards grand,  
Concluding with the epic idea, its ancestor was a fairy,  
And was so unquestionably rare, it'd been dubbed a *Rarey!*

*continued...*

Maddy loved my brazen fiction, and did a frivolous dance;  
Her conduct thus affirmed the fact, this would be my chance  
To gouge the lady's pocketbook, make a bundle without work,  
And in effect, become a thief in the guise of a guiltless clerk.  
I paid Van Weasel from my profit, which left me in the clear;  
Maddy took the prized Rarey home; no one saw her for a year.  
I pondered little about the sale until a day in May,  
When Maddy came declaring, "That damned plant can't stay!  
"It's grown so huge I've no room left, you've got to help me out."  
I was terribly busy then, but she had this little pout,  
That was so adorable, it touched a compassionate nerve,  
Triggering an unexpected response: "In what way can I serve?"  
"I want to purge my life of that monstrous, awful organism,  
But it's too immense for my car or any motored mechanism  
I own or retain at my disposal, or that of anyone I know;  
If I do not remove the plant, it will surely grow,  
And at the rate that its been growing in six days more I claim,  
My house will burst, everything lost, nothing to be the same!"

Maddy looked so forlorn and dazed, my heart went out to her.  
I knew if I couldn't satisfy her need, I'd be a brand of cur,  
So, I offered her the keys to my Uncle Ralph's dump truck,  
That I had used quite successfully to pull my car unstuck  
From the muck and mud and mayhem of old Van Weasel's lane,  
Where I had journeyed the day before, unfortunately in vain,  
To make amends for the irksome plant that nearly shut me down,  
But when I arrived, the pesky man was spending the day in town!  
It seems that I've digressed a bit from the tale I'm bound to tell;  
I'll mind my tongue, stay on track, recount how Maddy did well  
To rid herself of that evil plant, and save her hearth and home,  
But when she started upon her trek, she didn't know she'd roam  
Across the country through fourteen states in that old rickety rig;

*Continued...*

Every authority refused her plea, saying, “That Rarey is too big  
To dump into our landfills, abandoned quarries, or junk piles,”  
So Maddy kept her foot to the pedal for three thousand miles.  
Nearly out of gas and out of nerve, she parked along a road  
In the middle of Kansas prairie to check her tremendous load.  
Much to her astonishment, the Rarey had grown immense;  
The dump truck’s sides were bulging out; Maddy was feeling tense.  
Then a squawking sandhill crane caused her to turn around,  
And there before her very eyes, salvation had been found.  
Coincidence had parked the truck at the edge of huge ravine.  
She took a guilty glance about—there was no one to be seen.  
She backed the truck right to the edge, and pulled the lever down;  
The dump truck’s bed began to rise, a smile replaced her frown.  
The Rarey didn’t budge at first, then gave way with a rumble;  
Out of the truck and down the cliff, the Rarey it did tumble.  
Her duty done, her burden gone, she laughed at the broad prairie:  
And said, “The only thing left to say is, *It’s a long way to tip a Rarey!*”