

Sturt Haaga Gallery

Jun 28 — Sep 12,
2021



CASTLE GARDEN

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Featuring:

Shagha Ariannia
Beatriz Cortez
Samantha Morales Johnson
Amitis Motevalli
Fran Siegel
Jenny Yurshansky

Curated by
Debra Scacco



Left: New York, showing
Castle Harbor and Liberty
Statue, New York, U.S.A.
(aerial view, ships steaming
in harbor).

The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach
Division of Art, Prints and
Photographs: Photography
Collection, The New York
Public Library. (1880).

Introduction

Text by Debra Scacco

The world is written in code. Our language, street names, city grid all indicate centuries of migration and colonization, and their compounded ecological impact. In our place names alone, we find evidence both of the native Tongva people (in Tujunga, Cahuenga, Cucamonga) and early settlers and city-builders (Verdugo, Mulholland, Sepulveda). The plants we cultivate in our gardens are in no way an exception to this code. Named for America's first immigration station, *Castle Garden* decodes aspects of plant migration, connecting American garden ideals with their cultures and peoples of origin.

Through the centuries, humankind has attempted to "improve" on nature by cultivating gardens. With the colonization of distant lands came the desire to build empires in the image of one's homeland, as well as re-creating "exotic" places. The expanded movement of people introduced a new scale of both the coexistence of and conflict between cultures. The ideals of plant and garden tropes became declarations of culture and identity: the wealth evidenced by the British front lawn, native oaks as markers of ownership, the iconography of a Los Angeles palm. Over time, America has rewritten the stories of these plants as its own, so deep-rooted in national mythology that their true origin stories have been virtually erased.

This coded history hides in plain sight at Descanso Gardens. Home to Old Verdugo, a now-vanished ancient oak used to subdivide property, Descanso once proudly displayed a sign reading "A surviving patriarch of the days of Rancho La Cañada." Its prized camellia collection grew from World War II-era Japanese internment. Roses, perhaps our most commodified flower so commonly cited as an English ideal, are extensively evidenced in the Middle East throughout the Roman period. And some trees ubiquitous in the local landscape – including fig, olive, and most notably the Mexican fan palm – have earned a spot on the California Invasive Species List, deemed a threat to our native ecosystem.

Castle Garden discusses often veiled histories that exemplify the intertwined relationship between the history of plants and the migratory and political history of people. Within these often difficult truths, the flora that live on are indicative of hidden histories of generosity, resilience and human ingenuity. Despite best efforts to silence inhumane treatment and unspeakable injustice, the legacy of these plants points us back to truth. The love, care and optimism it takes to create a garden carries these stories us to as they live on in the memory of these plants and the people who lovingly tended them in the beginning, and continue to care for them to this day.

The stories in *Castle Garden* present a strength of will and the best kind of defiance that keeps cultural memory alive. And they present a mirror of the present, questioning our own participation and agency as, on so many levels, we witness history repeat itself.

Essay by

Samantha Morales Johnson

When I was around eight years old, my mother sat me down in a circle of other Tongva children and showed us how to make baskets out of round reed. She told us the first lesson we had to learn was to listen to the plant. If the reed wants to become a plate, let it be a plate. If it wants to become a candy dish, let it be a candy dish. We could only work *with* the plant, not *on* the plant. The second lesson she taught us was to have love and happiness in our heart as we wove. If you got frustrated with the reed, or sad, or angry, your emotions would show in the basket. Your anger would break the reed while you were trying to weave or your sadness would warp it into something it wasn't meant to be, filled with gaps and odd shapes. A good basket is woven with good energy, because you have to give the plant your love.

As I grew older I kept these lessons close to my heart. I noticed that when I followed these rules, the results were always better. Had I never built a relationship with plants, I would have never learned these important life lessons.

Plants are living beings just as we are. To my tribe, they are also ancestors that can teach us things. As you consider this exhibition, I urge you to see what each artist has done to learn from these plants, as they have worked *with* them and not *on* them. This is a collaboration with Mother Earth, with so many varieties of her plant sons and daughters. Something beautiful has been made with them despite their sometimes painful histories. Like people, plants can heal and adapt to difficult circumstances, a lesson we can all learn from something as small as weaving a basket to something as devastating as a forest fire. I wish all viewers openness, optimism and love in their heart so that they might learn the valuable things our plant relatives can teach us.





