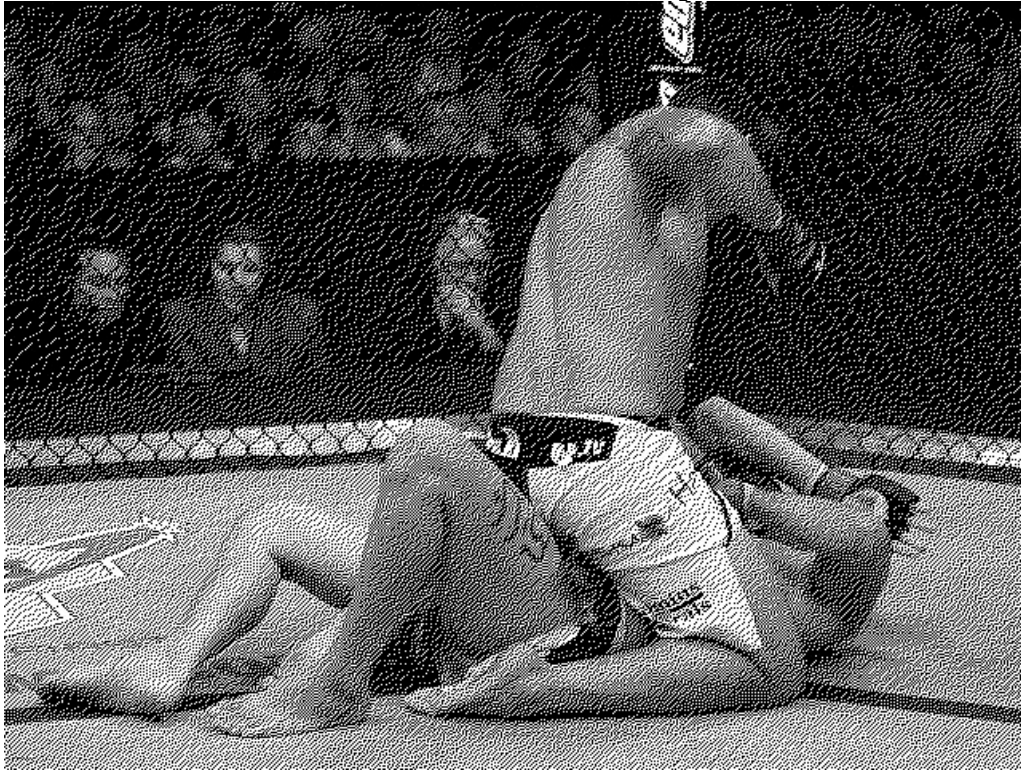


O SWEET FLOWERY ROSES presents



FINISHING HAMMERS

Mixed Marital Arts Poetry



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J. Reuben Appelman is a poet, screenwriter, and fight fan. He recently produced and wrote the feature documentary film Jens Pulver Driven, about a three-time world champion mixed martial artist. His book, Make Loneliness, was published by Seismicity Editions, and was an Editor's Choice favorite for 2009 in the international arts quarterly, BOMB magazine. He's currently working on a memoir about a serial killer's attempted abduction of him as a boy in Detroit.

Why You Fight

You spin on the floor, two spiders
Siamese at the pivot; each locked,
in their toppling, by the swarming
weight of the other. Inside you,
the falling is less gravity, more heated
memory that bursts the blood:
each trained eye had once been closed,
swollen-over from language; each bone,
broken at the hurt, had scarred with steel;
the skin of your knuckles had popped
like trees creasing open in winter, burning
while you slept, waking you to the self
that was left you. After so long orphaned,
here in the darkened cage you've become,
the *tap tap tap* is a hammer fist of patience;
you're a man trapped in a mine, chiseling,
until a single coin of light breaks through,
saying *this way, out here, where the horses run.*

Charlie Bondhus is the author of two books of poetry—WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED TO LOVE (2009), which won Brickhouse Books' s 2008-2009 Stonewall Competition, and HOW THE BOY MIGHT SEE IT (Pecan Grove Press, 2010) which was a finalist for the 2007 Blue Light Press First Book Award. He has also published a novella, MONSTERS AND VICTIMS (Gothic Press, 2010). He holds an MFA in creative writing from Goddard College and a Ph.D. in literature from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Charlie teaches English and creative writing at Raritan Valley Community College in Branchburg, New Jersey. He has been training as an MMA fighter for about a year, and expects to compete within another year.