Known around the world for their slim silhouette against electric skies, the palm is synonymous with the eden of Los Angeles. And still, only one palm varietal, *Washingtonia Filifera* (California fan palm) is native to Southern California. Introduced to the land we now refer to as Los Angeles in the 18th century by Spanish missionaries, the popularity of palms attracted favor in Europe during the Victorian era as symbols of conquest. They came to define the skyline of Los Angeles in 1931, when over 25,000 palms were planted in preparation for the 1932 Olympics. And so, the Los Angeles skyline was born.

And now, the aesthetic identity of the city faces a new challenge. With a life span of 75 to 100 years, Hollywood's original stars are beginning to fade. In recent years these water-intensive trees have begun to wane due to age, the South American palm weevil and the *Fusarium* fungus. Combined with a rising climate, heat islands, and a need for improved air quality, the needs of the metropolis demand trees that will work harder for what we have become. While palms in iconic locations will likely be replenished, the majority of dying palms will be replaced with trees that will provide shade and offset a warming climate.

Left: Moving a palm tree in MacArthur Park, Los Angeles, 1913.

Courtesy of the California History Room, California State Library, Sacramento, California

Shagha Ariannia

For artist Shagha Ariannia, palm trees have an added layer of personal significance. Born in Iran in 1984, Ariannia migrated with her family to Los Angeles in 2001. In video work *Mixtape: Goodbye Street, Goodbye Home* the viewer is presented with a layered narrative. Scenes of Ariannia swimming in an idyllic California swimming pool with palms on the horizon are interspersed with scenes from Iranian feature film *City of Mice* (1985). This children's film released in the midst of the Iran-Iraq War follows a city of mice forced to leave their home due to being hunted by a cat. The video presents the cat completely out of context, leaving the viewer unsure as to whether the protagonist is hunter or hunted. Paired with documentary sounds of war, the ambiguity of this central character aids the artist in reshaping her memory of the hunter.

Similar in contradiction is the artist's relationship with palm trees, with her first memories being those of southern Iranian date palms decimated by conflict. Upon arriving in Los Angeles the artist was immediately engulfed in contradiction by the most iconic feature of the city: symbolic of both the hope of the future and the pain of the past. Through the juxtaposition of disjointed audio and visual narratives, the work transforms fear to strength as she reconciles associative memory with the landscape and conditions of both her birth and adopted homelands.

A monoprint triptych depicts: a sea of decimated date palms in Southern Iran, early palms that helped create the persona of Los Angeles, and a bridge between these conflicting worlds. An abstraction of a Los Angeles palm being planted addresses the imported nature of the landscape, the necessary conflict to migrate the trees, and the labor required (commonly undertaken by immigrant workers) to sustain manicured facsimiles of the natural world.



Clockwise
Khorramshahr, 1985
Monoprint
22.5 x 30 in
2015

Los Angeles, 1930
Monoprint
22.5 x 30 in
2015

Los Angeles Workers, 1930
Monoprint
22.5 x 30 in
2015

Beatriz Cortez

Message from Manzanar (The Children's Garden) is a work dedicated to creating beauty and hope in the face of systemic oppression. It celebrates the generosity that shaped the gardens created by Japanese Americans while incarcerated at Manzanar and other sites of internment

In 1942, when approximately 120,000 Americans of Japanese descent were deemed "enemy aliens" and forced into concentration camps, the gardens they created there were a vehicle for personal and cultural survival. *Message from Manzanar* invites us to read the creation of a garden for detained children as a message from the past, an alarm sounding as history repeats itself before our eyes. While the practice of detaining thousands of migrant children continues along the southern US border, this work posits the question "Who is creating gardens for the children now?"



Left: *Message from Manzanar (The Children's Garden)*
Steel, Dimensions Variable
2021

Descanso Gardens has a long history with the Japanese American community, particularly in regard to their famed camellia collection. In 1942, Descanso founder Manchester Boddy acquired much of Star Nursery, owned by the Uyematsu family, and San Gabriel Nursery, owned by the Yoshimura family. The sales were forced by the political conditions created by President Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066 immediately following the bombing of Pearl Harbor. More than 120,000 Americans of Japanese descent were forced into incarceration, given as little as four days to two weeks to settle their affairs. Families were allowed to take only what they could carry. All other possessions had to be sold or left behind. This incarceration was the culmination of long-standing anti-Asian sentiment in the United States including the Alien Land Law of 1913, a law created to prevent Japanese immigrants from owning or long-term leasing agricultural land.

The acquisition of these two nurseries helped create Descanso's prized camellia garden, now among the largest in the world. Over the last several years, Descanso has been working with the Uyematsu and Yoshimura families, alongside historians Dr. Wendy Cheng and Naomi Hirahara, to reveal unknown truths related to the acquisition of the camellias.

Camellia japonica
'Berenice Boddy'
Photo courtesy of
Descanso Gardens



Fran Siegel

Franz investigates the ways in which European depictions of flora perpetuate ideals of wealth and refinery. Based on a Lidded Bulb Vase made by the Niderviller Porcelain Manufactory, the work deconstructs two core elements of the 18th century porcelain work: The delicate floral pattern on the face, and exquisite open work of the lid.

Throughout the centuries, European porcelain has depicted flora, elevating certain flowers to be considered elegant and even aspirational. As these works of finery continue to circulate throughout Europe and the colonies, ideals are established and reinforced as to what represents class and taste. Assumptions are perpetuated as to the origins of the flora as legacies of colonization live on in European decorative tradition.

The lidded bulb vase that inspired *Franz* was commissioned for local nobility, as evidenced by the coat of arms nestled within the central design. The exquisite open work vase held potpourri or flower bulbs.



Top: *Franz*
Burlap, Paper, Pencil, Fabric,
Cyanotype, Sewing, Weaving,
Canvas, Painted Branch and
Porcelain Mount 100 x 100 in.
2021

Right: Lidded Bulb Vase
(caisse à oignons)
Niderviller Porcelain
Manufactory France, c1768
Hard-paste porcelain,
polychrome enamel decoration,
and gilding
6.75 x 7.75 x 4.25 in.
Digital image courtesy of the
Getty's Open Content Program