Undisputed Welterweight World Champion

I.

When the blood came out in its sudden way
metal hot
spattering the young striker's neck, cheek, and jaw,
and Marco 'The Marshall' Vasquez
—grappler par excellence
and former Undisputed Welterweight World Champion—
crumpled beneath the here, there,
and everywhere weight
of a nineteen-year old boy's unrehearsed hunger,
the new champion, having never felt this kind of
slap-you-in-the-face
balls-in-your-gut exultation, fumbled for an apt descriptor.
Coffee spilled on a hand, perhaps?
Orgasm's inherent redness?
The first heat of spring and its
attendant shocks?
Some jerky, animal thing
crouching just outside
the periphery of vocabulary.

II.

After the hotel party,
naked in the hot tub
and just a little drunk,
he thought about poetry,
“the unsayable,” as his teacher
(a bespectacled twenty-something
fresh out of a master’s program) had put it,
ambitious on the first day of high school,
the air heavy with evaporating summer,
rowed desks still smelling of Windex.

“A postcard from a private island,
a sticky-note on the wall of the soul,
reminding it to pick up meaning
when it goes to market.”

He’d never forgotten this fortune cookie,
this pithy catalogue,
this de profundis.
It had even, in its own subliminal way,
informed his first tattoo—
a scruffy, youngish face with wide eyes and no mouth
pressed into his lower left calf, inked two years ago.
The design itself came to him
in a vision that could be described as religious
when his then-girlfriend had said
a first tattoo,
like first sex,
should mean something.

III.

For a week after his victory
in between flashbulbs and girls,
underneath the ostentatious shine of the champion’s belt, he wrote.

His poems sounded the way he looked
when he approached the Octagon:
cocksure and arrogant in bearing,
strutting feet, the words “epic” and “gladiatorial” appearing more than once,
lines freighted with syllables like muscle fruit on lean branches,
juicy with oxygenated blood;
yet at the same time a meditative cast, visible to those who cared to look,
chin parallel to chest, fettered energy sloshing about in the eyes,
allusions to battle as a form of being,

the pleasurable/unbearable weight of American manhood,
victory's frightening power to affirm,
all of the philosophy packaged within Zen couplets
scratching out the surprises of blood where there had previously been no blood,
the tumbling spiral of air pythoned off from the brain,
and the lattice work of men's grappling arms.

IV.

Were they love letters to himself?
The pornography of personal reflection?
Ballads to be beaten out in cut time on the bone timpani?
Were these poems about guys he knew and didn't know?
Tommy Ranger and his unassailable 11-2 record,
the unknown kids with day-jobs
scraping their knuckle-skin three nights a week in warehouse gymnasiums,
Diamond Dog ("Underdog" these days) Sherman,
Valentino Santorini, retired with his supermodel girlfriend to a villa in Tuscany,
still-undefeated Lightweight Champion Hayazaki
poor, vanquished Vasquez
already training for their inevitable rematch?

Yes, in the sense that all these men
knew what it was to shed skin, taste teeth,
and wear the serpent's folded scales,
coiling in and out of dirt,
bearing the unbearable weight of metaphor,
and living day-to-day
at the beck of a mouth
heavy with venom.

V.

He would find it exhausting, this truth-telling.
The dumb kid from Newark
was surprised as anyone
that his bones were full of books
leather-spined and freshly sheened.

When he cracked them
to reveal the red and yellow meaning
and smeared it across paper,
the whiteness still buoyant
with the tense promise of spilled bodies and
pain that bounced and rolled,
he thought of priests in thrall

to gods with trundling names,
slit-throat goats,
promises of rain from torpid clouds that hung, clenched,
like unripe fruit.

A festival of loosened cinches.
Him and the other guys,
with all their tightened springs
unwound on the page.

Let the fallen body writhe and huddle on the mat, he thought.
Let the page take the weight for awhile.
Men and poems alike
would share the burden
of a nineteen-year old boy's
loaded blood.

Gerardo Mena is a decorated Iraqi Freedom Veteran. He was in Special Operations for six years with the Reconnaissance Marines and was awarded a Navy Achievement Medal with a V for Valor for multiple acts of heroism while under enemy fire. He recently won the "2010 War Poetry" contest sponsored by Winningwriters and was featured in the online portion of Poets & Writers Magazine. He has poems forthcoming in DIAGRAM, Sleet Magazine, Burner Magazine, The San Pedro River Review, and The New Mexico Poetry Review. You can read more about him at <http://www.gerardomena.com>.

The Prize Fighter

I heard you were a prize fighter,
ducking and dodging rotating solar systems.
You are creating black holes with your right hook
while forging moons with your uppercuts
and fallen sweat.
You cranked an armbar and a star
went nova.
You choked your opponent
and the earth was born.

Russell Jaffe is the founder and editor of O Sweet Flowery Roses. His poems have appeared in or are forthcoming from DIAGRAM, La Petite Zine, Sugar House Review, Moria, elimae, Painted Bride Quarterly, and others.

canvas and how easy it is to think of human skin
prone or lying. what it is to be brave. reptiles. the loose scales and

vacillation, or a grinning face of.
but i want to hold you.

when i say vascularity you think of a
red map of the stars

little arcs of blood under the eyes
the doctor says ok. that always the way with map makers.

tiresome patterns. pressure points on the body, a swatch of red globs
that turn forest brown. a face down man.

your father or the things you wish you'd fought. belts.
old shoes and how the blocked the doorway. the wet wood.

the turn of a bone, a harsh name like splint or a shiv, a word
that forks the mortal tongue. the announcers make an allusion

to coiling. this
reversal, a cruel overoxidizing we call being alive sometimes.

Carol Berg has poems forthcoming or in *Artifice*, *Fifth Wednesday Journal*, *Pebble Lake Review*, *blossombones*, *qarrtsiluni*, *Melusine*, and elsewhere. Her chapbook, *Ophelia Unraveling*, is forthcoming from dancing girl press. She has an MFA from Stonecoast. Her web-site is located here: <http://carolbergpoetry.com/wordpress/>

Martial Arts Instructor

In his *gi*, with the wide hide-something
inside sleeves, how like an angel
he seems. Appears out of nowhere.
How he holds himself. How he bends.
How he bows to each student and grins.
Mirrors can't hold his image as he flutters
and kicks. Leaps off the ground with bare
feet. Speaks in the language of control.
How committed he is to the sharpened edge.
How he glides. How he looks you in the eye
as he sweeps you off your clumsy feet.

J.M. Brandt has slipped her poetry into various literary and poetry magazines with false flatteries and the empty promises of cookies. Some of these magazines include Short, Fast, and Deadly, Illya's Honey, Barbaric Yawp, and Breadcrumb Scabs (and will be appearing there again soon). Her hobbies include knitting, watching UFC, reading books about dinosaurs, and creating new secret handshakes with her husband.

Mirko's Legs

I'm terrified by his legs, the muscled
lightning bolts that they are.

Like a thick sickle as it quickly and sharply
slices the wheat from the earth,
his kick cuts the air. Separating molecules

and dissecting particles with the
blade of his foot.

Meat hooked onto his hips, like two
slabs of ribs from a Belgian Blue,
marinated in the sweat of Titans

and the roars of tigers. *Right leg – disaster.*
Left leg – destruction.

Maia's Feet

Your power is in angles,
sharp triangles
against the red neck – from the bend
of your legs or your elbows
sliding into the flesh
like the dull blade of a guillotine.
Every opponent is just another Antaeus
to pull from the earth,
push down to the mat, and unleash your
brutal math onto.

I've come to watch your
feet, the soft brown
soles and flexing toes. They have
their own language:
calm vowels and soft tones. With
your hands
too busy in their violent hunt,
your feet whisper what your
heart is screaming.

Each word is carefully calculated –
crouched on the mat,
toes splayed like thick
cuneiform means you need
to watch and observe.
Butterfly guard, toes peeking
from below the trunks,
are the sly curves of a confident smirk.

My favorite move is
when the feet are wrapped
like smooth ribbons around the stomach,
tightening and curling
into a bow - *your arm curving against the neck...*
signifying victory.