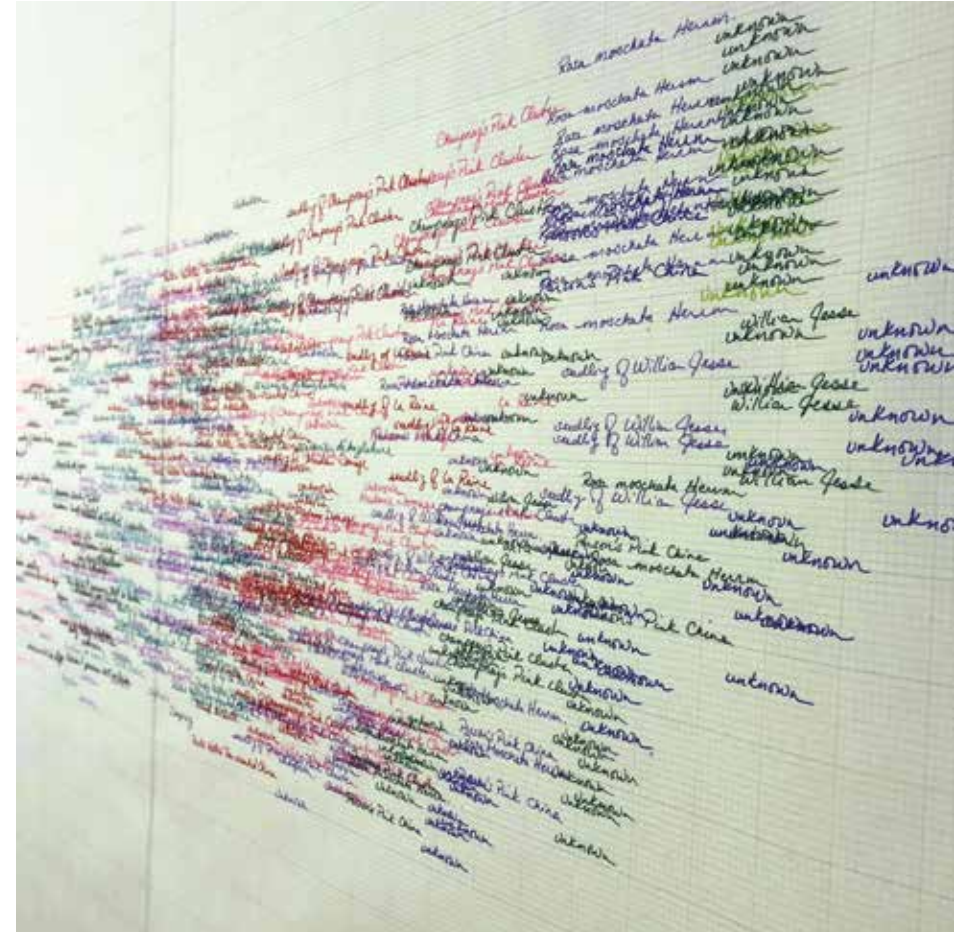
Amitis Motevalli

Roses are often associated with formal European gardens and rarified beauty. Less known is that many of these cultivars were imported to Europe, then transplanted and hybridized, during the violence of the Crusades by medieval royalty such as Robert I who led the Second Siege of Damascus. Popular plantings tended by rosarians in Western gardens draw their lineage from *Rosa gallica*, used for perfumes, teas, medicine and food in the geographic areas of Persia, Indus Valley and the Levant— known today as Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Ancient Persian folklore also tells the story of a nightingale who fell so in love with her white rose that she clutched its thorns and bled resulting in the deep color of the red damask, *Rosa damascena*.

The name Golestan translates from Farsi to mean land of the flowers and is also the title of a seminal collection of poetry by the 13th Century Iranian poet Sa'adi. Drawing upon the metaphor of the rose, Golestan Revisited is a multicomponent project launched in 2017 after eight years of following news stories of women and girls who had died in neo-crusade civil wars and, simultaneously, informally researching the breeding and origin of roses. These roses that were transplanted to Europe from

the SWANA (South West Asia North Africa) region starting in the 12th Century are employed to simultaneously symbolize and commemorate women and girls— sometimes nameless in their passing— who have died in contemporary 21st Century attempted coups and wars against “terror” and/or by the reactive Islamist occupations in and beyond the countries under attack. The image of the rose as a literal and symbolic captive is the entry point to contemporary facts of perpetual war, occupation, and resistance.

Golestan Revisited connects current wars to early practices in territorial mapping and resource nomenclature that served as a means to take possession, remove local agency, numerise, and classify both plants and people. The project was initially inspired by the story of 26-year-old Hasna Ait Boulahcen who was murdered during a November 2015 raid in Paris, when police had a standoff in her apartment intending to capture or kill, suspecting her estranged family who had entered the apartment to hide to be Islamic State responsible for the Bataclan attacks. The audio of her begging the police for her life as well as her background story triggered the artist to document and find evocative ways to tell the stories of femmes like Hasna. After learning



about the ways roses had been transplanted and hybridized from the SWANA region, Motevalli deepened her research and began renaming common roses to honor the women whose names appeared in fast disappearing news cycles.

Works created for this exhibition are based on the Queen Elizabeth Rose, hybridized by Dr. Walter E. Lammerts, geneticist and rosarian active at Descanso Gardens in the 1940s and 1950s.

Golestan Revisited
Ink on Paper
36 x 60 in
2018

Jenny Yurshansky

Blacklisted: A Planted Allegory explores the sociopolitical constructs of borders and belonging by interrogating the scientific classification of plants as “native,” “non-native” or “invasive” species. This is done by examining the state protocols of maintaining “blacklists” which are based on criteria such as competitiveness with native plants, negative economic impact, aesthetic value, or harmfulness to humans and fauna. The creation of such lists is constructed with implicit values based on the arrival of these species through colonialism, manifest destiny, waves of multi-ethnic labor-based immigration, and the global trade of goods and people. The blacklists’ use of terms such as “alien” or “native” reveal the cultural biases that inform scientific discourse around how, why, and by whom plants are considered “invasive.” *Blacklisted* questions these notions of alien-invasiveness and the correlated immigration policies founded on evolving notions of nationalism and negative perceptions of refugees, forced migrations, and labor-based immigrants who suffer when popular favor turns.