The Point of Breaking

The bright ribbon of blood
slides down Guida's sloped, primeval forehead,
tangling in his hair and unspooling across
the glossy skin of his chest.
His body hasn't evolved from
the lessons of blood and heat.
From the gnarled strands of hair hanging
over his face, he can only see the
shapes of his opponents like shadows
on a cave wall.

The mat is already stained in garnet and
rose quartz shards - the smoothness
of sharp rocks tumbled by force, thrown
and ground down to become soft edges on
the rough fabric. Sweat is confetti-flung into
the hot air, rattling against the metal teeth
of the cage and we are all still so hungry.

Guida's face is a rotten fruit with its
skin tightening and the insides oozing
out. His muscles stiffen, clustered around
his bones like rock candy; brutal scrimshaw
is etched into his skull by the pressure
of an uppercut. Blisters on his feet swell
like braille, their wild translations of pain
and salt push so hard against the flesh,
to the point of breaking,
to the point of shattering.

Greg Santos is the author of [The Emperor's Sofa](#) (DC Books, 2010). He is the poetry editor of [pax americana](#) and is on the editorial board of the Paris-based, [Upstairs at Duroc](#). He blogs at [moondoggy.blogspot.com](#)

Brock Lesner: Here Comes The Pain

Brock Lesner was raised on a farm in North Dakota.

As a child, Lesner dodged a barrage of arrows with glee.

Consequently, Lesner is now unable to eat s'mores without grimacing.

On his 15th birthday, Lesner hid among the karaoke singers and dreamed of being the next big thing.

Almost immediately, Lesner witnessed a frightening vision of things to come.

Years later, Lesner rode blindfolded o'er the eighteenth hole atop a golf cart.

For a few moments a day while sparring, Lesner pondered why a person can't taste their own tongue.

Once, when his wife was out shopping, Lesner snuck into a Pilates class with marked coolness.

Later that month, Lesner intervened in a lawsuit on behalf of the girl scouts.

One evening, Lesner awoke in a cold sweat, torture racking his brain on how they get the caramel in the Caramilk bar.

Before long, Lesner lamented the loss of his favourite boyhood futon.

Subsequently, Lesner could never get the hang of Sudoku again.

Over time, Lesner spent many days tirelessly checking his number of Facebook friends.

Craving Pop-Tarts after a night on the town, Lesner came to know the true meaning of loneliness.

Eventually, Lesner took up collecting novelty Pez dispensers and odd-shaped postcards.

Between bouts, Lesner spends his time perfecting his uncanny gift for ventriloquism.

After all, Lesner credits his many championship wins to his unwavering belief in the Tooth Fairy and the Easter Bunny.

Matthew Johnstone has poems in the newer Otoliths, GlitterPony and Shampoo. His first book of poems, Let's be close Rope to mast, you Old light (Blue & Yellow Dog Press) dropped at the end of 2010. He keeps his corner of the internet colorful at <http://hemouthsmewrong.blogspot.com>

Alligator

Lovely grounds endless glove.

When we roll
in no
splitting
bodies.

What we are about
is our particles
pressing
into each other.

+

What is
a language of the room
with little room, and no language.

Articulate
fist,
article on
the lung, mouthpiece out.

Vacated for.

Appreciate the
activated surface relevant
surface.

In the shapes are whistlers,
laying down in
the unconscious fur.

+

The intention is being shape filled by thrust.

Intuition bar, lapsing
tufts of scuffle.

Some repulsions
spray like a bell
echo,
on the skeleton.

A casualty on a cooing
crowd.

After the air, lord,
alternate
jawline,
market analysts,
hat manufacturers.

Sport is holy tearing bodies apart,
grunted
scaffolding away.

+

What we are
about is illegible, here

ghastly,
going directly.

Sought teeth
from bits of tooth on
the page.

Bending
bones will indicate a blue stage

Cheering hens, splash, brawl
promotion,
synaesthesia, my silent plum.

Hug me in your rubber guard.
Dearie lastly, take
my back, do
alligator rolls.

All toward, against it, you
my furring better.

Won't you blanket over me
with hammer fists.

Move
in the point two bodies
are intimate.

+

Also, your work of intuition, shaken
into a mouth
like tusks.

How best to
dance in a thousand
spots of air.

Sweeping water from the store-front.

Clear the
end, in

something else.

Then be articulate.

Fur invention, of
bones, sun, or clashing
pupils.