Blacklisted: A Planted Allegory (Herbarium) was created in conjunction with deep study of the California Invasive Species Advisory Council’s living list of invasive plant species. The piece, based on a herbarium cabinet, indexes 133 of these 600 listed alien-invasive plants that are simultaneously highly local and totally foreign. Original plant pressings have been recreated as hand-cut silhouette portraits that function as caricatures of each plant’s identifying characteristics. The arrival of these plants in California directly parallels the eras of manifest destiny, periods of increasingly multi-ethnic immigration and global shipping trade. While their evidence of human points of origin are strong, many of these plants are thought to be culturally Californian.

Blacklisted: A Planted Allegory (Recollection) tells the migration story of one such plant, the Peruvian pepper tree (*Schinus molle*). The narrative on the wall details the plant’s journey to California and its capricious experience once it settled into the landscape.



Top: *Blacklisted: A Planted Allegory (Herbarium)*
Steel herbarium cabinets, MDF, wood, hardboard, brass, assorted paper, 133 hand-cut silhouettes
70" x 59.5" x 22.5"
2015

Right: *Blacklisted: A Planted Allegory (Recollection)*
Graphite, Painted steel, plexiglass, MDF, hardboard, brass, assorted paper, hand-cut silhouettes
Wall text: 136" x 80"
Frame: 25" x 20" x 1.5"
2015





Blacklisted: A Planted Allegory (Audio Guide)

Streaming audio recordings situated across Descanso Gardens grounds.

1–3 minutes each, 2021
 Access the audio guide online at bit.ly/blacklistedaudioguide

This work is a web-based field guide for listeners to acquaint themselves with non-native plants commonly found in California. While the 23 featured plants are located across Descanso Gardens’ grounds, they can just as easily be found across Southern California. Each plant is performed with an anthropomorphized narrative, channeling its unique history and experience in arriving and settling in California.

These “alien-familiars”, including palm trees, succulents and thistles, arrived primarily as a result of human activity. These are the stories of generations of migrants.

These plants offer us a reflection of a landscape that is cultural as much as it is botanical, highlighting the simultaneous historical and cultural nature of flora. Our landscape tells the story of colonization, migration, borders, citizenship, belonging, and otherness.

Blacklisted: A Planted Allegory
(Audio Guide)

Reference Guide

1 ***Nymphaea Odorata***
(Fragrant Water Lily)

Point of Origin: North America
Date of Entry: Unknown
Voice: Anonymous

2 ***Pittosporum Undulatum***
(Victorian Box)

Point of Origin: Southeastern Australia
Date of Entry: Unknown
Voice: Andrea Bowen

3 ***Buddleja Davidii***
(Butterfly Bush)

Point of Origin: China
Date of Entry: Early 1900s
Voice: J.B. Waterman

4 ***Cotoneaster lacteus***
(Milkflower Cotoneaster)

Point of Origin: China
Date of Entry: 1854
Voice: Ali Ahn

5 ***Digitalis Purpurea***
(Foxglove)

Point of Origin: Europe
Date of Entry: 1700s
Voice: Josh Zuckerman

6 ***Euphorbia Myrsinites***
(Myrtle spurge)

Point of Origin: Southeastern Europe
Date of Entry: Unknown
Voice: Rob Nagle

7 ***Echium Candicans***
(Pride of Madeira)

Point of Origin: Northwest Coast of Africa
Date of Entry: Unknown
Voice: Theresa Floyd

8 ***Cynodon Dactylon***
(Bermuda Grass)

Point of Origin: Turkey and Pakistan
Date of Entry: Mid-1800s
Voice: Blair Brown

9 ***Rubus Armeniacus***
(Himalayan Blackberry)

Point of Origin: Armenia
Date of Entry: 1885
Voice: Jason Butler Harner

10 ***Eucalyptus Camaldulensis***
(River Red Gum)

Point of Origin: Australia
Date of Entry: 1800s
Voice: Karen White

11 ***Nicotiana Glauca***
(Tree Tobacco)

Point of Origin: South America
Date of Entry: 1800s
Voice: Joy Osmanski

12 ***Washingtonia Robusta***
(Mexican Fan Palm)

Point of Origin: Northwest Mexico
Date of Entry: Unknown
Voice: Fernando Siqueira

13 ***Bromus Diandrus***
(Ripgut Brome)

Point of Origin: Europe and Northern Africa
Date of Entry: 1860
Voice: Theresa Floyd

14 ***Zantedeschia Aethiopica***
(Calla Lily)

Point of Origin: Southern Africa
Date of Entry: 1700s
Voice: Rob Clare

15 ***Carduus Pycnocephalus***
(Italian Thistle)

Point of Origin: Mediterranean, North Africa, and East Europe
Date of Entry: 1912
Voice: Anonymous

16 ***Phoenix Canariensis***
(Canary Island Date Palm)

Point of Origin: Canary Islands
Date of Entry: 1600s
Voice: David Ross

17 ***Vinca Major***
(Periwinkle)

Point of Origin: Southern Europe and Northern Africa
Date of Entry: 1700s
Voice: Ali Ahn

18 ***Cytisus Scoparius***
(Scotch Broom)

Point of Origin: Europe and Northern Africa
Date of Entry: 1850s
Voice: David Ross

19 ***Olea Europaea***
(Olive Tree)

Point of Origin: Mediterranean basin
Date of Entry: 1769
Voice: Holley Fain

20 ***Ficus Carica***
(Edible Fig)

Point of Origin: Mediterranean region
Date of Entry: 1769
Voice: Joy Osmanski

21 ***Nerium Oleander***
(Oleander)

Point of Origin: Asia
Date of Entry: Unknown
Voice: Reiko Aylesworth

22 ***Lactuca Serriola***
(Prickly Lettuce)

Point of Origin: Europe
Date of Entry: 1890
Voice: Reiko Aylesworth

23 ***Schinus Terebinthifolius***
(Brazilian Pepper Tree)

Point of Origin: Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay
Date of Entry: Mid-1800s
Voice: Fernanda Andrade

Programming

Blacklisted: A Planted Allegory
Creative workshop
with Jenny Yurshansky

Sunday August 1,
10am – 12pm

This workshop is an opportunity to focus on the histories of the plants present in California, considering them as sites that mirror migration history and migrant stories. The workshop offers a sensory experience along with a presentation about the research that informs work presented by Jenny Yurshansky as part of *Castle Garden*.

Many of us are aware of—and in awe of—the beauty and diversity found in nature on hikes. Yet how many of us consider the plants and flowers in our yards or on a roadside are also both part of an ecosystem and a living record of human history in the place where they can be found. This workshop activity will provide some background of the origins of these plants as it relates to Southern California. Together we will learn about the histories of these plants and a variety of indigenous and traditional techniques for working with them to create small objects that can be thought of as totems, honoring these histories.

\$25 members / \$35 non-members

Guided Walkthrough
with exhibition curator
Debra Scacco.

Sunday August 22,
5:30pm – 6:30pm

Join curator Debra Scacco for a guided walkthrough of *Castle Garden*, providing a deeper context to the complexities of the works within the exhibition. Free with garden entry.

For registration details for both events, descansogardens.org/programs-events/

Castle Garden is funded in part by Heather and Paul Haaga and the Pasadena Art Alliance.



A Gallery in a Garden


The Sturt Haaga Gallery opened in 2011. It was created by repurposing, renovating and expanding Descanso Gardens founder E. Manchester Boddy's original garage, and completed a five-year renovation of the Boddy House and its surrounding landscape. Designed by the Los Angeles firm Frederick Fisher and Partners, Architects, the gallery expands upon the original structure and complements the historically protected architecture of the site.

As you peruse the work in the gallery, pay special attention to the way the design of the gallery spaces invites you to stay in visual contact with the garden that surrounds it.

Typically three exhibitions are presented each year. Through thematically unique showings, the gallery's program seeks to inspire visitors to Descanso Gardens to see nature in new ways and think about the "nature of Nature" from new perspectives. Past exhibitions have included themes that celebrate the elements to be found in the garden — light, water, wood — and delve into artists' interpretations of the nature of landscape; natural history; abstraction vs. pictorial depiction; biology; and the history of the Gardens' spaces.

By offering these shows, our hope is that visitors to both the gallery and to Descanso Gardens will, when they take their next walk, pay special attention to what they are seeing and experiencing and that, perhaps, what they've seen in the gallery will inspire them to see and think about the garden in new and unexpected ways.

The mission and programs of the Sturt Haaga Gallery are sustained by an endowment from Heather and Paul Haaga.



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