Interview with Cameron Conway

Cameron Conway was the 2007-2009 Poet-in-Residence at the University of Arizona's MFA Creative Writing Program. He is 2-0 at 155lbs as an MMA fighter. He has trained with Renzo Gracie, the London Shootfighters and is now studying Muay Thai in Thailand thanks to the sponsorship of www.WhatsYourFight.com. An MMA fighter and an award-winning poet; an MMA Trainer at Gold's Gym and a creative writing instructor for Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth; a certified personal trainer through the NSCA and a dynamic anti-bully spokesperson, Cameron is known worldwide as the Warrior Poet. Tuttle Publishing will release his memoir, *Caged: Memoirs of a Cage-Fighting Poet*, in August 2011. Salmon Poetry will release his book of poems, *Until You Make the Shore*, in January 2012. For more information about Cameron, check out www.CameronConaway.com.

(1) What got you interested in MMA? Same goes for poetry.

Regarding MMA, here's the short story of the longer story detailed in my memoir: As a 12-year-old boy in the middle of his parent's divorce, I walked into a movie rental store with the hopes of sneaking back to look at the porn section. Adjacent to this section was a plethora of Ultimate Fighting Championship VHS tapes. MMA was viewed as "bad" back then, just like porn, so it was always placed in the back "special section" of rental stores. I grabbed the copy with Ken Shamrock on the cover, the clerk called my mom for permission to rent it (it was rated MATURE at the time) and when she agreed an obsession began. Unbeknownst to me, I was also looking for a father figure at the time. Ken Shamrock, in many ways, filled that role.

Regarding Poetry: I had always loved inspirational quotes. You know, the type people display on Facebook and Twitter. And, subconsciously, even as a child I'd always been drawn to "tough guys" who said these inspirational quotes: Muhammad Ali and Bruce Lee, for example. At some deep, primal, barely recognizable level, something intrigued me about toughness blended with smartness. So, when the time came to choose a "filler" class to complete my degree in Criminal Justice at Penn State Altoona, I figured I'd give poetry a go. Little did I know that a five-second decision to sign up for an elective class would change the course of my entire life.

(2) What is beautiful about Mixed Marital Arts?

Outside the Cage: The mental preparation, the insecurities, the digging deep, the motivation, the setbacks, the discipline, the incremental daily progress, the evolution of technical and physical training, the teamwork.

Inside the Cage: The fluidity of force, the power of passivity, the limitless arsenal, matchups and personalities. That it is two humans with two bodies competing in an act that goes back to the beginning of time. Unlike other sports, there are no bats or balls or rackets or clubs. Just two bodies purely engaged.

(3) Do you think MMA should be at a higher, more prolific level than it currently is? Is it the UFC's responsibility to create a more accessible product? Talk about how you perceive the current landscape of MMA.

Thanks to MMA, the martial arts have evolved more in the past twenty years than they have in the previous thousands. That's a bold statement, but I believe it to be entirely true. Even within its own twenty-year evolution, not only have MMA fighters come to embrace multiple disciplines, but each individual discipline has been stripped of its impractical elements. To the greatest extent in history, we now know what works from each martial art and what does not in a fight with few rules. In the past, families like the Gracie's would have closed-door fights to test what worked. Now, all is open for the world to see. Aside from the technical evolution of the martial arts, the evolution within the strength & conditioning field owes much to MMA. What becomes an effective way to train elite MMA fighters immediately becomes a popular tool to train the general masses. MMA is everywhere, even if it's not obvious. I believe the accessibility is only growing, and I believe the UFC has done an incredible job at trying to responsibly grow the sport. Is it the UFC's responsibility? Yes, it is. They are now synonymous with MMA.

(4) Using the moniker "The Warrior Poet" seems evocative of ancient motifs that blend meditative thinking and physical prowess. Talk a little about what the nickname means to you and if you see Mixed Martial Arts as a new kind of warrior frontier. How does it fit into international shifts in warrior identities?

You are right on. The Warrior Poet is one who intentionally blends mindful, meditative thinking with physical conditioning. It's not a new concept by any means. Some of our world's greatest philosophers were also our greatest warriors. Even thousands of years ago they realized there was a positive correlation between simultaneously developing the mind and body. Science is just now catching up to what the masters knew long ago.

The nickname means the world to me, but as I say in the memoir: "I didn't know either field's history. Nor did I strive for their fusion. I was just a boy wanting to remove the confusion that dripped from pain's wild roots, a boy who by ferociously pursuing instinct blossomed into a simple man."

It's tough to gauge the international shift in warrior identity, though this is a terrific question. Apologies in advance for a potential rant here. On one hand, I think more men and women are encouraged to pursue areas that are outside of traditional gender roles. Men are becoming nurses. Women are becoming soldiers. However, I also feel a rising conservative push to keep our gender identities in tact. Commercials and advertisements talk about "man food" and through constant insinuation are trying to lump us into categories because once we define ourselves by their standards their "product" becomes something we need to buy. Religion's influence on politics is working in negative ways

as well. I mean, we have politicians – a few of which have just announced their presidential bid – who believe homosexuality is a choice, a sin, etc. Each political decision made that uses The Bible or any other religious text as a fundamental source rather than rational thought is a decision with the potential to perpetuate stereotypes, *misinformation* and *mythinformation*. This all starves the beauty of embracing human diversity. It's not ironic that those who were (and still are) adamantly against MMA are those closed-minded type. On the other hand, the definition of "warrior" is expanding well beyond the military, and this is all very positive. Great teachers are warriors. Those who devote their lives to helping children who have been victims of sex slavery are warriors. Ignorance can be innocent or purposeful. A goal of the warrior-poets around the world (there are thousands just like me) is to cut through ignorance. As a carrier of this nickname, I have come to carry the underdog status. I will continue my fight against closed minds, but I'll do so via the many nonviolent means used by Allen Ginsberg, the 14th Dalai Lama and countless others: Education.

(5) Does writing make you a better fighter/vice versa? Do you think it's important for athletes (particularly MMA fighters) to write and read? Why/why not?

Absolutely. I believe quality writing is the product of the most disciplined form of thinking. This ability to think, reflect and see all perspectives immediately applies to MMA. When I moved from the page to the cage, I entered my first fight knowing I had thought about my every possible weakness and strength. I was prepared for anything – including the emotions that could come if I lost. In my third fight, when I lost, I felt as though I'd already experienced losing so many times mentally that it wasn't tough to handle. I tapped out to a heel-hook, then calmly kissed the mat and thanked my opponent. This calmness came because I'd been training not just as a fighter, but as a thinker, as a writer.

As for the inverse, absolutely. My mentor, the poet Todd Davis, has told me on many occasions that those who were athletes and then transitioned to writing, especially those who were combat athletes (John Irving was a wrestler), entered writing with an intense discipline that, when combined with even a grain of talent, propelled average writers into greatness. In no way do I consider myself a great writer, and of course luck is also a part of a writer's success, but I've watched countless writers who are far more naturally talented than me struggle because they don't understand the work it takes or how to handle setbacks. In an article for *O, the Oprah Magazine*, the Pulitzer-Prize winner Junot Diaz said he worked more than eight hours a day at writing, that he had "...kept at it for five straight years. Five damn years. Every day failing for five years?" This is resilience. The fight game is all about resilience. It's a theme in every single fight movie ever made.

(7) Talk about what makes Mixed Martial Arts "poetic."

I think it comes to the lyric and the form. Lyrically, a poem can dance with movement on the page, with sound, with image, idea, juxtaposition. Even when poetry doesn't rhyme, as is the case with most good contemporary poetry, it still contains every other element of

rhythm. MMA is lyrical, fighter's bounce, they change levels for takedowns, they stick a punch out and bring it back, they move to the center of the cage then return to their corners, they explode in bursts then slow the pacing down. It's all very similar. Like poetry's page, MMA is contained and confined within a certain space – the cage. This space creates the rich concision that I think comes to define the best of both art forms.

(8) Is MMA a sport of the future? Do you see it changing or evolving at the same rate it has since its formal introduction in the 90s?

Of course, I'm biased. But I see MMA becoming one of the world's top five sports within the next ten years. Soccer and baseball are always mainstays, but MMA, especially now that it is beginning to explode in Asia, is going to mainstream in a way that few ever expected.

As for its evolution, this has already slowed down and will come to a crawl, an always-progressive crawl. New techniques will arise here and there and science will help fighters become better athletes. But the evolution boom is over.